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Memorialising and Witnessing Christ's Passion — New Perspectives on the 14th-Century Polychrome Wood Crucifix in Marttila, Finland

Abstract: This article presents an investigation of a 14th-century polychrome wood crucifix from the Marttila Church (Sankt Mårtens in Swedish), and other stylistically closely related crucifixes in the medieval diocese of Turku (Åbo), Finland. The article discusses the function of the polychromy in illustrating Christ's Passion and communicating its meaning to viewers. A technical analysis of the Marttila crucifix showed that the original polychromy was of a high technical and artistic standard. The examination also established a firm basis for further iconographical and comparative style analyses. The main argument is that the polychromy strengthens the sculpture's capacity to aid in mnemonic reflection and affective contemplation. It is also argued that the purchase of crucifixes with similar kinds of polychromies for other parish churches in the region may reflect a change in devotional and ritual practices, and possibly even St. Birgitta's (Birgitta Birgersdotter, 1302/1303–1373) personal influence in the diocese during the 1340s. This study provides new insights into the significance of polychromy for iconographical analyses, even if preserved in a fragmented form. Thus, the article contributes to the understanding of the visual tradition of depicting the crucified Christ in the Late Middle Ages.

Keywords: Polychrome wood sculpture, 14th century, Marttila/Sankt Mårtens, Diocese of Turku, *Crucifixi Dolorosi*, Iconography, Technical art history, Passion history, St. Birgitta, Devotion



*Fig. 1. Crucifix in Marttila Church.
C. 1340/1350. Hardwood with large
areas of original polychromy. Height,
figure: 100 cm, cross: 224 cm.
Photo Tero Pajukallio.*

Memorialising and Witnessing Christ's Passion

New Perspectives on the 14th-Century Polychrome Wood Crucifix in Marttila, Finland

Katri Vuola

During the 13th and 14th centuries, three-dimensional, sculpted crucifixes assumed a pivotal visual and ritual role in the sacred spaces of the Roman Catholic Church. One of the theological factors that affected this development was the doctrine of Christ's real presence in the Sacrament of the Eucharist (Holy Communion). When installed on the altar or in its vicinity, an image of Christ nailed to the cross provided background to and clearly illustrated the meaning of the Host (Christ's body) in the Mass. At the same time, images of the crucified Christ were used in the monasteries as tools for compassionate, affective meditation. Such devotional spirituality and its practices spread gradually among the laity in the course of 14th and 15th centuries.

Medieval crucifixes even today have a prominent place in the Finnish Lutheran churches, similarly as in the Scandinavian countries. However, their altered and fragmented appearances, together with their high placement out of reach of parishioners, offer few clues as to their initial symbolic and ritual value and functional purpose in the church space. This article aims to bring these sculptures 'down' from on high to better examine and analyse them, then interpret them within the context of Late Medieval spirituality.¹

The visual tradition and imagery of presenting Christ's torture and execution

on a wooden cross has long been a subject of extensive scholarly interest within a number of disciplines and theoretical frameworks. More recently, research has focused on, e.g. the interaction between the image and the person beholding it, on the agency and objecthood of the images and objects, and on the materiality of the devotion.² This article investigates a 14th-century polychrome crucifix from Marttila (fig. 1), together with other crucifixes purchased for the churches in the diocese of Turku (Åbo) at the time. It discusses the significance of including the polychromy (the multi-coloured surface) in the iconographical analysis. Polychromy refers here to the multi-coloured finishing and plastic modelling of details on a carved figure.³ Similarly important in the iconographical analysis of crucifixes are the separately carved wooden details attached to the surface of the sculpture, such as the 'grapes' of blood bursting from the side wound.

The first research question concerns the layered polychromy of the crucifix in Marttila Church: What kind of polychromy did the crucifix initially have, and how was it affected and changed by later painting and restoration? The second research question relates to the interplay between the artwork and the medieval beholder: What part did the polychromy play in communicating the events of Christ's Passion history and its meaning? The questions will be addressed against the backdrop of the Christ-centred devotional literature of the time. I will also shed light on how the Marttila crucifix and other closely related crucifixes may have been used and understood in their sacred, physical environment.

The article's main argument is that the Marttila crucifix was an instrument for contemplating the Passion history by memorising its events from Christ's humiliation at Caiaphas's house to his death and resurrection. At the same time, the sculpture could be approached and viewed as a collection of devotional motifs, such as Christ's body parts, wounds, blood and the instruments of his crucifixion. The iconographical analysis focuses on the signs and symbols of the physical suffering – wounds, bruises and tears – as well as on the blood dripping or streaming from the wounds on Christ's body.

Due to its fragility and fractured polychromy, the crucifix in Marttila Church was removed from the church wall in the summer of 2020 to be conserved *in situ*. In addition to helping preserve the sculpture, it offered researchers an opportunity to more closely examine the sculpture and investigate it from a technical standpoint.⁴ Liisa Helle-Włodarczyk mapped the restoration history to ensure that experts would choose the best conservation and restoration meth-

ods.⁵ Seppo Hornytskyj and Hanne Tikka examined the object by applying a handheld EDXRF (energy dispersive X-ray fluorescence) spectrometer, which yielded information on the pigments and metals used in the polychromy.⁶ In addition, the conservators collected small samples of the flaking layers of paint and ground for microscopic analysis. The goal of the technical investigations was to acquire information on the stratigraphy of the paint layers, to date the layers and to achieve a better understanding of the sculpture's initial visual appearance.

The article first briefly outlines the object's history and provides an overview of earlier research. Then, it describes the crucifix and its polychromy and assesses the relevance of the notion *Crucifixa Dolorosi* in this context. It continues by analysing the iconography of the crucifix in the framework of the devotional culture of its time and against the Passion narrative of the Gospels. Then, it gives a glimpse of the post-medieval alterations of the related suffering crucifixes in the diocese. The article concludes by examining their initial ceremonial and spatial context.

Earlier Research on the Marttila Crucifix

The crucifix focused on in the present study is on display in the 18th-century Marttila Church (Sw. Sankt Märten's), in southwestern Finland. The aisleless wooden church is in the cruciform style, and it has a belfry that contains a distinguished collection of medieval polychrome wood sculptures. In addition to the 14th-century crucifix, a large 16th-century crucifix hangs on the southern wall of the church.

Due to its modest proportions, the older of the two crucifixes is usually referred to as the altar or processional crucifix.⁷ Art historian C. A. Nordman (1892–1972) has dated the crucifix on stylistic grounds to between the years 1340 and 1350.⁸ It was most likely purchased from a wooden church or chapel in the nearby village of Mäntsälä, located circa two kilometres upriver from Marttila along the ancient road to Hämeenlinna (Tavastehus). According to local folklore, the chapel was built on a muddy riverbank, which resulted in its collapse into the Paimio River. The crucifix had supposedly been removed by then to a 16th-century church, the ruins of which lie in the vicinity of the present-day Marttila Church.⁹

Several centuries later, the pioneer of antiquarian research in Finland, Emil Nervander (1840–1914), became interested in the crucifix. Its appearance star-



Fig. 2. Detail from the crucifix in Marttila Church. C. 1340/1350. The viewer's attention is drawn to Christ's sorrowful face. Martinkoski Parish. Photo Tero Pajukallio.

tled him, and he classified the sculpture – together with ones in Perniö (Sw. Bjärnä) and Tenhola (Sw. Tenala) – as 'horrifying examples of 15th-century crucifixes'.¹⁰ C. A. Nordman was the first to analyse the artwork more profoundly, which he assigned, together with four other crucifixes, to the *Master of Lieto* (1965).¹¹ He also acknowledged the proportionally well-preserved and expressive colouring of the Marttila sculpture, arguing also that the workmanship represented the master's greatest artistic achievement.¹² He proposed that the sculptor may have been aware of the *Crucifixi Dolorosi* (Ger. *Leidenskrucifixe*) and discussed their relation to monastic mysticism in Cologne and surroundings areas.¹³

Christ's Suffering as Painted and Carved on His Body

The Marttila crucifix is composed of a *Tree of Life*-type cross, and it depicts Christ's hands and feet nailed to the cross. His hands struggle to support the weight of the body, and his head is leaning slightly downwards. The slender, skilfully carved body bleeds abundantly from an open side wound as well as from the hands and feet. The flowing blood is illustrated by bunches of wooden pegs (or pins) attached to the body and painted in red. Christ's unusually large eyes draw the beholder's attention to the large side wound, which runs through the chest.¹⁴ A crown of thorns sits on top of his head, but only a few spikes remain. Christ's face has an agonizing expression: his mouth is open as if shouting in pain, or else to speak his last words (fig. 2). The now broken nose underscores the humiliation. Tears – an unusual element in the iconography of the crucified Christ – run from the corners of his initially dark blue eyes (fig. 3).¹⁵

The loincloth wrapped around Christ's waist is skilfully carved, and it creates an illusion of a voluminous fabric: the cloth has horizontal and overlapping folds, which extend from the waist down to the edge of the cloth. There



Fig. 3. Detail from the crucifix in Marttila Church. Tears have been painted in the corners of Christ's open eyes. The tip of the nose is missing. Photo Katri Vuola.



Fig. 4. Detail from the crucifix in Marttila Church. The lining of the white loincloth has an azurite-blue colouring, repaired later with Prussian blue. The initially golden decorative patterns consist of a crescent moon and an eight-pointed star/sun. Photo Liisa Helle-Włodarczyk.

is a large, protruding fold in the lap. The loincloth's lining has an azurite-blue colouring, later repaired with Prussian blue.¹⁶ A now reddish, but initially golden, crescent moon and star/sun pattern decorates the cloth. In addition, two parallel and initially golden stripes decorate the edge of the cloth (fig. 4).¹⁷ The polychromy has survived extraordinarily well on the back of the crucifix: the hair painted with brown colour spreads out from the neck to the shoulders. The reverse side of the cross still has its initial red colouring, with decorations consisting of silvery rosettes executed via template painting (fig. 5).

The crucified in Marttila Church is undoubtedly a dramatic illustration of the execution of Jesus, who – according to the Gospels – was the son of God. The body of the figure bears signs of mistreatment and violence: it is covered with bruises (modelled using gesso) painted in a bluish-grey colour. Carefully painted drops of blood flow from small holes punctured in the middle of the bruises. As Nordman has aptly noted, the crucifix shows ‘roses of blood spreading on the upper body as a maleficent eczema.’¹⁸

Crucifigi Dolorosi and Monastic Spirituality

As illustrated above, the image of the crucified in Marttila Church is meant to evoke empathy and pity. It invites the beholder to engage in a spiritual dialogue. Should it then be linked to the *Crucifigi Dolorosi*, which are known as naturalistic, sometimes almost surreal, depictions of the tortured Christ on the cross? The demand for such sculptures is usually explained by the activities and spiritual influence of the Dominican and Franciscan orders and more generally by the influence of the monastic life and culture in the early 14th century. The *Crucifigi Dolorosi* exist today in Cologne and surrounding areas (Westphalia) as well as in, e.g. Italy, Spain, Dalmatia, Bohemia, Moravia, Austria and Silesia.¹⁹ In the Nordic countries, as well, there are crucifixes that profoundly exhibit Christ's Passion.

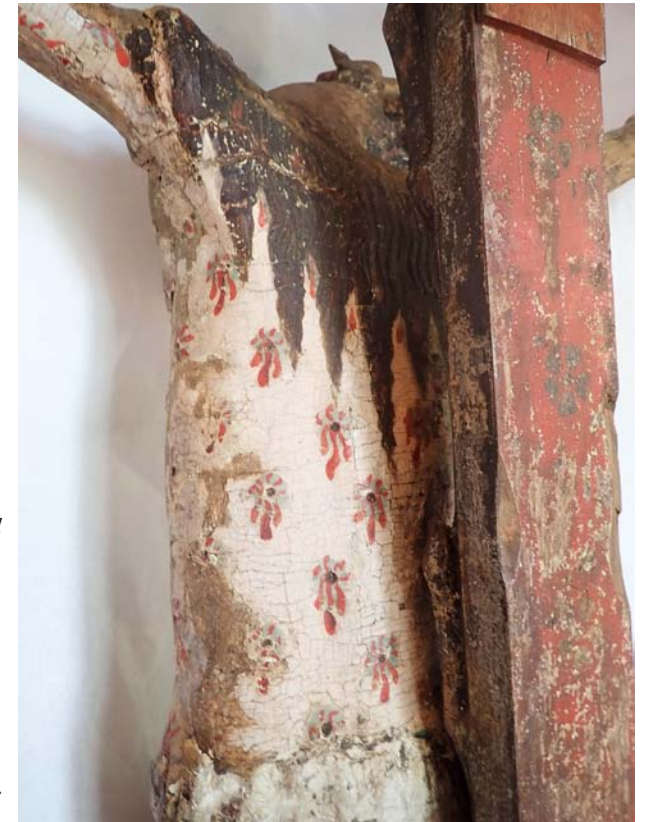


Fig. 5. Detail from the crucifix in Marttila Church. The original polychromy has survived extraordinarily well on the reverse side. The body is covered with blue-greyish bruises with flowing red blood. The dark rosettes on the cross initially had more of a silver tone. Photo Liisa Helle-Włodarczyk.

However, the *Crucifixa Dolorosi* do not comprise a univocal stylistic or iconographic category.²⁰ In fact, scholars apply the term quite loosely when discussing 14th- and 15th-century crucifixes. In his effort to characterise this distinct group, Godehard Hoffman (2006) has paid attention to the position and form of the body, the contrast between the thorax and the abdomen, how the arms are outstretched on the cross, the wounded feet and hands, which reveal the bones and tendons, and the lesions caused by flagellation.²¹ Carina Jacobsson (1995), again, has pointed out that some of the 14th-century examples in Sweden have distinct details, including flagellation wounds with small punctures in the middle on Christ's body and the clearly visible contours of the spine carved on the back of Christ's figure.²² This characterisation is especially apt, as well, for the crucifixes in the focus of this article.

Fourteenth-century Swedish *Crucifixa Dolorosi* crosses and, e.g. the wall painting in Kiaby Church (Scania, i.e. Medieval Denmark) from the mid-fifteenth century, have been interpreted as having a Birgittine influence, especially with respect to St Birgitta's (Birgitta Birgersdotter, 1302/1303–1373) visions.²³ The Birgittine order was well established by the beginning of the 15th century, and the collection of Saint Birgitta's visions, *Liber celestis revelacionum* (*The Heavenly Book of Revelations*), was widely known in the Swedish Realm and beyond at that time.²⁴

Päivi Salmesvuori (2007) has proposed that Birgitta aimed early on to gain publicity for her revelations, so they were well known in Sweden as early as the 1340s. This was, also, the decade when Birgitta had the first of her three revelations about Christ's crucifixion.²⁵ She had close spiritual and political ties with the Bishop of Turku, Magnus Hemming (b. 1290, in office from 1338 until his death in 1366). Therefore, her early visionary experiences must have been recognized, also, in the eastern-most diocese in the Swedish realm.²⁶ For these reasons, I have chosen Birgittine texts as a starting point for an iconographical analysis of the 'Finnish' *Crucifixa Dolorosi*, while acknowledging, however, that the relation between a medieval text and image is usually complex.²⁷

Christ of Pity

The first and only Birgittine convent in Finland was established in 1438 in Naantali (Sw. Nådendal). The collection of Birgittine writings from Naantali, *The Book of the Naantali Convent*, contains the text 'Virgin Mary and the

fifteen places of Christ suffering'. The text's style and content is rooted in the tradition of affective Christ-centred devotional literature. It is closely related to the widely known and read *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (c. 1300), attributed to the so-called *Pseudo-Bonaventure*.²⁸

Marko Lamberg has pointed out that 'The Fifteen Places', which follows the narrative of the Gospels, was probably pronounced in front of the congregation. The text urged listener to 'witness' the gruesome scenes on Christ's path to Golgotha and to identify with Mary as a co-sufferer and eyewitness to the mocking, torturing and killing of her son. Lamberg further suggests that the pathos and elaboration of Christ's humiliation and suffering surpasses even its description in the *Meditationes*.²⁹ In Birgitta's early revelation in *Liber celestis*, the gruesome scenes preceding the crucifixion are illustrated as follows:

As my Son was going on the place of his passion, some people struck him on the neck, while others hit him on the face. He was hit so hard and with so much force, that although I did not see who hit him, I heard the sound of the blow clearly. (Liber I, 10:21)³⁰

The Gospels describe Christ's execution in an almost laconic fashion: 'And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary, they crucified him there; and the robbers, one on the right hand, and the other on the left' (Luke 23:33).³¹ The passage is, thus, silent about the dramatic and bloody details that Birgitta experienced in her vision.

At that stage his eyes looked half-dead, his cheeks were sunken, his face mournful, his mouth open and his tongue bloody. His stomach sucked in towards his back, all the liquid having consumed, as if he had no vital organs. His hands and feet were rigidly extended, being pulled toward the cross and shaped like the shape of the cross. (Liber I, 10:26)³²

The crucifix in Marttila Church portrays Christ's vulnerability and suffering in very much the same way with the devotee being urged to 'see' in this contemporary text. Both text and image draw attention to the Christ's holy face and to the blood flowing abundantly from his wounds.³³ However, Christ shedding tears is an unconventional, if non-existent motif in the iconography of the crucifixion: it belongs rather to the *Ecce Homo* or the *Man of Sorrows* type of imagery and the numerous and popular sub-themes and versions of it dissemi-

nated widely in the 15th and 16th centuries.³⁴ The face of the sorrowful Christ underscores his role as the carrier of the sorrows and sins of humankind, as was thought to be predicted in Isaiah 53:2–5 in the Old Testament of the Hebrew Bible.

Caroline Walker Bynum has aptly formulated that the *Man of Sorrows* theme 'telescopes many moments of the Gospel story and many responses', whereas the *Crucifixion* and the *Ecce Homo* are instead narrative scenes.³⁵ However, the Marttila crucifix has a capacity to aid for both mnemonic reflection, and affective contemplation.



Fig. 6a–b. Above: Crucifix in Raisio Church. C. 1340/1350. Hardwood and softwood (cross). To the left: Remnants of medieval polychromy are visible on the edge of the loincloth, under the 18th century(?) blue and yellow colouring. Height 250 cm. Photo Katri Vuola.

Celestial Bodies and the Moment of Death

The disciple Matthew (27:45–46) has the following to say about Christ's death: '[Now] from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' After Christ had been crucified, a series of spectacular events occurred: 'Then also the veil of the temple was rent in two, the earth quaked, the rocks rent, and the dead saints raised from their graves' (Matthew 27:51–52).

The painted Calvary scenes often include the sun and the moon in the composition: they can be understood as signals of the three-hour period of darkness that descended over the Earth before Christ took his last breath. The period of darkness occurred in the middle of the day and has since been interpreted as an indication of a solar eclipse. Including celestial bodies in the iconography of the crucifixion addresses the cosmological significance of Christ's death and its importance for the salvation of all people.³⁶

The painter of the Marttila sculpture resolved the challenge of including these allegorical elements in a 'free-standing', three-dimensional representation by attaching decorative, initially golden elements to the white loincloth. The elements comprise an eight-pointed star/sun motif enclosed in a waxing crescent moon. Similar, but now severely fragmented, decorations can also be detected on Christ's loincloth in the Hattula crucifix in the province of Häme in Southern Finland. The sun and the moon are also included in, e.g. a simplified version of the Calvary scene on the provincial seal from 1326.³⁷ These iconographic elements may hide, as well, under the post-medieval, blue-coloured paint layer on the loincloth of the Raisio crucifix: two parallel and now blackened(?) stripes, as well as fragments of a golden stripe can be detected on the edge of the cloth (fig. 6).

The Side Wound and the Blood Left Behind

The disciple John (19:34) gives a description of the events following Christ's death: 'But after they were come to Jesus, when they saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers with a spear opened his side, and immediately there came out blood and water.' In Christian mythology, the soldier who punctured Christ's chest to ensure he was dead was named *Longinus*. In theological terms, blood was an attestation of Christ's humanity,



Fig. 7. Detail from the crucifix in Marttila Church, with blood flowing from Christ's side wound. A second layer of blood, which seems to have been modelled using chalk ground, is apparent under the carved grape of blood. The garish cadmium red is from a 20th century restoration. Photo Katri Vuola.

whereas water represented Christ's divinity. The mixture of wine and water ingested in the Eucharist meal were meant to represent these liquids.³⁸

Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out that 'in the Northern crucifixes, Christ's blood is usually depicted 'either as falling in a rain of fresh drops or as gushing out in streams – often in the same image'.³⁹ This is also the case in Marttila Church: a second blood stream is hiding under the carved one. This stream, probably modelled using gesso, flows abundantly from the wound down to the folded edge of the loincloth (fig. 7). It seems to consist of separate, elongated droplets – which are rather modest in style when compared to the Taivassalo crucifix (fig. 8). The crucifixes do not depict the blood as coagulated or drying, but as *Sanguis Christi*, 'alive in death', as formulated by Bynum.⁴⁰ The emphasis on the fresh, living blood as an aspect of blood piety and the ico-



Fig. 8. Crucifix from Taivassalo Church. C. 1340/1350. Lime-wood, oak and spruce (crossbeams) with fragments of medieval polychromy. Height, figure: 141 cm, cross: 366 cm. Taivassalo Parish. Photo Katri Vuola.

nography of Christ's sacrificial death reflect, broadly speaking, Late Medieval theological discussions on the nature of matter and God – a phenomenon profoundly and thoroughly explored by Bynum (2007).

As is typical of 14th-century crucifixes, Christ's head leans heavily to the right. This further addresses the wound and the blood as the focal point of the image.

Expressing devotion to Christ's wounds was an essential part of spiritual culture in the Late Medieval period, especially in the monastic milieu. The wounds functioned as a gateway to Heaven and an entry into Christ, and as a means for uniting with him in spirit.⁴¹



Fig. 9. Detail from the Christ figure in the crucifix from Hattula Holy Cross Church. C. 1340/1350. Hardwood and spruce (cross) with only fragments of medieval polychromy left. Height, figure: 118 cm, cross: 230 cm. Hattula Parish. Photo Katri Vuola.

When used as a separate devotional image, the side wound usually had a diamond-shaped or oval form, and it was of supposed life-size.⁴² This 'true measure' of the side wound could be written on, e.g. a parchment, which was then worn around the neck as an amulet believed to have magical powers and thus protect the carriers against, e.g. diseases, injuries, including blood loss, or sudden death.⁴³ In the crucifix in Hattula Church the width of the triangular and cavity-like wound is c. 5.5 cm centimetres, and it is painted red on the inside (fig. 9).⁴⁴ The rather large size of the wound is actually typical of many images of Christ in the diocese. This may indicate that they had a liturgical function: for example, in the Cistercian monastery of Wienhausen a Host was inserted on

Good Friday into the side wound of a life-sized sculpture of the dead Christ in the Easter sepulchre.⁴⁵ Thus, the Host, the *real* Body of Christ, literally merged with its sculptural form of Christ. However, the triangular-shaped side wound typical of the crucifixes under scrutiny was filled, at least partially, with carved and modelled details illustrating blood streams and withdrawn skin.

Writing with Blood Ink, Counting the Drops

The examination and conservation of the Marttila crucifix revealed that precious pigments and metals were used for the skilfully executed details. However, the present appearance is affected by modern-day restorations: e.g., the blood dripping from the bruises on the front side of the figure is striking because of the garish (cadmium) red colour and sloppy execution. The much larger crucifix in Taivassalo (height 366 cm) illustrates the wounded skin with carefully painted, rounded dots, from which pendula-shaped blood drops flow

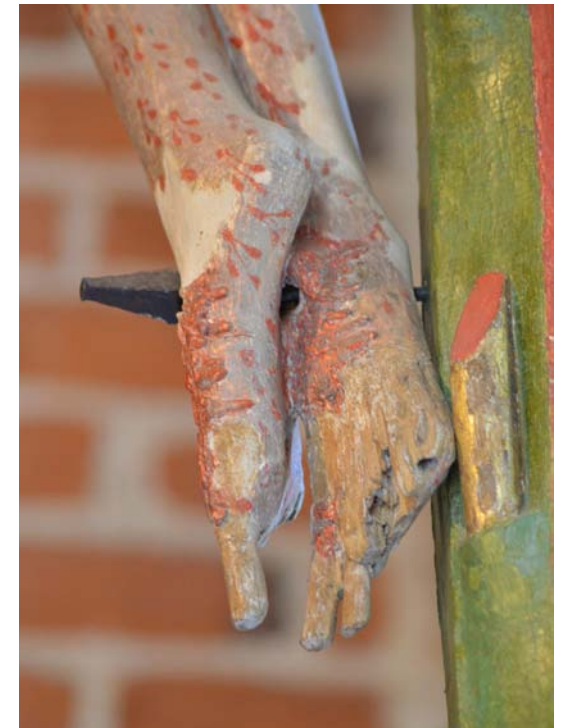


Fig. 10. Detail from the crucifix in Taivassalo Church. Pendula-shaped blood drops form a decorative pattern on Christ's skin. The blood on the feet was probably modelled using chalk ground. Photo Katri Vuola.

(fig. 10). However, these details belong to a secondary layer of paint, which possibly dates to the late 15th century or early 16th century.⁴⁶ Only Christ's face retains fragments of the original colouring, which corresponds to the colouring on the Marttila crucifix: there are traces of bleeding dot-like wounds encircled by greenish-coloured bruises.⁴⁷ Mirja-Liisa Waismaa-Pietarila's analysis of the paint layers showed that the large, open eyes of the Christ figure had been further widened by painting new eyelids. The alterations changed the sculpture's appearance, making it less dramatic, as Waismaa-Pietarila suggests.⁴⁸ The wounds and injuries depicted in the secondary paint layer are illustrated in a more conceptual and symbolic manner than a naturalistic manner. The skin 'decorated' with blood drops is reminiscent of the so-called *Charter of Christ*, a medieval metaphor for 'Christ as a book'. At the metaphoric level, the skin is a piece of parchment, on which the promise of redemption is written with 'blood ink'.⁴⁹ A well-known example of this conception is the prayer book *MS Egerton 1821* (c. 1480–1490/early 16th century), in which numerous blood drops are painted directly onto the parchment, but also on woodcuts glued to the pages.⁵⁰ Counting and touching the drops of Christ's blood was a popular form of devotion in the Late Middle Ages. Many female mystics, including St Birgitta, received spiritual confirmation of their exact number as well as the exact number of wounds – 547 500 and 5475, respectively.⁵¹

A sculpted image, exemplified here by the crucifix in Taivassalo, may have been adjusted to fit this type of contemplative praxis, with an artist commissioned to re-paint it, e.g. when church vaults were decorated between 1470 and 1486.⁵² The families commissioning such an enterprise belonged to the highest church elite, who must have had access to, e.g. illustrated prayer books and breviaries. However, the *Crucifixi Dolorosi* had long been 'out of fashion'. Models for the new polychromy were probably also available in the nearby parish churches, or the Cathedral of Turku.

A Living Cross and its Transformations

Many of the medieval crosses have been, in one or another way, altered and demolished or else replaced with a new one. In Taivassalo Church, for example, the crossbars were shortened in the 19th century, but restored to their supposed original colour and length in the 1970s.⁵³ In Marttila Church, the upper beam of the cross was missing or damaged, and so it was reconstructed in 1952.⁵⁴ In



Fig. 11. Altar crucifix in Kustavi Church. Second quarter of the 14th century. Hardwood with secondary and original polychromy. Height, figure: 36 cm, cross: 68 cm. Kustavi Parish. Photo Katri Vuola.

Raisio Church, the size of the cross does not seem to coincide with the carved figure's proportions. However, recent C14 analysis of the cross does not clearly contradict earlier dating of the crucifix based on its formal and stylistic characteristics. The C 14 analysis, together with a wood anatomic analysis showed that coniferous tree of different ages was used for the cross' construction.⁵⁵

In the 14th century, green-coloured *Tree of Life* type crosses, with cut branches in red and gold, were the most common frame for Christ's tortured and bloody body. However, this type of cross has been a symbol of Christianity since Antiquity, and it has its own history of formal and stylistic development. The *Tree of Life* type crosses set the background for the Christ figure

not only in Marttila, Taivassalo and Raisio, but also, e.g. in the Turku Cathedral and Kustavi Church (St. Gustav, fig. 11).⁵⁶ In Raisio, the crossbeams are attached with plates which show images of the four evangelists carved in bas-relief, and which are decorated with small flowers – presumably painted first at the end of the 18th century.⁵⁷

Together with the figure of the tormented Christ, the *Tree of Life* type cross constituted a powerful symbol of the renewal and salvation of the soul. In Christian mythology, the *Tree* is understood as a metaphor for the dual nature of Christ, his humanity and godliness. A carved figure of Christ together with a wooden cross constructed of timber sum up the meaning of Christ's suffering, and they 'mark the end station' of the Passion history.

The cross of the crucified Christ in Marttila Church was painted brown in some phase of its history. Perhaps it had woodgrains imitated by painting (*graining*), though no clear evidence of this exists anymore. Paradoxically, the brown colouring addresses here the materiality and *objecthood* of the cross: the colour of the dried wood blurs the cross's initial metaphorical meaning. The reverse side of the cross has retained its initial colours: silvery roses (or rosettes) have been attached to the bright, cinnabar-red ground (fig. 5). These decorations made of thin metal leaves have now oxidised, and therefore, become blackened.⁵⁸ Roses had numerous symbolic meanings and religious connotations in the Late Middle Ages; therefore, their exact purpose here is difficult to clarify exactly. However, instead of just being a decorative element, they further address the crucifix's devotional character: like the beads in *rosaries*, they refer to Christ's wounds and in a broader context, to his Passion and death.⁵⁹

In the case of the Hattula crucifix (fig. 9), Christ's figure is nailed to a secondary cross with rounded plates at the ends of the beams. The crucifix, traditionally called the *triumphal crucifix*, contains remnants of white colouring, and large, baroque-style flowers have been painted on the end plates. The year of the repainting, 1703, and the names of its financiers are written on a separate plate attached to the *stipes*.⁶⁰ It is plausible that the cross, which was constructed of softwood planks, also stems from the same year. It was probably at this point that the dark lining marking Christ's closed eyelids was painted. The crucifix's polychromy is now severely fragmented.⁶¹ However, the stratigraphy of the paint layers on the loincloth implies that the object has been continually repainted and parts of it replaced over the centuries: for instance, there are rem-

nants of the same silvery crescent moon and star/sun pattern on the loincloth as there are in the crucifix in Marttila Church (fig. 4).

As a result of a 20th-century reconstruction of the Hattula crucifix' supposed medieval placement, the sculpture hangs high up under the arch nearest to the altar. A narrow board has been attached between the pillars, below the sculpture, to designate or illustrate the alleged border between the nave and the chancel.⁶² This positioning, together with the long and narrow shafts of the cross (height ca. 230 cm), makes the artwork look larger and more imposing than it is in reality. The height of Christ's figure is, however, not more than c. 118 cm. Interestingly, Christ's figure on the Marttila cross – usually called an *altar* or *processional crucifix* – is only 18 cm shorter.⁶³ Therefore, I suggest that the two sculptures were initially purchased for an altar, and that they also date from around the same time.

To summarise, the proportionally small sizes of the Christ figures in these crosses carved in the round and the painted and carved details – together with the detailed rendering of the reverse side – imply that the crucifixes were meant to be viewed from close range, and from different angles. They allowed for intimate and even tactile contact, e.g. when carrying in Easter procession, and when needed, when viewing them in a static position beside an altar or on a pedestal.⁶⁴ Indeed, the lower end of the upright beam of the Marttila crucifix is tapered, which possibly made it easier to handle and move it from one place to another.

A travelling painter?

The crucifixes dealt with in this article form a somewhat isolated group with a distinct style of carving and painting. However, the crucified Christ from Botkyrka church (Södermanland, Sweden) contains a detail that links the work with the Finnish group: an eight-pointed star/sun decoration on Christ's loincloth.⁶⁵ There are also axillary hairs painted in the right armpit, similarly as with the crucifix from Marttila.⁶⁶ In either case the hair has the shape of a spindle – a unique detail executed with a thin brush and brownish colour (fig. 12). Even if the same painter would have executed both of the polychromies, the carving style and the wood material (oak) of the Botkyrka sculpture bear witness to another 'hand': Christ's figure has sorrowful facial features, in contrast with the 'suffering' type of faces with wide-open eyes and gaping mouth in the Finnish



Fig. 12. Crucifix from Botkyrka in Södermanland, Sweden. C. 1325/1350. Oak (figure) and hard wood (cross). Height, figure: 77 cm, cross: 211 cm. Swedish History Museum, Stockholm (SHM14313). Photo Katri Vuola.

crucifixes. It is likely that an influential model existed for all these sculptures, e.g. a well-known image of the crucified Christ with miraculous properties. This hypothesis is supported by the observation that Christ's figure in Botkyrka has a distinct triangular-shaped side wound cut through the thorax similar to the crucifixes in Hattula and Taivassalo and possibly also in Marttila – but also, e.g. in the sculptures depicting the resurrected Christ in Raisio and Nousiainen.⁶⁷

Conclusions

The Marttila crucifix was not unique for its time – it is only one of the best surviving examples. The technical examination of the sculpture's polychromy was more preliminary than decisive, yet, necessary for understanding the stratigraphy of the paint layers. The examination revealed some interesting visual and iconographic elements, which have received little or no attention in the Finnish scholarly writing. These elements include tears in the corners of Christ's eyes, bleeding bruises on the face and body, the dual blood stream flowing from the side wound, the golden crescent moon and star/sun pattern, the silvery rose decoration on the reverse side of the cross and the long, dark hair spread across Christ's shoulders. The execution of the polychromy required access to high-quality pigments and precious metals and necessitated special skills and artistic vision. The exquisite colouring was an integral part of the sculpture: it had an important role in communicating the history of Christ's Passion, and it supported the sculpture's capacity to aid in mnemonic reflection and affective contemplation. This article will hopefully draw further attention to and arouse new interest in medieval crucifixes, many examples of which remain in Finnish and Scandinavian churches. This attention may well prove crucial to their survival.

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Notes

- 1 This article is a part of my doctoral thesis, being completed at the University of Helsinki. It is funded by the Kone Foundation as part of the project 'Fragmentation and Iconoclasm in Medieval and Early Modern Objects', as well as by the Academy of Finland (Decision no. 315540) through the project 'Carving Out Transformations – Wood Use in North-Eastern Europe, 1100–1600'.
- 2 See, e.g. Lipton 2005, 1172–1208; Jung 2010, 203–240; Fisher 2006, 43–62.
- 3 On medieval polychromy and its significance to wood sculpture, see Marincola & Kargère 2020, especially 41–51; see also the classic in the field, Taubert 2015.
- 4 The severe flaking of the polychromy was acknowledged first in 2015. See Vuola 2015.
- 5 Helle-Włodarczyk 2020.
- 6 The examination was organised by the author, and carried out by Seppo Hornytzkyj and Hanne Tikkanen from *Materiaalianalyyssikeskus* (Helsinki) on 4 August 2020.
- 7 The dimensions of the crucifix are 100 x 87 x 35 cm (figure), and 224 x 125 x 9 cm (cross). See Helle-Włodarczyk 2020. The body and the legs were carved from one piece of wood, but the arms were carved separately and attached to the body. Due to the well-preserved polychromy on the back, it is unclear if the sculpture was hollowed out. The type of wood used for carving was not analysed, but I suggest that either lime wood or alder was used – or perhaps both. The cross is of a soft wood. On the use of wood in 14th-century sculpture, see Vuola 2019, 75–104.
- 8 Nordman 1965, 176; see also Riska 1985, 27.
- 9 Riska 1985, 9–10, 29.
- 10 Nervander continues to portray these crucifixes (later dated by C. A. Nordman between 1300 and 1350), as '...fasawäckande, med ymniga, stelnade blodströmmar betäckta krusifixer' (translation from Swedish into English by the author); see Nervander 1887–1888, 72, also cited in Vuola 2016, 86.
- 11 These sculptures are today located in the Taivassalo (Swed. Tövsala) and Raisio (Swed. Reso) parish churches and in Angelniemi chapel in the province of Finland Proper (Swed. Egentliga Finland), as well as in Hattula Church in Häme (Swed. Tavastland) province. See Nordman 1965, 167–176. The Master of Lieto is discussed in Vuola 2016, 81–104.
- 12 Nordman 1965, 167–176 and 174; see also Riska 1989, 196.
- 13 Nordman 1965, 174.
- 14 At present, the eyes have a brownish tone. However, the colour of the irises consists of azurite as well as cinnabar, lead white and iron oxides. See Hornytzkyj 2021.
- 15 Azurite was used to achieve the light blue/greyish tone of the tears and the bruises depicted on the body. The research group interpreted these details as belonging to the initial polychromy of the sculpture. See Hornytzkyj 2021.
- 16 Hornytzkyj 2021.
- 17 Analysis of the decoration revealed a high density of gold and silver. Hornytzkyj 2021.
- 18 Nordman 1965, 172: 'På hela den blottade överkroppen slå rosor av blod ut som ett elakartad eksem' (translation from Swedish into English by the author).
- 19 On this issue, see, e.g. Hoffman 2006, 13; Jacobsson 1995, 95.
- 20 See, e.g. Hoffmann 2006, 15.
- 21 See, e.g. Hoffmann 2006, 15.
- 22 Jacobsson mentions in this context the crucifixes in Åker and Bringetofta, as well as in Risinge, Tärna and Nysätra. Jacobsson 1995, 111.
- 23 Kaspersen 1980, 127f. The crucifixion scene shows Christ's feet nailed to the cross-beam, one across the other. This detail has been related by Kaspersen to St. Birgitta's third vision of the crucifixion.
- 24 The collection of Birgitta's visions was published in 1378 by her confessor, Alfonso of Jaén. See, e.g. Rychterová 2019.
- 25 Salmesvuori 2009, 221–225; *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden* 2006, 65–70. I am grateful to Docent Päivi Salmesvuori for sharing her knowledge and expertise on St. Birgitta's life and revelations and her early influence in Finland.
- 26 Salmesvuori 2013, e.g. in 59 and 126; Salmesvuori, e.g. in 2009, 24; Klockars 2017, 63–70.
- 27 On the the Birgittine iconography and the visions, see especially Oen 2018, 212–237; Räsänen 2013, 109–135.
- 28 Lamberg 2017, 370.
- 29 Lamberg 2017, 370.
- 30 *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden* 2006, 68.
- 31 For the Bible quotes in this article, I have used the digital version of the Douay-Rheims Bible; see <http://www.drbo.org/index.htm>.
- 32 *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden* 2006, 69.
- 33 Kauko & Lamberg 2014, 23; Lamberg 2014, 368–371.
- 34 The classic on devotional images in the Middle Ages is Ringbom 1965; a more recent study in this field is by Puglisi & Barcham 2013.
- 35 Bynum 2007, 150.
- 36 See Hamburger 2011, 1–34, e.g. 25, Fig. 20; Nickel 2007.
- 37 Reinhold Hausen characterises the seal as follows: 'ABITANCIVM . IN TAVASTIA. Kristus på korset mellan en växande halfmåne och en femuddig stjärna, allt på rutad botten med en punkt i varje ruta.' Hausen 1900, 27.
- 38 Bynum 2007; Rubin 1991, 303.

- 39 Bynum 2007, 153. This is illustrated in, e.g. the so-called *Kaufmann crucifixion* from c. 1340 (plate 14 in Bynum 2007).
- 40 See Bynum 2007, 153.
- 41 See, e.g. Rubin 1991, 302–306.
- 42 “[Here] the wound is one among the late-medieval ‘true measures’, which included the height of Christ and the Virgin and the length of their feet”. Lewis 1997, 208.
- 43 Rubin 1991, 305–306.
- 44 The exact dimensions of the wound are 5.5 x 3.2 x 3.2 cm. The cavity illustrating the wound is painted red inside, while in its deepest corner there is a small hole through the rib cage.
- 45 Appuhn, without specific reference, quoted by Pinchover 2014, 95; see also Rubin 1991, 294–297. Uličný gives examples of different types of Christ’s sculptures, including crucifixes with movable arms, symbolically buried in Easter Sepulchres in Bohemian churches. Uličný 2011, 24–64 (especially 43).
- 46 Waismaa-Pietarila 1983, 45.
- 47 These bruises have been partially covered with a light reddish paint. Waismaa-Pietarila 1981, 45. The dimensions of the crucifix are 141 x 121 cm (figure), and 366 x 239 (cross). Different types of wood were used when manufacturing it: the hollowed-out figure, the plates on the shafts and the text ribbon are of lime wood, while the reliefs on the plates and pieces of the hair are from oak and the cross is of spruce. Waismaa-Pietarila 1983, 50.
- 48 Waismaa-Pietarila 1983, 45.
- 49 Rubin 1991, 306.
- 50 Tammen 2011, 229–254, especially 231.
- 51 Parshall & Schoch (eds.) 2005, Nr. 49, 187, as cited in Tammen 2011, 244.
- 52 Ahlström-Taavitsainen 1984, 15.
- 53 Waismaa-Pietarila 1983, 50.
- 54 See Niemi 1952.
- 55 Vuola & Immonen 2020, 24.
- 56 The measurements of the badly damaged, partially restored crucifix in Turku Cathedral are 98 x 67 cm, and the height of the fragmented figure is 36 cm. See *Catalogue of the Collections in Turku Cathedral Museum*; in Kustavi, the height of the well-preserved Christ figure is 36 cm, and the crucifix 68 cm. Both sculptures were carved out from a light-coloured hardwood, possibly alder or lime wood.
- 57 The year of a previous repainting, 1663, and its financier’s name still remain in the lowest plate: ”Edle walb(orne) Maior (Major) Israel Grabbe till Norikala och Packenäs hafwer Låtitt måla datta Crucefix Gudhi till Gudz huus till prydndadt Anno 16 – 63.”
- 58 The red colour consists of cinnabar, lead white and earth pigments and a chalk ground; see Hornytzkjy 2021. The cross of the crucifix in Rute Church (Gotland, Sweden) has similar kinds of decorative roses on a red ground; see Eliason 2013, 147–167, 153; in Hälsingtuna Church, the cross of the crucifix contains silvery roses dated to c. 1300; see Tångeberg 1986, 79.
- 59 On the imagery of the rose and the rosary, see, e.g. Hamburger 1997, 63–100; Fallberg-Sundmark 2013, 54–59.
- 60 ‘Gudi till ährä har den Vålb:e Opbörsman Gabriel Alftanus Och des käre hustru Brijta Appia låtit måla denne Christi kårs den 14 Nov: 1703.’ Edgren 1997, 32.
- 61 A newspaper article from *Aamulehti* (31.7.1940), contained in the archives of the National Heritage Agency, suggests that the restoration done by Oskari Niemi took place “recently”. Helena Edgren has proposed the year 1946 for the date of the restoration; see Edgren 1997, 26, 32.
- 62 Knapas 1997, 130.
- 63 Anna Nilsén has pointed out that the notion of a *triumphal crucifix* was originally used when referring to the crucifix’s position under a *triumphal arch* and to crucifixes that presented Christ as a triumphant king. Nilsén 2003, 26–27, chapter 5 in its entirety.
- 64 On portable Christ sculptures in staged Easter plays, see Uličný 2011.
- 65 The height of the figure is 77 cm (oak), while the cross is 211 cm (another hard wood). Swedish History Museum ID SHM14313. I am grateful to Pia Melin, Mattias Malmberg and Carina Jacobsson for their kind help and inspirational discussions during my visit to the museum in August 2018.
- 66 J. Taubert and F. Buchenrieder give an example of this: they discovered painted hair in the left armpit of Christ in a crucifix from Forstenried, Upper Bavaria, during the restoration. The crucifix dates to around 1200. Taubert 2015, 153 and 152, Fig. 144.
- 67 See Vuola 2019, 92.

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