

# The Use of Marian Sculptures in Late Medieval Swedish Parish Churches

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This article discusses the use of wooden Marian sculptures in Swedish parish churches during the Middle Ages. By analysing the Marian sculptures' context, design and materiality together with vernacular devotional literature, I suggest that these different media together collaborated in the education of the lay congregation about the life of the Virgin and her cult. Together, sculptures and prayers facilitated private meditation. I will use the Madonna of Knutby Church as my leading example.

## Introduction

Located in the Swedish arch-diocese of Uppland, Knutby is a small parish with a 13th century, church situated close to Uppsala. The church's patron is St Martin of Tours, but its interior also contains many images of the Virgin Mary. Among other objects, the church contains an Apocalyptic Madonna from the late 15th century (according to Swedish History Museum, Stockholm). During the late medieval period in Sweden, namely in the 15th and 16th centuries, many examples of such Madonnas were locally produced for parish churches, and apocalyptic Madonnas were also imported into Sweden, usually from northern Germany or the Netherlands (see for example Andersson 1980: 64–78).

In this article, I will discuss the reasons behind the design, the intertextuality (i.e. the shaping of a text's meaning by another text by for example allusion, quotation), and the congregation's assumed perception of the Madonna of Knutby to provide a deeper understanding of the general use of wooden Marian sculptures in medieval Sweden. It is also of interest to understand how the parish churches could afford such expensive objects although, since these sculptures probably served as important subjects for the Marian cult in the parishes, there must have been some major donors who paid the extra costs.

Since one of my aims here is to show similarities between the Marian art designs in parish churches with the written texts that were used in the same cultural sphere, I have chosen to compare the artefacts with widespread vernacular prayers. Those prayers are frequent in the preserved Old Swedish prayer books from the same period, and can be found in books used by both lay people and nuns. The most common

prayers were presumably also known in parishes like Knutby, and thus could have been used by those who commissioned the art work discussed in this article.

## **Marian Sculptures in Swedish Parish Churches**

Like other European churches, Swedish medieval parish churches are divided into different architectural sections with specific uses; porches, naves, chancels and vestries. The nave and the chancel were most important for the Marian experience. In the chancel there was the high altar, and this section was separated from the nave by a large triumphal crucifix. Eventually, there was also an altar screen between the chancel and the nave, but it is unknown how many Swedish parish churches actually had altar screens (Nilsén 2003: 91–108).<sup>1</sup> The nave was divided into one Marian side with a Lady altar (the north), and another side with a side altar that was often dedicated to the church's patron (the south) (Nilsén 2003: 127). The use of the side altars was primarily extra-liturgical, and they were used for private devotion (Van der Ploeg 2002: 111, Williamson 2004: 362). There may have been sculptures on the altars, even if contemporary paintings of medieval churches usually place a reliquary on them (Nilsén 2003: 125–127).<sup>2</sup>

Some sculptures were inside retable shrines with doors that could be opened or closed. The painted doors told certain stories when the shrine was closed. The stories hidden inside were only made visible on certain occasions. This made such shrines an experience for the church visitor when they were opened.<sup>3</sup> To further understand the sculptures' use, it is also important to locate their original position; in the front

<sup>1</sup> Nilsén maintains that the altar screens could have many different uses and also looked differently.

<sup>2</sup> Altarpieces replaced the reliquary on the altar during the 13th century, especially in Northern Europe (van der Ploeg 2002: 116). Hellmut Hager (1962: *passim*) suggests that the common placement of panel paintings was on the side altars, at least initially. Later they might have been transferred to the high altar. The crucifix on the high altar was made obligatory in 1570 when Pope Pius V introduced the new Roman missal, even if it was earlier encouraged by the Church (van der Ploeg 2002: 107).

<sup>3</sup> We can talk about an obvious three-dimensional effect, similar to that of an altarpiece whose expression changed when the two-dimensional motifs became transferred into three-dimensional scenes (Liepe 1995: VI–VII). Even panel paintings had the same effect. Joanna Cannon (2002: 293) writes: "A *vita* panel could also commemorate the appearance and, in certain senses, the presence of a holy person. This presence might be located in the past, the present, or, indeed, in the future". Shrines were not opened only once a year, but also on other saints days, important for that particular church (Williamson 2004: 364).

of the church by the altar, on a side altar, or in the rear.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes, sculptures could be placed on the altars temporarily on specific occasions; referring to the Incarnation or to the Eucharist (Nilgen 1967: 311–316).<sup>5</sup>

Lena Liepe discusses whether there is a connection between wooden sculptures and murals in a church. She maintains that in some churches there is a connection between murals and crucifixes where the crucifixes are part of a narrative scheme. The connection between reredoses and statues of the Virgin Mary and murals is not that obvious, although it can sometimes be found (Liepe 1996: 224–229). Liepe concludes that it is possible that a specific iconographic motif is linked to a special situation, rather than to liturgy in general (Liepe 1996: 236).

<sup>4</sup> An Old Swedish miracle says that a sculpture of the Virgin Mary was placed in the porch, but this can hardly have been the normal case since medieval church porches usually contained only moral and ethical tales on the walls (Henning 1954: 179).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Hope (1990: 544) opposes this theory and argues that Nilgen over-theologises. Hope instead maintains that an image of angel Gabriel together with the Virgin was precisely that; an image of angel Gabriel with Mary.

It is far too sharp a binary to maintain that all liturgical activity had to do with a group of people, while tokens of respect were private. Private praying could, for example, take place inside a liturgical framework, even during mass – the preserved Old Swedish prayer books contain specific prayers which were meant to be read in private during mass, especially when the Host was shown to the congregation by the priest. Before taking the Communion it was, for example, prayed: “giff mik vsle syndersko O mildasta jomfru mädh renlek oc kärlek oc räddogha taka thins sons likama til minna siäls styrkilse oc äwärdelikin hwgnat” [*O gentle Virgin, give me worthless sinner your Son's body with purity and love and devoutness so that my soul will grow strong and have eternal comfort*]. See Geete 1907–09: 236. Mary's purity is honoured in contrast to one's own. Then, at the actual Communion, the prayer is about eternal joy: “Heel klarhethenna speghil, the hælga trefalloghetx heman, christi brwdha hws, thäs hælga anda sakerstya Oc alla ängla wärdoghastha högtidh Oc alla sundogha menniskio hop oc glädhi Maria fwl mädh nadh ... giffuande os äwärdhelika glädhi fför wtan ända” [*Hail mirror of transparency, the holy Trinity's home, Christ's bride house, the Holy Spirit's sacristy, and all angels most blessed feast, and all sinful people's hope and joy, Mary full of grace ... give us eternal joy in all times*] (Geete 1907–09: 236–237). Mary is now honoured because she carried Christ in her womb. After the Communion, the following was prayed: “O Sötasta blomster Jomfru maria gudz modhir, som aff thino iomfruliko lifue, födhe the wärdogasta fructena guds hälgaste likama, hwilkin iak owärdogasta syndhirska, hafwer nu takit i mit syndelika lifff” [*O sweetest flower Virgin Mary, God's mother who from your virgin womb gave birth to the most worthy fruit, God's most holy body which I, unworthy sinner, now have taken into my sinful body*] (Geete 1907–09: 126). In all of these prayers, Mary is praised for the Incarnation but, more importantly, these prayers show that certain private devotion was also structured liturgically (cf. Williamson 2004: 381). Such prayers are not unique to Sweden; they are usually translated from a common stock of medieval Latin material. (All translations from Old Swedish to English are by the author.)

### **Interior of the Knutby Parish Church**

Today, the Madonna of Knutby is placed to the right of the high altar in the chancel. During the Middle Ages, the sculpture was probably placed along the northern wall in the nave; alternatively, on the floor in the northern nave, close to the side altar. The church walls also contain paintings all the way to the floor and so it is unlikely that the sculpture was placed in such a position that those paintings became obscure. Besides the Madonna, Knutby Church also contains a medieval retable of Swedish origin (dated 1450–1475 according to Lindgren 1991: 182) with the Coronation of Mary as a central motif (see Fig. 1). On both sides of the Coronation we find apostles and saints; among them St Stephan, St Lawrence, St Olaf and St Erik. Notably, two of these, Olaf and Erik, are Nordic saints.



Fig. 1 *Altarpiece with the Coronation of Mary, Knutby Church, Uppland (1425–1450). Photo: Cecilia Lindhé.*

To the left of the altar, there is a medieval sculpture of Swedish origin depicting St Martin of Tours (see Fig. 2), the patron of the church. It is dated 1475–1500 (Pegelow 1998: 94–95). The sculpture of St Martin includes small images of St Bridget of Vadstena and her daughter St Catherine on its buttresses. Another medieval object is the triumphal crucifix that today hangs in the chancel on the northern side. According to Anna Nilsén, it might have adorned the high altar from the 15th century when the



Fig. 2 *St Martin of Tours, Knutby Church, Uppland (1450–1500)*. Photo: Cecilia Lindhé.

church replaced its original wooden arches with brick arches (Nilsén 2003: 203, Wilcke-Lindqvist 1979: 8).<sup>6</sup>

The interior walls were already painted in the 13th or 14th century. However, during the 15th century the church received new wall paintings, probably due to the restoration. Most of the new paintings have *Biblia pauperum* as a model, but we can also find some Nordic scenes from St Bridget's revelations, and from the life of St Olaf. On the north-western wall, one finds the legend of Mary's Dormition, probably inspired by the narrative in *Legenda aurea*; both a scene of Mary on her deathbed with the apostles, and a scene from her funeral procession. Following Liepe's argument, those murals could be interpreted as a deliberately planned iconographic scheme together with the Madonna (Liepe 1996: 228).

The walls also include painted coats of arms belonging to Archbishop Jakob Ulvsson (c. 1430–1521), and to the families of Sparre (of Tomta) and Väsby. Sparre owned properties in the surrounding land; Bengt Eriksson owned a farm at Björkö in Knutby, and his father, Erik Olofsson, had grounds in the neighbouring village of Almunge. Erik's wife, Kerstin Knutsdotter, came from the Väsby family. When such coats of arms are found in Swedish parish churches, they are supposed to belong to influential donors. This is probably also

<sup>6</sup> This change resulted in two aisles with free-standing pillars. Originally, the church only had one aisle that would permit an altar screen between the chancel and the nave on which the crucifix originally could have been placed.



Fig. 3 *The Madonna of Knutby, Knutby Church, Uppland, 15th century. Photo: Cecilia Lindhé.*

the case with Knutby Church. We know that the Archbishop, Jakob Ulvsson, was a generous donor to churches of Uppland (Nilsén 1986: 223). It may have been on his demand that Swedish saints were frequently represented in the church since the bishop was one of their main spokesmen. He exalted St Erik as the patron of Sweden, and his earliest known official act as Archbishop was to raise the day of St Bridget to *totum duplex*, the highest rank. Jakob was also very engaged in the canonisation of Birgitta's daughter Catherine (Kellerman 1935: 390–392). It is very plausible that, together with the Sparre and Väsby families, Jakob Ulvsson paid the costs of the church's renovation, and even for the new decorations.

### The Madonna of Knutby

Even if the congregation probably interacted with artefacts and murals mentioned above, and both intermediated and taught Christian dogmas, my initial focus in this paper is the use of the apocalyptic Madonna in Knutby Church. The Madonna of Knutby (see Fig. 3) is in many ways a very didactic object, just like

other wooden Madonnas in Swedish parish churches. We can assume that such sculptures aimed to aid the recollection of Virgin Mary's life since many Marian sculptures reveal a lot about her life and her cult in their design, and they remind the contemplative of stories locked away in their memory. The possibilities for interpretation are there, but they call for caution.

But what does the Madonna of Knutby tell us? First, that Mary was the mother of Jesus; she holds the child on her left arm. In her right hand she probably earlier held an apple that is now lost.<sup>7</sup> Mary as a mother of Jesus is confirmation of the Incarnation; that the word became flesh. God has chosen her to be His mother and that Mary voluntarily accepted this responsibility is visualised in her fateful expression. It is perhaps because of this that Mary and her son's eyes do not meet. Mary looks down humbly, with a contemplative expression. However, the child shows his human side when his eyes seem to be fixed on what Mary is holding in her right hand.<sup>8</sup> Next, the sculpture confirms that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. Mary's virginity is expressed by her hair hanging down. This alludes to stories about the Annunciation, the Visitation and the Nativity. Similarly, the sculpture describes Mary as the Queen of Heaven. She is crowned and she wears a golden mantle with jewellery.<sup>9</sup> This depiction of the Virgin Mary as the queen symbolises how Mary protects contemporary society. Mary was crowned in Heaven soon after her Assumption, due to her obedience and her humility.<sup>10</sup>

The Madonna of Knutby also incorporates the theme *Maria Ecclesia*. This theme dates back to Ambrose who writes in *De Spiritu sancto*: "Mary is not the Temple's God, but the Temple of God" (cf. Lindgren 1996: 373). The motif can be found, for example, in Jan van Eyck's painting *Maria Ecclesia* where the image of Mary fills the Gothic cathedral. The sculpture in Knutby Church has a Gothic ogee arch above the Virgin, indicating that Mary is in a church, just like in van Eyck's painting.<sup>11</sup>

The sculpture relates finally to the Woman of the Apocalypse: "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under

<sup>7</sup> The most common interpretation of the apple is as a symbol of Eve's disobedience but, in the Marian context, the apple instead becomes a symbol of Mary's obedience; Mary as the second Eve. Note that the apple can also symbolise the struggle between good and evil in the Book of Revelation.

<sup>8</sup> That artists often allowed the Christ child to concentrate on an apple in Mary's hand can be interpreted as a demonstration of God's appreciation of the obedience and humility Mary demonstrated during the Annunciation.

<sup>9</sup> Although in this case it is false jewellery, it must have given a sense of power and glory to the Virgin (cf. Bynum 2011: 41).

<sup>10</sup> Traditionally, Mary as queen dates back to Byzantine Christianity, and to Mary's title *Mater Dei*. During Easter, the hymn *Regina coeli* was sung, also connecting this theme to the written tradition. Mary as queen even had a political side since worldly leaders associated their own power with Mary's. For example, an empress was not crowned before she had given birth (Boss 2007(a): 156–157).

<sup>11</sup> Also St Martin stands in something resembling a cathedral. This shows that the holy persons belong to the church. On the continent we can find more advanced allusions of this sort (Bynum 2011: 62–63).

her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars” (Rev. 12: 1). The Madonna of Knutby is a clear example of this theme; Mary is dressed in the sun (see the rays of light emanating from her body), she has the moon under her feet, and she has 12 small stars around her head. In a Marian context, this quotation symbolises Mary which is explained by her humble answer during the Annunciation that allowed her to play a decisive part in our salvation (Williamson 2009: 150).<sup>12</sup>

Further, above the Madonna’s head there must have been four small wooden sculptures (now lost), probably angels. Moreover, behind the ogee arch, just above the Madonna’s head, there is a written text (see Fig. 4). The text is nearly hidden and, to notice it, you must be very close. Still the text is written with an aesthetic sense which indicates that the content must be important for the sculpture. Today, the placement of the sculpture makes it impossible to read the text, but it is probably a Marian prayer, a letter of indulgencies or something similar.

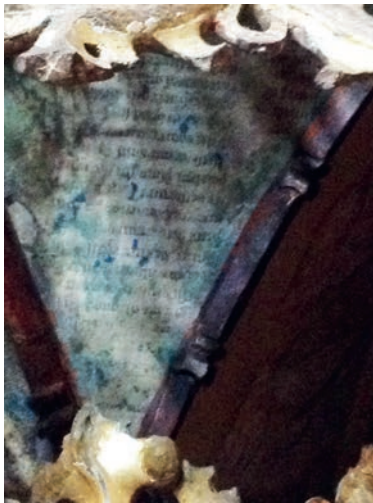


Fig. 4 *The Madonna of Knutby, detail.*  
Photo:author.

A close examination of the wooden plate behind the sculpture reveals four alcoves. These were probably made for hinges that are now lost. It is thus plausible that this sculpture originally had doors, indicating that it was part of a Marian retable shrine. The doors were possibly painted, but today we can only guess at the motifs. It might have been scenes from Mary’s life on the outside, and paintings of different saints

<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, the Woman of the Apocalypse can symbolise the church, which also relates the sculpture to *Maria Ecclesia* (see Boss 2007(b): 224–225).



on the inside, as seen on many other Swedish shrines (see Andersson 1980: *passim*). If so, it is highly possible that some Nordic saints like St Bridget, St Catherine, St Olaf or St Erik were painted on the inside, especially if the shrine was paid for by Archbishop Jakob Ulvsson who, as mentioned, had an interest in promoting Swedish saints. The outside of the shrine might have depicted the Annunciation, something quite common on shrines with well-preserved doors;<sup>13</sup> visualising the moment that creates the Queen of Heaven and makes Mary the Woman of the Apocalypse.

We can look at other late medieval shrines from Sweden to gain an impression of how the original Knutby shrine may have looked. For example, the late 15th century shrine from Harg's Church in Uppland has doors that on the inner side are depicted with St Catherine of Alexandria and St Dorotea on the left side, and St Barbara and St Margaret on the right (see Fig. 5). Another shrine, from Risinge Old Church in Östergötland is dated to circa 1450–1475 (Andersson 1980: 93) and has doors featuring St Catherine of Alexandria, St Olaf, St Erik and St Bridget (see Fig. 6). The outer sides of these shrines contain fragments of paintings.



Fig. 5 *Marian shrine, Harg's Church, Uppland (15th century). Photo: Cecilia Lindbé.*

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the shrines from Norra Fågelås Church, Västergötland, and from Sorunda Church, Södermanland (Andersson 1980: 102).



Fig. 6 *Marian shrine, Risinge Old Church, Östergötland (c. 1475)*. Photo: Cecilia Lindhé.

The most important purpose of retable Marian shrines in both Sweden and elsewhere was to remind the viewers of the traditions and tales about Mary, and to explain the Marian dogmas – that is to make the sculptures objects of devotion and meditation. That Mary was portrayed in three dimensions, and in a natural size, made it easier to identify with her, pray to her, and speak to her. When the shrines were opened during a feast day, Mary effectively became present in the mass. Caroline Walker Bynum describes it like this:

The viewer may be invited to penetrate *through* the outer image, but what he or she reaches is, in this case, another (even more plastic and tactile) image. (...) Indeed, the viewer's awareness that the altarpiece moves, the doors opening to reveal a deeper content on particularly important days, suggests a straining forward toward participation. (Bynum 2011: 67)

Here Bynum is discussing altarpieces with the Passion as the central motif, but her arguments can easily be transferred to Marian shrines.

## Liturgical and extraliturgical functions of cult sculptures in the Middle Ages

While written Marian sources have been analysed, it is still difficult to decide how visual artifacts were used practically in devotion and liturgy. Recently, scholars such as Lena Liepe, Beth Williamson, Kees van der Ploeg and Charles Hope have discussed the images' liturgical use. Today, the medieval Madonnas have been transformed into artifacts as either ornamentation or museum objects.<sup>14</sup> Their original use is obsolete since they have been taken away from their medieval cultural contexts. Thus, if we are to understand the Madonna of Knutby's primary function, we need to interpret its medieval character. We need to understand how the visual aspects – colours, details and structure – were chosen deliberately in order to facilitate meditation, to educate visitors etc. (Bynum 2011: 31). For example, the design provided on one hand a guide for identification and, on the other, showed the saints' glory and heavenly light (Liepe 1995: III). Even the sculptures' intended tactility – the possibility to caress the foot, to kiss the wounds of Christ – must be interpreted (Bynum 2011: 38).<sup>15</sup>

Medieval sculptures were colourful, often dressed and ornamented with jewellery. There was an emphasis on material riches which did not reflect any realistic circumstances about the motif. Sculptures of the Virgin Mary were not meant to imitate the poor Jewish girl who gave birth to Jesus; instead, her honour and glory were put forward by the complexity of the design (Bynum 2011: 53, 59, also McCracken 2006: 49). However, lay people regarded the images as more than mere representations; they were incarnations.<sup>16</sup> That people believed that such sculptures were an incarnation of the saint – that they were what they represented, as Bynum maintains – is understood by a famous miracle about a woman whose son was imprisoned. The woman took the Infant Jesus from a sculpture of the Virgin and child and refused to put him back until the Virgin Mary had helped the woman's son (Henning 1954: 180).

<sup>14</sup> Thus, today new functions for medieval sculptures have been developed in certain churches. For example in Vingåker Church, Södermanland, a new Marian chapel has been built around a medieval Marian sculpture.

<sup>15</sup> There are inscriptions on some objects that instruct their audience to honour the sculptures with their mouth and fingers. Bynum mentions, for example, a woodcut of Christ's wounds that offers protection and indulgences (Bynum 2011: 65). A letter of indulgence from Linköping's Cathedral (dated 1412) about masses that are concentrated on the Pieta describes that someone in search for indulgence should touch the sculpture (Källström 2011: 276–277).

<sup>16</sup> Bynum (2011: 125) maintains that: "to materialize was to animate".

During the Middle Ages, this was not particularly strange as there are many stories about Marian images performing miracles.<sup>17</sup> Usually, miracles were known to occur around relics of saints but, since Mary was held to have been taken straight into heaven upon her death and no body or bones of Virgin Mary have ever been invented, Marian miracles often took place at shrines and, according to miracle collections, many people were cured after visiting shrines etc. (Ward 2011: 154).

Caroline Walker Bynum (2011: 217–265) shows that material objects also inspired medieval people to have visions. The well-known revelations of St Bridget include many examples of this. Those revelations were probably also known by medieval Swedish laymen since they were preached in sermons and often used in edifying vernacular literature from the Swedish Middle Ages. For example, in book VII, chapter 2, Bridget is visiting Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, and has a revelation about Christ's presentation in the temple. In Assisi, she has a revelation about St Francis (Rev. Extr. 90), in St Clare's chapel in Naples she has a vision about Mary's locks (Rev. Extr. 94), and when she reads a manuscript containing *Speculum virginum* she has a vision about virginity, marriage and life as a widow (Rev. Extr. 96). At one stage, when she touches a piece of wood she feels that it is part of the Holy Cross (Rev. Extr. 106). Further, Bridget has many revelations during her pilgrimage in the Holy Land, among others about the birth of Christ (book VII, chapter 21).<sup>18</sup>

Objects of cult and liturgy had their place within the church – just as in Knutby, but it was not intended that people should pray to those objects. Prayers should be addressed to Christ, the Virgin or to a saint – the image thus functioned as an intercessory before God. Alf Hårdelin discusses medieval theories of the hermeneutics of images. He begins with one of the main arguments in the 8th century work *Libri Carolini* – that pictures were subordinated by words (Hårdelin 2005: 308–309). The same view – that while useful, images should not be worshipped in the same way as God – is expressed in Walahfrid's chapter *De imaginibus et picturis*.<sup>19</sup> Walahfrid argues that an image is like a book for the unlettered. Hårdelin maintains that this view is highly questionable since it indicates that general literacy obliterates the need for images. It is also doubtful that one can see medieval pictures as books for the illiterate since they often contain explanative language scrolls. D.H. Green makes a good point when he says that: “word and picture belong together and work together for the rus-

<sup>17</sup> Marian apparitions are known already from the writings of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas etc. (Maunder 2007: 424).

<sup>18</sup> A digital critical edition of St Bridget's revelations can be found at <http://riksarkivet.se/crb>.

<sup>19</sup> In *Libellus de exordiis Et incrementis quarundam in Observationibus ecclesiasticis rerum*, 9th century.

tics, however, only through the intermediacy of one who can read” (Green 2007: 53).<sup>20</sup> Another example contradicting Walahfrid is the so-called mystic images, for example, the pelican with its children.<sup>21</sup> They were never meant to be interpreted ‘literally’. Instead, Hårdelin argues that religious images should be seen as parts of the sacramental context of symbols sharing the ambition to raise our love to God in our heart (Hårdelin 2005: 312). It was the presence of the Divine in the room that was contemplated, caressed and spoken to.

It is feasible that one of the Madonna of Knutby’s primary functions was to facilitate mediation – to pray before images of the Virgin Mary probably visualised complex scenes of the Virgin’s life. Barbara Newman writes:

Closely linked to the veneration of actual painted or sculpted images was the construction of holy scenes within the mind. A nun who daily wept before the pieta or kissed the feet of the Crucified would find it increasingly easy to visualize these figures in prayer. (Newman 2005: 16)<sup>22</sup>

This must be seen as a cognitive act since it granted a close connection between meditative reading and visionary experience (Carruthers 1998: 184). Lena Liepe also gives examples of practices of meditating in silent prayer over a crucifix: “by fixating one’s eyes and mind on each of the wounds of Christ in turn and saying specific prayers” (Liepe 1996: 232). Similar practices are also told in contemporary sources, for example St Mechthild of Hackeborn describes how during private devotion she physically interacts with the image (*Liber spiritualis gratiae*, first book, chapter 33):

When Saint Mechthild went forward to kiss the Cross with divine inspiration, she said to the feet’s wound: ‘See, my Lord, all my expectations I send to You, and I take all Your will so that I will be fully cleansed afterwards, and when I am in all ways blessed then I never more will be tempted in any worldly matter’. And when she turned to the wound on His right hand, our Lord Jesus said to her: ‘Hide here all that is on your mind...’<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Green bases this on Paulinus of Nola (4th century) who describes a basilica’s images by referring to its language scrolls and, according to Paulinus: without the scrolls, it would be difficult to understand the images (cf. Arnulf 1997: 47–66).

<sup>21</sup> A frequent motif in Swedish parish churches (Almunge Church, Edebo Church, Husby-Sjutolft Church, Härkeberga Church etc.), but the motif does not occur in Knutby Church.

<sup>22</sup> Also see van der Ploeg (2002: 114): “However, the liturgy does not need such images, but devotional practice does: at times when no mass was celebrated, these depictions would eloquently stimulate contemplation on the mystery of the Eucharist.”

<sup>23</sup> “Thäntidh sancta mäktildis skulle ga fram, ath kyssa korseth aff gudhelighom jnskiwutillsom, tha sagdhe hon til fotanna saar Se min härra, alla mina astwndan thrykker jak i thik, ok tilfögther allom thinom wilia Swa ath jak här äpther wari fwllelica rensath, ok i alle mattho häl-

Mechthild reaches the Cross, she touches it with her lips, and she starts praying to Christ's wounds. When she comes to the wound on His right hand, Christ interrupts her and starts speaking. A contact has been established between Mechthild and Christ through the object.

Similar experiences are also recorded in miracles; *Sielinna thrøst*, a Swedish compilation based on the Low German *Seehlentrost* from the first half of the 15th century, probably written for a lay audience (see Andersson-Schmitt 1989: 162–182), describes how a simple monk used to salute Virgin Mary every time he passed an image of her. Finally Mary answered him through one of the images with the words: “you shall be blessed” (Henning 1954: 176). Another miracle, preserved in the vernacular miscellaneous manuscript Cod. Holm. A 110 (Royal Library, Stockholm) from 1300/1400,<sup>24</sup> tells of a knight who prayed before an image of the Virgin Mary until the Virgin raised his dead wife (Klemming 1877–78: 89–90). Such miracles where the devotee was rewarded by the Virgin Mary probably had both a didactic and an encouraging function, and they are usual in nearly all collections of texts to Our Lady.<sup>25</sup> Peggy McCracken has analysed Gautier de Coinci's collection *Miracles de Notre Dame* from the 13th century, and maintains that images were attributed an intercessory power (McCracken 2006: 47–57). This was explained theologically, stating that the image itself does not perform the miracle; it is God on Mary's advice: “God performs miracles for the sake of his virgin mother, but in Gautier's collection, God also performs miracles for her ‘ymage’, her image, a portrait or a statue” (McCracken 2006: 47).

## Marian sculptures and Marian prayers

To interpret the use of the Madonna of Knutby we need, as mentioned, to understand its medieval context. The Madonna alludes to contemporary traditions and cultural codes, but also to written texts. It is notable that the sculpture is surrounded by text,

ghat Ath jak aldrig här äpther maghe wffias j nakro thy som wärdhline til hörer Än til höghra handinna saar sagdhe härran jhesus til henna, göm här al the thingh ...” (Geete 1890: 73).

<sup>24</sup> About this manuscript, see Carlquist (2002: 59–63).

<sup>25</sup> It is debatable whether medieval people really believed in all of these miracles. It has been suggested that miracles can be understood as hallucinations or as folklore. Steven Justice (2008: 4–5) talks about two main perspectives: first, a didactic explanation maintaining that miracles were used as meaningful illustrations rather than as fact, secondly a perceptual explanation suggesting that people misinterpreted natural actions as supernatural. Justice himself maintains that the crux of the matter is conviction. Medieval people lived in a context where the stories of the Bible were the truth; they listened to sermons about the saints and Virgin Mary, and the message was ingrained (cf. Poleg 2011: passim).

both written (above her head) and intertext (in her design). This mass of information the sculpture expresses explained the importance of Mary for the Incarnation and for the Eucharist. But the congregation should also learn about Mary's role as intercessor and mediator. This is by no means unique for the Madonna of Knutby, it is the character of most wooden Marian sculptures in parish churches. By their design and intertext the sculptures become active partners to the devotees. Probably the primary use of the Madonnas was for private meditation, something indicated by how *Sialinna thrøst* advises lay people how to pray:

And pray to Him to remember and preserve you, so that the Holy Trinity's image or picture never will be separated from you in eternity. And then a Pater noster and an Ave Maria, His holy prayers, that is about how He came from Heaven to the world, and how He took humanity from Virgin Mary's most pure virginal womb. And then a Pater noster and an Ave Maria because of His blessed nativity; He was born for all of our comfort and joy...<sup>26</sup>

*Sialinna thrøst* then instructs people to pray simply; it is better to pray *Pater noster* or *Ave Maria* with devotion and consideration than to pray something that is not understood. Likewise, prayer should be assiduous (Carlquist 2004: 118). The Old Swedish translation of *Modus bene vivendi ad Sororem*, attributed to St Bernard, encourages prayer as private meditative devotion; the prayer shall have its base in the heart, not in the mouth. In the vernacular version of *Meditationes sancti Bernardi*, praying is described as a song of praise; eagerness and a humble mind are glorified (Carlquist 2004: 119). This was a common view during the Middle Ages. Thom Mertens writes:

Hugh [of St. Victor] claims in his *De modo orandi*, in accordance with 1 Corinthians 14, that it is the fervent heart that prays, not the mouth just saying the words of prayer. Words in prayer are not meant to inform God but to set the praying person's heart on fire. Someone who understands Latin should pray in Latin, but those who do not understand Latin will profit from prayers in the vernacular. (Mertens 2013: 143)

This perspective can be compared to the monastic practice called *Lectio divina* which had its roots by Origen, but was formalised during the 11th and 12th centuries. John

<sup>26</sup> "Oc bidhia han thik gøma oc bewara / at the hælgha threfalloghetz belæte eller liknilse wardhe alregh / æ wnnelika fran thik skild / Ther nest ena pater noster oc aue maria hans hælgha budhan som war tha han kom aff hymerike hit till werldena / oc tok mandom aff iomfru marie renasto iomfruliko lifwe / Ther nest ena pater noster oc aue maria hans wælsighnadha fødzo at han oss allom war føddir til thrøst oc glædhly ..." (Henning 1954: 120).

of the Cross maintained that we should seek in reading, and find in meditation, and by prayer the divinity would be revealed in contemplation (Cunningham & Egan 1996: 88–94). This was made possible by an elaborate design of the book page, organised for logical thinking. The text became an object, independent of the physical manuscript (Illich 1993: 33).<sup>27</sup> It is possible that images like the Madonna of Knutby were meant to be used in a similar way as prayers – the contemplation of such images should also have its root in the heart, not in the eyes.<sup>28</sup>

It is maintained that the church visitor should mentally travel with Christ – through His life and His work – for our salvation. Each mass will be a renewal of – above all – the New Testament.<sup>29</sup> In this process, both prayers and images were important since they expressed this path mentally and visually. A miracle in the Virgin Mary's Psalter, about a duchess, describes how the duchess divides the Psalter into three parts. She reads the first part before a Marian shrine finishing with three *Ave Maria* addressed:

*to her [Mary's] eyes that saw God's son, and for her ears that heard the angel's greeting, and so off her other limbs. And when I do this, I feel an indescribable sweetness flowing in all my bones, a sweetness that is more than the entire world's comfort.*<sup>30</sup>

The duchess reads the second part before the Cross, and the final part by the altar and its altarpiece. The miracle maintains that there is a connection between devotion and images. Together, prayers and images fulfil the duchess' reading. Some prayers should also be read before an image of Mary according to the prayer books; for example, *read this [prayer] on your knees before the image of Mary together with Pater noster, Ave Maria and Credo*<sup>31</sup>, or *it [this prayer] shall be read in front of Virgin*

<sup>27</sup> Cf. also Reilly (2011: 106): "Other Bible manuscripts were more obviously didactic in format. Glosed versions of the Psalter and other Scripture survive from monastic contexts, signalling their use in schools for oblates and novices, and perhaps during the private *lectio divina* of more senior monks."

<sup>28</sup> This also seems to apply to illuminated manuscripts. Thus, very few of such manuscripts owned by lay people are preserved from medieval Sweden, but images for meditation are more frequent in Swedish illuminated manuscripts (Carlquist 2007: 170).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. the medieval explanations of the mass, some vernacular ones are edited in Geete (1900: 79–92).

<sup>30</sup> "til hännas ögon om gudz son sagho, oc til öronen som hördho ängilsens helso, och swa aff androm hännas limom, Oc nar jak thätta gör, känne jak osigeliken söthma in fflytha j alla mina limi, hvilken som offwer gaar allan wärldena hwgnadh" (Geete 1923–1925: 394).

<sup>31</sup> "gudhelika läsa a sin knä för maria beläte mädh pater noster Aue maria oc credo" (Geete 1907–1909: 225).



*Mary's image where she stands in the sun.*<sup>32</sup> The content of those prayers can also be compared to visual images – words and image go hand in hand. For example, a prayer from the manuscript Cod. Holm. A 43 (Royal Library, Stockholm) says:

Hail Virgin, graceful star, purer than sun, God's gracious mother, sweeter than a drop of honey, more red than the rose, more white than the lily, all virtues embellish You who are mentioned by the angels, all saints honor You in heaven, because You are higher than all – have mercy with me. Amen.<sup>33</sup>

This prayer is built by several noun phrases lined up in a row, and most of these phrases have correspondences in visual images. Mary is mentioned as a virgin and the sculptures visualise Mary as a virgin. Then the prayer says that Mary is a graceful star and she is purer than the sun; something that is seen in sculptures of the Virgin Mary where Mary is portrayed in bright colours with a dark background. Mary as Christ's mother is also visualised in sculptures where Mary has the child on her arm or in her lap. That Virgin Mary is sweeter than a drop of honey might eventually allude to the materiality of the sculptures – they were often meant to be touched. The red roses and white lilies mentioned in the prayer might be expressed by the colours of the sculptures, but the connection is more obvious in wall paintings in Swedish parish churches where red roses and white lilies are usually painted around images of Mary. The prayer also maintains that all virtues embellish Mary. This is usually seen in how sculptures display Mary's humility and obedience by her looks and gestures. Then, the prayer says that Mary is seen by the angels as the most dignified. This can be related visually to images where Mary is crowned, but also to images where angels surround the Virgin. The angels may allude to the legend that says that Mary was crowned by her Son with angels as witnesses. Mary's title Queen of Heaven is visualised by the shrines' doors where different saints surround her. In Madonnas where Mary is portrayed as the Woman of the Apocalypse, she is literally higher than all others, just like in the prayer, since she is standing on the moon. The conclusion is thus that both prayers and sculptures allude to Marian dogmas by intertext. I am sure that this was obvious to the church visitor during the Middle

<sup>32</sup> "hon skal läsas för iomffru maria beläthe thär hon star i solinne" (See Geete 1907–1909: 226). The following addition is interesting 'where she stands in the sun', which alludes to a Madonna that also is the Woman of the Apocalypse – just like in Knutby.

<sup>33</sup> "Heel jomfru, nadhåful stjärna, clarare än sool, gudz modher ärofwl, söthare än honogx droppe, rödhare meer än roos, whitare än lilia, alla dygher pryda tik, änglomen ypparen, all hælgon hedhra tik j hymmerike, thy at thu äst allom höghre, miskunna mik Amen" (Geete 1907–1909: 225).

Ages since the written prayers usually gesture to the same kind of texts as the images.

## Conclusions

In this article I have maintained that, to fully understand material objects of cult and devotion, we need to analyse their design and their intertextuality. Just like a praying devotee was in need of some basic knowledge of related texts to obtain a full understanding of the code words actualising a certain theme, dogma or standpoint regarding Mary, he or she also needed knowledge about symbols when meditating before an art work. When Marian followers learned about code words or symbols with a distinct meaning defined in authorised texts, they also enlarged their understanding of Mary, Christianity, virtues etc.

Mieke Bal uses the term *quotation* in a similar way as linguistics uses intertextuality. She writes: “the sign borrowed, because it is a sign, inevitably comes with a meaning” (Bal 1999: 9). Both prayers and images contained hidden information. To unlock this, the devotee was in need of certain knowledge. The joint interpretation made a social unity among the initiated, honouring the same Marian conventions. Using Norman Fairclough’s terminology, we can talk about the interplay of norms: “the focus is on discourse conventions rather than other texts” (Fairclough 1992: 104).

Besides Mary as part of the Incarnation and Mary as a symbol for virtues, Mary as an intercessor is an important message that the images and prayers together conveyed; Mary’s daily intervention was made apparent. Taken together, prayers and images created a wholeness whose meaning was far greater than the mere aesthetics. Jointly, they aimed to generate the experience of Mary as present in the community. When people during the Middle Ages viewed an image of Mary in the church, read prayers to the Virgin, they were supposed to feel love for God, compassion with the Mother etc. The Madonna of Knutby, just like other Marian sculptures, represented the Queen of Heaven, and her message was that Mary is together with us in the church.

As with most Marian sculptures, one of the Madonna of Knutby’s aims was to create, together with prayers and meditation, mental pictures for the devotee; the sculpture was to facilitate conviction through visualisation. Private devotion aided this by emphasising the importance of the intercessor; that Mary was something concrete and trustworthy. Mary Carruthers writes: “The emphasis is not on faithfully ‘illustrating’ the words, as we might demand, but on making some ‘picture’ in order to feel, to remember, and thus to know” (Carruthers 1998: 132). Carruthers means

that this is a part of the rhetorical action called *enargeia*, which was not just about the eyes, but about all senses. In this view, sculptures were rhetoric tools for illustrating dogmas in mind, sight and touch – in both liturgical and private devotion.

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