

# The medieval Calvary group in Norway: context and functions

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## Introduction

Like their other West European counterparts, medieval Scandinavian churches housed a great number of images with the crucifix in focus. As many as one hundred and forty polychrome sculpted wooden crucifixes from c. 1100-1350 have survived only in Norway.<sup>1</sup> Of these, at least nine belong to a so-called Calvary or Crucifixion group (*Kreuzgruppe/Kreuzigungsgruppe*),<sup>2</sup> where the crucifix is flanked by sculptures of the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist.<sup>3</sup>

A crucifix, in which central doctrinal and liturgical tenets are expressed, has obvious links with the liturgy. However, the purpose of placing the Virgin and St. John on either side of the crucified Christ in a medieval liturgical context may seem less clear. The present paper will discuss the significance of the Virgin and St. John at the foot of the Crucifixion and the probable functions which a Calvary group may have served the local congregations in medieval Norway. Why did some churches, particularly from the twelfth century onwards, prefer the Crucifixion iconography with the Virgin and St. John rather than an unaccompanied crucifix?

<sup>1</sup> Kollandsrud, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The sculpted Calvary group is also sometimes called a triumphal cross group (*Triumphkreuzgruppe*), since the majority of such crucifixes can be classified as triumphal crosses. See Hauss herr, 1979, pp. 131-168; Hauss herr, 1972; Wolska, 1997, p. 25; Nyborg, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> These are the Calvary groups of Urnes (c. 1150), Giske (c. 1200), Rauland (c. 1220-30), Østsinni (c. 1230-40), Skoger (c. 1250-75), Balke (c. 1260-80), Kjøse (c. 1270-80), Grong (late 13<sup>th</sup> century) and Hedrum (c. 1300). In addition to these groups some medieval sculptures in wood of the Virgin and St. John, but also crucifixes, have survived, which can be attributed to such a group. These are the Virgin and St. John from Austråt (c. 1230-1250) and Dyste (c. 1260-1280), St. John from Heggen (c. 1240-1255), the Virgin from Tanum (c. 1300) and the Virgin and crucifix from Romfo (the Virgin late thirteenth century and Christ fourteenth century). A figure of St. John which now belong to the Romfo group in Romfo church is a later addition, probably from the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. Another wooden sculpture from Dyste (beginning of the fourteenth century) has also been identified as St. John from a Calvary. For further details about the groups, see Blindheim, 1998; Blindheim, 2004; Gullåsen, 2003. It is also probable that a crucifix, dated c. 1260, discovered during excavations in Rygge church in 1980, was flanked by sculptures of the Virgin and St. John. I would like to thank Tine Frøysaker for pointing this out to me.

The extant Norwegian Calvary groups display great variations of style, provenance (map, fig. 1) and dating, and represent only a fraction of the material that once existed. The group from Urnes stave church dated c. 1150 (fig. 2) is a good example of such an early group from the Western part of Norway. According to Martin Blindheim,<sup>4</sup> the majority of the extant Calvary groups are datable to the middle and the second half of the thirteenth century and belong to a widespread West-European tradition,<sup>5</sup> such as the group from Balke church in the eastern Norway dated c. 1260-80 (fig. 3). Most of the Norwegian Calvary groups come from parish churches, but whether this was their original origin remains moot.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years historians of medieval art have discussed the interaction between imagery and rite in the church room. Christian art has been interpreted in the context of liturgical functions which seem essential for understanding its meaning.<sup>7</sup> Staale Sinding-Larsen has suggested two distinct categories/functions in which images may serve liturgy: *formal functions* or *auxiliary functions*.<sup>8</sup> These distinctions seem appropriate as a point of departure when discussing liturgical functions of medieval cult sculpture in Norway. Although there are few literary sources to precise uses (*formal function*) of religious sculpture in medieval parish churches or to the reasons for acquiring such images,<sup>9</sup> it is likely that the Norwegian Calvary groups

<sup>4</sup> Blindheim, 1998; Blindheim, 2004.

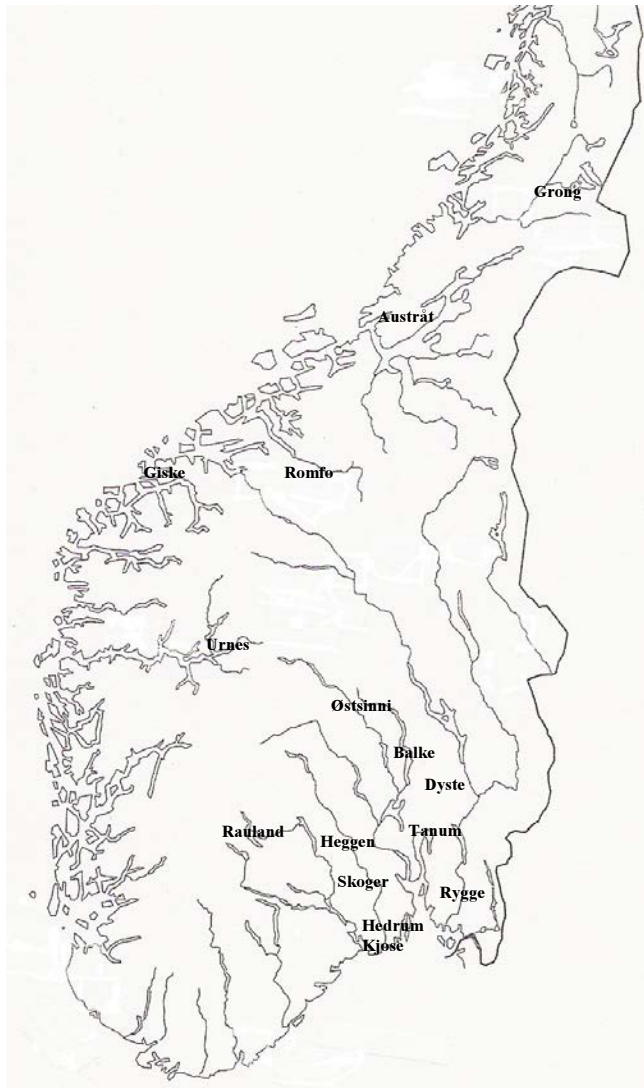
<sup>5</sup> Andersson, 1949, and Blindheim, 1998, have pointed to England and France, but also Germany, for stylistic influences on several of the extant Norwegian Calvary groups.

<sup>6</sup> The sculptures from Austråt, the Virgin from Tanum and the Calvary groups from Skoger, Hedrum and Urnes are probably in their original churches. In the Middle Ages the Hedrum church was probably one of the so-called *fylkes* churches (i.e. main church) in Viken. The sculptures from the medieval Balke, Giske and Heggen churches are now in museums. The Calvary groups in the new Kjose and Rauland churches may have been placed in stave churches originally. The new Rauland church replaced the old Rauland stave church in 1803. The new Kjose church replaced a timber church from 1606 in 1850. The timber church was built when the old Kjose stave church was torn down in 1606.

<sup>7</sup> Hourihane, 2003, footnote 3, refers to some general studies on the subject.

<sup>8</sup> Sinding-Larsen, 1984, pp. 29-30.

<sup>9</sup> According to Liepe, 1996, Björkman, 1957, p. 278, cites a reference to handling of a sculpted crucifix in the liturgy of Good Friday in instructions on how to use the liturgical text. The passage refers to the carrying and uncovering of the cross in front of the high altar, and the kissing of the feet of the crucifix (*ad venerationem crucis*). Banning, 1983, has also noted a passage in a Danish prayer book on how to meditate 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. However, both Björkman's and Banning's texts are from the Later Middle Ages in Sweden and Denmark and are thus not necessarily relevant for the thirteenth-fourteenth century.



*Fig. 1. Map of Norway with names of churches which contain extant Calvary groups dated c. 1150-1350, or from which such sculpture groups came to various museums.*



Fig. 2. Urnes Calvary group, Urnes church. Photo: Museum of Cultural History/Oldsaksamlingen, University of Oslo.

served liturgy in so-called *auxiliary functions*, that is, used for illustrative purposes without any inherently liturgical ties.

### The iconography and context of the Calvary group

In general, the iconography of the Norwegian wooden Calvary groups follows a schema typical of how such groups had developed in northern Europe by the twelfth century.<sup>10</sup> Written sources and a few extant Crucifixion groups suggest that it was common also to include figures other than the Virgin and St. John in these groups, especially cherubim, such as the group in Halberstadt Cathedral, dated c. 1220.<sup>11</sup> The inclusion of either cherubim, bishop saints or even deacons on the rood seem to have had liturgical sig-

<sup>10</sup> The description of Gervase (c. 1200) of the rebuilding of Christ Church Cathedral in Canterbury, by Archbishop Lanfranc (c. 1010-89), refers to a screen separating the choir and the nave with a transverse beam above supporting a crucifix and the figures of the Virgin, St. John and two cherubim, see Brieger, 1941-42, p. 87. See also Hausscherr, 1979, p. 150. Some of the earliest groups to have survived are German, for instance the one in the Church of the Holy Cross, Lechschwaben, Altenstadt, dated to first quarter of the twelfth century, but the group survives in most areas of West-Europe, from Scandinavia in the north to Spain in the south, from the first part of the twelfth century onwards. The type does not seem to have developed in the same form in Italy, but is instead represented by the large scale painted crucifix, a so-called *Croce Dipinta*, that often had depictions of the Virgin and St. John in roundels at the ends of the arms of the cross and were perhaps suspended in a manner similar to the Calvary groups.

<sup>11</sup> Hausscherr, 1979, p. 144.



*Fig. 3. Balke Calvary group, Museum of Cultural History/Oldsaksamlingen, University of Oslo. Photo: Museum of Cultural History/Oldsaksamlingen, University of Oslo.*

nificance.<sup>12</sup> It has been suggested that a Norwegian group, the so-called Balke Calvary (fig. 3), also included figures other than the Virgin and St. John originally, among others sculptures of St. Catherine and St. Mary Magdalene. However, beyond stylistic similarities, few arguments have been given for this reconstruction.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The late thirteenth century Crucifixion group in the former collegiate church at Bücken near Bremen includes two bishop saints (one of them is a reconstruction), see *ibid.*, p. 158. The Calvary group in Hamra church on Gotland, Sweden, c. 1330-40, includes two deacons. See Wolska, 1997, p. 136. Cherubim on the rood partly refer to the belief that they were present at the consecration of the Host, and indicating that through them redemption could be foreseen.

<sup>13</sup> Blindheim, 1952, has proposed that as many as seven sculptures originally belonged to the Balke Calvary group.



Fig. 4. Wall paintings, the southern altar niche in Tanum church. Photo: Author.

It has been argued that different types of arrangement were preferred for the Calvary groups during the Middle Ages.<sup>14</sup> For example contours in the wall painting in the southern altar niche in Tanum church in Akershus county, dated fourteenth century, suggests that a sculpted Calvary group was intended to have been placed here (see fig. 4).<sup>15</sup> It is, however, normally assumed that a Calvary group had its position in or above the entrance to the ritual chancel (the “triumphal arch”).<sup>16</sup> If this was the case, the group would have been a focal point of the church from the congregation’s point of view, dominating the space and being a centre for attention during mass.<sup>17</sup> The triumphal cross in particular is therefore often linked with a liturgical function connected to the performing of the Eucharistic sacrifice, emphasizing the presence of Christ at the consecration of the Host, as well as a reference to Christ’s triumph and His second coming. Although there was a shift in emphasis

in Northern European art from showing Christ as victorious king (*Christus Regens*) in the Romanesque period to Christ dead or dying in Gothic art (*Christus*

<sup>14</sup> See especially Nilsén, 2003. See also Nyborg, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> That a sculpture of the Virgin, dated c. 1300 (at present in Tanum church), belonged to this Calvary group, is probable. The painting that has survived in the altar niche, a sun and a moon, also suggests the presence of a Calvary group even there. The sun and the moon in the altar niche are almost identical to the sun and the moon above the painted Calvary representation on the wall above the chancel entrance in the church (also dated fourteenth century), see Anker, 1974, pp. 16-22.

<sup>16</sup> The location of the Calvary groups in the Norwegian medieval churches has not been discussed properly in previous research, but it is likely that it followed the European tradition and that they were connected with the high altar or a holy cross altar, placed on a rood beam in or above the chancel entrance. However, the size of some of the Norwegian Calvary groups (for example Rauland, see fig. 5) may also point to a different location for these groups than on a rood beam.

<sup>17</sup> See Haussherr, 1972; Wolska, 1997; Brieger, 1941-42; Evelyn, 1996.



	Urnes	Giske	Østsimni	Austråt	Rauland	Balke	Skoger	Kjøse	Grong	Hedrum	Romfo
Circa date	1150	1200	1230-40	1250	1220-30	1260-80	1250-75	1270-80	Late 13 <sup>th</sup> century	1300	14 <sup>th</sup> century
County	Sogn og Fjordane	More og Romsdal	Oppland	Sor-Trøndelag	Telemark	Oppland	Buskerud	Vestfold	Nord-Trøndelag	Vestfold	More og Romsdal
Arms in a horizontal line	x	Arms lost	Arms lost	x	x	x	x	x	x		
Side wound	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Suppedaneum	x	Cross and part of legs lost		x	x	Cross lost				Cross lost	
Parallell feet	x	x			x						
Cross-feet pose			x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Cross intact	x				Cross later		x	x	x		Cross later
Eyes open	x		x		x	x	x	x			
Eyes closed		x		x					x	x	x
Halo	x				x						
Royal crown	x	x	x	x							
Crown of thorns						x	x	x	x	x	x
Measurements height x width x depth	118x118,7x37 cm	133x28 cm. Arms and lower parts of legs lost	83,2x20x12,5 cm. Arms lost		69,8x48cm	157x127x19 cm	108x101x14,5 cm	H 120 cm	Exact measurements do not exist.	74x68x12 cm	75x60x21 cm
Remains of original polychromy	x		x		x	x	x		x		

\* Christ from Austråt was lost in a fire in 1916, but the sculpture is known through old photographs which show Him flanked by the extant sculptures of St. John and the Virgin. See Ree and Wallem, 1916.

Fig. 5. The iconography of the extant Norwegian crucifixes from Calvary groups.

*Patiens*),<sup>18</sup> the triumphal crosses, independent of their size, emphasize Christ's two natures, presenting Christ as God and king, creator of the world and victor over evil and at the same time as the suffering and dying son of Mary. The Calvary crucifix never seemed to display the tortured agony more typical of some late medieval crucifixes in Europe, particularly in Germany.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> This shift in emphasis is, however, a simplification since the two iconographic types, Christ as victorious and as suffering, existed side by side. See for example the two Norwegian crucifixes from Horg, both dated end of twelfth century, at Vitenskapsmuseet, Trondheim (see Blindheim, 1998, cat. 12-13).

<sup>19</sup> For example the forked crucifix (Gabelkreutz) in Santa Maria in Capitol, Cologne, 1304, see Sekules, 2001, fig. 64. A similar Crucifixion type also spread to Scandinavia, for example the Norwegian crucifix from Fana Church, Hordaland, c. 1300-1350, now in Historical Museum, Bergen.



Fig. 6. Giske Calvary group, Historical Museum, Bergen. Photo: Museum of Cultural History/Oldsaksamlingen, University of Oslo.

Christ's triumph and victory is expressed especially through the cross and the royal crown, as for example Christ from Urnes (fig. 2) and Giske (fig. 6). According to a homily in Old Norse, dated c. 1200, on the Finding of the Holy Cross, the cross is the mark of God's victory and the sign of the redemption of the people and the angels' joy.<sup>20</sup> Although many crosses from the Norwegian Calvary groups are missing, it is likely that several of them had representations of the four apocalyptic creatures (the lion, the ox, the man and the eagle) at the four extremities of the cross,<sup>21</sup> transforming the representation of the crucifix to a *Majestas Domini* on the

<sup>20</sup> 'In inventione sancte crucis sermo', *Gamal Norsk Homiliebok*, 1931.

<sup>21</sup> The medallions with the Evangelist symbols were added to the c. 1150 cross belonging to the Urnes Calvary group, probably in the thirteenth century at the same time as the Virgin and St. John were repainted. See Frøysaker, 2003. It is possible that the extant crosses from both Skoger, Kjøse and Romfo had the four beasts in their cut quatrefoils similar to the cross from Grong Calvary group and other Norwegian triumphal crosses, such as the ones from the churches at Feiring (thirteenth century) and Haug (c. 1225), and from Borre (c. 1275-1300) in Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo. See *NIKU publikasjoner 105*, 2001, cover and p. 15.



cross,<sup>22</sup> and as such addressing and combining Christ's death of redemption on the cross with His return in Majesty. Scandinavian vernacular literature, such as religious poems in the skaldic tradition, also strongly emphasizes royal symbolism in its description of Christ.<sup>23</sup> Some of the Norwegian crosses, for example the cross from Grong and Skoger (fig. 7), with its growing leaves and flowers, was probably also linked with the idea of the cross as *arbor crucis* or *arbor vitae*. Similar to liturgical texts, particularly those connected with the passion during the twelfth and thirteenth century,<sup>24</sup> the Old Norse fourteenth century *Petrus saga Postola* interprets the cross as the tree of life: "þetta [krossinn] er lífstre".<sup>25</sup> The history of the cross-tree down to Christ's passion is, among other vernacular texts, found in *Hauksbók*.<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 7. Skoger Calvary group, Skoger church. Photo: Author.

Although several of the crucifixes emphasize Christ's status as King of heaven and earth,<sup>27</sup> His human suffering and death is accentuated through His crown of thorns (fig. 3 and fig. 7) and His closed eyes (fig. 6).<sup>28</sup> In addition, all the representations of

<sup>22</sup> Ezekiel 1:5-10; 10:14; Rev. 4:6-7.

<sup>23</sup> See Tveito, 2002. Both in Norway and Sweden a large number of crowned crucifixes have survived from a period that lasted well into the thirteenth century, a time when other types (including the crown of thorns) were prevalent on the continent. It must be stressed that it was not a peculiarly Scandinavian iconographic tradition. See Horn Fuglesang, 2004, p. 213.

<sup>24</sup> See Wolska, 1997, p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> 'Petrus saga Postula', *Postula Sögur*, 1874, p. 198. "This (the cross) is the tree of life."

<sup>26</sup> *Hauksbók*, 1896, pp. 182-185. See Overgaard, 1968.

<sup>27</sup> Through the cross, the royal crown, but also Christ's open eyes, the way His arms form a horizontal line and in the way He "stands" nailed to the cross.

<sup>28</sup> It is generally accepted that representations of Christ on the cross with open or closed eyes reflect His status as either alive, dying or dead. See Hellemo 1996, pp. 69-82. There are examples of both types in the Norwegian Calvary group material, see fig. 5.



Fig. 8. Wall painting from Ål stave church, Museum of Cultural History/Oldsaksamlingen, University of Oslo. Photo: Museum of Cultural History/Oldsaksamlingen, University of Oslo.

the crucified Christ from the Calvary groups show the lance wound at Christ right side. Augustine (*Tractatus in Johannem*) interpreted Christ's side wound as the opening door to life where the sacraments of the Church floats; blood for forgiveness of sin, water for baptism.<sup>29</sup> As a motif of the Eucharist and a symbol of the Sacrifice of Christ, which led to redemption of the Christians, Christ's side wound became important first from c. 700 onwards.<sup>30</sup> This motif is commonly depicted in two-dimensional representations emphasizing the dogmatic connection between Christ's blood (His sacrifice) and the wine of the Eucharist, served in the chalice, for example the

<sup>29</sup> Augustine of Hippo, 1995, p. 50.

<sup>30</sup> Horn Fuglesang, 1996. A Carolingian ivory, c. 820/30, reused on a book cover of the early eleventh century, contains one of the earliest depictions of Ecclesia collecting the blood from Christ's side wound in a chalice. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich, MS. Clm. 4452. A similar representation is depicted in the *Drogo Sacramentary*, Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, MS lat. 9428, f. 43v and in the *Utrecht Psalter*, Universiteitsbibliothek, Utrecht, MS 32, f. 67r.

painting of the Crucifixion on the eastern wall of the chancel ceiling of Ål stave church (fig. 8).<sup>31</sup> No chalice occurs in the sculpted Norwegian Calvary groups and it problematic to gauge to what extent the Norwegian congregation in a parish church associated Christ's side wound with the actual Eucharist and the priest's exegesis on it. One of the few vernacular texts that mentions this connection is not specific, *Mariu saga*: "...síðublóð þins sótaста sonar leysti til eilífs ljós ok lífs frá myrkrum."<sup>32</sup> However, the wine (and water) of the Eucharist was always associated with Christ's blood, either physically (the transubstantiation) or symbolically. It is therefore likely that the medieval congregation also made these associations during mass, especially if the Calvary group was connected with the high or holy cross altar. As also pointed out in Norwegian-Icelandic *Messuskýringar* (explanations of the mass) from the twelfth and thirteenth century, in connection with the reading of the Canon of the mass: "...snuesc fórn í hverre messo i holld oc blóþ domini".<sup>33</sup>

Peter Brieger has argued that England in particular was instrumental in the development of the triumphal cross or the so-called rood,<sup>34</sup> to which the development of the Calvary group can be linked. Brieger points out that it seems more than a coincidence that it was only from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards that the custom of erecting a triumphal cross spread over Western Europe and he asks whether there is "a connection between Lanfranc's stand on transubstantiation and the rood of Canterbury by which the real presence of Christ as well as the integrity of the body were manifested."<sup>35</sup> In this connection it is of interest that in addition to the group in Canterbury, at least five churches in England possessed large Crucifixion groups in metal by the end of the Anglo-Saxon period.<sup>36</sup> It should, however, be questioned whether England's high number of early recorded Crucifixion groups compared with other European countries may be explained by the generally better survival of written sources here.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> The wall painting, dated c. 1300, is now in Museum of Cultural History/Oldsaksamlingen, University of Oslo.

<sup>32</sup> *Mariu saga*, 1871, vol. 1, p. 335. "...your dearest son's sideblood redeemed to eternal light and life from darkness."

<sup>33</sup> *Messuskýringar*, 1952, p. 52: "...the offering transforms (changes) in every mass to the flesh and blood of Christ". A central term in this quote is *snuesc i*. According to Fritznér, 1954, p. 465, this term (*snúa i*) may be translated into "forandre en ting til noget", i.e. to change something into something else. It has been argued that the doctrine on the transubstantiation is implied in this text. See Molland, 1974.

<sup>34</sup> Brieger, 1941-42, p. 87.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>36</sup> See Raw, 1990, pp. 41-42.

<sup>37</sup> See Nyborg, 2003, footnote 34.

It should be noted, on the other hand, that Anglo-Saxon artists seem to have made a deliberate choice among the models available to them and apparently preferred the Byzantine Crucifixion type with the Virgin and St. John to those with the soldiers or the crucified thieves.<sup>38</sup> Barbara Raw relates this emphasis on the Crucifixion type with the Virgin and St. John to the significance which was attached in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries to the moment when Christ entrusted His mother to His disciple, for example in Ælfric's writing.<sup>39</sup> In a sermon for the Assumption, based on the so-called *Epistola ad Paulam et Eustochium*, attributed in the Middle Ages to St. Jerome, Ælfric emphasizes the human element in Christ's relationship with His mother and His disciple, introducing a reference to the sorrow of the Virgin and St. John at the cross.<sup>40</sup> The main theme of Ælfric's sermon is, however, that the audience should "call with constant prayers to the holy mother of God, that she might intercede for us in our necessities with her Son."<sup>41</sup> Since Christ, who is true God and true man, allowed Himself to become man through the Virgin, He will grant her requests. As Raw points out: "These passages indicate an emphasis in Ælfric's writing on Christ's human nature which came to him from Mary, on the connection between the incarnation and the redemption and on the Virgin's role as an intercessor for man."<sup>42</sup>

The Virgin's significant role as intercessor (*mediatrix*) for the people with God and Jesus Christ is also emphasized in Old Norse literature, such as a homily on the Virgin: "...ok caollum á hana næst guði at hon biði hin almatka guð at hann fyrir-gefe os allar syndir vaórar ok styrki ós til viðr-sió synda at vér megem með guði vera ok guð með ós per omnia secula seculorum. amen."<sup>43</sup> The Virgin has a prominent position among the saints and she is also the dominant female character in Nordic medieval art. Because the Virgin was accepted as *Dei genitrix*,<sup>44</sup> and hence the source of Christ's humanity, she was given a significant role in the Redemption as a Co-Re-

<sup>38</sup> Raw, 1990, p. 95.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97; Ælfric, 1844, p. 439, CH 1.xxx: "...at Christ's passion, he himself and Mary stood with sorrowing mind opposite the holy rood, on which Jesus was fastened." References to and extracts from the *Epistola ad Paulam et Eustochium* can also be found in Old Norse homilies and other liturgical texts from the Middle Ages. See Hjelde, 1990, p. 329.

<sup>41</sup> Ælfric, 1844, pp. 453.

<sup>42</sup> Raw, 1990, p. 98.

<sup>43</sup> 'Sermo de sancta Maria', *Gamal Norsk Homiliebok*, 1931, p. 134. "Next after God shall we call on her, so that she can ask the almighty God to forgive all our sins and strengthen us in our vigilance against the sin. Then we will be with God and God with us for ever and ever. Amen." (Translation based on the Norwegian by Salvesen and Gunnes, 1971.)

<sup>44</sup> See 'Theotokos', 'Mary', *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1997.



Fig. 9. Østsinni Calvary group, Museum of Cultural History/Oldsaksamlingen, University of Oslo. Photo: Museum of Cultural History/Oldsaksamlingen, University of Oslo.

demptress (*corredemptrix*). The Virgin's presence at the Crucifixion and her participation in the actual passion (her *compassio*) inspired the religious fantasy of the time and several texts describing the Virgin as the Mater Dolorosa were written. About 1200 the grief of the persons and especially of the Virgin watching at the foot of the cross, seems to have been introduced to Scandinavian vernacular literature, and first introduced it became a popular subject with the poets. For example a fragment of a *Mariuflokk* from about 1200 describes the Mater Dolorosa bathing the feet of Christ with her tears.<sup>45</sup> However, it is not until the Later Middle Ages that the cult of the Mater Dolorosa seems to have reached a full flowering in Scandinavia and most of the passionate poems and other vernacular texts describing her grief and sorrow date from the fourteenth century onwards, for example the poem *Máriugrátr*.<sup>46</sup>

The iconography of even some Norwegian Calvary Virgins, for example the Virgins from Urnes (fig. 2) and Østsinni

(fig. 9) who wear a crown, seem to emphasize her rank as Queen of Heaven, a reference to her Assumption and Coronation, expressing her supremacy.<sup>47</sup> It is also in-

<sup>45</sup> Paasche, 1914, p. 122.

<sup>46</sup> Finnur Jónsson, 1973.

<sup>47</sup> That the mourning Virgins wear a crown is not an extraordinary element of Norway. Particularly within the Swedish material, several of the Virgins from Calvary groups wear a crown, for example the Virgins from Kjestad, Västergötland, from Berg, Småland, and from Ornunga, Västergötland. Also within Spanish and German medieval wooden sculpture there are several examples of Calvary Virgins wearing a crown. Bergh, 1996, pp. 1-12, makes a list of Spanish and Scandinavian crowned Virgins from Calvary groups. Even in Anglo-Saxon art there is a representation showing the mourning Virgin with a crown at the foot of the cross. See Beckwith, 1972, cat. 17a. The polychromy of some of the extant Norwegian Virgins, such as imitation of gold and expensive types of fur, also emphasizes her high rank.



teresting to note the interchange of the commonly crowned Ecclesia (such as for example in the altar canopy in Torpo stave church, Buskerud) and the Virgin (sometimes crowned), always standing on the right side of the cross in Crucifixion representations, especially since the Virgin in the West was associated with the Church from early on. St. Ambrose held her to be a type of the Church, in that giving birth to Christ she also brought forth Christians who were formed in her womb with Him.<sup>48</sup>

Together with the Virgin, St. John the Evangelist also became a front figure in European art and poetry in the High Middle Ages, especially through his relationship to the Virgin. Many writers, from theologians to poets, favoured St. John among the four Evangelists for various reasons. Like *Legenda aurea*, which related the four privileges which God bestowed upon St. John,<sup>49</sup> a homily in Old Norse on the Evangelist also points out some of the privileges of St. John. In this homily the particular abilities of the eagle (St. John) is emphasized.<sup>50</sup> The eagle can look fixedly at the sun and see the divinity of Christ more clearly than the other Evangelists who, although they spoke much about Christ as man, wrote little of his divinity. St. John, on the contrary, told little about Christ as human, but "...hann scyrði gløct taocn guðdóms hans",<sup>51</sup> and because of this he also "...floug upp til himins með drotne".<sup>52</sup> Especially because of the Assumption of St. John, but also because of his special relationship with the Virgin and his status as Christ's beloved apostle, his role as an important intercessor with the Lord became established. In addition to this, since St. John, by being the author of the Book of Revelation, had been given to know the secrets of the end of the world and consequently also was given a prophetic role, he was assigned a prominent position among the saints.

Most of the Calvary representations show St. John holding a book (figs. 3, 6, 7, 9 and 10), indicating his status both as an Evangelist and as the author of the Revelation. In a narrative sense, the book reflects the Gospel of St. John. St. Ambrose, in his commentary on St. Luke's Gospel, claimed that St. John's account of Christ's death was to be preferred to that of the other Evangelists since he is the only one who records Christ's words to His mother and John from the cross.<sup>53</sup> St. John is also an eyewitness since he was the only Apostle to stand with the Virgin at the cross. As the

<sup>48</sup> 'Mary', *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1997.

<sup>49</sup> *The Golden Legend*, 1993, vol. 1, pp. 50-55.

<sup>50</sup> 'Sermo de Evvangelistis. In die sancti Johannis', *Gamal Norsk Homiliebok*, 1931.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49: "...he interpreted clearly the signs of Christ's divinity".

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49: "...ascended with the Lord to heaven".

<sup>53</sup> Raw, 1990, p. 95; Ambrose, 1957, p. 383.

Gospel of St. John points out in the description of the piercing of Christ's side: "This is the evidence of one who saw it – trustworthy evidence, and he knows he speaks the truth – and he gives it so that you may believe it as well."<sup>54</sup> Also in the Prologue of the Gospel the author presents himself as an eye-witness: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."<sup>55</sup>

In Western iconography, St. John seems increasingly to have accompanied the interceding Virgin even in the Last Judgement, resembling to some extent the intercession iconography of the *Deësis*.<sup>56</sup> This raises the question whether figures of St. John the Evangelist with a beard, for example St. John from Urnes (fig. 2), originated in depictions of the interceding St. John the Baptist who normally flanks the seated Christ. Emile Mâle has suggested that artists who placed the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist in prayer to the right and left of the Judge in the Second Coming were guided by popular piety and the hope that even on the day "the Virgin and St. John would still be powerful intercessors who would save many a soul by their prayers."<sup>57</sup> Mâle also refers to Honorius Augustodunensis' remark about the Virgin and St. John being the first fruits of the resurrection.<sup>58</sup> As written in the Old Norse translation of *Elucidarius*: "Maria toc licam eftir dauða oc groft. oc va[r] upp nomín siðan i dyrð. En iohannes do i sialfre upp numnín-gu. oc endrlifnaðe."<sup>59</sup>

### **Liturgical functions of the Calvary group**

The mass was the central nerve in the medieval church and of great importance for the ordinary layman or woman. Although the content and structure of the Norwegian Orders of the mass render the European tradition,<sup>60</sup> the liturgy in the Norwegian countryside parish church must have been coloured by the architecture of the church

<sup>54</sup> John, 19:34-5.

<sup>55</sup> John, 1:14.

<sup>56</sup> See the portal of the north transept of the Burgos Cathedral, Spain, c. 1240-5 and central portal, west façade, Notre-Dame, Paris, c. 1220-30 in Williamson, 1995, fig. 335 and fig. 76. *Deësis* is a representation of Christ seated, with the Madonna on His right and St. John the Baptist on His left.

<sup>57</sup> Mâle, 2000, p. 371.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Honorius Augustodunensis, 1992, p. 88. "Mary resumed her body after her death and burial, and then was assumed into glory. And John died during the ascension and returned to life." Translation by Scherabon Firchow, *ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>60</sup> Fæhn, 1953, p. 16.



(many being very small and intimate) and the liturgical personnel, often just a single priest. Since the main language of the mass was Latin, it is also a question to what extent the congregation was involved. However, the liturgy must have been a vivid experience for both the priest and his parishioners, probably with the interior and decoration of the church heightening the experience of the congregation.

Sinding-Larsen argues that one of the *auxiliary* functions of liturgical imagery is to “focus one’s attention upon and illustrate the main and subordinate topics in the liturgy while this is being performed.”<sup>61</sup> He exemplifies this by pointing to the crucifix placed on the screen separating the chancel from the sanctuary, which would “thus serve the congregation, which is otherwise barred from direct participation in the Mass.”<sup>62</sup> He also argues that the “figure of Christ obtains a complete sense only when evaluated in its functional context, which is that of an altar.”<sup>63</sup> The triumphal cross expresses some of the central doctrinal points of the Church since in one image it sums up Christ’s triumph and resurrection as well as His redemption of mankind, made possible by His human suffering and death.

Contrary to a simple cross without image, which is a time-free symbol, a time-dimension is implied in a crucifix. By placing the figures of the Virgin and St. John at either side of the crucified, this time-dimension is emphasized to an even higher degree, in that it refers to the historical event which took place on Golgotha.

<sup>61</sup> Sinding-Larsen, 1984, p. 30.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.



*Fig. 10. St. John from Grog Calvary group, Grog church. Photo: Tore Holter, Riksantikvaren.*

Throughout the Middle Ages there were discussions on whether the sacraments of the altar were symbols or the real presence of Christ's flesh and blood (the transubstantiation). The liturgical reform under Charlemagne led to an awareness of the problems involved in the Eucharist.<sup>64</sup> The dispute came to a head particularly with Lanfranc and Berengar of Tours in the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but it was not until the fourth Lateran council in 1215 that the doctrine on the transubstantiation was actually promulgated.

It is interesting, as Brieger points out, that the development of the triumphal cross, to which the development of the Calvary group seems to be linked, appears to coincide with Lanfranc's and the Church's stand on transubstantiation. It is important to keep in mind, however, that there are written references to sculpted crucifixes as early as the Carolingian period, although the earliest surviving example is the Ottonian wooden crucifix of Gero in Cologne Cathedral, dated c. 969-76.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, there was a general development of cult sculpture particularly from the twelfth century onwards and the development of the triumphal cross with lateral sculptures may be seen as part of this more general trend. This general increase in sculpture can also be applied to Norway, but regarding the liturgy it is uncertain when the doctrine on the transubstantiation was introduced here and whether it was clearly expressed during mass. If the Calvary group was placed in or above the chancel entrance (either above the holy cross altar or framing the high altar) it would have been at the focal point of the congregation's attention during the important moments of the mass. The crucifix may therefore have been seen, especially after the introduction of the Elevation of the Host around 1200,<sup>66</sup> "as the visual embodiment of Christ's presence in the sacraments and of the propitiatory sacrifice that the congregation shared through the Eucharist."<sup>67</sup>

Strictly speaking, the presence of the Virgin and St. John at the cross refers to the incident in which Christ entrusted the Virgin and St. John to each other (John 19:26-27) and has little relevance for the central prayer of the mass or to the action it accompanies. They seem nevertheless to accentuate the doctrinal point of the real presence of the flesh and blood of Christ in the sacrament of the altar and the identity of the historic body with the eucharistic body. The Virgin, being *Dei genitrix*, at the foot of the cross can be interpreted as a reference to the reality of the incarnation,

<sup>64</sup> Brieger, 1941-42, p. 89.

<sup>65</sup> Schiller, 1968, fig. 455.

<sup>66</sup> For the history of the elevation, see Jungmann, 1986, pp. 206-17. See also Hardison, 1969. When the practice entered Norwegian parish churches is uncertain.

<sup>67</sup> Liepe, 1996, p. 233.

a reality which St. John testified to in his writings. The presence of the Virgin and St. John, the eye-witnesses, involves a time-dimension and implies an element of the past which is presented anew during the mass. According to Jan Schumacher,<sup>68</sup> this view that the past is presented anew during the mass is expressed in interpretations of the mass from the twelfth century onwards. For example in Honorius Augustodunensis' *Gemma animae de divinis officiis*,<sup>69</sup> which was translated into Old Norse in the twelfth century and in which the whole mass is interpreted as a dramatic presentation of Christ's life, passion and resurrection.<sup>70</sup> Such an element of time would of course be even stronger during the celebration of the Good Friday liturgy, since the western liturgy generally demonstrated a desire to celebrate Christian events at the time of the day when they might have happened.<sup>71</sup> During Good Friday the readings, both from the epistle and the gospel, focused on the suffering of Christ. According to Ulf Björkman, St. John's account of Christ's passion was preferred to the other gospels because of the saint's presence at the Crucifixion.<sup>72</sup>

Honorius' *Gemma animae* is partly influenced by Amalarius of Metz,<sup>73</sup> who in his *Liber officialis* interpreted the mass as a dramatic ritual which re-created the historical events of salvation history.<sup>74</sup> Raw has noted that "the large Crucifixion groups which were introduced into Anglo-Saxon churches in the middle of the eleventh century would have provided an admirable focus for a liturgical drama of the kind described by Amalarius."<sup>75</sup> Raw suggests that the deacons might have taken St. John as their representative for the grieving disciples and that the sub-deacons could use the Virgin as a reminder of their role as the Holy women.<sup>76</sup> Jacqueline Liéveaux-Boccador and Edouard Bresset also argue that Calvary groups (and the sculpted Depositions) developed under influence from liturgical drama.<sup>77</sup> To which extent such a

<sup>68</sup> Schumacher, 1993, p. 79.

<sup>69</sup> Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 172, p. 541-738.

<sup>70</sup> Schumacher, 1993, p. 71. The Mass-order of the *Gemma animae*, first book, forms part of *Gamal Norsk Homiliebok*. See Gjerløw, 1968, p. 96. Both *Ordo Nidrosiensis ecclesiae* and *Missale Nidrosiense* are influenced by Honorius' *Gemma animae*. *Ibid.*, p. 96-104.

<sup>71</sup> Bedingfield, 2002, p. 123. As Bedingfield points out, there was, however, a tension between this desire to celebrate Christian events at the time of the day when they might have happened and the practical need to, at times, rearrange (usually by anticipating earlier in the day) these commemorative masses.

<sup>72</sup> Björkman, 1957, p. 260.

<sup>73</sup> Hjelde, 1990, p. 65.

<sup>74</sup> Raw, 1990, p. 183.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>77</sup> Liéveaux-Boccador and Bresset, 1972, p. 270.

liturgical drama was transferred to the local church in Norway (which had few, if any, deacons) is uncertain. That the Virgin and St. John were put forward as models for imitation and “that the priest celebrating mass is invited to stand with them at the foot of the cross”,<sup>78</sup> may, however, have applied to the Norwegian parish liturgy. It is of interest in this connection that some sacramentaries and missals have a picture of the crucified Christ flanked by the Virgin and St. John before the *Te igitur*, the prayer which begins the Canon of the mass and is spoken immediately before the Eucharistic sacrifice.<sup>79</sup> It is also of interest that St. John from Grong (fig. 10) has a tonsure, which points to a possible identification of the Apostle with the priest.<sup>80</sup>

The iconography of the triumphal cross with the flanking figures also contains an element of victory and a reference to the certainty of the resurrection. The triumphal cross therefore also refers to the *anamnesis* or the *Unde et memores*, the prayer in which the passion, resurrection and ascension of Christ were commemorated and which followed straight after the *Qui pridie*, the actual words of the consecration.<sup>81</sup> The actual location of the triumphal cross if placed in or above the chancel entrance, would also emphasize that the road (*via sacra*) to heavenly glory goes through the crucified Christ. Such an interpretation is possible especially if it is related to a homily in the Old Norse homily on the Dedication:<sup>82</sup> “En af þvi merkir sumt, þat er i kirkiunni ér, himin-rikis dyrð en sumt iarðlega cristni. Songhus merkir hælga menn á himni. er kirkian cristna men á iorðu.”<sup>83</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Raw, 1990, p. 81.

<sup>79</sup> Equating T with the Crucified Christ came into current use in Sacramentary decoration as the initial T of the opening phrase ‘Te igitur clementissime...’ of the Canon of the mass in the Ottonian period. See Pächt, 1986, p. 43. The canon picture draws attention to the meaning of the mass. Some of them show only the crucified, others include the Virgin and St. John, such as the one from Verdun Cathedral, Bayerische Staatsbibl., Munich, Clm. 10077, f. 12r, see Raw, 1990, p. 81. A similar canon picture can be found in *Missale Nidrosiense*, København, fol. h.vij. verso, dated 1519, see Fæhn, 1953, p. 45.

<sup>80</sup> A priestly role of St. John has been promulgated in some texts. Michael, 1995, p. 75, points out that this role, in which St. John becomes the deacon who officiates for Christ, was emphasized especially in Apocalypses produced in England in the thirteenth century. In this, as Michael points out, a Eucharistic function is implied.

<sup>81</sup> Danbolt, 2001, p. 54.

<sup>82</sup> Schumacher, 1993, p. 75.

<sup>83</sup> ‘In dedicatione tempeli (*sic*) sermo’, *Gamal Norsk Homiliebok*, 1931, p. 96. “Therefore some parts of the church signify heavenly glory and some parts Christendom. The chancel signifies the saints in heaven and the nave the Christians on earth.” Translation by Turville-Petre, 1972. The Norwegian homily *In dedicatione tempeli sermo* (the stave church homily) is partly influenced by Honorius’ *Gemma animae*, see Salvesen and Gunnes, 1971, p. 176.

From the discussion above, it seems possible to link the Calvary group with Sinding-Larsen's *auxiliary* function to focus one's attention upon and illustrate some of the main topics in the performed liturgy.<sup>84</sup> It is also likely that these groups "served as illustrations during catechizing activities or other teaching aid in one's introduction to the participation in the liturgy,"<sup>85</sup> for example in connection with the readings and the priest's sermon. The Calvary group probably also functioned as focus for "private devotion – in a non-formal liturgical sense,"<sup>86</sup> both during and outside of the mass. The iconography of the Virgin and St. John indicates that they functioned as mediators and intercessors for the viewer's empathy and that they could serve as models of behaviour. The Calvary group may have had an effect similar to the Byzantine three-figure Crucifixion icons, which probably were used also for private devotion.<sup>87</sup>

It seems that one of the intentions behind placing various sculptures of saints in the church was to induce the congregations with a solemn mood of devotion and remind them of the holy persons. For the common believer who sought the intercession, protection and help of the saints, the sculptures were personifications in which a sacred element was physically present. According to Hans Belting: "The bodylike sculpture made the saint physically present, while the golden surface made the saint appear as a supernatural person with a heavenly aura."<sup>88</sup> But as Stacy Boldric points out: "the religious image was to serve as a devotional aid and mediating representation of a sacred being, rather than the being itself."<sup>89</sup>

Through the Virgin's and St. John's close relationship with Christ (both on earth and after their Assumption and the Virgin's Coronation) they were both important intercessors with the Lord. They must have been central to the devotion for a great many people, as reflected in the poetry dedicated to them, produced in Norway and Iceland in the Middle Ages. When the priest asked the Virgin and God's saints to pray for him at the beginning of the mass, the congregation may similarly have praised the Virgin and the saints and asked for their intercession in their prayers. The Virgin and St. John are also mentioned in the *Communicantes* of the canon, in which the priest calls on the help of the saints, particularly that of the Virgin. With the implied reference to resurrection and possibly the Second Coming in the Calvary groups, the intercession of the Virgin and St. John would probably help to win grace partic-

<sup>84</sup> Sinding-Larsen, 1984, p. 30.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>87</sup> Schiller, 1968, p. 105.

<sup>88</sup> Belting, 1994, p. 299.

<sup>89</sup> Boldric, 2002, p. 14.

ularly on the Day of Judgement. This role is also emphasized in a poem of the Later Middle Ages, which, according to Jónas Kristjánsson, is still sung as a hymn on Iceland and the Faroes, namely the poem *Ljómur*; “Beams of light”.<sup>90</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson has noted that particularly stanzas 31-2 “voice the belief that on Judgement Day the intercessions of the Virgin and St. John win grace even for the damned.”<sup>91</sup> Being the source of Christ’s humanity, the Virgin’s role as co-redemptrix (*corredemptrix*) is also important in this connection.

There is yet a further function which might be applied to these groups, namely that they could “hold the attention of or at least ‘distract’ in a positive manner the bored congregation during the much-deplored long liturgical proceedings in which it often did not have much share.”<sup>92</sup> Sinding-Larsen points to the Council in Vienne in 1313, at which this was discussed as a social problem. Since the language of the mass was mainly Latin, it may legitimately be questioned to what extent the medieval parish congregation was involved. On the other hand, Sven-Erik Pernler points out that the fact that the laity did not speak Latin does not necessarily mean that they did not understand what was going on during mass. He compares this with today’s situation: few people speak Latin, yet they perfectly understand and play an active part during the mass.<sup>93</sup> However, if the sacrament was received as infrequently as has been suggested for the twelfth to the fourteenth century (although the period witnessed a remarkable devotion to the Eucharist),<sup>94</sup> it is possible that images such as the Calvary group functioned as an important positive “distraction” for the congregation. It is uncertain how frequently the Eucharist was received by laypeople during the High Middle Ages in Norway. The church law of Frostating (c. 1260-70) points out that every man older than seven years is to receive the body of Christ every twelfth month on Easter day.<sup>95</sup> Although the laity probably received the communion in both forms in the introductory period of Christianity in Norway, it seems that it became common practice to omit the chalice for the laity from the thirteenth century onwards even here.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson, 1997, p. 388. *Ljómur*, see Helgason, 1938.

<sup>91</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson, 1997, p. 388.

<sup>92</sup> Sinding-Larsen, 1984, p. 30.

<sup>93</sup> Pernler, 1993, p. 120.

<sup>94</sup> Macy, 1984, p. 118.

<sup>95</sup> See *Frostatingslova*, 1994, II 40.

<sup>96</sup> Fæhn, 1980.

## Conclusion

Similar to most medieval church art, it is likely that also the Calvary groups in the Norwegian parish churches served liturgical needs. Although the group cannot be defined as liturgical imagery in a formal sense, it probably served the liturgy of parish churches in various so-called auxiliary functions. It is probable that they could serve as a focus of attention, illustrating the main and subordinate topics in the liturgy while this was being performed, since they express the central doctrinal tenets: the belief in Christ's resurrection and redemption of mankind, made possible by His human suffering and death on the cross. The two lateral figures of the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist accentuate these central points, which would explain why some medieval churches preferred the Calvary group to an unaccompanied crucifix. But also because of their close relationship with Christ (both on earth and after their Assumption and the Virgin's Coronation), their dialogue with Him and their grief for Him, they probably offered the viewer a model of behaviour and functioned as mediators and intercessors for the viewer's empathy and devotion. It should be stressed, however, as Sinding-Larsen points out, that during the stages of the liturgy of the mass, images would have had different connotations as the accent shifts within the system of the liturgy itself. "As mass liturgy proceeds, one and the same image will be seen in varying contexts",<sup>97</sup> and could therefore receive different interpretations.

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<sup>97</sup> Sinding-Larsen, 1984, p. 36.



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## Sammendrag

Flere av triumfkrusifiksene som er bevart fra perioden ca. 1150-1350 i Norge tilhørte en såkalt kalvariegruppe, hvor Kristus på korset er flankert av Maria og apostelen Johannes. Krusifikset uttrykker sentrale dogmer, og har dermed også en klar tilknytning til liturgien. Hvilke funksjoner Maria og Johannes har hatt ved korset i en liturgisk sammenheng i middelalderen er mindre opplagt. Denne artikkelen diskuterer Marias og Johannes' betydning ved krusifikset, og hvilke funksjoner kalvariegruppen som helhet kan ha hatt i det norske kirkerommet i middelalderen. Kalvariegruppens ikonografi og dens sannsynlige plassering i kirken tyder på at disse gruppene må ha tjent liturgien først og fremst gjennom de funksjonene Staale Sinding-Larsen kaller *auxiliary functions* (hjelpfunksjoner). Dette betyr at gruppen ikke kan defineres som et liturgisk bilde i streng forstand, men at den først og fremst ble brukt illustrativt uten en formell liturgisk tilknytning.

I artikkelen kommer det frem at det sannsynligvis er ulike årsaker til at flere kirker, særlig fra 1200-tallet og utover, foretrakk korsfestelsesikonografien med Maria og Johannes fremfor et enkelt krusifiks. Blant annet fungerte trolig kalvariegruppen både som et fokus og som en illustrasjon av liturgiens hovedpoeng. Gruppen kan også ha fungert som en introduksjon av disse hovedpoengene til menigheten. Maria og Johannes, de to sentrale øyenvitnene, aksentuerer triumfkrusifiksets sentrale dogme; troen på Kristus oppstandelse og frelse av menneskene, muliggjort gjennom hans menneskelige lidelse og død på korset. Det er også sannsynlig at kalvariegruppen fungerte som et ikke-formelt andaktsbilde, både under og etter messen. Helgenskulpturene minnet menigheten om Marias og Johannes' sorg og deres nære forhold til Kristus, både på jorden og etter deres himmelfart. De var viktige forbilder i tillegg til å være sentrale formidlere av den enkeltes empati, andakt og bønn. Kalvariegruppen som helhet kan også, i likhet med annen kirkeutsmykking, ha hatt en positiv distraksjonsfunksjon for menigheten under messen.

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