

Jan Henrik Munksgaard: The Reformation Promoted the Dannebrog

Abstract: *Up until 1536, the Danish-Norwegian Church formed part of the Catholic religious community, with the Pope as its head. Following the Reformation, the Danish-Norwegian king became the ecclesiastical head of the new Protestant state. This was evident in many ways, including the use of banners and flags in church art. My lecture aims to show that in the 17th and 18th centuries, the depictions of flags changed in the Danish-Norwegian church.*

In art, Christ is depicted with banners in two contexts: the Resurrection and the Ascension. In Catholic Europe, Christ's victory banner was most often rendered with a red cross on white ground both prior to and after the Reformation. In Denmark-Norway, depictions of banners and flags were changing from the beginning of the 17th century to a white cross on red ground. This change from a red cross on white ground to a white cross on red ground might appear to be insignificant, but is in fact of great symbolic effect. In my lecture, I will try to show that the change in the use of flags and banners was the result of a conscious national religious policy implemented by the authorities.

In contemporary art today, flags are relatively seldom used to create effects. Previously, however, flags and banners were more commonly depicted in symbolic contexts, particularly in Christian art, and banners are often seen in motifs depicting Christ's Resurrection, descent to hell and Ascension. In these situations, Christ is shown with a high-held lance banner in His right or left hand. The banner is the very symbol of the Resurrection. My theory is that the design of the banner might provide important information about contemporary attitudes to the Church and the State, in other words the relationship between the ecclesiastical and secular powers.

In my lecture, I will compare the Resurrection banner as it appears in medieval art with the banner depicted in church art of the 15th and 16th centuries. My observations are based on paintings and sculptures in Norwegian churches.

What was the shape of the banner, which colours were used, and which symbols were included? Did the Resurrection banner undergo any changes from the Middle Ages up until recent times, and if so, what were the reasons for these changes?

In the Middle Ages, Norway and the Norwegian Church formed part of the universal Roman-Catholic Church and had the same faith and symbols as the rest of the Christian world. The Pope was recognised as the head of the church, and all Norwegians were his followers. Norway was a poor country at the outskirts of Europe, and around 1350, the country had slightly less than half a million inhabitants. Only a few privileged persons were literate. Pictorial art in our meaning of the word was non-existent. The only place where people could see coloured pictures was in the churches, and hence these pictures served as official Christian stories used for instruction purposes for the congregation. These pictures were the cartoons of the time. Church art was, moreover, a reflection of the divine and a proof of God's existence.



Medieval altar frontals

In Norway, a great number of frontals with religious motifs from the High Middle Ages have been preserved (1250-1350). These gothic paintings hang in front of altars and told stories of crusades, the lives of

holy men and women, and the Bible, and not least of Christ's Passion and Resurrection.



The frontal in Nes Church depicts Christ's Resurrection from the grave. He is dressed in a simple, red mantle over His naked body. In His left hand, He holds a white lance with a solid-coloured three-pointed yellow banner. The yellow colour probably symbolises heaven or paradise

in the same way as the yellow colour of halos and gold mosaic in church apses of the Late Antiquity period indicated that the persons present were in the Kingdom of God.

In the frontal from Røldal Church, Christ rises from the grave with His right hand raised to give blessing. In His left hand He holds a white lance with a yellow cross at the top. The Resurrection banner is solid-coloured white and comes to three points at the fly. The white colour symbolises purity and innocence. Christ is innocent when He rises from the dead.



In most of the Resurrection motifs on Norwegian frontals, Christ has a cross on His banner. Two paintings in Eid Church are cases in point. Here Christ carries a white lance banner in His left hand. The banner has a small, black cross on the bunting, with the fly cut into three tails.



Another and more characteristic frontal from Årdal Church shows motifs of both the Resurrection from

cross was the Resurrection banner not only in Norway. All over Europe, the same symbol was used to depict the Christ's Resurrection. A case in point is Piero della Francesca's fresco in the San Sepulcro town hall from approximately 1465. Christ stands up majestically and stares at us. In His right hand, He is holding a cross banner, and from the right side of his body, blood is flowing out after the stab of the lance. In the late Middle Ages, this banner was a common European image of the Resurrection.

The Reformation in Denmark-Norway

In 1536, King Christian III. of Denmark-Norway decided that the country was to become Protestant. At Easter 1537, the last Catholic archbishop, Olav Engelbrektsson, sailed from Norway. By that time, the Catholic Church had lost the Danish-Norwegian realm. The spiritual revolution was a top-down one; it was a revolution by the King and parts of the upper social strata, with the people not much involved in the religious changes. Nevertheless, the episcopate was abolished, the belongings of the Church were confiscated and the Lutheran Church organisation was introduced under the control of the King and his administration. All contact with the global Catholic Church and the Pope in Rome was terminated.

To the general public, the changes were evident in the form and content of the church service. The new doctrine was to be built on the Gospels, not on the Pope's authority. The Latin mass was replaced by the pastor's sermon in the congregation's mother tongue and the singing of hymns. The transition to Protestantism was to have consequences not only for the religious faith, but also for the use by the church in Denmark-Norway of flags and banners.

Altarpieces

In the beginning many of the Lutheran pastors were hostile to pictures and had altarpieces made with only texts, so-called catechism altars, without any drawings or figures.

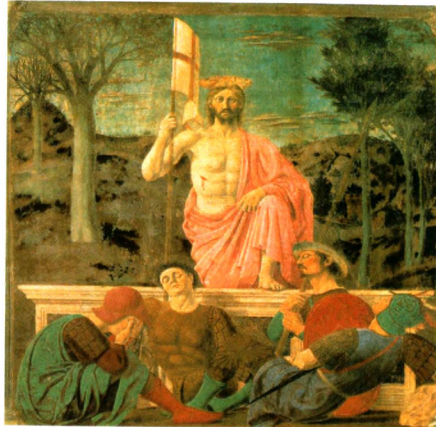


The Resurrection banner

On the basis of these examples, we may say that Christ appears with a banner in two contexts, namely the Resurrection from the grave and the descent to hell. In no other situation is He carrying a banner. This banner becomes a symbol of the victory over death. In order to emphasize this, the banners are painted in white or yellow, which undoubtedly symbolises Christ's innocence, purity and place in heaven. To further make clear what this is all about, the cross has been included in the banner. The cross has since the second century been a Christian symbol. It certainly signified Christ's Passion and Death, but in particular His victory over death, his Resurrection and his triumph. The red colour of the cross symbolises His blood, and consequently the red cross on a white ground was a very symbolically loaded motif.

At the same time, we can ascertain that Norwegian banners in the 11th and 12th centuries quite often were long, narrow and three-pointed. The pictures are so unambiguous that they leave little doubt about that fact.

The white banner with the red



the grave and the descent to hell. In Limbo, Christ leads Adam and Eve out of the devil's mouth. Both places, He holds in His left hand a red lance with a yellow cross at the top, and a white three-pointed banner with a red cross potent.

The frontal from Roldal Church also shows a motif from the decent to hell.

Here too, Christ stands in front of the devil's mouth, holding the white lance with both hands. The white three-pointed banner has a red cross over the whole bunting, and the arms of the cross reach out to the edges of the banner.



In the Norwegian frontals, the white banner with the red outstretched cross is also depicted in connection with stories of crusades. In one picture story, the Saracens stand in front of the walls of Constantinople. The citizens are in great danger and believe they can only be saved by assistance from above. The Christian army represented by ten knights are praying in front of an altar picture of Virgin Mary. In the foreground, a bishop is kneeling down together with the knights. They are holding the white banner with the outstretched red cross.



The same three-pointed banner is carried by the emperor Heracles and his knights outside the walls of Jerusalem.

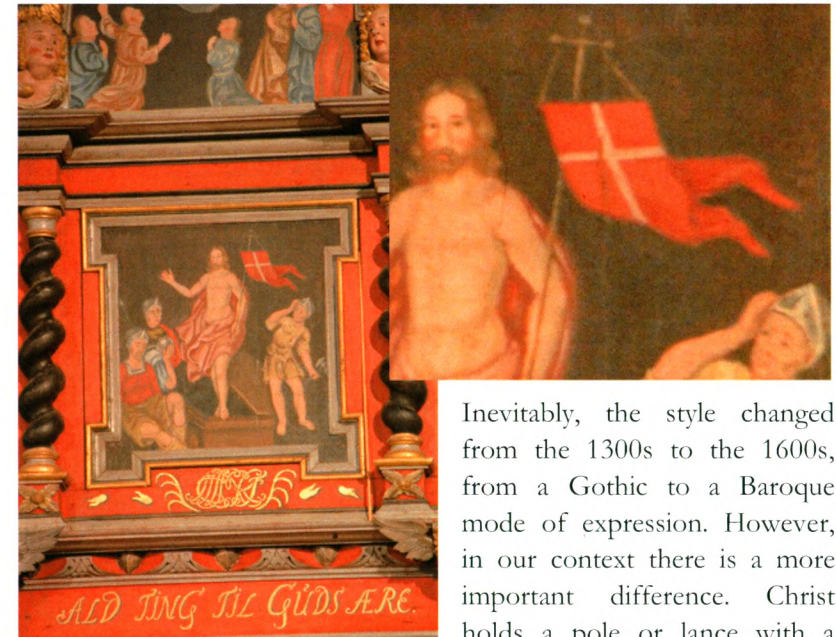


In the 15th century, these altarpieces were replaced by often lavish and dominant altarpieces with sculptural and painted scenes from Bible stories. As time passed, these altarpieces were designed according to a prescribed formula, with a depiction of the Holy Communion at the bottom, the crucifixion in the middle, and the Resurrection at the top.

Most of the images of the Resurrection showed the victorious and triumphant Christ holding a flag or a banner in His left

hand.

The Resurrection and Christ's Ascension were some of the most frequent motifs in Norwegian church paintings from the end of the 14th century. And banners appear exclusively in images of the Resurrection. The theme in the Middle Ages was the same as in recent times: Christ Triumphant with a banner of triumph.



Inevitably, the style changed from the 1300s to the 1600s, from a Gothic to a Baroque mode of expression. However, in our context there is a more important difference. Christ

holds a pole or lance with a cross banner. The banner might well be the traditional white one with a red cross, but from the beginning of the 15th century, cross banners were usually painted with a red cross on a white ground. In the 15th and 16th centuries, banners with a white cross on a red ground become dominant.

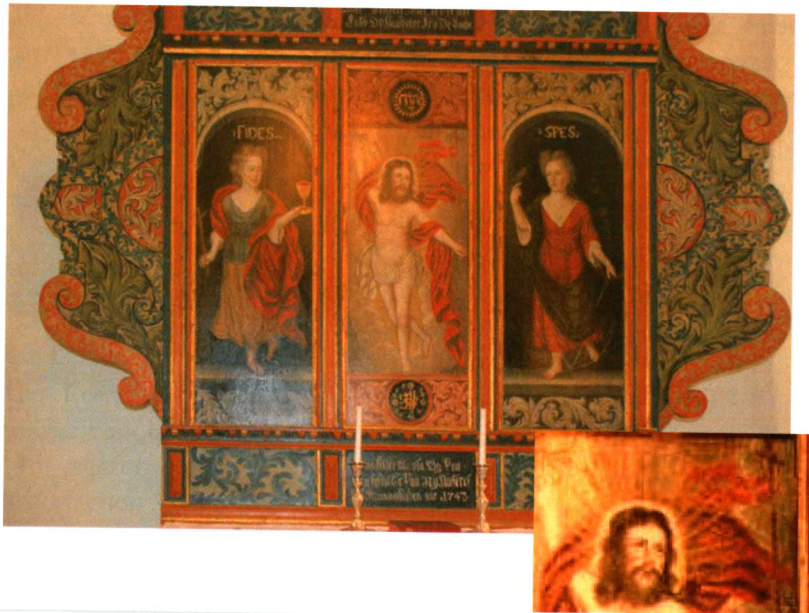
A classical example of these banners is the altarpiece from Skedsmo Church near Oslo. Between the Crucifixion and the Ascension, the Resurrection is depicted. Christ stands on the edge of the coffin with a light red cloth around his naked body. He is the Victor who conquered death. He raises His right hand to show His nail hole. In His left hand, He holds a pole with a tailed red banner with a white cross.



The same motif is used in Alstadhaug Church from 1636. Above the

crucifixion scene is a painting of the Resurrection. Christ is standing on the edge of His grave wrapped only in a loincloth. In His right hand, He holds a cross-shaped pole with a tailed red banner with a white cross.

In Høvåg Church from 1743, Christ is depicted in the centre with faith and hope on each side. In a white loincloth, wrapped in a red piece of textile, He is holding a red banner with a white cross.



else is He seen with this symbol.

So, the church artists created a banner that was identical to the *Dannebrog*, the official Danish-Norwegian flag. In this way, Christ became victor and standard-bearer for the King and the Danish-Norwegian state. The congregation, in fact all Norwegians, experienced and participated in church services where they were bound to see



In the 15th and 16th centuries, numerous altar-pieces in Norwegian churches had depictions of Christ holding a red banner with a white cross. Like in the Middle Ages, Christ appears with a banner in Resurrection scenes, and nowhere

Christ holding up the *Dannebrog* as if He identified with the symbol of the King and the state. The impact was particularly strong because pictures, and specially coloured pictures, were rare at the time, and were generally found only in churches. Consequently, to ordinary people the *Dannebrog* could have been considered one with Christ.

Why the Dannebrog in churches?



What was the reason for this transition from white with a red cross to red with a white cross? Was the introduction of the *Dannebrog* on altarpieces a mere coincidence, was it due to practical artistic requirements, or could it have been a conscious act



on the part of the authorities in order to promote the combined Danish-Norwegian state and the King?

First of all, we can safely say that a symbol-laden change of this kind could



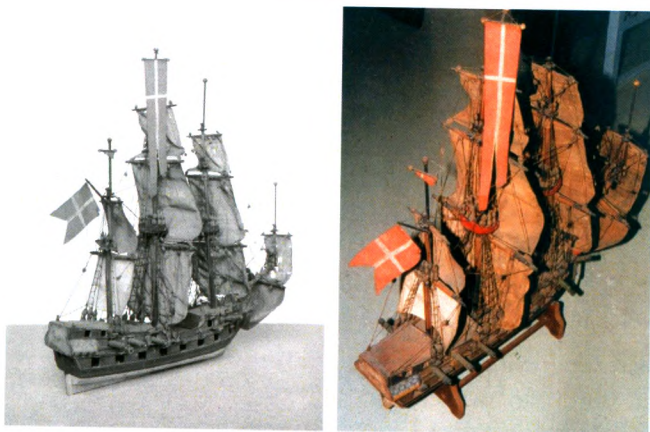
hardly have been a coincidence. It is more likely to assume that the interior of the churches reflects the painters' imagery. One explanation of the transition from white banners with a red cross to red banners with a white cross might be hidden in the way artists worked.

Almost all Danish-Norwegian craftsmen and artists that worked in Norway used models for their paintings and sculptures. These models were mass-produced copperplate engravings made by the great European masters, and were all in black and white. It is doubtful whether the artist knew the colours of the banners in the original pieces. To them, it could be natural to use the colours they saw in their local environment, namely the colours of the Danish-Norwegian



Dannebrog. Consequently, the change in colours might be explained in terms of the artists' practical situation.

At the same time, we can ascertain that other factors work against this theory. As from the first half of the 15th century, ship models were hung in the ceiling of church naves. This was common all over Northern Europe¹⁴. These models are usually called votive ships. In Norway, they were decorated with *Dannebrog* pennants, *Dannebrog* streamers and *Dannebrog* flags from all masts and spires. The flags and pennants were often larger, relatively speaking, than the ones on real ships in order to give an extraordinary decorative impression. In addition, many small paintings of Norwegian ships with the *Dannebrog* were found on altarpieces and epitaphs in Norwegian churches.



As a side effect of the use of these flags, the Danish-Norwegian unified state was in focus in very many Norwegian church rooms. To many Norwegians, the *Dannebrog* in the church was the only flag they saw during a long life-time. The *Dannebrog* was otherwise absent in the farming communities in Norway. The use of flags on ships and in churches consequently had a decisive impact on the Norwegian people's identification with the *Dannebrog* in the 15th and 16th centuries.



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In addition to the *Dannebrog*, the Danish-Norwegian and Norwegian coats of arms served decorative purposes in church rooms in the 15th and 16th centuries. Denmark's three lions and Norway's axe-holding lion as well as other heraldic motifs, not least the King's monogram, were central motifs in many church interiors. On altarpieces, epitaphs and church chairs, the initials of Christian IV., Fredrik VII. and other kings were included in highly visible and central places.

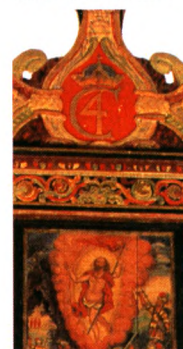
In the altarpiece in Kinn Church from 1644, King Christian IV's monogram is placed between the Resurrection and the Ascension, and in Elmelund Church on the island of Møn in Denmark, the altarpiece has the initials of Christian IV instead of a depiction of the Resurrection. These monograms are not isolated cases, but on the contrary a regular element in Norwegian churches.

The King as God's substitute

These mundane expressions of the policies of the king, state and authorities clearly indicate that the monarchy wanted to make clear that it was an ecclesiastic and not only a secular power. The Reformation and the break with the Pope's Church provided the Danish-Norwegian king with an opportunity to manifest his position through the church and through religion in quite a different way than what had been the case previously.

The absolute Danish-Norwegian monarch had, according to himself, been given two duties. He was to protect the realms and also ensure the proper faith. Politics and religion were not separate entities.

On this background,



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there is reason to believe that the use of the *Dannebrog* in the Danish-Norwegian churches was an integrated and a conscious effort to promote the monarch, and as time went by, also the Danish-Norwegian absolute monarchy. The Danish-Norwegian flag, the red banner with a white cross, was the banner of both the King and God.



And finally. What colours were used for the Resurrection in the other Protestant countries? What about Sweden? What about Prussia? I am just asking.



Endnotes:

1. Humbla 1930. In Venice, votive ships are believed to date back to the 13th century, p 59.

References:

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About the author



Jan Henrik Munksgaard from Kristiansand, Norway, earned his cand. phil. degree in history in 1971. From 1972 he was Curator at the Historical Museum, University of Bergen, where he was made Chief Curator in 1982. Since 1986 he is Director of the Vest-Agder Fylkesmuseum (Vest-Agder County Museum) in Kristiansand. He is author of several articles on Norwegian and Danish flag history, and former editor of *Nordisk Flaggkontakt*, the journal of the Nordic Flag Society.

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