

AXEL BOLVIG
 The non-written material
 Paper at Leeds 1999

Traditionally History is a text-oriented science. Since the establishment of history as a science during last century philology has been a guiding line for historians. Our methodology has been created in order to research in written source material. Of course do the written material possess qualities that non-written material does not. The linearity of the verbal language offers you possibilities of expressing causalities, dating, identification of where and why etc. Verbal language can be used to express rational thoughts. That is why we depend on it here at this session. On the other hand non-written material might give you insight in the history of mentalities if you exam the intentional expressions and the unintentional connotations. But it can also be used in research of social, demographic and material history.

In the following I shall deal with two kinds of non-written material: architecture and images.

Architecture is defined by having a practical functional purpose – or else it is a monument. A building is a cover for the weather, be it a house, farm, castle or a church. It means that all that deviate from the functional are loaded with meaning. The medieval castle should connote an unforceable mount of stones. Last century's houses expressed the defence of family: *My home is my castle*, today's museums of modern art represent the extreme economic value that art has turned out to be. Look at the typical difference between a historical museum and a museum of art. The former is located in an old building whereas the latter is a piece of modern architecture. And so is the case with even humble church buildings of the Middle Ages.

Pictures do on the contrary possess a means of communication, which has nothing to do with the image itself, say a 15th century depiction of the Crucifixion that took place 14 hundred years earlier. It is another kind of communication, which differs from verbal communication. There is no linearity in images and consequently no grammar. All the meanings of an image are presented in the one and only syntax. The non-linearity of an image can best be used to express emotions. The analogy between picture and depicted enables us to get information of the material life through the spectre of the image-maker.

In this rough outline I will try to demonstrate the use of non-written material first of all as a source of Danish social history but also of the history of mentalities.

The first set of church buildings was erected by timber during 10th and first half of 11th centuries. This material represents Nordic tradition of building in Denmark, but it may also tell us, that the churches were not meant for eternity. The typical period of existence of this kind of wooden buildings is a few decades, which is equal to the lifetime of a generation. Since the second half of 11th century stone as a building material replaced wood. The stone -*Petrus* - represents eternity. Maybe the change of building material is just due to the development of the spread of religion but it is

interesting to notice that to our knowledge stone was not introduced until after mankind had survived the crucial year one thousand.

The typical material in West-Denmark is **ashlars of granite** while in East-Denmark ordinary **raw stones** of granite were used. The squared cut blocks represented the ideal material for church building according to many written evidences. It is amusing to see that in East-Denmark they hid the raw stones behind plaster upon which they drew lines to fake a church erected by ashlar.

The difference in building material between east and west has been much debated in Denmark, which you will hear more about in the next paper. In short my suggestion is that cutting stones was a work for free men. The art demanded a long apprenticeship. In order to avoid a master taking his un-free servant back after having learnt the craft articles for stonecutters in England demanded freeborn apprentices. And so it must have been the case in Denmark too.

The land-owning elite was in east Denmark so small, so exclusive that they could not recruit say stone cutters and consequently under-privileged labourers had to collect from the fields raw stones usable for building. In west Denmark society consisted of a larger group of gentleman farmers, who produced a surplus population to recruit say stone cutters.

[Gjøl, Vinderslev]

So the treatment of building material might indicate a differentiation in the freeborn classes.

The same is the case concerning the size of the churches. This discussion demands a research in the design of the buildings. A normal village church consisted of a **chancel and a nave**. The nave was centred around the baptismal font placed on a high podium in the middle. The west end of the nave had a special accommodation for the church builder and his family. Along the northern and southern walls were built-in benches. This accommodation leaves room for 50-60 persons and no more. Counted in very rough figures a normal parish consisted of about 400-500 inhabitants of which only a few percent had a seat in the church. The arrangement of the interior was very exclusive excluding the huge majority of the population.

[transparenter]

The élitism of the church is underlined by the special accommodation in the west end. A very expressive example we find in **Fjenneslev** church. Like many other eastern churches it got twin towers which signal a church of a magnate. Inside a gallery was erected. It rests on two granite columns. Originally they stem from Egypt and have been used in Roman buildings and later on reused by being transported the long way from central or south Europe to the middle of the Danish island of Zealand. Both the material and the arrangement are significant signs of secular power exposed through a church building.

[dias Fjenneslev]

In the larger churches of West-Denmark we seldom find such architectural expressions. We do not have many evidences of special accommodations in the western part of the nave.

The interesting conclusion of an interpretation in the size of the churches is that the smaller ones erected by raw stones depicted in the field represent the elitist exclusive private chapel.

The bigger churches erected by impressive ashlar of granite are the result of a group of gentleman farmers' joint efforts to erect a building fit for housing their larger community.

This reflection of a difference in the social hierarchy between east and west we also find in the wall paintings of the Romanesque period.

As already shown, in the elitist East Denmark we find depictions of church founders. Proud right up standing men and women handing a church model to God.

[dias]

In West Denmark on the same locations in the churches we find depictions of **The Sacrifice of Cain and Abel**. The two sons of Adam and Eve are certainly not dressed like peasants and shepherds. On the contrary they are richly dressed representing the community of the small society of church founders.

[Dias]

In the late Middle Ages the small eastern churches were expanded. Very often the nave – which is the space for the congregation – was enlarged. And all over Denmark we witness that the build-in benches and the accommodation in the nave for the founders were removed, and the font put into a corner in the west. The result was a considerable expansion of the space of the parishioners.

These initiatives took place after the demographic catastrophes during 14th century, which resulted in a considerable reduction of the population.

Why did people enlarge the nave of the local churches when the population was reduced to maybe the half?

The demographic, social, economic and agrarian changes in 14th century Denmark resulted in the abolishment of large farm production and the establishment of a lessee farming system. The lack of labour meant a social and economic rise of the peasants. The direct and personal connection between manor and church (chapel) evaded as the fields of the landowners were scattered over huge distances.

The care taking of the local churches was turned over to churchwardens elected among the local peasants and consequently representing them. To a great extent these communities took over the churches and of course demanded room for them selves and their families.

So even if the population decreased the congregation grew resulting in a 'democratisation' of church life.

This 'democratisation' of the church during the late Middle Ages is reflected in the imagery on the walls and vaults. Diachronically we notice:

*a growth in the amounts of decorated churches

*a change in typical subjects and

*within the visual expression a growth from a formalised static Romanesque to a realistic vivid folkloristic imagery.

[nu statistikker: A: dekorerede kirker B. antal motiver C. Workbook 1 (motivstatistik) D. Placeringen af motiver]

Majestas Domini surrounded by his evangelists dominates the Romanesque period and it almost disappears after 1250. It is an image of both heavenly and earthly power. The lord surrounded by his vassals.

The Coronation of the Virgin Mary replaces **Majestas Domini**. This change is symbolic in many ways. Mary gets a heavenly position as a queen and the crown emerges as a symbol of power. It can for instance be seen in the depiction of **The Three Magi** who in the early Romanesque period appear as The Wise Men from the East but as crowned kings throughout the rest of the Middle Ages. The Coronation of Mary indicates too a changed position of women in the ideology of the imagery of the period.

As a matter of fact during the period where we find the absolute majority of the coronation of Mary Danish queens rather often governed the country on behalf of their underaged sons. This we do not hear about before and after the one and a half century 1250-1400 - the period of the coronation of Mary.

In the late Middle Ages local peasants took over the administration of the churches in the capacity of churchwardens. The peasants forced their influence upon the life and the decoration of their local parish churches. They made their imprint on late medieval imagery. They made their own idealistic interpretation of Gods harsh admonition to Adam and Eve after the Fall. They visualised a comfortable nuclear family, Eve did not submit to Adam but enjoyed family life and Adam did the ploughing without any effort.

My conclusion is that by utilising the growing access to the visual source material we get possibilities of new and renewed research in many aspects of the Middle Ages.

Let me not forget to remind you of our presentation on the Internet of Danish Wall Paintings. The address is:

[transparent]