

# MEDIEVAL MURALS IN NORWEGIAN STONE CHURCHES

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## INTRODUCTION

In Norway, it was not common to build churches from stone in the Middle Ages. It is estimated that of approximately 2,300 churches only around 320 were made of stone.<sup>1</sup> Today, this ratio is reversed and of the 191 surviving medieval churches, 159 are churches made of stone.<sup>2</sup> At least 33 of these contain preserved remains of medieval murals. These are painted on lime-based supports and differ from wall paintings in the wooden churches both in terms of painting technique and the associated preservation and conservation issues.<sup>3</sup> This article focuses on medieval murals in Norwegian stone churches.

Centuries of rebuilding, deterioration and overpainting, followed by 20<sup>th</sup>-century restorations, have left their mark on the murals. An analysis of medieval murals thus requires the cooperation of art historians and conservators, in part because of the often poor or fragmentary condition of the works, which can frustrate efforts to interpret scenes or figures. Furthermore, historical restorations regularly included extensive additions, alterations and reconstructions. As a result, it is frequently difficult to differentiate between material from different periods. Only recently has

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<sup>1</sup> Riksantikvaren, Kirker. Stavkirker, <https://www.riksantikvaren.no/arbeidsomrader/stavkirker/>, 2022 (first published 2020).

<sup>2</sup> The medieval churches in the Swedish counties Jemtland, Härjedalen and Bohus Len, which were part of Norway until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, are not included in this article.

<sup>3</sup> Of the 32 preserved medieval wooden churches (27 of them stave churches), seven have medieval murals. Except for the canopy in Hopperstad and the baldachin in Torpo stave church, the preserved murals are in very fragmentary state; see OLSTAD 2016, 75.

an interdisciplinary perspective been brought to the documentation and interpretation of these Norwegian paintings.<sup>4</sup>

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all Norwegian murals were whitewashed. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, attitudes to historic churches changed, and murals were uncovered and restored. Today, what remains of medieval murals is typically fragmentary, and consists of figurative motifs, ornaments, signs, and single images. The colours have faded, leading to a loss of detail. Moreover, during earlier restoration work, conservators may have embellished the motifs, sometimes leading to a misinterpretation of scenes and figures or hindering a reliable evaluation of the original decorations. In many cases, there are now murals from different periods on display side by side, works not intended to be viewed together. These amalgamations hamper efforts to distinguish motifs and date them.

This article discusses information about mural restoration and conservation in the form of stratigraphy, painting techniques and conservation treatments together with art historical studies to yield new knowledge about the medieval murals in Norwegian stone churches. It addresses the following questions: when were murals first painted in Norwegian stone churches, and what was the extent of these paintings? What motifs and ornaments remain? Is it possible to identify any workshops?

In an effort to answer these questions, we present a survey of the restoration history of the murals and examine murals with figurative motifs from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, we review some of the ornamental murals, including the borders, architectural designs and drapery as well as individual symbols and images, such as ships and labyrinths.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Although there has been no comprehensive technical and art historical overview of Norwegian medieval murals, there is previous work on which our research has been built. Two art historical studies on Norwegian medieval murals provide an overview of larger figurative motifs; they do not, however, include ornamental and minor murals. The first is Erik Oddvar Dæhlin's 1956 master's thesis "En studie over norsk monumental-maleri fra middelalderen" (A Study of Norwegian Monumental Murals of the Middle Ages). Dæhlin addresses medieval murals in stone and wooden churches in Norway, focusing on figurative motifs. He divides the murals into stylistic groups: murals from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries bear influences from England and France; murals

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<sup>4</sup> Research project "Norske kalkmalerier fra middelalderen til 1850" (Norwegian Murals from the Middle Ages until 1850), Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research, 2018–2020, <https://www.niku.no/prosjekter/norske-kalkmalerier/>.

from the 15<sup>th</sup> century have common European features. He also stresses the difficulty of studying Norwegian murals given their often fragmentary condition and poor state of preservation. In the years since this 1956 publication, more medieval wall paintings have been discovered.

The second study is a 2017 master's thesis by Katharina Ursula Refsahl: "Middelalderens monumentalmaleri i Norge" (Medieval Monumental Murals in Norway). Refsahl describes different groups of motifs and places them in a Scandinavian context. She also examines their function and use.

Most descriptions of medieval murals are found in texts about the churches in which they are located. Frequently they are art historical in nature, lacking any technical analysis from conservators, with the focus on iconographic interpretations of the pictorial programme, such as Wenche G. H. Lamark's master's thesis "Tanum kirkes kalkmalerier" (Tanum Church's Frescoes, 2009); Margrethe Stang's chapter "Interiøret i senmiddelalderen: Noen spor" (Late Medieval Interiors: Some Traces) in *Tingvoll Kyrkje* (Tingvoll Church, 2006); and Lisen Bull's short text on the murals in Mære Church in *Den iconographiske post* (1974).

The documentation project *Norges Kirker* (Churches in Norway, 1949–2013) has gathered scholarly material on churches and their interiors in seven of the former 19 Norwegian counties. This includes documentation on ten medieval stone churches with medieval wall paintings, providing descriptions of murals from an art historical point of view.

Lars Hauglid's 1974 study on Tanum Church is one of the few publications addressing the technological conservation and restoration of medieval murals, including pigment analysis. His restoration report must be considered the most comprehensive publication in this field.

Correspondence between conservators and *Riksantikvaren* (Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage) together with restoration reports serve as the primary source of information concerning conservation treatments. However, restoration reports earlier than the 1970s may be incomplete. In his 1953 book, *Tre lag kalkmalerier i Dale kirke* (Three Layers of Wall Paintings in Dale Church), the Norwegian conservator Ola Seter discusses his findings regarding the uncovering work in Dale Church in Luster.

More recent restoration reports, from around 2000 onwards, usually provide the most thorough findings on the extent and condition of Norwegian murals. These contain archival studies and observations on painting techniques. A recent article considers non-programmatic murals of images and inscriptions, often referred to as graffiti, and connects them to memorial functions.<sup>5</sup>

The study of murals requires the marrying of art history and conservation, including layer structure (stratigraphy), materiality, and restoration history. This article attempts to fill in much-needed documentation in these areas.

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<sup>5</sup> Images and Inscriptions 2022.

## MEDIEVAL MURALS IN STONE CHURCHES: RECOVERY AND RESTORATION

The oldest preserved Norwegian medieval stone churches date from the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, while most of the preserved medieval stone churches in Norway were built between 1150 and 1300. During the first decades of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there was a dramatic decline in building activity in Norway.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that the population decline had started several decades before the Black Death, and thus the demand for new parish churches decreased. The combined effect of this earlier population decline and the devastating consequences of the plague on the population in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century was that few new churches were erected until the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

Of the 159 surviving medieval Norwegian stone churches, most are rural parish churches. With some exceptions, they are *long churches*, with a rectangular nave and a small square or apse chancel. Town churches of the Middle Ages were larger and more complex, such as Trondheim Cathedral, Stavanger Cathedral, Bergen Cathedral, and St Mary's Church in Bergen.

At least 33 of these 159 stone churches have murals that can be dated to the medieval period, the majority of them occurring in parish churches (Table 1). St Mary's Church in Bergen and Stavanger Cathedral are town churches that have preserved medieval murals with figurative motifs, and Trondheim Cathedral has only minor surviving ornamental fragments.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, none of the medieval murals in these churches were visible. Owing to new interpretations of Protestant piety in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a simple, whitewashed church interior was preferred. Additionally, a growing population and more buoyant economy in the mid-1800s, together with a new Church Act in 1851, led to a building boom. Many small, dilapidated medieval churches were enlarged and refurbished. As a result, often colourful and sometimes redundant inventory was removed, replaced or overpainted. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, a new interest in historic churches developed and with it a new awareness and concern for historic building preservation. The *Fortidsminneforeningen* (The National Trust of Norway) was founded in 1844, and then in 1912, seven years after Norway's independence, the National Heritage Board was established. Thereafter began a large restoration programme of numerous medieval churches, which gave a new impetus to the search for medieval buildings and gave rise to the concept of medieval inventory. Through these efforts, murals were rediscovered and uncovered between mainly the early 1900s and 1980, with the exception of two recent discoveries in 2020–2023.

Because there are few murals on stone walls in Norway, few restorers specialize in this medium. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only a handful of conservators worked on church interiors and inventory. Trained as artists or craftsmen, they normally worked on a wide range

<sup>6</sup> THUN, SVARVA 2017, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Only 20 churches were erected in Norway between 1537 and 1600 (none of them preserved today); see STORSLETTEN 2008, p. 45.

1. Dale Church in Luster.  
 Medieval wall paintings, (A) covered by  
 a 16<sup>th</sup> century mural, (B) partly exposed  
 (Photo: Susanne Kaun, 2016)



of different materials, such as easel painting, wooden sculptures, painted wooden inventory and murals.<sup>8</sup> The craft was usually learned via internships in Denmark, where mural conservation has been practiced since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; back in Norway, masters taught apprentices.<sup>9</sup> In keeping with other European countries, the conservation field together with the associated scientific approaches developed in Norway from the 1960s onwards. In 1963, a training programme for painting conservators was established, where the focus was on easel paintings and polychrome sculptures. Even though the conservation of murals on lime-based supports was not included in the programme, a few (two to three) painting conservators worked on murals.<sup>10</sup> Today, there is still no academic education for mural conservation in Norway.

The process of uncovering of murals always puts great stress on the support surface. Because rendered walls and paint layers are fragile, the procedure can lead to physical losses; in many cases, rough tool use has left marks. As a result of these potential physical risks, decisions have had to be made: is uncovering justified, or would it entail too much stress for the painting? And in cases where there are several layers of murals, which period should be prioritized and displayed?

As an example, in the 1960s, three layers of murals were discovered in Dale Church (Sogn og Fjordane). The conservator decided to remove an 18<sup>th</sup>-century mural of biblical figures in painted niches to uncover an extensive figurative mural of biblical scenes dating from the 1560s.<sup>11</sup> The third layer, medieval murals, is still untouched and just partly uncovered (Fig. 1). In other churches,

<sup>8</sup> BRÆNNE 2012, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> ANDERSEN, KAUN 2021, pp. 138, 145.

<sup>10</sup> BRÆNNE 2012, p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> HOFF 2000, pp. 48–58.



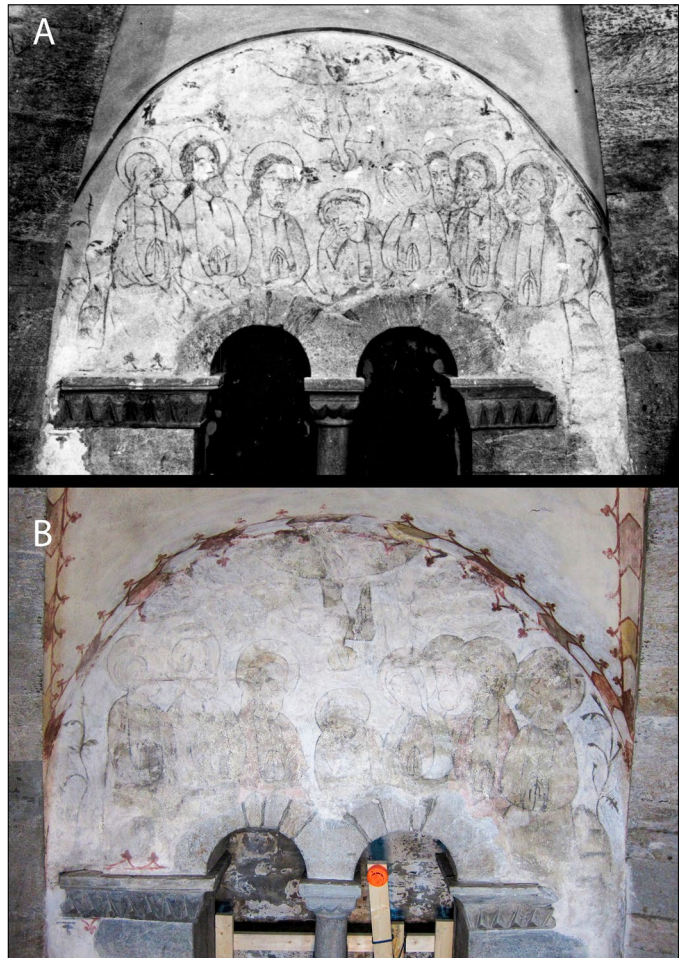
2. Tingvoll Church. Three layers with paintings side by side, partly uncovered, fragmentarily preserved and affected by decay: a consecration cross, a medieval figurative motive with inscriptions and a painted drapery from the 17<sup>th</sup> century (in red colour) (Photo: Susanne Kaun, 2021)

though, such as Tingvoll Church (Fig. 2), murals from different periods have been uncovered and are on view side by side, without any explanation or visual guidance to help understand the art historical contexts and periods to which they belong. This can be confusing and give a misleading impression of the murals.

Other problems have arisen owing to previous conservation treatments.<sup>12</sup> For example, after the uncovering of late medieval murals in St Mary's Church in Bergen, in the 1930s, the motifs were quite legible, but 50 years later, owing to a conservation medium that darkened over time, the paint layers have partly vanished and the surface has also darkened. During the 1981 restoration, the background was painted white around darkened figures to provide a contrast. A comparison of the murals after the 1930s uncovering and today reveals that much of the motif has been lost; we now have only a vague idea of what the painting may have originally looked like (Fig. 3).

In addition to the issues connected with the materials used in conservation treatments, the different approaches employed by conservators in historical restoration also need to be taken into

<sup>12</sup> Conservation is a consolidating and preserving treatment to countermeasure further decay.



3. *St Mary's Church in Bergen. (A) The Pentecost scene after uncovering in the 1930s (Archive of the Directorate for Cultural Heritage in Norway), (B) the same scene today (Photo: Susanne Kaun, 2021)*

account.<sup>13</sup> At times, historical restoration is characterized by extensive retouching and reconstruction, as can be seen in the murals in Nes Church, Telemark. Carried out in the 1930s and 1950s by the same hand, the restorations resulted in what can be described as over-restored murals, meaning that, owing to the conservator's extensive and interpretative additions, it is difficult for even an expert to identify the original medieval painting. These methods were typical in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and need to be considered when evaluating the murals' appearances today and our choices on how to treat them.

In Nes Church (Telemark), the recurring ornaments and borders that frame the figurative scenes were retouched by the conservator. The restoration of the figurative motifs has been carried

<sup>13</sup> *Restoration* is the treatment that aims to reveal the aesthetic value of a historic object.



4. Nes Church in Telemark. (A) Murals on the vault depicting Christ in Majesty surrounded by symbols of the four evangelists. The murals have been heavily restored, with repainted frames, (B) figurative additions and (C) repainted contours (Photos: Susanne Kaun, 2014)

out in a more restrained manner; nonetheless, figure contours have been freshened or repainted (Fig. 4). Most likely, the murals were fragmentary when they were uncovered and could not be easily read. Other examples of conservators making generous additions to poorly preserved murals, probably with the aim of making them more legible, can be found in other churches, as well.

However, because of these restoration practices, the authenticity of murals is at times completely called into question, such in the Trondenes and Ringsaker churches. Both churches have some fragmentary, apparently medieval ornamental and figurative motifs, and it is suspected that a conservator was responsible for painting the bulk of them.<sup>14</sup>

Other historical restorations are characterized by a more restrained approach, where the preservation of the original material was considered to be paramount. This principle guided the conservator who restored the murals in Rygge Church in 1925. Here, the mural fragments of the Trinity have been preserved without additions or retouches.

Often, in general, a more restrained method was employed for figurative motifs versus architectural or recurring ornaments because figurative motifs were considered to have more “artistic” qualities, and ornamental elements were easier to reconstruct. The restored architectural ornaments, on the other hand, can serve as a framing device for fragmented murals. Today, academic restoration practices are very restrictive, with the rare additions always carried out under the supervision of a trained eye with respect for the original materials.<sup>15</sup> Original paint layers are never interfered with, and any additions must be integrated “harmoniously into the whole, but at

<sup>14</sup> This needs a closer examination.

<sup>15</sup> MORA, MORA, PHILIPPOT 2001, pp. 329–345.



the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.”<sup>16</sup>

As already noted, the painting techniques of Norwegian medieval murals have not been studied thoroughly, with little pigment or binder analysis performed. On the basis of visual observations, we can assume that the medieval murals in Norway were most likely painted using a *secco* technique or – like Danish medieval wall paintings – in a combination of fresco- and *secco*-technique, applied on a lime slurry or, less commonly, on a render.<sup>17</sup>

The identified pigments in Norwegian murals are red iron oxides, probably red ochre, cinnabar, red lead (minimum), azurite, green copper pigments, and charcoal black.<sup>18</sup> The instability of some pigments has resulted in colours changing or vanishing, and with them the motifs – for example, azurite that has turned green over time,<sup>19</sup> red lead that has turned black,<sup>20</sup> and organic pigments that have faded.<sup>21</sup> These are typical pigments from medieval times, which are also found, for example, in Danish medieval murals. In Danish murals, the exclusive blue pigment lapis lazuli, lead white and the arsenic-based pigment orpiment are also found.<sup>22</sup>

Knowledge of layer structure, materiality, and the restoration history are therefore crucial to understanding mural remnants.

## 12<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY MURALS: CONSECRATION CROSSES (NON-FIGURATIVE MOTIFS)

Most of the medieval stone churches were built between 1150 and 1300 and the earliest surviving murals have been dated to the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with the exception of consecration crosses, some of which date from the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 5). When a church was built, it would be consecrated by the local bishop prior to being put into use as a place of worship.<sup>23</sup> The church was sanctified and made into a sacred space. Purification and consecration by the bishop included blessing the building and anointing it with holy oil, twelve times outside and inside. Each of the places anointed with oil would then be marked with a cross, today called a consecration cross. Twelve crosses, symbolizing the twelve apostles, were painted or marked on the walls in the nave and chancel. Consecration crosses are extant in 19 of the surviving medieval stone churches. The

<sup>16</sup> The Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, 1964, article 12.

<sup>17</sup> TRAMPEDACH 2007, p. 130.

<sup>18</sup> HAUGLID 1974, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Observed in Nes Church in Telemark.

<sup>20</sup> Observed in Tanum Church in Viken.

<sup>21</sup> Observed in Alstadhaug Church in Trøndelag.

<sup>22</sup> BØLLINGTOFT 2007, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> ANDÅS 2012, pp. 94–100; ANDÅS 2021, pp. 314–318.

surviving Norwegian crosses have four arms of equal length, enclosed in a circle, and were usually designed using a compass and often painted in red or black.<sup>24</sup> They were incised and painted on fresh render, on a lime slurry, or even on the surface of a non-rendered, raw stone wall.<sup>25</sup> In some cases, the hole for the armature which was meant to hold a candle has survived. It is also common to find several consecration crosses painted on top of one other.<sup>26</sup>

An analysis of painting techniques and stratigraphy indicates that consecration crosses were applied after the initial erection of the churches on the first render while it was still fresh, and in some cases even before the church interior was lime-washed. This last piece of information indicates that the churches were not always painted from the outset. Moreover, the repainting of consecration crosses constitutes evidence that they were a part of the church's decoration over a long period.

It is especially interesting that all the preserved consecration crosses seem to have been painted on a monochrome wall (raw or whitewashed) and not together with other ornamental or figurative murals. However, during the medieval period it was not uncommon for consecration crosses to be overpainted with figurative murals, as in the Tanum, Tingvoll and Dale churches.



5. Tanum Church. A well-preserved consecration cross (Photo: Susanne Kaun, 2011)

### 13<sup>TH</sup>- AND 14<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY MURALS: FIGURATIVE MOTIFS

The majority of preserved figurative murals can be dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The most complex figurative programme preserved in a stone church in Norway is found in Nes Church (Telemark), where the entire chancel is painted. Nes Church was built around the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and is one of few examples of a chancel with a vaulted brick ceiling.<sup>27</sup> The chancel walls and vault are covered with murals which can be dated to the late 13<sup>th</sup> century and the first

<sup>24</sup> Black paint may in some cases be blackened red lead.

<sup>25</sup> For example, in the Enebakk and Hurum churches.

<sup>26</sup> For example, in Lade Church.

<sup>27</sup> There is also a wooden vault with medieval paintings in Slidre Church, which is a stone church.

6. Alstadhaug Church.  
 (A) *The Passion of Christ above the chancel arch*, (B) *detail of St John the Evangelist*  
 (Photos: Susanne Kaun, 2017)



half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>28</sup> Even though some parts have been heavily restored, the former quality of the paintings is evident.

In the ceiling there is a *Majestas Domini*, Christ in Majesty, surrounded by symbols of the evangelists (Fig. 4). The lives of the church's patron saints, St Peter and St Paul, along with Simon Magus, are depicted on the north and south walls.<sup>29</sup> Red, blue, and green predominate in these colourful murals. The images are framed in frieze-like rows and were originally accompanied by a descriptive text underneath each scene; today, only a few text fragments are preserved. Medallions (imitating textile *refil*) and draperies decorate the lower parts of the walls.

Behind the altar, on the east wall, the Coronation of the Virgin Mary is portrayed, and on the opposite wall, above the chancel arch, the Crucifixion. Christ hangs on a green tree with branches shaped as a cross. He is flanked by a soldier (possibly Stephaton) and three other figures: the Virgin Mary, St John, and the final figure may be Mary Magdalene, who is often included among those by the cross, as in this scene.<sup>30</sup>

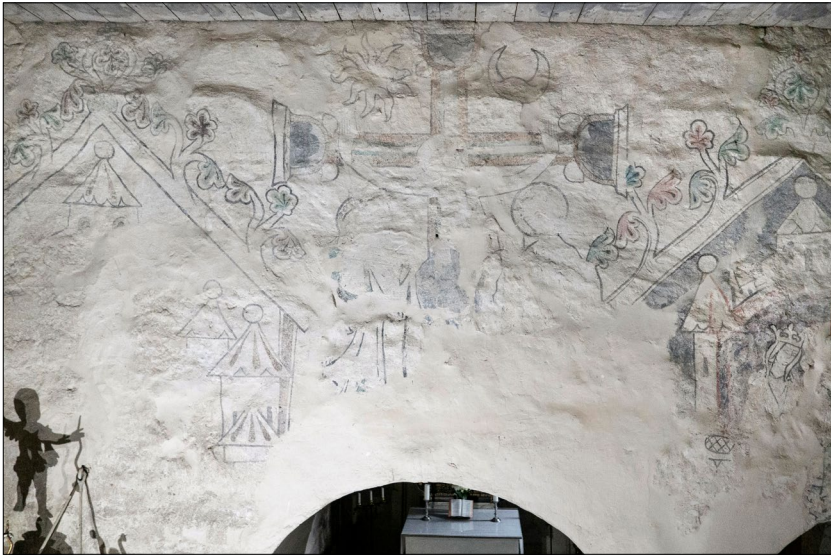
Another large and partly well-preserved mural, skilfully painted and rich in detail, is in Alstadhaug Church (Trøndelag), in the octagonal chancel. The church was built in the middle of 12<sup>th</sup> century, and around 100 years later, the octagon was added as an extension of the chancel and was subsequently decorated with murals. The Passion of Christ is depicted over the chancel arch: the Flagellation, Road to Calvary, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. There were further scenes that are no longer decipherable (Fig. 6).

In the octagon cross rib vault there is a Christ in Majesty flanked by two seraphs. On the south side of Christ, the Intercession of the Virgin Mary can be seen, and on the north side, John

<sup>28</sup> DÆHLIN 1956, p. 107; REFSAHL 2017, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> FETT 1941, p. 31–62; DÆHLIN 1956, pp. 91–102.

<sup>30</sup> DÆHLIN 1956, p. 93.



7. Tanum Church.  
The Calvary group above  
the chancel arch in the  
nave (Photo: Susanne  
Kaun, 2022)

the Baptist. Around the walls of the apse there are fragments of a city with buildings, towers and arches. On the north side there is a fragment of a ship with two seated passengers and a standing figure adorned with a halo. The rest of the boat is no longer visible, making it difficult to interpret the original motif. However, judging by some typical boat scenes in murals, it could represent St Olaf's sailing race, St Nicholas saving a ship, Jonah and the Whale or Noah's Ark. Since Alstadhaug Church is dedicated to St Peter, Refsahl suggests that the boat motif depicts Christ rescuing Peter from drowning.<sup>31</sup> In the six window niches there are traces of figures, which, it has been suggested, may represent the apostles.<sup>32</sup> The restoration of the murals in Alstadhaug Church seems to have been restrained, making it possible to differentiate between the original elements and any additions.

In Tanum Church (Akershus), the whole east wall of the nave, including the southern altar niche, has large murals which are fragmentary in places. The church was built in the second half of 12<sup>th</sup> century and the murals date from around 1300.<sup>33</sup> Right above the chancel arch, there is a Calvary group with Christ on the cross flanked by the Virgin Mary and St John (Fig. 7). On the north and south sides of the arch there are architectural frames. In the south frame, the Coronation of the Virgin is discernible, but in the north frame, no traces of motifs have been detected. It is likely that the north side once depicted a scene from the life of the Virgin Mary, the patron saint of the church, possibly the Annunciation, Nativity or the Death of the Virgin.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> REFSAHL 2017, p. 53.

<sup>32</sup> DÆHLIN 1956, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> CHRISTIE 1996; LAMARK 2017, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> CHRISTIE 1996. LAMARK 2017, p. 74, argues that the scene could have been Annunciation.



8. Botne Church. Devils on the north wall in the nave (Photo: Susanne Kaun, 2020)

The altar niche on the south side of the arch has fragments of murals from the Passion of Christ. Today murals on the south side are visible: Christ in Majesty (above) and Christ in Limbo (below), where Christ reaches out to Adam and Eve in the gaping jaws of Hell. On the back wall of the niche, there is a wooden sculptural Calvary group set against a painted background with the sun and the moon. The murals have been documented and restored in accordance with current conservation principles.<sup>35</sup> All retouches have been carried out in such a way that the original paint can be distinguished from any lines and paint applied later. Since the restoration techniques have avoided adding material or significantly altering the original matrix, the images of the preserved mural are decipherable, even in their fragmentary condition.

In Botne Church, which was built during the second half of 12<sup>th</sup> century, there is another variation of Hell which, due to heavy restoration, is difficult to date.<sup>36</sup> On the north wall of the nave, there is a scene depicting a devil riding a man into the flames of Hell (Fig. 8). To the right of this pair, there are two standing figures, a devil and a man, the latter strongly repainted, making it difficult to determine his original intended identity.<sup>37</sup>

In Rygge Church, which was built in the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, there is a fragmentary remnant of a large mural of the Holy Trinity, where, in the apse vault of the chancel, God the Father holds his crucified son in his lap. The scene is set in a mandorla held by an angel. The mural has been

<sup>35</sup> HAUGLID 1974.

<sup>36</sup> REFSAHL 2017, p. 32, dated the murals to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but they could as well be from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, or even more recent, such as from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as Susanne Ørum has suggested (ØRUM 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Only the lower part of the garment of the man is original, while the hands and face are later additions.



9. Kinsarvik Church. (A) A bishop on the south wall in the nave, (B) St Michael on the north wall, both around five metres tall (Photos: Elisabeth Andersen, 2020)

dated to the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>38</sup> Originally, there may have been four angels or the four evangelists supporting the mandorla, though today the only preserved figure is an angel, also the symbol of St Matthew. The scene is so faded and fragmented that it is difficult to discern the style.

The largest figures portrayed in a Norwegian church are in Kinsarvik Church, which was built around 1200. On the north wall of the nave, there is a figure of the archangel Michael five metres in height weighing souls on scales, while two small devils, a fraction of Michael's size, attempt to pull the scales in their favour (Fig. 9B). Opposite this mural, on the south wall, stands an unknown bishop, who is as tall as the archangel (Fig. 9A). Both works have suffered decay and only the ground layers have been preserved. The contours and ornaments have been partly repainted.

In 2023, two censuring angels on the chancel vault in Stavanger Cathedral were discovered which could be dated to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>39</sup>

Many medieval murals are difficult to date. In Mære Church, which was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, there are surviving mural fragments in the altar niche on the south side of the chancel arch. These include, on the back wall, the fragments of a person one metre in height, dressed in a mantel and cloak. On the south side of the niche, there is a scene depicting three people in a container flanked by two figures. Two possible interpretations of this scene have been proposed: Shadrach,

<sup>38</sup> CHRISTIE, CHRISTIE 1959, p. 262; ANDERSEN 2019, pp. 158–159.

<sup>39</sup> At the time of writing this article, the murals were being restored by the Museum of Archaeology in Stavanger, with the work scheduled to be completed in 2024.

Meshach and Abednego in the furnace, from the book of Daniel (3:16–18); or the legend of St Nicholas miraculously restoring to life three children killed by a butcher.<sup>40</sup> According to the legend, the butcher had pickled the children in a barrel, planning to pass them off as ham for sale. Having travelled to the area to provide famine relief, Nicholas saw through the ruse and is said to have resurrected the children from the brine. If the altar was dedicated to St Nicholas, the latter interpretation would be the most plausible.

### 15<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY TO THE REFORMATION

At least four stone churches have preserved murals with figurative motifs dating from the late medieval period, which in Norway ended in 1537 with the advent of the Protestant Reformation.

In Slidre Church, which was built in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a late medieval mural has been preserved on the upper east wall of the chancel, now partly covered by the altarpiece. It is of high quality, and the upper section depicts the Coronation of the Virgin flanked by angels playing instruments; below this register, there is an Assumption of Mary (or Ascension of Christ) flanked by the 12 apostles, each holding his attribute (Fig. 10).

Dæhlin argues that there are affinities between this mural and those painted by the Union Master in Fogdö Church and Strängnäs Cathedral in Sweden.<sup>41</sup> However, the murals in Slidre Church resemble

even more closely those in Tensta Church in Uppland, Sweden, which are signed by Johannes Rosenrod and have been dated to 1437.<sup>42</sup> Rosenrod was active in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century,



10. Slidre Church. (A) *The Coronation of the Virgin, flanked by angels playing instruments. Underneath, the Assumption of Mary (or the Ascension of Christ) – covered by the altarpiece – flanked by the Twelve Apostles; (B) detail of three apostles (Photos: Susanne Kaun, 2022)*

<sup>40</sup> BULL 1974.

<sup>41</sup> DÆHLIN 1956, p. 135.

<sup>42</sup> *Katedralen* 2015. Thanks to Anne Braun for making us aware of the similarity.



11. (A) Tensta Church, Sweden. Detail of an apostle (Photo: Lars Johnson). (B) Slidre Church. Detail of an apostle (Photo: Susanne Kaun, 2022)

and he may also have worked in Danmarks Church outside Uppsala. It is unknown if he travelled to Slidre, but the similarities between the paintings are so striking that it is tempting to believe that he or one of his pupils created them (Fig. 11).

In Tingvoll Church, which was built from 1170 to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, several murals dating from the late 14<sup>th</sup> or first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century decorate the nave.<sup>43</sup> Although the murals are fragmentary, a depiction of St George fighting the dragon can be discerned on the south wall, accompanied by the text “...riddare scte jurian drekan” (“the knight St George [slays] the dragon”) (Fig. 12). This is the sole surviving mural of St George in Norway. On the north wall, there are fragments of figures, including a group of three: a seated man, another seated man with a bowed head, and a standing man holding a long stick (Fig. 13). These figures may represent a saint’s martyrdom or the Flagellation, as Stang suggests.<sup>44</sup> A further group of three figures portrays a man with a prominent hat and a bishop (with both men holding scrolls), as well as a peasant wearing a gugel. There are also traces and fragments that suggest there were other figures, but these are in such poor condition that they are difficult to interpret.

In St Mary’s Church in Bergen, which was built in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, there are figurative murals dating from the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>45</sup> They are preserved in four arches

<sup>43</sup> STANG 2006, p. 294.

<sup>44</sup> STANG 2006, pp. 291–297.

<sup>45</sup> DÆHLIN 1956, pp. 136–137; LIDÉN 2000, p. 54; REFSAHL 2017, p. 37.





12. Tingvoll Church. St George and the dragon on the south wall in the nave  
(Photo: Susanne Kaun, 2018)



13. Tingvoll Church. Partly uncovered wall paintings, depicting a prominent man and a bishop  
on the north wall in the nave (Photo: Susanne Kaun, 2022)



14. *St Mary's Church in Bergen. (A) The Flagellation and (B) a detail. Today this mural is covered by the pulpit (Photos: Susanne Kaun, 2010)*



15. *Stiklestad Church. Part of a frieze with fragmentary figurative scenes surrounded by reconstructed painted frames on the north wall of the nave (Photo: Susanne Kaun, 2020)*

between the vault and triforium as well as above the chancel arch. In the eastern vault in the north aisle, there are further fragments of figures. In the four arches, there are figures of Peter and Paul, a *memento mori* motif, a Pentecostal motif (Fig. 3), the Ascension of Christ, and in the vault, an unidentified man with his right arm outstretched in a gesture of blessing. Fragments of the Last Judgement can also be seen above the chancel arch. In 2005, the restoration of the pulpit revealed a well-preserved mural of the Flagellation that had been hidden behind it (Fig. 14).<sup>46</sup> Because the

<sup>46</sup> HEGGENHOUGEN 2010, p. 20.

mural had been covered by the pulpit since 1676, it had never been overpainted or restored. It is likely that a larger programme of the Passion of Christ ran along the pillars on the southern arcade, and perhaps the life of Christ ran along on the north side.

In Stiklestad Church, which dates from the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, 15<sup>th</sup>-century murals line the north and south walls of the nave. Nicely reconstructed painted framework surrounds traces of figurative scenes. Because images have been left fragmented, it is impossible to make determinations about their style; however, the remaining details suggest that they were scenes from the life and death of Christ (Fig. 15).

### ORNAMENTAL MURALS

Figurative scenes are often embedded in ornamental elements, such as linear or foliage borders, drapery and painted frameworks with architectural elements. In many churches, such preserved ornamental decoration is, however, devoid of any figurative motifs.

Typical architectural ornamental painting includes ashlar stone imitations and dogtooth- and zig-zag borders placed in and/or around window openings, altar niches, and chancel arches, as well as running along the walls or ceilings (Fig. 16). Borders are frequently shaped as hearts, lilies (*fleur de lis*) and clover.



16. Murals with architectural ornament. (A) Chancel arch in Nes Church, Telemark. (B) Chancel walls in Siljan Church (Photos: Susanne Kaun, 2020)



17. Romnes Church.  
 Drapery painting in the  
 chancel (Photo: Susanne  
 Kaun, 2021)

Three churches have examples of painted drapery, all in the chancel and all from the county of Telemark: the Romnes (Fig. 17), Seljord and Nes churches. In Seljord (1150–1250), drapery has been preserved behind the altar in the apse, below the traces of figures. It falls from the middle of the wall and vanishes 1.5 metres above the floor. In Nes, it runs along the lower part of the murals on the chancel walls and also from the middle of the wall, but ends one to two metres from the floor. The drapery is connected to a frieze of medallions with animal motifs, which evokes the pictorial structure of the textile *refil*.<sup>47</sup> In Romnes Church (1150–1250), on the other hand, the drapery is not connected to any figurative motifs, but starts at the upper edges (i.e. not in the centre) of the north and south walls at the back of the apse and ends about two metres above the floor. These draperies imitate textiles commonly used to cover medieval church walls, either for practical insulation reasons or for aesthetic, decorative purposes.<sup>48</sup>

These ornamental murals have often been heavily restored and repainted, probably because it was “easier” and therefore justifiable for the conservator to reconstruct recurring patterns and architectural murals. Because of the lack of documentation, though, it is not always clear to what extent reconstructions are based on original fragments. In some cases, the conservator’s reconstructions may not faithfully represent the original border and ornamental decoration.

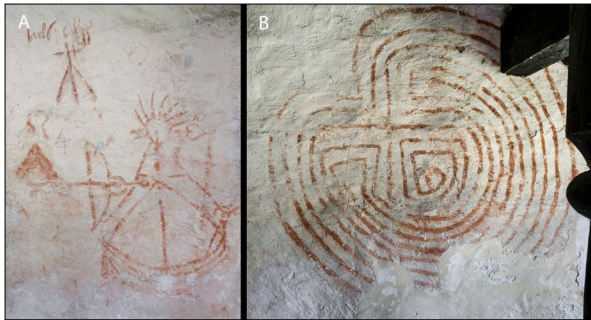
<sup>47</sup> ENGELSTAD 1952, pp. 21–22. As seen on a *refil* from Hvammr Church, Island.

<sup>48</sup> WALLEM 1909, pp. 25–29; NØDSETH 2021, pp. 339–342.

SIGNS AND SINGLE IMAGES



18. *Siljan Church (1150–1250). A single image of a medieval ship in the chancel (Photo: Susanne Kaun, 2020)*



19. *Seljord Church. Exterior wall paintings on the west wall. (A) The image of a ship and (B) a labyrinth (Photos: Susanne Kaun, 2020)*

In addition to the murals and decorations discussed above, single painted images can also be found on interior and exterior church walls, such as coats of arms, labyrinths, ships, individual letters as well as some unidentified signs.<sup>49</sup> These are often painted in monochrome red or black, using a simple painting technique and a less artistic style, and as such, they have been regularly mislabelled as graffiti.<sup>50</sup> However, these images are not unauthorized, informal, or unplanned, but were executed with a purpose and a meaning connected to the church.<sup>51</sup>

Ship images are widespread and are found in churches and other types of building all over Europe, and also from several different periods.<sup>52</sup> These are frequently difficult to date. In Norway, many of them depict typical medieval ship types, as in the Kviteseid and Siljan churches (Fig. 18). Given that ship images are widely found, they must have had a known symbolic meaning, for example representing salvation or a votive function.<sup>53</sup>

Seljord Church is a unique example of an exterior mural with images depicting ships, a labyrinth, and unidentified figures, extending from the north to the south side of the western entrance (Fig. 19). At Slidre Church, there is a labyrinth on a door on the south side of the building. The location of these labyrinths suggests that they may have served some kind of apotropaic

<sup>49</sup> Craftsmen's and other marks sometimes found painted on the exterior are not considered to be murals, and have therefore not been included in that list.

<sup>50</sup> Images and Inscriptions 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Images and Inscriptions 2022.

<sup>52</sup> FELBO 1992; ARTZY 1999; CHAMPION 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Images and Inscriptions 2022, pp. 81–82.

or protective purpose.<sup>54</sup> But labyrinths could also symbolize a physical pilgrimage to the church as well as a spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem.<sup>55</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The number of medieval murals in Norway is limited: one in five medieval stone churches, in total only 33 churches, have surviving fragments. They are found in naves and in chancels, on walls and on ceilings, and consist of figurative motifs, ornamental murals, and signs and single images. Two of these churches retain exterior wall paintings from the medieval period.

Due to the often poor or fragmentary condition of the murals, it can be difficult (and sometimes impossible) to determine their date. Nevertheless, one can assume that more than half of the remaining figurative motifs date from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries and the rest from 1400 to the end of the medieval era (1537). These most often depict New Testament stories and saints' lives. They differ in style, their state of preservation and of restoration as well as in their condition: in many cases they are fragmentary, have lost significant amounts of their original colours and have often been heavily restored, thus making it difficult to make determinations regarding dates, style and iconography.

In addition to figurative scenes, there are many ornamental murals, such as linear or foliage borders, drapery and painted frameworks with architectural elements. These can be linked to figural scenes or they can surround windows, altar niches, portals or run along walls and ceilings. There are also several churches with signs and single images that had symbolic meanings or votive functions.

Although nothing indicates that the same workshop was active in different churches, a connection to a Swedish workshop is strongly suggested for the murals in Slidre Church. It could be that the poor condition of many of the works has obliterated details that could be used to identify similar styles and techniques.

Interestingly, apart from consecration crosses, there is no evidence or any surviving fragments of wall paintings or even written sources mentioning wall paintings from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. On the basis of analyses of painting techniques and stratigraphy, it can be concluded that consecration crosses first emerged on bare or whitewashed walls, prior to the appearance of the first figurative murals in medieval churches. We may therefore infer that the church interior in Norway in the 12<sup>th</sup> century may have been without murals in the first period and that it was not until after decades or centuries that colourful murals with ornamental or figurative motifs appeared in Norwegian stone churches. We do not know either if all churches had murals.

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<sup>54</sup> KRAFT, SAWARD 2005, p. 2.

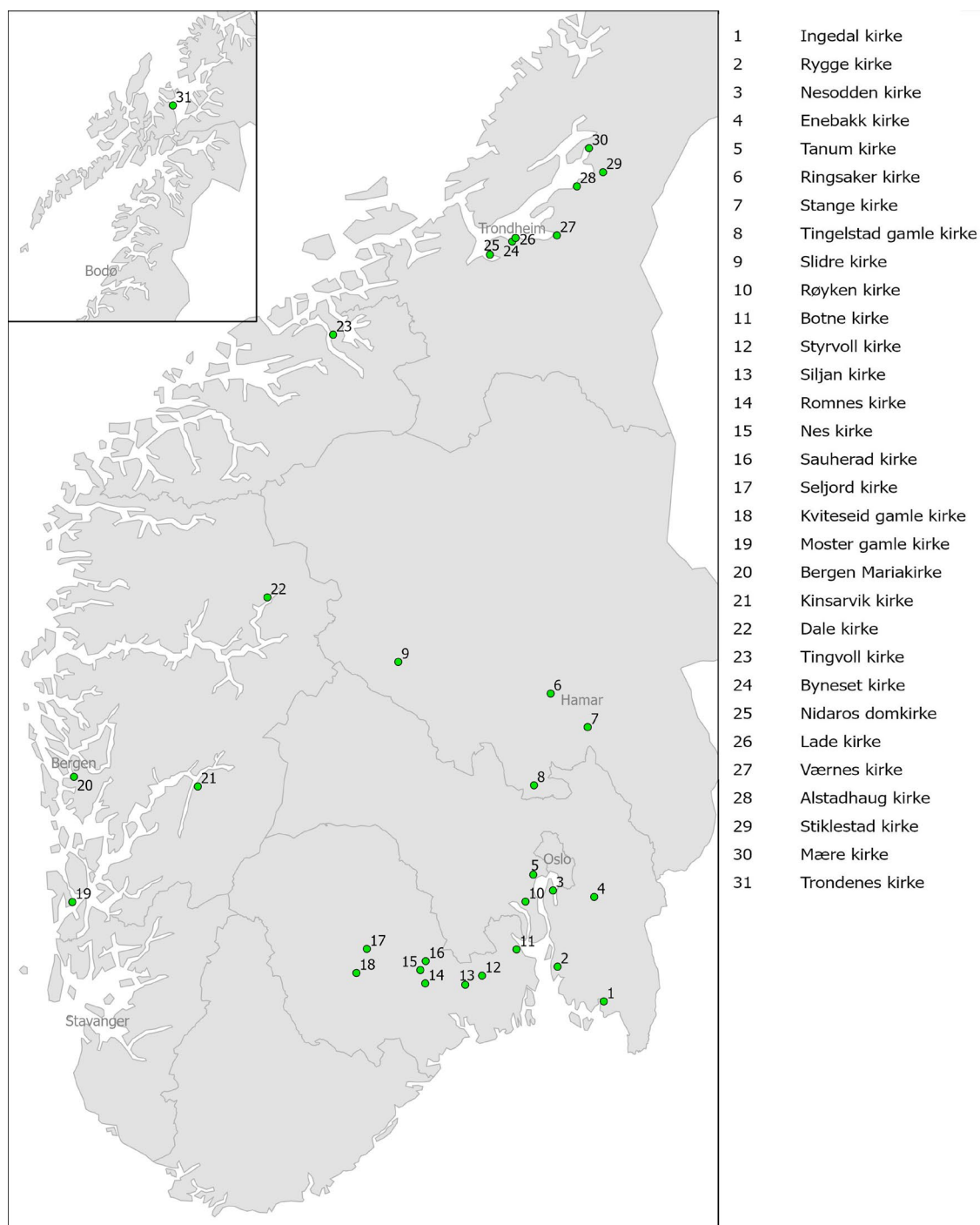
<sup>55</sup> CONNOLLY 2005, p. 286.

There is a general lack of in-depth studies on medieval mural painting techniques and no pigment or binder analyses from the past half century. Thus far, pigment analysis has been conducted on medieval murals in only one of the 33 churches.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, it is crucial that more research is conducted on Norwegian murals, especially technical analyses, to identify which pigments and binders have been used, the layers they are painted on (stratigraphy), and the extent of restoration treatments and additions. Furthermore, in cases where murals from different time periods are displayed, information is needed to help viewers navigate and contextualize the visual material; this applies to art historical matter, painting techniques, and conservation studies, within both a national and wider European context.

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<sup>56</sup> HAUGLID 1974.

Map 1. Locations of Norwegian stone churches with documented medieval murals  
(Susanne Kaun and Elisabeth Andersen, 2023)





*Table 1. Medieval murals in Norwegian stone churches in alphabetical order of locations (Susanne Kaun and Elisabeth Andersen, 2023)*

Church	County	Built in	Dating mural	Description of the mural
Alstadhaug Church	Trøndelag	1100–1200	1100–1200/ 1280–1350	Consecration crosses, Passion of Christ, Christ in Majesty, apostels, buildings.
Bergen St Mary Church	Vestland	1140–1180	1400–1450/ 1400–1537	Flagellation, Peter and Paul, Christ Ascension, the Triumph of Death, Pentecost, Doomsday, unidentifiable figure, ornamental, foliage from several periods.
Botne Church	Vestfold	1150–1200	Medieval	Devils, unidentifiable figure, Hell.
Byneset Church	Trøndelag	1100–1200	1100–1200	Consecration crosses.
Dale Church	Vestland	1250–1300	1250–1300	Consecration crosses, unidentifiable figures and buildings.
Enebakk Church	Viken	1100–1200	1100–1200	Consecration crosses.
Hurum Church	Viken	1150	Medieval	Consecration crosses.
Ingedal Church	Viken	1150–1250	Medieval	Border.
Kinsarvik Church	Vestland	c. 1200	Medieval	Consecration crosses, St Michael, bishop, foliage and border.
Kviteseid Old Church	Telemark	c. 1150	Medieval	Consecration crosses, ships images, signs and inscriptions.
Lade Church	Trøndelag	1150–1250	1150–1250/ medieval	Consecration crosses, unrecognizable decor.
Moster Old Church	Vestland	1100–1150	Medieval	Unrecognizable decor.
Mære kirke Church	Trøndelag	1140–1180	Medieval	Consecration crosses, three people in a container, a saint (St Nicolas?).
Nes Church	Telemark	c. 1250	1250–1350	Story of St Peter and St Paul, Coronation of the Virgin, Crucifixion, Christ in Majesty, drapery, architectural ornamental and foliage connected to the figurative scenes. Inscriptions connected to figural scenes.
Nesodden Church	Viken	1150–1250	Medieval	Architectural ornamental.
Nidaros Cathedral	Trøndelag	1100–1300	Medieval	Foliage.
Ringsaker Church	Innlandet	1100–1150	1100–1150/ medieval	Consecration crosses, St Michael, architectural ornamental, borders, inscriptions, unidentifiable signs.
Romnes Church	Telemark	1150–1250	Medieval	Drapery.
Rygge Church	Viken	1100–1150	1100–1150/ 1300–1350	Consecration crosses, Holy Trinity, foliage and borders connected to the figures.

Røyken Church	Viken	1150–1250	1150–1250	Consecration crosses, architectural ornamental.
Sauherad Church	Telemark	1150–1250	1150–1250	Consecration crosses.
Seljord Church	Telemark	1150–1250	Medieval	Unidentifiable figures, border and drapery connected to the figures, labyrinth, ship images, unidentifiable images (exterior).
Siljan Church	Telemark	1150–1250	Medieval	Consecration crosses, architectural ornamental, borders, ship images.
Slidre Church	Innlandet	1150–1200	1150–1200/ 1400–1450	Consecration crosses, Coronation of the Virgin, angels and apostles. Borders and inscriptions connected to the figures, coat of arms, labyrinth (exterior).
Stange Church	Innlandet	1230–1250	Medieval	Architectural ornamental, border.
Stavanger Cathedral	Rogaland	1100–1150	1300–1400	Angels swinging censers.
Stiklestad Church	Trøndelag	1150–1200	1450–1500	The life and death of Christ, borders and architectural ornamental connected to the figures.
Styrvoll Church	Vestfold	1100–1200	Medieval	Borders, architectural ornamentals.
Tanum Church	Viken	1150–1200	1150–1200/ c. 1300	Consecration crosses, Crucifixion, Coronation of the Virgin, Passion of Christ, Christ in Majesty, borders, foliage and architectural ornamental connected to the figures, inscription.
Tingelstad Old Church	Innlandet	1200–1250	Medieval	Architectural ornamentals, signs.
Tingvoll Church	Møre og Romsdal	1170–1250	1170–1250/ 1350–1450	Consecration crosses, St. Georg and the dragon, Flagellation? Bishop, peasant and a prominent man. Inscriptions connected to figural scenes.
Trondenes Church	Troms	1350–1400	1350–1400	Consecration crosses, bishop, unidentifiable figures, borders, foliage, ship images.
Værnes Church	Trøndelag	1150–1200	1150–1200	Consecration crosses.

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**SREDNJEVEŠKE STENSKÉ POSLIKAVE  
V NORVEŠKIH KAMNITIH CERKVAH**

Povzetek

Na Norveškem je 159 srednjeveških kamnitih cerkva, od katerih jih ima vsaj 33 fragmente stenskih poslikav iz srednjega veka. Te poslikave najdemo na stenah in obokih v ladjah in prezbiterijih, v nekaterih primerih pa tudi na zunanjščini. Srednjeveške stenske poslikave vključujejo figuralne in dekorativne motive. Figuralne motive najdemo v petnajstih cerkvah, v katerih so najpogostejši hagiografski prizori in novozavezne zgodbe. Poleg figuralnih prizorov so pogoste tudi dekorativne poslikave, kot so linearni ali vegetabilni robovi, draperije in bordure, poslikane z arhitekturnimi elementi. Stenske poslikave se razlikujejo po slogu, stanju ohranjenosti in restavriranosti. V mnogih primerih so fragmentarne, izgubile so veliko količino prvotnih barv in so pogosto močno restavrirane, zato je težko razbrati njihov slog in ikonografijo ter jih datirati. Z izjemo posvetilnih križev ni znanih stenskih poslikav iz 12. stoletja. Več kot polovica ohranjenih figuralnih motivov izvira iz 13. in 14. stoletja, preostali pa so iz obdobja od leta 1400 do konca srednjega veka (1537).