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SECULARITY AND SPIRIT SITTING SIDE BY SIDE: THE FIFTEENTH-CENTURY PEW-ENDS OF ST ÓLÁV'S CHURCH

SECULARIDAD Y ESPÍRITU SENTADOS UNO AL LADO DEL OTRO: LOS BANCOS DEL SIGLO XV DE LA IGLESIA DE SAN ÓLÁV

Caitríona Spratt[1]

Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore the religious, social, and political reasons for the elaborate decoration of the fifteenth-century pew-ends of St Óláv's church in the Faroe Islands. Óláv Haraldsson was a Norwegian king who made his last stand at the battle of Stiklestad in 1030. The king's sainthood was solidified with his canonisation by the eleventh-century Bishop Grimketel. A growing Norwegian political influence in the Faroes fostered the growth of Christianity. The church of St Óláv was built circa the twelfth century. Inside the church of St Óláv, on the Faroese island of Streymoy, once sat a set of beautifully carved wooden pew-ends. After six hundred years, eighteen of these pew-ends now sit in the national museum in Tórshavn. Their carvings depict various imagery, including escutcheons and religious figures, such as the apostles. The general lack of sources written about the Faroe Islands, as well as the Islands' small population, has led to a lack of research in academia surrounding Faroese history. The carvings and decorations offer information on life in the mediaeval Faroe Islands. With little being written on these bench ends, this article hopes to analyse the religious, social, and political spheres to contextualise and indicate reasons for the pew-ends' decoration in the first place. Ultimately the religious, social, and political contexts of the time are the reasons why these pew-ends were decorated with the carvings that they have.

Keywords: Pew-end, Faroe Islands, Escutcheons, Religious Imagery

Resumen: El objetivo de este artículo es explorar las razones religiosas, sociales y políticas para la elaborada decoración de los extremos de los bancos del siglo XV de la iglesia de San Óláv en las Islas Feroe. Óláv Haraldsson fue un rey noruego que hizo su última posición en la batalla de Stiklestad en 1030. La santidad del rey se solidificó con su canonización por el obispo Grimketel del siglo XI. Una creciente influencia política noruega en las Islas Feroe fomentó el crecimiento del cristianismo. La iglesia de San Óláv fue construida alrededor del siglo XII. En el interior de la iglesia de San Óláv, en la isla feroesa de Streymoy, una vez se sentó un conjunto de bancos de madera bellamente tallada. Después de seiscientos años, dieciocho de estas bancas se encuentran ahora en el museo nacional de Tórshavn. Sus tallas representan varias imágenes, incluyendo escudos y figuras religiosas, como los apóstoles. La falta general de fuentes escritas sobre las Islas Feroe, así como la pequeña población de las Islas, ha llevado a una falta de investigación en el mundo académico que rodea la historia de las Islas Feroe. Las tallas y decoraciones ofrecen información sobre la vida en las Islas Feroe medievales. Con poco escrito en estos extremos de banca, este artículo pretende analizar las esferas religiosa, social

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y política para contextualizar e indicar las razones de la decoración de los extremos de banca en primer lugar. En última instancia, los contextos religiosos, sociales y políticos de la época son las razones por las que estos extremos de los bancos fueron decorados con las tallas que tienen.

Palabras clave: Extremo de la Banca, Islas Feroe, Escudos, Imaginería Religiosa

Figure 1

The eighteen lavishly carved, fifteenth-century pew-ends of St Ólav's Church in Kirkjubøur, the Faroe Islands, are objects of national pride for the Faroese people. This national pride is attested in the pew-end postage stamp design.[2] The St Ólav's pew-ends design was issued on the Faroese postage stamp in October 1980 and in January 1984. The emphasis of the pew-ends as an iconic symbol of the Faroe Islands hints at their importance as a marker of national identity for the Faroese. These ornately decorated pew-ends offer stunning visuals of escutcheons and religious figures, such as saints, apostles, and bishops. The origins and purpose of the pew-ends are unknown, hence this article will propose that religious use, social use, and political use are the main reasons for the decoration of the benches. The motifs presented on these bench ends offer a key insight into the relationship between the secular and spiritual spheres of the mediaeval Faroe Islands.

Early written sources on the Faroe Islands are scarce (Holterman, 2020, p.221). The Faroe Islands are first mentioned by the Irish monk Dicuil in his *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* (Bronté, 2014, p.96). Dicuil describes a set of islands inhabited by Irish hermits until Norsemen arrived (Dicuil, 1967, p.77). The other main written source is the thirteenth-century *Færeyinga Saga* (the saga of the Faroese Islanders), which describes the Christianisation of the islands (Arge, 2005, p.601). According to the saga, the Christian faith was accepted around 998CE at the *Løþing* (local parliament) (Arge, 2015, p.237). The Norwegian scholar Gro Steinsland argues that the conversion triggered numerous changes within Scandinavian society, such as the advent of a new set of limitations within society (Steinsland, 2011, p.10).

[2] Several of the pew-ends appeared on the Faroese stamps. The stamps can be accessed online under the title 'Pew Gables-Set of Mint,' *Posta*, 12 Feb 2001, on https://en.stamps.fo/ShopItem/2001/0/PPA997982/SETT

St Óláv's Church

St Óláv's church is the only mediaeval parish still actively in use in the Faroe Islands (Arge, 2015, p.242). It is a rectangular building approximately 21.8 X 7.5 M, which sits near the sea (Arge, 2015, p.242). The church was built as part of the Catholic episcopate in the twelfth or thirteenth-century (Eilertsen, 2012, p.158). St Óláv's church is in Kirkjubøur, which is on the southwest end of the island of Streymoy (Arge, 2015, p.245). The episcopal seat was at Kirkjubøur (Arge, 2015, p.245). In 1111, the Faroese bishop's seat was situated at Kirkjubøur (Holterman, 2020, p.201). After first being under the direction of the Diocese of Lund in Sweden, the Faroese came under the Diocese of Nidaros, Trondheim, in Norway circa 1152 (Hansen, 2003, p.63). Although the founding of the Faroese Bishopric was not recorded in any documents, it is associated with the reign of the Norwegian King Sigurd Jorsalafarer (1103-1130) (Arge, 2015, p.245). Then in 1277, the Norwegian king imposed his law on the Faroe Islands, thereby making the authority of the *Løþing* defunct (Hansen, 2003, p.63).

The architecture of the church in Kirkjubøur has a lot of foreign influence, which demonstrates its connections to the Nordic and international church (Arge, 2015, p.250). In the mediaeval period, new saints' cults were promoted through legends, sermons, images, and liturgy (Ommundsen, 2009, p.151). Dedicating a church to a saint was another way of promoting them. St Óláv's church is dedicated to Ólálfr II Haraldsson, who died at the battle of Stiklestad, near Trondheim, in 1030, attempting to reclaim the Norwegian throne (Ommundsen,2009, p.151). Much of what is written about the saint is recorded in the twelfth-century account *Passio Olavi* (Ommundsen, 2009, p.151).

St Ólav's Pews

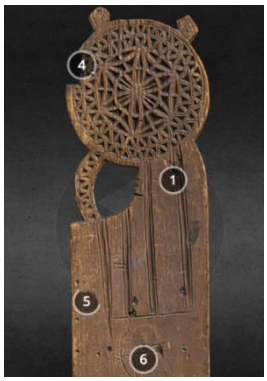

Figure 2

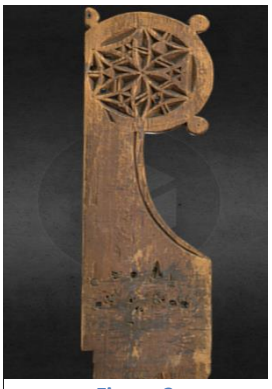
Figure 3

St Óláv's eighteen decorated bench ends can be dated to the early fifteenth-century though carbon dating and by analysing their motifs, specifically the coats of arms that relate to the Kalmar Union (Eilertsen, 2012, p.159). The dimensions of these bench ends range from 113 x 31 x 2.5 cm. to 137 x 40.5 x 5.5 cm.[3] It is assumed that the pews were once painted (Krogh, 1988, p.35). The motifs range from escutcheons to depictions of religious figures. The pew-ends all follow the same design, in a carved long wooden, vertical plank, with a circular escutcheon perched on top. The pew-ends have carvings on either side of their panels. Three of the pew-ends are asymmetrically shaped and depict more complex scenarios, such as Pew O's carving of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus, and Pew A's carving of the Virgin Mary kissing Elizabeth who is pregnant with John the Baptist (Eilertsen, 2012, p.159). Two of the pew-ends, Pews Q and R, have little to no carvings, except for a mandala-type design on the escutcheon.


Figure 4

The bench ends were possibly from a Norwegian workshop for church furniture from the first half of the fifteenth-century (Eilertsen, 2012, p.159). The earliest church on the Faroe Islands was made of wood (Arge, 2015, p.244). Many of the importations to the Faroe Islands came from Norway, specifically from the trading town of Bergen (Arge, 2020, p.286). Wood was one of the importations that the Faroe Islands received from Norway. According to the Danish archaeologist and architect Knud J. Krogh, C14 dating has revealed that the benches are made of pine from a tree that was felled circa 1405-1410 (Krogh, 1988, p.34). Information regarding the origins of the pew-ends has yet to be uncovered. Until this information has been unveiled, much of what can be discussed about these pew-ends relies on speculation and comparison. In general, the Faroe Islands are quite poorly documented (Arge, 2020, p.277). Despite the uncertainty, it could be argued that these church

[3] https://sketchfab.com/Savn/collections/kirkjubarstolarnir-kirkjubur-benches-d64ecf811d87480b8408d880975cf25d Kirkjubøarstólarnir - Kirkjubøur Benches [Accessed: 17 Feb 2024] Any future mention of the church pew-ends can be referenced to this website, which contains 3D images of all of the eighteen pew-ends.

pew-ends were made at a workshop in Bergen, Norway, in the early fifteenth-century. Whether the pew-ends were carved in Norway, or the Faroes is also undetermined. However, if the pew-ends were crafted in Norway, it seems reasonable to suggest that they were also carved in Norway.

There has been some debate about whether the pews were intended for the Faroes or for a church in Norway (Eilertsen, 2012, p.160). Daniel Brunn, an archaeologist and military captain, argued that the pews were intended for the fourteenth-century Faroese Saint Magnus Cathedral (Eilertsen, 2012, p.160). In 1988 Krogh published an article legitimising the theory of the pew-ends being created for the Faroese cathedral (Eilertsen, 2012, p.161). It was the use of the Faroese coat of arms on Pew P that convinced him. Pew P contains four elaborate carvings. The main carving is that of an abbot, possibly St. Brendan due to the inclusion of a burning torch. Above St. Brendan sits St. Óláv, adorning both a halo and crown. The back of the bench end exhibits the seal of Eric of Pomerania, which consisted of three crowns, and at the back of the escutcheon is a ram. The ram was the official Faroese coat of arms during the Middle Ages and was re-introduced with the Home Rule Act of 1948 (Eilertsen, 2012, p.161). Krogh supported the notion that the pews were for the Faroe Islands due to their motifs (Eilertsen, 2012, p.161). Inclusions such as the Faroese coat of arms, and the Faroese bishop Erlendur, would perhaps seem out of place anywhere but in a Faroese context. Norwegian scholar Lill Eilertsen states that whichever church these benches were produced for is an 'unsolved puzzle' (Eilertsen, 2012, p.160). The scarce number of sources on the topic is perhaps the reason for the lack of scholarship on the pew-ends. Yet, considering the inclusion of Faroese symbols, and the fact that they were preserved in a Faroese church, it could be argued that these pew-ends were produced for a church in the Faroe Islands.

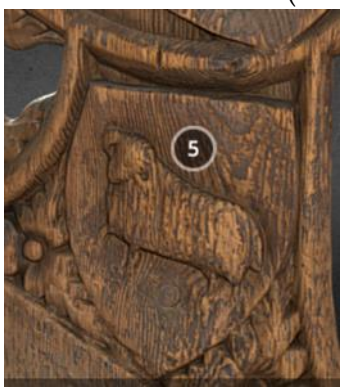

Figure 5

St. Óláv's pew-ends are a Faroese nationalist symbol, hence the abundance of pride that the Faroese people have for them. In 1380, the Faroes followed Norway into a dual Danish-Norwegian kingdom (Lockwood, 1946-1953, p.252). The Faroe Islands would eventually gain home rule from Denmark in 1948 (Eilertsen, 2012, p.154). This home rule was the culmination of a growth of an anti-Danish sentiment in Denmark's colonies in the late nineteenth-century

(Lockwood, 1946-1953, p.252). With the growth of nationalism, the pew-ends became a symbol of Faroese subjugation due to the fact that from the late nineteenth-century the pew-ends were housed in Denmark. Eilertsen describes how as early as 1860, the ground beneath St. Óláv's church was under threat of coastal erosion (Eilertsen, 2012, p.158). A builder from Tórshavn, Gudbrandur Sigurdsson, began to restore the parish in the 1870s. Gudbrandur made several adjustments to the church's interior. The locals regarded the new reconstruction's interior as simple in comparison to the original (Eilertsen, 2012, p.159). The mediaeval pieces of furniture were no longer compatible with the restored church room, and the pew-ends were not deemed robust enough for ordinary use. Thus, the district governor H. Finsen and Dean Hammershaimb wrote a letter to the Ministry of Church and Education in Copenhagen. In exchange for taking and caring for the pew-ends, they requested financial aid for the renovation of the church. Thence, the eighteen pew-ends were sent to Copenhagen in 1875 (Eilertsen, 2012, p.159).

In 1890 the first proposal to return the pews was made (Hansen, 2003, p.35). In 1955 the Faroese National Board entered into negotiations with the Danish government (Eilertsen, 2012, p.160). As the result of political negotiations, the 'repatriation of cultural historical and archaeological material,' that had been kept in Denmark, has been carried out since 1971 (Eilertsen, 2012, p.155). In 1977 the Danish Ministry of Culture agreed to repatriate the pew-ends (Eilertsen, 2012, p.161). Hence, the development of archaeology and history was intricately linked to Faroese nationalism (Hansen, 2003, p.35).

From both the mediaeval period and more modern history, it is evident that these bench ends played a role not only in ecclesiastic but also in secular history. For an item that reveals so much, surprisingly little has been written about its specific purpose and origins. By arguing that religion, social status, and politics are reasons for the decoration of these benches, hopefully, an original and relevant perspective can be added to the discussion.

The word pew is said to have derived from the Dutch word *puye*, which was derived from the Latin word *podium*, which meant a place 'in the amphitheatre next to the arena' for important people (Fowler, 1844, chapter 1). The premodern church was modelled on the biblical Temple of Solomon, which had no pews and was a more mobile space (Doll, 2011,

p.14). In early Christian sermons, the congregation stood or knelt (Fowler, 1844, chp.1). Before the introduction of pews, the congregation was accustomed to moving freely in the naves during the sermon (Brown, 2011, p.2). While the exact date of introduction of pews is unknown, P. S. Barnwell, a scholar of the mediaeval period, argues that pews were introduced circa the thirteenth-century (Barnwell, 2011, p.70). The pew constantly evolved throughout the mediaeval period, up until the eighteenth-century (Viola, 2008, p.272).

While no physical evidence remains, it is believed that simple movable forms of seating existed in churches for a period before the insertion of pews (Barnwell, 2011, p.72). There may have been seats available for the aged and infirm (Barnwell, 2011, p.70). In the initial phases, the seats were made of stone and placed against the walls. These seats then moved into the nave, where they were first arranged in a semicircular position around the pulpit, and later fixed to the floor (Viola, 2008, p.35). The first seats to be implanted in churches were stone benches (Cox, 1916, p.4).

Christian author, Frank Viola framed the pew as a 'symbol of lethargy and passivity' (Viola, 2008, p.34). The introduction of pews emphasised the fact that the congregation gathered to hear the word of God (Jürgensen, 2017, p.1045). Catholic sermons did not preach for a lengthy amount of time, as in Protestant sermons (Fowler, 1844, chp.1). The implementation of fixed seating was the symbolic indicator that church goers should prepare themselves for a lengthy lecture in which they were expected to sit and quietly concentrate. In the Post-Reformation period fixed seats for the congregation became more widespread (Brown, 2011, p.2).

Figure 6

While extraordinarily carved bench ends were not common in the mediaeval period, they were not unique to St. Óláv's church. Cornwall has a plethora of carved mediaeval bench ends (Cox, 1916, p.10). In St. Nonna's church, in Cornwall, there are scenes of musicians carved onto bench ends by a man called Robert Daye in the sixteenth-century (Rose-Jones, 2016, p.87). Yet, the elaborate carvings of so many pew-ends in one single church dating back as early as the fifteenth-century is in fact something that is unique to St Ólav's church and something that does not appear to be recorded anywhere else. This exceptionality can perhaps be understood by suggesting different functions for the pew-ends' sophisticated carvings.

Functions of the Pew-ends

Religious Use

Religious expression was a reason for the decoration of the St Óláv's church pew-ends. A key feature of Christian churches is the iconography of various saints and religious figures. Alongside the stunningly carved bench ends, there have been other decorated objects found within St Óláv's, such as stove tiles with images of Saint Paul the Apostle (Holterman, 2020, p.202). A space that is prettily decorated provides a more inviting presence for its congregants, though there are of course other reasons for the incorporation of imagery in religious spaces.

Figure 7

Images in the church were invested with meaning for their mediaeval audience (Giles, 2007, p.106). These depictions and images served a range of functions. In a sermon given in Latin to a congregation whose majority did not understand Latin, images played a key role in ensuring that the laypeople were aware and knowledgeable of Christian saints and their mythology. Images conveyed messages and meaning to their illiterate audience (Hahn, 2010, p.286). On bench G the apostle St. Thomas is depicted. The story of St Thomas is that while travelling to India, the saint demonstrated the power of God by hastily erecting a palace for a king. It was in this same spot that the saint was killed with a lance. The emblem on bench end G is that of a lance. This image offers its audience a clear portrayal of what the saint should be remembered for.

Memory is another reason for the decoration of these bench ends. Scholar of Old Norse literature, Pernille Hermann discusses in great depth the study of memory and techniques for remembering. A technique she describes is the method of *loci* (Hermann, 2018, p.666). This refers to the connection within the mind of places and locations to specific memories. Hermann discusses the use of the method of *loci* in Old Norse sagas as a method for identifying those of important social status (Hermann, 2018, p.669). Kate Giles, an archaeologist of buildings, refers to the use of images for memory as 'art of memory' (Giles, 2007, p.107). Giles argues that seeing is a central part of memory (Giles, 2007, p.107). Specific figures that are depicted on the bench ends could suggest that the saints were of particular importance to the Faroese people and Christianity in the North Atlantic, thus it was important for the congregation to remember them. The use of depictions on bench ends is also interesting, as the pews are a space specifically designated for the laypeople.

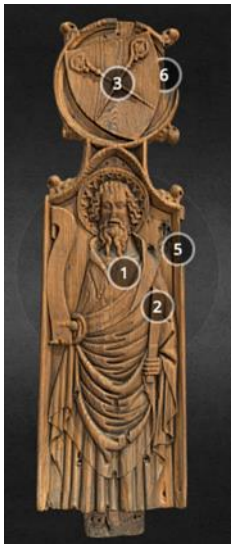

Figure 8

Unlike ceiling frescos and stained-glass windows, pews were solely for the use of the congregation. This meant that as each member of the congregation went to take their seats, they were greeted with images and motifs of saints that they were expected to be familiar with. Mediaeval art scholar Cynthia Hahn argues that images and iconography in the church were used to prepare the viewer for their experience in the religious space (Hahn, 1997, p.1082). The depiction of specific saints emphasised the connection between the secular and spiritual spheres. For example, on Pew L, the apostle St Bartholomew is depicted. In his left hand, the saint holds his emblem, a knife. St Bartholomew was martyred by being flayed alive with the knife with which he is depicted. He is the patron saint of butchers and tanners. Motifs such as these could indicate to churchgoers how all-consuming Christianity was, no corner of their lives was untouched by God. Images were just one of the ways to promote the cult of different saints (Sands, 2008, p.141). Other ways included the use of prayers, legends, and naming traditions (Sands, 2008, p.141). It was through using these images and legends, that the lives of the saints were connected to the lives of the congregation. In the mediaeval period, images were connected not only with the sense of sight but also with the sense of touch. Giles describes how mediaeval sight was thought of as a form of 'providing the beholder with the sense of touching the object of vision' (Giles, 2007, p.107). The fact that these images incorporated two of the human senses reiterates the integral part that imagery played in the lives of Christian worshippers.

Seating arrangements within mass were often determined by family association, gender, and social segregation (Brown, 2011, p.2). Early modern England historian Christopher Marsh argues that gender was a key factor in how church seating was arranged (Marsh, 2005, p.10). In England, there was a tradition of separating the sexes. This practice would have become easier with the implementation of fixed seating. Gender roles are defined in spatial terms (Flather, 2015, p.44). Social historian, Amanda Falther discusses how spaces can be gendered, even if they are occupied by both sexes, due to how each gender experiences and perceives a space (Flather, 2015, p.46). Gender played a role in the restructuring of church space (Flather, 2015, p.46). This segregation of the sexes mirrors both the secular and spiritual hierarchies, that of the patriarchal ideals which existed at the time. Through the analysis of numerous travel logs, such as that of the nineteenth-century Botanist Hans Christian Lyngbye, Krogh states that the north wall of the church was possibly the woman's side (Krogh, 1988, p.10). Krogh stated that there were fifteen benches for men, and a further twelve for women (Krogh, 1988, p.12). Unfortunately, Krogh does not elaborate further on this point, except to say that the actual layout of the church remains unknown (Krogh, 1988, p.37). In the English tradition, men sat on the south side of the church, while women sat on the north (Cox, 1916, p.17). Depictions of the Virgin Mary on bench-ends in Wiggenhall church in Norfolk, were thought to indicate where the women sat in church (Cox, 1916, p.17). The use of the female figures like the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth could possibly have indicated female seating in St Ólav's church. Although gender segregation in England does not indicate that the mediaeval St Ólav's church also maintained this gender segregation, it does offer a medium of comparative.


C. F. N.
Wiggenhall St German, Norfolk

Figure 9

The Virgin Mary is depicted on three of the eighteen bench ends. On Pew A, the story of Mary meeting Elizabeth, the mother of St. John the Baptist is depicted. This motif is known as *The Visitation* and exhibits the two haloed women kissing. Elizbeth has a headdress, while Mary does not. Roberta Gilchrist, a renowned mediaeval scholar, discusses how the covering of a woman's head indicated that she was married (Gilchrist, 2012, p.98). It must be noted that Mary and Elizabeth's kissing would not necessarily have been perceived as romantic in the way that modern viewers might perceive it. Gilchrist states that female homosexuality was largely unacknowledged at this time (Gilchrist, 2012, p.98). Historian of the mediaeval period, Michael D. Barbezat argues that kissing on the mouth was socially acceptable between members of the same sex at this time and carried with it no sexual connotations (Barbezat, 2016, p.412). A kiss was a symbol of Christian unity, a spiritual act that strengthened peace and oaths between people (Barbezat, 2016, p.413).

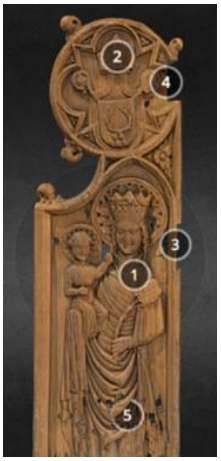

Figure 10

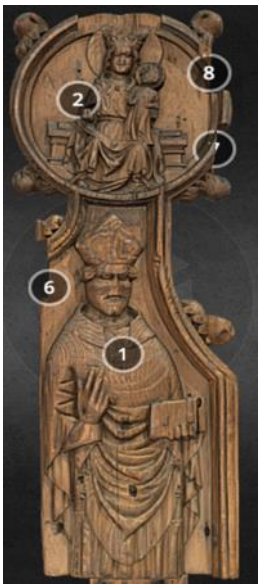

Figure 11

On Pew B, Mary is depicted with the infant Jesus. As in Pew A, both Mary and the infant Jesus have haloes around their heads. Pew B exhibits a standing Mary who, alongside her halo, wears a crown, symbolising her elite status within the heavenly realm. In Pew O Mary is once again depicted with baby Jesus. These three depictions of women could imply a gendered space in the church's seating arrangement. As the order and layout of the benches were not recorded when the church underwent restoration in the nineteenth-century one can only make assumptions that the Faroese church was similar to its English counterpart in stating that these female depictions indicate a gendered layout of the church.

Imagery in mediaeval churches offered the congregation a means of participating (Giles, 2007, p.115). Iconography helps with memory, as well as maintaining ideas of social order. As well as this, church artwork offers a physical embodiment of Christian ideology and ideologies of the church and secular powers.

Social Use

In a society where there was no division between the secular and spiritual, the church was a central space within the community (Sands, 2008, p.141). Hence the gathering of the community to attend church services would have played an integral part in how a family presented itself to the community, and how this family was perceived by their community. Professor of Scandinavian studies, Haki Antonsson argues that the use of expensive and grandiose religious items was less of an expression of religious identity, as it was an expression of social status and wealth (Antonsson, 2014, p.61). The Sunday church service allowed for people to display their social standing through their clothing, and their position within church (Marsh, 2005, p.3). Marsh argues that opportunities for 'collective self-definition grew more comprehensive' with the evolution of the church's interior structure (Marsh, 2005, p.3).

In analysing 'space syntax,' Giles acknowledges the difficulty of entering particular physical spaces within a building (Giles, 2007, p.108). With the introduction of pews came the introduction of a more rigid and less mobile church space. Seating fixed the congregation into 'hierarchical ranks,' with the pulpit as the 'centre of visual and aural attention' (Giles, 2007, p.114). In viewing the pews as a feature of hierarchical structure and control of the laypeople, the imagery that is associated with them would have had a powerful effect on the congregation who saw it each time they attended mass.

Unfortunately, as sources for the Faroe Islands are scarce, the implementation of English sources shall be used to consider social use as a reason for the decoration of the pews-ends. In England pews had a tradition of being used as a weapon by parish elites 'to discipline and control the lower orders' (Marsh, 2005, p.5). Nineteenth century English scholar, John Coke Fowler discussed how English parish churches originated from feudal lords and were for the benefit of their family and tenants. Thus, the founder of the church would probably reserve some part of the church floor specifically for their own and their successors' use (Fowler, 1844, chp.1). In England, pews were sold and treated as private property (Viola, 2008, p.35). In England people even requested to be buried under the pew that their family reserved (Bennett, 2018, p.408). Congregants would pay for spaces in which to erect their own pews, or buy existing benches from the church (Bennett, 2018, p.408). For those who could not afford to erect their own, pew renting

became a common custom in England. This custom continued for centuries (Saint, 1995, p.41). In England there was also a custom of churchwardens who maintained order and oversaw church seating (Marsh, 2015, p.8). Aside from playing a key role in maintaining hierarchical order, churchwardens were also tasked with maintaining discipline during the service and ensuring that everyone was paying attention (Marsh, 2015, p.24). Surviving churchwarden accounts from the first half of the fifteenth-century suggest that the role of churchwarden had existed for some time (Barnwell, 2011, p.74).

At the April 1287 Synod in Exeter, Bishop Quivel stated that no person should be able to claim any seat within the church as their own, except for noblemen and patrons (Quivel 1287). Bishop Quivel's statement reiterated the idea of the wealthy being entitled to seats, while the laypeople simply did not have the right to sit (Cox, 1916, p.4). In the statement addressed to king Henry VIII in 1546 by Robert Crowley, *Supplication of the Poore Commons*, Crowley declared that pews were not a place where 'poor men durst to come' (Crowley, 1546). While these sources focus on the English tradition, they can be relevant when looking at the purpose of the decorated pew-ends in St Óláv's church.

Church pews carried a sense of elitism (Marsh, 2015, p.8). When attempting to maintain a social standing of prestige, one must always maintain an image of superiority in every aspect of life. A seat at the front of the congregation was top tier, due to its proximity to the altar, and its centrality within the sermon (Marsh, 2015, p.26). There was a movement in the nineteenth-century concerning the possible removal of pews (Billing, 1845, p.xxi). The fact that this debate became so heated indicates how important the role of pews became within the church. In 1857 J.H. Hobart Brown, a Manhattan reverend, wrote that the pew system 'enslaves the church,' through the wealthy not acknowledging the rights of poorer people, and therefore ignoring the divine right of God (Brown, 1857). Many who partook in this debate argued that a *free church* should be a place where each person was equal under the house of God (Potter, 1845).

Several of the pew-ends depict escutcheons. These escutcheons typically belonged to political figures, bishops, and families. The ownership of carved pew-ends by religious figures and those of high social status would have provided a way in which to further elevate one's position within the community, due to the relationship of the spiritual and secular sphere. This

would have elevated one's position amongst contemporaries but also would have immortalised a person or family.

Figure 12

Three of the bench ends reference a specific bishop. Pew B has what is presumed to be a bishop's coat of arms on the top panel of the bench end. The escutcheon contains two crossed croziers with a mitre. It has been suggested that the coat of arms could belong to Johannes *Theutonicus*, a German Dominican friar who died in the thirteenth-century. On Pew O a depiction of a bishop with a book offering his blessing is exhibited. While a consensus on this bishop has never been reached, the fourteenth-century Faroese Bishop Erlendur has been suggested. Bishop Erlendur held his position from 1268 until 1308 (Arge, 2015, p.249). Faroese archaeologist Símun V. Arge has gone so far as to refer to Erlendur as the best known of the Faroese bishops (Arge, 2015, p.248). Also, on the back of this bench end there is a small *escutcheon with a fesse, that although blank now was presumably originally painted.* Above this unknown escutcheon is a coat of arms that is similar to that depicted in Pew B of Johannes Theutonicus. Regardless of who the bishop is, the depiction is presumed to be an *episcopal arm*. Pew F exhibits an escutcheon with a band that rests upon a crozier. While the origins of the escutcheon are uncertain, the use of a crozier suggests that the coat of arms belonged to a bishop or ecclesiastic. Pew F also includes the depiction of what has presumed to be the apostle St. Andrew, due to the fact that he carries a saltire, which is the type of cross that he was crucified upon.

Familial coats of arms on the bench ends are more difficult to determine, and therefore claims of these coats of arms belonging to a family can only be a suggestion. As written sources from this time are scarce, there is no way to determine whether families who sought to enhance their social standing did dedicate church pews in their family names, as was common in England. Although images of families leaving their mark on these bench ends are difficult to discern, Pew H and Pew M could be used to suggest that families did have their family coat of arms painted onto the pew-ends.

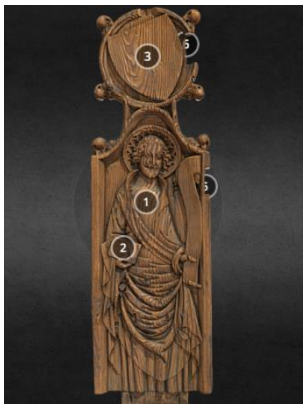

Figure 14

On the upper panel of Pew H, there is a blank escutcheon. This escutcheon presumably had a coat of arms painted onto it. This would indicate its existence as a coat of arms. On Pew M the top panel consists of a blank escutcheon which was also once presumably painted with a coat of arms. From analysing the pew-ends it is evident that the bishops' coats of arms were carved rather than painted directly onto the bench ends. While the use of painting instead of carving could have been a stylistic feature, there is the possibility that it was a different type of coat of arms. There is the possibility of these coats of arms belonging to laypeople.

Figure 13

Pews were symbols of social status in the mediaeval church. That congregants felt so strongly about them is attested in the fact that they were bought, rented, and requests were made for people to be buried near particular seats (Barnwell, 2011, p.74). As religious and secular society were intertwined, promoting one's social status in the religious sphere enhanced one's standing within the community. Much like using imagery on these bench ends to elevate one's social status, the imagery was also made use of politically.

Political Use

Politics are a reason the St Óláv's pew-ends were decorated. Political and religious figures have been depicted on these bench ends. With no separation between the secular and spiritual aspects of life, the church offered the perfect opportunity to inundate laypeople with political stances and ensure loyalty and support to rulers and other powerful figures (Sands, 2008, p.141).

Antonsson claims that Christianity is the perfect tool of 'ideological hegemony in an increasingly stratified society' (Antonsson, 2014, p.66). The Norwegian King Ólálfr Tryggvason was able to exert his authority overseas, and so initiated a top-down conversion process in the Faroe Islands (Bonté, 2014, p.94). This exertion of power overseas can be exemplified by the figure Sigmundr Brestisson in *Færeyinga Saga* who converted the Faroe Islands at the behest of the Norwegian king ((Bonté, 2014, p.104). Christianity further helped to bring the Faroe Islands under Norwegian control. The eleventh-century cult of St Ólálfr played a key role in connecting the divide between old and new beliefs (Antonsson, 2014,

p.61). Hence it could be argued that St Óláv's church itself played a role in promoting Christianity and Norwegian authority.

In 1380 King Hákon VI died, leaving the Norwegian throne to his Danish wife, Queen Marguerite I. Norway and Denmark subsequently entered into a coalition bringing along their overseas colonies. The Battle of Falköping in 1389 resulted in Margrethe's troops overpowering those of King Albrecht of Sweden (Sands, 2008, p.146). In 1397, Queen Marguerite introduced the Kalmar union between the Nordic kingdoms. This union would last until Sweden's secession in 1523. Yet Norway, Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands remained subjects of the Danish king (Eilertsen, 2012, p.155).

By 1397 Eric of Pomerania was crowned heir of all three Scandinavian kingdoms (Sands, 2008, p.147). Eric was a problematic and unpopular ruler (Sands, 2008, p.147). Bengt Jönsson, a key opposition to King Eric, first demonstrated his opposition to Eric in 1432 at the election of the new Archbishop of Uppsala (Sands, 2008, p.148). The Kalmar Union caused a considerable amount of turmoil for the Nordic region (Sands, 2008, p.145). Saints and their images played a role in the political sphere during this period (Sands, 2008, p.141). Images in religious settings would have been understood by their mediaeval viewers (Hahn, 1997, p.1082). Seeing these images of figures frequently in a sacred space had the power to incite specific mental and physical attitudes towards these figures (Hahn, 1997, p.1104). Thus, images and iconography were used in churches to further propagate the ideologies of those in power.

Bench ends A, C, K, N, and P all depict motifs concerning the Kalmar Union or the coat of arms of a specific region. Pew-end A depicts the coats of arms of Eric of Pomerania, and his consort, Philippa of England. Eric was the Kalmar Union's first king, and he married Philippa on the 4th of October 1406, thus Brunn concluded that the benches were made between 1406 and 1430, when the Queen died. This assumption corresponds with the later C14 dating (Eilertsen, 2012, p.159). The coat of arms presented on bench A is similar to the 1398 seal of Eric of Pomerania. Pew A also depicts the coats of arms of Denmark, Norway, the Kalmar Union, the English or possibly Danish arms, and the shield of Pomerania. Other figures on Pew A are the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth. The inclusion of figures who have been viewed as the epitome of purity on the same bench end as King Eric and Queen Philippa is significant.

This indicates that the sculptor wished for his audience to view these rulers as beings considered worthy enough to be presented alongside these divine figures.

Figure 15

Bench end N's main motif is St. John the Evangelist. On the upper panel of the bench end sits a coat of arms that depicts three crowns above a cross. This was first introduced as the national symbol of Sweden in 1364 and was later used as a symbol for the Kalmar Union. Accompanying a tonsured abbot in bench P is the enthroned St Óláv. The pew also exhibits the Faroese coat of arms, which depicts a ram, alongside the Kalmar Union's three crown coat of arms. The consistent use of symbols of the Kalmar Union could have been an effort to ensure the Faroese people's familiarity and acceptance of the foreign rulers.

Figure 16

In bench end C, the portrayal of St John the Baptist is accompanied by the Norwegian national coat of arms. In the coat of arms sits a lion. Circa the 1280s, the royal Norwegian lion owned the crown and axe of St Ólálfr. Bench end K bears an escutcheon with crossed keys. There is a possibility that this is the arms of Christ's Church in Bergen. This supposed depiction of a Norwegian coat of arms could have been an attempt to illustrate the connection between the local people of Kirkjubøur and their Norwegian overlords.

Figure 17

The frequent use of symbols of both the Kalmar Union and Norway implies that the bench ends had a political element to them. This in turn suggests a probable reason as to why they were decorated. Depicting the coat of arms of the ruling powers in a space that was so important within the community, could have been an attempt to endear the Faroese to their overseas rulers.

Conclusion

Elaborate and exceptional in their design, the carved pew-ends of St Ólav's church are an exceptional example of mediaeval church artwork in the Faroe Islands. The carved depictions suggest that the crafter or crafters who carved the pew-ends had reasons more than just aesthetics for the artistic choices they made. There are a number of reasons why the bench ends of St Óláv's church were decorated; religion, social status, and politics being three. The

introduction of pews altered the church space forever. Through the confinement of the congregation's mobility, promoting hierarchical social order, to highlighting specific powerful figures. It was through the use of specific motifs that these bench ends offer scholars an insight into the link between the secular and spiritual spheres of mediaeval Europe. Through the decoration of these pew-ends, ideologies and individuals themselves were promoted. Through analysing specific motifs that were included on the bench ends, it is evident that specific saints and biblical figures were important amongst Christians at this time and were thus expected to be remembered. Pew-ends also allowed for the church to implement its patriarchal order on the public sphere. Through the method of buying and selling, church pews had a class element to them. This class element must be mentioned when understanding the presence that the pews, and pew-ends, had within the church. It was through pew-ends that another facet of elitism could be manifested. Being a significantly important public space, the stance that a local parish took on a matter held a lot of sway amongst the congregation A more secularised society would frown upon the use of images and symbolism of political figures in a religious space. It is evident through analysing the continued promotion of political figures on the pew-ends that this was not the case in the fifteenth-century Faroe Islands. Acknowledging that the sculptors had reasons why they included specific symbols and figures, it is suggested that religion, social status, and politics were key factors in the decoration of these eighteen pew-ends. Ultimately there are many gaps in the knowledge that this article has not been able to fill. It is because of the work of people like Knud J. Krogh that information has revealed roughly when the wood for the pew-ends had been cut down and hinted at potential places that it could have originated from. With time and a renewed interest in these beautiful structures, more information could be amassed on the origins of these pew-ends. This article has attempted to understand the reasoning behind the decoration and carvings of these pew-ends. It is through more academic scholarship, that there is a hope for the reinvigoration of interest on the pew-ends of St Óláv's church.

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