

Noëlle L. W. Streeton, Tine Frøysaker, and Peter Bjerregaard, eds,
Sacred Medieval Objects and Their Afterlives in Scandinavia (Brill,
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Review

Resulting from the project 'After the Black Death: Painting and Polychrome Sculpture in Norway', the present book concentrates on the *material biographies* of devotional objects from the medieval North (XI; p. 2). Historians, conservators, material scientists, and museum professionals contributed to both the project and this book. A preface, seventeen chapters, organized in five thematic parts, and a closing index configure it. Numerous images, all duly credited, provide additional information for each chapter. Part 1 concentrates on the original appearance and use of these objects. Part 2 focuses on modern methodological approaches to studying their evolution. The challenges of some of these approaches are discussed in Part 3, whereas Part 4 explores the contemporary use of these objects. Part 5 offers some concluding remarks. In a book as extensive and diverse as this one, it is only possible to comment briefly on a selected number of chapters.

The first chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book. Appearing before the volume's first part, it explores the shifting status of a selected number of medieval Scandinavian objects in the early modern period. It does so by connecting ideological frameworks brought by the Reformation to an active repurposing of devotional objects. The Reformation spurred a discourse that sought to deprive objects of their

agency, or at least erase such a perception, by portraying them as mere remnants of a past era. And so, many devotional objects now stand isolated, removed from their original context and phenomenological functionality. Nöelle Streeton (pp. 4–11) calls for considering both aspects to understand their shifting perceptions and reparations over the centuries. The chapter also explores the complex relationship between tradition, renovation, and the perceived value of devotional objects as historical heritage. Inheritors of such a multiplicity, they have now become museological heritage or achieved the status of ‘art’, which, as Streeton explains, is inherently problematic (p. 25).

The first part of the book (‘Original Object. Original experience’) begins with the second chapter. In it, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Anne Irene Riisøy touch upon the concepts of *blót* and *bæmir* to analyze the continuities and ruptures of divine communication from the pagan to the early Christian period. Their core argument is that *bæmi* substituted *blót* (p. 48) as a set of ritualized practices that made supernatural communications possible while ensuring social cohesion. For the heathens, these practices involved sacrifices, wordy speeches (*langmæli*), worshipping statues, and feasts, whereas Christians worshipped sculptures of saints and employed concise prayers. The authors chiefly locate the performance of these practices in *hof* during pagan times and in churches after the conversion. As divine communication required specialized knowledge, it was primarily performed by kings, chieftains, and earls in pre-Christian times. In Christian times, kings and bishops were the main agents of

divine communication, but other powerful individuals capable of founding churches also played a role in it during the earliest stages. The increasing organization of the church in the following centuries, paradoxically, resulted in a growing popular accessibility to supernatural communication. Notwithstanding the success of Sigurðsson's and Riisøy's argument, some of the secondary discussions (e.g., pp. 45–46; 48) appear overstated, owing to the scarcity of examples, the difficulties inherent in Old Norse written sources, and the seemingly uniform treatment of these sources. In addition, the chapter would have benefited from the inclusion of recent archaeological literature, specifically regarding the debate on *hof*.

Nöelle Streeon and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson turn towards the craftspeople of the far North in the second chapter. They consider how the main actors in the production of devotional objects found a balance between crafting sculptures and respecting ambiguous views and prohibitions against idolatry. The chapter analyzes Old Testament passages as adapted in *Stjórn*, theological writings, sagas, and surviving objects. These reflect that craftspeople 'satisfied desires within wealthy church foundations for resplendent symbolic objects' (p. 65). Their work required a learning process to handle valuable materials, thereby conferring a special status on them. Yet, craftspeople had to juggle the sociological stigmas related to laboring. Not least, the issue of idolatry chased both craftspeople and beholders; copying Byzantine models of the Virgin and Christ protected them from suspicion. It was important to avoid similarities between pre-Christian idols (*Skurðgoð*) worshipped (*blóta*) in pagan times

and images of holy personages (*líkneski*) that could be venerated. The key was crafting 'see-able' (i.e., perceptible) images. A shift had occurred by the mid-fourteenth century, thanks to some theological treatises: polychrome wooden sculptures started to populate Icelandic and Norwegian churches by the late medieval period, while craftspeople began producing original images of local saints. Crafters justified their actions in prologues to art-technical treatises that emphasized their virtuosity and purity of mind.

The same authors explore these treatises in the fourth chapter to examine the mindset surrounding the making of images in the far North during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The chapter transcribes, translates, and comments on the treatises 'Image Making' (*Líkneskjusmíð*) and 'To Paint on Wood' (*Að mála upp á tré*). These texts show that Icelandic and Norwegian craftspeople worked in similar ways on images that fed directly into northern Latin Christian practices. The treatises allow the authors to argue that craftmaking practices were already well-established in northern Europe by 1300 (p. 91). Bishops' cartularies (*máldagar*) from Skálholt and Hólar, for the period c. 1320 to 1500, additionally testify to the presence of a great deal of craftspeople in Iceland and Norway. The chapter concludes with an interesting reflection on the existence of a North Sea network that enabled craftspeople to operate at multiple locations. Although both treatises offer specific and impressive details, the omission of others (quantities, materials, and tools; pp. 100–04), the distance between ideal instructions and real working conditions, and the plausible unavailability of

materials despite trade networks, may call for caution when inferring how craftspeople operated.

The sixth chapter is a good example of the second part, 'Ageing Gracefully?', which centers around conservation and non-invasive research on late medieval objects. The chapter focuses on the late medieval sculptural group of Saint Anne with the Virgin and Child located at the Collection of Norwegian Antiquities at the University of Oslo (#C23312). This sculpture was damaged by image-breakers, who aimed to prevent spiritual interactions through the object, and was later repaired and repainted. However, the lack of documentation regarding provenance and reparations prevented a coherent understanding of the piece (pp. 164–65). The sculpture was treated between 1932 and 1933, removing secondary interventions and some gilded effects. The use of new imaging and surface methods, along with consultation from the repairer's notes, has now offered an enhanced understanding of the original polychromy and of the changes that have occurred over time. These results underscore the importance of interdisciplinary research to understand medieval working practices and interactions between devotees and objects.

The third part, 'Interrogating Materials. Decoding transformations', concentrates on challenges associated with contemporary conservation. Authored by Aoife Daly and Jørgen Wadum, Chapter Nine explores the possibilities offered by new, non-invasive dendrochronological methodologies to study late medieval polychrome sculptures and altar objects made of composite polychromed oak boards

(pp. 287–91). In addition to dating most objects, this effort has provided new, impressive interpretations about their provenance, late medieval trade, material choices, and working techniques.

In Chapter Twelve, Jørgen Wadum considers the subjectivities and complexities inherent in the observation and study of ancient objects. These challenges arise from the very objects themselves, which carry symbolic values that should be considered either for research or exhibition purposes. One of the merits of the chapter is that it moves beyond the lens of historical art towards the broader, complex, and contested concept of heritage. The author presents a wonderful plea to think of objects as ‘living heritage’, with their nuances, resignifications, and potential future trajectories, and encourages an interdisciplinary collaboration informed by this concept. Although it does not tie directly with the previous chapters, one cannot think of a better end to this part of the book.

Part 4 — ‘Becoming medieval heritage’ — embraces the concept of heritage to review museum exhibitions in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. In Chapter Fifteen, Karoline Kjesrud offers an overview of the main ideas that have configured the permanent exhibitions at the Museum of Cultural History of the University of Oslo. Evolving from a ‘cabinet of curiosities’ mindset towards ideas of nation-building, to later being dominated by an academic, stylistic, and artistic (or aesthetic) approach, the exhibitions have played an important role in shaping Norwegian cultural memory. Today, the narrative has adopted a heritage perspective to offer

anthropologically relatable narratives for our present (pp. 493–96). The changing attitude towards these objects as exhibition ‘agents’ demonstrates the extent to which the concept of heritage is a contested one.

Karl Christian Alvestad continues exploring such complexities in Chapter Sixteen. The chapter explores the ideological influence of German Romanticism on Norwegian romantics and the long-lasting conflation of Romanticism, the medieval past, and a growing nationalistic approach to history. The Norwegian state and private enterprises have spurred this linkage to this day, using medieval symbols. Recent far-right cooptations of such symbols, the author argues, have nuanced and tarnished the popular appeal they once garnered, except for Saint Olaf (pp. 520–23). The chapter concludes with an appropriate call for caution towards heritage as a narrative maker.

Chapter Seventeen is the last, and hence, conclusive, part of the book. Elina Gertsman links some concepts discussed in the other chapters through the Borre cross (#C6130). The piece conveys multiple views about Scandinavian late medieval objects. It was enmeshed in a complex European cultural network, and yet, it is particularly local. The cross lacks the image of Christ, aligning with the ideas forbidding *Skurðgoð*, while conveying a halo of transcendence and omnipresence linked to the Christian ethos of *bæni*. Non-invasive research on this object also serves to consider the potential and pitfalls of these methodologies. The chapter concludes the book with an apt reflection: interdisciplinarity requires collaboration and critical reasoning. As this

book illustrates, the latter is fundamental for exhibited heritage, given its socio-political contingencies.

The merits of a book should be evaluated through its results. For this reason, I would like to conclude by returning to the first pages. The preface states that this project has 'led to new insights into human-material interactions, new interpretations of their changing appearances, and new understandings of the impact of changing locations and priorities within museums' (XI). As shown here, this statement is not an exaggeration. I would argue that this is partly a result of moving beyond traditional narratives based on the history of art to instead focus on the craftspeople. Although the book succeeds in distancing itself from an 'artistic' approach to instead favor interdisciplinarity (p. 25), some chapters, especially those in the first part, lack a broader perspective. It seems as if the authors could have enhanced their overall approach had they considered parallel lenses and theories. However, as the first chapter states (p. 3), the volume avoids theorizing about object agency or engaging with current archaeological narratives. No explanation is given for such avoidance, and the present reviewer cannot help thinking about an omission that could have brought alternative and pertinent insights to ponder over, especially in chapters five and twelve. In addition, given that Old Norse terms are not standardized throughout the book, an initial note on spellings would have been welcome. Despite this criticism, the book offers a stimulating analysis of the conditions under which late medieval craftspeople in the far North operated, an essential — but sometimes overlooked —

theme. It also presents up-to-date methodologies for understanding these objects and an interesting discussion on their status as living heritage. No doubt, this book will become essential for any scholar interested in the many aspects related to sacred Scandinavian medieval objects.

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