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**Images of Late Medieval 'Daily Life':
 A History of mentalities**

Speaking of *images of daily life* most historians usually refer to those images that depict scenes from contemporary life. To many historians - as far as they use visual source material at all - images of shoes, ploughs, swords, etc are considered as relevant testimony of aspects of daily life contrary to religious, fabulous, innovative, artistic and decorative images. Shortly as images relevant to *Sachkultur*.

As a matter of fact it is a very narrow attitude relying on traditional methodological ways of thinking. To most historians images are equal or parallel to the written word - as they were centuries ago to Gregory the Great and many others.

From Saint Gregory onwards till today's historians images are treated in the same way as narrative documents - to the research of which we have developed a refined methodological research system. But an image is not a narrative source and as such it cannot narrate anything about what people were doing, where, when and why. To do this we need a discursive communications system and images are non-discursive constructions.

Images are loaded with information. But contrary to the text all this information is gathered in the one and same syntax. It is the task of the historian to create his or her own narration when studying an image. But the narrative is created by the spectator's imagination, not by the image itself or for that matter by the artist.

What we do - as a matter of fact - is to make a description, a translation of what we see depicted.

This description may be of a narrative character. I quote from a description of a picture written by the fourth century Greek Libanius:

"There was a countryside and houses of a kind appropriate to peasant country-people - some larger some smaller. Near the cottages were straight-standing cypress trees. ...The trees, I dare say, offered the peasant a resting-place, with the shade of their boughs and the voices of the birds joyfully perched in them. Four men were running out of the houses, one of them calling to a lad standing near - for his right hand showed this, as if giving some instructions.

Another man was turned towards the first one, as if listening to the

voice of a chief. A fourth, coming a little forward from the door, holding his right hand out carrying a stick in the other, appeared to shout something to other men toiling about a wagon, for just at that moment a wagon fully loaded, I cannot say whether with straw or some other burden, had left the field and was in the middle of the lane. ..." [quotation from Michael Baxandall: Patterns of Intention]. This description is a narrative of some daily life. But it is a story told by Libanius and not by the artist. Our possible use of historical methods by asking if this scenery is historically true or not or if it is corresponding to the material reality of daily life, is directed towards Libanius' use of words and not towards the painter's use of brush, lines and colour. The eyewitness is Libanius and the account is his. What he witnesses is a picture. To *his* account we can apply our methods. The image on the other hand contains a lot of non-linear visual information to which we only can bring meaning by translation to a linear communications system. It is important to stress that other descriptions of the same picture never will be totally like the one of Libanius. My description of any image will differ more or less from your description of the same image.

In another way the description of the fourth-century Libanius differs from most other descriptions of images. He uses the past tense. By this he is making the picture described a piece of source material in a historical space. Other historians or art historians use the present tense, like: "There *is* a countryside...the trees *are* offering shade to the peasants...Four men *are* running out of the house" etc. By this we draw the picture into our own contemporary space and thus making it an a-historical piece of source material.

I am quite convinced that we all gathered here today use the present tense when describing an image.

[**dias: Adam pløjer**]: "A man *is* ploughing with two horses - maybe it *is* Adam after the Expulsion of Paradise - the ploughman *is* rather well dressed wearing a peasant's coat - *do* the peasants really use horses when ploughing - it *is* strange that he *is* working alone with a plough with ploughshare" etc.

In "La chambre claire" Roland Barthes baptised the photograph *it has been (interfuit)* as if the contents was of a historical character. But he too uses the present tense when describing Charles Clifford's photo *Alhambra* thus making it a contemporary narrative.

Our involuntary use of the present tense marks one of the fascinating differences between the discursive text and the non-discursive image. Being a relic of the Middle Ages the image itself (which I

present to you in an analogue form by using a slide) is a historical source. But by presenting its contents of visual information in a non-discursive way and by tempting the spectators to perceive the contents in the present tense its information is of an a-historical character.

And yet we are still convinced that images are invaluable historical source material!

In a way many of the medieval images are loaded with a *narrative* element. Their iconographic motives are often referring to stories told in the Bible or in Saints lives. That is why Saint Gregory the Great and many other learned scholars from the middle ages till today talk about images as the bible of the illiterate. Of course that is nonsense. Medieval images only refer to the stories of bible to those people who already are familiar with the contents of the bible, the saints lives etc. This widespread attitude towards images is only a pretext, an excuse for accepting images in the churches.

Many representatives of the church were completely aware of these conditions. I quote from John of Genoa from late thirteenth century: "Know that there were three reasons for the institution of images in churches.

First, for the instruction of simple people, because they are instructed by them as if by books.

Second, so that the mystery of the incarnation and the examples of the Saints may be more active in our memory through being presented daily to our eyes.

Third, to excite feelings of devotion, these being aroused more effectively by things seen than by things heard"

[quotation from Michael Baxandall: "Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy"].

The first item, that the images were the bible of the illiterate shows the contempt of the literati towards simple people. This clash of interests is well known in today's discussion of the function of TV and comic strips compared to books.

The second item, that images support memory is a widespread understanding in the pedagogical work in our schools.

The third item, that images excite feelings is a well known means in today's advertising, posters, political propaganda, press photos and indeed in our own private photo collections.

In a way there is no difference between the views of Gregory the Great, John of Genoa and other learned medieval writers and the widespread attitude towards images in our own society.

John of Genoa and the many others that wrote about images never mentioned *a fourth item*: the documentary force of an image. This is understandable because medieval people did not think in documentary terms. The word documentation is a relative new invention - often used by historians. And wrongly used when historians ask for depictions of daily life in the Middle Ages. The demands for visual documentation are closely related to the rise and expansion of the photograph. The special kind of mechanic indexicality of a photograph provides it with a documentary ability unknown to other visual means of expression. The passport authorities accept a photo of me but not a drawing even if it is much better.

When I to this paper I use slides. Thoughtless I take it for granted that you accept my slides as a representative documentation of the images represented through the slides. Without protesting you accept the change in size, the change of original context, an inaccurate scale of colours etc.

To sum up:

Medieval images do not narrate anything including the daily life.
 Medieval images do not document anything including the daily life.
 The visual information of an image is neither correct nor incorrect.
 The visual information of an image is of an a-historical character presenting itself in the present tense.

To be historically understandable the visual information of an image must be translated to a discursive system, which is a linguistic system.

Not two translations of the visual contents of an image will be identical.

Where and how do we then find medieval daily life?

[Den rige og den fattiges bøn]

As the feudal medieval society did not function in accordance with Jürgen Habermas' *Öffentlichkeitsmodelle* of the bourgeois society, medieval images did not belong to a specific private or cultural sphere. They were part of a totality consisting of all sides of life. So even the most sacred pictures were part of the daily life.

- Most medieval paintings and sculptures were created by skilled artists belonging to the sphere of production.
- The images were often commissioned or bought by people from many parts of society.

- The intentions behind a commission were partly religious, partly private, partly political, and partly economic.
- The images were exhibited in the churches that belonged to the religious and cultural and partially the private spheres.
- The spectators and users belonged to all parts of society.

Medieval images *are* part of the totality called daily life. They *reflect* a mental conception of daily life. They *form* the mental conception of daily life. As they were part of the fight for the soul of man, they were also part of the fight for the notion of daily life.

What you see here is a slide-projection of a Danish late medieval wallpainting. It is full of visual information, but the narration is mine.

The iconographic classification reads *The Poor and the Rich Man's Prayer*. Iconography corresponds to the function of captions. This caption indicates a kind of mental action of the two men depicted. It does not say for how long, how often, where and when they pray. But the iconographic caption functions as a starting point for the spectators linguistic translation.

A translation from a non-discursive communications system to a discursive system is a matter of personal choice. An image has no indication of where to start and where to end a translation, in which succession the recognizable configurations should be mentioned, which values should be conferred to the configurations, etc. All its information is open, belonging to *space* and not to *time*.

The religious iconography has put a precise conventional contents behind the caption. It was well known to image-users of that time. The poor man - like Lazarus - is thinking of Christ while the rich man is thinking of his worldly goods.

Christ hanging on the cross has it's own caption. It was the most common iconographic sign full of its own connotations. The crucified Christ is the object of devotion of all men. In order to fill up the rest of the caption *The Poor and the Rich Man's prayer* the artist relies on a coded system that is built on analogy to his contemporary society. From the iconographic caption we know - and medieval man knew - that it is a devotional action performed by respectively a poor and a rich man. They are kneeling with their hands raised in prayer. Both positions express a conventional body language known to everyone. Kneeling in a prayer was a daily life routine which implies specific gestures. By kneeling you indicate that you are praying. But it tells nothing of the contents and direction of your prayer.

We know and they knew that the poor man is thinking of Jesus Christ and the rich man is thinking of his worldly goods. That is part

of the verbal story. That is what the lines are showing us. Consequently the two male figures represent a poor respectively a rich man. But do these configurations depict a late medieval poor and rich man? My answer is no. And they do certainly not bring documentation of the dress of the two representing different social groups.

[Martin deler sin kappe med fattige] The poor praying man is depicted in another way than the poor, who receive the half of Saint Martin's cloak. These poor men were the beggars. They belonged to the absolute bottom of society. I here refer to Michel Mollats classification of the poor in his book "The Poor in the Middle Ages"

[Lazarus] And Lazarus too is in a much more pathetic condition. The same classification can be labelled on Lazarus.

[hyrderne på marken] Even the shepherds in the field are more miserably dressed than our poor man. They represented poverty in the countryside.

[Adam i arbejde] He resembles more the local peasants as they are representing Adam dwelling

[sædekornslegenden] or as they are harvesting in the legend of the fast growing grain.

[Keldby] In a way the image shows us a representative of the peasants thinking of Jesus Christ when praying. Did the peasants do that in their daily life? We don't know but that is the ideology of the image.

[Åstrup] What about the rich man then? He is rather modestly dressed. He reminds me of the typical Dane after his meeting with our taxation system.

[de tre fyrster møder døden] Three men on horseback are meeting the Death in the shape of three skeletons. The men are very richly dressed like kings or princes. Of course the image shall tell the spectator that even the mightiest person is nothing confronted with Death. But it also tells us that wealth causes death without blessing. The three men are too occupied by their worldly mortal prosperity. They have hunting and not God on their minds.

[Fanefjord] Exactly as our praying man has his earthly goods on his mind. But he is not dressed like the three horsemen. As a matter of fact he is but modestly dressed. He is neither the nobleman nor the great landowner. It is a well-to-do man thinking of his worldly goods. And he has not much to boast of: some ordinary clothes, a chest probably full of nice things, some beer barrels, maybe a horse and sometimes his house. It is a modest prosperity that diverts his thoughts.

What he is thinking of are obtainable goods. **[ølbygning i Tuse]**

Every farm brewed its own beer and had its own beer barrels.

[Adam pløjer] When ploughing in the images the peasant uses even two horses. **[Adam og Eva i Hjembæk]** The peasant family is wearing nice clothes.

[Tingsted] What we see, is the peasant kneeling indicating a prayer. He is depicted as a modest man kneeling before Jesus Christ. As an industrious man he is thinking of worldly goods that he might be able to obtain. Contrary to the poor man he has something to be grateful of. And is that so bad after all?

[rige mands gæstebud i Fanefjord] If we try to find the peasants' notion of wealth we turn to the iconographic motive: "The Feast of the Rich Man" created by the same workshop which has made most of the scenes of "The Poor and the Rich Man's Prayer". It is a very modest banquet. A man and his wife have paid the rich man a visit. They are sitting all the three at a table without cloth. There is no indication of room and space. No indication of surroundings.

[rigmands gæstebud i Helsingør] Compared with the version of the same iconographic motive in a monastery in the most prosperous late medieval town in Denmark, Elsinore, one is struck by the difference in attitude to the notion of wealth. At Elsinore the rich man is surrounded by two mistresses who are caressing him, four servants who take care of food and drink, four other smaller servants who entertain and play music. They are sitting in a nice room. They are well dressed. Wein, Weib und Gesang. And a lot of it.

[rige mands dødsleje i Helsingør] It is understandable that the rich man of Elsinore on his deathbed is at the mercy of the devils. In the village church on the contrary there is no testimony of the rich man's death. He wasn't rich and consequently his death without visual drama. Why should the devil devote his time to that anonymous, innocent man?

[Judas hænger sig i Fanefjord] In the same parochial church you find visualised what will happen to the man who obtains money in an indecent way. Judas has hung himself and two devils are dragging his soul out of his body. The nouveau rich, the man who has not deserved his money, is doomed to Hell. In spite of the narrative of the Lazarus legend - that you saw just before - the rich man at the table is not leaving his modest comfort in order to go to Hell. He has done nothing wrong. He is just a well-to-do peasant.

[Brunnby] So is my 1997-reading of the late medieval wallpaintings in Denmark. They were mainly ordered and paid by the local

peasantry, they were executed by artists or craftsmen with the same roots. They were meant to be seen and experienced by the same people. They cannot but express the mental world of the inhabitants in an accidental parish. They reflect and they form this rural world.

Another example will underline this hypothesis.

[Jordelivet]

After The Fall God said to Eve:

"I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." (Genesis 3, 16)

To Adam he said, "cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food." (Genesis 3, 17-19)

God set up some severe conditions for the first couple. She should bear under pain and submit to the man. He should work hard on a soil full of stones and weed.

But they did not obey orders in the visual world of their wallpaintings. Eve is sitting in a comfortable chair spinning. She is wearing a nice dress. Adam is digging with a spade. It is not hard labour. He is not depicted as a worn-down labourer. On the contrary he too is well dressed.

Between the two is a small child in a cradle. With her foot the mother is rocking the baby. They form a small family: father, mother and child. No female submission to the man. No painful birth. No hard work. But a careful life and a sheltered existence.

In a way this representation of the verbal contents of the iconographical caption is a clear-cut protest against God. It is the expression of the peasants' ideal conception of their daily life. And if not - the image is part of the forming of such ideal conceptions.

Peasants' rebellions are not always violent.

[Barnedrabet med mødrenes modstand]

The mothers did not give up the care for their children. King Herod ordered his soldiers to kill all babies in Bethlehem. But the women started a counterattack. With their spinning tools they hit the soldiers trying to save the children. Of course they did that. Mothers will always protect their children.

The motive depicts violence towards children. How often have not the inhabitants of small villages witnessed aggressive gangs, violent brawls, rapes etc.

The Massacre of the Innocents is *the* image of violence. It is not more stereotyped than our press photos of fights between police and troublemakers or demonstrators, between Israeli armed forces and Palestinian youths.

I hope not that The Massacre of the Innocents is an image of daily life, but it is an image of violence, of executioners and victims who existed in the daily life.

The men are missing in the defence of the babies. It does not mean that men did not care. The image of The Massacre of the Innocents is not a documentation. Rather it reveals that the small children were under female supervision and care. Some years later the small ones were not children any longer but small grown ups working on the farms and in the fields with a much closer relation to the male world.

Today we try to make ourselves believe that we are visually informed of the things going on throughout the world. But whether it is CNN or our local TV station we see the same kind of images. So-called documentary photos and TV have established a kind of news-iconography as conventional as the religious images of The Middle Ages.

Sitting in front of our TV screens many of us think that we get information of politics, economics, daily life etc. Luckily we forget most of the contents as soon as we switch off or go on zapping. It doesn't matter for tomorrow we will see the same images and so on and on again.

These thousands and thousands of images form our daily life. They are seen all over the world. They create a conform conception of life surrounding us.

In the Middle Ages people did not need the daily input of so-called new pictures. They accomodated to the paintings fixed on the walls. These images belonging to the Christian world were in contents more varied than our news coverage. The Massacre of the Innocents, The First Labour, [Keldby] The Prayer of the Rich and the Poor man vary dependant of their surroundings.

Images constitute some of the best source material to our understanding or our identifying ourselves with the mental world of medieval people.

In the late medieval village church the mental world of the parishioners, of the local peasants, is to be seen overall.