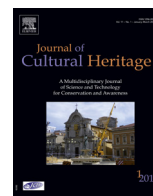




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Case study

Analysis of mediaeval Swedish paintings influenced by Russian-Byzantine art

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ABSTRACT

Sweden has several hundred churches with relatively well-preserved mediaeval mural paintings. A few churches possess murals painted in a Russian-Byzantine style, most of them on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. Four Gotland stone churches are included in this investigation as well as painted boards saved from three since-long demolished wooden stave churches. Most of the paintings are dated to the 12th century. In total 116 pigment samples were examined by SEM/EDX, and six lead pigments were also analyzed with a MC-ICP-MS mass spectrometer to determine the isotopic composition. The results show that the pigments used agree well with what has been observed for other Gotland murals, but are somewhat different from those commonly used in mediaeval church murals on the Swedish mainland. With the exception of Mästerby Church, the lead isotope measurements indicate a German origin for the lead pigments. It has for a century been argued whether these “Byzantine” paintings were produced by Russians or domestic painters. A contribution to this discussion is made in the light of the analyzed results and from historic and logical arguments.

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1. Research aim

This study was undertaken for two reasons. The first was to find out which pigments were used for the 12th century Russian-Byzantine paintings in mediaeval churches on the island of Gotland, and compare with German-inspired church murals on Gotland as well as on the Swedish mainland. The second aim was an attempt to contribute to the century-old discussions whether these “Byzantine” paintings were made by domestic or foreign (Russian) masters. The material investigated was collected from murals in four Gotland stone churches and painted boards from three since-long demolished wooden stave churches. Gotland was an important commercial centre in the Baltic Sea area during the first centuries of the Middle Ages, and the influence from the nearby Russia was large. The paintings in this study have earlier been examined by art historians and compared with Byzantine art in

Russian cathedrals, but still some uncertainty remains as regards the painters' nationality.

2. Introduction

Hundreds of mediaeval churches in Sweden possess more or less well-preserved murals painted *a secco* on lime ground. The authors have earlier documented and analyzed many of their pigments [1,2]. Many painters working on the Swedish mainland were Germans or had been trained in Germany, and for an overwhelming part of the murals a German influence is indicated [3–5]. The most renowned painters were Albertus Pictor, Johannes Iwan and Johannes Rosenrod. However, a limited number of paintings instead indicate a Russian-Byzantine influence. Almost all of these are found on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. Its only town, Visby, was during 1150–1300 an important commercial centre as a member of the Hanseatic League. The Russian influence here was large, and at least one Russian church was built in Visby. This mediaeval town is now inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Four Gotland stone churches which possess *a secco* murals painted in a Russian-Byzantine style were investigated in this study (cf. Table 1). In addition, we have secured paint on wooden boards from three since-long demolished Gotland stave churches. All these

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Fig. 1. Map showing part of northern Europe, including the island of Gotland. Marked are also areas and places of interest on the Swedish mainland and in Russia. 1 = Novgorod, 2 = Staraya (Old) Ladoga.

paintings have been examined and discussed by art historians and compared with murals in Russian cathedrals (cf. Fig. 1). In some Gotland churches there are also baptismal fonts and sculptural decorations in stone with a typical Byzantine influence. One of the stonemasons has been given the anonymous name Byzantios. Additional knowledge of the origin and context of baptismal fonts in Gotland churches has been provided from the chemical composition of pigment traces found on seven baptismal fonts [6]. However, there still remains an uncertainty as regards the nationality of the painters who created the Russian-Byzantine paintings on Gotland. Were they Russians or domestic artisans? The present study was undertaken in order to shed some light upon these problems. Naturally it was also of interest to compare the results with data for paintings in other mediaeval Swedish churches, on Gotland and on the mainland. Some notes will be given for the seven studied churches, in the order they are listed in Table 1.

The most well-preserved Byzantine paintings in Sweden are found in the church at Garde. Each of the north and south walls of the tower arch (cf. Fig. 2) has a painting of a saint. Lagerlöf [7] has suggested that they illustrate the Russian saints Boris and Gleb. There are also some fragmentary paintings in other parts of the church, one of them possibly illustrating The Last Judgement. Mural paintings in a Byzantine style are also found in Källunge Church.

Table 1
Summary of the investigated material from Gotland churches.

Church	Ground	Dating of paintings (AD)	Number of pigment samples analyzed
Garde	<i>a secco</i>	Around 1150	27
Källunge	<i>a secco</i>	Around 1190	18
Havdhem	<i>a secco</i>	Late 12th century	2
Mästerby	<i>a secco</i>	Early 13th century	43
Dalhem ^a	Wood	Early 12th century	12
Sundre ^a	Wood	Early 12th century	9
Eke ^a	Wood	Around 1120	5
Total			116

^a Boards from since-long demolished stave churches.

Most of these are fragmentary, many of them ornaments, mainly located near the triumphal arch. Nisbeth [3] has drawn attention to their great similarity with the Garde paintings and with those in the Nereditsk Cathedral near Novgorod, the latter dated to around AD 1190. The church at Havdhem, in south Gotland, only possess one painting, situated in a window recess in the apse. However,



Fig. 2. A Byzantine saint painted on the north wall in Garde Church. Photo: Bengt A. Lundberg, National Heritage Board of Sweden.

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