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Splendor and Scarcity of Religious Matter: Medieval Cathedral Treasuries of the North

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**splendor and scarcity of
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medieval cathedral
treasuries of the north
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ABSTRACT

This article provides an introduction to medieval treasuries, or collections of objects in churches, in Northern Europe. Particularly cathedral treasuries offer a significant material assemblage from the Middle Ages, and consequently an essential perspective on the complex relationships between objects, matter, and religious practice. We discuss the definitions of the "North," and "treasury," and as a case study, describe the history and research potential of the medieval treasury in Turku Cathedral, Finland.

Keywords: church treasuries, Middle Ages, North, Turku Cathedral

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Introduction

The treasuries of medieval cathedrals in Western and Central Europe have formed a vibrant field of study since the twentieth century. Following a tradition that began in the nineteenth century, and especially within German-speaking regions, lavishly-illustrated catalogues of such collections have been published, as well as studies of their liturgical and cultural significance (e.g. von Ahn and Mannhardt 2020; Amann 2021; Becks & Lauer 2000; Bednarz et al. 2009; Bedoire 2020; Brandt, Höhl, and Lutz 2015; Caskey 2021; Domschatz- und Diözesanmuseum Eichstätt 2022; Kiebler 2012; Kotzur and König 2008; Kyzourová 2012; Lepie and Minkenberg 2010; Meles 2001). Scholarship has focused on the most well-known and revered cathedrals, usually located in the more populous regions of Western, Central, and Southern Europe. As a result, treasuries in peripheral parts of Europe, such as Scandinavia, have received less attention. Meanwhile, the cathedrals of Northern Europe preserve highly significant and often surprising collections, which illustrate the complex relationships that exist between objects, matter, and religious practice. For this special issue of *Material Religion*, we have gathered a group of expert scholars in order not only to make a significant contribution to our understanding of these northern European treasuries, but also to bring this knowledge into dialogue with scholarship relating to their counterparts elsewhere on the continent. In the introduction, we will first discuss the geographical scope of this special issue, then proceed to define the concept of “treasury,” and finally, as an example, discuss a specific medieval treasury – that of Turku Cathedral in Finland.

In this issue, we use the term of “the North” to refer to the countries north of Germany, comprising of the Nordic and Baltic countries. These are not only united by their geographical proximity, but have also been significantly affected the Protestant Reformation. The religious iconoclasm advocated by some leading Reformers often resulted in the destruction and fragmentation of the region’s Catholic ecclesiastical treasuries. In addition to this, many of the North’s cathedral collections have been devastated by wars, looting, sales forced by financial necessity, and even by the perceived need to modernize. This has generated a situation in which the study of medieval ecclesiastical collections requires painstaking reconstruction. This draws not only on surviving objects, but also on the architectural history of ecclesiastical buildings, visual depictions made in medieval paintings and murals, and modern sketches made of later-vanished objects, as well as various written records. Nordic scholarship on medieval treasuries is especially attuned to such detailed, empirical analysis (Lieve 2006), which also requires a cross-disciplinary understanding of liturgical and other devotional, material, and visual aspects of medieval religion. As a result, the study of ecclesiastical treasuries

represents an important case of interdisciplinary endeavor within the field of material religion.

The study of medieval treasuries also constitutes a highly versatile field of research because of their heterogeneous nature. A medieval treasury refers to a collection of objects belonging to a specific church (e.g. Cordez 2015). Although all medieval churches required a material assemblage that could include portable altars, sacred vessels, relics and reliquaries, liturgical vestments, images and statues, chandeliers, crowns, processional crosses, liturgical texts, and other manuscripts, the term “treasury” is usually associated with high-status ecclesiastical centers, such as monasteries, abbeys, and cathedrals. Most of the objects in such treasuries were produced by professional artisans. Exceptions might include fragments of the Wood of the True Cross, bones of saints, and other relics. For non-manufactured items of this type, medieval artistry expressed itself instead in the production of tangible and intangible presentation frames, which served to establish the value of the items they adorned. Parts of such treasuries, especially the relics and reliquaries, were intentionally displayed to parishioners, pilgrims, and other devotees, and many of these continued to be exhibited as part of museum collections after the Middle Ages. However, it is important to acknowledge that there existed no uniform pattern of progression from medieval treasuries to modern museums. Instead, these two phenomena should be viewed as functionally distinct.

Medieval Treasuries as Living Organisms

Medieval cathedral treasuries have long been of interest to scholars, who see them as predecessors of early-modern *Wunderkammern* or cabinets of curiosities, and thus, ultimately, as the origin of modern museums. However, the historical genealogy that links treasuries to museums is far from simple, and one must be mindful of the variety of other collections in existence during the Middle Ages, such as those belonging to rulers or the nobility. While they may share similar characteristics, the main difference between these collection types, be they medieval or post-medieval, lies in their function (Mariaux 2019). It is in fact this difference that makes the phenomenon of establishing and maintaining such collections fascinating. On the one hand, both treasuries and museums can create new value for ordinary objects by recontextualizing them, which happens when, for instance, bones and everyday objects are framed as relics in cathedrals or as display pieces in museums. However, in treasuries, unlike in museums, collected items usually maintained most of their original purpose, i.e., their spiritual significance as well as their exchange and instrumental value. In other words, treasuries were depositories for exchange capital – items which could be given or sold – that served to support the spiritual and cultural capital of the institution. While ecclesiastical objects were sacred, they were not immutable, and

could be dismantled, melted down, or reused if necessary. Cathedral collections were thus dynamic and driven by spiritual concerns. This emphasizes the importance of reconstructing the biographies or itineraries of individual items as well as the life-history of each treasury.

Every item within such collections had its purpose in maintaining spiritual life more generally (e.g. Chapuis 2001, 13, 17–19). Rather than consider medieval treasuries in relation to museums, Husband (2001, 32) has compared them instead to living organisms. Liturgical artifacts were central to ecclesiastical life, and their use was ordered and framed by the church calendar. They served as a material expression of the spiritual conscience of their institution, and their acquisition and disposal reflected the prevailing religious, political, and economic circumstances of the parish or diocese in question. Burkart (2009) writes along the same lines and argues that treasuries materialized cultural values. They were based on the tensions between symbolization and material representation, discourses, and practices, which opened up a wide horizon for the meanings and functions of treasuries. This calls for a cultural theory of medieval religious collecting, or a theory of how lines between ecclesiastical and other “assemblages” were established and dissolved, applying a Deleuzian concept (DeLanda 2016; Deleuze and Guattari 2019).

Despite the centrality of the collecting process, medieval treasuries were not museum collections. The objects within them were not considered works of “arts and crafts,” or “sacred art” in the sense that we use such terms (Cordez 2015). Nonetheless, each object in a treasury had its specific material qualities and requirements for craftsmanship in its production. The minute examination of such details provides insights on workshop organization and practices, the technical treatment of physical substances, and the use of materials in religious practice and luxury consumption. Consequently, the analysis of material and technological issues can offer a means to also access the spiritual, social and intellectual aspects of medieval life.

Any medieval cathedral, its treasury, and, in particular, its holy relics, had the role of preserving material traces of a collective memory and maintaining the distinctive identity of its church, and even that of the surrounding community (Pearce 1995, 102–108; Netzer 1991, 19; Räsänen, Hartmann, and Richards 2016). Liturgical artifacts were often donations made by members of the elite, a fact which could be commemorated on the surfaces of the objects themselves. Chalice and patens in particular, central to the performance of the mass, could bear the names and arms of their donors. These were objects intended to be shown and seen, contemplated and venerated, although their aesthetic value as liturgical artefacts was considered less important than their spiritual role within Divine Service.

Since treasuries could have so many functions, serving not only as material expressions of temporal and spiritual authority, but also as monetary reserves and as memorials commemorating donors and the surrounding community, their scholarly study must be an interdisciplinary venture. This brings together not only the surviving objects, architecture, and furnishings, as well as the results of scientific analyses of their materials, but also such written records as accounts ledgers of religious institutions, church inventories, private wills that include donations to the Church, and letters of indulgences – decrees which removed or reduced the punishment of sins committed by the recipient. Consequently, the group of scholars in this volume hail from different disciplines, each applying their own unique approach to the source evidence.

The Nordic context for cathedral treasuries is distinct from that found elsewhere. Firstly, because the surviving corpus of material is more limited than that from other regions of Europe, it is feasible for one scholar to master all the available sources and compare the results of her or his reconstructions with results obtained from other regions and countries. Secondly, and rather surprisingly, the material is, at least in part, much better preserved than in the rest of Europe. For instance, although only about a hundred medieval parish churches existed in Finland, these have preserved over 800 wooden sculptures from the Middle Ages. This signifies an excellent rate of survival, relatively speaking, when compared with, for example, Central Europe. A crucial factor contributing to this state of affairs was the destructive impact of conflicts such as the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) and the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), which mostly affected regions further south. As a result, the subsequently high rate of preservation in the North enables scholars to undertake more comprehensive analyses on the phenomenon of medieval treasuries. Thirdly, and related to the second point, the Protestant Reformation not only destroyed many objects, such as monstrances, reliquaries and censers, but also made their use obsolete (Bynum 2016). This paradoxically aided in their preservation. In most other parts of Central, Western and Southern Europe, Catholic Christianity and its liturgical practice continued to evolve. Liturgical objects and artworks that were considered outdated were routinely replaced with new pieces and interiors were regularly refurbished. Meanwhile, in the churches of the North, medieval or Catholic items were mostly left in their original state, preserving them for present-day scholarship.

The alterations made to medieval objects during and after the Protestant Reformation carry special significance, revealing attitudes both towards Catholicism and to the local past. Many wooden sculptures were mutilated: depictions of saints lost their eyes, noses, and arms, or, especially in the case of statues of holy virgins, were stripped of their crowns, vestments and other valuable adornments. Such damage was partly intentional, and

partly the unplanned result of the poor storage conditions into which these artworks were sometimes placed. Some triptychs and similar works with multiple components could be severed into separate pieces, sometimes repainted, and transferred into new devotional surroundings (Räsänen 2013a; 2013b). This fundamental change in function could transform such objects into repositories of social memory and of a parish's identity, eventually earning them a place in modern museum collections. The history of treasuries becoming museums is therefore manifold, requiring scholarly scrutiny, since it affects how medieval assemblages survived and how their objects were treated, for example, by conservators of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Treasury of Turku Cathedral

The first ecclesiastical center in Finland was situated at Koroinen in present-day Turku, South-Western Finland. The site is located at the tip of a cape in the Aurajoki River separated from the mainland by a dry moat and embankment. Inside the fortified area lie the ruins of a thirteenth-century cathedral and bishop's residence. During the late thirteenth century, the episcopal see was moved two kilometers downstream to its present-day location in Turku. Turku Cathedral was consecrated in 1300 and dedicated to the Virgin Mary and St Henry of Uppsala (Gallén 1978; Nilsson 2017). The building was originally erected in wood, but replaced with a masonry construction in the early fifteenth century (Hiekkanen 2020, 263). Turku was among the northernmost urban centers of Europe during the Middle Ages, and its medieval diocese covered almost the same geographical area as the modern state of Finland, which then constituted the eastern part of the Kingdom of Sweden.

The main body of the cathedral's architecture has not changed markedly since the Late Middle Ages, with only a few new chapels being added during the early modern period (Laitinen 2012; Pirinen 2016). In contrast, the building's interior has been completely altered, and various periods of looting, confiscations conducted during the Protestant Reformation, as well as several devastating fires (most importantly the Great Fire of Turku in 1827), have ensured that only a portion of its medieval treasury survives. As a result, many items are known only from entries made in heterogenous written sources.

The first scholar to describe the cathedral's inventory was the historian and antiquarian Adolf Lindman. In 1869, he compiled a small volume to serve as a guidebook to the cathedral (Lindman 1869). However, the first detailed study of its surviving objects was published as part of Juhani Rinne's three-volume work on the medieval history of the cathedral, published in the 1940s and 1950s (Rinne 1941–1952). Although scholars have continued to study the treasury and its individual objects subsequently, a comprehensive and up-to-date catalog is yet to be produced.

The basis for Rinne's work was the extensive restoration of Turku Cathedral that he directed in the 1920s. Rinne also created the first permanent museum exhibition of the cathedral's surviving objects. The next major restoration took place in the 1970s. At this point, the museum exhibition was entirely remodeled, reopening in 1982, remaining unchanged to this day. A further restoration of the cathedral will take place in the 2020s, at which point the museum is also due to be renewed.

What particularly caught the attention of Rinne (1932) was the medieval assemblage of relics and reliquaries in the cathedral. These contained some remains of the first bishop of Finland, St. Henry of Uppsala, whose cult became central to the cathedral's religious profile (Heikkilä 2005; 2016). Rinne was the first scholar to analyze the relics with the help of the natural sciences, and this approach has resumed in the twenty-first century (e.g., Arponen, Maijanen, and Immonen 2018; Lahti 2019).

The relics and reliquaries of the cathedral have survived as two groups. Firstly, a number of them were deposited in a medieval wooden reliquary casket traditionally attributed to the Blessed Bishop Hemming (in office 1338–1366), presently on display in the cathedral. A second deposit was discovered in the sacristy during the restoration of the 1920s, concealed within a bricked-up wall niche. This collection consists not only of relics wrapped in textiles, but also of pieces of bone, wood, textiles, paper, a reliquary purse or bag, pieces of wax seals and a medieval coin.

The most impressive reliquary in the collection is a skull-shaped object wrapped in Chinese red silk damask with embroideries. In previous scholarship, it has been attributed to either St. Henry or King Eric of Sweden, the leaders of the legendary first Swedish Crusade to Finland in the 1150s. Beneath the layers of damask, there are nineteen linen pouches with bones and a few pieces of linen cloth, which are probably the remains of emptied bone packages. Most packages contained only a single bone or a bone fragment, while five were found to hold multiple bone fragments. Based on the recent radiocarbon dating of the textiles and threads, the assembly of the skull relic took place in around the mid-fourteenth century. By contrast, the dates of the bones in the structure range from 550 BC to 1220 AD, a testament to the object's complex identity (Arponen, Maijanen, and Immonen 2018).

The significance of these medieval relics, the valuable textiles in which they were wrapped, and the lost reliquaries of precious metals in which they were once displayed, reveal their material qualities as objects, along with production techniques. They also provide evidence that reveals medieval conceptions of saints, the religious history of the cathedral and its connections with other religious centers, and the material and practical aspects of the cult of relics.

Relics, reliquaries, sculptures, bells, and other items necessary for exercising local liturgical tradition and devotional practices form the core of this special issue, together with our understanding of how these items were acquired, displayed, and promoted. In these articles, the reconstruction of the medieval treasury becomes a way of understanding medieval Christianity more broadly. Moreover, following the Middle Ages, every such treasury had a unique history. In the North, during the nineteenth century, these local and material histories were frequently fashioned into the elements of Grand National narratives.

With this special issue of *Material Religion*, we want to introduce readers to the scholarly tradition of describing and examining the medieval treasuries of the North. This began in the nineteenth century, but in recent decades, this field of research has developed as a powerful and interdisciplinary tool to analyze medieval Christian culture. On the one hand, new scientific methods for describing and dating the surviving materials have created unforeseen possibilities for scholars to acquire information, and on the other hand, the long history of previous research provides ample sources and data for creating balanced reconstructions. Medieval treasuries can thus be seen as vital and dynamic entities with intricate ties to medieval devotional practices and material aspects of faith.

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