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Images and Inscriptions

A Study of the Murals in Kviteseid Old Church

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Kviteseid Old Church in Telemark, Norway, is a medieval stone church with murals of a seemingly informal character. These depictions consist of ships, figures, individual letters, and longer inscriptions, apparently randomly placed on the interior chancel walls. By studying the painting techniques, the stratigraphic structure and the motifs of the paintings, the authors explore the intentions behind these motifs. They argue that, although of simple manufacture and unprogrammatic, they were an important part of the late-medieval and post-Reformational church experience. Several of the images and inscriptions may have had a memorial intention. This study provides a new understanding of a type of murals found in several medieval churches in Norway and abroad that has often been (mis)interpreted as graffiti.

Introduction

Kviteseid Old Church, situated in the region of Telemark in central Norway, is one of 159 preserved medieval stone churches in the country. This stone church belonged to Oslo bishopric and is dated to the second half of the twelfth century (Nygaard 1996: 49; Ekroll & Stige 2000: 106). Kviteseid is a medieval stone church with understudied murals: remains of seemingly informal character, regarded by many as doodles, graffiti or unpretentious pieces of work by an untrained hand. These depictions consist of ships, figures, individual letters, and longer inscriptions, apparently randomly placed, clearly visible on the lower parts of the chancel walls.

Even if they do not fulfil the preconditions of "art" as part of a systematic iconographic programme or wall decoration, we argue that the purpose and meaning of these figures and letters requires further study. This article takes a novel approach

[1] The authors are listed alphabetically and have all contributed in equal measure to the article. We would like to thank NIKU for financial support for this article. Moreover, we would like to thank Stefka G. Eriksen, the editors and the anonymous reviewer for valuable feedback on the article.

by studying textual and pictorial elements together. By studying the painting techniques, the stratigraphic structure, and the paintings themselves, we identify different motifs and inscriptions on the walls of Kviteseid Old Church. Regardless of whether they were executed simultaneously or not, their collocation on the same lime layer means that the images must have been viewed together by the clergy and congregation.

In the present article, we ask whether the various signs and symbols belong together, when they were made, what they symbolize, and what their purpose is. We seek answers to these questions by analyzing painting and drawing techniques, the layout (i.e. the placement, orientation, and closeness to other motifs), and the stratigraphy. We further extend the analysis by comparing the motifs and inscriptions with similar motifs and inscriptions found in other churches, and by looking at by comparing the paintings' location with the functions of the different parts of the church.

In the following, we will first present previous research on graffiti and resembling murals in Norway and Scandinavia before we introduce the murals in Kviteseid. Secondly, we discuss 1) whether images and inscriptions belong together or not, 2) which period they are from, 3) what they symbolize, and finally, 4) what the purpose of these images, signs and letters was. By exploring the intentions behind these motifs, we gain new knowledge about a type of wall painting found in several medieval churches in Norway and abroad that has often been seen as graffiti, suggesting that they were produced unofficially. We argue that, although of simple manufacture and unprogrammatic, they were an important piece in the late-medieval and post-reformational church experience.

State of the art

Little research has been done on Norwegian wall paintings in general, and there is no published overview of the existing material. However, in connection with church interior registrations and restoration reports, we can often find some descriptions of murals. Nonetheless, in books describing church interiors, e.g., booklets and jubilee publications, apparently informal images, signs, and inscriptions are often omitted. Although there is no general overview of these murals, recent studies by Susanne Kaun and Elisabeth Andersen have provided further insight into the execution and history of various forms of unprogrammatic or often-neglected types of murals in various churches (Andersen & Kaun 2019; Andersen & Kaun 2021).

In Norwegian studies of text and motifs on church walls, emphasis has generally been put on graffiti, in particular on runes and ship motifs. Runic graffiti in churches has recently been studied by Zilmer (2016), Bernobi (2020), Holmqvist (2021a), and

Bollaert (2022). These studies share the position that church graffiti is added over time and that it is has various functions. They agree, moreover, that the religious function is dominant in medieval runic church graffiti. The largest study of figurative graffiti in Norwegian churches is Martin Blindheim's doctoral thesis (1985) on graffiti in the medieval stave churches. Blindheim claims that this graffiti was made by the stave church builders, and that they were, in part, carved as a pastime. Arne Emil Christensen's study on ship graffiti (1995) concludes that "ship graffiti are the work of men, depicting a male field of interest, and that they are restricted to maritime societies" (Christensen 1995: 184). These studies focus either on textual inscriptions or figurative motifs. However, there is a lack of studies which views textual and figurative expressions in conjunction with each other.

Pål Nymoen has discussed the painted ships in Kviteseid Old Church and Siljan Church (2010: 35–40). He dates the ships between the fifteenth century and the sixteenth century. Nymoen suggests that the ship paintings could have been inspired by the close connection between the church and seafaring. Kviteseid is located next to the lake Kviteseidvannet, which, although over 70 km inland, is navigable to the sea. Local placenames such as *Hollendarodden* indicate an international, seafaring connection.[2] Another explanation for ship paintings, Nymoen points out, are their votive functions: for gratitude and as prayers for a safe journey. He also points out the strong symbolic relation between ships and the church. Nymoen argues that ship paintings, such as the one in Siljan church, are often planned and accepted. However, he claims that the ships in Kviteseid appear as graffiti (Nymoen 2010: 38).

In Denmark, there has been more extensive research on the murals in medieval churches, most recently by Sissel F. Plathe (2019). She surveys and identifies "mason paintings", despite their primitive character, as an essential group of late-medieval murals. In 1991, Ulla Haastrup proposed that certain types of simple Danish medieval murals were executed by masons and not by professionally trained painters (Haastrup 1991: 26–28, 30–31). Plathe describes murals painted in wet lime and claims that they were executed by the vault masons immediately after vaulting (2019: 31). It is interesting that these mason paintings involve similar motifs and inscriptions as those found in Kviteseid Old Church. Nevertheless, the Danish vault paintings differ significantly in painting technique and background, as they were painted in newly applied lime in Gothic vaults (Plathe 2019). This means that these Danish vault paintings are from the Gothic period, executed as an ensemble. The mason paintings occur mostly in two colours, grey and red, and were constructed with the help of incisions and compasses (Plathe 2019: 33–34). Plathe demonstrates that each motif may

[2] Hollendarodden can be translated as "the Dutch promontory".

have symbolic connotations, and she also demonstrates how text and image may support each other. Danish church murals are also documented in the extraordinarily extensive database and homepage "Kalkmalerier i danske kirker" ("Wall paintings in Danish churches") from the National Museum of Denmark,[3] which describe and show all Danish murals dated between approximately 1100 and 1775. The database does not have a separate category for murals like those in Kviteseid Old Church, however, and this type of mural is greatly outnumbered by other kinds of decorational programmes and motifs.

In Finland, Katja Fält has explored these so called "construction worker paintings" or "primitive" wall paintings in her thesis "Wall paintings, workshops, and visual production in the medieval Diocese of Turku from 1430 to 1540" (Fält 2012), and in two articles from 2011 and 2013 (Fält 2011; Fält 2013). Her research covers a group of wall paintings made in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the Diocese of Turku. The paintings have been attributed to church builders. She argues that the label "primitive" is a false, modern characterization and that there is no evidence to describe the painters as unskilled locals. She similarly argues against the subject matter being connected to paganism. Instead, she contends that the visual language of this extensive and diverse body of works is not fully legible, and paintings cannot be accurately interpreted.

As seen above, there is international research on material resembling what we find in Kviteseid and other Norwegian churches. However, few have studied the particularities of the Norwegian context, and none has sought to combine the study of informal text and images. This is the gap which the present article contributes to filling, using the Kviteseid murals as a case.

The murals in Kviteseid Old Church

Built in the twelfth century, Kviteseid Old Church has typical medieval architecture with a rectangular nave and a smaller chancel with an apse in the east. Inside, the church has whitewashed walls. The inventory is post-Reformational, dated mainly to the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Since 1915, Kviteseid Old Church has been out of use as a regular church, because a new church was built to replace it. The church is presently part of the Kviteseid Local History Museum which is found nearby.

In the chancel (fig. 1), we find the remains of several murals. At a height of between approximately 110 cm and 270 cm above the floor, we find various images and inscriptions, apparently unordered and painted on top of and next to each other. Both

[3] Nationalmuseet in Denmark. "Kalkmalerier i danske kirker" (Wall paintings in Danish churches) https://natmus.dk/salg-og-ydelser/museumsfaglige-ydelser/kirker-og-kirkegaarde/kalkmalerier-i-danske-kirker/, last accessed 5 October 2022.

the paintings and the inscriptions have been rendered in a monochrome, linear style, mostly in black.

Beginning from the east, we find at least four (maybe five) sailing ships and several longer inscriptions on the southern wall (fig. 3), as well as separately standing Gothic minuscule letters, clearly outlined. The longer inscriptions are painted with a greater care for layout. In total, eight inscriptions are identified on this wall. On the western wall, one can make out the remains of further sailing ships, at least one on each side of the chancel arch. On the northern wall (fig. 2), starting from the west, we find a large sailing ship, considerably larger than the other sailing ships, a huge, intertwined ornament, a decorative knot, and below the latter a helmeted soldier with a sword and a shield, the top of a sailing ship, and a consecration cross. Further east, we see an animal with antlers, most likely a deer. Partly covering the neck and throat of the deer, we find another inscription, the only one in red. To the east of the deer, another sailing ship is found, and in between the deer and the ship, several undefined signs and marks can be traced. In the eastern apse, there are two more consecration crosses. These crosses in Kviteseid are different from those found in other Norwegian churches. In contrast to those, the crossarms do not touch the surrounding circle, and they are smaller than what is common otherwise. These crosses are outside the scope of this article, though they may be relevant for the dating of the other murals.[4] In between these figures, traces of at least eight inscriptions are preserved. All consist of minuscule letters, excepting the capitalized first letter of names. These inscriptions are shorter, and only individual Gothic minuscule letters and words, most likely names, are present. The inscriptions vary in length, size, colour, and script, and are likely to have been made at different times and by different hands. It is likely that the chancel originally contained more inscriptions, since not all sections of these two walls have been equally well preserved. Even the inscriptions which are still discernible today are in most cases either damaged or faded, which means that the overall legibility is low.

All the images and inscriptions are rendered in monochrome; apart from the one red inscription, all of them are black in colour. They are painted with a dry application method by using an implement that might also be used for drawing, such as charcoal or red chalk. This is quite an unusual application technique for official wall paintings, which are often more colourful, using different pigments and binders. While most of the images have been produced in a simple, less artistic manner, the image of the deer shows that it was rendered by a skilled painter, although likewise using charcoal.

[4] Consecration crosses were painted in medieval time to mark where the bishop had anointed the church with chrism or holy water when consecrating the church. They must therefore pre-date the Reformation in 1537.

Fig. 1: The chancel in Kviteseid Old Church. Photo: Susanne Kaun

Their simple painting technique and their less artistic style gives Kviteseid's paintings a sketch-like character. Nevertheless, the reason for using a simple painting technique may lie in its accessibility and is not necessarily related to the value of the images as a religious expression. Charcoal and red chalk were more accessible and easier to use than paint and brush, since it involves readily available materials and does not require specific tools and knowledge.

These wall paintings were discovered under flaking lime layers (Helland 1967) and thereafter surveyed and partly uncovered by conservators Arne Bakken and Ola Grefstad (Bakken 1967). This work started in 1967.[5] The paintings were said to be found on a render from before 1591 (Hauglid 1967) and were dated to the sixteenth

[5] The restoration of the wall paintings seems to have continued after 1967, as the survey report mentioned further need for restoration of the wall painting. It is unclear when this restoration was finished due to the lack of a final restoration report or other documents that could confirm the restoration. Correspondence between Riksantikvaren and the congregation in the years 1968 and 1969, discussing financial issues, imply that restoration work might have been done during those years (e.g., Stephan Tschudi Madsen to John Hals, 1968, 26 February; Hals to Riksantikvaren, 1968, 6 September, RAA; Tschudi Madsen to Hals, 1969, 12 May, RAA).

Fig. 2: The northern chancel wall in Kviteseid Old Church. Photo: Susanne Kaun

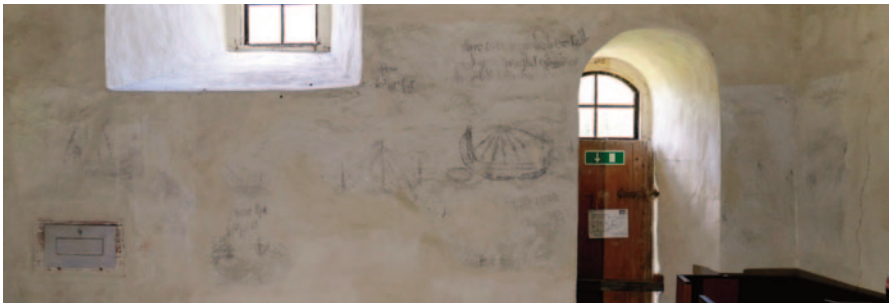

Fig. 3: The southern chancel wall in Kviteseid Old Church. Photo: Susanne Kaun

and seventeenth century. However, the consecration crosses have been dated to the thirteenth century (Ekroll and Stige 2000: 108–109). Since the consecration crosses and murals are both found on the same layer, we may conclude that some of the murals could have been painted before the Reformation.

Due to the lack of a final restoration report and complementary photo documentation, we do not have verified documentation of how much of today's paintings was added during the restoration. However, by comparing a limited number of historical photos from before and after the uncovering in 1967 with the situation today, we can infer that little retouching was done. A visual examination of the paint strokes confirms this assessment. This means that the murals can be considered original, and not a modern interpretation.

How should the murals in Kviteseid be understood?

The murals in Kviteseid are not part of a formal iconographic programme or ornamental interior painting. They do not form a coherent story or scene. The texts and images belong to different styles and were not all created simultaneously; the first ones were added to over time. That the murals were rendered at different times, as well as their apparently incoherent appearance and sketch-like character, could lead to the murals being (mis)interpreted as historic graffiti. The term graffiti is widely used in historic research in epigraphy and art (see, e.g., Bernobi 2020; Blindheim 1985; le Bon 1995; Hesjedal and Bertelsen 2011; Holmqvist 2021b; Lohmann 2020; Lovata & Olton 2015; Rozhdestvenskaja 2012; Yasin 2015; Zilmer 2016). It is used with various definitions, mostly based on criteria which are difficult, or impossible, to establish with certainty in historic material. At its core, graffiti is usually contrasted with official, authorized, and planned inscriptions and works of art, and is typically considered informal, unauthorized, and spontaneous.

However, these murals should not be understood as prototypical graffiti. In this article, we argue that they are not informal, unauthorized, or unplanned, at least at an individual level. Instead, we will propose that at least some of these murals were requested and paid for. It is worth noticing that this also applies to the ship motifs in Kviteseid. Ship drawings that are not part of a narrative, e.g., the legend of St Olav, Noah's ark, Jonah and the whale, are commonly categorized as graffiti (Artzy 1999; le Bon 1995; von Busch et al. 1993; Champion 2015; Christensen 1995), although some scholars have previously opposed this categorization (see Hesjedal and Bertelsen 2011; Nymoen 2010). They argue that these ships in general must have been part of, and accepted as, the church "decoration".

If the murals in Kviteseid are not graffiti, how are they then best understood? Referring to the National Museum of Denmark's homepage "Kalkmalerier i danske kirker" (Wall paintings in Danish churches) (2006–16), the Kviteseid motifs could be classified as "marks and signs".[6] This is, in our opinion, a good classification as it does not imply that the murals necessarily belong together or form a unity. This is, for instance, seen in churches with a formal iconographic room programme, where the church interior is decorated in the same style, and perhaps also with imagery forming a coherent story. We hypothesise that the murals in Kviteseid are formal, but not coherent, and that, like graffiti, they have been added over time.

[6] 'Tegn og merke', our translation, see: https://natmus.dk/salg-og-ydelser/museumsfaglige-ydelser/kirker-og-kirkegaarde/kalkmalerier-i-danske-kirker/om-motiver/.

What belongs together and when are they executed?

The walls in Kviteseid Old Church are uneven with a rough and bumpy surface. They are covered with an unevenly applied, coarse lime sludge with irregular brush structure. However, the lower parts of the walls in the chancel were re-rendered. This must have happened at some point in the medieval period, since a medieval consecration cross is painted on that reparation render. The images and letters are painted directly on the surface of the reparation render and therefore must have been executed after the renovation, at the earliest in the late-medieval period.

As described above, all images and inscriptions are drawn with something like a charcoal pin or red chalk. The different images and inscriptions vary in paint stroke and artistic quality; while most of the images are rendered in a simple, less artistic manner, the image of the deer was executed by a skilled artist. Therefore, we can assume that the motifs and letters were executed by different hands, indicating that they were not painted as one unit. Even if at first glance the distribution of the images appears random, a closer look reveals that they are not arbitrarily placed on top of each other. It seems more likely that they are intentionally placed side by side, each taking the others into consideration.

None of the longer inscriptions can be connected to the images; the lines of text seem to be independent of the images and of each other. Similarly, the ship images seem to stand on their own without any connection to letters or words. The only unambiguously intentional combination of image and letters is found in the huge decorative knot with an 'o' in the centre. Such a combination of single letters and images is also observed in Skrøbelev Church (fig. 4) and Husby Church (fig. 5), Denmark. Keeping this in mind, it is possible that some of the individual letters may be connected to proximate images, such as the minuscule letters next to the soldier image. However, due to the uncertain interpretation of these minuscule letters, any connection must remain hypothetical. Other minuscule letters appear to stand isolated, though the present degree of preservation does not allow for certain conclusions to be drawn.

Building on the hypothesis that these pictures and inscriptions were made one after the other, it is reasonable to believe that the large pictures came first, when the wall was like a white sheet, and the smaller pictures were applied one after the other in the remaining empty spaces. A stratigraphic study of the paint layers discloses that on the northern wall, the deer must have been painted before the huge decorative knot, and the knot before the soldier, while the red inscription was painted last. The red inscription is the only internally dated one, containing the date 1595. It is plausible

Fig. 4: The minuscule 'm' painted beside a unicorn, a well-known symbol for Mary, in Skrøbelev Church, Denmark. Photo from https://natmus.dk/salg-og-ydelser/museumsfaglige-ydelser/kirker-og-kirkegaarde/kalkmalerier-i-danske-kirker/, photographed by Kirsten Trampedach, 2007.

Fig. 5: The minuscule 'h' painted underneath Hilleborg Skinkel's coat of arms in Husby Church, Denmark. Photo from https://natmus.dk/salg-og-ydelser/museumsfaglige-ydelser/kirker-og-kirkegaarde/kalkmalerier-i-danske-kirker/, photographed by Kirsten Trampedach, 2015.

that this date refers to the time of production. Interestingly, this red inscription is drawn on top of the deer, implying that the deer must pre-date 1595.

Due to these technical observations, we believe that the different motifs and inscriptions are executed individually, one after the other, but each new one with respect to the existing ones. Taking the above-mentioned assumptions concerning the earliest possible and latest dating into account, the murals may be dated to the period between the late-medieval period and the end of the sixteenth century. Both the motifs and letter forms are typical for the period. In the following, we look closer at the various motifs and inscriptions.

The motifs

On the walls of the chancel, as described above, we find a large decorative knot, a soldier, a deer, and several ships; in between and above these, there are minuscule letters, names, uninterpreted inscriptions consisting of some words, and also longer inscriptions. Below, we go through these motifs and inscriptions in detail.

Decorative knot

In the centre of the north wall, we find a big, decorative knot which was originally sized 1.5 x 1.5 m (fig. 6). This is the largest mural in Kviteseid Old Church and was presumably one of the first to be drawn. It has the shape of an "endless knot", a symbol of eternity which is often found as a decorative element on church furniture, altarpieces, and grave slabs.

Inside the knot, a minuscule 'o' is found. This 'o' is one of up to eight minuscule letters drawn on the walls (see pp. 72–74 and figs. 6, 8), although it stands out from the others in two ways: it is placed out of reach of a standing individual, and it is clearly part of the larger decorative knot-design. A similar ornament, with a crowned 'p' drawn inside it, is found in Aarhus Cathedral, and eternal knot decorations reminiscent of those in Kviteseid Old Church, but without minuscule letters are found in several other Danish churches, e.g., Søften (see Plathe 2019: 103, fig. 84) and Astrup (see Plathe 2019: 110, fig. 92).

Both the placement and execution of this letter and its decorative knot indicate that its production was time-consuming and a matter of some importance. In contrast, the other painted minuscule letters are all drawn at eye level and seem to have been placed more haphazardly in between the other inscriptions and murals. As elaborated below, we have considered several interpretations for the minuscule letters. In this instance, it seems most likely that the 'o' refers to the name of a person who has had

a decoration knot painted on the wall. It is not possible to draw a firm connection to any person in this instance.

Fig. 6: The large, decorative knot is placed high up on the northern chancel wall in Kviteseid Old Church. In its middle, there is a minuscule 'o'. To the right: reconstruction drawing of the knot ornament. Drawing and photo: Susanne Kaun.

The soldier with minuscule(s) in Kviteseid

Just below the large knot, there is a soldier, measuring 45 cm in height. Beside him, there are two minims forming one or two minuscule letters (Fig. 8). The soldier faces east and is dressed in a tunic with a belt and knee-breeches, while parts of his feet have not been preserved. He is beardless and has short hair under a Renaissance helmet. His shield is raised in his left hand and a sword in his right, as though he is leaping towards an invisible enemy.

Soldiers are depicted on murals in narrative scenes from several biblical stories, such as Samson defeating the Philistines (Hassing church, Denmark), the Massacre of the Innocent (Church of St. Mary, Helsingør, Denmark), and the Passion of Christ. A soldier without a narrative scene could be a specific person, such as Holger Danske (Ogier the Dane) (Skævinge kirke, Denmark) or St. Olaf; the latter is often depicted with an axe (Dingtuna church, Sweden). When they are depicted alone, they are often passive, i.e., standing or sitting and not in action, like the one in Kviteseid, with the shield held up and the sword raised. It is therefore more likely that the soldier in Kviteseid, with his helmet, sword and shield could be interpreted as the Christian Knight in accordance with Paul's allegory in Ephesians 6: 13-18:

> Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Ronneby Church in Sweden has an example of a depiction of the Christian knight dated to 1586. The Kviteseid knight appears to be a simpler variant of the Ronneby knight, with the belt of truth buckled around his waist, the helmet of salvation, the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit in his hand (Figs. 7 & 8).

Fig. 7: The Christian knight as he is depicted in Ronneby Church in Sweden. Photo: Danske kalkmalerier, bind 7: Efter Reformationen (København: Nationalmuseet, 1992), s. 156.

Fig. 8: The soldier in Kviteseid Old Church is located just underneath the decorative knot. Adjacent to him is one or two minuscules, which may be the initials of a person. Photo: Susanne Kaun.

Beside the soldier, there are two minuscule letters uncertainly identified as 'lk'. This is one of up to eight minuscule inscriptions painted on the chancel walls. In addition to the 'o' discussed above, part of the ornamental knot, there are two more minuscule letters on the northern chancel wall: an 'ø' just above the hind part of the stag and a single engraved minim, possibly an 'i', located just underneath and between the soldier and the ship. On the southern wall, 'pd' can be found. The area in front of 'pd' is damaged, and it is possible, though not certain, that the two extant minuscule letters were once preceded by more script. To the right of it, a faint 'o' can be found, only partially outlined and of uncertain form. Finally, to the west of the southern chancel portal, the remnants of three minims, possibly forming an 'm', can be seen. These

inscriptions share in common that they do not form words, that the letters are of Gothic minuscule script, and that they are outlined, i.e., most lines are drawn double. This contrasts with the other inscriptions, which are longer and form words or full sentences, and whose script consists of single lines. Similar outlined Gothic minuscule letters are found both painted and carved in several churches in Telemark and western Norway.[7]

Of these minuscule letters, 'lk' is the one positioned closest to a figurative motif, the soldier, and a central question is whether the two belong together. To answer this, we must first look at the possible functions of the minuscule letters.

Relatively common as these outlined minuscule letters seem to be, they are difficult to interpret, since no complete words are preserved. Holmqvist (2021a) discusses their function in Borgund Stave Church and presents various possible interpretations. However, she was unable to draw any definitive conclusions. In Denmark, similar minuscule letters are found in medieval churches, such as Øxendrup, Skrøbelev, Gudme, Hesselager, Husby, Skivholme, and Århus Cathedral. In these churches, more of the context has been preserved. For instance, in Øxendrup, the minuscule 'm' is crowned and encircled (see Plathe 2019: 182, fig. 161), indicating that it may denote Mary (see the discussion on crowned 'p' in Plathe 2019: 228). Similarly, in Skrøbelev an 'm' is painted beside a unicorn, a symbol of the Virgin Mary (Plathe 2019: 254, fig. 226; fig. 4 in the present article). In Gudme, 'p' is rendered through various symbolic ornamentations, including a lily (Plathe 2019: 193, fig. 169). This evidence suggests that single minuscule letters may have been used as religious symbols. Moreover, in Husby, a minuscule 'h' is painted underneath the coat-of-arms of Hilleborg Skinkel (Plathe 2019: 149, fig. 131; fig. 5 in the present article), in which case the 'h' is most likely to refer to the personal name Hilleborg.[8] The Danish evidence indicates that minuscule letters have been used both with worldly and religious symbolism, although everything carved or painted in churches may at one level be interpreted as religious.

In Kviteseid Old Church, and the other churches in Norway, however, a range of different minuscule letters are carved and drawn, and they lack a clear connection to imagery or identified individuals. This complicates analysis. There is no clear religious

[7] For instance, in Seljord Church in Telemark and Borgund Stave Church in Sogn. See Bollaert 2022 and Holmqvist 2021a.

[8] It is worth noting that minuscule letters are also sometimes found on coins and on seals from the period in question. See e.g., the coin of King Hans (1483–1513), which figures an 'h' (Skaare 1995: 21) and Nikolas Sveinsson's seal from 1430 which figures an 'n' (Fjordholm, Hohler, Kjellberg & Nyquist 2012: no 124). In both instances, the minuscule letter is identical to the first letter of the owner's name.

symbolism; the minuscule letters are not, for instance, 'm's found close to other symbols for Mary, such as the 'm' adjacent to a unicorn in Skrøbelev Church in Denmark (fig. 4), or crowned and encircled 'm's as seen e.g. in Øxendrup Church in Denmark as a symbol for Mary, or abbreviations for Jesus like 'ihs'. Instead, the body of Norwegian church wall minuscule letters represent a range of different letters, and they are not clearly connected to any imagery. This combination of great variety and a lack of unambiguous religious symbolism makes it likely that the minuscule letters represent initials of personal or place names in Norway, rather than being religious symbols.

Returning to the minuscule close to the soldier, it is possible that it is the initial of a person represented by the soldier, and thus that the minuscule and soldier belong together. An indication of this is the proximity of the two figures. However, this could also be incidental. If the minuscule and soldier belong together, an interesting discussion relates to the function the minuscule may have had. Contemporaries would have known which person the soldier represented, with or without a minuscule adjacent to it. Today, however, the minuscule will not help us in identifying the soldier. In that respect, the main function of the minuscule may be to signal that the soldier is not only a symbolic image, but also a representation of a person.

The deer

A deer is drawn east of the soldier (fig. 9), almost touching the knot with its head. The deer is 115 cm long and galloping westwards. It has large antlers, and its back is covered with a saddlecloth. As with the soldier, a minuscule can be found near the deer, above its hind quarters, though today, nothing indicates that the two are meant to be read together. They are located closely together, but not necessarily in a unified composition. The stroke thickness is also different. If they were intended to be read in conjunction, locating the minuscule underneath the deer would seem more natural. However, another inscription partly covers the minuscule, and this may have faded the minuscule and thus altered our impression of it. We cannot rule out that either name or minuscule was once connected with the deer.

Depictions of deer appear on wall paintings in different settings and may have several symbolic meanings. We find it on murals as part of the Creation (Brøby Church, Sorø), as part of a hunting scene (Bregninge Church), or as in Ørbæk where the deer is eating from the Tree of Wisdom (Søndergaard 1999: 207). Another depiction is the deer as a reference to Agnus Dei (the Lamb of God). This is found in Eidfjord Church and Bringetofta Church (Ullén 1995: 35). In the latter depiction, the deer has the same pose as the Lamb of God, lifting its front leg and turning its head.

In Kviteseid Old Church, on the other hand, the deer has a shabrack, a saddlecloth decorated with heraldic ornaments. Thus, it is probably referring to a family's coat of arms. Deer are commonly used as heraldic symbols, and the shabrack lends weight to this interpretation of the Kviteseid deer. Exactly which coat of arms is depicted on the shabrack is difficult to interpret, though it could be one of the many variations of ermine spots, as a heraldic representation of the tail (Neubecker 1979: 87).

Heraldry in Norwegian churches has been known since the Middle Ages (Nissen and Bratberg 2013: 51). In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, coats of arms and initials flourished in churches, e.g., on pews, pulpits, baptismal fonts, ritual vessels, textiles, and murals.[9] Although lost knowledge to us today, it must once have been well-known to the congregation which family or person the initial "o" in the knot and the coat of arms on the deer referred to.

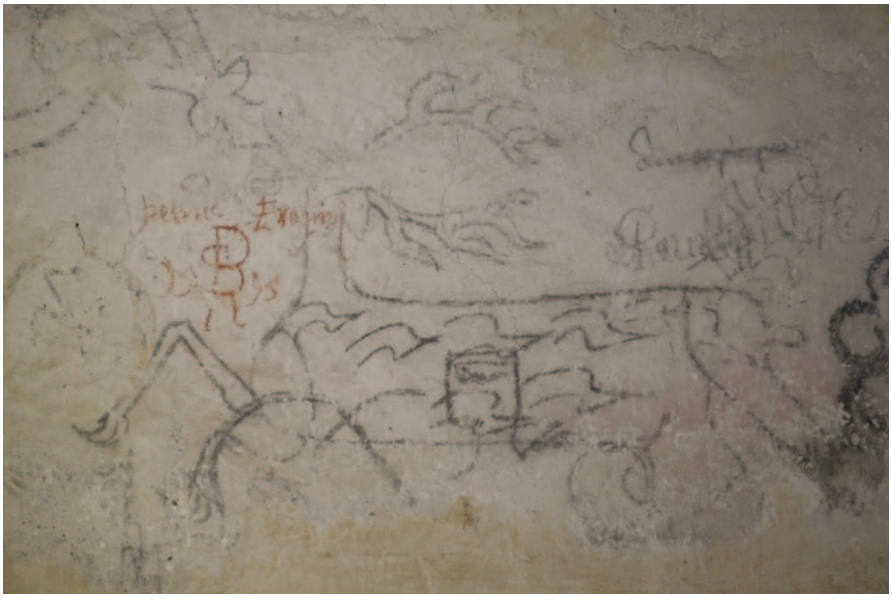

Fig. 9: The deer in Kviteseid. A name can be seen written in red to the left of and across its throat. A saddlecloth covers its back, and three different inscriptions, including a name, a minuscule and a sequence of undecipherable letters, are located above its hind. Photo: Susanne Kaun.

[9] See www.norgeskirker.no.

Names and short texts

In the chancel, there are also several names and other short, though uninterpretable, inscriptions. The most easily interpreted name is found to the left of and across the neck and throat of the deer, written in red over two lines:

Petrus Erasmi
15P̃RS95

Fig. 10: The name Petrus Erasmi is written to the left of and across the throat of the deer. Below, we find the year 1595 and a monogram consisting of the letters PRS. Photo: Susanne Kaun.

The first line contains a Latinization of the name Peder Rasmussen, the second line a date and monogram, PRS, for the same name. This inscription stands out as the only instance of red paint in the chancel. Even the script stands out, as it has a more cursive appearance than the others. The first name starts with an enlarged 'p' descending below the ground line, and the second name starts with a majuscule 'E'. Long 's' and the final 'i' descend below the ground line and 'a' is single story, distin-

guishing this script from that of the other inscriptions. Thus, both script and colour indicate that this inscription is different from the rest.

An interesting question is who Petrus was, and why his name was written on the wall. The different colour and script used for his name may indicate different origins, background, or time. Variants of this name – Petr, Peter, Peder, etc. – have been in common use in Norway since c.1200 (Lind 1905–15: col. 833), while his father's name, Erasmus / Rasmus, has been known in Norway since the late-fifteenth century (Kruken & Stemshaug 2013: 465–466), and even longer in Denmark (Knudsen, Kristensen & Hornby 1936–40: cols. 245–246). The name is originally Latin.

Peder Rasmussen may have been either Danish or Norwegian, and we know little more about him than his name and that he lived – or died – in the year 1595. Assuming that Peder wrote his own name, we may deduce that he was literate, for his writing is neat and the Latin is correct. It is possible that Peder Rasmussen could have been a priest, though no priest of that name is known to have worked in Kviteseid or any of the other churches in its vicinity.[10] The pastor (sogneprest) in Kviteseid at that time was Kristiern Olufssøn (Bang 1897: 101–102). The closest we get is a priest named Peder Rasmussen is registered from Volda in 1615, but we have found no connection between Kviteseid Church and this individual. No other Peder Rasmussen fitting to the period occurs in surviving written sources.

Literacy was, however, not restricted to the clergy, and it is also possible that he was a person of standing with knowledge of writing, or that someone else wrote his name for him. In that respect, it is interesting that in the year 1595, Jens Nilssøn, bishop of the diocese of Oslo 1580–1600, visited Kviteseid; in connection with this, restoration work was done in the church.[11] Peder Rasmussen may have given a donation to the church on this occasion. Another possibility is that Peder was part of the bishop's entourage, coming in from Denmark.[12] However, this would lead to the

[10] This information is collected from Bastian Svendsen's (1795-1865) Norsk prestehistorie (Svendsen n.d.), a catalogue over priests from the dioceses of Hamar and Oslo. The catalogue can found in microfilm format at https://www.genealogi.no/norsk-prestehistorie/. Svendsen worked on the catalogue for several years, and testamented it to the University Library. Several scholars and genealogists have added information after Svendsen's death, and the catalogue is presently administered by Norsk Slektshistorisk Forening, which is in a process of updating it and publishing it digitally.

[11] Kviteseid parish was part of the Diocese of Oslo until the fifteenth century, when it became part of the Diocese of Hamar. After the Reformation, the Diocese of Hamar became part of Oslo. Thus in 1595, Kviteseid was again part of the Diocese of Oslo.

[12] Indeed, a priest named Per is known to have visited the church in Bø together with Jens Nilssøn in 1579 (Søfrenssøn 1564–1599/1898: 11), and this Per may be identical to the Peder in Kviteseid. Most of all, however, this demonstrates how common the name is, and that several

question why only Peder wrote his name, and no one else in the party. If Peder was a particularly important person in this group, he would most likely have appeared in the surviving written records of the visit as well.

What occasioned the painting of this name on the chancel wall is uncertain, and we have not found any more information about the other names. However, it is clear that writing names on church walls was a common practice in the sixteenth century, since similar examples are found in other churches, such as Eidfjord, Siljan, and Trondenes. In Slidredomen, a similar but longer inscription mentions the death of a Dominus Haaning Olaf,[13] and in Trondenes, an inscription commemorates the death of Sira Anders.[14] It is possible that the painted names in Kviteseid are less explicit parallels, occasioned by the named person's death, though this is far from certain since it is not stated in the inscription (see also Holmqvist 2018: 116–119 for a parallel discussion on runic names).

Peder's name is the only fully interpreted inscription on the Kviteseid walls. Apart from his inscription, there are seven further short inscriptions in the chancel of Kviteseid which may be names similar to that of Peder's. These consist of one or several words and are carved over one or two lines. Of these, six are found on the north wall and an uncertain inscription is found on the south wall. Two inscriptions begin with an enlarged minuscule or capital and are most likely names. The other five may consist of names, or short messages, but their state of preservation is too poor to allow interpretation.

Per's, Peter's, and Peder's may have passed through Kviteseid around the year 1595. Thanks to the editors for pointing out this additional Per to us.

[13] Ano a Nat d̄no 1591 obiit
d̄ Haaning Olaf [...] die januari
sepultus die epiphanio [...]
Anno ab Nativitate domino 1591 obiit Dominus Haaning Olaf [...] die januari Sepultus die Epiphanio
[The year since the birth of our lord 1591 died Lord Haaning Olaf on the [...] day of January and he was buried on Epiphany day.] Translation by the authors.

[14] Anno 1561 døde sira Anders 9 Februarii
[The year 1516 sir Anders died on 9 February] Translation by the authors.

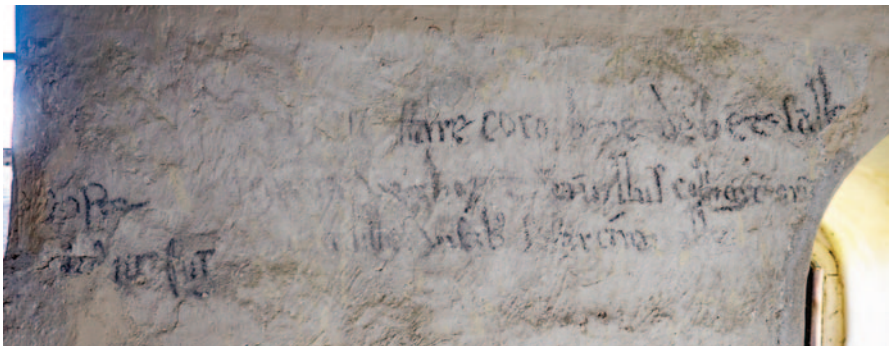

Fig. 11: Two of the longer inscriptions are located on the southern chancel wall in Kviteseid Old Church, as seen here; the inscription to the left has been damaged due to the enlargement of the window. The contrast and colours in the image have been adjusted to enhance details and make the inscriptions stand out. Photo: Susanne Kaun.

Longer texts

In addition to the short inscriptions, several painted inscriptions are remains of longer texts which probably once comprised one or more full sentences. They differ from the inscriptions discussed above not only in length, but also in style. We have identified three of these inscriptions, but it is possible that more were originally present. All three are found on the south wall, two are painted c. 2,5 m above floor level and are not accessible without a ladder, while one is painted at eye level. All three are only faintly and partly preserved, and in only one of them, distinct words can be read. This inscription is painted high up to the left of the southern entrance to the chancel (fig. 11). There, it seems to be located independently, somewhat removed from the more clustered inscriptions and murals on the northern and lower southern wall. The inscription consists of three well-spaced horizontal lines, and our attempt at reading results in the following transcription: [15]

a) [..] s͡tare c̣oro:ḅẹne debet sal̲l̲[. -]
b) [.c4.] [.]a̲b[..][-̣ṭ:n̲[..]llus[.] c̣allig[..-..]
c) [...]ll[.]:..s[.]ib̄ [..]sar[.]i[.]a [.]ll̲e

[15] The transcription follows the principles denoted in the catalogue to Bollaert (2022: 3–4). Notably [.c4] denotes that traces of approximately 4 signs can be seen. A dot represents an uninterpreted sign, while a dot underneath indicates uncertain reading of a sign. A bow over indicates ligatures, and a line over indicates abbreviation.

Individual words can be made out, and the inscription seems to make use of spaces, but also some word dividers consisting of two vertically aligned dots are present. It is possible that originally all words were separated with dots, but that these have been more prone to fading, since they may have been painted less strongly. The first line is best preserved, and three words can be read: *stare*, 'stand, stop', *bene* 'good', and *debet* 'it/he/she must'. In the final line, one recognises the abbreviated ending -ibus. While these words clearly indicate that the inscription is in Latin, they leave us with little information with regards to interpretation. The verb *stare* is sometimes used in epitaphs to request the attention of a reader (see, for instance, Syrett 2002: 195–202; Bollaert 2022, T21). However, it is far from certain that this inscription is an epitaph since attention may be requested in other contexts also. Moreover, since the preceding part of the wall is damaged, it may have contained a now lost prefix.

The script of the inscription is non-cursive, but from such a small sample its identification is difficult. This is further complicated by the lack of research on painted inscriptions, and their letter forms. Comparison can be made with engraved inscriptions, manuscript texts, or inscriptions on coins and sigils. However, as of yet it is unclear how painted inscriptions have responded to developments in writing practices related to either manuscript production, or that of inscriptions on stone or metal. In Norway (as abroad), carvers and writers seem to have responded differently to changing trends. As noted by Debias, et. al. (2007: 135), the dating of painted inscriptions is particularly difficult, and so far, we know little of what inspired the letter forms of wall paintings. In Kviteseid, it seems the individual Gothic minuscule letters may be inspired by epigraphic practices of the time, but this is less clearly the case for this longer text.

Considering its damaged quality and the small size of the sample, only few diagnostic features of the script are present. The lettering is perhaps too narrow to be a Caroline minuscule, and the upwards slanting tongue/beam of <e> also does not fit this script, in which this would be horizontal. The leftwards sloping shaft of <a> similarly does not fit Caroline minuscule form. It is unlikely the script is Caroline minuscule, and this fits well with the dating of the other inscriptions (Late Medieval, or Post Reformational). However, the script also contains few of the characteristics to be associated with Gothic minuscule scripts, at least when found epigraphically. The lettering is still rounder than would be expected, the shafts are unbroken, and the <st> ligature does not descend below the baseline. Perhaps, this may indicate that the painted inscription more closely followed manuscript practice, or that the script instead is of Humanist minuscule form, or a blend. The latter could indicate a dating to the Late Middle Ages or the Post Reformational period. It is evident, how-

ever, that the inscription is of a different script than the other, shorter inscriptions. This, together with the placement, layout, and length of the text, indicates that the inscription may be more formal, or at least more carefully executed than most of the others, making it stand out from the shorter inscriptions, such as the names and individual minuscule letters.

The two other longer inscriptions are so badly preserved that little can be made of them. It is possible that they were of a similar style as this one. One of them is located just to the left of this inscription and can partially be seen on the picture above (fig. 11). It is largely lost due to enlargement of the window in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The third longer inscription is rendered lower down, in a more accessible location.

Ships

At least nine sailing ship images are found in Kviteseid Old Church, and thus, the ship is the most common motif in Kviteseid. Various ship images are also found in other Norwegian churches, both outside and inside; some churches also have several ship images, for instance Trondenes Church.

In Kviteseid, the ship images are distributed approximately evenly on the southern, western and northern chancel walls, and are placed at different heights. They are painted in various styles and thus do not seem to be connected. We can find two types of ships, both considered medieval ones. First, we have at least four sailing ships with a round hull and a single mast; they might represent a boat type like a *bússa* or *knǫrr*, two Norse merchant ship types from the medieval period (von Busch et al. 1993: 33). The huge ship image on the northern wall stands out due to its bigger size (fig. 13),[16] but also because it is apparently a different ship type. Like the other ships, it is single masted, but it has a straight bow, and the hull planks are vertically divided. It might represent a cog, a medieval seagoing vessel, used for trading (von Busch et al. 1993: 34). On the other hand, it is hard to see if the ship in Kviteseid had a crow's nest, or a castle on the stern, which would be typical for seagoing vessels like the cog. None of Kviteseid's ships are depicted with set sail, and no anchor is detected. Such elements are found in ship images in other churches, such as in Høyjord and Kinsarvik. It is difficult to date the ship drawings certainly solely based on the ship type, as all of these ship types may have been used over a long period. In other churches, e.g. in Kinsarvik and Høyjord, apparently younger ship types with several

[16] The remains of the huge ship measure 1 m in height and 1.2 m in width; the smaller ones measure 25 to 55 cm in height and width.

masts and square sails are found; this indicates that ship images were made over a long period of time in Norwegian churches.

Ship images are widespread and are found in churches and elsewhere all over Europe. Their widely distributed presence suggests that ships must have been a commonly known symbol in many periods, and it most likely had various meanings. In the ensemble of murals in Kviteseid Old Church, the ships are not part of a biblical or religious scene (e.g., Noah's ark, Jonah, St Olav), and they do not seem to be connected to persons or dates. Most likely, the ships in Kviteseid were used as a symbol. In Christian iconography, ships have several symbolic meanings, foremost as the symbol of the Church, but also for the transition from life to death and salvation. A ship may also symbolize travelling and have a votive function. Sailing ships were the most effective and often the only means of transport for people and goods until steam engines made their entrance in the nineteenth century; they were essential for travel and trade. As such, they may have been executed as a form of prayer for a safe journey or in gratitude for surviving a dangerous voyage.

Fig. 12: This ship is located on the southern chancel wall, below the longest inscription. Below this ship, one may discern the remnants of another inscription. The words in this inscription cannot be read, and it is impossible today to determine whether ship and text were meant to be read together, or whether their collocation is incidental. Photo: Susanne Kaun.

Fig. 13: A large ship is located to the west on the northern chancel wall. This ship is considerably larger than the rest, measuring approximately 1 metre in height and 1.2 metres in length. Photo: Susanne Kaun.

Concluding remarks

To conclude, we return to our initial questions: Do the various signs and symbols belong together? When were they made? What do they symbolize? And what is their purpose?

In this article, we have shown that in general, the various signs and symbols on the walls of Kviteseid Old Church are not directly related to each other, but they were visible together over a long period, probably several decades. The images and inscriptions were probably executed successively between the late-fifteenth century and 1595. The localization of these murals in the chancel, practically filling the lower parts of the walls, means that they must have had a function in the church, or at least have been accepted. Their placement in the chancel, the location for high-status burials, is a further indication that they were connected to people of a high social standing. They are likely to have been drawn and paid for by different people on separate occasions, though they are related in that they had similar functions and were seen and understood together.

The murals were probably executed one after another and with respect to those already in existence. There is no obvious connection between text and images. Some single letters may belong together with images, and some of the longer texts and minuscules may relate to each other; the large minuscules may, for instance, give the initial of a person whom the image was meant to commemorate. The large minuscules are likely to give the initial of different persons; several of the shorter texts also consist of personal names. The deer carries a saddlecloth with a coat of arms which connects it to a family. The knot, a symbol of eternity, contains the letter 'o' that could connect it to a person or family. It may be connected to a burial or stand as a memorial

for a person or a part of a donation to the church. Ships could symbolize voyages and function as votives. The longer texts are very damaged. They may have had a memorial function as well, but other functions cannot be excluded. Several of the images and inscriptions in Kviteseid are therefore likely to have been made as votives, or in memory of a person or a donation.

This study of the murals in Kviteseid Old Church provides a new understanding and meaning to images and inscriptions that have been regarded by many as doodles, graffiti, or unpretentious pieces of work by an untrained hand. They were executed with a purpose, and they did indeed have a function and an accepted place in the church environment. They appear in the centuries around the Reformation, and we still have preserved remains of images and inscriptions of this kind in several Norwegian churches.

In future studies, further knowledge may be gained by studying additional murals of the same kind in other Norwegian churches. A major question is whether the conclusions drawn in the present article are transferable to other Norwegian churches, or whether an in-depth study of similar murals in other churches would alter the picture. Moreover, we find parallel motifs in heraldry, seals, and on coins, which can often be dated more accurately than murals; comparing church decorations to similar motifs on other types of artefacts may increase our knowledge of church murals of the type found in Kviteseid. Additionally, several manuscripts have marginalia of an apparently similar character, and it may prove fruitful to explore these seemingly similar expressions in various media in a future study.

Abbreviations

Riksantikvaren (The Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage)

RAA (Riksantikvarens arkiver / Archive of the Directorate for Cultural Heritage in Norway)

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