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Gender or Ritual?

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Jes Wienberg

Gotlandic Church Portals: Gender or Ritual?

Closed Portals

Why are the portals closed or missing? That is, why are the northern church portals sealed in most medieval churches in Scandinavia, or why did they disappear, while the southern portals continue as entrances into the church (fig 1)? Did the northern portals function as entrances for women and the southern portals as entrances for men? Does the blocking of the northern church portals expose a change in the relationship between men and women – or a change in religious rituals? When did the change occur? And are there regional differences?

Between Church and Churchyard

Over the last few years, architecture has gained new attention as a social and mental arena created by people, but at the same time, consciously and unconsciously, it has influenced and restrained the actions and thoughts of these people. Here the church with its house and burials stands as an example, where the relationship between people and between people and God is exhibited.

The medieval orders are apparently visible in the church architecture in the tripartition with the choir belonging to the priest, the nave belonging to the peasants or townsmen and the tower belonging to the aristocracy. Social differences can also be seen in the location of the graves, which, according to rank, can be separated in zones from the church building out to the periphery of the churchyard as it is known in Norwegian laws.

Even more distinct is the separation of gender both inside the church and outside in the cemetery. The nave was divided into two parts with men on the south side and women on the north side. In the southern part of the nave there was an altar dedicated to a male saint and in the northern part an altar dedicated to a female saint, frequently the Virgin Mary (Gilchrist 1994, 133 ss.). The division appears unmistakably after the Reformation, when the former

wall-benches or free-standing benches were replaced by pews. During the service all had their defined seats, which we know from written sources and even from drawn plans. Men had their seats on the south side and women on the north side. A person's seat was furthermore defined by age and social rank. This tradition continued well into the 19th century (Gustafsson 1950).

A separation between men and women has also been documented in the churchyard. Men were buried south of the church and women north of the church (fig 2). The division is typical for Christian graves and occurs more or less consistently during the first centuries of Christianity in Scandinavia, from the 10th to the 13th century.

The separation in the churchyard according to gender has been connected to the corresponding division inside the church. The separation ends somewhere in the 13th century, but the date is not known for certain and might vary locally and regionally. The end of the separation is connected to a changed view of the relationship between men and women. Men obtained a more important role as head of the family, which was emphasised by the religious marriage. Women now were to be buried together with their men on the males' side of the church, the southern side. In the same period the northern side became associated with coldness, the evil and the devil (Vretemark 1992; Kieffer-Olsen 1993, 99 ss.; Nilsson 1994).

Church Portals

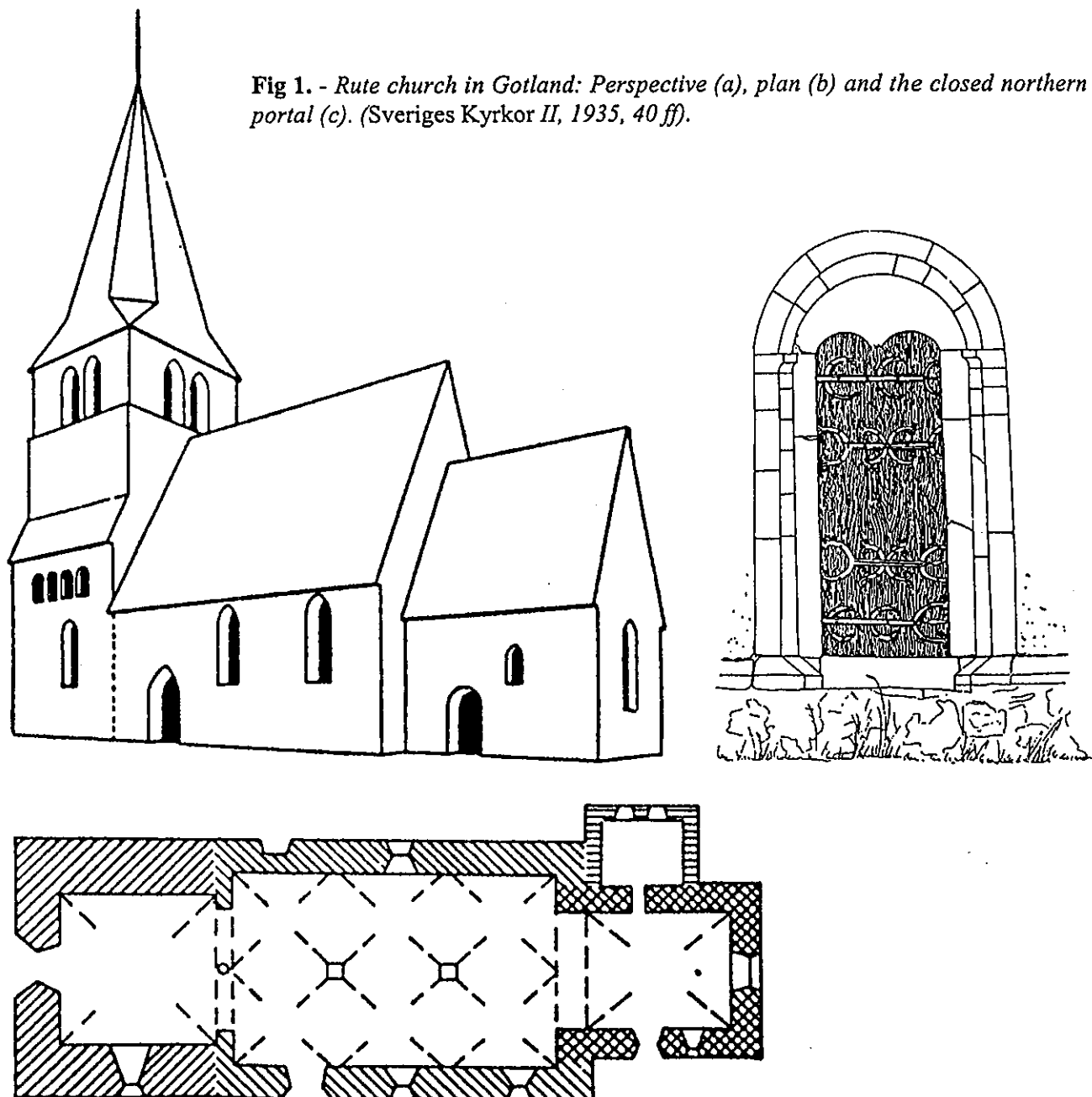
Attention has been paid to church portals especially in art historical studies. The portals have been described and analysed, as their elaboration could be of help in the definition of style, contacts and dating of the church. The portals have been used to divide buildings into groups of style or workshops. Style analysis has been one of the main methods of dating the architecture. However, the functions of the portals have seldom been discussed in research. The functions have been regarded as unproblematic.

The number and location of the portals vary within Scandinavia. Often there is a door to the choir from the south. In this way the priest had his own entrance, the 'priest's door' (Löija 1996). In Denmark there were normally two portals leading into the nave, one to the south and one to the north. The southern portal must have been the entrance of men and is called the 'men's door'. The northern portal must have been for women and are called "women's door". According to most of the literature, the northern portals were sealed or disappeared somewhere in the late Middle Ages about the same time as porches were erected in front of the southern portals. In the west part, through a tower, there would be an entrance for the owners or patrons of the church. In Norway and Sweden it was more common to have two portals leading into the

nave, one from the south and one from the west, whereby the latter was the main entrance. Here the northern portal occurs only seldom (Mackeprang 1944, 60 ss.; 1948, 1 ss.; Cinthio & Blindheim 1964).

Alternatively there is a possibility that the function of the portals was primarily symbolic. The portal or door symbolized Christ, the entrance to Paradise. The portals could have been used for processions during church festivals, in connection with burials and maybe even every Sunday. In England the processions are well known; thus, for instance, the coffin was carried in through the northern portal and out through the southern portal. The north side of the church together with the northern portal are associated with the stories of the Old Testament and the south side and the southern portal with the New

Fig 1. - Rute church in Gotland: Perspective (a), plan (b) and the closed northern portal (c). (Sveriges Kyrkor II, 1935, 40 ff).



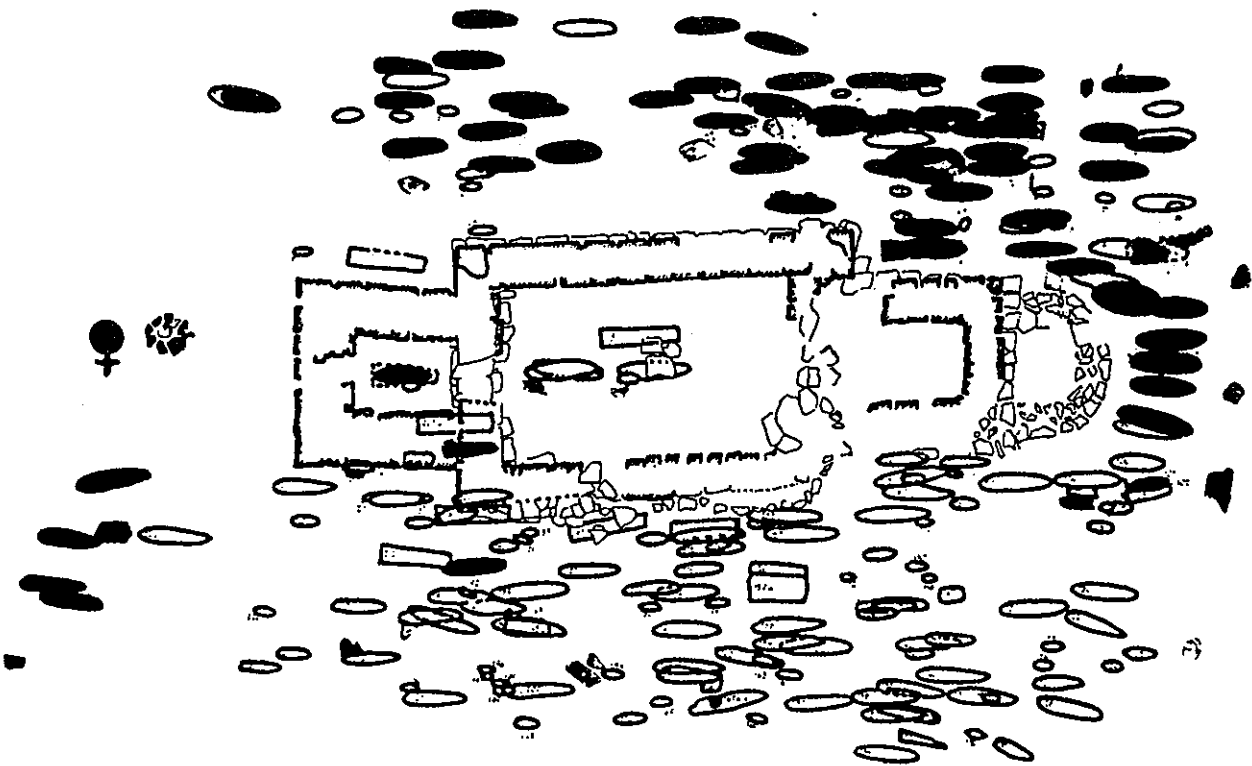


Fig 2. - *Västerhus church in Jämtland with a separation of graves according to gender (Gejvall 1960).*

Testament. The northern portal may have been blocked after the Reformation, when the Catholic processions disappeared (Johansson 1968; Holmberg 1990, 40 ss.; Christie & Christie 1993, 68).

A Gender Perspective

Medieval archaeology is not and has never been distinguished by any theoretical or methodological avant-gardisme. In the shadow of history and the written sources the discipline has been conservative and utmost cautious. Social and economic perspectives reached medieval archaeology far later than the archaeologies of other periods. Still a gender perspective has not had any major impact, apart from a few exceptions (Gilchrist 1993).

Would a gender perspective lead to the formulation of new questions or to the attaining of new results regarding the churches and in particular the portals? Could the occurrence of northern portals, so called "women's doors", contribute to the study of the relationship between men and women during the Middle Ages?

My starting-point and my expectations were quite clear: provided that the northern portal was a door for women, then the blocking of the door or its disappearance could help to determine when there was a transformation from gender separated graves into

family graves. Local or regional variations in the sealing of the northern portals would unveil gender variations in time and space.

The church portals would be a good empirical starting point because they are often preserved, well-documented and might be dated by style. The same questions could be examined through archaeological excavations in churchyards, but for practical, economic and ethical reasons such investigations would probably be few. The chronological development and the geographical variation would be much easier to map using the many portals. Though the question remains whether the assumption is correct, that is, if the portals to the nave were really connected to a gender separation.

Gotlandic Church Portals

The medieval churches on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea are well-preserved and well-documented. Furthermore, the many building phases could be dated within narrow limits with the help of architectural details, wall-paintings and dendrochronology (Sveriges Kyrkor; Roosval 1911; Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991; Bråthen 1995). The churches were continuously being rebuilt and enlarged from the first stone building about 1150 until about 1350, when the building activity came to an end. The architecture was

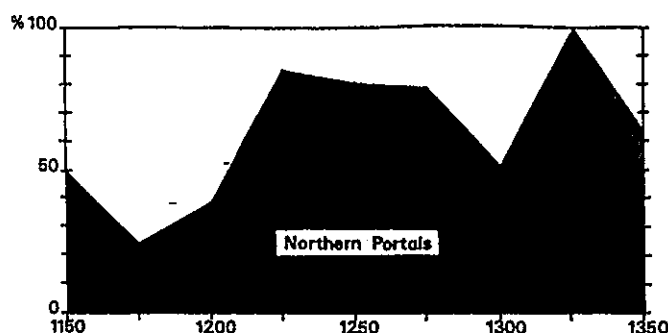


Fig 3. - The presence of northern portals at churches in Gotland between 1150 and 1350. The investigation includes 99 churches. The northern portal might be situated in the nave (45) or in the tower (24) which is more or less integrated with the nave, but the statistical tendency is the same regardless of the exact location of the northern portal. The information on portals and datings are taken from the inventories "Sveriges Kyrkor" and Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991.

almost frozen so that today around 100 parish churches have been preserved. The island of Gotland would be an excellent place to analyse the chronological development regarding the portals, which here vary in size, form and decoration and have been commented upon in several studies (Roosval 1909; Lagerlöf 1992; Redelius 1992). Gotland is also a relevant area to investigate as several archaeological finds and excavations have shown that the northern side of the churchyards were used for women until the 13th century and then remained unused almost until today.

When were the northern portals sealed in Gotland or when did they disappear? The task is easy and I had expected to read a clear tendency in my statistics. I also expected the northern portals to disappear around 1225. But this proved not to be the case.

The southern portals steadily grew larger and more elaborated during the Middle Ages, but in fact the northern portals never disappeared (fig 3). Churches with and without northern portals existed side by side in Gotland from the very first stone buildings until the youngest building phases in the 14th century. So it is not possible to see any correlation between the blocking or disappearance of the northern portals and the stop of burials on the northern side of the churchyards.

Portals to Paradise?

Normally a scientist does not use paper or time at a conference to publish a rejected working hypothesis. The result of my little experiment was definitively negative, but it is still a surprise.

Maybe I ought to have been more cautious when regarding the northern portal as a special door for women, remembering churches as Västerhus i Jämtland where there was no northern portal, but where women were still buried on the northern side. The absence of motives on the portals associated with gender might also have been a warning against making fast conclusions. Wise after the event, I also found examples of gothic portals on the northern side of

churches all over Scandinavia. Information from the time of the sealing of the northern portals is scarce, but there are instances where portals were being blocked only *after* the Reformation, in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries (Koch 1983, 65). Still it has become a common opinion that the northern portal is a "women's door" and that it went out of use in the late Middle Ages.

Now more than ever it is relevant to throw some light on the functions of church portals. That is, why do different church designs – churches with and without a northern portal – occur in the same period? Why was there a growing focus on the southern side of the churches during the Middle Ages, so that this side achieves the greatest portals, the greatest windows and so that the porches are built at this side? Is this a result of a change in the relationship between men and women, a result of a 'patriarchalisation'?

To come closer to a solution it may be necessary to collect the very scattered information on portals and their functions. Variations within Scandinavia ought to be mapped to see the differences between countries and regions.

If the northern portal was not a special "women's door" the question is, what was it then? Furthermore it is no longer obvious that the church body reflects the three or four medieval orders. Instead the symbolic or ritual use of the portals will be in focus. But this kind of work is yet to come.

Invitation

This paper represents my preliminary reflections on church portals. I intend to continue my research and therefore I am interested in contacts with other medievalists, who know of the use and meaning of church portals during the Middle Ages or later. Please contact Jes Wienberg (Reader) at the address given below or by E-mail: Jes.Wienberg@ark.lu.se.

Translated with the help from
Birgitta Håkansson and Bodil Petersson

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