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Interpretations of old wood

Figuring mid-twelfth century
church architecture in west Sweden

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Abstract

This thesis explores mid-twelfth century church architectures in west Sweden. The architectures are investigated in the light of a case, five parish churches' naves, in particular their attics and surviving mid-twelfth century roofs. Working from the insight that these roofs were most likely visible from the rooms below, the thesis presents in-depth analysis of the sites, buildings, and their organisation of forms and volumes. The archaeological evidence is approached with architectural perspectives, and the study brings together a partly new view of the mid-twelfth century church architectures.

The churches' attics and roofs have seldom been in the focus in studies that interpret the historical church architectures. Thus, even if the uniquely old roofs are well preserved, we understand only fragments of how they may have been significant. The naves were created in a period before we have specific documentary evidence. Thus, as a study system, the idea that the archaeological physical remains establish 'iterated, performed, articulations' guide the work throughout. The physical evidence is approached with architectural perspectives. The historical architectures are viewed as a matrix for peoples' beings and doings, which means that the architectures were both essential, present 'everywhere', and routine, 'everyday'. The thesis presents relationships between the remains and architectural perspectives.

Based on investigations in the buildings, and a 3D laser scan of one church, the analysis first focus on walls and roofs respectively and thereafter explores relationships between these. The interpretations show that the naves' masonry walls formed a firm and 'cave-like' setting, and that the roofs contrasted with a light and 'lively' character. The roof in one nave, in Gökhem's church, articulates or marks 'zones' in the room below, interpreted as the 'west', 'middle' and 'east'. Thereafter the thesis focus attention on four architectural themes in a sequence of events, i.e. 'discovery and approach', 'portal and doorway', 'entry and exploration' and finally, 'recalled in visual memory'. In these, the focus is on the same church in Gökhem however, some investigations connect to stave churches in Norway, as well as to a woven picture of a church, in a tapestry from north Sweden. In the last part, the thesis cast light on some important subsequent changes. The results provides a basis for future projects, pointing to the importance of the wooden built remains in Sweden and Norway, working from 'site topology', and analysis of medieval built environment from the viewpoint of preserved textiles.

The five churches are part of a Swedish national heritage and they were, together with many other small churches in Sweden, extensively restored during the twentieth century. In this process, they lost some of their local diversity. As we now try to fit these monuments, which have a national identity, into an increasingly complex world with many identities, new understandings of the churches' varying pasts are important. The thesis seeks to strengthen archaeological and architectural perspectives within conservation, and argues to include roofs as particularly significant, in future monument assessments.

Key words: architectural analyses, early medieval church architecture, common-tiebeam roofs, early medieval tapestry.