The Dance of Death in Inkoo. A Medieval Church Painting as a Source of Local History

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Let us assume that almost 500 years ago a Central European traveller – for example a pilgrim on his way to the church of the Holy Cross in Hattula – by chance decided to drop in to pray for protection at the church of Inkoo, when making his way along the coastal road in Southern Finland. Having accustomed himself to the dimly lit church hall, he would perhaps have stood there surprised for a moment, even wondering, but then would have nodded his approval. Look, the Dance of Death even here, in the far North. Having had a closer look at the painting the traveller might have been surprised even more. What on earth, a Dance of Death without a Pope, that is utterly impossible, and then smiling to himself, "the Dominican friar has received his just deserts", and sighing with sympathy, "poor mother, what may have happened to you and your baby". He would have remembered how it was known and told as far as in Rome a couple of winters ago, about a disastrous pestilence that had been raging in Finland, he would have prayed for all the wretched souls and set out hastily to continue his journey while there still was time for it.

We, who today approach a medieval church, don't have our traveller's inside information. Past centuries have, particulary in Finland which is situated between the East and West, destroyed with merciless efficiency most of the written documents that might have told us something about the life and circumstances of medieval man. All that is left is scattered information – both archaeological and art historical material, the interpretation of which is much more difficult.

The painting representing the Dance of Death in the church of Inkoo, lying on the coast of the Gulf of Finland close by the sea, is one example of these unwritten documents. The frieze of the Dance of Death covering a major part of the church hall's northern wall was apparently painted at the beginning of the 16th century. The painting forms part of a larger one, which covered almost all the wall and vault surfaces of the church; only remnants of this can be seen at present. Works of the same painter group are known from two other South-Finnish churches in the very neighbourhood of Inkoo. Except for the Dance of Death the subjects used by the painters don't differ from pictorial subjects in

use at the same time in other parts of Finland and Scandinavia. The style of the paintings, instead, is unique, no analogues to it have been found either in the west, Sweden, or in the south, Estonia.

The paintings in the church of Inkoo were covered up after the church had been badly damaged in a fire, at the beginning of the 17th century, and were partly uncovered again in the year 1894. The new window opened in the northern wall of the church at the end of the 19th century destroyed part of the painting and even the figures discernible today are unfortunately partly fragmentary. When the painting was being restored for the first time, figures of persons were reconstructed with very heavy coating paint as was conventional at the time. Sadly, it could not be removed later. Thus, even after the latest restoration work done in 1987–88 the painting is in its appearance still partly a creation of later times, which is worth remembering when it is used as a historical source.

The Inkoo Dance of Death consists in its present shape of seven figures dancing with the death. The first in the procession is a man dressed up in a long fur-decorated garment, in front of whom there have been traces of the death who had been leading the man. The man's yellow, originally crown-like headpiece, rich outfit and stately beard show without question that he is a king.

The next couple in the Dance of Death consists of the death carrying a spade and a person identified as a bishop because of his headdress. The third couple is formed by the death armed with a scythe and a man whose headdress is decorated with three gorgeous feathers. Grand, feather-decorated berets and bonnets belonged solely to the costume of the upper classes during the late medieval times, thus we can be almost certain that this man is a nobleman.

The next couple has been destroyed by the window opening, and of the fourth couple discernible today only an apparently wealthy lay representative wearing a long gown has remained.

Finding out the identity of the man in the fifth couple is the most difficult task. The figure discernible today is mostly a reconstruction. According to the records from the year 1894[1] the man was not a representative of clergy and his headpiece was probably very similar to the one in, e. g., the Alderman's Dance of Death "Handschrift Zimmern" from about the year 1520.[2]

The identification of the male person in the sixth couple is easy. He is a Dominican dressed up in a costume typical for his monastic order, in a light coloured girdled underdress and a dark outer robe.

[1] National Board of Antiquites, Section of History, Topographical Archives.

[2] Hammerstein 1980, Fig. 316.

Fig. 1: The church of Inkoo in the year 1907. Photo: C. Frankenhaeuser, National Board of Antiquities.

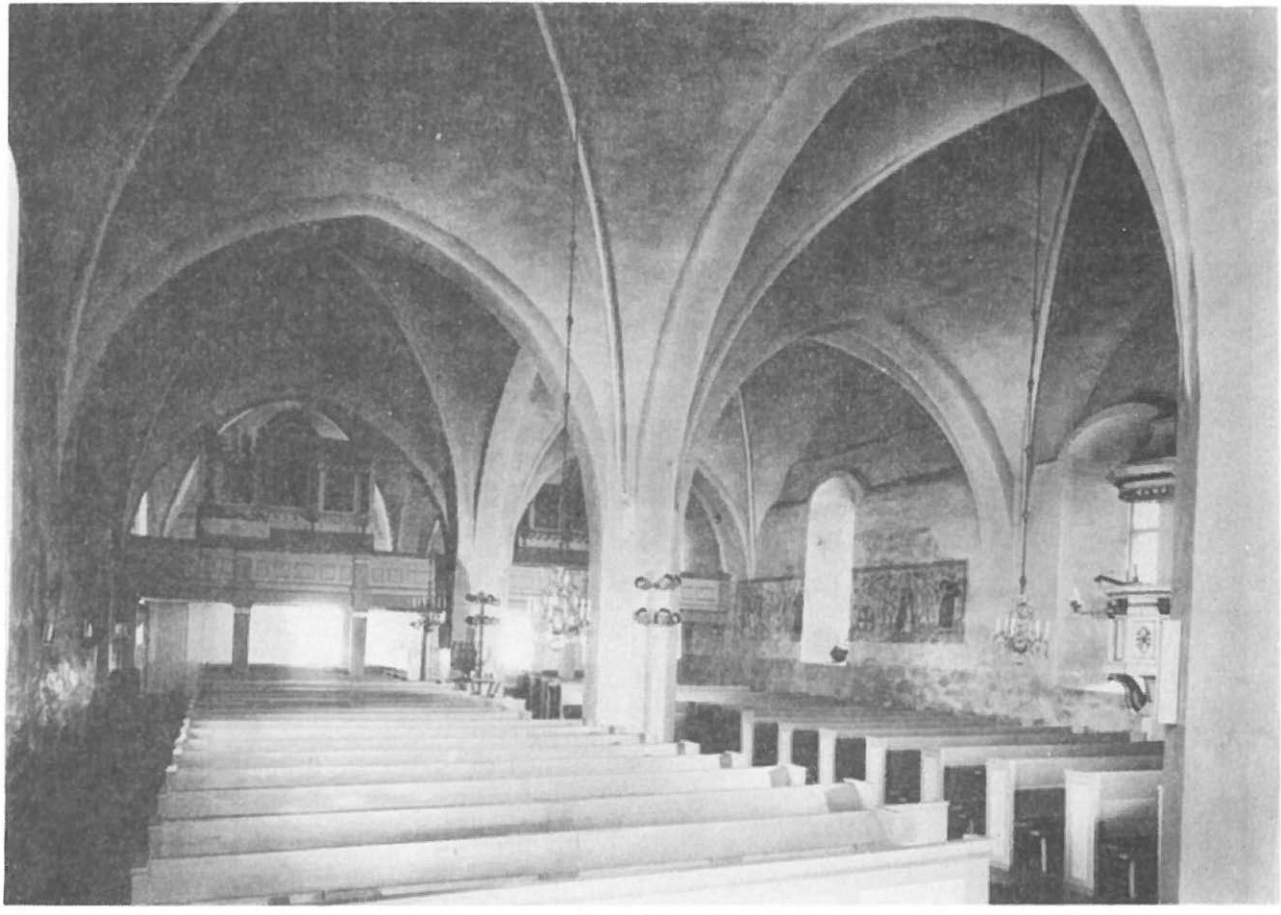

Fig. 2: The church of Inkoo, inside view, 1988. Photo: P. O. Welin, National Board of Antiquities.

Fig. 3: Restored eastern part of the Dance of Death, 1988. Photo: P. O. Welin, National Board of Antiquities.

Fig. 4: Restored western part of the Dance of Death, 1988. Photo: P. O. Welin, National Board of Antiquities.

The last couple following the Dominican in the dance frieze is formed by Death and a woman, both of them now remaining partly covered by the floor of the organ loft at the western end of the Church. Beside the woman there possibly was a small child – not even Death having been able to separate the mother and her child.

Because of the total composition of paintings on the northern wall of the Church, the procession of the Dance of Death moves from the point of view of the spectator exceptionally from left to right, the traditional direction of the blessed. In most other paintings with a similar motif Death dances with his partners to the direction of damnation, that is, to the left (compare, e. g., with the famous Lübeck Dance of Death).

The Inkoo Dance of Death may after a hasty look appear to be only a variant of a pictorial motif commonly used in the Middle Ages and, even more, rather poorly preserved as such. A more closer examination of the painting indicates, however, that it conceals special features which may be a help in the research on the medieval state of Finland and especially of Inkoo.

The first point to draw the spectator's attention today, is the choice of the pictorial motif itself.

Researchers have not come to full agreement on where and when the phenomenon of the Dance of Death was originated and whether its earliest form had been visual or written.[3] There exists a greater unanimity in the connection of the Dance of Death with the best known plague, the so-called Black Death. The first monumental Dance of Death was painted in Paris on the wall of St. Innocents cemetery in the year 1425 and this started the wildfire-like spreading of the motif of the Dance of Death to large parts of Europe.

From the middle of the 15th century onwards monumental Dance of Death representations occur, beside those in France, in England, Northern and Southern Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Northern Italy and today's Yugoslavia. Only the Scandinavian area remained outside this boom. From Denmark, which lies nearest to continental Europe, two Dance of Death paintings are known, but none from Norway or Sweden. The more surprising then it seems to find such a great painting frieze in Finland.

In the Middle Ages Finland was part of Sweden, the so-called Eastern half of the Empire (Sw. Östra rikshalvan), and most influences that have moulded Finland's economic and cultural life were diffused by the mother country at that time. Absence of the motif of the Dance of Death from Sweden shows clearly, however, that the influence for its use in Inkoo cannot have come from the west. The Inkoo painting is thus a clear example of the fact that the

[3] Rosenfeld 1954; Hammerstein 1980.

Finns had independent cultural contacts elsewhere, particularly south from the Gulf of Finland, to the Estonian direction. Good examples of these contacts are also artefacts, coins, rings and other things that have been found during church excavations.[4] The nearest Dance of Death to Inkoo can be found some 60 kilometres away. In Tallin, a frieze of the Dance of Death painted by Bernt Notke may have been in existence already at the end of the Middle Ages.[5] If this is the case, the idea of acquiring a similar painting for Inkoo may well have originated from there. The Dance of Death was a well-known motif also in the other Hansa towns.

Another interesting feature in the Inkoo painting is the choice of persons appearing in it.

As we have already seen, the first performer in the Inkoo Dance of Death is a layman, a king, and not the leading figure in the Catholic Church, the Pope, quite unlike most other Dances of Death. The situation cannot be interpreted as being caused merely by the disappearance of the painting's beginning part on the wall of the church. East from the frieze there was a window in the Middle Ages, thus there was no space for any other dancing couples on the wall.

Absence of the Pope from the group of the dancers is not likely to be mere chance. For people living at the northern frontier of the Catholic world the Pope (especially at the end of the Middle Ages) had certainly been a distant and even unreal person. Of much bigger importance for ordinary people was the bishop of their own diocese, an influential person directing Finland's affairs from Turku, whose rumbling shook the earth beneath the ordinary citizen's feet.

A painting of the Dance of Death without a Pope can be found also in Denmark, in the Church of Norre Alslev, in which a small space has been made to include the essential contents of the painting. In Norre Alslev the procession is also lead by a king followed by a bishop.

In Norre Alslev the painting ends with a peasant dragging a dungfork. In the Inkoo painting there is no representative of this rank and apparently never has been. In all the Dance of Death representations I know of, where both a peasant and a child (or mother and child) appear, the peasant has always been positioned above the child in the social rank.[6] In the Inkoo painting the Dominican is positioned before the mother and child and in front of him a

[4] Hiekkanen 1988.

[5] Lumiste–Globatschowa 1969.

[6] Hammerstein 1980.

person wealthier than a peasant. Thus, there has been no room in the painting for a representative of the common people.

One of the basic characteristics of the Dance of Death motif has been from the very beginning a great flexibility: it was possible to make the painting longer or shorter, add or remove persons according to the need of any given time. In some cases the persons described in the dance can even be mentioned by name.

The initiator and sponsor of the Inkoo painting is not known. When examining the frieze one can notice, however, that wealthy men, obviously of common birth, have a strong representation in it.[7] Provided that it is a question of a conscious choice in the Inkoo gallery of persons, one could well think that the painting was sponsored by men who were from Inkoo or carried on their activities there – in the case of a rural parish mainly peasant merchants or lower functionaries. And the painting's persons with long robes should be regarded as some kind of "portraits". In Finnish circumstances it is very rare that ordinary citizens of common birth act as donors of paintings. Except for just a couple of cases all the donors pictured on church walls are representatives of the nobility or clergy.

Documentary evidence relating to the area of Inkoo at the turn of the 15th and 16th century is extremely scarce, even the name of the vicar of the parish at the time is not known. On the locality's economic life the documents reveal almost nothing, nor have there remained mentions of peasant merchants. From the neigbouring parishes of Inkoo, however, several persons are known, who emerged from among the common people, carried on large-scale trade directed towards Tallin and employed several persons in various specialized tasks. In some cases the business is known to have continued in the hands of the same family for many generations. Besides peasant merchants there may also have been lower functionaries such as representatives of law and clergy. The economic situation of peasant merchants has been quite good, most of them have been amongst the biggest landowners in their villages according to the surviving information.[8]

One proof of the relatively wealth of at least some of the inhabitants of Inkoo is the fact that its church is fairly large in size, about the eighth largest of the Finnish medieval parish churches. Especially in the late Middle Ages notable extension works were carried out in the church which demanded big financial support from the parishioners, particularly because no rich landowners of noble birth lived in the region.

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[7] Hammerstein 1980, Fig. 316.

[8] Kerkkonen 1959.

Busy trading activities would naturally have come about considering the geographical position of Inkoo. Inkoo lies almost across from Tallin on the northern coast of the Gulf of Finland. Indeed a medieval sailing route from Denmark and Sweden which had served already the Vikings at their time, passes by Inkoo Church and turns here to the south, towards Estonia, the nearest Hansa trade center.[9]

The third question raised by the Inkoo Dance of Death painting is its connection with the plague. Elsewhere in Europe one has been able to note how the Dance of Death representations were born either for a preventive purpose, to protect a town from approaching epidemics (e. g. Lübeck), or to a memory of disease previously raging in a locality (e. g. Basel).[10] Has the Dance of Death motif a similar connection with the history of disease in Finland, or had it become a mere fashion phenomen when it had finally reached the far north?

In Finland extremely little is known about the effects of medieval pestilence epidemics, actually nothing. The so-called Black Death is known to have reached Sweden and Tallin in the years 1349–1350[11] and indirectly it may be concluded that Finland was not spared from the disease either, even though documents keep silent about the matter. Scattered references to people who had caught the plague begin to occur only at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries and the beginning of the 16th century. However, the references don't make it possible to form an opinion on the prevelance of the plague epidemics. Were they confined merely to urban areas and other population centres, for example monasteries, or did the countryside get its share of the scourge, too? The documents don't even mention the coast of Southern Finland with the exception of the cities of Turku and Viipuri.

The Dance of Death painting in Inkoo alone cannot give an answer to the question but combined with some other observations it can illuminate the matter.

In Tallin, the nearest trading centre to Inkoo, the plague is known to have been raging at least during the years 1504 and 1510.[12] At the same time pictures of Saints of the Plague begin to appear in churches on the Finnish side. A statue of Job carved in Lübeck at the beginning of the 16th century has been preserved in the parish church of Helsinki and pictures of the same sufferer revered in Scandinavia particularly as a Saint of Plague, have appeared

[9] Finlands Medeltidsurkunder (= FMU) I, 100; Edgren 1977.

[10] Rosenfeld 1954.

[11] Möller-Christensen et al. 1981, 238–248.

[12] FMU VI, 5054; FMU VII, 5477.

also in two other churches at the southern coast of Finland (not to mention other Saints of Plague). As well as the Dance of Death another painting with a prominently exposed plague motif exists in Inkoo Church. On the southern wall of the chancelary there is a portrait of St. Rochus, from whose name it has been attempted to derive the Finnish word for "rokko" (= pox).

People in the early 16th century already knew how to avoid centres contaminated by the plague.[13] However, art historical evidence indicates that peasants did not succeed in avoiding this disease, which spread easily with trade contact. In Finnish folklore, too, several stories have survived of how sides of ships returning from abroad were full of [imaginary] arrowheads. These arrowheads flew off again when the ship had reached harbour and infected a lot of people.[14]

In Inkoo the disaster caused by the plague was worsened by Danish sailors who destroyed badly both the church and all of the surrounding area around the year 1509.[15] When the church was repaired after this, local people may have felt the subject of death to be topical.

Research on medieval church paintings makes it very temptating to overinterpret; one tries to get more out of the paintings than was ever included in them. In my opinion, however, the preceding observations have shown that the medieval church paintings can have their worth in the research on medieval everyday life. The Inkoo Dance of Death tells us both about the local economic life, peasant merchants's activities in Inkoo at the beginning of the 16th century, and about the effects of the plague on the southern coast of Finland at the same time. The information is to be regarded of such importance, because written documents from this period no longer exist.

(Translated by Mrs. Heli Lahdentausta, M. A.)

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[13] FMU VI 5054; Klockars 1979, 144.

[14] Society of Finnish Literature, Folklore Archives.

[15] Brenner 1936, 44.

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Inhaltsverzeichnis

Jaakko Masonen:
Finnland im Mittelalter. Zur Einführung 5

Christian Krötzl:
Migrations- und Kommunikationsstrukturen im finnischen Mittelalter 13

Luigi de Anna:
Il nutrimento del pregiudizio. Codici alimentari riferiti
agli abitanti della Finlandia e del Settentrione nelle fonti occidentali 29

Jaakko Masonen:
Zum Krankheitsbegriff im finnischen Mittelalter 45

Marko Nenonen:
Hexenglauben, Mensch und Gemeinschaft in Finnland.
Spätmittelalter und frühe Neuzeit 58

Jussi-Pekka Taavitsainen:
Finnish Limousines. Fundamental Questions
about the Organizing Process of the Early Church in Finland 75

Helena Edgren:
The Dance of Death in Inkoo.
A Medieval Church Painting as a Source of Local History 89

Verzeichnis der Mitarbeiter 101

Informationen an die Mitglieder von "Medium Aevum Quotidianum" ... 103

Verzeichnis der Mitarbeiter

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Mitteilungen an die Mitglieder von "Medium Aevum Quotidianum"

Das vorliegende Heft von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* widmet sich der Auseinandersetzung mit Alltag und materieller Kultur des Mittelalters in der finnischen Forschung. Es setzt damit die in Heft 15 begonnene "Länderserie" fort. Unser Dank gilt den beiden Herausgebern des Heftes, Christian Krötzl und Jaakko Masonen, sowie den Autoren der Beiträge. Die angesprochene "Länderserie" soll in zwangloser Folge fortgesetzt werden. Diesbezügliche vorbereitende Kontakte wurden vor allem mit ungarischen, schwedischen und jugoslawischen Kollegen geknüpft.

Neben den bereits in *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 18 angekündigten, für 1990 geplanten Heften wird im Februar/März 1990 *Medium Aevum Quotidianum. Ergänzungsband* 1 erscheinen. Dieser Band leitet eine Reihe ein, die in unregelmäßigen Abständen umfangreichere Abhandlungen zu Alltag und materieller Kultur des Mittelalters aufnehmen soll. Wir freuen uns, die Leistungen der Gesellschaft für ihre Mitglieder damit neuerlich erweitern zu können. Der genannte *Ergänzungsband* 1 wird sich mit der "Bedeutung von Schlaf und Traum im Mittelalter" auseinandersetzen. Dabei handelt es sich um eine überarbeitete und erweiterte Dissertation von Maria E. Wittmer-Butsch (Zürich), die bei Ludwig Schmugge am Historischen Seminar der Universität Zürich verfaßt wurde und in ihrer Methode in starkem Maße von alltagsgeschichtlichen Ansätzen ausgeht.

Gerhard Jaritz, Herausgeber