

NORDIC, AND EUROPEAN. THE RELIC SHRINE FROM FILEFJELL (NORWAY), 1230–1250

NÓRDICO Y EUROPEO. EL RELICARIO DE FILEFJELL (NORUEGA), 1230-1250

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ABSTRACT

The thirteenth-century relic shrine from Filefjell (Norway), which is now part of the church art collection at the University Museum of Bergen, is among the most richly decorated and best preserved of its type in Scandinavia. The house-shape of the shrine and its supporting structure correspond to that of contemporary relic shrines found across Europe. Its crowning, a tendrilled crest with projecting dragonheads at both ends, however, was drawn from local pre-Christian artistic traditions in Viking woodcarving. Most fascinating are the motifs that decorate the shrine's sides, which are derived from foreign and much older canons, namely that of early Christian (Christ and the apostles) and Classical art (medallions).

KEYWORDS: medieval Norway, medieval art, Christianisation, relic shrines, Classical iconography.

RESUMEN

El relicario del siglo XIII de Filefjell (Noruega), que ahora forma parte de la colección de arte religioso del Museo Universitario de Bergen, es uno de los más ricos y mejor conservados de su tipo en Escandinavia. La morfología de casa que presenta el relicario y su estructura de soporte es análoga a la de otros contenedores de reliquias contemporáneos conservados en toda Europa. Sin embargo, su coronación en forma de zarcillo, con cabezas de dragón que sobresalen en ambos extremos, procede de las tradiciones artísticas locales precristianas de la talla de madera vikinga. Lo más fascinante son los motivos que decoran los laterales del recipiente sacro, que proceden de los cánones iconográficos foráneos y mucho más antiguos, concretamente del arte paleocristiano (Cristo y los Apóstoles) y del arte clásico (medallones).

PALABRAS CLAVE: Noruega medieval, arte medieval, Cristianización, relicarios, iconografía clásica.

The University Museum of Bergen possesses two small copper-clad relic shrines dating from the thirteenth century. The finest and best-preserved one originated from St Thomas's church on the Filefjell, a mountain plateau east of the Sognefjord (Figs. 1–2).¹ This church was located around 1000 m above sea level along the 'Kongevegen' ('King's Road'), one of the most prominent routes between western and eastern Norway.² The now-empty oak casket (h 37.5 cm, w 40 cm, d 14.8 cm), covered in sheets of gilded copper with embossed figurations, may be stylistically dated to 1230–1250. It is not known whose relics were preserved inside originally. The shrine's form and iconography combine Christian motifs with pre-Christian ones, not only from the Nordic Viking past, but also from the Antique roots of European Christianity. In 2019–2020, the shrine travelled across the continent as part of the exhibition *North & South. Medieval Art from Norway and Catalonia 1100–1350*, which was shown in Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, the Netherlands, and the Episcopal Museum of Vic, in Spanish Catalonia.³ The aim of this article in honour of Herbert L. Kessler is to shed light



Fig. 1. Relic shrine from Filefjell (Norway), 1230–1250, frontal view (photo: Universitetsmuseet i Bergen, Svein Skare)

¹ Inv. nr. MA 52.

² On this church, see A. M. HOFF, S. CHRISTIE, O. STORSLETEN, "St. Tomaskirken", www.norgeskirker.no

³ S. KUHN, "Golden House with Dragon Heads", in *North & South. Medieval Art from Norway and Catalonia 1100–1350*, J. KROESSEN, M. LEEFLANG, M. SUREDA (eds.), (exhibition catalogue Utrecht/Vic), Zwolle, 2019, pp. 152–153.



Fig. 2. Relic shrine
from Filefjell
(Norway),
1230–1250,
oblique
view (photo:
Universitetsmuseet
i Bergen, Svein
Skare)

on the remarkable form and iconography of this fascinating shrine, an object that, despite its small size, reveals a large story of how medieval Norway took its place in Christian Europe.⁴

HIGH MEDIEVAL ART IN THE BERGEN ‘KIRKEKUNSTSAMLING’

The origins of today’s University Museum of Bergen go back to 1825, when Wilhelm Friemann Koren Christie (1778–1849) founded the so-called ‘Bergens Museum’.⁵ Amongst other

⁴ In 2020, Stephan Kuhn and I published a different version of this study in Norwegian in the yearbook of the University Museum of Bergen: “Relikvieskrinet fra Filefjell”, *Årbok for Universitetsmuseet i Bergen* (2020), pp. 74–84. I would like to thank Stephan for a fruitful collaboration. Words of gratitude are also due to several other colleagues for their help in identifying the shrine’s iconography: Klazina Staat (Ghent, Belgium), Anja Klöckner (Frankfurt am Main, Germany), John Herrmann (Boston, USA) and Jan Bremmer (Groningen, the Netherlands). James Morrison (Auckland, New Zealand) and Martin Schwarz (Basel, Switzerland) kindly checked the English manuscript.

⁵ On the history of the collection, see H. VON ACHEN, “The Origins of the University – the Bergens Museum Art Collection”, in H. VON ACHEN, E. RØYRANE, S. MEYER, W. WEHUS, *Art and Architecture at the University of Bergen*, Bergen, 2018, pp. 5–118.

roles, Christie had presided over the first Norwegian parliament in 1814, and worked closely with the bishop of Bergen, Jacob Neumann (1772–1848). The museum, which aimed to document and exhibit the natural and cultural history of western Norway, became a major research centre and would constitute the basis for the later University of Bergen (founded in 1946). The museum's collection of church art (in Norwegian: 'kirkekunstsamling') is among the finest of its kind in Europe.⁶ Most objects came from churches in western Norway but their style, techniques and iconography reflect the many cultural connections that tied this region to other areas surrounding the North Sea, such as the British Isles, the Low Countries, and Germany, and even beyond, to the Mediterranean and the Near East. Among the most 'exotic' objects is a bronze aquamanile from Øvre Eiker (Buskerud), shaped like a bulky-bellied duck with a vertical nozzle on its back.⁷ Recent research by Joanna Olchawa suggests a ninth- or tenth-century origin in Persia.⁸

The Bergen church art collection largely took shape during the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century, a period when many medieval churches in Norway were demolished and replaced by larger modern buildings. Christie and Neumann were particularly interested in objects dating from the period before the Protestant Reformation in 1537, which the museum charter of 1833 describes as: "relics of the Catholic cult, such as old altarpieces, crucifixes, relics, reliquaries, images of saints, procession staffs and -banners, censers and holy-water receptacles, baptismal fonts, old gravestones, etc."⁹ Various objects illustrate how a Viking nation gradually became Christian during and after the eleventh century. This is true of several building parts from demolished stave churches, most of which were erected during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.¹⁰ Richly carved door jambs feature intricate patterns of vegetal and animal motifs that were rooted in the existing woodcarving tradition of the Vikings. A stave from the wooden church in Stedje dating from c. 1180 carries a unique dedicational inscription in Runic script in which a woman called Sigrid of Kvåle calls for the remembrance of a certain Arndór.¹¹

Most objects in the Bergen church art collection originally served as liturgical furnishings. In western Norway, a relatively large number had survived the Reformation and three centuries of Protestantism when the museum was founded. Some remained in use after the Reformation, some were repurposed, others tolerated or simply forgotten¹². The absolute

⁶ A catalogue presenting a selection of one hundred outstanding artworks is J. KROESEN, S. KUHN, *The Medieval Church Art Collection. University Museum of Bergen (Norway)*, Regensburg, 2021.

⁷ Inv. nr. MA 148.

⁸ J. OLCHAWA, *Aquamanilien. Genese, Verbreitung und Bedeutung in islamischen und christlichen Zeremonien*, Regensburg, 2019, pp. 228-229.

⁹ H. VON ACHEN, *Norske frontaler fra middelalderen i Bergen Museum/Norwegian Altar Frontals in Bergen Museum*, Bergen, 1996, p. 19: *levninger af den catholske cultus, saasom gamle altertavler, crucifixer, reliquier og reliquies-kriin, helgenbilleder, processionsstave, processionsfaner, røgelses- og vievandskar, døbefunter, døbebækkener, gamle liigstene m.m.*

¹⁰ Of an estimated one thousand examples only twenty-seven of such 'stavkirker' remain standing today. See L. ANKER, J. HAVRAN, *The Norwegian Stave Churches*, Oslo, 2005.

¹¹ Inv. nr. MA 125. The inscription reads: *Penna staf gaf Sigríör á Hvjáli fyrir sálu Arndórs ok sér til muskunnar* ("This stave was given by Sigrid of Kvåle for the soul of Arndór and to her own grace").

¹² On the treatment of medieval objects in Lutheran churches, see J. KROESEN, "The Survival of Medieval Furnishings in Lutheran Churches. Notes towards a Comparison between Germany and Scandinavia", *Iconographisk post. Nordisk tidskrift för bildtolkning/Nordic Review of Iconography*, 3-4 (2018), pp. 4-39.

highlights in the Bergen church art collection are high medieval altar decorations of painted wood.¹³ The museum possesses no less than twenty painted altar frontals from the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries out of a total of around 125 examples preserved across Europe.¹⁴ There are also several carved Virgin-and-Child sculptures, the types and styles of which reflect fashions and influences from overseas, mainly France and Britain. Most of these 'Maddonnas' still possess their original polychromy and some preserve (parts of) the tabernacle shrines in which they were enclosed.¹⁵ From the stave church in Årdal stems a unique wooden altar baldachin from c. 1300, parallels of which are again found exclusively in Catalonia.¹⁶ One important reason for the survival of such high medieval altar decorations is the economic decline of Norway after the Plague of 1348–1349, which preserved them from being replaced by late Gothic furnishings.¹⁷

RELIC SHRINES IN NORWAY AND BEYOND

The relic shrine from Filefjell is a rare object, even in the relatively rich context of medieval church art in Scandinavia. Lutheran church authorities suppressed the veneration of relics after the Reformation, and most shrines in the Nordic countries were confiscated by the Crown for their material value. In Norway, this occurred after the introduction of Lutheranism in 1537.¹⁸ Whereas frontals, statues and retables were often maintained – at least from the outset – as altar decorations, the Reformation put an end to the age-old relationship between altars and relics. The five metal-clad relic shrines preserved in or from Norway therefore only represent a fraction of the original stock. As mentioned above, it is not known whose relics were kept inside the shrine from Filefjell; its decorations provide no indications to that effect, and it is even uncertain whether the St Thomas church was dedicated to the Apostle or St Thomas Becket.¹⁹ The shrine's survival may be due to its ownership passing from the parish into private hands, after the church was abandoned during the Plague in the fourteenth century. It is not known whether it returned to the Protestant church that was re-erected during the seventeenth century close to its predecessor's location, but that seems unlikely.²⁰ The

¹³ This is the topic of Stephan Kuhn's doctoral thesis, which he will defend in 2022. Project title: *High Medieval Altar Decorations in Norway in a European Context (c. 1150–1350)*.

¹⁴ Statistics compiled by Stephan Kuhn. The similarity to painted altar frontals in Catalonia, where more than half of the total European stock is preserved, is striking; see the above-mentioned catalogue *North & South* (footnote 3).

¹⁵ On this object type, including the examples kept in the University Museum of Bergen, see now J. KROESEN, P. TÅNGEBERG, *Helgonskåp. Medieval Tabernacle Shrines in Sweden and Europe*, Petersberg, 2021.

¹⁶ J. KROESEN, "Altar Canopies: Baldachins and Ciboria", in *North & South*, KROESEN, LEEFLANG, SUREDA (eds.), pp. 56–65.

¹⁷ J. KROESEN, "Survivors of a Shipwreck: The Fate of Altar Decorations (1100–1350) in Europe", in *North & South*, KROESEN, LEEFLANG, SUREDA (eds.), pp. 78–83. Nevertheless, the University Museum of Bergen also holds a sizeable section of late Gothic artworks including altarpieces, tabernacle shrines, crucifixes and sculptures that reflect western Norway's embedding into the 'Hanseatic world' with close connections to Germany and the Low Countries becoming apparent.

¹⁸ Ø. EKKROLL, "State Church and Church State: Churches and their Interiors in Post-Reformation Norway, 1537–1705", in A. SPICER (ed.), *Lutheran Churches in Early Modern Europe*, Farnham, 2012, pp. 277–309.

¹⁹ The last-mentioned saint was canonised in 1173, around the same time when the first church was built.

²⁰ This church was torn down in 1808. Several furnishings from its medieval predecessor have survived, including a painted wooden frontal showing the Virgin and Child that is now in the Museum of Cultural History at the

shrine came to Bergens Museum in 1828 as a donation by the local lord (in Norwegian: 'lensmann') Hans Leganger.²¹

The casket takes the form of a house resting on posts at the four corners, with a saddle-back roof crowned by a decorative crest. This basic form was commonly found throughout Europe, as exemplified by numerous miniature St Thomas Becket shrines of enamelled copper which were exported from Limoges to all parts of the continent in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The openwork roof crest of the Filefjell shrine features tendril motifs reminiscent of Viking art, and is topped with an orb and a cross in the middle. Decorative ridges of a similar design run along the rims of the slanted roof sides. At the top, on both sides, sit projecting dragon heads with gaping mouths in elegantly curved forms. These motifs recall the carved dragons that decorated the prows of the longships used by the Vikings on their sea journeys. Dragonheads were also used to decorate the roofs of the stave churches, most famously in Borgund (Sogn og Fjordane) dating from 1150–1200.²² The corner posts are connected by openwork panels showing round-arched arcades that resemble the corridors surrounding many stave churches, called 'svalganger'. The posts and the supporting structure are decorated with twisted motifs and zigzags in dark brown.²³

The Filefjell shrine casket and its embossed figurations closely resemble several further examples that survived the Reformation in Norway. The only shrine that is preserved in its original context is found in the stave church at Hedalen (Oppland) (Fig. 3).²⁴ It is equally covered in plates of gilded copper with embossed figurations, and it is equipped with projecting dragonheads of the same type as in Filefjell; a possible supporting structure is now lost. One side features the martyrdom of St Thomas Becket, which clearly indicates the presence of that saint's relics inside. The pictorial style and the tendril decorations suggest a dating around the middle of the thirteenth century. A thirteenth-century miniature shrine from Våtnås (Buskerud), which is now preserved in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, shows an even closer resemblance to the Filefjell shrine.²⁵ The dragonheads and the embossed figures of Christ and the apostles on both shrines are practically identical. Several copper sheets of a third shrine of the same type were found during excavations on the site of the vanished church of All Saints in the city centre of Bergen.²⁶ Several authors, including Harry Fett and Thor Kielland,

University of Oslo (inv. nr. C 17806) and the wooden baptismal font with a conical lid that is now kept in the stave church of nearby Øye (Oppland).

²¹ KUHN, "Golden House", p. 153. The present church at Filefjell, which dates from 1971, possesses a modern copy of the relic shrine.

²² Intriguingly, they serve as decorations to the *naves* (=ships) of the churches. Recent research on the art and techniques of the stave churches is compiled in K. BAKKEN (ed.), *Preserving the Stave Churches. Craftsmanship and Research*, Oslo, 2016.

²³ Several Norwegian scholars have described this decoration form as 'emaille' ('enamel'); for example, T. KIELLAND, *Norsk gullsmedkunst i middelalderen*, Oslo, 1927.

²⁴ ANKER, HAVRAN, *Norwegian Stave Churches*, p. 238.

²⁵ Copenhagen, Nationalmuseet, inv. nr. 9085. P. GRINDER-HANSEN, "Den gyldne kirke fra Våtnås og oldsagssamlingen fra Det kongelige Selskab for Fædrelandets Historie", in *Arvesølv. Studier fra Nationalmuseet tilegnet Fritze Lindahl*, Copenhagen 2003, pp. 179–192.

²⁶ Now preserved in the University Museum of Bergen, inv. nr. MA 127ab.



Fig. 3. Hedalen (Oppland, Norway), stave church, miniature relic shrine of St Thomas Becket, c. 1250 (photo: author)

assumed that all three shrines were produced by the same workshop, which they localised in the mentioned city, then the Norwegian capital.²⁷

Kielland believed that these miniature shrines were modelled after the monumental tomb-shrine of the holy Norwegian King Olav in the cathedral at Nidaros, modern Trondheim.²⁸ The *Heimskringla*, which contains the Sagas of the Norwegian kings that were written down in Iceland by Snorri Sturluson around 1230, provides a detailed description of St Olav's shrine-tomb, which closely corresponds to the shape of the above-described miniature shrines: "King Magnus let a shrine be made, and he had it decorated with gold and silver and precious stones. This shrine was made like a coffin both in size and shape, but there was an arcade under it and on top of it was a lid, shaped like a roof with a crest and heads on it. There are hinges behind the lid and clasps on the front, which they lock with a key. King Magnus let the sacred remains of King Olav be placed in this shrine".²⁹ The shrine of St Olav did not

²⁷ H. FETT, "Overgangsformer i unggotikens kunst i Norge", *Foreningen til norske fortidsminnesmerkers bevaring. Årbok*, 67 (1911), pp. 1–21, here p. 7; KIELLAND, *Norsk gullsmedkunst*, pp. 98–101.

²⁸ KIELLAND, *Norsk gullsmedkunst*, p. 49.

²⁹ Translation after Ø. EKROLL, *The Octagonal Shrine Chapel of St Olav at Nidaros Cathedral. An Investigation of its Fabric, Architecture, and International Context*, (PhD thesis NTNU University), Trondheim, 2015, p. 81.

survive the Reformation, and further images or descriptions are lacking.³⁰ Øystein Ekroll noted that other similar shrine-tombs may also have served as models for the shrine caskets, such as the ones from Filefjell, Våtnås and Hedalen, including those of St Sunniva in the cathedral of Bergen and of St Hallvard in the cathedral of Oslo.

The shape of the Filefjell shrine corresponds to that of most monumental shrines preserved across Europe, including a wooden example from the first half of the fourteenth century in the church of St Theobald at Saint-Thibault-en-Auxois (Burgundy, France). Holes in the corner posts indicate the original presence of decorative boards in between here too. A concentration of coffin-shaped relic shrines from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is found in the German Rhineland and the Meuse Valley in Belgium and the Netherlands.³¹ Like the Filefjell shrine, these all consist of a house-shaped wooden chest clad with precious metals, the lustre of which was meant to evoke heavenly splendour.³² Their brilliance could be further enhanced by means of applied precious stones, including rare Antique gems. Some, or even most, of these shrines stood on a pedestal placed at right angles behind the altar so that they *de facto* served as altar retables. Such an arrangement can still be seen in its original position behind the high altar of St Severin's Church in Cologne. Here the metal shrine is set in a stone frame with trellises on all sides, which rests on four late-Romanesque columns. Although the present metal shrine dates from 1819 replacing the original one that was destroyed during the French occupation in 1795–1798, the supporting structure dates to the thirteenth century.³³

Most relic shrines were occasionally carried around in processions; the mentioned St Olav's shrine in Trondheim, for example, left the church each year on 29 July.³⁴ This was obviously even easier with smaller shrines such as the described Norwegian examples. The earlier discussed St Thomas Becket shrine in Hedalen is preserved together with its medieval wooden bier – remarkably in a Lutheran context. It could be carried by two people, as shown in a black-and-white photograph from the 1920s.³⁵ Such procession scenes involving small relic shrines are found represented here and there in contemporary sculpture, for example in France, on a capital in the crypt of the abbey church of Saint-Denis, near Paris, and on the northern portal of Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire in Burgundy; both carvings date from the twelfth

³⁰ Analysis in Ø. EKROLL, "The Shrine of St Olav in Nidaros Cathedral", in *The Medieval Cathedral of Trondheim. Architectural and Ritual Construction in their European Context*, M. SYSTAD ANDÅS, Ø. EKROLL, A. HAUG, N. H. PETERSEN (eds.), Turnhout, 2007, pp. 147–207.

³¹ Most are kept in church treasuries in cities including Cologne, Aachen, and Maastricht. On such shrines, see: *Rhein und Maas. Kunst und Kultur 800–1400*, (exhibition catalogue Cologne/Brussels), Cologne/Brussels, 1972; *Ornamenta Ecclesiae. Kunst und Künstler der Romanik*, A. LEGNER (ed.), 3 vols., (exhibition catalogue Cologne), Cologne, 1985.

³² On relics and reliquaries as art works, see: *The Way to Heaven. Relic Veneration in the Middle Ages*, H. VAN OS (ed.), (exhibition catalogue Amsterdam/Utrecht), Baarn, 2001; *Treasures of Heaven. Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, M. BAGNOLI, H. A. KLEIN, C. GRIFFITH MANN, J. ROBINSON (eds.), (exhibition catalogue Baltimore/Cleveland/London), London, 2011.

³³ C. KOSCH, *Kölns romanische Kirchen. Architektur und Liturgie im Hochmittelalter*, Regensburg, 2000, pp. 52–55.

³⁴ A similar surviving custom is found in Maastricht (the Netherlands), where the twelfth-century shrine of St Servatius is still carried around every seventh year, a procession called the 'Heiligdomsvaart' ('sacred parade'); the shrine is known as the 'Noodkist' ('emergency chest'), indicating that its *virtus* was particularly sought after in times of distress.

³⁵ See KIELLAND, *Norsk gullsmedkunst*, pl. 92.

century.³⁶ Regarding the Filefjell shrine, nothing is known about how it may have been placed inside the medieval stave church. Was it displayed permanently or temporarily? Was it connected to the (high) altar, or located elsewhere in the church? Was it ever carried around in procession? Although written records from the seventeenth century reveal – remarkably – that the church at Filefjell attracted many pilgrims, it is not known whether this tradition goes back to the period before the Reformation.³⁷

EMBOSSSED FIGURES OF CHRIST AND THE APOSTLES

The copper sheets that cover the shrine on all sides are decorated with embossed decorations punched into the surface from the backside. Several figures are identical and were probably made using the same template. Both narrow gables feature standing figures, probably apostles, carrying books; one is flanked by decorative bands with smaller enthroned (apostle?) figures inside oval-shaped haloes. The slanted roof sides show rows of standing bare-footed apostles, all framed by trefoil arches on either side of the enthroned and cross-nimbed Christ inside a slightly wider arch in the centre. One side, where all copper sheets are preserved, features a symmetrical pattern with two apostles carrying books to the left of Christ and two further ones in a praying pose without books to his right. The other roof side shows the enthroned Christ placed to the right of the centre, while one of the praying figures is now missing. The motif of Christ amidst the apostles recurs on one of the long sides of the shrine, with the two figures to the left in a sitting posture and the praying figures on the right missing their feet. Remarkably, the same is true of the enthroned Christ in the centre, which clearly indicates that the sheets were not originally meant to be placed here.

The standing and seated figures of Christ and the apostles have an undeniable Classical feel about them that is reminiscent of the sculptured decorations found on early Christian sarcophagi. The beardless, enthroned Christ who appears as a teacher amidst his apostles is a motif often found on the sides of such marble coffins dating from the fourth and fifth centuries. A well-known example is the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus († 359), preserved in the crypt under St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Christ is shown largely in the same pose holding a scripture in his left hand – on the sarcophagus in Rome this is a scroll, on the relic shrine from Filefjell a book (*codex*). The Christ figure on the Filefjell shrine differs from the ancient model in that his right arm is raised before his chest in a speaking gesture. The pleating of the vestments of all standing and seated figures is clearly inspired by Roman models, if not necessarily in a direct manner since Roman pictorial formulas exerted a pervasive and continuous influence over image-making throughout the medieval period. Harry Fett related the suppliant figures to the right of Christ to early medieval Byzantine models.³⁸ However, the trefoil arches characteristic of the late Romanesque and early Gothic style periods clearly indicate the shrine's date in the second quarter of the thirteenth century.

³⁶ A. K. PORTER, *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads*, vol. 10, Boston, 1923, Figs. 1435, 1522.

³⁷ H. LAUGERUD, *Reformasjon uten folk. Det katolske Norge i før- og etterreformatorisk tid*, Oslo, 2018, p. 278. Lauge-rud suggests that the demolition of the church in 1808 was meant to curb ongoing pilgrimage.

³⁸ FETT, "Overgangsformer", p. 7.

MYSTERIOUS MEDALLIONS

The long side of the shrine opposite Christ amidst the apostles features three circular motifs that can be described as medallions as they resemble medals or large coins. The central one features a lion attacking another animal, probably a stag or a deer, on its back. Harry Fett explained this motif as a personification of Good and Evil, with piety (the stag) being assaulted by the Devil (the lion).³⁹ The scenes shown in the other two medallions are identical. We see a naked young man riding on an animal that appears to be a lion while he is looking over his shoulder to a female figure who stands or walks behind him on the left side. In front is a bearded man who leads the lion uphill toward the right. Harry Fett interpreted this scene of persons around and riding a wild animal as a representation of the thousand years of peace described in Revelation, 20.⁴⁰ More recently, other historians, including Anne Marta Hoff, have interpreted the image as a reference to the peaceful kingdom of Heaven described in Isaiah, 11:6: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little child shall lead them”.⁴¹ However, neither of the two Biblical visions can be identified with certainty in the depiction on the medallions.

Even though the scenes shown might leave room for a Christian interpretation, the style and the design are rather reminiscent of profane Classical art. This was already observed by Thor Kielland in 1927, who referred to some possible models for the scene of the lion attacking the stag.⁴² This motif is found on several Antique gems and other small round objects, including coins.⁴³ Glenn Markoe, who studied the motif of the lion attacking a prey animal, demonstrated its spread in the Ancient Near East and Archaic Greece and he related its meaning to divine and heroic triumph.⁴⁴ Therefore, it is not surprising that the motif is frequently found depicted on shields and harnesses. The Getty Villa in Malibu (Los Angeles, USA) preserves two decorative plates (9 x 12.5 cm) of gilded silver, of Parthian origins and dating from the period 225–100 BCE, that originally served as *phalerae* or breastplates worn in battle (Fig. 4).⁴⁵ The Classical motif would have a long afterlife, particularly on Byzantine seals. An illustration of this is a small example (24 mm in diameter) from the tenth or eleventh century that belonged to a man called Akindynos, which is now preserved in the Arthur M. Sackler Museum at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass (USA)⁴⁶. Here the lion is not biting the stag in its back but is instead pouncing on it with both his front claws.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁴¹ Cited from the New King James Version. See HOFF, CHRISTIE, STORSLETEN, “St Tomaskirken”.

⁴² KIELLAND, *Norsk gullsmedkunst*, p. 106 (and endnote 22).

⁴³ Various examples are shown in A. FURTWÄNGLER, *Die antiken Gemmen. Geschichte der Steinschneidekunst im Klassischen Altertum*, Vol. 1, Leipzig/Berlin, 1900: pl. VIII, 44; pl. XI, 22-24; pl. XIII, 36; pl. XXVIII, 23; pl. XXXI, 2, 5, 6; pl. LVII, 1. An example of the latter is a Macedonian coin from the fifth century BCE that is now in the art market. This and other coins can be retrieved via www.coinarchives.com.

⁴⁴ G. E. Markoe, “The ‘Lion Attack’ in Archaic Greek Art: Heroic Triumph”, *Classical Antiquity*, 8/1 (1989), pp. 86–115.

⁴⁵ Inv. nrs. 81.AM.87.2 and 81.AM.87.3.

⁴⁶ Arthur M. Sackler Museum, BZS.1951.31.5.2420. The inscription starts with a cross and reads in translation: “Lord, help your servant Akindynos”.



Fig. 4. Two *phalerae* (harness plates) of Parthian origins, second century BCE, now at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu (USA) (photos: J. Paul Getty Museum Los Angeles, with permission)

BACCHUSRIDE

In Classical iconography, the young man riding a lion, a panther or a tiger is a representation of the triumph of the Greek god Dionysos (=Roman Bacchus), the god of wine, frenzied festivity, and immortality.⁴⁷ The motif of a merry inebriated parade, which is known as the *thiasos*, appears frequently on coins and gems, as well as in floor mosaics and on Roman sarcophagi. An entirely preserved example is found in a mosaic from the second century CE preserved in the Archaeological Museum in El Jem (Tunisia), the ancient city of Thysdrus (Fig. 5). Here we see Dionysos with a large jug in his hand riding on a lion toward the left in the company of two satyrs (male spiritual beings representing fertility) and a maenad (a woman in ecstatic frenzy playing on a cymbal). A gem in the collections of the British Museum shows Dionysos riding on a goat that is equally led by a satyr.⁴⁸ Vivid representations of the *thiasos* or ‘Bacchusride’ are found depicted on several Roman sarcophagi, including one from the second quarter of the third century CE now preserved in the Archaeological Museum of the Phlegrean Fields in Baia (Italy) and a marble example from around 260–270 CE kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Fig. 6).⁴⁹ The latter example shows the god riding on a panther in the company of four young men as personifications of the four Seasons.

The bearded man who leads the parade in the medallions on the shrine from Filefjell may be interpreted as a satyr, even though concrete indications, such as pointed ears, a horse tail or an erection, are lacking (admittedly, the same is true of the mosaic floor in El Jem). The woman at the back is unlikely to be a representation of a maenad, as she does not seem to be

⁴⁷ On this and other particular representations in Ancient art, see the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (LIMC).

⁴⁸ London, British Museum, inv. nr. 1814,0704.1353.

⁴⁹ New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. nr. 55.11.5.



Figure 5. Dionysos (Bacchus) riding a lion accompanied by two satyrs and a maenad on a Roman mosaic floor from the second century CE, now in the Archaeological Museum of El Jem (Tunisia) (photo: Wikimedia commons)



Fig. 6. Marble sarcophagus showing the Triumph of Dionysos (Bacchus), around 260–270 CE, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (USA) (photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art New York, with permission)

in any form of ecstasy and carries no musical instrument. Her peaceful, subdued pose is rather appropriate to the role of the Nysiads, or nymphs of the mythical Mount Nysa, to whose care Zeus had entrusted the education of the young god Dionysos. The Nysiads raised him together with the old satyr-god Silenus (in Greek: Seilenos). Several characteristics of the medallion on the Filefjell shrine seem to support this interpretation: the beard of the man at the front may suggest his advanced age, and the fact that the woman walking at the rear seems to have taken the arm of the young man who is riding on the lion could be taken as a visualisation of her role as educator. Another possibility is that the woman who holds his hand represents Dionysos' wife Ariadne. This Cretan princess married the god after she had been jilted by Theseus, whom she had helped slaying the Minotaur and escaping from the labyrinth. Among the sons she bore to Dionysos was Oenopion, the inventor of wine.

CLASSICAL MOTIFS CHRISTIANISED

Integration of Classical heritage, but reinterpreted in Christian terms, was a common procedure in medieval Christianity. A highly influential example is the *Physiologus*, a

collection of allegorical descriptions of animals that was among the most widespread books in medieval Europe. The core of this work, a Greek treatise from late second or early third century CE, was translated into Latin and gradually expanded with Christian material that was mainly taken from the Bible. The medieval *Physiologus*, for example, interpreted the lion as a symbol of Christ, following the image of the Lion of Judah described in Revelation 5:5. Several gods and other characters from Classical mythology were also given a Christian meaning. Around 1340, the French Benedictine monk Pierre Bersuire wrote an allegorical interpretation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Christian terms. In the introduction, the god Bacchus (Dionysos) is said to represent Christ, and the vines that accompanied him are explained as a reference to his sacrificial blood. The monk argued that the motif of Bacchus riding a tiger was an image of Christ vanquishing the devil and tyranny. Even though Bersuire wrote his text around one hundred years after the shrine from Filefjell was made, it illustrates how Classical motifs lived on in new meanings in medieval Christianity.

Independent of the meaning that medieval believers may have given to the medallions on the Filefjell shrine, or what message was intended by the commissioner, it cannot be denied that the artist was familiar with these Classical motifs. Even though Scandinavia had not been part of the world of Greek-Roman Antiquity, these motifs must have also circulated in the North, for example in the shape of old coins or gems such as those mentioned before. These objects may have reached Norway through trade or as donations, as spoils of war or stolen goods. They also migrated once they had been reused in a Christian context, for example as decorations on liturgical vessels and books, reliquaries, processional crosses, etc. Classical motifs were also copied and integrated into newly made objects. For example, the motif of the lion attacking a prey animal (a stag?) was carved out from the back of the throne in an ivory figure of the enthroned Virgin and Child kept at the Bargello Museum in Florence (Italy).⁵⁰ Such small travelling figures were sculpted in northern France around the middle of the twelfth century and found their way across the Latin West. In summary, it must remain undecided whether the motifs found on the shrine from Filefjell were Christianised in Norway or reached the North already under a Christian guise.

CONCLUSION

The thirteenth-century relic shrine from the stave church of St Thomas on the Filefjell, which is now part of the church art collection at the University Museum of Bergen, is among the most richly decorated and best preserved of its type in Scandinavia. The shape and iconography of the small metal-clad casket are a fascinating illustration of how medieval Norway, once Christianised, found its place in a larger cultural tradition that was rooted both in the Jewish-Christian and Classical traditions. The house-shape of the shrine and its supporting structure corresponds to that of contemporary relic shrines found across Europe. Its crowning, a tendrilled crest with projecting dragonheads at both ends, however, was drawn from local pre-Christian artistic traditions in Viking woodcarving. The motifs that decorate the sides of the shrine were derived from foreign and much older canons, namely that of early Christian

⁵⁰ Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, inv. nr. 88C. I thank Stephan Kuhn for bringing this example to my attention.

(Christ and the apostles) and Classical art (medallions). The latter motifs, which must have reached Scandinavia through wars or trade, were incorporated in Christian art, and thus became imbued with new meanings. In this way, the relic shrine from Filefjell shows us how the Vikings embraced Christianity with its Antique roots on the one hand, while not forgetting their own artistic traditions on the other.