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Images of Late Medieval 'Daily Life': A History of mentalities

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Most historians are the disciples of Johan Guthenberg. They only make use of the written source material and they only use the printed book as medium for their exposition of the results of their research. Many historians - as far as they use visual source material at all - usually refer to those images that depict subjects from contemporary life. Traditionally they cling to images of recognizable objects. Images of shoes, ploughs, swords, etc are considered as relevant testimony of aspects of daily life contrary to religious, fabulous, innovative, artistic and decorative images. The images used by historians most often refer to existing artifacts from the past that offer an opportunity for the traditional methodological control: is the depicted subject in correspondance with the real thing or not?[1] Shortly the images used by most of the historians that use visual source material are images relevant to *Sachkultur*.

As a matter of fact it is a very narrow attitude relying on traditional methodological ways of thinking. To most historians images are equal or parallel to the written word - as they were centuries ago to Gregory the Great and many others.

From Saint Gregory onwards till today's historians images are treated in the same way as narrative documents - to the research of which we have developed a refined methodological research system.

But an image is not a narrative source and as such it cannot narrate anything about what people were doing, where, when and why. To do this we need a discursive communications system and images are non-discursive constructions.[2]

Images are loaded with information. But contrary to the text all this information is gathered in the one and same syntax. It is the task of the historian to create his or her own narration when studying an image. But the narrative is created by the spectator's imagination, not by the image itself or for that matter by the artist.

What we do - as a matter of fact - is to make a description, a translation of what we see depicted. We verbalize the image.

This description may be of a narrative character:

"There was a countryside and houses of a kind appropriate to peasant country-people - some larger some smaller. Near the cottages were straight-standing cypress trees. ...The trees, I dare say, offered the peasant a resting-place, with the shade of their boughs and the voices of the birds joyfully perched in them. Four men were running out of the houses, one of them calling to a lad

[1] Niels M. Saxtorph: xxxx; Morten Bjørn og Ole Reiter: xxx; Historische Zeitschrift: xxx

[2] Axel Bolvig, "Med passende ændringer", *Sølv og salte*, 19xx, p. xxx

standing near - for his right hand showed this, as if giving some instructions. Another man was turned towards the first one, as if listening to the voice of a chief. A fourth, coming a little forward from the door, holding his right hand out carrying a stick in the other, appeared to shout something to other men toiling about a wagon, for just at that moment a wagon fully loaded, I cannot say wether with straw or some other burden, had left the field and was in the middle of the lane....".[3]

This description is a narrative of some daily life. But it is a story told by Libanius and not by the artist. Our possible use of historical methods by asking if this scenery is historically true or not or if it is corresponding to the material reality of daily life, is directed towards Libanius' use of words and not towards the painters use of brush, lines and colour. The eyewitnes is Libanius and the account is his. What he witnesses is a picture. To *his* account we can apply our methods. The image on the other hand contains a lot of non-linear visual information to which we only can bring meaning by translation to a linear communications system. It is important to stress that other descriptions of the same picture never will be totally like the one of Libanius. My description of any image will differ more or less from your description of the same image.

In another way the description of the fourth-century Libanius differs from most other descriptions of images. He uses the past tense. By this he is making the picture described a piece of source material in a historical space. Other historians or art historians use the present tense, like: "There *is* a countryside...the trees *are* offering shade to the peasants...Four men *are* running out of the house" etc. By this we draw the picture into our own contemporary space and thus making it an a-historical piece of source material.

A describtion of for instance the iconographic motive of Adam at work after the Expulsion (Fig. 1) will typically read:"A man *is* ploughing with two horses - maybe it *is* Adam after the Expulsion of Paradise - the ploughman *is* rather well dressed wearing a peasants coat - *do* the peasants really use horses when ploughing - it *is* strange that he *is* working alone with a plough with plougshare" etc. What we are confronted with is a modern verbal translation of a late mediaval image.

In "La chambre claire" Roland Barthes baptised the photograf *it has been (interfuit)* as if the contents was of a historical character. As a matter of fact he too uses the present tense when describing Charles Cliffords photo *Alhambra* thus making it a contemporary narrative.[4]

Our involuntary use of the present tense marks one of the fascinating differences between the discursive text and the non-discursive image. Being a relic of the Middle Ages the image itself is a historical source. But by presenting its contents of visual information in a non-discursive way and by tempting the spectators to perceive the contents in the present tense its information is of an a-historical caracter.

And yet we are still convinced that images are invaluable historical source material!

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[3] Quotation from Michael Baxandall: *Patterns of Intention*. *On the Histoical Explanation of Pictures* (1985) 1992, p. 2

[4] Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire* 1980

In a way many of the medieval images are loaded with a *narrative* element. Their iconographic motives are often referring to stories told in the Bible or in Saints lives. That is why Saint Gregory the Great and many other learned scholars from the middle ages till today talk about images as the bible of the illiterate. Of course that is nonsense. Medieval images only refer to the stories of bible to those people who already are familiar with the contents of the bible, the saints lives etc. This widespread attitude towards images is only a pretext, an excuse for accepting images in the churches.

Many representatives of the church were completely aware of these conditions. Among those John of Genoa from late thirteenth century:

"Know that there were three reasons for the institution of images in churches.

First, for the instruction of simple people, because they are instructed by them as if by books.

Second, so that the mystery of the incarnation and the examples of the Saints may be more active in our memory through being presented daily to our eyes.

Third, to excite feelings of devotion, these being aroused more effectively by things seen than by things heard".[5]

The first item, that the images were the bible of the illiterate shows the contempt of the literati towards simple people. This clash of interests is well known in todays discussion of the function of TV and comic strips compared to books.

The second item, that images support memory is a widespread understanding in the pedagogical work in our schools.

The third item, that images excite feelings is a well known means in today's advertising, posters, political propaganda, press photos and indeed in our own private photo collections.

In a way there is no difference between the views of Gregory the Great, John of Genoa and other learned medieval writers and the widespread attitude towards images in our own society.

John of Genoa and the many others that wrote about images never mentioned *a fourt item*: the documentary force of an image.

This is understandable because medieval people did not think in documentary terms. The word documentation is a relative new invention - often used by historians. And wrongly used when historians ask for depictions of daily life in the Middle Ages.

The demands for visual documentation are closely related to the rise and expansion of the photograph. The special kind of mechanic indexicallity of a photograph provides it with a documentary ability unknown to other visual means of expression. The passport authorities accept a photo of me but not a drawing even if it is much better.

When teaching I use slides. When publishing an illustrated essay I use printed reproductions. Thoughtless I take it for granted that the recipients accept my slides and reproductions as a representative documentation of the images represented through these media. Without protesting the audience and the

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[5] Quotation from Michael Baxandall: *Painting and Experience in Fiftheenth Century Italy* (1972) 1974, p. 41

readers accept the change in size, the change of original context, an inaccurate scale of colours etc. The documentary force of the photographic representation is vital.

To sum up:

Medieval images do not narrate anything including the daily life.

Medieval images do not document anything including the daily life.

The visual information of an image is neither correct nor incorrect.

The visual information of an image is of an a-historical character presenting itself in the present tense.

To be historically understandable the visual information of an image must be translated to a discursive system, which is a linguistic system.

Not two translations of the visual contents of an image will be identical.

Where and how do we then find medieval daily life?

As the feudal medieval society did not function in accordance with an *Öffentlichkeits-modelle* of the bourgeois society,[6] medieval images did not belong to a specific private or cultural sphere. They were part of a totality consisting of all sides of life. So even the most sacred pictures were part of the daily life.

Most medieval paintings and sculptures were created by skilled artists belonging to the sphere of production.

The images were often commissioned or bought by people from many parts of the secular society.

The intentions behind a commission were partly religious, partly private, partly political, and partly economic.

The images were exhibited in the churches that belonged to the religious and cultural and partially the private spheres.

The spectators and users belonged to all parts of society.

Medieval images *are* part of the totality called daily life. They *reflect* a mental conception of daily life. They *form* the mental conception of daily life. As they were part of the fight for the soul of man, they were also part of the fight for the notion of daily life.

My point of departure in this printed essay is a reproduction in black and white of a colour-slide of a Danish late medieval wallpainting (Fig. 2). It is full of visual information, but the narration is mine.

The iconographic classification reads *The Poor and the Rich Man's Prayer*. Iconography corresponds to the function of captions. This caption indicates a kind of mental action of the two men depicted. It does not say for how long, how often, where and when they pray. But the iconographic caption functions as a starting point for the spectators linguistic translation. It corresponds to what Roland Barthes calls *la fonction d'ancrage.*[7]

A translation from a non-discursive communications system to a discursive system is a matter of personal choice. An image has no indication of where to start and where to end a translation, in which succession the recognizable configurations should be mentioned, which values should be conferred to the configurations, etc. All its information is open, belonging to *space* and not to *time*.

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[6] Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* 1968

[7] Roland Barthes, "Rhétorique de l'image", *Communications* 4, 1964, p. 44f

The religious iconography has put a precise conventional contents behind the caption. It was well known to image-users of that time. The poor man - like Lazarus - is thinking of Christ while the rich man is thinking of his worldly goods.

Christ hanging on the cross has it's own caption. It was the most common iconographic sign full of its own connotations. The crucified Christ is the object of devotion of all men. In order to fill up the rest of the caption *The Rich and the Poor Man's prayer* the artist relies on a coded system that is built on analogy to his contemporary society. From the iconographic caption we know - and medieval man knew - that it is a devotional action performed by respectively a poor and a rich man. They are kneeling with their hands raised in prayer. Both positions express a conventional body language known to everyone. Kneeling in a prayer was a daily life routine which implies specific gestures. By kneeling you indicate that you are praying. But it tells nothing of the contents and direction of your prayer.

We know and they knew that the poor man is thinking of Jesus Christ and the rich man is thinking of his worldly goods. That is part of the verbal story. That is what the lines from their mouths are showing us. Strictly speaking the image does not show what the two men are thinking of, the lines indicate the destination of their verbalised prayer. Consequently the two male figures represent a poor respectively a rich man. But do these configurations depict poor and rich man in late medieval times? My answer is no. And they do not bring documentation of the dress of the two representing different social groups.

To define the social position of the two praying men it is necessary to expand the syncronic research to other depictions of the poor and the rich. The result of such a visual perspective will show a differentiation within the different social groups.

Saint Martin was one of the first figures in the world of religious images to show charity. From the beginning of 14th century very often he is depicted richly dressed on horseback while cutting the half of his cloak to give to some beggars. These poor men were the "beggars in search of their daily bread". They belonged to the absolute bottom of society. "Tens or even hundreds of paupers followed the funeral corteges of the wealthy, waiting for their posthumous handout. The poor waited at the doors of the churches, occasionally entering and disturbing the services within. They ate no meat and drank no wine. They were sick, blind, crippled, maimed, covered with sores. They were dirty and smelled bad. They were ugly and fearsome to look at. 'They were deemed nasty".[8] The poor praying man is depicted in another way than the poor, who receive the half of Saint Martin's cloak. He represents another definition a poor man.

Lazarus too is to be classified among these nasty beggars. Saaint Luke gives the linguistic ancrage to the pictures of Lazarus. Lying at the rich man's door "was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scrapes that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores".[9]

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[8] Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages* 1986, p. 232f

[9] Luke XVI, 20-21

As a contrast to the rich man the dogs feel pity for Lazarus. This is part of the moral of the linguistic story. In medieval real life the dogs behaved in another way. Dante wrote, "With that fury and with that storm, with wich dogs run out upon the poor wretch, who where he stops suddenly asks alms".[10]

Lazarus belongs to the wretched poor. After his death his soul went directly to heaven. But it is not the Lazarus-type we see depicted praying to the crucified Jesus Christ.

Moving a step up the social ladder we find pictures of the shepherds. They are often enclosed in the depictions of The Nativity. An angel is proclaming the happy news to the shepherds in the fields or we find them at the stable admiring the child. According to the text they are positively connoted.

And yet they detach themselves from the other participants by their clothes and appearance. With the stockings hanging down below their buttocks they are declassified. They are more miserably dressed than our poor praying man. They represented poverty in the countryside.

"The shepherd was sanctified in the iconography of the Annunciation and Adoration. But in reality the shepherd was hardly a sacred figure. Like the forest workers, his presence was troubling. Working alone, he communicated only with animals, whose bestiality he shared. He was thought to posess evil powers. Many shepherds were odd or mentally retarded and therefore despised. No one would marry his daughter to a shepherd. People looked upon shepherds as lazy, because their work required little physical effort. they were badly paid. Thus shepherds were poor mentally, socially, and economically - and their filthe appearance only confirmed this general perception".[11]

Certainly it is not a shepherd we find depicted in the Prayer of the Rich and the Poor Man.

The poor praying man resembles more the local peasants as they are representing Adam dwelling after the Expulsion. Digging or ploughing Adam "the peasant" is not an underdog. He is nicely dressed. His work is not too hard. He has the disposal of expensive tools such as a plough and draught-animals.

The poor praying man finds his equals too among the peasants depicted in visualization of the legend of the Fast Growing Grain. Here we see well dressed peasants harvesting normally with a sickle.

In a way the typical image of The Rich and the Poor man's Prayer shows us a representative of the peasants and not of the poor population thinking of Jesus Christ when praying. The sole difference is found in the holes on the elbows of the praying man. That is the only iconographic means used to connote "Poor man", the rest is a visualization of a middle-class peasant thinking of the sufferings of Jesus Christ. That is the ideology of that part of the image.

What about the rich man then? As a matter of fact he is rather modestly dressed. He reminds me of the typical Dane after his meeting with our taxation system. Again it is useful to look at other images of the very rich people. They are represented in images of Vanitas.

Three men on horseback are meeting the Death in the shape of three skeletons. The men are very richly dressed like kings or princes. So are their

[10] Quotation from Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages* 1986, p. 233
[11] Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages* (1978) 1986, p. 239f

horses. With gerfalcons on their gloved hands they are accompanied by their hounds. Of course the image shall tell the spectator that even the mightiest person is nothing confronted with Death. But it also tells us that wealth causes death without blessing. The three men are too occupied by their worldly mortal prosperity. They have hunting and not God on their minds.

Exactly as our praying rich man has his earthly goods on his mind. But he is not dressed like the three horsemen. As a matter of fact he is but modestly dressed. He is neither the nobleman nor the great landowner. It is a well-to-do man thinking of his worldly goods. And he has not much to boast of: some ordinary clothes, a chest probaly full of nice things, some beer barrels, maybe a horse and sometimes his house. It is a modest prosperity that diverts his thoughts.

What he is thinking of are obtainable goods.

Many farms brewed their own beer and had their own beer barrels**.** In the village church of Tuse we see the peasant's wife with a beer barrel - being helped and/or attacked by some devils. But the motive indicates a wide decentralisation of beer brewing. When ploughing in the images Adam "the peasant" uses even two horses whereas the rich man only has one horse in his thoughts. "A plough team, no matter wether made up of oxen or horses, was an extremely expensive investment, and as a rule it was only the peasant with a medium or large-size holding who was able to afford one".[12]

Adam and Eve at work after the Expulsion are in the late middle ages nicely dressed forming af nuclear family. The clothes that the rich man is thinking of differ not much from the dress of the first couple.

What we see is the peasant kneeling indicating a prayer. He is depicted just a bit more sumptuous than his counterpart which is iconographically necessary to create the connotation of a rich man. As a well-to-do man he kneeling before Jesus Christ. As an industrious man he is thinking of worldly goods that he might be able to obtain. Contrary to the poor man he has something to be grateful of.

I have tried to prove that the late medieval Danish wall paintings contrary to those of the 12th and 13th centuries mostly were the expression of the local peasants, normally initiated by the church wardens who were elected amongst the peasants themselves, and financed through the fabric paid by the peasants. The visual language of the walls and vaults in the late Middle Ages belongs to the peasants who have risen to fairly good living conditions caused by the lack of labour and the and the dissolution of the manorial system.[13]

If we try to find another example of the peasants' notion of wealth we turn to the iconographic motive: "The Feast of the Rich Man" created by the same workshop which has made most of the scenes of "The Poor and the Rich Man's Prayer". It is a very modest banquet. A man and his wife have paid the rich man a visit. They are sitting all the three at a table without cloth. There is no indication of room and space. No indication of surroundings.

Compared with the version of the same iconographic motive in a monastery in the most prosperous late medieval town in Denmark, Elsinore, one is struck

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[12] Werner Rösener, *Peasants in the Middle Ages* (1985) 1996, p. 138f

[13] Axel Bolvig, *Kirkekunstens storhedstid*. *Om kirker og kunst i Danmark i romansk tid* (1992); *Bondens billeder*. *Om kirker og kunst i dansk senmiddelalder* (1994)

by the difference in attitude to the notion of wealth. At Elsinore the rich man is surrounded by two mistresses who are caressing him, four servants who take care of food and drink, four other smaller servants who entertain and play music. They are sitting in a nice room. They are well dressed. Wein, Weib und Gesang. And a lot of it.

It is understandable that the rich man of Elsinore on his deathbed is at the mercy of the devils. In the village church on the contrary there is no testimony of the rich man's death. He wasn't rich and consequently his death without visual drama. Why should the devil devote his time to that anonymous, innocent man?

In the same parochial church you find visualised what will happen to the man who obtains money in an indecent way. Judas has hung himself and two devils are dragging his soul out of his body. The nouveau rich, the man who has not deserved his money, is doomed to Hell. In spite of the narrative of the story told by Saint Luke the rich man at the table is not leaving his modest comfort in order to go to Hell. He has done nothing wrong. He is just a well-to-do peasant.

So is my 1997-reading of the late medieval wallpaintings in Denmark. They were mainly ordered and paid by the local peasantry, they were executed by artists or craftsmen with the same roots. They were ment to be seen and experienced by the same people. They cannot but express the mental world of the inhabitants in an accidental parish. They reflect and they form this rural world.

"The Poor and the Rich Man's Prayer" is not showing two representatives from opposite levels of the social stratum. Rather a slight differentiation within the group of peasants that dominate the local society. The film director Michelangelo Antonioni has through his 85 years long life tried to demonstrate that behind a picture there is another picture more true etc. Behind the religious iconographic caption we find a picture of the late medieval Danish peasants. Not a documentary but an image of their self-understanding. An image of their ideology. And this is more true than the contents of their prayer.

Another example will underline this hypothesis of the selfconceit of the peasants. As an example I chose the representation of the motiv Adam and Eve after the Expulsion in the village church Hjembæk (Fig. 3).

After The Fall God said to Eve:

"I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." To Adam he said, "cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food" (Genesis 3, 16-19).

God set up some severe conditions for the first couple. She should bear under pain and submit to the man. He should work hard on a soil full of stones and weed.

But they did not obey orders in the visual world of their wallpaintings. Eve is sitting in a comfortable chair spinning. She is wearing a nice dress. Adam is digging with a spade. It is not hard labour. He is not depicted as a worn-down labourer. On the contrary he too is well dressed.

Between the two is a small child in a cradle. With her foot the mother is rocking the baby. They form a small family: father, mother and child. No female

submission to the man. No painful birth. No hard work. But a careful life and a sheltered existence. Production and reproduction form a synthesis.

The unity and togethernes of the family is underlined by the man using a spade and not a plough. "The most important among the gardening implements was the spade, which helped to loosen the topsoil so as to prepare it for the sowing or planting of the more delicate garden plants".[14] The garden represented the family's own property contrary to the fields of the community where the work depended on a system of common and compulsory uses.

In a way this representation of the verbal contents of the iconographical caption is a clear-cut protest against God. It is the expression of the peasants' ideal conception of their daily life. And if not - the image is part of the forming of such ideal conceptions.

Peasants' rebellions are not always violent.

The mothers did not give up the care for their children in the pictures of The Massacre of the Innocents (Fig. 4). King Herod ordered his soldiers to kill all babies in Bethlehem. But the women started a counterattack. With their spinning tools they hit the soldiers trying to save the children. Of course they did that. Mothers will always protect their children.

In a way this exegis contains a rebellion against law and order. The ruler ordered the massacre. The soldiers obeyed the order. But the women challenged his authority. You will never find such a defiance in images of 12th and 13th centuries. It demands a certain kind of self-consciousnes and social security to defy the kings orders.

The motive depicts violence towards children. How often have not the inhabitants of small villages witnessed aggressive gangs, violent brawls, rapes etc.

The Massacre of the Innocents is *the* image of violence. It is not more stereotyped than our press photos of fights between police and troublemakers or demonstrators, between Israeli armed forces and Palestinian youths.

I hope not that The Massacre of the Innocents is an image of daily life in a late medieval village, but it is an image of violence, of executioners and victims who existed in the daily life.

The men are missing in the defence of the babies. It does not mean that men did not care. The image of The Massacre of the Innocents is not a documentation. Rather it reveals that the small children were under female supervision and care. Some years later the small ones were not children any longer but small grown ups working on the farms and in the fields with a much closer relation to the male world.

Today we try to make ourselves believe that we are visually informed of the things going on throughout the world. But whether it is CNN or our local TV station we see the same kind of images. So-called documentary photos and TV have established a kind of news-iconography as conventional as the religious images of The Middle Ages.

Sitting in front of our TV screens many of us think that we get information of politics, economics, daily life etc. Luckily we forget most of the contents as soon

[14] Werner Rösener, *Peasants in the Middle Ages* (1985) 1996, p. 129

as we switch off or go on zapping. It doesn't matter for tomorrow we will see the same images and so on and on again.

These thousands and thousands of images form our daily life. They are seen all over the world. They create a conform conception of life surrounding us.

In the Middle Ages people did not need the daily input of so-called new pictures. They accomodated to the paintings fixed on the walls. These images belonging to the Christian world were in contents more varied than our news coverage. The Massacre of the Innocents, The First Labour, The Prayer of the Rich and the Poor man vary dependant of their surroundings.

Images constitute some of the best source material to our understanding or our identifying ourselves with the mental world of medieval people.

In the late medieval Danish village church the mental world of the parishioners, of the local peasants, is to be seen overall.