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**A FRAGMENT OF A CHOIR-STALL IN HOLLOLA CHURCH –
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ADDITION TO ART-HISTORICAL MATERIAL**

Abstract

In 1994 the side-panel of a medieval choir-stall was found during archaeological excavations in the stone church of Hollola in southern Häme (Tavastia). Part of the plank bears a carved grapevine motif while the round end plate depicts the face of the dead Christ. The motif is unique in Finland and perhaps elsewhere. The plank belongs to the overall wooden church interior of which several other parts survive. The interior was planned and carved when the church was built in the 1490s.

Keywords: Finland, Middle Ages, Hollola Church, a choir stall, church interior, murals, cult of *Corpus Christi*.

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In 1994 small-scale archaeological excavations were carried out in Hollola Church, in southern Häme. Among the artefacts discovered under the floor-boards in the SW corner of the nave was part of a choir stall (Fig. 1), which had remained mainly intact because of the dry sand layers.¹ The find is exceptional. Large sculpted pieces of wood have not been found in archaeological excavations of churches in Finland.² Moreover, the find itself is a work of art with few counterparts in Finnish medieval wooden sculpture.³

The object is a wooden plank of pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) 113 cm high and weighing six kilograms after drying for some time. It consists of two parts of different shape. The lower part is a rectangular field with plant ornament consisting of a grapevine with grapes in relief (Fig. 2). The grapevine has no leaves and the grapes are somewhat peculiar, with more of an impression of pomegranates. Beneath them is a protrusion with two nail holes for attaching the plank to the rest of the choir stall. The top-most part is a round disc (diameter 41 cm) with four small decorative protrusions at the sides and a round ornament (diameter 7.5 cm) on top. The disc is filled by a man's head *en face* with apparently closed eyes and the mouth slightly open (Fig. 3). The hair is marked by deep parallel grooves in groups of regularly changing direction thus giving

the impression of braids, and the beard is smoothly curved. Behind the head are the arms of a Maltese cross. The other side of the plank is smooth, lacking decoration or traces of attachments to the main part of the choir-stall. No traces of colour were found.

Hollola Church is one of the few churches in Finland with fragments of choir-stalls, pew railings or even a Bishop's pew.⁴ Obviously, the object discussed was part of the overall choir interior planned and carved in connection with the construction of the church or slightly afterwards, perhaps after the vaulting was finished.⁵ The style and techniques of the vine greatly resemble the wood carvings of other objects from the church.⁶

Scholars have long since agreed that the stone church of Hollola, dedicated to the Virgin Mary was built towards the end of the 15th century.⁷ The years between 1475 and 1485 have been proposed⁸ but it seems that this date is slightly too old and that the church most likely was planned and built between 1490 and 1500.⁹ The differences between different opinions are nevertheless minor. The date of the interior of the choir is accordingly ca 1500.

The male head can no doubt be interpreted as that of the dead Christ since it is on the background of a cross.¹⁰ The time after the moment of death is testified by the closed eyes and the slightly opened



Fig. 1. The side-panel of the choir-stall from Hollola Church. Photo Mirja-Liisa Waismaa-Pietarila 1994.

mouth. The style is expressive although not quite convincing anatomically. An especially prominent feature is the low forehead. The head was carved by the same master who made the small figures in the so-called *antemensale* of the main altar of the church.¹¹

The same fixed frontality as in the head of Christ is to be found on two other planks with same function. They are full-scale figures presenting Ss Olav and James the Elder.¹² The former is from the so-called Bishop's pew while the other has not been identified as part of any known pew or choir stall. The newly found plank differs in form and construction from the other two, thus raising the number of hypothetical pews or choir stalls to three.

The presentation of the head of the dead Christ in the context of a choir stall is unique in Finland where fragments of choir stalls have survived in some 10 churches. There seem to be no counterparts in other countries, although a thorough analysis of the material has not been possible. The iconographic background is a future task, and it can be pointed out that no comprehensive study of the wooden interiors of the Finnish medieval churches has been carried out so far. Thus, only a couple observations concerning the church of Hollola is presented here.

First, there is no special cult known in the church as far as the scanty written sources are concerned. Nevertheless, there are parallel images to the Christ's head in other parts of the church. On the above mentioned assumed *antemensale* monstrans is depicted carried by four angels. Inside the fountain, or container of the host, the latter is seen attached into a *lunula*.¹³ Above the doorway to the sacristy a partly demolished mural also depicts a monstrans held by two angels, a plausible interpretation presented by *Tove Riska*.¹⁴ The immediate function of the painting is to point to the sacristy, the place where the holy bread is preserved. In a wider perspective the bread denotes the Holy Body of the Christ, *Corpus Christi* and the related cult around it that was widespread during the Late Middle Ages in Europe.¹⁵

The monstrances are not the only hints to an otherwise unknown cult in Hollola Church. On two of the four choir vaults of the church the face of the Christ with a background of a cross is painted among the other ornaments.¹⁶

Thus, there seem to be grounds to see the head of Christ on a choir stall as a presentation of the liturgical interior of the church enhancing the cult of *Corpus Christi*. On the other hand, there are also other depictions of human figures on choir stalls, as mentioned earlier. This, together with the knowl-



Fig. 2. Detail of the lower part. Photo Mirja-Liisa Waismaa-Pietarila 1994.



Fig. 3. Detail of the upper part. Photo Mirja-Liisa Waismaa-Pietarila 1994.

edge that no other Finnish churches contain such depictions, seems to point to the solution that in Hollola church the planned pictorial programme of the choir interior was different from other churches. This again seems to diminish the value of the above arguments for a cult of *Corpus Christi*.

The problem remains unsolved. Still, there are four different depictions of the same motif in the church that point to a certain direction. In other churches with the same motif it is usually presented only once. The head of Christ is depicted in murals of the churches of Kaarina, Korppoo, Kumlinge, Laitila, Maaria, Perniö and Pyhtää. In the Bridgettine Church of Naantali it is painted above the consecration crosses and in the outer east wall.

NOTES

- 1 Hiekkänen 1994B. See also the reports by Pentti Pietarila, Mirja-Liisa Waismaa-Pietarila and the author in the Archives of the Department of Monuments and Sites, National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.
- 2 Finds of fragments of wooden sculpture are reported from several churches in Finland, viz. Kumlinge, Perniö and Sauvo. The latest find before Hollola was in Kaarina church 1983 (Karin Lehtonen).
- 3 See Nordman 1965.
- 4 Other churches with fragments of wooden interior are at least Kaarina, Kalanti, Korppoo, Mynämäki, Perniö, Sauvo and Taivassalo. Historical notes of vanished choir stalls etc are for example from the church of Maaria and Pohja as well as in several churches of the Åland Islands.
- 5 Ahlström-Taavitsainen 1984. On church interiors see Nilsén 1991.
- 6 On these, see Nordman 1980.
- 7 Kronqvist 1937; Kronqvist 1948; Rinne 1938; Pettersson 1955; Pettersson 1959; Gardberg 1978. – The church was built on the southern slope of a hill the highest point of which is a hill-fort. See Taavitsainen 1982; Taavitsainen 1990.
- 8 Drake 1976; Sinisalo 1985.
- 9 Hiekkänen 1994A; Hiekkänen 1994B.
- 10 Another possibility could be the head of St John the Baptist, but this theme has not a cross as its background. Depictions of the head of St John are rare. The most famous is on a wooden cover of a baptismal font from the church of Pertteli, now in the National Museum. Reutersvärd 1978. In Perniö a seal stamp was found with the head of St John. Taavitsainen 1981.
- 11 Riska 1987.
- 12 Meinander 1908.
- 13 See Källström 1939; Lindgren 1987.
- 14 Riska 1985.
- 15 Swanson 1995.
- 16 The ornaments can be classified among the so-called primitive paintings (ca. 1430–1520). Riska 1985.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- FM = Finskt Museum
 HAik = Historiallinen Aikakauskirja
 HTF = Historisk Tidskrift för Finland
 SM = Suomen Museo
 SMYA-FFT = Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja – Finska Fornminnesföreningens Tidskrift