

AXEL BOLVIG

Contrasts in Time and Space.

The Use of the Image-Database: Danish Wall Paintings

'Kontraste im Alltag des Mittelalters', Ed. Gerhard Jaritz. 2000

Compared to other European countries Denmark has most and the best-preserved wall paintings. Out of a totality of about 2.000 village churches we have knowledge of painted medieval decorations in nearly half of them.

Many wall paintings have been lost during the past centuries. When in last century we started to uncover the paintings the conservators wanted to get to the original decoration which is the first set of pictures from the Romanesque period in 12th and 13th centuries. Consequently they destroyed some late medieval decorations.

On the contrary today we do not wish to destroy what we find underneath the whitewash. Consequently some earlier paintings are still to be found beneath the latest decorations.

Anyhow we have enough paintings preserved from the Middle Ages to get an impression of a development of motifs, intensity of decoration campaigns, differences between East- and West Denmark, dispersion of motifs etc. This is a main reason for us to establish a database consisting of A. digitised pictures of wall paintings combined with a verbalised index and B. a verbal index of iconographic motifs<sup>1</sup>.

Unfortunately the database containing the pictures of which we till now have scanned 5.400 is not yet complete, but we have a complete index of all known traditional iconographic motifs which amounts to 11.500. By the expression 'traditional iconographic motifs' I mean the motifs that refer to the Bible or well known written source material such as the 'Crucifixion', the 'Nativity', 'Saint George'. This means that alternative or marginal motifs such as devils, grotesques, working scenes, violence, human relationship etc are not (yet) recorded<sup>2</sup>.

On the contrary we are on stable ground when dealing with the traditional iconographic motifs because of their well-known conventional configurations. Using this iconographic index we are able to make quantitative image analysis. It gives us for the first time a working tool for diachronical and synchronical analyses.

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<sup>1</sup> Jesper Jerne Borrild, "Medieval Danish Wall-paintings – an Internet Database", *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 39, Krems 1998, p. 21-36. Ed. Gerhard Jaritz

<sup>2</sup> Concerning the historical background for the 'non-existence' of the marginal motifs see Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge*, 1992. Concerning the Danish tradition see Axel Bolvig, *Bondens billeder – om kirker og kunst I dansk senmiddelalder*, 1994, p. 75ff; Steen Schjødt Christensen, "Mysterious Images – Grimacing, Grotesques, Obscene, Popular: Anti- or Commentary Images?", *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 39, Krems 1998, p. 55-75. Ed. Gerhard Jaritz; Annedorte Vad, "Devils here, there and everywhere", *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 39, Krems 1998, p. 37-54. Ed. Gerhard Jaritz

Today Denmark is a small country. In the Middle Ages it was larger including the southern part of Sweden and South Schleswig. Denmark was divided into 8 dioceses. In the following analyses to a certain extent I have to stick to the dioceses because all traditional indexing use the diocese as the ultimate location of each recorded motif. As it shall be demonstrated later the diocese or the episcopal administration had no or very little influence on the decoration of the local churches. It is much more fruitful to operate with regions defined on basis of social, demographic and economic relations.

Wall paintings differ from other kinds of pictures because they still are located on the very spot where they were painted. Therefore geography is an important factor when dealing with them as a historical source material. Consequently each motif has at least the following information: name of church, local district, diocese, motif, dating, location in the church.

By the name of the church we get the specific geographically located parish and by location in the church we get precise information about where the motif is depicted in a church (e.g. nave, second vault, eastern severy). It is especially the diocese of Odense that creates problems. It consists of several islands<sup>3</sup>. Two of the islands – Lolland and Falster - are geographically located south of Zealand which itself constitutes a diocese. In the whole diocese of Odense 1397 iconographic motifs are registered in the period 1100-1550. 934 of these are located in churches on Lolland and Falster corresponding to 67% of the total amount of motifs. The contrast in decorating activity is even bigger when looking at the motifs. On Lolland and Falster 53 churches display 934 motifs which amounts to 17,6 motif each church. In the rest and the biggest part of the diocese 51 churches display 463 motifs which amounts to 6,5 motif each church.

Combining the complete verbal index with a GIS-system<sup>4</sup> we can form a general view of the dispersion of churches with painted decoration and of the individual indexed motifs. Fig. 1 shows the parishes with decorated churches<sup>5</sup>. It clearly demonstrates that the Great Belt is forming of cultural dividing line between the eastern and the western part of Denmark leaving Lolland and Falster to East Denmark. The statistic use of the index thus contradicts the general understanding, that the episcopal administration had the surveillance of the decoration of the local churches. A wall painted decoration was a local directed phenomenon<sup>6</sup>.

In the following diagrams the islands of Lolland and Falster are put together with the diocese of Roskilde (covering Zealand) and these two islands consequently reduce the diocese of Odense. Fig. 2 displays the diachronical development of churches that got decorations within periods of 50 years. We see a steady increase in the amount of decorated churches 1100-1350, a decrease in the following period and a huge increase from 1400 till 1550 which as a matter of fact means 1536, the year of the Reformation in Denmark. It is natural to combine the decline during the last half of 14<sup>th</sup> century with the demographic, social and economic changes caused by The Black Death but it is not that easy.

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<sup>3</sup> The medieval dioceses of Denmark are shown on our web-site: [www.kalkmalerier.dk/billedbase](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/billedbase)

<sup>4</sup> Geographic Information System

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately till now it has been impossible to get a GIS-map of the relevant part of Sweden and of south Schleswig

<sup>6</sup> Axel Bolvig, *Bondens billeder – om kirker og kunst i dansk senmiddelalder*, 1994

As wall painted decorations were rather cheap we cannot use an economic explanation. If on the contrary a decoration with religious images is an expression of devotion and hope of salvation one should expect an increase of decorations in a period where death tolled amongst people. We still need to give an explanation of this phenomenon.

The diagram on fig. 2 covers the amount of decorated churches of medieval Denmark. As such it hides differences and contrasts between east and west. Fig. 3 displays the development of decorated churches in each diocese in periods of 50 years starting with 1100-1149. The columns 3-8 represent the western part of Denmark. In all the dioceses we notice that the real increase takes place not until the last decades before the Reformation. But we also notice great differences. The diocese of Århus takes the lead. Indeed in the period 1500-1549 (1536) most churches were decorated in this diocese. The diagram also displays that the two eastern dioceses, Lund and Roskilde during the whole period 1100-1500 by far experience the most intense decoration campaigns.

Fig. 4 is a display of the amount of decorated churches in the western part (in front) and the eastern part (behind) of Denmark in periods of 50 years during the whole Middle Ages. It is as mentioned not until the very last decades that the western churches take the lead. If we compare this diagram containing decorated churches with a diagram displaying the amount of indexed motifs (fig. 5) we notice equality between east and west concerning the last decades. This indicates a much higher amount of motifs in the eastern than in the western churches. Again the contrast between east and west demonstrated.

The iconographic index can be used to research in the location within the churches of some mayor motifs. As an example a query on each of the four severies displays the following number: eastern severy: 1422, western severy: 1087, northern severy: 1173 and southern severy: 1064. Fig. 6 shows the dispersion within the four different severies of some of the greatest groups of motifs: the Creation, the Fall, Adam and Eve after the Fall, the Annunciation, the Birth, the Crucifixion, the Day of Judgement, Evangelists and Coat of Arms. It is not surprising that the most depicted motif, the Day of Judgement mainly is to be found in the eastern severies. This is also the case with the Creation and the Crucifixion. The important religious motifs are as expected located in the severies that are orientated towards east, towards the high altar. More interesting is it to notice that a completely secular motif like Coat of Arms also mainly is located in the eastern severies. Quantitatively it equals the Creation and the Crucifixion. The most likely explanation to this phenomenon may be that the secular donors of the painted decorations who are represented through their coat of arms wanted to be placed on the most important severies next to the most important religious motifs. A location in the severies on the western axe is less important. Here the dominant motif is Adam and Eve at work after the Expulsion representing the daily life of ordinary man and woman that means picturing the secular life. As a conclusion a contrast in space between the eastern and the western axe of the churches is clearly demonstrated. It is interesting too to notice that the Fall to a very little extent is represented on the northern severies. Traditionally the northern part of a church is considered as the dark side contrary to the southern side.

It is relevant to show the development in time of the same motifs. Fig. 7 is a diagram showing the dispersion of these motifs within the periods 1350-99, 1400-49, 1450-99 and 1500-49 (1500-36). We see that the Day of Judgement, Evangelist, Coat of Arms and partly the Crucifixion are culminating during the very last decades before the Reformation whereas we notice a small decline concerning Adam and Eve. Unfortunately it is not possible from the material to find out if there is a connection between the motifs culminating at the beginning of 16<sup>th</sup> century – especially between the Day of Judgement and the secular influence documented by the Coat of Arms.

Here I can only hint at some of the explanations to the above mentioned contrasts. In almost every aspect we notice differences between East Denmark and West Denmark during the Middle Ages: Legally, socially, economically, demographically. During the Romanesque period c. 1100-1250 the churches in the West were erected by ashlar of granite and generally they were bigger than their eastern sisters that were erected by stones picked up from the fields. These smaller churches of the East were in this period a real expression of the exclusive private church built by the elite and without doubt reserved for this elite. The bigger churches in the west were elitist too but they had to accommodate a larger group of free landowners.

During the late Middle Ages where the large-scale production collapsed and the system of lessee farms took over we witness a relatively well to do group of peasants that took over the local churches. In spite of a considerable decline in population after the Black Death the churches were enlarged in order to house this new group of peasants. This development resulted in an expansion of the small eastern churches that to a much higher degree were vaulted. And we find the late medieval paintings first and foremost in the vaults.

In the visual world of the wall paintings we find many examples that indicate a close relation between society and imagery. As mentioned in the Romanesque period the eastern churches belonged to a small group of large-scale landowners whereas the western churches generally were erected by smaller groups of landowners. Consequently we do not find an equal dispersion of some specific motifs. The motif depicting a donor standing with a model of the church is an eastern phenomenon<sup>7</sup>. Where normally the donation motifs are located, in the western churches we often find *The Sacrifice of Cain and Abel*. The western churches were often erected not by individual magnates but by a small group of landowners. Therefore the donor motif must have been felt meaningless. *The Sacrifice of Cain and Abel* fitted better as a connotation of donation by a group of benefactors<sup>8</sup>.

Another motif underlines the social difference between east and west. In the Romanesque period *Majestas Domini*, which is God in His glory, was a dominant motif expressing both the notion of the mighty God and the notion of the mighty land-owning magnate. This is stressed by the location of the motif. Some places in the church were of greater religious importance than other places. Contrary to the churches of West Denmark the eastern churches as a rule

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<sup>7</sup> 20 motifs with donors are indexed. The dispersion of the motif between East and West Denmark is respectively: 17 and 3. See [www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/) sh/ 148, 25/ 61, 32-3/ 52, 32-3/ 29, 15/ 181, 15/ 114

<sup>8</sup> [www.kalakmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalakmalerier.dk/) 29-3/ 74, 29-3/ 72, 30-2/ 47, 30-3/ 28, 20/ 78

had apses that were decorated with a *Majestas Domini* motif<sup>9</sup>. The depiction is very similar to its European sisters and of a high artistic standard. This image of the highest ruler is often interpreted as connoting the visual notion of secular power<sup>10</sup>. God surrounded by his Evangelists can on an ideological level easily be interpreted as the prince surrounded by his vassals. This connotative world belongs to the eastern part of Denmark<sup>11</sup>.

In some churches located in the western part of Denmark there are Romanesque wall paintings representing knights in combat. There is disagreement today as to what these scenes refer to: motifs from the Old Testament, the battle between good and evil, specific historical events? It may be that the people of that time saw all these and other motifs in the combat scenes<sup>12</sup>.

At all events, we can also see the combat scenes as expressing the attitude of the land-owning classes to war and combat as part of life. It is interesting to note that these motifs are concentrated in West Denmark where we find a larger and more diversified group of free landowners. Many of the younger sons of these families had to turn to military service.

I shall now leave the east west problematic and turn to some examples of diacronic contrasts within the representation of some motifs. *The first Labour* is one of my favorite motifs. Here we find the ideological world of the social groups that stood behind the paintings. Naturally, it is the farmers who are the descendants of Adam and Eve as far as work is concerned. Their status can perhaps best be defined as that of the producers. But those who worked the soil were not an unchanging group throughout the Middle Ages. From agricultural worker to lessee farmer, from a surplus population to a lack of human resources, is broadly speaking the line of development undergone in the Danish Middle Ages. The picture of life on earth is therefore fashioned very differently in the early and late Middle Ages respectively.

The Romanesque 12th-century portrayal of *The first Labour* in Todbjerg church only shows Adam and Eve<sup>13</sup>. The couple has no children. There is no chair for her to sit on but a rock. No real dress. No relationship is seen between man and wife. They are expelled to the naked nature. They are portrayed as miserable slaves of labour without any mitigating circumstances. Very surprisingly, she is entirely naked. The image cannot be interpreted positively. Its everlasting everyday life is as harsh as God's original words to the two.

In the Late Middle Ages on the other hand the notion of *The first Labour* is quite different. Now we see the child or children and the tenderness. The mother is now sitting in a good chair taking care of the children while spinning, she has returned from the harsh nature. Man, woman and children form a family as suggestions of positive values. Adam and Eve are behaving in direct

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<sup>9</sup> See [www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/) Majestas in motiv

<sup>10</sup> Georges Duby, *Le temps de cathédrales*, 1976, p. 64; cf. Georges Duby, *Art et société au Moyen Age*, (1995) 1997, p. 34

<sup>11</sup> 72 depictions of *Majestas* are known today. 54 belong to the eastern part of Denmark and 18 to the western part. Out of a totality of 114 registered *Majestas*-motifs 102 belong to the period 1100-1300 whereas only 12 belong to the rest of the medieval period 1300-1550

<sup>12</sup> [www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/) 29-3/ 34, 35, 38, 39, 41, 43, 44; 30-2/ 69, 70; 14/ 23, 24

<sup>13</sup> [www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/) 25/ 47

contradiction to God's words. No birth pangs, no submission to the husband, no exhausting work. In reality it is a total disobedience to God<sup>14</sup>.

These distinct contrasts between 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and the late Middle Ages need a short explanation: Like all European countries, Denmark was primarily an agricultural community. A small elite of powerful men, with the king at their head, owned the land. They accumulated vast tracts of land that was worked from their home farms and the many tenant farms. Farm labourers who did not themselves own farms big enough to feed a family worked these large estates. Farm labourers had few rights if any in early medieval Danish society. The system of great estates was based on an increasing population surplus and a constant expansion of cultivated areas. In a period with too high a birth rate children were not valued, so why depict them in spite of the biblical text? In the imagery of these magnates the working lawless population was not valued higher, so why not depict them as working tools in stead of human beings?

This agrarian and social system could only function on the basis of the farm workers' labours, and it was doomed to collapse the moment the population increase changed into a decline. Throughout most of Europe, populations declined drastically during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, primarily on account of visitations of the plague. Today it is calculated that the population fell by between a third and a half, though the fall was unequally distributed geographically. It was in particular the poorest section of the population that suffered from the epidemics, undernourished and wrongly nourished as its members had been.

With the decrease in population, the amount of labour available were reduced too. There was a lack of farm workers. Consequently, the system of large landed estates was gradually changed into a one of lessee farms, in which the landowners made plots available to farmers who took it on lease in return for providing the landowner with part of their production. Throughout most of the Middle Ages, the shortage of lessee farmers was so great that the landowners could not make the leases too demanding. In broad terms, it can be argued that Danish peasants in the 15th century enjoyed the best conditions they have known until last century.

Lessee farmers were not independent, but to a certain extent they could determine their own conditions. The methods of cultivation resulting from the lessee system were based on a considerable degree of co-operation in production, and indeed in many aspects of village life. The farmers took most decisions in their common *things*/moots. Churchwardens were normally selected from among the better-placed farmers. And so it is natural to imagine that many of the initiatives that the wardens undertook with relation to extending and decorating the churches echo discussions and decisions that the farmers were together responsible for. It is within these artistic and social frameworks that we must understand the late medieval wall paintings.

From being the owner of great tracts of land cultivated by farm workers, to owning a large number of scattered plots that were leased to others, was the

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<sup>14</sup> Axel Bolvig, "Images of Late Medieval 'Daily Life': A history of mentalities", *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 39, Krems 1998, p. 107ff. Ed. Gerhard Jaritz. [www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/) 14/ 112, 29-1/ 1, 29/ 90, 9/ 65, 12/ 180

course of development experienced by the upper classes. From being a deeply dependent class of farm workers to being able to decide for themselves as lessee farmers on the manner of cultivation was the course of development for ordinary farmers. In a society of a too high death rate human beings are highly valued. Therefore family life gets central position in late medieval imagery.

Apparently the last example of diachronical contrasts seems contradictory to the development of the depiction of the labourers, the peasants. We find quite the opposite development in the notion of the shepherds. Five depictions of shepherds from different periods of the Middle Ages shall document the change over time. These images display an interesting development from positive to negative connotations connected to this social group.

In Hvorslev church there is a depiction from the first half of 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>15</sup>. Three well-dressed shepherds are sitting in quiet and relaxed attitudes. One is praying, another points at the star. He is wearing a horn shaped like an oliphant. The next example is from the first half of 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>16</sup>. An angel is bringing the happy message to two shepherds, one of which is playing a horn while the other is praying. They too are well dressed and behave nicely. In Høyby church the motif painted 1380 is simplified. An angel is bringing the message to a shepherd who is taking his hand to his head by surprise. He is also dressed in a long gown and wearing elegant pointed shoes<sup>17</sup>. These positive connotations connected to the shepherds disappear in the late Middle Ages. In a depiction from 1450-75 we see an angle approaching two shepherds. One is sitting with a huge stick. The other is playing the bagpipe. Opposite his earlier colleagues his gown is narrow and short. His stockings are hanging loose<sup>18</sup>. Both his appearance and his instrument are negatively connoted<sup>19</sup>. This negative notion is even more radically represented in another wall painting from the same workshop<sup>20</sup>. The shepherds are wearing a stick and playing a bagpipe. They are depicted next to the Birth of Christ. The nearest shepherd, with the loose stockings, is turning his bare buttocks to the holy scene, which is an offensive attitude used by the tormenters that are mocking and torturing Jesus Christ during his Passion<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore they behave more violently and they are represented in the negative profile. During the 15<sup>th</sup> century the shepherds are depicted very negatively. Being the happy, well-dressed and quiet receivers of the message of the birth Jesus Christ at the beginning of the Middle Ages the shepherds are changed to rude badly dressed bagpipe-playing ugly persons that turn their back to Jesus Christ<sup>22</sup>. This is a development completely opposite what happened to the peasants.

As long as the commissioners of the decorations belong to the old freeborn land-owning class the shepherds are depicted in accordance with their religious

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<sup>15</sup> [www.kalkmalerier.dk/ 29-2/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/29-2/) 28

<sup>16</sup> [www.kalkmalerier.dk/ 17/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/17/) 45

<sup>17</sup> [www.kalkmalerier.dk/ 32-1/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/32-1/) 3

<sup>18</sup> [www.kalkmalerier.dk/ 9/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/9/) 34

<sup>19</sup> Dorte Falcon Møller, *Music aloft*, 1996, p. 61ff

<sup>20</sup> [www.kalkmalerier.dk/ 30-3/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/30-3/) 53

<sup>21</sup> [www.kalkmalerier.dk/ 14/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/14/) 52, 14/ 103, 12/ 36

<sup>22</sup> Axel Bolvig, "Images of Late Medieval 'Daily Life': A history of mentalities", *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 39, Krems 1998, p. 102. Ed. Gerhard Jaritz.

iconographic contents as the very first who experienced the birth of Christ. In the late Middle Ages on the contrary the visual language belongs to the better off lessee peasants who despised the shepherds as people who were not included in the local society and who lived together with the animals. Consequently they are declassified compared to the lessee farmers as we saw them represented by Adam and Eve at *The first Labour*.

My last example is a demonstration of contrast within the same pictorial notion. In the wall paintings there are two different ways of depicting Paradise referring to two different texts, the *Creation* and the *Day of Judgement*. The Paradise that God created is filled with animals and trees, it represents nature, the external space with living and acting creatures<sup>23</sup>. The Paradise as the home for the redeemed at the *Day of Judgement* is a building, a castle or a walled city, the internal space filled with souls that are passive<sup>24</sup>. The two different visualisations connote respectively nature versus culture.

The establishment of the image base with the Danish Wall paintings and the creation of a complete index of the iconographic motifs constitute a starting point of a new kind of research in visual source material. For the first time we are able to make quantitative analyses enabling us to find contrasts within the geography of the wall paintings, within the location of the images and within the representation of specific motifs. We can to a certain extent make diachronical and synchronical comparisons. If we succeed in making the image base complete, yes if we should have an opportunity of combining the existing and coming image bases from all over Europe we face a new era in the research of medieval imagery.

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<sup>23</sup> [www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/) skabelse\*

<sup>24</sup> [www.kalkmalerier.dk/](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/) JB/ 00191, JB/ 00118, sh/ 401, sh/ 325, sh/ 216, sh/ 214, sh/ 210, 30-3/ 68, 30-2/ 71, 33-2/ 12, 19/ 24, 14/ 154, 11/ 20, 11/ 12