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## *Medieval Iconography in the Digital Age: Creating a Database of the Cult of Saints in Medieval Sweden and Finland*

*Abstract:* This report describes *Mapping Lived Religion*, an ongoing research and digitization project based at Linnaeus University and in collaboration with the University of Gothenburg. The project members are building an open access, online database of objects and texts connected to the cults of saints in medieval Sweden and Finland. The database is connected to a digital map and includes a register of medieval places. As part of its work, the project has enabled the digitization and digital publication of the *Iconographic Index*, housed by the Swedish National Heritage Board. Additionally, the photographs from *The World of Medieval Images* have been re-digitized as high-resolution images in collaboration with the Swedish National History Museums. By the end of the project, the database will be a major research and educational resource for those working on and teaching this period. As an open access portal published in both Swedish and English, it will offer data on the cults of saints to anyone with an interest in the field in Sweden, Finland, and internationally.

*Keywords:* Iconography, Middle Ages, Cult of Saints, Database, Digitization, Iconographic Index, World of Medieval Images, Art History, Sweden, Finland.

# Medieval Iconography in the Digital Age:

## Creating a Database of the Cult of Saints in Medieval Sweden and Finland

*Lena Liepe & Sara Ellis Nilsson*[1]



Fig. 1. *The Resurrection of Lazarus. The local saint David of Munktorp is embroidered on top of the figure of Lazarus. Embroidery on cope shield, Västerås Cathedral. Flanders, late-fifteenth century. The addition has been attributed to the atelier of Albert Pärlstickare. Photo Iconographical Index, Swedish National Heritage Board (CC o).*

The documentation, registration, indexing, and filing of huge quantities of images is a time-honoured pursuit in Nordic art historical scholarship on medieval iconography in general, and on the iconography of saints in particular. In many cases, proper research can begin only after the laborious work of collecting all of the available information about the corpus of images to be investigated has been carried out. Typically, the main focus of an investigation is a specific motif, but also the medium – murals, wooden sculpture, stained glass, manuscript illuminations – may form part of the selection criteria, as well as the delimitation to a geographic region such as a province (*landskap*) or a diocese. The material thus collected by the scholar provides the foundation not only for his or her own research, but also as a source of data to be mined by future students of medieval art. Ideally, these data are stored in a way that opens for usage by anyone that takes a legitimate interest in them.

Up until recently, a person in need of a systematic overview of the occurrence of a specific saint, subject, or theme in medieval church art in Sweden had no choice but to go to Stockholm and leaf through maybe hundreds of typed index cards in the boxes of the *Iconographic Index* (*Ikonografiska registret*) at ATA (the Antiquarian-Topographical Archive of the Swedish National

Heritage Board, Riksantikvarieämbetet). As part of the research project *Mapping Lived Religion: Medieval Cults of Saints in Sweden and Finland*, the *Iconographic Index* has now been digitized and made publicly accessible both within the *Mapping Saints* database, and soon, directly also via the Swedish National Heritage Board. Furthermore, the content of the database *The World of Medieval Images* (*Medeltidens bildvärld*), long since appreciated by students of the art and history of the Middle Ages for its superb stock of high-quality colour images, has been re-digitized as high-resolution images and included in the *Mapping Saints* database (https://saints.dh.gu.se/).

The purpose of this report is to familiarize the reader with the project and the database and map that will be its output and major publication, as well as to highlight the fundamental role of the *Iconographic Index*, of *The World of Medieval Images*, and of art historical studies on medieval church art in Sweden and Finland, as sources of visual evidence for the cult of saints in the Middle Ages.

### THE MAPPING LIVED RELIGION PROJECT

*Mapping Lived Religion: Medieval Cults of Saints in Sweden and Finland* is a five-year project, financed by the Swedish Research Council in cooperation with Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities (2019–2023). Its objective is to develop a digital research resource including a comprehensive, open-access, online database of art historical, archaeological, and historical documentary material, with a mapping component. When it is finished, the resource will provide open access to data related to the cults of saints in the Ecclesiastical Province of Uppsala, including that from several cultural heritage collections. The latter include the aforementioned, newly digitized material, the digitization of which was undertaken in collaboration with the Swedish National Heritage Board and the Swedish History Museum (Historiska museet). Users will be able to search for and analyse information about saints' cults chronologically and geographically across the medieval and early modern periods, thus opening for interdisciplinary research through the combined analysis of texts, objects, and buildings. An additional output will be the publication of a register of medieval religious places in Sweden and Finland.

The theoretical base for the project is *lived religion* (LR), a framework for studying lay religiosity and its manifestations in the life of ordinary people. It offers an approach that focuses on religion as practice, custom, and experience, rather than as creed. The aim of LR is to include in the understanding of religion the layers of everyday practices that subtend and feed into the active religious life of a period. LR understands religion situationally, placing it on a social field within the domain of daily life, practical activity, and shared beliefs.[2] In the project, digital methods are applied in order to achieve a greater understanding of medieval lived religion as expressed through the cult of the saints. Saints have been chosen as the foci of the project as they reflect a local character of the Christian religion, and the traces left by their veneration are an important part of cultural heritage. In order to study the connection between saints and LR, our database model centres on the analytical component: *Cult*



Fig. 2. Although Jesus Christ does not fall within the remit of the Mapping Saints *database, Christological programs such as that found on the baptismal font in Gistad Church, Östergötland, contain a number of saints that are included: in this case, the Virgin Mary, Joseph, the Three Kings, and John the Baptist. From left to right: the Crucifixion, the Baptism, Joseph's Dream, the Nativity, and the Adoration of the Magi. Limestone, 1200–1250. Photo Lennart Karlsson, Historiska museet/ SHM (CC BY).*

*Manifestation*. This concept refers to when the cult of a saint is "manifest" in a particular place at a particular time, or over a specific period.

In the past, researchers from different disciplines have used a variety of sources to study aspects of, for example, cultural history, religious networks, and artistic expression. The current project applies an interdisciplinary perspective, combining history, art history, and archaeology. The multifaceted approach is more than one researcher alone can cover and necessitates collaborative teamwork. Five specialists are engaged in this work: project leader Sara Ellis Nilsson (history, LnU), Anders Fröjmark (history, LnU), Lena Liepe (art history, LnU), Terese Zachrisson (history, GU), and Johan Åhlfeldt (research engineer, GU).

The project studies the cults of saints within the Swedish medieval church province, which included most of present-day Sweden, excluding Bohuslän, Halland, Blekinge, Skåne, Härjedalen and some areas of Dalarna, but including Finland and part of modern-day Russia (the Karelian Isthmus). The period of study has been set from the year of the ecclesiastical province's formation in 1164 until the Uppsala Synod in 1593, which consolidated the Swedish Protestant Reformation.[3]

### DIGITAL METHODS AND MATERIAL

At its core, the project belongs to the digital humanities in its approach, and thus, applies a number of digital methods. A short overview of these will be given here.

### Research Resource: Database Development

The database's foundation consists of its varied source material: medieval texts and objects, early modern inventories, antiquarian reports, and medieval religious places. At the start of the project, the state of this material varied, from unedited/undigitized to digitized. Some of the material is found in digital collections and can be linked to; however, a large portion of the project work involves editing, transcribing, translating, and manual data input. In addition, as stated above, a major part of the database is the digitization of the two cultural heritage collections from the Swedish National Historical Museums and the Swedish National Heritage Board: *The World of Medieval Images* and the



Fig. 3. The medieval Scandinavian bishoprics (excluding those in the North Atlantic). The Mapping Lived Religion *project includes the bishoprics in medieval Sweden and Finland (within the dotted line). Map: Sara Ellis Nilsson (CC BY-SA).*

*Iconographic Index*, respectively. This array of source material will enable interdisciplinary analyses which have historically been sequestered to separate fields such as art history, history, archaeology, ethnography, and philology. Interlinking and combining these sources will provide a fuller understanding of the medieval and early modern cults of saints (fig. 4).[4]

The project applies the principles of linked open data (also referred to as LOD) and, thus, is also part of a larger research infrastructure including Swedish Open Cultural Heritage (SOCH, K-Samsök). The project combines traditional and digital scholarship, applying digital methods such as mapping, as well

*Fig. 4. Screenshot from October 6, 2021, of the* Mapping Saints *input interface, currently under development. Link: https://saints. dh.gu.se/search (CC BY-SA Mapping Lived Religion Project).*
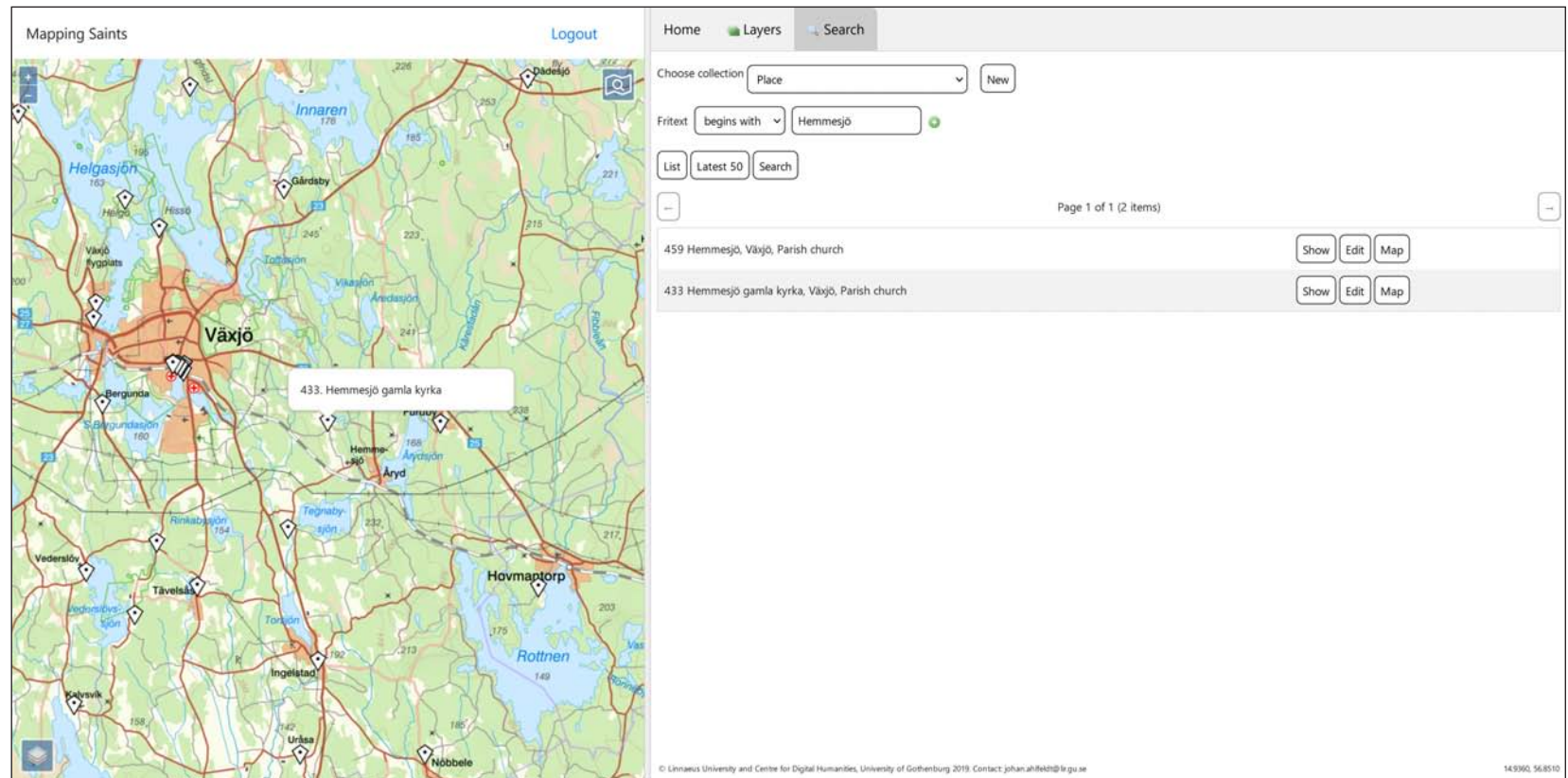


as critically analysing medieval and early modern sources such as texts and objects. By applying LOD, the project aims to build a digitally sustainable research resource which will achieve the goal of enabling future research in the field.

The core concept of the database is the *Cult Manifestation*. Together with the geographical component (map and register of medieval places), the *Cult Manifestation* determines the structure of the database. Each manifestation is based on source material collected by the project. A manifestation is connected to a database table containing one of five *Type of Evidence* categories: *Cult Objects*, *Feast day*, *Narratives*, *Patronage*, and *Prayers and Devotional Acts*. Church dedications, images, relics and other physical objects, occurrences in texts of various kinds, appearance in liturgical uses, and recorded practices of

more or less (in-)formal character are among the main types of evidence categories for manifestations that testify to the cult of the saint (or saints) concerned. Subsequently, the manifestation is based on (and connected to) one *Type of Evidence – Subcategory*. At the time of writing, this second level category is as specific as possible, and contains everything from "festival", "market", and "relic" to "altarpiece" and "miracle".

### Digital Research Methods: analyses
In future analyses, the project will apply *spatial-temporal analysis*. To this end, the database contains spatial data for religious places: churches, chapels, religious houses, holy wells, cathedrals, and shrines. Dates and the dating of

*Fig. 5. Kumlaby Church, Småland. 1475–1500. The abduction of Saint Eustace's children by wild animals. Mural attributed to Amund who painted and signed a decoration in Södra Råda Church, Värmland, in 1494. Photo Lennart Karlsson, Historiska museet/SHM (CC BY).*

sources are also important components in order to implement a timeline in visualizations of the cults of saints in the region. The aforementioned *Cult Manifestation* is always connected to specific coordinates on the resource map and a date interval termed the *function time-period*. It will thus be possible to both search the map as well as visualize changes in the landscape over time. It will also be possible to combine analyses of different types of source materials – images and texts for example – in order to investigate the cults of just one or several saints, as well as the existence of different geographical spreads of cults.

### VISUAL SOURCES

As mentioned, the sources which provide the data that is currently being fed into the database do not just consist of written information in the form of calendars with saints' feasts, *vitae* and miracle collections, records of patronage, letters of indulgence, wills, written accounts of oral traditions, and antiquarian reports. Material evidence is vital as well, not least relics and reliquaries

that give incontestable proof of the existence of saints' cults – although often enough the identity of the saint from whom a sliver of bone has survived cannot be determined any longer. Yet, an essential source category is made up of the literally thousands of depictions of saints that still exist – or, in some cases, are lost but have been documented – in and from the churches of Sweden and Finland. It was clear from the beginning of the project that the inclusion in the database of church art in all its various forms was an absolute necessity, and furthermore that the way forward was to look backwards and draw on the work already done by preceding generations of scholars.

The pioneers who laid the foundation for the study of medieval art in the Nordic countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries invested a lot of energy in the inventorying of churches, including the registration of the motifs and iconographic programmes of church art. These efforts resulted in the ambitious national publication projects *Sveriges kyrkor*, *Suomen Kirkot – Finlands kyrkor*, *Danmarks kirker*, and *Norges kirker*, as well as in monographs and surveys of selected categories of works, often supplied with comprehensive catalogues that are of great, enduring value. The ability to recognize and identify the subjects of the murals, altarpieces, baptismal fonts, liturgical textiles, et cetera, presupposes knowledge of Christian iconography. In the 1920s, Johnny Roosval – chief editor of *Sveriges kyrkor* together with Sigurd Curman – set up *Registrum Iconographicum*, a card index with brief descriptions of the standard motifs of Christian art, complete with dates for their appearance, and often also a photo. The *Registrum's* eight main categories, one of which was dedicated to saints in alphabetical order, were further divided into subcategories. On a national level, the *Registrum Iconographicum* was an expression of the same ambition to create a reliable resource for future research that had led to the founding, on a much grander scale, of the *Index of Christian Art* at Princeton University in 1917.[5] The *Registrum Iconographicum*, although never completed, served its purpose as a source of information both for the students of Roosval's classes in iconography, and the art historians who surveyed churches for *Sveriges kyrkor*.[6]

A major step towards making the vast stock of medieval church imagery in the Nordic countries accessible to systematic study was taken in the 1970s, when national iconographic indices were established. The Swedish *Iconographic Index* is a comprehensive record of iconographic motifs and programmes

*Fig. 6.* Iconographic Index *card of the 16th-century altarpiece in Hemmesjö Church, Småland, accessed through the* Mapping Saints *portal. Internal ID "Iconographic 31805". (CC BY-SA Mapping Lived Religion Project).*



of medieval church art in Sweden up to the early sixteenth century, put together mainly by art historians Mereth Lindgren and Ingalill Pegelow. Many of ICO's readers are already well acquainted with the *Index's* manually typed cards. Each card gives concise information on the subject, medium, and date of murals, altarpieces, wooden sculpture, baptismal fonts, liturgical vessels, vestments, stained-glass windows, and grave slabs, to name the main categories of objects. In the case of extensive decoration programs made up of many parts, such as murals, reliefs on baptismal fonts, or rows of saints and narrative scenes on altarpieces, each saint or scene has its own card. Two series of cards exist, one which is topographically sorted according to province and parish, and the other according to subject. On most cards, black-and-white photos of the mo-

tifs in question are also mounted. All of the *Index's* c. 35,000 unique cards were digitized in 2020 by the Swedish Heritage Board and the *Mapping Lived Religion project*. These cards will soon be searchable through K-Samsök's user-interface Kringla. The cards and their metadata will be stored on ATA's server and made available through the Swedish National Heritage Board's web service SOCH (Swedish Open Cultural Heritage). This will also allow others to build on and use this data via a web-API (Application Programming Interface). Currently, it is possible to access and do limited searches of all of the digitized cards through the *Mapping Saints* portal (fig. 6).

For the purposes of the *Mapping Saints* database, only those cards that relate to the cults of saints are relevant; this means that for instance crucifixes,

*Fig. 7. Newly digitized image of the 16th-century altarpiece in Hemmesjö Church, Småland, from* The World of Medieval Images, *accessed through the Mapping Saints database (CC BY-SA Mapping Lived Religion Project).*



scenes from the Old Testament, moralities, and monstrous figures and animals are left out. Enough remains, however, to make the job of linking each digitized card that records a saint, or a scene involving a saint, to the corresponding *Cult Manifestation*, a task of considerable dimensions. When the database is complete, the user will be able to perform searches for individuals (including saints), and/or subjects, and/or types of evidence (with regard to the *Iconographic Index* this is equivalent to "type of object"), and/or geographic location, and/or date and function time-period. For each entry to which a card in the *Iconographic Index* is linked, a search result will not only display the written information fed into the database, but also a digital image of the card, as shown in fig. 6.

As mentioned, the second main collection of images that is being quarried for the *Mapping Lived Religion* project is that of the database of art historian Lennart Karlsson's photographs of ecclesiastical art currently available as low-resolution images in *The World of Medieval Images*, owned and managed by the Swedish History Museum. In order to facilitate the linking to the database of all relevant photos, the metadata which has been exported from the Swedish History Museum's database includes the location of each church (*landskap och ort*) where the art was photographed. Using these places, we will automatically match the images to the churches in our database as a first step. The second step once again involves manually linking to each entry. The task to manually link each object in *The World of Medieval Images* to its counterpart in the *Map-*

*ping Saints* database is, again, time consuming, but when finished will mean that the large majority of the entries related to representations of saints in murals, wooden sculpture, and baptismal fonts, will be amply illustrated by high-quality colour photos. To aid in the linking process required for each entry, the type of object (*sakord*) is included in the *World of Medieval Images* metadata which is similar to our *Type of Evidence – Subcategory*. More detailed descriptions of the object are also provided in the metadata from the museum as "type" (*typ*) and "sub-type" (*undertyp*). Similarly, to the *Iconographic Index* as described above, a search result will result in a link to the relevant images from *The World of Medieval Images* (fig. 7).

Mention should also be made of the Iconographic Card Index of Finland originally housed at the Picture Collections of The National Board of Antiquities (Museiverket) in Helsinki. The Index was collected by Christina Cleve who worked for the Finnish National Heritage Agency and is a complete registration of all medieval church murals in present day Finland. Currently the cards in the Finnish Iconographic Index can be accessed via the Image Archives reading room at the Finnish National Heritage Agency. The plan is to digitize the cards in the course of the next year and make it accessible through the *Finna* portal – the Agency's search service to find material from Finnish archives, libraries, and museums. When this occurs, it will hopefully be able to link through *Finna* and facilitate its inclusion in the *Mapping Saints* database.

* * *

The overarching ambition of the *Mapping Lived Religion* project is to collect, process and publish all the data from all available sources on the cult of saints in the Ecclesiastical Province of Uppsala in the medieval and early modern period. At present, some allowances have to be made in order for the project to achieve its objective within the five years that we have at our disposal. For one thing, bibliographical references are for the time being limited to a selection of standard works, such as *Sveriges kyrkor* and the major art historical surveys. One of the good things about databases, however, is that they do not have to be complete before they are put to use, and the plan is to continue adding to the content – including bibliographical references – also after 2023, to the extent that time and money allow. Hopefully, we can also count on "a little help from our

friends", i.e., the community of scholars with an interest in and knowledge of medieval church art, iconography, and saints' cults in Sweden and Finland. For instance, our sister project – *Lived Religion in Medieval Finland* (2021–2023) – which is financed by the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland (*Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland*) will be contributing to and utilizing the database, as well as the digital analytical tools that we are developing. We will also invite members of our advisory board to contribute to the database, as an additional form of academic crowdsourcing. In the future, we likewise wish to involve other scholars who are interested in sharing their research in the continuing development of the database.

## Notes

1 The project members Terese Zachrisson (University of Gothenburg), Anders Fröjmark (Linnaeus University), and Johan Åhlfeldt (Centre for Digital Humanities, University of Gothenburg) also contributed to the project work described in this article. We would likewise like to thank our collaborative partners – Johan Nordinge (Swedish National Heritage Board), Eva Vedin (Swedish National Historical Museums), and Ilar Gunilla Persson (Swedish National Historical Museums) – for their invaluable work in digitizing the collections described in this article.

2 Haakedal 2008; McGuire 2008; Orsi (1985) 2010.

3 See also Ellis Nilsson 2020; Ellis Nilsson et al. forthcoming 2022.

4 For further discussion of the challenges of digitizing art historical material and including metadata for digital analysis, see Kieven 2011.

5 Lavin 1993, 39–40.

6 Tuulse 1972, 11.

## Internet links

*Mapping Saints* portal: https://saints.dh.gu.se/

Links to screenshots:
Fig. 4: https://saints.dh.gu.se/search
Fig. 6: https://saints.dh.gu.se/iconographic/31805
Fig. 7: https://saints.dh.gu.se/shm_art/http:%2F%2Fkulturarvsdata.
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