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Talkative Head Reliquaries in the Nordic and Livonian Middle Ages

Abstract: Reliquaries shaped as heads or hands were called "speaking reliquaries" for several decades since the term – in German, *redende Reliquiare* – was coined by Joseph Braun in his book *Die Reliquiare des Christlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung* (1940). Their shape was assumed to have an explicitly informative function: to reflect the relics they contained. This was challenged by Cynthia Hahn in her article "The Voices of the Saints: Speaking Reliquaries" (1997). Hahn has since shown in her many articles and books that the relation between the shapes and contents of reliquaries is not straightforward, and that reliquaries of various shapes can indeed "speak".

This article examines the "talkativity" of head reliquaries with examples from the Baltic and Nordic countries. It discusses their different forms of expression and their thematics, ranging from concrete aspects such as the saints represented by the reliquary and the relics within to the identity of their commissioners, and more abstract themes like sainthood, seeing, belief, and blessing.

Keywords: Reliquary, Skull, Bust, Head, Medieval art

Fig. 1. Unknown artist (workshop of Haaken Gulleson?), 15th century. Sigtuna, Mariakyrkan (Church of Our Lady), Sweden. Photo Sofia Lahti 2013.

Talkative Head Reliquaries in the Nordic and Livonian Middle Ages

Sofia Lahti

When the Danish professor and author Holger Jacobaeus visited Roskilde Cathedral as a young student in 1671, he saw several pieces of medieval art. Among them were two wooden heads. Jacobaeus was told that "during the Catholic times", i.e. in the Middle Ages, the heads had been nailed to the altar, and that their function was to nod when people were absolved of their sins; in practice, as Jacobaeus registered in his notebook, someone would move the heads with an attached metal wire.[1]

What kind of objects were those mercifully nodding heads? In the medieval Catholic context, wooden heads on the altar would most likely be reliquaries. But reliquaries nailed onto the altar and operated with metal wires for the purposes of confession? Nailing something onto the altar sounds unlikely, but moving medieval sculptures with the help of wires for ritual purposes was a known practice – not extremely common, but not unheard-of – in the late Middle Ages.[2] Fortunately, Jacobaeus illustrated his observation with a drawing (fig. 2), in which two heads are lodged in a small, winged altarpiece; this would mean that they were attached to its wooden structure, not to the altar itself. The heads and the altarpiece have since disappeared; to my knowledge, no object currently remains in Danish churches or museums that would corre-

Fig. 2. Holger Jacobaeus (1650-1701), a drawing of two nodding heads on the altar in Roskilde cathedral. Printed in Holger Jacobaeus' Rejsebog 1671–1692, *København 1910.*

spond to the drawing. Also, no other known written document seems to refer to the same object.

The explanation of the heads' function was, of course, a story told over hundred years after the Reformation, from an outsider perspective in relation to the Catholic tradition, and so it may include several misunderstandings. The object depicted in Jacobaeus' drawing seems unusual and could even be a post-medieval rearrangement of originally separate medieval objects or fragments.

Could the nodding heads, in fact, have been reliquaries? The medieval reliquary collection of Roskilde Cathedral did include several heads of the Eleven thousand Virgins, and its most precious treasure was the skull of St Lucius in a silver-gilt reliquary. The head reliquary of St Lucius was no longer present at the time of Jacobaeus' visit, as it was apparently confiscated in 1534 or soon after that.[3] It is not known when and how the head reliquaries of the Virgins left the cathedral, so some of them could still have existed in 1671. However, Jacobaeus' drawing of two bald-looking heads implies that these were neither heads of the Virgins, nor holy bishops. Nevertheless, their reported interactive potential

and ritual authority are the kind of capacities reliquaries would have gained by containing the physical presence of saints in the form of relics.

When the Jesuit theologian and art historian Joseph Braun wrote his seminal treatise on European medieval reliquaries (*Die Reliquiare des Christlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung)* in 1940, he singled out certain reliquaries as those that speak. He used the term "Redende Reliquiare", speaking or 'telling' reliquaries, to describe those reliquaries that in his view were shaped to express something of their content. Those were reliquaries shaped as the saint whose relics they contained or as the body-part from which the relics within originated. A head reliquary of St Ursula, then, would speak of its contents by stating clearly with its shape that what lay inside it was a skull of St Ursula (or one of her eleven thousand companions). Actually, the Ursuline head reliquaries do often match Braun's definition in the sense that there really is a correlation between their shape and their contents.

For several decades, the term "speaking reliquaries" was commonly used for figurative, particularly body-part-shaped reliquaries. The design of those sculptural reliquaries was understood as having an explicitly informative function: either identifying the body-part the relics consisted of, or the saint in question. This assumption was challenged by the art historian Cynthia Hahn with her article *The Voices of the Saints: Speaking Reliquaries* (1997), which represented a revelatory turn for the interpretation of medieval reliquaries. In the article, as well as her many other articles and books, Hahn has consistently shown, first of all, that the relation between the shape and the contents of reliquaries should not be read as straightforward, and secondly, that reliquaries of various shapes can talk about a variety of topics in various ways. Indeed, most medieval reliquaries have some kind of representative shape, such as crosses, chapels, or boats. Hahn also suggested a new term "shaped reliquaries" for the figurative ones, and "body-part reliquaries" for the ones shaped like heads, hands, or feet.[4]

In this article, I will begin by discussing the different ways reliquaries can speak or communicate, and then focus on head-shaped reliquaries in a group of medieval neighboring countries: Livonia, Denmark, and Sweden including Finland. Nearly all of these objects are lost and thus only known from medieval written documents: inventory lists, miracle collections, legends, diaries and chronicles.[5] Concentrating on how those lost holy heads are described in the sources, I will examine their potential talkativity.

How do reliquaries talk and what can they say?

The element of communication can be recognized in all physical aspects of reliquaries. The mere existence of a reliquary sends a very essential message about the concrete presence of saints. It says, "there are relics here". In addition, reliquaries communicate with their shape, illustrations, ornaments or text, but also their size, material, weight, structural details – and even signs of damage or repair.

The size of a reliquary communicates the maximum size of the relics inside it, but it can also be a statement of magnitude, taking up much more space than what its actual contents would require. The materials also carry both symbolic, practical (e.g. reflecting the light) and contextual information: gold and silver were considered the best materials for containing and communicating the sacredness of the relics – due to their purity, their capacity to reflect light, and their association to the heavenly Jerusalem – but also the wealth of the church and/or the donor of the reliquary. A transparent crystal or glass reliquary invites the viewers to a direct eye contact with the relics (even if they were often shrouded in textile). A wooden reliquary may imply that the fundraising for a more expensive one in silver was still ongoing – but not necessarily; when made by master sculptors and painters, a wooden image or devotional object could be as luxurious – and depending on the paint and polish, even as brightly shining – as one in gold or silver.[6]

Structural details can communicate particular practices pertaining to each reliquary – e.g. a large, visible opening or locking mechanism, implying both access and protection, or handles for carrying the reliquary in processions. Even damages or signs of repairs can speak – more or less explicitly – about the age of the object and events in its history.

The images or texts on the surface of the reliquary can complement the message of the shape or speak of something different. They can connect the reliquary to the life, death, and miracles of the represented saint, to the heavenly community of saints, or to its commissioner and donor – or all of these. Texts on the reliquary can also simply state the saints represented by the relics or address the saints by prayer.

The shape of a reliquary can have literal, symbolic, narrative, or devotional meanings. It can represent the saint or body-part contained within, as per Braun's definition, or refer to something more abstract, like a chapel-shaped

reliquary representing the Church. A cross-shaped reliquary can refer to the passion of Christ and the salvation, and simultaneously to a shard of the Holy Cross contained inside it.

The four surviving Nordic medieval arm reliquaries demonstrate how they could speak of their contents by all the above means: their size and shape imitate human hands, and they are made of shining silver and gold or, in the case of the wooden arm of one of the Ten thousand Martyrs in the Danish National Museum, painted to look like those materials. They reveal a glimpse of their contents by the means of transparent windows. They contain imagery and text connecting them to specific saints – albeit both the shape and the text can also disagree with the contents, which is the case of the arm of one of the Ten thousand Martyrs: the *authentica* label on the relic states "this is from the arm of one of the Ten thousand Soldiers", although the relic is a leg bone.[7] The hands also speak by gestures: the arm reliquary of St Eskil from Linköping makes the sign of blessing with two fingers, and in the silver arm reliquary of St Birgitta, the position of the fingers indicates an activity that was central for the saint's life: writing. The hand must have been holding a pen, like another hand reliquary of St Birgitta described in a medieval document from Lund Cathedral, but the pen no longer exists.[8]

In sum, when reliquaries speak, both the messages and the rhetoric means are manifold. In the following pages, the focus will be on the type of reliquaries traditionally seen as particularly eloquent: head-shaped reliquaries.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to remember that various degrees of speaking or communication are not exclusive of these reliquaries in the late medieval cults of saints. As Martin Wangsgaard Jürgensen discusses in a recent article, saints themselves can be understood as communication: as representations, signs, metaphors, and arguments. They – or in this context, particularly their pictorial representations – can signify collective sainthood, sanctity, and the kingdom of Heaven, but also, though patronage, they can stand for more mundane things such as countries, communities, or churches.[9] The coexistence of these aspects can be recognised in reliquaries, too, although reliquaries – just like certain miraculous devotional images – tend to accumulate an independent presence that may often have overpowered the other meanings.

Red cheeks and red silk: Extant head reliquaries

Only one head reliquary remains in the region – or perhaps three, depending on the principle of classification; they shall be briefly discussed below. From the written sources, approximately fifty medieval head-shaped reliquaries from Nordic and Livonian churches can be recognized, all of them now lost; the surviving reliquaries are not mentioned in the documents. Therefore, this article will mainly concentrate on the lost head reliquaries, registered in various written sources.

The only remaining bust reliquary in the region, a fifteenth-century polychromed wooden female saint from the St Mary's church in Sigtuna, Sweden (fig. 1, p. 70), may have represented St Ursula or the Eleven thousand Virgins. The bust, however, does not explicitly speak about her identity – except that the saint wears a crown, which indicates that she is one of the holy Virgins. The bust's provenience is not known, and it is not mentioned in any known medieval written source. Stylistically, it seems related to the work of Haaken Gulleson's workshop. The saint's dress and crown are painted in gold, and under the dress she wears a red garment. Her expression is a pensative smile, with blushed cheeks implying humanity and emotion, and with the eyes gazing slightly downwards in an attitude that could suit both intently listening to the prayers of devotees and meditating on divine grace. The relics, now lost, have been placed in the hollow space in the head, and the top of the head, hidden inside the crown, is lost as well. There is not enough space inside the head for a whole skull, so the relics must have been smaller fragments.[10]

As not all head-shaped reliquaries contained skulls, not all reliquaries made for skulls were shaped like heads or busts. A group of reliquaries designed for skull relics, although not shaped to represent the head, consists of four wooden, footed ciborium-type containers with lids, made in the Vadstena monastery in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. They are covered with textile and embroidered, one of them explicitly with a sentence stating that the reliquary contained the head of one of the martyr companions of Saint Gereon. As Eva Lindqvist Sandgren has convincingly suggested, another one of these reliquaries was possibly made for the skull of Saint Birgitta and later repurposed to contain the skull of Saint Katarina of Vadstena.[11] Recognizing this plausible connection required a profound contextual understanding of both the extant object and the written sources, as the eyewitness descriptions of the reliquaries

Fig. 3. Unknown artist, textile skull reliquary, c. 1300. Turku Cathedral Museum, Finland. Photo Sofia Lahti 2023.

employed in the translation of the relics of Saint Katarina in 1489 are rather vague, stating that the saint's mandible was placed in a reliquary made of crystal with gold and silver, and her skull in a decorated reliquary, which is not described more specifically.[12]

At least two textile-based reliquaries for skull relics survive as well, although those are never explicitly mentioned in the available medieval written material. Both of them belong to the Turku (Åbo) Cathedral in Southern Finland and are made with red silk. One of them is shaped like a little cap, containing fragments of the top of a skull and decorated with a ribbon crown, a symbol of virginity also used in the outfits of nuns (fig. 3).[13] The other one is shaped like a skull, constructed of several skull fragments, and embroidered with a martyrium scene of the beheading of a saint. Both of them have lost all the explicit attributes linking them to specific saints, but their remaining characteristics still express several themes: their shapes represent the human head, the blood-red silk implies martyrdom and relics, and the fragmented iconographic elements speak of a decapitation and of virginity. Despite the attempts of several researchers, neither

of these two reliquaries have been conclusively identified.[14] These two textile reliquaries may originally have been kept inside other reliquaries, perhaps head-shaped wooden or silver ones, but not necessarily. Skull relics are generally often wrapped or sewn in silk before inserting them in a head-shaped reliquary, but silk – particularly with embroideries or other decorations – has also been used as a reliquary material as such in the "holy heads" of St Ursula in Cologne.[15]

None of the Nordic written sources seem to explicitly mention the kinds of head reliquaries that have survived in Vadstena and Turku – reliquaries that do not have a face, but that are still made specifically for skull relics and explicitly speak of their contents with illustrations, texts, and shapes. The existence of these different head reliquaries demonstrates that certain objects may require more research and interpretation and yet be nearly impossible to recognize in the sources.

Healing and singing heads of holy women

We can imagine that the reliquaries shaped like heads or busts of saints were the ones that talked most directly to their medieval viewers. Several head-shaped reliquaries existed in medieval Livonia and the Nordic countries, too. But what can we know about the "user experience", their ways of speaking?

Cynthia Hahn states that head reliquaries "work as 'machines' to carry the prayers of the faithful to God – ears, hands, eyes, mouth combine to create powerful engines of intercession."[16] She analyses how they were perceived by the devotees, not only as sacred and impressive to look at, but also as capable of seeing them, hearing, and almost starting to speak; this impression was created by the intensity of the viewer's devotion, but also consciously facilitated visually by emphasizing the eyes and mouth in the reliquary face.[17]

Hahn's analysis is based on silver or silver-gilt reliquary heads, but the description is true for polychromed wooden reliquary heads as well. Their shapes and proportions were similar, and usually the silver ones had a wooden core, but due to the surface material, their appearance was rather different. While the wooden heads were painted to resemble real human faces, the silver heads with their shining metal skin had quite a different presence – less human, but perhaps more divine, with the glossy surface reflecting light, even appearing to be emitting it. Art historian Michael Camille reflects on their intimidating aspects, deeming them "indeed rather disturbing decapitated objects whose metallic hollowness made them ideal sites for the entry of demonic forces." He also quotes a case from fourteenth-century France, where a silver head reliquary of one of the Eleven thousand Virgins, venerated by the Templars, was suspected of being the object of idolatry. In the document, the reliquary was described in an exceptionally detailed manner. The description corresponds to several reliquaries still extant in European churches and museums:

> a certain large beautiful silver-gilt head, shaped like that of a woman, within which were the bones of a single head, rolled-up and stitched in a certain white linen cloth, red muslin having been placed over it, and there was sewn in there a certain document on which was written "capud LVIII", and the said bones were considered as similar to the bones of the head of a small woman, and it was said by some that it was the head of one of the eleven thousand virgins.[18]

Although the description was written in the context of suspected idolatry, it still recognizes the beauty of the sculpted head – another aspect that is seldom present in medieval accounts of devotional objects. Reliquaries are usually described with only few details, and head-shaped reliquaries were usually simply registered as "heads" (*caput*, *huffud*, *houet*).[19] Certain head reliquaries, like those of St Sunniva in Selje or Bergen, St Erik in Uppsala, St David in Munktorp, St Brynolf in Skara, and St Sigfrid in Växjö are only implied in documents such as legends, collections of miracles, registers or inventories, and without explicit proof, their existence can only be speculated.[20]

Head reliquaries in silver were less common than wooden ones, and when the surface material is not mentioned in the written documents, a wooden head is more probable. However, some examples are unambiguously registered as "silver heads with relics". In any case, many of the reliquaries' visual messages and means of communication are not expressed in the written documents.

Often, although not always, the head or bust reliquaries contained a saint's skull. In many surviving head-shaped reliquaries, the top of the head is easy to open, and would be opened on certain occasions to allow a glimpse of the skull relic.[21] The contents of the bust reliquary in Sigtuna were probably sometimes shown in this way, too. Such a gesture concretized the physical presence of the relics – something the viewers knew and believed, but that they could only seldom witness with their own eyes.

The majority of the head reliquaries known to have existed in medieval Europe represented St Ursula or her beheaded companions, the Eleven thousand

Virgins. Most of them were wooden polychromed heads or busts, of which there was abundant production in the Cologne region. Ursula's name often seems to have been used as synonymous with the entire group, which probably made it easier to accept that there were dozens of skulls of St Ursula in reliquaries all over Europe.[22] In the light of remaining written evidence, it can be assumed that Nordic and Livonian churches had altogether over 30 reliquaries representing the heads of these holy virgins. They existed in monastic churches of the Cistercians in Esrum, the Birgittines in Vadstena, the Dominicans in Visby, Franciscans in Copenhagen, and cathedrals in Roskilde and Copenhagen. Many of them were purchased and donated by kings, queens, and bishops – the same persons that contributed substantially to other kinds of reliquaries and devotional objects in general.[23] Most of these reliquaries were apparently shaped as busts, but even the heads of the Eleven thousand Virgins were not always enclosed in head-shaped reliquaries: in Lund, the head of one of them was kept in a large reliquary casket, and one likewise in Copenhagen.[24]

In the Cistercian convent of Esrum in Zealand, Denmark, the convent church had an altar with thirteen heads of the Eleven thousand Virgins. Their material or shape is not mentioned in the sources, but as stated above, head reliquaries were often simply referred to as "heads", and the most common reliquary for these saints was a wooden, polychromed bust. A group of thirteen busts would probably have been incorporated in an altarpiece. According to a seventeenth-century source, the thirteen heads were also reported to have the capacity of singing. Once, after the Christmas Eve Matins, the brothers were in the church singing *Te Deum Laudamus*, and the heads of the virgins on the high altar began to sing with them.[25] This anecdote is post-medieval, but it was written in a Catholic, Ursuline context, which means there was a continuity of perspective on saints and relics and the ways reliquaries could interact or have agency. If individual head reliquaries were experienced as approachable and capable of hearing and speaking, a group of thirteen could constitute a choir and praise God together with the Cistercian brothers. For the brothers, the miraculous event of singing reliquaries would have been extraordinary even musically, as the male and female monasteries were separate institutions, and male and female voices singing together wouldn't usually be heard in their churches.

At least four of the heads of the Eleven thousand Virgins in this region had a silver surface, and they would have corresponded to the description quot-

Fig. 4. Unknown artist, Reliquary bust of St Ursula, 11th century. Cathedral museum in Viseu, Portugal. Photo Sofia Lahti 2024.

ed by Camille. The extant silver head reliquaries from medieval Central and South Europe (see e.g. the St Ursula reliquary from Viseu, fig. 4) can give us an approximate indication of their appearance. When the belongings of the wealthy Black Heads merchant brotherhood of Riga were listed in c. 1500, they had two gilt or gold-covered reliquary busts of the Eleven thousand Virgins (*twe borst bylde van holde gesneden vnde vnde* [!] *vorguldet*). The busts were in the church of St Peter in Riga, which was located next to the Black Heads' own building. In the church, the place for the heads and three other reliquaries purchased by the Black Heads would be the brotherhood's own altar, where they had also acquired a gilt wooden reliquary image of St George. According to the inventory, each of the two reliquaries contained "one head of the Eleven thousand Virgins" (*in jewelken bylde is eyn houet van den 11 dusent juncffrouwen*).[26]

One of the four reliquaries kept in the Teutonic Order's castle in Dünamünde (Daugavgrīva, currently in Latvia) in 1442 was "a silver head of a virgin saint with relics" (*1 sulveren juncfrowenhowet wul hilgedomes*).[27] The virgin or the relics are not named, which may mean that her identity was too obvious to be written down. The Virgin Mary, as the patron of Livonia and also the most venerated saint in medieval Europe generally, was represented in most churches by images and relics, but to my knowledge, she was not represented by any head reliquaries in medieval Europe. Another holy virgin that had a great importance for the Teutonic Order in the Baltic region was St Barbara, whose relic in a silver head reliquary was venerated in Althaus, Prussia.[28] However, when a reliquary in medieval sources is registered as "head of a virgin" without a name, the most likely identification is one of the Eleven thousand Virgins.

When the silver items from Porvoo church in Finland were listed for confiscation in 1535, one of the items was "a crowned head of St Ursula" (*ett Vrsula huffud med Crona*).[29] The description is brief but contains more information than what it would seem at first sight. The material is not mentioned, but as the confiscations were targeted on silver and gold from churches, a wooden head reliquary would not have been included. As often happens with head reliquaries, the object is simply defined as "head", and typically for confiscation documents, its contents are not registered; thus the reliquary function is not explicit like in Riga and Dünamünde, but any other function than that of a reliquary is highly unlikely for such an object. The fact that St Ursula is mentioned by name, although the confiscators did not usually register names with the objects, indicates a visual means of communication: the saint's name was possibly written in a visible place – on a "document" attached to the relics, like in Camille's example, or engraved on the silver surface. As St Ursula was known for her vast community of virgins, even a single reliquary of her head had the power to evoke the presence of eleven thousand others.

The Dominican church of St Catherine in Tallinn had a silver (plated) reliquary head of St Dorothy (*sunte Dorotheen houet vorsuluert*) around the year 1500, when an inventory of the church's treasures was written.[30] Despite being one of the Capital Virgins and rather popular in medieval Central Europe, St. Dorothy was not often represented by reliquaries.[31] According to the legend, St Dorothy was decapitated, which adds a layer of meaning specifically to relics and reliquaries representing her head, underlining her martyrdom. Another silver bust of St Dorothy (fig. 5) survives in the Polish National Museum in Wroclaw; it was commissioned in the late fifteenth century for the town hall chapel in Wroclaw, possibly by King Sigismund of Luxemburg, and made in Silesia or Hungary.[32] The provenance and history of the reliquary in Tallinn is unknown, but a royal donor could be behind it as well; Cynthia Hahn has observed that head reliquaries were often commissioned by kings,[33] and while there may have been other wealthy donors or collective efforts for acquisition, it is understandable that few other people had sufficient resources for purchasing such objects.

Fig. 5. Unknown artist, Reliquary bust of St Dorothy, c. 1500. National Museum in Wrocław, Poland.

One possible donor with a personal interest in St Dorothy might be the fifteenth-century queen Dorothea of Brandenburg, who was an avid collector of relics and had purchased at least two heads of the Eleven thousand Virgins for her own chapel in Roskilde Cathedral.[34] However, the extant documents do not indicate a direct connection between her and the Dominicans of Tallinn. Instead, the wealthy Black Heads, who were prominent in Tallinn, too, might be the owners of the head reliquary of St Dorothy: they had their own altar in the church of St Catherine, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, St Gertrude, and St Dorothy.[35] To add to the mystery, there are no documents connecting the reliquary to them, either; it is not mentioned in other inventories of the devotional objects of the brotherhood or of the Dominicans' church before the year 1500 or in the lists of confiscated items in 1524–1525.[36]

Vadstena Monastery in central Sweden had a rich collection of relics and reliquaries, including several heads of the Eleven thousand Virgins, but the most precious treasure and the destination for thousands of pilgrims arriving in Vadstena were the relics of St Birgitta. Her skull relic is mentioned in a few written documents,[37] and as the word "head" was interchangeably used for both head relics and head reliquaries, most of those mentions can be read as "the head relic in its reliquary". However, the origin and destiny of the reliquary are unknown, and its appearance is only explicitly mentioned in one source: the illustrated Chronicle of Constance. According to the chronicle, Bishop Petrus Lykke of Ribe held the bust reliquary of St Birgitta in his hands while addressing the church authorities in the Council of Constance, c. 1412, arguing for her canonization (fig. 6).[38]

The head of St Birgitta, in its reliquary, was frequently carried in festive processions in the Vadstena monastery. It was also used for healing. In one miracle account, it was placed against the head of a possessed woman, and she was healed.[39] According to a later anecdote, the skull relic was still being used in the same way after the Reformation, as late as in 1593, when it was placed on the main altar for healing a man that was possessed.[40] Perhaps the same qualities that made both Michael Camille and the fourteenth-century French inquisition feel as if there were demonic forces involved in the silver head reliquaries, convinced others of their powerful blessing and healing capacities. From the Nordic countries, no other documented cases of such practices have survived, but it can be assumed that the practices with St Birgitta's head were not iso-

Fig. 6. The only known image of the head reliquary of St Birgitta: Ulrich von Richental's (c. 1360–1437/1438) drawing of Bishop Petrus Lykke holding the reliquary bust of St Birgitta while presenting the case for her canonisation at the Council of Constance 1414–1418. Chronik des Konzils zu Konstanz. Photo Rosgartenmuseum Konstanz / Public domain.

lated incidents; they were examples of wide-spread European relic cult practices. From medieval and early modern Portugal, for instance, several cases of head relics, often in silver head reliquaries, being used for healing both people and animals are registered. A famous one, a still extant 13th-century silver head reliquary of St Fabian in the Royal Basilica of Castro Verde, is fashioned with a perforated mouth and nostrils (fig. 7), apparently to facilitate interaction and healing through breath.[41]

Voices of bishops and donors

The earliest known silver head reliquary in the Nordic region was the one containing the skull of St Lucius, which reportedly already existed in Roskilde Cathedral in the twelfth century. The story of the discovery of the beheaded patron saint's brightly shining skull relic in Rome and its voyage to Denmark was illustrated in paintings on the walls of the cathedral. The head of St Lucius in its silver-gilt reliquary was brought out and carried in procession on feast days, but also during times of hardship, when his heavenly intervention was needed.[42] Together with the images on the walls, the reliquary was able to communicate both the presence of St Lucius and the history of his relics. The shape of the reliquary has been discussed by researchers, most recently Lena Liepe and myself – many medieval expressions and drawings point towards a head-shaped reliquary, but it is not absolutely certain. The skull, wrapped in yellow silk, has survived, and a modern reliquary bust was made for it in 1910, based on an interpretation of the written descriptions.[43]

Another head reliquary of a holy bishop existed in Turku Cathedral, where the most venerated relics since its consecration around the year 1300 were those of the local patron and first bishop, Henrik of Uppsala, after they had been brought from the saint's tomb in the church of Nousiainen in Southern Finland. According to a sixteenth-century chronicle, bishop Magnus Olai (Tavast), who invested in St Henrik's cult in various ways, also purchased silver reliquaries for the head and arms of St Henrik around the year 1420. As the chronicler, bishop Paulus Juusten put it, St Henrik's head and arms were "made in silver" or "put into silver" (*caput et brachia beati Henrici argentea facta sunt*) by Magnus Olai.[44] Like with St Lucius' reliquary in Roskilde and St Birgitta's in Vadstena, St Henrik's head (and hand) relics were clearly important and were mentioned in his legend, but the written sources omit the exact shape or at least

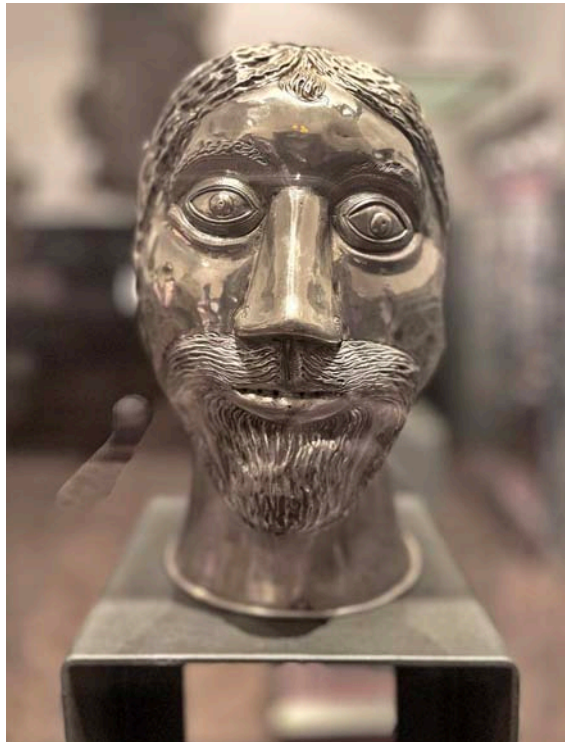

Fig. 7. Unknown artist, Reliquary bust of St. Fabian, silver, 13th century. Royal Basilica of Castro Verde, Portugal. Photo Sofia Lahti 2024.

leave room for interpretation. Surviving episcopal head reliquaries, such as the fifteenth-century bust of St Martin of Tours (fig. 8), illustrate how St Henrik's silver head may have looked.

Apparently, the commissioner's name had remained associated to the reliquary or reliquaries for at least hundred years after his time. This was probably the intention of Magnus Olai, who had himself portrayed on the large stone sarcophagus he commissioned for St Henrik's other relics remaining in the Nousiainen church,[45] and he may have taken care of having his name or coat-of-arms engraved onto the head reliquary as well. Thus the reliquaries would always also speak of Bishop Magnus while demonstrating the presence of his holy predecessor.

The fifteenth-century reliquary list of Lund Cathedral was written in more detail, even if some details are ambiguous. According to the list, the cathedral had "a large silver head of St Lawrence, with gilt hair and crown" (*magno*

Fig. 8. Unknown artist, Reliquary bust of St Martin of Tours, gilt silver and copper, basse-taille enamel over silver, made in Avignon/Limousin (?), 1340–1360 and 1400–1500. From the church of Soudeilles (Corrèze, France). Louvre OA 6459. © 2015 GrandPalaisRmn (Musée du Louvre) / Stéphane Maréchalle.

capite argenteo cum corona & capillis deauratis) and "a small silver head with a bishop's mitre, with shoulders" (*paruo capite argenteo cum mitra episcopali, habente humeros*). The small bishop's head or bust contained relics "from the grave of Our Lord; besides, a bone of St Clement, and of St Thomas, Archbishop of Canterbury and martyr." There were relics of two bishops, and I have suggested that the reliquary may have visually represented St Thomas Becket of Canterbury, because he was named more specifically. The principal head reliquary of St Thomas was, of course, in Canterbury, and the head reliquary of St Lawrence in Rome, but through these other reliquaries, the presence of their heads could be felt in Lund as well.[46]

The mention of shoulders on the smaller head seems to imply that the larger head did not include shoulders; this may mean that it was made in the thirteenth century or earlier, when head reliquaries often were shaped without shoulders, only including the neck (see fig. 9). The large head was claimed to contain "the entire head of St Lawrence" and was further specified in the list as formerly

Fig. 9. Unknown artist, Head reliquary of St Eustace, 1180–1200, Basel, Switzerland. © The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

having belonged to "the king of England". The crown on the head may not only have symbolised St Lawrence's martyrdom, but as a crown is not a typical element in the saint's iconography, it could also be a reference to the royal donor. As St Lawrence was the patron saint of the cathedral and one of the most venerated saints throughout Europe, his head in a silver-gilt head reliquary must have been an object of extraordinary significance, perhaps even more than the heads of St Lucius in Roskilde and St Henrik in Turku. That it was a donation from a king gave it further value. The king in question is not named, but at least two names can be speculatively mentioned. The reliquary could be associated to Canute the Great, an eleventh-century Danish king of England, who was known as an active promoter of the cult of saints and relics. If the reliquary was from his time, its assumed shoulderlessness would not be surprising. Another suggestion is King Henry V, who is known to have given generous gifts – including reliquaries – on the occasion of his daughter Philippa's marriage to Eric of Pomerania in 1406.[47] It is likely that the king had his name or emblem engraved on the reliquary as well, making it speak on his behalf.

Animation and devotion

In the Nordic source material, the documents do not specify how head reliquaries were displayed in the churches, but in medieval European paintings or drawings, three types of display are most common to be depicted: they were placed directly on altars or shelves; they could be incorporated into altarpieces, like the nodding heads in Roskilde; and on feast days, they could be presented to the audience in the hands of bishops. Between these moments, they were kept in closed cabinets unless they had a permanent place in an altarpiece. All kinds of reliquaries, not only heads, were displayed for veneration and carried in processions on feast days, so they could be seen moving towards and past the devotees. In the hands of religious professionals, a head reliquary could easily turn to face the devotees and nod towards them, too. However, the two anecdotes expressing most explicit communicativity or interactivity in head reliquaries – the two nodding heads in Roskilde and the thirteen singing heads in Esrom – are both written down after the Protestant Reformation, in seventeenth-century Denmark.

The nodding heads, confirming or blessing the ritual of absolution, as well as the presence of St Birgitta's head reliquary in the council of Constance can be

understood in the context of the medieval tradition of bringing the presence of saints in reliquaries to authorize certain rituals.[48] In a head-shaped reliquary, the gestures of watching and nodding could express the saint's witnessing role particularly clearly.

A different, non-religious notion of interactive heads also took shape in medieval literature: the philosophers Roger Bacon, Robert Grosseteste, and others were claimed to have created robot-like mechanic heads that would be able to answer questions related to alchemy or astronomy.[49] Whether the powerful reputation and appearance of head reliquaries – metallic ones in particular – was one ingredient in these apparently fictional ideas, can only be speculated.

Religious images and reliquaries animated by being lifted and carried around, opened and closed, or moved with wires, have been compared to robots or puppets. Art historian Michelle Oing suggests that the concept of puppet can be employed to interpret the dual character of head reliquaries, more specifically to the polychromed wooden busts of the Eleven thousand Virgins, as something perceived simultaneously as alive and lifeless. With the contrast of their lifelike faces and explicitly fragmented shape, they both create and break the illusion of aliveness – quite like puppets.[50] Mobility in itself could work both ways: nodding may have increased the impression of the saint's conscious, interactive presence as a person, while opening and closing the top of the head would have underlined the rather different, holy but faceless presence of relics. Just like with puppets, the work of the "puppeteer" was not enough to create the illusion: the devotionally active, sensory and sensitive receptivity of the viewer was essential for the holy heads to speak and convey their message of blessing and salvation.[51]

Turning away

Of the hundreds of Nordic and Livonian churches, at least twenty were blessed with the presence of head reliquaries. The extant written sources indicate that there were circa fifty head reliquaries in the region altogether, out of which circa ten with silver or gilt surfaces; and considering how much of the written material is lost, it is likely that there were more such items than what is registered in the surviving documents. The objects represent both international and local saints. Each of them has required a remarkable investment, and in many cases, even the commissioner's name has prevailed, together with the name of

the saint represented. As Hahn has observed, the shape and the relic contents were not necessarily directly related, but the correlation is more likely in named head reliquaries.

The function of these holy heads was to "talk" to the devotees in ways that expressed the existence and power of relics, inspired their faith, responded to their doubts and worries, elevated their minds, encouraged them to pray and to live in devotion. They lent the authority of the saint to situations where it was needed for blessing and confirming official rituals. The polychromed wooden reliquary busts may have seemed kind and approachable, while the shining silver busts might have been awe-inspiring and frightening embodiments of saintly power. Yet, we cannot really know exactly how all this was perceived by their medieval audiences.

Some head reliquaries were destroyed during the years of the Protestant Reformation – the heads of the Eleven thousand Virgins in Riga probably fell victim to an iconoclastic attack by members of the same brotherhood that had brought them to the church some years earlier.[52] Many silver head reliquaries were confiscated or evacuated. In Roskilde, in 1534, theologian Poul Helgesen wrote a fervent plea to save the head reliquary of St Lucius from impending confiscation, but apparently in vain: only the relic in its silk wrapping survived.[53] However, at least in some churches, a shift in devotional practices had already taken place before the Reformation, and as a result, the saintly power of the holy heads no longer protected them from losing their privileged position. Silver and gold were the most appropriate materials for housing the holy relics, but their monetary value was also a risk. The head reliquary of St Lawrence, along with other liturgical items in silver from Lund cathedral, was borrowed and pawned by the archbishop Birger Gundersen in 1479.[54] Bishop Joachim Rønnow did the same with two silver heads from the Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen, apparently to pay his own debts, in 1529. The bishop was given the reliquaries when he asked for some "less often used" silver items.[55]

When encountering medieval reliquaries in museums or churches, even for a twenty-first-century viewer, the heads are the easiest ones to perceive or imagine capable of talking. For them to speak of the miracles and heavenly grace, in the way they spoke in the Middle Ages, the viewer would need to approach them with authentic religious devotion and veneration. To a non-religious visitor, they may speak of the saint they represent or the relics they contain, but

inevitably, they also speak of their own time and of the distance between us and them. This relative introversion, the way historically distant objects seem to turn away, refusing to reveal their essence or engage in a proper interaction with us, is insightfully conveyed by the social media content creator Greedy Peasant's short video animations, in which the late-medieval head reliquaries at the Metropolitan Museum turn to talk to each other, bickering, gossiping and inquiring about each other's relics – while ignoring us, the viewers.[56]

Notes

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1 "*Capita qvædam lignea altari infixa, qvæ ante tempus reformationis ope fili ferrei mobilia, nutu suo remissionem peccatorum credulæ Antiqvitati affirmabant*." Jacobaeus 1910, 3.
2 Swift 2015.
3 Lahti 2019, 249–253; Liepe 2021, 123–146.
4 Hahn 1997, 20–31; Hahn 2012, 67–141.
5 Concerning the Nordic sources, this article is based on the material collected for my doctoral thesis (Lahti 2019). No Norwegian examples of head reliquaries were found. For Livonian sources, I gratefully rely on the work of Anu Mänd (Mänd 2008).
6 Kollandsrud 2014, 51–66.
7 See Lahti 2015.
8 Lahti 2019, 229–232; Liepe 2018, 644–645.
9 Wangsgaard Jürgensen 2018, 13–34.
10 Lahti 2017, 188–203.
11 Lindqvist Sandgren 2018, 46–47.
12 *Den stora kyrkofesten*, 46–47; *Diarium Vadstenense*, 884: 14; Lindqvist Sandgren 2018, 40–54; Lindqvist Sandgren & Wahlberg 2018, 184–195.
13 Karttila 2014, 10–25; Lahti 2019, 289–294. For a similar crown on a male saint, see the twelfth-century head reliquary of St Candide, e.g. Hahn 2012, 127.
14 For recent discussion on its dating, see Arponen et al. 2018 and Lahtinen 2022; for the historiography and further discussion, see Lahti 2019, 294–313.
15 See e.g. Montgomery 2010, 78–79.
16 Hahn 2012, 243.
17 Hahn 2012, 122–123.
18 Camille 1991 (1989), 275–276.
19 Braun 1940, 64–65.
20 See Lahti 2019, 265–271.
21 See e.g. Liepe 2021, 138.
22 Montgomery 2010, 39.
23 Lahti 2019, 253–261.
24 Axel-Nilsson 1989, 101–105; *Scriptores Rerum Danicorum VIII*, 289.
25 Crombach 1647, 668; see also Lahti 2019, 254–255.
26 Mänd 2008, 201; see also Mänd & Randla 2012, 55.
27 Mänd 2008, 192.
28 Leighton 2022, 103, 107–109; Leighton 2020, 5–50.
29 Leinberg 1892,1; Källström 1939, 117, 313.
30 Mänd 2008, 219.
31 A third example is a fifteenth-century reliquary monstrance with an image of St Dorothy in Basel; see Hänni et al. 1998, 102–113.
32 See e.g. Uhrin 2018, 47.
33 Hahn 2012, 117–133.
34 *Danmarks kirker III:3, Roskilde Domkirke, Bygning og inventar* 1951, 1640 (https://nmdanmarkskirkerprod.blob.core.windows.net/files/kob_amt_1267-1755_02.pdf).
35 Mänd & Randla 2012, 50.
36 Mänd 2008, 210–224.
37 See e.g. *Scriptores rerum svecicarum medii aevi III:2*, 271–273.
38 Feger / Richental 1964, 33r; Lahti 2019, 246–248.
39 See e.g. Katajala-Peltomaa 2020, 121–122.
40 Bygdén, Gejvall & Hjortsjö 1954, 71.
41 Torres & Boiça 1993, 229–242; Capelão 2022, 191–197. On breathing in animated sculpture, see Jörgensen 2023, 42–79.
42 *Scriptores Rerum Danicorum III*, 617; Petersen 1874, 404–407; Liepe 2021, 139; *Danmarks kirker III:3, Roskilde Domkirke, Bygning og inventar* 1951, 1272-1273, 1638–1639 (https://nmdanmarkskirkerprod.blob.core.windows.net/files/kob_amt_1267-1755_02.pdf).
43 Liepe 2021, 123–146; Lahti 2019, 249–253.
44 Juusten 1988, 58; Lahti 2019, 261–265.
45 Edgren & Melanko 1996.
46 Axel-Nilsson 1989, 94–95; Lahti 2019, 240–245.
47 Lahti 2019, 240–242.
48 See e.g. Lahti 2019, 330.
49 Truitt 2015, 69–95.
50 Oing 2020, 28–37.
51 On animation in medieval devotional sculpture, see Skinnebach 2023, 106–141.
52 Mänd & Randla 2012, 75–76.
53 Liepe 2021, 123.
54 Wrangel 1923, 19; Axel-Nilsson 1989, 39.
55 *Danmarks kirker I:1, Vor Frue kirke, Københavns domkirke*, 1945–1959, 38 (https://nmdanmarkskirkerprod.blob.core.windows.net/files/KobenhavnBy1_003-231.pdf); Rørdam 1859–63, 31.
56 Greedy Peasant (instagram.com/greedy.peasant/); see also Lahti 2022.

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