Shining, touching, nodding, singing. Sensory encounters with reliquaries in the Medieval Nordic countries[1]

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In medieval Europe, reliquaries were often the centrepieces of churches. Cathedrals and popular pilgrimage churches in particular could afford several precious reliquaries made of gold, silver, crystal, and gems by skilful artisans. Sophisticated wooden or textile reliquaries were also made in order to match the heavenly glory of their holy contents, the relics of saints. When in use, reliquaries and their contents were essentially inseparable: one could hardly function without the other, and an encounter with a reliquary meant an encounter with relics. In any case, the interface for people to see and touch was the reliquary.[2]

In the medieval Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland), roughly between the 12th and 16th centuries, there were more than 6,000 churches together containing thousands of reliquaries. What remains are some 200 existing reliquaries or fragments of reliquaries and 400 written mentions of reliquaries that no longer exist.[3] Nearly all the artefacts discussed in this paper are lost.

Historian Caroline Walker Bynum has stated: "Increasingly in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, religious experience was literalized into encounter with objects."[4] David Morgan, a historian of art and religion, writes about special "focal objects" that serve as the visible interface and nodus to an invisible network of various agencies. As a result of this interface

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented and discussed in the history of religion seminar of the Trivium Unit, Tampere University. I am grateful to the participants (Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, Raisa Toivo, Marika Räsänen, Anna-Stina Hägglund, and Saku Pihko) for their insightful comments, without which this article could not have been finished. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their sound advice.

2 Relics were seldom taken out of reliquaries, but their power was contagious to the extent that an empty reliquary could be understood as having gained some of this power by contact with the relics. See, for instance, Kate M. Craig, *Mobile Saints: Relic Circulation, Devotion, and Conflict in the Central Middle Ages*, New York 2021, p. 91.

3 Sofia Lahti, *Silver Arms and Silk Heads. Medieval Reliquaries in the Nordic Countries*, Åbo 2019, 5. The churches in the area of present-day Finland were part of the archdiocese of Uppsala during the discussed period.

4 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Dissimilar similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe*, New York 2020, p. 29.

position, they are capable of enabling and enacting enchantment.[5] A reliquary is one of those active objects par excellence; it is a visual and material medium conveying and containing the presence of relics. In the medieval church, reliquaries did not exist in isolation, as they were encountered in the church space as part of a sensorial continuum, surrounded by paintings and sculptures, illuminated by candlelight and enhanced by other effects such as the smell of incense and the sounds of devotional music.[6] In the visitor's mind, these elements merged with memories, expectations, and prayers as well as knowledge of the saints' lives and miracles. The perceived presence of saints – and, as Morgan phrases it, enchantment – was the sum of all these factors. When the extant reliquaries are now encountered in the glass cases of museums or churches, their visual impact is typically experienced without the involvement of the other senses contributing to the medieval encounters with reliquaries.

The focus of this paper is on the accounts of encounters with reliquaries in medieval Scandinavia as instances of lived religion.[7] Lived religion is here understood as formulated by Morgan: "religion as one of the things people do in order to organize their worlds into coherent domains of experience such as social order, personal relationships, and interactions with forces beyond the immediate control of the body or community."[8] In this article, I use this term to indicate the presence of religion in everyday life and how it is manifested in various and variable personal and social practices, parallel to but not necessarily conforming with the official dogma or practices as defined by ecclesiastical authorities. This perspective of lived religion is not limited to lay religiosity but also concerns people within the ecclesiastical hierarchy.[9] The question I seek to answer, based on medieval Scandinavian written sources, is: How are encounters with reliquaries described from

5 David Morgan, *Images at Work: The Material Culture of Enchantment*, Oxford 2018, pp. 90–112.

6 On the interaction between liturgical objects and the human senses, see, for instance, Éric Palazzo, "Sensory Activation in the Liturgical Devotions of Saints", in *Ora pro nobis. Space, Place and the Practice of Saints' Cults in Medieval and Early-Modern Scandinavia and Beyond*, Nils Holger Petersen, Mia Münster-Swendsen, Thomas Heebøll-Holm & Martin Wanggaard Jürgensen (eds.), Copenhagen 2019, and Fiona Griffiths & Kathryn Starkey, "Sensing through Objects", in *Sensory Reflections: Traces of Experience in Medieval Artifacts*, Fiona Griffiths & Kathryn Starkey (eds.), Berlin & Boston 2018.

7 Some of the topics, based on the same sources, are discussed from an art history perspective in my thesis (Lahti 2019), particularly in the chapter "Social Life of Reliquaries".

8 David Morgan, "The Material Culture of Lived Religion: Visuality and Embodiment", in *Mind and Matter – Selected papers of NORDIK 2009 Conference for Art Historians,* Johanna Vakkari et al. (eds.), Helsinki 2010.

9 On the definitions of lived religion, see Sari Katajala-Peltomaa & Raisa Maria Toivo, *Lived Religion and Gender in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, London & New York

the point of view of the senses and interaction? If the reliquaries' visual message was their very essence, to what extent did it shape the documented encounters between people and reliquaries?

As devotional tools, reliquaries primarily belong to the ecclesiastical sphere, as they were produced and administrated by the Church. Both laypeople and clergy may be considered their "target audience". The most typical context for a layperson or a religious professional to encounter reliquaries was in a church during feast days. However, reliquaries did exist in the private sphere as well: certain clerics, rulers, or wealthy laypeople could own personal reliquaries, often in a wearable form (pendants, brooches, rings). For average laypeople, self-made containers used for contact relics were an option that did not require economical or ecclesiastical privilege.[10]

For members of clergy and religious orders, the experience of encountering reliquaries at least partially differed from that of laypeople due to their easier access to reliquaries and duties related to their storage or arrangement for display. Clerics were also the authors of documents describing laypeople's encounters with reliquaries as well as controllers and orchestrators of lay access to the holy objects, which means that assessing lay experiences is a more complex endeavour. However, the outlines of lay encounters may be deduced from documents concerning issues such as miracles, local historical events, and financial transactions. In this article, the accounts of encounters with reliquaries are analysed as examples of how such situations were perceived or presented.

In these written documents, the division between relic and reliquary is seldom clear-cut, which is quite natural considering their physical and conceptual interdependence. In certain descriptions, it is possible to distinguish reliquaries as independent artefacts and aesthetic objects. These can, for instance, be found in documents looking upon different stages of a reliquary's biography as an artefact: its commissioning, making, acquisition, bequeathal, storage, improvements, repairs, theft or attempts of theft, intentional or unintentional damage, and even destruction. However, these sources are not examined in this article. In the following pages, I discuss encounters with reliquaries in two different kinds of Nordic medieval written sources: reports of *translatio* feasts and miracle stories. They serve

2021. See also Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, Marika Räsänen, Sofia Lahti & Anna-Stina Hägglund, "Levd religion i det medeltida Finland", *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland* 2021:2.

10 Sarah Blick, "Common Ground: Reliquaries and the Lower Classes in Late Medieval Europe", in *Matter of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period*, James Robinson, Lloyd de Beer & Anna Harnden (eds.), London 2013, pp. 110–115.

to illustrate the Scandinavian encounters with reliquaries and the physical settings for these encounters.

All set for visual impact

The impact of a reliquary is essentially based on two main elements: the viewer's knowledge of its sacred contents and the viewer's observation of its visual content, which consists of size, shape, materials, and imagery. The vast diversity of reliquaries thus implies a diversity of impacts, which are further diversified by factors in the surrounding space, the situation, and the social position of the individual encountering the reliquary. In the church, the circumstances were arranged to facilitate these encounters and enhance their visual effect. Reliquaries could be seen during religious feast days, either in motion, carried in procession, or immobile and on display for the devotees to move towards and around them. These were important occasions, when the saints in their reliquaries were brought to share the space with people, in some cases even spaces of everyday life.

When reliquaries were taken out for devotional festivities, they were placed on the altars, often together with images, books, and candles, according to specific written instructions. The arrangements on different altars varied locally and according to the feast day.[11] Reliquaries were also displayed in wall niches or shelves near the altars, or in retables with built-in niches for this purpose.[12] In larger churches with vast collections of relics and reliquaries, celebrations involving reliquaries were organised several times every year. In the church of Our Lady (Vor Frue) in Copenhagen, for instance, the reliquaries were brought out not only on the feast day for all relics (*Festum reliquiarum*) but also for six additional annual feasts.[13] For laypeople, the

11 Guilielmus Durandus, *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, Louisville 2007, pp. 52–56; G. J. C. Snoek, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist: A Process of Mutual Interaction*, Leiden 1995, pp. 209–213; Louis van Tongeren, "Use and Function of Altars in Liturgical Practice According to the *Libri Ordinarii* in the Low Countries", in *The Altar and Its Environment 1150–1400*, Justin E. A. Kroesen & Victor M. Schmidt (eds.), Turnhout 2009, pp. 270–271.

12 See, for instance, Cynthia Hahn, "The Meaning of Early Medieval Treasuries", in *Reliquiare im Mittelalter*, Bruno Reudenbach & Gia Toussaint (eds.), Berlin 2005, p. 2; Cynthia Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400 – circa 1204,* Pennsylvania 2012, p. 203; Lena Liepe, "Det befolkade rummet. Relikfyndet från Torsken kyrka", in *Berørt av bygninger. Festskrift for Ingebjørg Hage*, Elin Haugdal, Hege Olaussen & Svein Aamold (eds.), Tromsø 2015, p. 268; Hanna Källström, *Domkyrkan som andaktsmiljö under senmedeltiden: Linköping och Lund*, Skellefteå 2011, pp. 181–182.

13 Thelma Jexlev, "Vor Frue kirkes relikvier", *Historiske meddelelser om København*, Årbog 1976, pp. 29–30; "Vor Frue Kirke, København", in *Danmarks kirker* (DK), danmarkskirker.natmus.dk (12/1 2021), København 1945–1948, pp. 35–37; *Scriptores Rerum Danicorum*

reliquaries of their nearby church became familiar through these repeated events in which clerics might read aloud the contents of each reliquary, the relics of holy helpers and protectors of the community, from written lists.[14] Through such repetition, the local relics and other treasures thus became part of the community's shared knowledge and self-image, as observed by art historian Jennifer P. Kingsley.[15] Around 1515, the *Festum reliquiarum* ceremony in Vor Frue church must have been remarkably lengthy, as the church had over 200 relics in 42 different reliquaries.[16] In the Cathedral of Lund around 1470, the collection was even greater: over fifty reliquaries of various materials, shapes, and sizes containing hundreds of relics pertaining to 417 different saints were displayed in the feast of relics, as described in the *Ordo in ostensione sanctarum reliquiarum in ecclesia Lundensi* (Order of Exposition for the Holy Relics in Lund Cathedral).[17]

In some cases, entire chapels, crypts, and ambulatories were built for the display of relics, such as the late-medieval chapel dedicated to the relics of the Virgin Mary in Linköping. In the Nidaros Cathedral, an octagonal chapel was built for the shrine of St Olaf, and an adjacent side chapel was probably built for another precious relic – a drop of the blood of Christ.[18] In these spaces, the visitor could go from the wider church space into a more intimate space for that particular encounter. The movement of visitors in the space was also controlled. The recommended itinerary of a pilgrim in Linköping cathedral is indicated in fifteenth-century letters of indulgence: several kneelings, songs (singing or listening), and prayers while beating one's chest were recommended at specific "stations", as well as kissing the ground, devotedly following the relics in a procession, preferably followed by monetary contributions to the church.[19]

Processions with reliquaries were arranged during the *Festum reliquiarum*

(SRD) VIII, Hafniae 1774, pp. 260–456. On Nordic feasts of relics and processions, see Lena Liepe, *Reliker och relikbruk i det medeltida Norden*, Stockholm 2020, pp. 92–96.

14 Jexlev 1976, p. 40.

15 Jennifer P. Kingsley, "Picturing the Treasury: The Power of Objects and the Art of Memory in the Bernward Gospels", *Gesta* 50:1, 2011, p. 30. See also Hahn 2005.

16 SRD VIII, pp. 260–268; see also DK, "Vor Frue kirke, København", pp. 37–38; Poul Grinder-Hansen, *Danmarks Middelalder og Renaessance*, København 2002, p. 110; Niels-Knud Liebgott, *Hellige maend og kvinder*, Höjbjerg 1982, pp. 101–131; Liepe 2020, pp. 77–80.

17 SRD VIII, pp. 446–456. The list was edited and studied by Sven Hylander in 1820 and more recently by Göran Axel-Nilsson in 1989. See also Liepe 2020, pp. 71–77.

18 Margrete Syrstad Andås, "A Royal Chapel for a Royal Relic?", in *The Nidaros Office of the Holy Blood: Liturgical Music in Medieval Norway*, Gisela Attinger & Andreas Haug (eds.), Trondheim 2004, pp. 185–188.

19 *Svenskt diplomatariums huvudkartotek* (SDHK), https://sok.riksarkivet.se/sdhk (12.1.2021) 17861; Källström 2011, pp. 100–104.

and several other occasions throughout the liturgical year.[20] In the Birgittine order, reliquaries were included in all processions, accompanied by singing the hymn *Preciosi sunt sancti*.[21] These processions could extend from inside the church to nearby roads and fields. In a procession, reliquaries were seen from various angles and distances; the experience was predominantly visual, but not similar for all viewers. Gold and silver reliquaries reflected candlelight inside the church or daylight outdoors, whereas colours and shapes were perceived differently depending on the surroundings. The smallest details, such as carved images or texts on the surface of the reliquaries, were only discernible to the clerics holding them.

Reliquaries were also involved in rituals related to agriculture. In Lund, periods of drought were fought by carrying a large wooden reliquary casket containing the head of one of the Eleven Thousand Virgins and several other relics of different saints in a procession accompanied by prayers for rain.[22] St Olaf's shrine in Nidaros and St Erik's shrine in Uppsala were brought out to bless the fields in the springtime.[23] Just like miracles, these rituals strengthened the feeling of a community in which both the local inhabitants and the locally venerated saints, present in their reliquaries, belonged and shared an interest in the community's well-being.

Unlike laypeople, religious professionals could be present when reliquaries were opened for inserting or taking out relics. These exceptional operations took place during the ceremonies of *translatio*, the festivities for the transition of a saint's remains to a tomb or subsequently to new reliquaries. The *translatio* of a local saint's relics was a rare and memorable event, not only for the privileged individuals in close contact with the relics but also for the entire local community. The date was fixed in the liturgical calendar and celebrated by a liturgical feast in the years to follow. The translations

20 On Nordic processions, see Liepe 2020, pp. 50–62.

21 Corine Schleif, "The Art of Walking and Viewing: Christ, the Virgin, Saint Birgitta, and the Birgittines Processing through the Cloister", in *The Birgittine Experience*, Claes Gejrot, Mia Åkestam & Roger Andersson (eds.), Stockholm 2013, p. 251; Volker Schier, "Writing and Rewriting Processions: The Reworking of the Procession Liturgy by the Birgittine Nuns of South Germany", in ibid., p. 281.

22 Göran Axel-Nilsson, *Thesaurus Cathedralis Lundensis: Lunds domkyrkas medeltida skattsamling*, Göteborg 1989, pp. 117–118. This is a good example of reliquaries containing relics of several different saints instead of representing one saint. This was quite typical, although most of the encounters discussed here are with reliquaries associated to one saint.

23 Øystein Ekroll, "The Shrine of St Olav in Nidaros Cathedral", in *The Medieval Cathedral of Trondheim: Architectural and Ritual Constructions in their European Context*, M.S. Andås, Ø. Ekroll, A. Haug, N. H. Petersen (eds.), Turnhout 2007, pp. 149–150, 159; Herman Bengtsson et al., *Uppsala domkyrka, 5: Inredning och inventarier. Sveriges kyrkor: konsthistoriskt inventarium. Vol. 231*, Uppsala 2010, p. 140.

themselves were celebrated with great pomp and ceremony, providing a feast for all senses: sparkling displays of church treasure, candles, decorations, incense, and fireworks. Meanwhile, the church echoed with music, prayers, and sermons. The sense of taste was not forgotten either as generous amounts of food and drink were supplied to the guests of honour after the ceremony.[24]

The reports of the *translatio* feasts of Blessed Katarina of Vadstena in 1489 and Blessed Hemming of Åbo in 1514 are among the few Nordic medieval documents describing both the reliquaries and the ways in which they were handled. Certain activities were only performed for the "inner circle": in the *translatio* of Katarina, a procession of the regent Sten Sture and the highest clergy walked to the tomb of the saint, kneeled, and opened it accompanied by chanting and incense. The bones were lifted up and placed in their new reliquaries. The participants were able to kiss the relics and smell their lovely scent. The saint's mandible was placed in a crystal monstrance, and one elbow was placed in an arm of gilt silver. The remaining bones were placed in a red casket and then in a larger full-body casket originally made for St Birgitta's relics. The lay audience must have been kept at a distance during these ceremonies, but many other sensory impressions were provided for the benefit of laypeople as the church was decorated with candles, lavish textiles, and images of Katarina, whereas the space had been carefully arranged in order to allow large crowds to move about safely. Musical instruments and choirs could be heard, and in addition to the reliquaries, a new image of the saint was unveiled – commissioned just in time for the translation. In procession, the relics in their new reliquaries were carried to the main altar, around the church, and through the churchyard, accompanied by the head of St Birgitta and another relic in their own reliquaries. This procession was witnessed by hundreds of people in the church and churchyard, from its fences, and even from the rooftops of nearby buildings. Pilgrims were rewarded with indulgences and a contact relic: they could take a drop of the blessed water used by the archbishop to wash the saint's bones.[25]

The *translatio* of Blessed Hemming in Åbo in July 1514 is documented

24 Källström 2011, pp. 98–99; *Diplomatarium Fennicum* (DF), df.narc.fi (12/1 2021) 5715; G. E. Klemming (ed.), *Svenska medeltidens rim-krönikor. 3: Nya krönikans fortsättningar, eller Sture-krönikorna: fortgången af unions-striderna under Karl Knutson och Sturarne, 1452–1520*, Stockholm 1867–1868, pp. 194–195.

25 *Diarium Vadstenense* (DV). *The Memorial Book of Vadstena Abbey: A Critical Edition with Introduction*, Clas Gejrot (ed.), Stockholm 1988, pp. 271–273; *Den stora kyrkofesten för Sankta Katarina i Vadstena år 1489: Samtida texter med översättning och kommentar,* Birgitta Fritz & Lars Elfving (eds.), Uppsala 2004, pp. 45–55. On kissing and smelling in the context of the cult of St Katarina of Vadstena, see, for instance, *Processus seu negocium canonizacionis b Katerine de Vadstenis: efter Cod. Holm. A93*, Isak Collijn (ed.), Uppsala 1942–46, pp. 72–73; Fritz & Elfving 2004, pp. 46–47.

in a detailed plan by bishop-elect Hemming Gadh, who had previously participated in the preparations for St Katarina's translation. For Blessed Hemming, there was going to be only one reliquary, a wooden casket painted in gold. Gadh had planned the celebrations to be breath-taking: along with images of Hemming, there were fireworks, birds flying inside the church, music, incense, and colourful flower petals floating in the air. Gadh underlined that this was to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience for all inhabitants of Åbo. As in Vadstena, the actual translation was to take place in a separate space, accessible only to the clergy and the guests of honour, after which the reliquary would be carried in procession by the regent and other guests of honour and finally placed on an altar, where laypeople could kiss it and bring their gifts to the saint.[26]

The visual and material characteristics of the reliquaries are described in the texts concerning the translations in Vadstena and Åbo, but they are not the only focus of attention: all the other visual elements as well as sounds, smells, and ritual practices are registered in as much detail. The sources reveal the effort and material resources spent on striving to create an awe-inspiring experience. This plethora of mental, physical, and material resources can be seen as part of religious economy, as suggested by David Morgan: "Lived religion may be described as a form of economy, a cultural system of exchange in which participants enter into relations with spiritual realities and with their community. […] objects and images commonly serve as the token or currency in this economy."[27] This may be why these documents register the visual details more attentively compared to the miracle accounts or wills discussed below. For the church, impressive reliquaries potentially represented a good investment from a purely monetary point of view – they increased the reputation of the church and attracted more visitors, which, in turn, brought income. However, they also represented an investment in the saints, something they deserved and could expect from their custodians. The relics required containers worthy of their holy presence. In a sense, the lists of reliquaries in the Cathedral of Lund and the Vor Frue church in Copenhagen constituted lists of these investments.

26 DF 5715; DF 5716B; DF 5725; Henrik Gabriel Porthan, *Henrici Gabrielis Porthan opera selecta. Pars I*. Helsingfors 1859, p. 285; Birgit Klockars, *Biskop Hemming av Åbo*, Helsingfors 1960, pp. 18–23; see also Liepe 2020, pp. 98–99 ; Kirsi Salonen, "Promoting Bishop Hemming: A New Phase in the Cult of Saints in the Medieval Diocese of Turku", in *Helgener i Nord. Nye studier i nordisk helgenkult*. Magne Njåstad & Randi Bjørshol Wærdahl (eds.), Novus Forlag 2020, pp. 89–104.

27 Morgan 2010, p. 27.

Sensory miracles

During feast days and other encounters, there was a potential for miracles. Although most Nordic miracle stories describe miracles occurring at a distance and pilgrimages being made as rituals of gratitude *after* being healed, the collections also include cases of healing by touching or being in the physical presence of relics or reliquaries. Certain miracle accounts seem to imply direct physical contact with relics, but as the official rules prohibited taking relics out of their reliquaries[28] and allowing laypeople to touch relics,[29] it must be assumed that the contact was always with a reliquary. Even if the rules may have been ignored from time to time,[30] these occasions would not have been registered in a document aiming to promote the local cult.

The large shrines containing the entire body of a local saint could be approached by pilgrims, and physical contact with these shrines was very much desired. The large shrines or tombs, permanently present in the church spaces, were accessible to both visual and tactile contact without the intercession of clerics. Frequently, even these larger shrines or parts of them could be carried in processions. St Henrik's sarcophagus in Nousis in South Finland was – and is – an immobile stone structure, whereas the shrines of, for instance, St Olaf in Nidaros, St Birgitta in Vadstena, St Erik in Uppsala, and St Knud in Odense were portable or included a removable, portable casket as part of their structure. Miracle collections and translation accounts describe how visitors approached the shrines differently. In addition to admiring the reliquary with their eyes, they were praying, bowing, kneeling, touching, kissing, making the sign of the cross, and bringing votive offerings. In the case of a reliquary shrine or a tomb, the visitors may have been able to insert their hand inside it, lie in front of it, or crawl under it. They may have even practised *incubatio* – sleeping or spending several days in front of the saint's tomb until they were healed.[31]

Nordic accounts of healing miracles often describe them as occurring in the presence of a saint's "corpus" or "sepulchra". In such cases, what the pilgrim encountered was the shrine or tomb, since the translation from the

28 See, for instance, Christoph L. Diedrichs, *Vom Glauben zum Sehen. Die Sichtbarkeit der Reliquie im Reliquiar. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sehens,* Berlin 2001, pp. 10–14.

29 Nicole Herrmann-Mascard, *Les Reliques des Saints. Formation coutumière d'un droit,* Paris 1975, pp. 201–203; Pierre-André Sigal, *L'homme et le miracle dans la France medieval (XIe – XIIe siècles),* Paris 1985, pp. 35–40.

30 On relics taken out for ceremonial occasions, see, for instance, Lena Liepe, "Arm i arm. Om form och innehåll hos medeltida armrelikvarier", *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland* 2017:4, p. 651.

31 Christian Krötzl, "Suomalaisten pyhiinvaellukset osana eurooppalaista perinnettä", *Suomalaiset pyhiinvaeltajat keskiajalla*, Tampere 2014, p. 52; Sigal 1985, pp. 135–144.

tomb into portable reliquaries would only occur at the end of the canonisation or beatification process, for which purpose the miracle accounts were collected. In many miracle stories, the tombs or the encounters with them are not described at all, as simply visiting the tomb seems to have sufficed for healing.[32] In certain cases, however, more interaction is registered.

In a miracle from Vadstena, a man who suffered from cramps in his left hand was cured after touching the stone surface of Blessed Katarina's tomb. Already when approaching the tomb, he saw a supernatural light and heard a question: "Won't you find many remedies here?" He moved his hand back and forth on the stone surface of the tomb, and the pain was gone.[33] Katarina's body would only be translated into new reliquaries some years later, meaning that it was still in a stone tomb, and the contact with its stone surface is underlined in the hand miracle. In the miracle collection, the monk Andreas Cristmanni describes the tomb – while still under construction – as made of large stones and having a "marvellous grandeur".[34] Apart from that, it is not known what the tomb looked like and whether it had carved or sculpted images or text referring to the saint, like the tomb of St Nikolaus of Linköping.[35] In any case, what the visitors saw was not always the bare stone surface, as tombs could be covered with precious textiles; for example, St Katarina's tomb received a donation of a red velvet cover in the 1470s. The cover, parts of which are still extant, was embroidered with an image of Katarina and a prayer addressed to her, with the coats of arms of its noble commissioners embroidered in each corner.[36]

32 See, for instance, Liepe 2020, pp. 111–116; see also *Vita Beati Brynolphi condam Episcopi Scarensis*, 1870.

33 "*Tandem veniens ad sepulcrum beate Katerine, vbi illustratus quodam lumine supernaturali, loquebatur in anima dicens: 'Numquid tu sicut plures hic habebis remdium' et posuit manum suam contractam girando eam huc atque illuc super lapidem sepulcri beate Katerine. Quofacto statim et incontinentj, vt dixit prefatus Laurencius, sensit, quod digiti suj contracti absque lapidorum omni dolore ad statum pristinum redierunt, et pro recuperata sanitate obtulit vnam manum ceream ad sepulcrum beate Katerine in signum miraculi secum facti*." Collijn 1942–46, p. 100.

34 "[…]*vidit in eodem opidio in monasterio Vastenensi lapides erectos et eleuatos pro sepultura beate Katerine ad partem australem ipsius monasterij, super quorum lapidum eleuacione et magnitudine multum tunc temporis mirabatur.*" Collijn 1942–46, p. 73. The miracles were collected in the 1470s, nearly a century after her death and over a decade before her *translatio* in 1489. See also Anders Fröjmark, *Mirakler och helgonkult. Linköpings biskopsdöme under senmedeltiden*, Uppsala 1992, p. 148.

35 Källström 2011, pp. 198–202.

36 According to textile historian Anne Maria Franzén, the creator of this artwork was Albertus Pictor. The edges of the cloth with part of the embroidered text and the coats of arms still exist, whereas the middle part, probably with an image of Blessed Katarina, is lost; see Anne Maria Franzén, "Ytterligare ett medeltida gravtäcke", *Fornvännen* 1963:4.

Detail of the embroidered cover for the tomb of Blessed Katarina of Vadstena. Örebro läns museum, Sweden. Photo: Per Torgén, CC-BY-NC.

With or without a textile cover, the tomb of Blessed Katarina had at least one visual element that was constantly renewed and increased in scope, speaking eloquently to any visitor of its (her) miraculous power. According to the miracle collection, it was adorned by votive offerings brought by grateful recipients of miracles. There were male and female figures, eyes, heads, jawbones, shinbones, feet, hands, and arms made of wax,[37] as well as an eye, a pair of breasts, and a figure made in silver.[38] Similar body part votives were suspended on St Birgitta's tomb too[39] and undoubtedly on the tombs of all Nordic saints having gained a reputation as powerful helpers.

In another miracle of Katarina of Vadstena, a paralysed ten-year-old girl – suitably named after Katarina's mother Birgitta – was brought to the tomb of the saint and cured after contact with the relics placed over or on top of her head.[40] This indicates that the patient was not only put in contact with the saint's tomb, but also that some smaller relics had already been

37 Collijn 1942–46, pp. 9, 81–123, 163–178, 195.

38 Collijn 1942–46, pp. 99, 170, 193.

39 An example of a silver arm suspended "in front of the relics of Lady Birgitta" as a votive gift for healing the pain in the donor's arm: "*Ceterum mittimus vobis quoddam brachium argenteum ex voto propter dolorem, quem in brachio nostro dextro habuimus, factum ad honorem Dei et laudem / ante reliquias domine Birgitte, cuius interuenientibus meritis sanitatem recepimus, appendendum*", SDHK 10799.

40 "*sed voto per eum ad beatam Katerinam facto et circa eius sepulcrum completo statim cum*

placed in individual reliquaries that could easily be moved. The description of the miracle is antecedent to the reported translation of St Katarina's relics from the stone tomb into new reliquaries in 1489, which could mean that smaller-scale translations of her relics into portable containers had already taken place, perhaps precisely for the purposes of similar healing situations, or that the relics had at least been placed in textile pouches. According to historian Marika Räsänen, small ad hoc reliquaries were also put into use at the monastery of Fossanova in the early 14th century for the healing of women who could not access the tomb of St Thomas Aquinas; men and children entering the monastery were cured by touching the tomb or being placed on top of it just like in the first miracle of St Katarina.[41]

In both these miracles of St Katarina, the impact of the reliquaries was above all tactile rather than visual, and the healing of the hand also involved sound (or speech, perceived in one way or another). As impressive as the tomb may have been with engravings, embroideries, and votives, the healing situations were not occasions for contemplating the imagery and letting it lead one's mind towards salvation. Only the monk Andreas Cristmanni, as mentioned above, was receptive to the tomb as a visual object.

Miracles were also associated with reliquary processions. There are two examples of healing miracles taking place in Uppsala during processions with relics of St Erik, written down in the late 13th century. In both cases, the healed individuals were near the procession at the moment of healing – and yet the visual impact of reliquaries was not involved. Instead, the healed individuals' perception of them was based on audition. In one miracle, the passing-by of St Erik's relics in a procession healed a Franciscan monk from his illness. While he lay sick by the window, he was cured merely by hearing the singing of the clerics carrying the shrine.[42]

Another sound associated with reliquaries is the sound of bells: bellringing was primarily used when elevating the host,[43] and some monstrances for the host had tiny bells attached that would ring whenever the monstrance was carried. Written reliquary lists reveal that this effect was implemented on some reliquary monstrances as well: a reliquary pyx with two bells was at least included in the collection of the Church of Our Lady of Copenhagen

beate Katerine reliquie superposite fuerunt capiti suo, conualuit et intra triduum perfectam sanitatem recuperauit." Collijn 1942–46, p. 197.

41 Marika Räsänen, "St Thomas Aquinas's relics and lay devotion in fourteenth-century southern Italy", in *Poverty and Devotion in Mendicant Cultures 1200–1450*, Constant J. Mews & Anna Welch (eds.), London 2016, pp. 135–136.

42 Tryggve Lundén, "Eriksofficiet, Eriksmässan och Eriksmiraklerna", *Credo* 1945:1–2, pp. 52–53.

43 Martina Bagnoli, "Longing to Experience", in *A Feast for the Senses: Art and Experience in Medieval Europe*, Martina Bagnoli (ed.), Baltimore 2017, p. 39.

in the early 16th century.[44] In the other miracle, a poor, blind woman was praying to God and the martyrs by the church door, and when the shrine of St Erik was carried past her, she suddenly regained her eyesight.[45] Again, the ringing bells, chants, and other sounds of the procession must have been the strongest sensory information she had of the relics passing – then supplemented by the sight of the reliquaries as soon as the miracle had taken place. Hence, the visual impact of the reliquaries could be enhanced by the fact that they were the first thing she saw after regaining her vision and that she, as expected, knew that they were the medium through which her healing had occurred.

In Nidaros, a sinner was converted after seeing St Olaf's "glorious body" carried in procession.[46] As stated above, the holy body would not have been carried without a reliquary, which implies that this is one of the few Nordic miracles where the visual impact of the reliquary plays a role. The gloriousness of the relics was duly conveyed by the shrine, which was undoubtedly skilfully made and shining, covered with gilt plates in one of its many transformations and re-makes that had already begun at the time of the miracle collection in the late 12th century.[47] In another miracle from Nidaros, during a feast of St Olaf – possibly while the shrine was carried in procession – a paralysed man was accidentally knocked down by the crowds and fell under the casket containing St Olaf's bones, after which he got up and was miraculously able to walk.[48] Unlike in the miracles of Blessed Katarina, this story does not present the paralysed man as being brought into contact with the shrine in order to be healed; instead, the accidental nature of the event is highlighted. If the shrine was being carried or had been placed on a higher pedestal, pilgrims could get underneath it even without being knocked down.[49] As in the other miracle involving St Olaf's shrine, it seems as if the person affected by the saint's power (*virtus*) was not expecting the miracle despite having arrived at the church. A possible function of the element of falling in this story could be that it highlights the surprise and thereby the saint's power: the *virtus* of the saint worked without

44 "*pixide deaurata cum duabus campanis & cruce superius*", SRD VIII, p. 265.

45 Lundén 1945, p. 60.

46 "*Nam cum beati martyris Olaui corpus gloriosum in processione extra ecclesiam portaretur…*", *Passio et miracula Sancti Olavi,* F. Metcalfe (ed.), Oxford 1881, p. 91.

47 Grethe Authén Blom, *Helgenkonge og helgenskrin: En kongeskikkelse i forvandling fra sagatid til reformasjonstid*, Trondheim 1994, pp. 7, 29; Øystein Ekroll, "St Olavs skrin i Nidaros", in *Pilgrimsvägar och vallfartskonst. Studier tillägnade Jan Svanberg*, Margareta Kempff Östlind (ed.), Stockholm 2002; Ekroll 2007, pp. 152–153, 184–185.

48 Metcalfe 1881, p. 106.

49 On being healed by getting beneath a reliquary while it was being carried, see, for instance, Craig 2021, p. 85.

even being asked, as in the common trope of saints helping people who are not aware of their powers or have expressed doubts concerning the saint.

The "Pax vobiscum" reliquary cross from Lempäälä, Finland, 15th century. Photo: The Finnish National Museum, CC-BY.

Portable reliquaries were generally only handled by clerics, preferably with a cloth between the reliquary and their hands.[50] Their interaction with visitors was aided and activated by clergy, making the reliquaries perform gestures and movements; the portable reliquaries would approach people instead of being approached. Arm reliquaries – particularly ones representing the arms of holy bishops, such as the arm reliquary of St Eskil in Linköping – were used by living bishops to perform blessings and other liturgical gestures,[51] and other reliquaries could be used in the same way. For instance, a reliquary cross from Lempäälä (Finland) has a written greeting, "Pax vobiscum", covered by an oval crystal on its front side.[52] The small text could not be seen by the laypeople, but it appears to be directed at them. It could have been read out by the cleric holding the cross during the *pax vobiscum* ceremony.

Head-shaped reliquaries, with their expressive faces often in almost natural size, represented the reliquaries best suited for interaction. In Xanten, Germany, a reliquary head was reportedly lifted up so that it could thank generous donors by kissing them.[53] Similar practices may have been adopted in Nordic churches as well, although they are not explicit in any of the remaining documents. In Vadstena, St Birgitta's head – probably in a head-shaped reliquary[54] – was not only displayed for veneration and carried in processions[55] but also used for healing. It was apparently effective against

50 Dee Dyas, "To Be a Pilgrim: Tactile Piety, Virtual Pilgrimage and the Experience of Place in Christian Pilgrimage", in *Matter of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period*, James Robinson, Lloyd de Beer & Anna Harnden (eds.), London 2014; Martina Bagnoli, "Dressing the Relics: Some Thoughts on the Custom of Relic Wrapping in Medieval Christianity", in ibid.

51 Cynthia Hahn, "The Voices of the Saints: Speaking Reliquaries", *Gesta* 36:1, 1997.

52 Visa Immonen, *Golden Moments: Artefacts of Precious Metals as Products of Luxury Consumption in Finland c. 1200–1600*, part II, Turku 2009, pp. 70–71.

53 Renate Kroos, "Vom Umgang mit Reliquien", in *Ornamenta Ecclesiae. Kunst und Künstler der Romanik*, 3, Anton Legner (ed.), Köln 1985, p. 31.

54 Lahti 2019, pp. 228–230.

55 Andreas Lindblom, *Birgittas gyllene skrin*, Stockholm 1963, pp. 19–20; *Scriptores Rerum*

Reliquary for the head of St Birgitta in the hands of Bishop Petrus Lykke. Drawing from Ulrich Richental's Chronik des Konzils zu Konstanz, c. 1430. Rosgartenmuseum Konstanz, Hs. I, Richental: Konzilschronik. In: Otto Feger (ed.), Ulrich Richental: Das Konzil zu Konstanz. Faksimile, Starnberg & Konstanz 1964, fol. 33r (Wikimedia Commons).

demonic possessions. In one healing miracle, it was placed on top of the head of a possessed woman, while a Birgittine silver cross relic was placed on her chest.[56] Even after the Protestant Reformation, as late as 1593, the head reliquary was placed on the main altar to heal a man thought to be

Svecicarum medii aevi (SRS), III:2, Upsaliae 1876, pp. 271–273.

56 "*Quadam autem die positum est capud domine Brigide super capud eius et ligata est super eius pectus crux argentea paruula, quam domina Brigida posuerat in sepulcro Dominj in Jerusalem, et osculabatur manum cuiusdam senis presbiteri*", in *Acta et processus canonizacionis beate Birgitte,* Isak Collijn (ed.), Stockholm 1924–1931, pp. 121–123. On Nordic possession cases, see also Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession and Lived Religion in Later Medieval*

possessed by an evil spirit.[57] In both cases, the visuality of the reliquary is left unmentioned. The reliquary is no longer extant, but some of the surviving reliquaries bear marks of wear from frequent touching and possibly kissing,[58] which is also mentioned in medieval sources as one of the ways to approach reliquaries. Instead of hands, it was actually more acceptable for the pilgrims to touch the reliquaries with their mouths and foreheads.[59] Even the tombs of saints were kissed by grateful pilgrims, as the miracles of Blessed Nils Hermansson of Linköping attest.[60]

Two anecdotes concerning the seemingly independent activity or interactivity of head reliquaries are known from Nordic churches. Since the 12th century, thirteen heads of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, probably in wooden reliquary busts, were placed on the main altar of the church in the Cistercian Abbey of Esrum in Denmark. One Christmas Eve, when the monks were in the church singing *Te Deum Laudamus*, they heard the thirteen heads of the holy Virgins joining in and responding.[61] Again, the encounter with primarily visual devotional media was registered as auditive. It is not possible to assess whether there were technical or emotional causes behind this effect, but in any case, it illustrates the sensitivity to this kind of interaction that was essential in medieval religious experiences. Images of saints were witnessed as speaking, moving, weeping, or bleeding when they were activated by the five senses during religious rituals, as defined by historian Éric Palazzo.[62] The story of the singing reliquaries was recorded in the 17th century; that is, in a post-medieval source but still within the Catholic tradition. In the healing miracles of St Erik, the role of reliquaries as visual mediators of the presence of relics was *substituted* by music – the

Europe, Oxford 2020; on this particular case, pp. 121–122. St Thomas of Aquinas's head was used for healing by contact as well; see Räsänen 2016, p. 135.

57 *Heliga Birgittas reliker*, Artur Bygdén, Nils Gustav Gejvall & Carl Herman Hjortsjö (eds.), Lund 1954, p. 71.

58 See, for instance, Lahti 2019, p. 306.

59 Bagnoli 2014, p. 103.

60 Liepe 2020, p. 113.

61 "*tredecim Parthenicae sodalitatis huius caluariae sunt translatae, quae cum decenter ornatae fuissent aris impositae, nocte Natalis Dominici (sic), dum Matutinis absolutis hymni Ambrosiani primus versus, praecinente Praefecto Monasterij cantatus esset a Religiosis: alterum* Te aeternum patrem, *tredecim capita suavissimo caelestique concentu cecinerunt.",* Hermannus Crombach, *S. Ursula vindicate. Vita et martyrium S. Ursulae et sociarum undecim millium virginum etc. ex antiquis monimentis … descriptus (et) notabilibus argumentis … confirmatum*, Cologne 1647, p. 668. A French book repeating the same story in 1656 is quoted in Scott B. Montgomery, *St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne: Relics, Reliquaries and the Visual Culture of Group Sanctity in Late Medieval Europe*, Oxford & New York 2010, p. 29.

62 See, for instance, Palazzo 2019, pp. 165–179; Morgan 2018, p. 36.

relics or reliquaries were the reason for the singing – but in Esrum, the visual impact of the holy busts was instead *complemented* by music, perceived as sung by the saints themselves. As historian of music Emma Dillon has observed, collective processional singing was a method for the singers to merge into a collective anonymity "within a corporate, singing body, and with the sacred subjectivities expressed within the hymn texts."[63] The collective singing in Esrum brought the monks into a "corporate body" where they and the holy heads were united within the temporal boundaries created by the hymn.

In Roskilde, a post-medieval anecdote also included a notion of active holy heads – possibly head reliquaries – on the altar. According to a seventeenth-century traveller's report, an altarpiece in Roskilde Cathedral had two wooden heads attached to it, and in the times before the Protestant Reformation, the heads would nod when people were absolved of their sins. The story included an explanation of how this movement was arranged: the heads were nailed to the altarpiece and could be manoeuvred with iron wires attached to them.[64] Although currently surviving head reliquaries in altarpieces are not known to be movable,[65] this kind of arrangement is quite possible. As the anecdote was registered some hundred years after the Protestant Reformation, it may have been influenced by a somewhat judgemental attitude towards the culture of the "papal times". From the Lutheran point of view, both relics and confession, as well as theatrical elements involved in the use of holy images, were perceived as idolatrous and false, and the story could have been invented in order to point out their unacceptability. However, as indicated in the examples of Xanten and Vadstena, reliquaries were in fact mobilised in various ways, and mechanical means of creating movement in devotional images – often with wires or strings – were known. Medieval sculptures that could nod are still extant, for instance, in Hungary.[66]

63 Emma Dillon, "Sensing Sound", in Bagnoli 2017, p. 106. See also Hilkka-Liisa Vuori, Marika Räsänen & Seppo Heikkinen, *The Medieval Offices of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Helsinki 2019, pp. 195–236.

64 *Holger Jacobæus' Rejsebog* (ed V. Maar), København 1910, p. 3 (https://slaegtsbibliotek.dk/922455.pdf). The altarpiece is no longer extant, but it is depicted in the source with a simple drawing.

65 Bust- or head-shaped reliquaries were sometimes placed in altarpieces. Large 14th-century altarpieces with bust reliquaries of the Eleven thousand Virgins exist in the Cologne Cathedral and the Marienstatt Abbey in Germany. The nodding heads in Roskilde may have represented the same group of saints. By the late 15th century, the cathedral's collection of relics apparently included four heads of the Eleven Thousand Virgins. See Jexlev 1976, pp. 31–36; "Roskilde Domkirke", DK, p. 1640; Tue Gad, "St. Ursula", *Kulturhistoriskt leksikon for nordisk middelalder: Fra vikingetid til reformationstid*, København 1980, pp. 370–372.

66 Johannes Tripps, "The joy of automata and Cistercian monasteries: from Boxley in Kent to San Galgano in Tuscany", *Sculpture Journal* 2016:25:1; Christopher Swift, "Robot Saints",

The context of the heads' communicative movement in Roskilde was logical too: reliquaries were perceived as carrying not only the saints' presence and *virtus*, but also their authority in confirming legal or moral matters such as vows, agreements, and crowning kings.[67] In the same manner, confirming the absolution of sinners could be one of their "duties".

Devotional encounters with relics and reliquaries were undoubtedly full of emotion. As contemporary researchers of sensorial devotion have observed, sensory stimuli were instrumental in attaining the desired emotions and thereby elevating one's mind towards spiritual contemplation.[68] In the field of emotions as well, the experience of clerics is better documented than that of laypeople. In 1286, the monk Petrus de Dacia from Visby describes in his letters how he felt while carrying a head relic of one of the Eleven Thousand Virgins close to his body. The reference to carrying it like this implies that the relic may have been in a purse-like textile reliquary, which naturally yielded a closer contact than a metallic or wooden container. Petrus wrote that the holy head's presence, while he was carrying it, frequently brought him an intense emotion he describes as "a sweetness in the heart".[69] As in many of the miracles discussed above, the reliquary played a less central role when the experience was based on things other than visual mediation. The visual impact was secondary to physical contact and the feeling of the object's weight. Even then, the experience could not have occurred without a reliquary of some kind, as relics were not transported or presented without protection.

Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural, Special Issue: Animating Medieval Art 2015:4:1. The nodding heads also bring to mind the medieval trope of philosophers creating oracular automata in the shape of heads made of brass, although post-medieval Nordic folklore is not very likely to have been influenced by these; see E.R. Truitt, *Medieval Robots: Mechanism, Magic, Nature, And Art*, Philadelphia 2015, particularly pp. 69–95. See also Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, "Live Matter and Living Images: Towards a Theory of Animation in Material Media", *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 2017:86:3: *Matter and materiality in the study of medieval art*.

67 Scott B. Montgomery, "The Saint and the King: Relics, Reliquaries and Late Medieval Coronation in Aachen and Székesfehérvár", in Robinson, de Beer & Harnden 2014, pp. 32–39.

68 See, for instance, Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, "Prostheses of pious perception: On the instrumentalization and mediation of the medieval sensorium", in *The Materiality of Devotion in Late Medieval Northern Europe*, Henning Laugerud, Salvador Ryan & Laura Katrine Skinnebach (eds.), Dublin 2016; Bagnoli 2017, pp. 33–45.

69 "*magnam cordis dulcedinem ex presencia illius capitis sepissime sensi*", in *Petri de Dacia Uita Christinae Stumbelensis,* Johannes Paulson (ed.), Göteborg 1896, p. 158; Monika Asztalos, *Petrus de Dacia om Christina från Stommeln – En kärleks historia*, Uppsala 1991, pp. 320–325; Lahti 2019, pp. 236–237.

In the situations described above, the miracle-related encounters with reliquaries were dominated by tactile and auditive interactions. The touching could be perceived as mutual, as Abbot Thiofrid of Echternach wrote around the year 1100, "[w]ho with fast faith touches the outside of the container whether in gold, silver, gems, or fabric, bronze, marble, or wood, he will be touched by that which is concealed inside."[70] The Uppsala miracles and many others demonstrate how active touching was not necessary for sensory encounters with reliquaries or for miracles. The Nidaros miracles suggest that even "fast faith" may not always have been required.

Considering the amount of investment in the visual impact of reliquaries, it is striking that visual descriptions of these are nearly absent in the Nordic written documents on encounters with reliquaries, shrines, or tombs of saints. This observation resonates with the recent discussion brought up by Lena Liepe regarding the enduring theory of the late-medieval laypeople's devotional need to see the relics; for instance, through a piece of glass or crystal within a monstrance. In fact, that kind of view does not seem to have been available nor particularly desired by devotees.[71] On the basis of the small sample of sources discussed above, it might be tempting to ask whether the role of visuality in the functions of reliquaries has been overestimated. However, the impressiveness of the reliquaries was hardly ignored by the medieval pilgrims; it was simply not an element that belonged in the construction of miracle stories. In those situations, the impact of saintly power was so overwhelming that it even outshone the shining golden reliquary, the great stone tomb, or the expressive sculpted busts.

Conclusions

The defining element of a religious encounter with a reliquary was the sense of the relics' physical yet invisible presence, conveyed and compensated by the exterior visual content of the reliquary. The ideal circumstances for this to be felt were during feast days in the church space, where the experience was complemented by various other sensory stimuli, a mixture of arranged and controlled effects and the random elements brought by fellow people participating in the event. In churches with large collections of reliquaries, the visitors could feel surrounded by them, as if immersed in the community of saints. As Bynum states, "this amassing (of relics, images, etc) was not because of any loss of significance by individual objects. More was better exactly because each object had power."[72]

70 Quoted from Hahn 2012, p. 24.
71 Liepe 2020, pp. 62–65.
72 Walker Bynum 2020, p. 36.

Reliquaries were made and displayed with the intention of causing a strong visual impact, and their combinations of eloquent shapes and sumptuous materials must indeed have filled pilgrims with awe. Despite this, Scandinavian medieval sources hardly ever express this visual impact when referring to encounters with reliquaries. Instead, they focus on the moments of touching the reliquaries, hearing them, or observing them as active. The visitor's encounter with a reliquary resembled a dialogue: the presence of the saint was felt and responses to prayers were heard. The element of movement increased the impression of reliquaries as living, when the wings of an aumbry or altarpiece were opened, or in processions, when reliquaries were seen moving through the crowd. Active reliquaries could be made to move towards the visitor, reach out and touch the devotee, or nod. One reason for the absence of visuality in the accounts is that most miracle stories of local saints were written before their relics were transferred from a stone tomb to more elaborate reliquaries. However, not even in the stories concerning body part reliquaries is the visual impact a prominent feature. In the context of Nordic miracle stories, the visual dimension of a reliquary was secondary to tactile and auditive signs of the saint's miraculous power. Nevertheless, the visuality of reliquaries contained a powerful message that was impossible to ignore, and it must have influenced the overall sensory, emotional, and devotional content of the encounters. Exactly how medieval lay viewers experienced it is only implicitly documented in Nordic written sources.

As an element of lived religion, reliquaries were more present in the lives of religious professionals than of laypeople. Both groups experienced miraculous healing in contact with reliquaries, and the accounts of these experiences do not essentially differ in the sources. Instead, the differences lay in their professional positions and responsibilities. Naturally, clerics were familiar with the theological thought behind relics and reliquaries as well as the rules concerning their veneration. They routinely had access to reliquaries in their home institutions. They also had duties related to the storage and maintenance of reliquaries, which carried enormous religious as well as material value. They were responsible for these treasures both with regard to their own institution and to the saints whose presence was contained in the reliquaries. This perspective of religious economy can be sensed in certain documents such as lists of reliquaries and reports of *translatio* ceremonies, in which the visual aspect of reliquaries is considered.

For clerics, many saints were also deceased colleagues of the same religious calling. During festivities, this collegiality was part of the performance: clerics were not mere spectators but also participants and actors in the mass and procession, parading together with the sacred objects, and

facilitating the interaction between reliquaries and their audiences. This familiarity might have gradually diminished the feeling of awe despite the glorious appearances of the reliquaries. However, various medieval narrative images and texts attest to the devotional thrill felt by religious professionals while in contact with reliquaries. Here, the story of the collective singing of Esrum monks with reliquary heads is a rare example of an extraordinary, interactive encounter. The strongest feelings were related to the relics/saints represented by the reliquaries, but in certain descriptions, such as the one from Esrum, it seems evident that the reliquary was a vital element to which the devotional emotion was extended and a "focal object" that enabled enchantment in a way relics alone could not.

Summary

In a medieval church, saints were present in their relics and could be encountered, but typically not directly seen or touched. The sensory encounters occurred via specific interfaces or, in David Morgan's words, focal objects – reliquaries made with the best available skills and materials to represent the holy presence. These encounters, taking place, for instance, in the contexts of miracles or feasts of relic translations, were highlights of lived religion for laymen and religious professionals alike despite the differences between the groups' daily lives and access to religious objects.

Reliquaries were made with remarkable investments in visual impact. However, in the medieval Nordic written sources, this impact is seldom described. Instead, other sensory and interactive effects manifesting the power of the saints and their relics – scents, sounds, touch, and movement – seem to dominate the emotionally charged encounters with reliquaries. This article argues that the eloquent shapes, shining materials, and hagiographic imagery were not ignored, but their message was incorporated into the other sensory stimuli in the written descriptions of encounters with the holy objects.

Keywords: reliquaries, relics, Middle Ages, senses, devotion