

‘I AM WELL DONE – PLEASE GO ON EATING’:  
FOOD, DIGESTION, AND HUMOUR IN LATE  
MEDIEVAL DANISH WALL PAINTINGS

Axel Bolvig

*Beer, Butter, Intestines, and Grilled Human Flesh*

TCNE 11. Grant rissee? – The Medieval Comic Presence 2006

**I**esus never laughed or smiled. Holy people behave like Him: they tend to be solemn, austere, and their body language is restricted. They ought in any case to behave like Jesus. But in late medieval Danish wall paintings some holy people rebel, and St Laurence even jokes. He seems to take part in a widespread change in attitudes in the visual language of northern Europe during the fifteenth century. What is more, in Danish wall paintings he is one of the most commonly depicted holy people. In a comprehensive index of the iconographic motifs of Danish wall paintings, the image of St Laurence appears more than one hundred times.<sup>1</sup>

Representative depictions of St Laurence usually show him standing with a grill in his hand.<sup>2</sup> The grill refers, of course, to his martyrdom. In some churches he is depicted lying on the grill surrounded by his tormentors who kindle the fire under the saint. The fire blazes up and the

tormentors use great pitchforks to turn St Laurence over.<sup>3</sup>  
In two cases a scroll adds a linguistic commentary. One  
of the scrolls bears the inscription: ‘MatthŠi Cap. 5 v 44’.  
This inscription refers

1

Axel Bolvig, *Danmarks kalkmalerier* (Copenhagen:  
Politikens, 2002), p. 317.

<sup>2</sup> <[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)> search: laurentius.

3

<[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)> search: 20/74 (Tyvelse  
church); AB/19-15.jpg (Vallensb<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>k church); JB/255  
(Skamstrup church); lund-019-088.jpg (Brunnby church);  
Sigerslevvester-24.jpg (Sigerslevvester church).

to a passage from the Gospel according to Matthew which  
reads: ‘ego autem dico vobis diligite inimicos vestros  
benefacite his qui oderunt vos et orate pro persequentibus  
et calumniantibus vos’ (‘But I tell you, love your enemies  
and

4

pray for those who persecute you’). So, the contents on  
the scroll are an external commentary, expressed not by St  
Laurence but by Jesus according to the evangelist  
Matthew. The other scroll reads: ‘in manus tuas domine

commendo spiritum meum' ('Into your hands, my Lord, I commend my spirit'), indicating

5

words spoken by the saint and addressed to God. So far, the images I have discussed are in no way surprising.

However, in one parish church, Tuse, above the saint on the grill, there are two scrolls with inscriptions indicating the saint's remarks as he was being tortured: 'gratias tibi ago domine jesu christe quod portas celi ingredi merui' ('I thank you my lord Jesus Christ because I have deserved to enter the gate to heaven'); and 'assatus sum commedite' ('I am well done, go on eating') (Fig. 1).

6

These two scrolls refer to The Golden Legend. The first is directed towards God and the second refers to the saint's ironic commentary to the tormentors. The saint's invitation to eat him may be considered to offer an example of black humour.<sup>7</sup> The function of the inscription is a brilliant example of what Roland Barthes calls *relais*. According to Barthes, the interpretation of images can be uncomfortable, what he calls 'la terreur du signe incertain'. Images can be interpreted in a number of ways and an accompanying text can be used to guide the viewer/reader into understanding an image in the way intended by the artist/ author. To avoid multiple interpretations of an image, the linguistic message of

<sup>4</sup> <[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)> search: 9/54 (Mårkølv church). Quotations from the Vulgate are from the Bible Gateway: <<http://bible.gospelcom.net>>. English translations are taken from *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version; Containing the Old and New Testaments Revised* (London: Nelson, 1952).

<sup>5</sup> <[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)> search: Over Drøby-15.jpg (Over Drøby church). These words echo Psalm 31. 5: ‘peccatum meum notum facio tibi et iniquitatem meam non abscondo dixi confitebor scelus meum Domino et tu dimisisti iniquitatem peccati mei semper’ (‘Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God’); and Luke 23. 46: ‘et clamans voce magna Iesus ait Pater in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum et haec dicens exspiravit’ (‘Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last.’)

6

Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. by William Granger Ryan, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), II, 67.

7

Jeannine Horowitz and Sophia Menache, *L’Humour en chaire: le rire dans l’Église médiévale*, Histoire et Sociétés, 28 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1994), p. 22.

Figure 1. Tuse church. St Laurence. 1460–80. All photos  
© Axel Bolvig.

the text can take on the function of *ancrage*, that is, fixing the meaning of the image. But language is not limited to the role of ‘semantic extradition’; its second function — that of *relais* — brings to the viewer/reader complementary and supplementary information, for example the identity of a place or a person. An inscription can therefore comment upon, describe, clarify, or complete an image.<sup>8</sup>

The image itself, with its absurd violence, is grotesque but in accordance with the conventional narrative depiction of saints being tortured. It is in fact an expression of violence in medieval society with its combination of drama, action,

Roland Barthes, ‘RhŽtorique de l’image’,  
*Communications*, 4 (1964), 44–45.

suffering, and entertainment. The motifs of eating, digesting, and food are embedded in the written remark as well as in the image. The irony and humour of the image are expressed in linguistic terms. In a small Danish parish church, centuries before George Berkeley and David Hume, the painter, a certain Isefjordsmesteren, gave his version of the phrase ‘esse est percipi’: the proof of the

saint is in the eating. The same notion is found in Psalm 34. 8: 'Gustate et videte quoniam bonus Dominus beatus vir qui sperat in eo' ('Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him'); and in I Peter 2. 3: 'si gustastis quoniam dulcis Dominus' ('You have tasted that the Lord is good').

The important question which interests us here is whether we can find corresponding humour expressed in the non-discursive visual language. A scroll with its linear statement is a foreign matter: its remark in time exists within an image functioning in space. The different configurations of a non-discursive image interrelate in a way which makes it difficult to transfer Barthes's twin linguistic functions *ancrage* and *relais* to a purely visual function. The image of St Laurence on the grill does not really imply that he considers himself fit for human consumption or that he invites his tormentors to a cannibalistic meal. It is up to the viewer to give the text and image such an interpretation.

Two seminal books on humour, both dating from the end of the twentieth century, challenge the widespread and commonly held view of a solemn and austere late Middle Ages. Both of these works, *L'Humour en chaire* and *Rire au Moyen âge*, convincingly demonstrate how people — both lay and secular — laughed and joked in the centuries preceding the Renaissance.<sup>9</sup> Jeannine Horowitz, Sophia Menache, and Jean Verdon examine rich

written material, of which there is very little left in Denmark, but only peripherally refer to visual material, of which we possess a considerable amount, especially in our wall paintings. Visual material certainly has something to say on the subject.

The imagery of late medieval Danish wall paintings represents a shift in mentality compared to the Romanesque aristocratic period. To a large extent the wall paintings of the fifteenth and first half of the sixteenth centuries constitute the language of the local peasantry in an illiterate society.<sup>10</sup> The religious images refer not just to Scripture but also to a verbal retelling formulated by the ordinary

9

Horowitz and Menache, *L'Humour en chaire*; Jean Verdon, *Rire au Moyen âge* (Paris: Perrin, 2001).

10

Axel Bolvig, 'Images of Late Medieval "Daily Life": A History of Mentalities', *Medium Aevum Quotidianum*, 39 (1998), 94–111.

man.<sup>11</sup> The many other painted subjects that could be labelled 'grotesques' without doubt refer to vernacular speech despite the fact that the wall paintings contain

many Latin inscriptions.<sup>12</sup> We must try to find jokes, ironic commentaries, and surprising remarks expressed visually rather than linguistically. This is my guide in interpreting wall paintings.

The depiction of St Laurence on the grill should not be regarded as an isolated motif. In their inscriptions Danish painters always describe their decoration of a church in the singular, as one picture, despite our modern habit of subdividing their work into several iconographic subjects.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, 'St Laurence on the grill' should be considered alongside various other iconographical subjects within *the* picture that is the total decoration of Tuse church.

Next to St Laurence, in the same cell, the martyrdom of St Erasmus is depicted (Fig. 2).<sup>14</sup> Erasmus is lying on a bed, just as St Laurence lies on the grill. Two tormentors are winding the intestines out of his stomach. The image obviously depicts torture and also suggests notions connected to the stomach: eating, digestion, and food. As I mention above, St Laurence is one of the most commonly depicted saints in the more than one hundred such images. However, we only find the image of St Erasmus in seven churches.<sup>15</sup> Why is a very popular saint depicted alongside a lesser one? What connects these two saints? My answer is: eating, digestion, and food. Stretched on the bed, St Erasmus is smiling. If he had had

free access to speech I guess his remark in a scroll would read: *you have got yards of my intestines, go on stuffing them.*

These two images are situated beneath an image of St George fighting the dragon. The combat takes place in front of a princess and her parents (Fig. 3).<sup>16</sup> The story tells that the dragon demands two sheep to eat every day. When there are no sheep left, the king must offer his daughter, the princess who, in the picture, is waiting to be devoured by the dragon. The image shows how the passing hero saves the princess by slaying the monster; it has, in effect, had its last meal.

11

Axel Bolvig, *Den ny billedbibel* (København: Politikens, 2003), pp. 16–63.

<sup>12</sup> See <[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)> search: droleri.

13

Axel Bolvig, '*H<sup>3/4</sup>c pictura completa fuit per manus*: Om kalkmalerier og rammer', forthcoming.<sup>14</sup>

<[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)>

search: 30-3/ 77, Tuse-36.jpg,  
739-009.jpg (Tuse church).

15

Bolvig, *Danmarks kalkmalerier*, p. 303.

<sup>16</sup> <[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)> search: 30-3/  
76, Tuse-35.jpg, 739-007.jpg, 739-030.jpg  
(Tuse church).

Figure 2. Tuse church. St Erasmus. 1460–80.

In the neighbouring cell on the same lower level we find two images illustrating stories which are quite different from the depictions of St Erasmus and St Laurence. This said, they are closely related to the latter subjects on the connotative level. To the left of the cell we can see an unmarried woman broaching a cask of beer or wine. A devil is helping her hold the barrel so that she can fill a huge jug. Behind the woman another devil is pushing a tap between her legs in order to draw off her fluids into a jug (Fig. 4).<sup>17</sup> The sexual overtone is direct and clear, but the main idea underpinning the image is related to food — wine or beer — and to bodily fluids that could be the result of digestion. The two kinds of fluid are poured into jugs, suggesting that they are intended for consumption. The woman's body is compared to a barrel and her gesture is clearly a sexual one. A linguistic *relais* could read: *Her fluids are well*

*brewed so you can begin drawing them off; or: Tap the woman and get a cordial.*

<[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)> search: 30-3/ 74, Tuse-31.jpg, Tuse-62.jpg, 738-033.jpg, 738035.jpg (Tuse church).

Figure 3. Tuse church. St George. 1460–80.

To the right of this scene a married woman is seen churning butter: she clearly draws the stick up and down into the churn. A devil is helping her in this scene imbued with sexual overtones, one which finds a parallel in an old Danish proverb: *fanden og hans punpestok* ('the devil and his pump rod'). A devil behind the woman has lifted up her skirt to expose her bare buttocks and to have sexual intercourse with her (Fig. 5).<sup>18</sup> The devils' sexual misuse of the woman is closely related to her making food for consumption. Her body is compared to a churn and her bodily gesture seems to invite sexual intercourse. A scroll might read: *The fluid has turned solid but go on using it.*

<sup>18</sup> <[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)> search: 739-029.jpg (Tuse church).

Figure 4. Tuse church. Tapping of wine or beer. 1460–80.

My modest attempt to transfer the visual messages we find in Danish wall paintings into linguistic *relais* demonstrates both the power of images and their lack of linear precision. The last two images discussed above are situated beneath a depiction of damned souls being dragged into the mouth of Leviathan to be swallowed — and consumed? (Fig. 6).<sup>19</sup> Just as the dragon insists on devouring sheep, and finally a princess, so does Satan require the nourishment of damned souls. Each individual image in the two neighbouring cells deals in some way with body, food, and consumption and, since women are involved, with sex. In my male understanding the images are embedded in a Laurentian sense of humour.

<sup>19</sup> <[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)> search: Tuse-29.jpg, Tuse-52.jpg, 738-033.jpg, 738-034.jpg, 739033.jpg (Tuse church).

Figure 5. Tuse church. Churning of butter. 1460–80.

Figure 6. Tuse Church. Mouth of Leviathan. 1460–80.

### *Early Breakfast*

In the parish church of Ěspš there is an action-packed depiction of Adam ploughing which dates from around

1500. He can be seen whipping two horses, one of which is rearing up. An inscription in Old Danish reads: ‘huist hoo fra(m) saa bad Ada(m) val op til ottev<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>rth’ (‘Gee up! gee up! So Adam welcomed the horses to breakfast’) (Fig. 7).<sup>20</sup> After the Expulsion God said to Adam:

ad Adam vero dixit quia audisti vocem uxoris tuae  
et comedisti de ligno ex quo praeceperam tibi ne  
comederes maledicta terra in opere tuo in laboribus  
comedes eam

cunctis diebus vitae tuae

<sup>18</sup> spinas et tribulos germinabit tibi et comedes herbas  
terrae

<sup>19</sup> in sudore vultus tui vesceris pane donec revertaris  
in terram de qua sumptus es qui pulvis es et in  
pulverem reverteris (Genesis 3. 17–19)

(Because you have listened to the voice of your wife  
and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded  
you, ‘You shall not eat of it’, cursed is the ground  
because of you; in

<sup>20</sup> <[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)> search: LOA-  
30DSCN3751.jpg (Espš church).

Figure 7. Espš church. Adam ploughing. Ca. 1500.

pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.)

In the late Middle Ages Adam and Eve have rebelled against God's threats. They behave in fact rather like well-to-do tenant farmers. In this image, both are well dressed and they form a tight nuclear family. Eve is not subordinated to Adam who, in turn, does not work himself to death (Fig. 8).<sup>21</sup>

It is extremely tempting to consider these two linguistic statements within the self-understanding of late medieval peasantry. Long ago God said: *By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread* and, around 1500, Adam answered: *Let's have some breakfast*. Ploughing the land, as seen at Ěspš, has always had implications

<sup>21</sup> Bolvig, 'Images of Late Medieval "Daily Life"', pp. 107–09; Bolvig, 'Contrasts in Time and Space: The Use of the Image-Database "Danish Wall Paintings"', in *Kontraste im Alltag des Mittelalters*, ed. by Gerhard Jaritz (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), pp. 234–35.

Figure 8. Ěspš church. Eve spinning. c. 1500.

associated with ritual, with the earth, and therefore with human fertility. From 3000-year-old petroglyphs to the picture found on the old five hundred kroner Danish banknote, scenes of ploughing have long been ascribed with special significance.

Images are loaded with information. However, in contrast to texts, all of this information is gathered in the same, single syntax. The narrative is created by the viewer's imagination, not by the image itself. And the viewer almost always uses the present continuous tense in his or her narrative: the peasant *is* ploughing.<sup>22</sup> It therefore follows that the local parishioners might easily identify with Adam

— according to their notion of a happy and perhaps defiant life — but not with God's Adam. Even if an inscription is missing in depictions of the motif of the first Labour, we might expect that the viewers of that time, in their linguistic narratives, would inevitably use the *relais* function to refer to their own situation, or rather to their notion of a better life on earth.<sup>23</sup>

### *Transubstantiation and Vice Versa*

In the parish church of Smørum there is a not-too-well-preserved painting from about 1500 representing the Last Supper. This painting is located just above the high altar. Jesus is seated at a table together with his apostles. This

is, of course, their last meal, the one at which the Eucharist was instituted. The image contains a central religious subject: transubstantiation. By using a few words Jesus Christ is able to transform bread and wine into his own body and blood. This is arguably a transformation that nobody really understood. Indeed, in 1536, shortly after the Reformation, his words *hoc est corpus meus* were used in a transformed version, *hokus pokus* (hocus-pocus), by ordinary men and (especially) by conjurers in Denmark. The change from food and drink to flesh and blood was impossible to explain, but it seems to me that in Smørum the notion received a visual commentary which framed the Last Supper. To the right of the table a man is throwing another man over the heads of the seated apostles. On his way down, to the left, a married woman is whipping him (or another man) so hard that he defecates on a man who is himself urinating in a bucket (Figs 9 and 9a).<sup>24</sup> How can these bodily evacuations happen just as Jesus is instituting the Eucharist?

<sup>22</sup> Bolvig, 'Images of Late Medieval "Daily Life"', pp. 95–96.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. <[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)> search: 20/149 (Hyllested church); 28-1/76 (Benestad); sh/ 22, Elmelunde-24.jpg, Elmelunde-25.jpg, Elmelunde-53.jpg,

Elmelunde-100.jpg, Elmelunde-103.jpg (Elmelunde);  
lund-040-005.jpg (FjŠlkinge); Fulltofte-36.jpg (Fulltofta).

24

<[www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/)> search: smŕrum in kirke and nadver (Smŕrum church). Cf. Katrin Kršll, 'Die Komik des grotesken Kšrpers in der christlichen Bildkunst des Mittelalters', in *Mein ganzer Kšrper ist Gesicht: Grotteske Darstellungen in der europŠischen Kunst und Literatur des Mittelalters* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1994), pp. 38–39; and Steen Schjŕdt Christensen, 'Mysterious Images – Grimacing, Grotesques, Obscene, Popular: Anti- or Commentary Images?', *Medium Aevum Quotidianum*, 39 (1998), 72–75.

Figure 9. Smorum church. Last Supper and entertainment.  
c. 1500.

A grotesque *relais* might read: *What is miraculously transformed by the body, the body gives back in a transformed way.* Is it really possible that this image, located over the high altar, in a visual way — that is, in space — demonstrates an evolutionary transformation from bread and wine to flesh and blood and further to faeces and urine — that is, in time? A very badly preserved painting in the church at Lŕjt might well underline the validity of this question. The painting represents a man urinating into a chalice.<sup>25</sup> There are several other images of men urinating and defecating in

Danish wall paintings, but none is so closely related to a depiction of the institution of the Eucharist.<sup>26</sup> If objections were raised regarding such ‘profane’ entertainment at the Holy Supper, the artist could gesticulate and say that the acrobats are performing their obscene play in another room. This comment can be made in the light of a better-known example: in 1573 Paolo Veronese was summoned to appear before the Holy Office because

25

Jens Bruun, *Ligt kirke i ni Ærhundreder* (Aabenraa: Ligt lokalhistoriske Forening, 1997),  
p. 26.

26

Axel Bolvig, *Kalkmalerier omkring Æresund*  
(Copenhagen: Sesams, 2000), p. 146.

Figure 9a. Smørum church. Last Supper and  
entertainment. c. 1500.

of his painting ‘The Last Supper’. The painting contained all kinds of human and animal figures, all of which the Holy Office considered incompatible with the gravity of the subject. Veronese answered that he did it with the idea that these people were outside the room where the supper was taking place.<sup>27</sup>

### *Conclusion*

At the top of the same vaulting at Løft Smørum another figure broadens the references to, or suggestions of, bodily transformation. A grotesque, naked man with a huge mouth is depicted with a large drinking cup in his right hand while, with his left hand, he is gorging himself with something resembling a ham. A closer look at the image reveals that the 'ham' is in fact his own stomach: he is literally eating himself! (Fig. 10). This is a sort of egocentric cannibalistic recycling. The image certainly makes me wonder where he has got the drink from. It would seem problematic to suggest that the image of man who is eating is meant as an ironic commentary on what Jesus is consuming at the table of the Last Supper after having pronounced that the bread is in actual fact his flesh. As far as late medieval Danish wall-painted imagery is concerned, it is tempting to consider the strange scenery accompanying a most holy and inexplicable scene as a bit of fun. The non-discursive image could easily have been clarified by a discursive *relais*. Imitating St Laurence, our man might say: *This is my body* — which, de facto, it is — *I am well done, I will go on eating it: Esse est percipi.*

See my introduction to *History and Images: Towards a New Iconology*, ed. by Axel Bolvig and Philip Lindley (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), p. xxix.

Figure 10. Smørum church. Man eating himself. c. 1500.