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LOST VALUES & UNUSED POSSIBILITIES IN THE MEDIEVAL CHURCHES IN GOTLAND

INTRODUCTION

There are 92 medieval parish churches and about 15 medieval church ruins on the island of Gotland. The diocese of Gotland has the highest density of well-preserved medieval churches in the region of the Baltic Sea. The churches were mainly built in stages during the 12th, the 13th and the first half of the 14th centuries. Those days, especially during the 12th and 13th centuries, Gotland, as the lock in the middle of the Baltic Sea, was extremely rich. All ships had to pass Gotland and the whole population of Gotland was involved in business all around the sea. (Figure 1). The Hanseatic League with modern bigger ships and cogs weakened the unique position of Gotland. In 1361 the Danish king Waldemar Atterdag conquered Gotland. The island became a Danish province in the periphery. Most of the churches are built of limestone, the main stone material in Gotland, but in the south of Gotland there are some churches mainly built of sand stone. In addition to the very specific locally characterized architecture, the Gotlandic churches are famous for their medieval stone portals, medieval art pieces of stone sculptures, medieval art pieces of wooden sculptures, medieval *al secco* wall paintings and medieval stained-glass windows (about 40 squared meters).

Since the Middle Ages the building structure of only two churches (Fårö and Eksta) has been heavily rebuilt. This does not mean that there are no additions in the churches after the medieval age. The Reformation in the 16th century led to many additions, especially, in the interior, for example, new altarpieces, pulpits and benches. But Gotland was a poor county, a Danish one until 1645 when Sweden got Gotland via the treaty in Brömsebro. The Danish used Gotland only as a military strategic island in the middle of the sea. When Gotland became Swedish, it became part of the super powerful Sweden with provinces all around the Baltic Sea. This meant a new economic boom for Gotland. Merchants moved in, especially, from the war-ravaged Germany. Many interiors of the churches were renewed during the end of the 16th and beginning of the 18th centuries.

THE RESTORATIONS DURING THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

Swedish princess Eugenie settled down in Gotland in the middle of the 19th century. Her health was weak so a resort and tourism grew up in her presence. This triggered a new interest in the history and nature of the island. During the second half of the 19th century and beginning of 20th century almost all the churches fa-

ced some kind of restoration measures. Heating systems for wood were installed. The chimneys for the stoves were integrated into the medieval walls. These measures caused extensive damages to medieval wall paintings under the white washed surface. However, in those days a few inspectors and Gotlandic enthusiasts became aware of the richness of the medieval heritage. During the 19th century some other measures were taken to restore the churches, for example, restoring interiors including new wall paintings, altarpieces, benches and organ galleries.

During the decades of 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s almost all of the churches were restored again. As a result of restoration, the 19th century additions were totally or partly destroyed. This was motivated with reference to “poor artistic standard”, “unfitting to the medieval architecture”, or just “ugly”. The fact is that the elite of Swedish architects of about 1900, for example, Johan Fredrik Åbom, Gustaf Lindgren, Isak Gustaf Clason and Ferdinand Boberg, created these additions. But not only the pieces of the 19th century were destroyed, the wall paintings from the 17th and 18th centuries were taken away to uncover the fragments of medieval paintings, even the important benches and organ galleries from the 17th century were torn out. The main idea was to free the medieval rooms from later additions, especially, from the 19th century. Only two churches, Dalhem and Ardre, have fully



Figure 1.

Hejde church. A typical Gotlandic church built in several stages. The nave from about 1230, the choir and the lower part of the bell tower from the middle of the 14th century. The upper part of bell tower from the end of the 14th century. Photo County museum/ Louise Borgö.

preserved the restorations by “architect” Axel Herman Hägg, a Gotland born artist, from the 19th century. (Figure 2, 3).

Most of the organ galleries were removed in the 1950’s and 1960’s and this has caused a lot of problems for the organs and for finding proper storerooms for all kinds of movables. These storerooms could easily have been adapted for the galleries. Nowadays all kinds of different solutions are used to meet these modern needs, and



Figure 2.

Dalhem church is one of the few well preserved interior restorations from about 1900. County museum/ Photo Louise Borgö.



Figure 3.

Dalhem church. The wall paintings were planned and composed by the architect Axel Herman Hägg and painted by the local painter Wilhelm Pettersson. Photo County museum/ Louise Borgö.

they are often a dominating part of the architecture of the historical room.

The comfort of the churches was improved. New heating systems based on oil and, later, on electricity replaced the old systems. The new systems were many times installed in a brutal way partly destroying the benches and other parts of the interiors. However, the benches were renewed or rebuilt in several churches.

The idea of the 1940's to 1970's was to let the medieval architecture dominate in the room, but the churches were built as Catholic churches and were used longer as Lutheran churches so some problems emerged. The architects had to keep the pulpit and the benches or to make the new ones. These restoration processes were not of high quality; the elite of the Swedish architects did not create them. Many values were lost in this process. Gotland has been a diocese with an unbroken historical chain of preserved restoration ideas. On one hand, without these restorations many values might have been preserved; on the other hand, the churches would have reached us in a much poorer physical status.

The Society of Gotlandic churches (*Samfälligheten Gotlands kyrkor*) were established in 1984 to which every parish belongs nowadays. The

society has the right to collect taxes from all the members of the Swedish church in Gotland for the purpose of restoration. These taxes and state subsidies constitute the economic foundation of the society. The responsibility of the society is to maintain the exterior and interior of churches, except for movables such as art pieces. Every year about 5-6 extensive restorations projects and maintenance work are carried out in every church. The extensive restorations would be impossible for a single small parish with only 30-200 members for economical and mental reasons.

However, the issue of heating 92 churches is currently a very important question. It is expensive for small parishes, some of them with just about 100 members, to heat a big medieval stone church. Many of the heating systems in Gotland are about 50 years old and are in great need of renewal. To install new systems always means physical damage to the cultural heritage. In addition, hot and dry climate will usually cause damages after the installation. On the other hand, an unheated church may face great problems caused by humidity.

Lau church was restored in 2003-04. The heating system from the 1950s never functioned properly so the church was kept cold. The in-

terior was dominated by the last restoration. The current restoration has used a new sort of heating. There is an electrical heating system to keep a low ground temperature in the church all the time. The radiator heaters placed in two historically camouflaged chandeliers over the benches are used during services. (Figure 4 - 6). This kind of system is more favourable for the interior than the older systems. The system can also be adapted into the old benches without destroying them.

About 15 years ago architect Mr Jan Utas at the County museum prepared the programs of restorations. He has now established an own company, but he will still be the main architect of the restoration projects. The physical status of the churches has served as priority for restorations, which is a decision made in close cooperation with the representatives of the County administration and the County museum, Mr Joakim Hansson and Ms Louise Borgö respectively. This cooperation has led to restoration ideology whereby the measures are carefully articulated. It is impossible to return to the time before the last restorations but the effort is to make the best out of the situation. All the different periods the church faced are carefully documented in order to preserve them. In case something needs to be removed, it is always properly documented and the fragments are usually stored if possible.

THE WALL PAINTINGS

The medieval churches in Sweden were not whitewashed after the Reformation, as many people would think. The tradition to decorate churches continued past the Reformation. The whitewashed interiors became popular during the 18th century as an aesthetic architectural ideal. (Figure 7). Bäl, a small medieval church, was whitewashed approximately in the beginning of the 19th century. In the middle of the 20th century there were even three different stages of restoration. The result of this turned the church into one of the least interesting interiors in Gotland. In the 1960's test surfaces were opened in the whitewash and the medieval paintings were found. For nearly 30 years the parish wanted to uncover the paintings but the Central Board of Heritage (*Riksantikvarieämbetet*) would refuse. The inspectors and conservators at the Central Board had the opinion that the paintings did not have the "artistic level to be uncovered" or were in too bad condition.

In 1997 the parish asked the County administration for permission to uncover the paintings. A symposium was held a few years later. The



Figure 4.

Lau church was restored in the 1950's. The interior before last restoration. Photo County museum/ Jan Utas.



Figure 5.

Lau church was restored in the 1950's. The interior before last restoration. Photo County museum/ Jan Utas.



Figure 6.

Lau church was restored in the 1950's. The interior under last restoration. The big crowns are for radiating heating. Photo County museum/ Peter Olsson.



Figure 7.

Bäl church. The interior was white washed in the beginning of 19th century. Situation before the last restoration. Photo 1968 County museum/ W. Falck.



Figure 8.

Bäl church. A preserved part of the paintings from 13th, 14th and 15th centuries, at right a St George and the dragon from 14th century. Photo County museum/ Louise Borgö

conservative inspectors at the Central Board had the opinion that we should retain some whitewashed church interiors and leave it for the future generations of conservators and inspectors to discover and uncover the medieval paintings. The other opinion was to uncover the paintings as the parish wanted. (Appendix figure 23). The County administration decided to allow the parish to uncover the paintings under certain conditions. The conditions were straightforward. The parish had to treat the paintings as fragments even if these were badly damaged and could use no or as few as possible retouches. A reference group with members of the parish, the Society of Gotlandic churches, the museum, the County Administration, conservators and other specialists was established. The parish and the Society of the Gotlandic churches accepted the conditions.

The restoration was carried out in 2001-02. All the surfaces on the walls and vaults, except for some reference surfaces, were uncovered down to the medial layers. Interesting paintings from the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries were found under the later layers, partly in very bad condition. Retouches were applied only to the architectural motives at the openings and arches in order to retain the uniformity of architecture. The parish was somewhat shocked about the fragmental paintings at the very beginning but accepted the result. (Figure 8). Bäl church has gained a more interesting and exciting interior than before and has become a very important site for experts and tourism. It is a good example of how lost values can get new forms.

Lost values have been reconstructed in some other churches such as Hamra and Gammelgarn churches. Hamra church in the south of Gotland was renovated in 1792 when a new painted classicistic altarpiece of limestone and new wall paintings were added to the interior. The wall paintings consist of painted draperies in deep red behind the altar, the pulpit and other openings in the choir. It is the amateur painter, former officer Magnus Möller, who painted these and similar paintings in several churches in Gotland. Unfortunately, most of them were destroyed in later restorations, except for the paintings in Ekeby church. The fragments of the paintings in Hamra were discovered during the restoration in 1997. These were in quite poor condition, but the detailed watercolour sketches from the 1890's were found in the Archives at the Central Board of Heritage. The parish was very interested in reconstructing the paintings, but the County museum was very much against the idea. The interior of Hamra church is do-

minated by the details from the 18th century and no medieval paintings or fragments were present on the surfaces for the drapery paintings. (Figure 9 – 11, appendix figure 24). The County Administration allowed for the reconstruction. It was a fully reversible reconstruction that completed the interior. At the same time the original colour surface of the altarpiece was uncovered under two later layers of paint. The original motive of the altarpiece was some angels on a cloud. The problem was the layer between the original layer and the layer from the 1950's. This layer painted in 1892 by local painter Johan Gardelin had another motive – that is, a piety lamb. The motive was situated on one coloured background on the original surface. It was decided to preserve the lamb by painting it in the same colour as the background from the 1790s. The lamb is still visible in the light from the side. Thanks to this decision, the altarpiece got its original motive back, but the 19th century motive was not lost either. In the process of the restoration, reconstructing and conserving the 18th century atmosphere in the church have recovered lost values. This was also an important pedagogical example to show how the medieval church room looked like at the end of the 18th century.

The situation in Gammelgarn church was somewhat similar. This medieval church was badly damaged by fire at the end of the 15th century. Almost all the paintings, except for some fragment from the beginning of the 15th century, were destroyed. The pulpit and the benches from the 17th and 18th centuries dominate the interior. The painted black ribbons in the vaults were part of this interior. The imitation of black-stone borders was painted around the door and window openings and the arches. Behind the pulpit there was a painted drapery. (Figure 12 - 15). These paintings closely related to the furniture were whitewashed in the 1950's. During the restoration in 2000-01 the parish became interested in reconstructing these lost paintings. There were many good photos of the interior. It was easy to find the exact tone of the colour. The conditions for the reconstruction were excellent. The County administration gave the permission with the same conditions as in Hamra – namely, the reconstruction was fully reversible. It turned out that the parish had some difficulties in figuring out the result due to which some members were quite shocked. However, Gammelgarn is the only church in Gotland, which has these black ribbons in full scale and gives a good picture as to how a very usual interior of the beginning of the 18th century looked like.



Figure 9.
Hamra church. The interior from about 1900. The altarpiece is from 1892 and has a painting (lamb) from 1887 by Johan Gardelin. Photo County museum/ E. Erić.

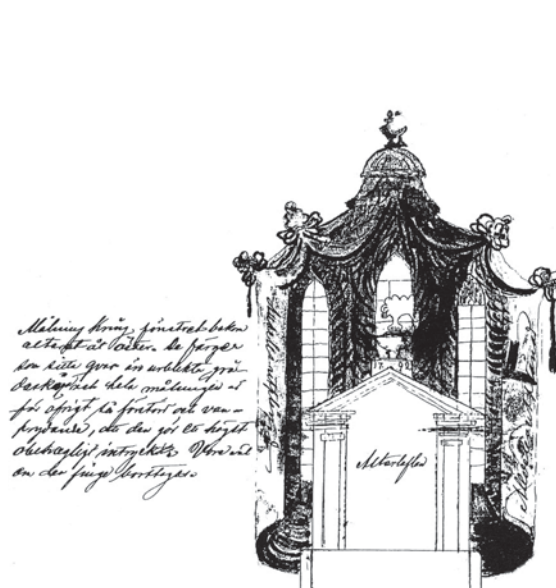


Figure 10.
Hamra church. The drapery drawings from 1892 were documented in 1890's before white washing them. Drawing in ATA.



Figure 11.
Hamra church. During the restoration the lamb was uncovered and in there are also parts of the layer from 1792. C. H. Eliason/ County museum.



Figure 12.
Gammelgarn church. The interior about 1900. Observe the black vault ribbons and imitated stone paintings in the arch. Photo County museum/ E. Erić.



Figure 13.
Gammelgarn church. The interior after restoration in the 1950's. The church was whitewashed. Photo County museum/ Gunnar Svahnström 1958.



Figure 14.
Gammelgarn church. The white washed vaults after the restoration in the 1950's. Photo County museum/ Gunnar Svahnström 1958.



Figure 15.
Gammelgarn church. The vaults after last restoration again painted with ribbons. Photo County museum/ Loise Borgö



Figure 16.
Bro church. The interior about 1900. The floor is from the 19th century. Photo County museum/ E. Erić.



Figure 17.
Bro church. The 18th century floor before last restoration. Photo County museum/ Louise Borgö.

THE MEDIEVAL FLOOR IN BRO CHURCH

Bro church is one of our most popular sites visited by tourists. The church has a very nice interior, the medieval room dominated by the paintings from different periods. In 2000 the interior restoration was initiated due to the bad condition of the beams under the floor. The wooden floor of the 19th century was opened. (Figure 16). There was another floor under this floor in the choir. It was made of stone with many medieval tombstones. However, floor in the nave and tower was wooden. (Figure 17). About 90% of the floor was well preserved and dated to 1303 and 1215 by means of dendrochronological methods.

However, the beams under the medieval wooden floor were in poor condition so the condition of the floor was documented and the floor itself carefully removed. We found the remains of the burials under the floor, dating back to the Viking age and stretching to the 19th century. After repairing the beams, the medieval floor was put back exactly to where it was before. It could not be used as the permanent floor but a copy of the floor was made of wood from the same forests as the original timber. (Figure 18 - 19).

This restoration helped to recover some lost values, for example, the tombstones. We also learned about the ancient techniques from the medieval floor.

THE MEDIEVAL WOODEN SCULPTURES AND OTHER ART PIECES

Gotland is known for the high quality of medieval wooden sculptures and other medieval art pieces. There were certainly many more of them around, but many of them were removed from the holy room up to the attics or even destroyed after the reformation and, especially, during the 18th century. (Figure 20). In the middle of the 19th century many medieval wooden sculptures in the attics were sold to the State Museum of History, the County Museum and even to private persons. Several of the most important masterpieces of medieval sculpture from Gotland are still in the museums.

Today we have another opinion about the sculptures. The majority of the inspectors would like to have the sculptures back in their right context of the churches; however, there are several problems about it. The pieces are usually in quite a bad condition and the clergy would like to have them renovated and repainted. The inspectors consider them as art pieces and the clergy as religious objects. However, most of the mem-



Figure 18.

Bro church. The medieval stone floor found in the choir with several tomb stone that were lost. Photo County museum/ Louise Borgö.



Figure 19.

Bro church. The medieval wooden floor dating 1303. Photo County museum/ Louise Borgö.



Figure 20.

Träkumla church is a good example on having the medieval sculptures back in the right context.

bers of the parish are interested in getting them back so we will see the first cases in Bäl and Bro churches in about a year.

There are also other problems concerned with medieval sculptures. One of them is the climate. The heating systems of the churches are important for controlling the climate and humidity in the churches and, especially, for the painted wooden pieces of art. The problem with heating has been solved by keeping a low temperature all the time, except the services when the temperature is rapidly taken up and afterwards down. The wooden sculptures will not react in such a short time.

The church breakers, thieves and petty thefts also present problems for church art. The medieval wooden sculptures are properly documented, so there should not be a market for them but still there is one. Some amateur collectors buy them and keep them in their secret collections. These make a very hard case for the police to find them. Most of the high quality pieces are stolen when the churches are locked. By breaking in, a gang of church thieves has stolen many medieval sculptures in the north of Sweden. Another kind of thieves is occasional thieves who grab a sculpture because it is easy to steal. It is important to ensure the safety of our cultural heritage by means of different safety systems. Finally, a third kind is petty thefts. It is almost impossible to avoid them, as usually these might be tourists hunting for souvenirs. In my opinion, it is certainly important to be prepared for all kinds of consequences but you can never be 100% sure. The solution does not lie by any means in locking our heritage up in cellars. It is important to keep the pieces in their right context and resort to museums and storages only when there is no alternative way. Removed from their context, the pieces of art will lose part of their value. Therefore, it is essential that all people access and see the cultural heritage in the right context in order to get a deeper understanding of our work and history. We might lose some pieces but who will see them in a cellar?

CEMETERIES

All the medieval churches in Gotland have cemeteries surrounding them, which have been in use since medieval times. In some places they are even surrounded by medieval stonewalls and some medieval tombstones have been preserved. From the 15th to 19th centuries most of the graves had wooden monuments and most of them disappeared due to natural reasons. (Figure 21).

In old photos from about 1900 there are very few monuments and trees on the cemeteries. The parish clerk used the cemetery as a hay-field and it was part of his salary! Since about 1900 the cemeteries have been remodelled into parks with trees, and different kinds of stone monuments have been built on the graves. The tradition to have the surface around the church open has disappeared.

Today the trees are nearly 100 years old, often in poor condition and so huge that they destroy the stonewalls around the cemetery. (Figure 22). The flower decorations are growing on the graves but the monuments are becoming more and more standardized. New customs such as memory places and stones are coming in. You could say that almost the whole tradition from 100 years ago is lost.

But people in our society are more mobile today than they were one hundred years ago. Many people move from the countryside to the cities. They do not like to take care of all kinds of decorations on the graves but the memory places grow in popularity. The old trees have to be removed or renewed. Probably some part of the old tradition will come back with big open areas and a few left monuments but I do not believe we will be back so far as hay-making.

3 AUTHENTICITY

The churches in Gotland enjoy an effective system of maintenance and access economical resources needed for restoration. About every 40-year or perhaps over somewhat longer period a larger restoration project will be carried out in every church. Is this good or too much effort to maintain our churches? The answer is yes and no. Everything, even old buildings, should be in good shape and look nice in Sweden. The exteriors of the churches have never been kept so well as now. The interiors are just beautiful, nice clean paintings and everything "tip top". But do these churches look old? They do partly so, as the patina is missing in most cases and the authenticity is partly lost. We should probably slow down the process to some extent in order not to lose the values. Every time the wall paintings in a church are cleaned, some parts of the original colour and brightness are lost.

On the other hand, there are many technical installations in our churches. It does not concern only the heating systems, but also the electrical appliances of different kinds, lightning conductors and other high-tech installations in the churches. These become out-dated just in some years. The technical installations are the



Figure 21.
Tofta church in 1880'. Observe the small trees. Photo in County museum.



Figure 22.
Toft church. The small trees have grown up and the memory place is a new tradition growing stronger. Photo County museum/ Louise Borgö.

biggest fire hazards in many churches. A fire in a culturally valuable building is always a catastrophe. It is of great importance to establish what kind of techniques we allow in the churches. Permissions are given to install mobile antennas in church towers because it is impossible to discover them from outside and the installation meets all the security requirements. It is noteworthy to mention that in case this were forbidden, a freely standing antenna would have been built quite near a church, destroying the historical landscape. This is a choice between two bad alternatives, whereby the antenna is

used for the common needs and the cultural values are not given the same weight.

These are some aspects of how lost values can be used as possibilities. The major concern is to discover the possibilities and to promote them. With new ideas and methods, we can get more values and knowledge out of our heritage. We need to let a great interest in history ride us on the wave as long as it lasts because there will be days when the interest in history declines. Our heritage is an important factor of getting new opinions and formulating new ideas.

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PRARASTOS VERTYBĖS, NEIŠNAUDOTOS GALIMYBĖS GOTLANDO VIDURAMŽIŲ BAŽNYČIOSE

S a n t r a u k a

Gotlando saloje yra devyniasdešimt dvi viduramžių parapiinės bažnyčios ir apie penkiolika bažnyčių griuvėsių. Baltijos jūros regione Gotlando vyskupija pasižymi didžiausiu gerai išlikusių viduramžių bažnyčių tankumu. Šios bažnyčios statytos daugiausia XII–XIII a. tarpsnyje ir XIV a. I pusėje. Tuo metu, ypač XII–XIII a., Gotlandas buvo nepaprastai turtingas Baltijos jūros prekybinis uostas. Dauguma bažnyčių statytos iš kalkakmenio kaip pagrindinės statybos medžiagos, tačiau pietinėje salos dalyje yra keletas smiltainio bažnyčių. Be šiai vietai būdingos labai specifinės architektūra, bažnyčios garsios viduramžių akmeniniais portalais ir meno kūrinių: akmens ir medžio skulptūra, *al secco* sienų tapyba ir vitražais.

Nuo viduramžių laikų buvo perstatytos tik dvi bažnyčios. Tai nereiškia, kad per tą laiką bažnyčiose nebūta jokių pokyčių. XVI a. reformacija paskatino daugelio papildymų, ypač interjere (pvz., naujų altorių dalių, sakyklų ir suolų), atsiradimą.

Per pastaruosius dvidešimt metų atlikta atliekama sisteminga ir profesionali Gotlando bažnyčių restauracija, atskleista ir surinkta daug naujų faktų. Tai įgalina suprasti ir iš naujo atrasti vertybes, laikytas prarastomis. Straipsnyje pateikta keletas pavyzdžių, kaip dingusios vertybės gali virsti naujomis galimybėmis.

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