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## Challenges in Researching Medieval Ecclesiastic Art in Finland — The Passion of Christ in the Visual and Material Culture of Medieval Finland

### Introduction

Medieval devotion was deeply connected to the visual and the material. Wall paintings, statues, altarpieces, liturgical objects, textiles and personal objects reflected and were influenced by the devotional atmosphere, liturgical interests and personal preferences. Devotion was constructed, defined, and made visible with the help of images and objects. Images and objects were thus deeply interconnected to devotional and liturgical practices. Researching the visual, the material, and the devotional as profoundly intertwined poses several challenges and problems. This article is concerned with the devotion directed to the Passion of Christ in medieval Finland, the ways it was manifested visually and materially in the ecclesiastic context, and some of the challenges related to the research of the subject.

One of the expressions of the devotion towards the Passion of Christ was the Cult of Corpus Christi which directed attention to the body of Christ. In medieval Finland, this cult was initiated by bishop Magnus II Tavast. In 1421, the Bishop founded the prebendary of the Corpus Christi in the cathedral of Turku. It included a chapel and an altar inside the cathedral [11, p. 322, 391; 12, p. 57–59]. The prebendary was usually supported by the revenues from an estate. Thus, the bishop himself donated the lands to the prebendary and funds for the maintenance of the altar, and ordered regular services to be held on the altar [11, no. 391, 419, 517; 10, p. 182, 246]. The bishop also embellished the altar by acquiring a large monstrance, a Venetian altar cloth, reliquaries, and other liturgical paraphernalia for it [7, p. 57–58]. By the 1440s, the prebendary of the Corpus Christi was the biggest in the cathedral, including 34 estates, 29 of which bishop Magnus had acquired himself [11, no. 492, 507, 553; 12, p. 60, 102; 10, p. 183]. It has been suggested that bishop Magnus was especially interested in the devotion of Corpus Christi, but since the devotion towards the body and passion of Christ in the late Middle Ages was extremely popular throughout Europe, this claim is difficult to substantiate. The bishop equally promoted the cults of Saint Henry, who is the patron saint of Finland, Saint Bridget, Saint Hemming, and the Virgin Mary [10, p. 240–249].

The cult soon became popular, influencing the visual and material culture of the diocese. The Passion was included in the pictorial programmes of wall paintings and the suffering and the dead body of Christ materialised in statues. Objects used in the Mass

became imprinted with visual depictions relating to the blood and body of Christ. On the whole, the medieval art historical data connected to the Passion and the cult of Corpus Christi consists of a heterogeneous body of material. This has not been fully charted in previous research and images and objects are scattered around the country. Quantitatively, the amount of works is quite vast, consisting primarily of wall paintings and statues, various liturgical and devotional objects such as chalices, patens, and textiles.

### **The visual and material manifestations of the Passion devotion**

The tormented and bleeding body of Christ provided access to the divine. Seeing Christ's body in pain was a reminder of the salutary promise that could be reached through the body. According to the medievalist Robert Mills, dominant power structures were partly sustained through the deployment of representations of pain and punishment. Images were also used in order to create an arena for the construction of institutional authority: the punished body of Christ helped to convey a message about the coherence of the Church. Mills connects the iconography of pain and suffering to the transfiguration, or sublimation, of death, suffering, and self-sacrifice. According to Mills, such depictions not only propagate power but also generate and legitimise various forms of pleasure [8, p. 16–17]. When we see pain, we may in fact experience a kind of pleasure. Christ's body can be viewed as a "sublime body", one that reveals the transformation from suffering to salvation. The sublime body allows one to simultaneously indulge in the violent depictions and at the same time, through the sublime object's, Christ's, inherent indestructibility, avoid permanent repercussions from that indulgence [1, p. 84–85]. According to Susan Arvey, witnessing suffering can convert into a redemptive pleasure of inflicting emotional suffering on oneself [1, p. 86–87]. The viewer who sees suffering, both physical and emotional, and compassion depicted in images of the crucifixion, is persuaded to feel pity and compassion, and is simultaneously the one whose own suffering is witnessed by other members of the community. This suffering turns into a meaningful religious experience, an experience of pleasurable pain for religious ends [1, p. 112]. According to Mitchell B. Merbach, passion could invite its viewers into a communal experience, one of shared pain, contrition, and suffering, but also into a kind of shared joy in the transformative potential of suffering. It was a form of salutary seeing in which the spectators actualised the salutary power of the image of Crucified Christ in their experience of watching [9, p. 174–175].

Wall paintings were closely connected to communal seeing and devotion. In medieval Finland, the existing wall paintings that represent the Passion are mainly from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The earliest surviving paintings are from around 1300, possibly from the 1290s, in the church of Lemland in the Åland Islands, situated off the south-east coast of Finland. The paintings represent scenes from Christ's Passion such as *Flagellation*, *Crucifixion*, and the *Doubting Thomas*, placed on the chancel walls. The scenes are partially fragmented, making the examination and evaluation of the paintings challenging, in part. The best preserved painting is the *Last Supper* on the north wall of the chancel, visually bringing forth the importance of the communion for the commu-

nity. The general placement of the paintings in the chancel walls in Lemland highlights the Eucharistic relationship between the altar and the images: the paintings offer a visual reminder of Christ's blood and body as the sacrificial offering and the chancel operates as the place where this offering is perpetually consumed during the Mass.

During the fifteenth century, the representations of the Passion gradually became an established part of wall paintings. Typical motifs included the *Crucifixion* and Christ as *The Man of Sorrows*. Partially visible *Crucifixion* scenes can still be seen in the sacristies of Mynämäki and Kalanti. Both of these paintings have been dated to the first quarter of the fifteenth century [5]. In both of these depictions, the *Crucifixion* was represented as a separate scene without other accompanying scenes of the Passion. In the churches of Taivassalo and Kalanti, the *Crucifixion* is the visual culmination of the Passion narrative. In Taivassalo, the scene takes place in Golgotha and the crucified Christ is flanked by the grieving Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, possibly Mary Magdalene and Mary of Cleopas, and a group of soldiers<sup>1</sup>. In Kalanti, the *Crucifixion* scene is similar, although partially fragmented due to the enlargement of the north wall window. In both Taivassalo and Kalanti, other scenes of the Passion included in the pictorial programme are largely the same: *Last Supper*, *Flagellation*, and *Crowning with Thorns*. The paintings in both of these churches were made by the same group which explains the similarities in both style and the choice of motifs. The motifs have been placed mainly in the western part of the nave, that is, in the back of the nave. This placement is functional in the sense that the common parishioners most likely congregated in the western part of the nave during the Mass. The highly emotional character of Christ's Passion would have thus been closer to the people for them to identify with and contemplate upon.

*The Man of Sorrows*, represented in the chancel wall in the churches of Parainen<sup>2</sup> (1486) and Kalanti (1470–1471), shows Christ showing his wounds with the instruments of torture and kneeling next to the Virgin Mary who is portrayed as the Madonna of Mercy, *Mater Misericordiae* (also known as the *Schutzmantelmadonna*), protecting the mankind inside her cloak. The motif is impressive, especially in Parainen where Christ is depicted with his wounds gushing blood and his body filled with small red ulcers. The motif emphasises the position of Christ and the Virgin as the intercessors for mankind before God who has also been included in the paintings in Parainen and Kalanti. Here the suffering body of Christ operates as a medium through which the devotees could reach towards God and explore and participate in the imitation of Christ and his suffering.

Large Passion series with detailed depictions of the events leading to Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection have been executed mainly in the early sixteenth-century churches (*Ill.* 35)<sup>3</sup>. With them the amount of Passion scenes increases and their narrative

<sup>1</sup> The two women behind the Virgin are most likely Mary Magdalene and Mary of Cleopas, since according to the Gospel of John, they were present at the *Crucifixion* (John 19,25).

<sup>2</sup> There is also another *Man of Sorrows* in the chancel vault of Parainen. In this painting, Christ is depicted alone.

<sup>3</sup> The churches include Kumlinge, Hattula, Lohja, Rymättylä, Siuntio, Espoo, and Inkoo.

potential becomes clear. The motifs were generally placed on the western part of the nave, although this was not a strict rule<sup>4</sup>. This placement seems highly intentional: the parishioners became almost a part of the crowd witnessing the crucifixion, participating in the suffering as it happened. They could feel pity and compassion and use the images in private and communal devotional activities. This closeness and certain accessibility of the visual depictions enhance the emotional and dramatic quality of the Passion imagery.

Statues also represented the scenes of the Passion, but compared to wall paintings, their narrative quality was different. Statues were material, three-dimensional objects that could embody divinity and sanctity in a concrete way. Statues were tactile and often made to appear alive; thus they “reproduced” the essence of the represented being in a visible form. For example the statues depicting Christ lying in a grave do not merely represent the dead body of Christ (*Ill.* 36). These types of statues were used in Passion plays and in the liturgy of Good Friday where the wooden body of Christ was often symbolically buried. The statue thus had a performative quality which was connected to its materiality, and through that, to liturgy.

The typical statues connected to Christ and his Passion were *Crucifixion*, Christ as *The Man of Sorrows*, and *Pietà*. All these motifs aimed at making the physical suffering of Christ concrete and tangible and at conveying to the viewers the bodily torments he endured. Suffering was also a popular theme in the inner panels of altarpieces meant for the main altar. Altarpieces were generally sculpted and painted, and they were meant to stand on, over, or behind the altar. For example an altarpiece from Vanaja church, made in Antwerp in the early sixteenth century, represents the *Crucifixion* as the main motif of the central panel. There are also smaller depictions representing the *Seven Sacraments* and *Flagellation*, *Crowning with Thorns*, and *Noli me tangere*. Depictions such as these were mainly connected to the visual and devotional sphere of the chancel area and thus not primarily directed at the parishioners. Further, the closing and opening of the wings of the altarpieces added motion and regulation to devotion and created a dramatic spectacle of orchestrated use: the wings may have been opened for certain liturgical celebrations only, which made these occasions special.

The altar was the place for the celebration of the Mass, and Christ's bodily offering represented on an altarpiece emphasised this. According to the concept of transubstantiation, as promulgated by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the body of Christ is physically present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist as the flesh and blood. The image of the Crucified Christ was even imprinted on the communion wafer. This way, the crucifixion became “consumed visibility” by individuals and the community, and it participated intrinsically in the creation of devotional community. Liturgical objects and textiles were also an inseparable part of the liturgy and they have a direct connection with the blood and body of Christ offered in the Eucharist. The objects which were in connection with the blood and body of Christ were *vasa sacra*, sacred objects, and they had to be made of precious metals such as gold or silver. The amount of liturgical

<sup>4</sup> In the church of Rymättylä, the Passion imagery has been placed mainly on the eastern part of the nave, that is, to the chancel area.

objects — chalices, patens, ciboria, monstrances and such — must have been quite impressing during the medieval era, since every altar basically had to have a set of specific vessels. In Finnish medieval parish churches the amount of altars varied, but there were usually at least two or three side altars in addition to the main altar. And in Turku cathedral, the main church of the diocese, the number of side altars might have been over 40 — the exact number is not known [12, p. 2–3]. Thus, the amount of liturgical objects in the Turku cathedral alone has been quite impressive. Visa Immonen has calculated that there might have been at least 300 sets of medieval communion vessels. In comparison, only 29 chalices and 19 patens dated to the Middle Ages and Early Modern period survive [6, p. 120].

Liturgical objects in contact with the Host were prestigious and valuable ones and instructions concerning their use and maintenance were given by the bishop. Furnishings in the altars were the responsibility of the clergy. The synod statute issued by bishop Hemming in 1352 in the diocese stated that the clergy was obliged to take care that all the altar cloths and altar paraphernalia were kept clean. The same statute also includes instructions regarding the preservation of wine and consecrated host; priests had the responsibility to take care that they were unspoilt [2, no. 634]. The laity was also encouraged to contribute in acquiring the liturgical objects. In 1441 and 1445 bishop Magnus II Tavast announced 40 days of indulgences for those who give or bequeath for example chalices and corporals to the Turku cathedral [11, no. 496, 523]. Lay members in the diocese gave chalices and patens, or pieces of silver or gold to be used in the production of these objects, altar cloths, and money to be used in order to acquire cloths and vestments for altars. Members of clergy and religious orders contributed equally, by giving and bequeathing chalices and patens (*Ill.* 37).

Pious donations of ecclesiastical equipment can be seen as one way in which people contributed to the religious life of the community. By donating and bequeathing liturgical objects used in the altar, individuals connected themselves with the body and blood of Christ and symbolically participated in the ritual [14, p. 147–148]. Such actions also take Eucharist as the devotional starting point through which the devotional subjects were being constructed: donating and making liturgical objects do not merely stand out as private deeds; they also signal the individual's devotional conditions to a broader community. Via tangible, concrete objects like these, the donors and makers continually constructed themselves through ritual: the constant use of these objects in the celebration of the Mass was a perpetual confirmation for both the one and the larger community for pious deeds done. Devotion expressed in this way was both private and communal.

### Problems and challenges in research

Devotion to the suffering body of Christ thus was visualised and materialised in many ways in medieval Finland. But compiling a comprehensive and detailed account of the relationship between cult, image, and object is not an easy task. In many cases the original physical and spatial context of the object is difficult to reconstruct and this can

seriously influence the analysis of the functioning of the objects within a cult and the liturgy. This only partially applies to wall paintings, for they were constantly present and visible inside the church, and because of this they perpetually repeated and duplicated the Passion history in a visual way. The power of this visual duplication and repetition is in some cases challenging to piece together, because the paintings have been painted over or completely removed throughout the centuries for various reasons. One of the main reasons was the alteration and restoration of churches after the medieval era due to the advent of the Lutheran faith that favoured simplicity in both devotion and interior design. Paintings were painted over, hacked down, moved from one place to another, and heavily restored. For example in the church of Espoo, built and decorated in the 1510s with, among others, scenes from the Passion cycle, the medieval nave was altered to a cruciform plan [4, p. 429]. In consequence, the central part of the nave was completely destroyed, and currently only the eastern and western parts of the nave are medieval. Thus the only remaining wall paintings are in these parts of the church while the rest, that is roughly half of the paintings, are completely destroyed.

Reconstructing the cultic function of statues is equally challenging in this respect when there is no information of the location of the statue in the church, or, as is sometimes the case, when it is not known in which church the statue was originally located. The statues have sometimes endured long peregrinations. Statues might have been removed from the altarpiece or groups they were a part of and parts of the statues have been destroyed or disappeared. After the Reformation, the cultic function of medieval statues became redundant and some were even seriously mistreated. Only some of the statues were left inside the church, while many were moved to secondary places from the main altars and side altars, and many were stored and even forgotten in storage rooms, cellars, and attics [13, p. 13–15]. Many statues have completely vanished.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when medieval art in Finland piqued the interest of art historians, historians, and museums, medieval statues were not considered as cult objects — they rather became “art objects” and many were taken into and exhibited at museums. The ideal medieval statue was without any ornamentation; it was simple with the wooden surface visible. In reality, however, the original medieval appearance of the statues was much more visual than it is now. We know, for example, that some of the statues were embellished with clothing or jewellery, but during the medieval era this was more likely to be a rule [4, p. 74, 125, 164, 2070, 462]. Jewellery and clothing worn by the statues have not survived. Furthermore, the colours are often faded so it is sometimes difficult to fully understand the original visuality and materiality of the statues.

The majority of liturgical objects have been lost for good. This is mainly due to the Reformation, although objects of precious metals were also stolen, looted, sold, or melted down. In the Kingdom of Sweden, the Reformation was spearheaded by king Gustav Wasa who wanted to have dominion over the Church. Because of this, the church property was confiscated and taken over by the Crown. Objects of precious metals, such as chalices and patens, were valuable and thus usually the first ones to be confiscated. In



the diocese, the confiscations were begun in 1535 and the systematic confiscations initiated after 1557 [6, p. 46; 3]. Some of the objects survived and are currently preserved mainly in museums. In a similar fashion, a lot of medieval textiles have vanished during the centuries due to confiscations, thefts, fires, abrasions, and sales. After the Reformation, many of the liturgical textiles vital for the Catholic cult became redundant due to the new, Lutheran regulations.

The material loss is not the only thing complicating the analysis of medieval images and objects connected to the Passion of Christ and to their devotional and liturgical use. The amount of medieval textual sources in Finland dealing specifically with the images and objects and the cult of Corpus Christi is very small. The available texts are mainly various diocesan letters such as indulgence letters, testaments, and donation letters, and their information mainly reveals what was donated or bequeathed to the altar of the Corpus Christi in the Turku cathedral (this was mainly land and various religious services). Some of the documents deal with devotional issues such as masses to be held at the altar of the Corpus Christi, the Corpus Christi procession, or visiting the altar. There are several occasions where objects are mentioned in literary sources but these fragments are scarce and often cursory in nature. Thus, the construction of the development and practical applications of the cult via literary source material is also based on the fragmentary data.

The fervent interest that was focalised in the suffering body of Christ during the medieval era throughout Europe equally left visual, material, and spiritual imprints in the ecclesiastic art of medieval Finland. Christ's bleeding, tortured, and tormented body was represented and replicated in various visual media from paintings to textiles. The parishioners encountered these various depictions in the course of the liturgy and in the course of their own devotional actions. The images and objects of the Passion became embodied in the individual and communal piety in the parishes. Suffering was an active, on-going, and repetitive drama that offered a setting for the performance and enactment of devotion. The remains of that devotion give us a glimpse of the full power of the visualised and materialised suffering, and the impact it had on the religious life in medieval Finland.

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**Название статьи.** Вопросы изучения средневекового церковного искусства в Финляндии: Страстной цикл в визуальной и материальной культуре средневековой Финляндии.

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**Аннотация.** Средневековое благочестие создавалось, характеризовалось и визуализировалось через образы и предметы, находившиеся в тесном взаимодействии с религиозной и литургической практикой. Одним из проявлений средневекового благочестия был культ Страстей Христовых, который стал очень популярен в средневековой Финляндии и оказывал влияние на визуальную и материальную культуру всей епархии. Цикл Страстей включался в художественные программы монументальной живописи, а страдания Христа и Его мертвое тело воплощались как в статуях, так и в литургических предметах и тканых изделиях. В статье рассматривается почитание культа Страстей Христовых в средневековой Финляндии и способы, посредством которых оно визуально и материально проявлялось в духовном контексте, а также некоторые сложности, относящиеся к изучению данной темы.

**Ключевые слова.** Средневековое искусство, Финляндия, Страсти Христовы, визуальная культура, материальная культура, поклонение.

**Title.** Challenges in Researching Medieval Ecclesiastic Art in Finland — The Passion of Christ in the Visual and Material Culture of Medieval Finland.

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**Abstract.** Medieval devotion was constructed, defined and made visible with the help of images and objects. Images and objects were thus deeply interconnected to devotional and liturgical practices. One of the expressions of medieval devotion was directed towards the Passion of Christ. The cult became highly popular in medieval Finland and influenced the visual and material culture of the Diocese. The Passion was included in the pictorial programmes of wall paintings and Christ's suffering and dead body was materialized in statues, as well as in liturgical objects and textiles. The article is concerned with the devotion directed to the Passion of Christ in medieval Finland, with the ways it was manifested visually and materially in the ecclesiastic context, and with some of the challenges related to the research of the subject.

**Keywords.** Medieval art, Finland, Passion of Christ, visual culture, material culture, devotion.

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