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The adaption of an established European visual language in Denmark during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries

Paper at The University of Hull

By this paper I will try to question traditional historical explanation of art and culture, of artistic influence, and cultural relationship.

I will try to indicate that traditional writings on the subject is bound to last century's idealistic conception of art and culture and to an imperialistic way of thinking which is expressed by the frequent use of a centre-periphery model and finally to the concept that artistic and cultural movements go from an élitist top slowly downwards to a broad illiterate, uneducated vulgar peasantry.

If instead we apply a modern notion of art and culture with its take-off in the expression: 'Art is dead', and if we acknowledge that since the collapse of the colonial empires a centre-periphery way of explanation is unsatisfactory, and if we face that many cultural and artistic movements of succes have developed from the bottom of society – then we should have a chance of looking at medieval artistic influence and cultural relationship through different glasses.

At first I shall give this definition of culture: *the parameter of production of meaning within which social life is taking place and is being continued*. With a starting point in this definition we can divide cultural relations as contacts:

- a. between communities within the same geographic territory
- b. between communities from different geographical territories and countries

These two kinds of relationship correspond roughly to respectively a horisontal and vertical connection. A horisontal connection takes places within people or groupings of the same kind, wether nobility *or* peasantry, clerical *or* secular, men *or* women. A vertical connection takes places between groupings of different positions, wether nobility *and* peasantry, secular *and* clerical, men *and* women.

It is worth mentioning that cultural connection not necessarily corresponds to other kinds of connection such as economic, political and military. And it is also worth mentioning that applying the words *art* and *culture* to medieval society is an anacronism reflecting a bourgeois notion of these subjects as belonging to a separated and isolated sphere in society, which they did not in medieval times.

Today the words *cultural relation*, *connection* and *influence* often connote established contacts between established institutions within organised political and economic systems. In the Middle Ages things looked different. We can divide artistic and cultural influence into two: the organized and the unorganized.

- an organized cultural campaign is produced by a group or an institution. It is directed towards a defined formation of recipients, wether of gender, age, social, political, economic and / or religious status.
- An unorganized cultural relation will be defined as the influences that the recipients are being exposed to and adopt by means of 'accidental' communication within daily life.

This symposium is dealing with relations between different geographic territories and consequently I can rule out the huge subject that covers cultural influence within a specific country or geographic territory, where we find such important issues as up- or down going movements within a specific society. But as it has often been assumed that cultural and artistic ideas and expressions move downwards within a society from an élitist top to the peasantry many years later – so is the conception of cultural influence between countries. It is a widespread notion that Ile de France, the Rhine-district, Lombardy and some other places developed the brilliant art and architecture that gradually inspired other territories, and that the court of Bourgundy created the newest and best fashion that was copied all over Europe. But do these movements correspond to what we have witnessed during history and especially the preceding century? Cultural and artistic means of expression like Woodcut, Printing, Photography, Tango, Jazz, Rock, Film, Cartoons are phenomena that almost have lost their original low-social roots by an overwhelming acceptance from top to bottom of world-society.

Looking at Denmark's relations to the rest of medieval Europe it has been a galvanized understanding that the country belonged to the periphery of Europe. According to a traditional centre-periphery explanation the Danes were the recipients of art and culture from the centres in Northern France, Germany and England. It was a one-way communication.

According to this *empirical* way of thinking the dominant position of the great powers was so big that a small country like Denmark automatically accepted and overtook their view of the world, their philosophy of life, their understanding of art and culture, their egocentric definition of what is good taste and what is bad taste, what is art and non-art. Danish historians and art historians looked at our medieval art through Kipling's glasses. Cultural and artistic migration became a guide for explanation, evaluation and dating. And migration was always a one-way path from the European centres to a northern periphery. They were donors, we were receivers. They produced the supreme art. We made inferior copies or tried to live up to their ideals. Cultural reciprocity did not occur to the minds of our grandparents.

Cultural influence has seldom been looked at as an active political force in itself. Speaking of the Middle Ages it is a widespread notion among historians that cultural influence follows economic and political relationship. But why has art to follow trade, why not the opposite?

It is also generally accepted that cultural and artistic influence is a matter of unproblematic acceptance of the recipients. But was art and architecture generally accepted, say in the Middle Ages? Were new ideas and forms really imported to fill up a widespread need of aesthetic renovation? Is artistic migration only a matter of an unavoidable movement from the qualified to the unqualified or is it perhaps a result of an export of ideology as part of a policy?

And finally is it reasonable to think of cultural impact only in terms of a one-way flow from so-called centres to so-called peripheries? Or do we not have to include reciprocity in cultural matters?

We need to reconsider these attitudes. We need to skip notions of last bourgeois century and try to see if today's artistic and cultural policy can

inspire us to establish a new model for understanding the function of art and the migration of culture between different geographic territories.

Today it is impossible to think in terms of centre-periphery. Too often we have witnessed the enormous force of politically and economically small countries: Vietnam and Somalia towards USA and Afghanistan towards Russia and Serbia against NATO.

Today we are much aware of both the organized and un-organized cultural influence. XXX Johnson has even tried to explain world history as based on clash between different cultures.

An organized cultural policy is often applied on a high political level. Rapprochement between two hostile countries is normally initiated by cultural activities such as exchange. Not long ago USA and Iran

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These questions deal with the writings of historians and art historians during last and this centuries as much as with the situation of a newly Christianized Denmark during 11th-14th centuries. The traditional way of explanation is influenced by the acceptance of a colonialist ideology that has dominated Europe until recently. Denmark was a small country and the colonial empires were big. Today the situation has completely changed. Small European countries are equal or at least influential partners in a European Union, former colonial powers are dependent on cooperation and alliances with smaller partners. Politically, economically and culturally there are no real centres and consequently no peripheries. This new situation has made its imprint on historical thinking of the past.

In my paper I shall try to outline new attitudes towards the interpretation and explanation of the Romanesque art and architecture in Denmark during 12th and 13th centuries. Today we do not entirely accept a centre-periphery model. The more and better access to published material tends to make specific centres disappear. The establishment of databases with written and visual source material on the Internet is *opheve* any conception of centres and dependant peripheries. We have to revise the very many traditional attempts to find connections between pieces of art and architecture in Denmark and in specific centres of neighbouring countries. We must look at cultural activities first in a European secondly in a local, but never in a national perspective. The establishment of image databases without a centres and boundaries consequently shall help this new approach.

In this new light I shall discuss the cultural interrelationships between Denmark and other European countries. The Danes - or more correctly - the small freeborn landowning élite accepted Christianity in 10th and 11th centuries. They used Christian art and architecture in a very self-confident way. The Romanesque art of the period fitted well into the ideology of this élitist class. Unfortunately we do not possess source material to tell us how other classes reacted to this new art and architecture. A likely possibility is that they were only exposed to Romanesque art at a distance. They were not meant to be the recipients of European Christian faith and art. Maybe the lower classes did not care about a Christian ideology which conformed to the landowning rulers. Romanesque art in Denmark looked exactly like art in all other places in Europe but we do not know if it was perceived in the same way. It is difficult to see if and in that case which influences during the Romanesque period went the other way from say Denmark southwards. Did a North European impact expire with the viking expansion?

In *Vita Anskarii* we read that the Danish king allowed the missionary to build a church in Schleswig. By hearing this news the merchants of Hamburg and Dorestad got happy that they without fear could visit the town. Without needing to trust this information it indicates that the spread of architecture and religion formed part of an economic expansion. This commercial aspect can be connected to mission as a kind of cultural imperialism. Why did the merchants not convert to Danish pagan beliefs in order to improve trade? The answer may partly be found in the fact that the source is produced by the church with an interest in underlining mission.

It is interesting to notice that once christianized the élite in Denmark very fast accepted and absorbed the new religious art and architecture. Before the erection of stone-churches wood was used as a building material. The new material is chiefly granite. It indicates that the Danes did not depend on foreign influence but used their own accessible stone material. There is a great difference between the churches in western and eastern Denmark respectively. The materials used and the way they were treated vary greatly, and there is a difference in the average size between the two areas. An artistic difference is also seen in the fact that many of the Jutlandic churches are decorated with granite reliefs, which is not the case in Zealand. All in all we took over an established design of a church but not the material the use of which we developed ourselves. The arrangement of the interior was created with reference to the ideology of the building owner. The nave was fitted with benches let into the walls along the north and south sides, in the central axis of the nave a high podium with steps leading up provided the setting for the font, and in the west end there was special accommodation for the owner of the church and his family. In a church of this kind there was only room for about fifty people, whose attention was directed towards the font and the walls opposite their seats. The churches were thus élitist in only having room for a small section of those living in the parish, that is to say the independent landowners' families. On average there must have been about 500 inhabitants a parish but the interior arrangement of the churches only had room for some fifty. The use and perception of Romanesque imagery must be evaluated in this restrictive perspective. It was accepted without any translation. I shall try to indicate why a very formalistic and static imagery with catholic subjects presumably without problems could function not only in Denmark but all

over Europe. Romanesque art fitted perfectly into the self-understanding of a small powerful landowning ruling class.

The churches had flat wooden roofs, and so the paintings were painted on the walls. The Romanesque wall paintings are static and stiff in expression; there is hardly any movement in the figures. The walls are completely painted out. The motifs are lofty and dignified. In many areas, the choice of motifs differs from those of the Late Middle Ages.

The Romanesque churches had flat wooden ceilings so the frescoes were placed on the walls, first of all in the apse and the chancel but very often in the nave too. Painting on the surfaces of the walls often results in a linear type of visual expression and the motifs are normally of a narrative character referring to biblical subject matter. The pictures are two-dimensional unlike the late medieval paintings on vaults, which in a way are three-dimensional, partially surrounding the spectator. Like Romanesque paintings in other parts of Europe, the walls were decorated in their totality such that the fine background colours completely covered the white plaster.

The figures are depicted in a majestic way in static situations without violent movements. Even if they refer to biblical stories their narrative elements seem frozen or stiffened. They radiate solemnity with their frequent use of frontality. There are but few analogous references to contemporary material society; on the contrary the imagery connotes the self-understanding of the great landowners. There is a close link between style, motifs and the person commissioning the pictures.

Of the 1780 indexed iconographic motifs from the period 1100-1300 some of the most frequently depicted are: Evangelist(s) 126; *Majestas Domini* 102; Apostle(s) 79; Angel(s) 76; Mary 66; Saint(s) 54 St. Peter 49; The Day of Judgement 46; Bishop(s) 36; The Magi 33; St. John 29; Prophet(s) 28; Founder(s) 26; Lamb of God 23; St. Paul 20; The Offering of Cain and Abel 20; The Crucifixion 15; Virtue(s) 15; The Annunciation 13; The Nativity 12; Abraham's Bosom 10. The many depictions of evangelist(s) refer most often to the evangelist symbols surrounding the *Majestas Domini*¹. Therefore, it can be argued that the *Majestas Domini*, i. e. God in His glory, was the dominant motif, expressing both the idea of the mighty God and the idea 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 situation in the west of Denmark, the eastern churches as a rule had apses that were decorated with a *Majestas Domini* motif². 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 visually the notion of secular power³. God surrounded by his Evangelists can on an ideological level easily be interpreted as the prince surrounded by his vassals.

¹ Søren Kaspersen, "Majestas Domini – Regnum et Sacerdotium. Zu Entstehung und Leben des Motifs bis zum Investiturstreit", *ibid.* "Majestas domini – Regnum et Sacerdotium. Das leben des Motifs in Skandinavien während der Kirchenkämpfe unter besonderer Berücksichtigung Dänemarks im 12. Jahrhundert", *Hafnia. Copenhagen Papers in the History of Art*, No 8, 1981, p. 83-146, No 10, 1985, p. 24-72

² See www.kalkmalerier.dk Majestas in motiv

³ Georges Duby, *Le temps de cathédrales*, (1966-67) 1976, p. 64

This connotative world belongs to the eastern part of Denmark⁴. It is interesting to notice that the death of the Lord, the *Crucifixion*, does not appear very often. And in accordance with traditional Romanesque expression, Jesus is not depicted as a dead man⁵. The two most important apostles, *St. Peter* and *St. Paul*, are depicted relatively often. They are the followers of Jesus Christ. He delegated some of his divine power to his trusted men. These two apostles connote the vassals to whom the feudal lord delegated some of his power. Abraham with souls in his bosom at *the Day of Judgement* belongs to the Romanesque period not only in Denmark. This subject, which disappears during 13th century, can also be interpreted as a visualisation of the feudal lord surrounded by and taking care of his vassals⁶.

It is also in the eastern part of Denmark that we find pictures of the church founders, proud men and women handing a church model to God (fig. 1). In Jutland where as a rule a partnership of landowners stood behind the erection and decoration of the churches this motif seems irrelevant⁷. In the same location where we find images of the founders in eastern Denmark, in the west we often find depictions of *The Sacrifice of Cain and Abel*. The two sons of Adam and Eve are richly dressed so they do not represent the peasant and the shepherd; on the secular level they represent the church founders' small community of landowners.

The imagery of Romanesque art is very aristocratic so it was easily accepted by the huge landowners. The expression of power is more accentuated than in the ornamentation of the Viking age. There is no indication of an export to Denmark of this imagery but rather of an import or rather of a participation within an artistic expression common to the élitisk classes all over Europe. Romanesque art is very universal but it is also very exclusive. The majority of the population did not participate in the communication through Romanesque art. We do not know if they opposed to it. My guess is that they were excluded and consequently lived in ignorance of this art.

On the contrary during the late Middle Ages we notice a dividing line between northern and southern Europe. Here Denmark formed part of the development of an artistic expression that is one of the most interesting our history of art.

⁴ 72 depictions of *Majestas* are known today. 54 belong to the eastern part of Denmark and 18 to the western part. Out of a total 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

⁵ www.kalkmalerier.dk sh/ 255 (Råsted church 1125-1150)

⁶ www.kalkmalerier.dk 25/ 141 (Fraugde church 1175-1200)

⁷ 21 depictions of founders are indexed. 16 belong to the eastern and 5 to the western part of Denmark