

**Zeitschrift:** Schweizerische numismatische Rundschau = Revue suisse de numismatique = Rivista svizzera di numismatica  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Numismatische Gesellschaft  
**Band:** 97 (2019)  
  
**Artikel:** The architectural setting of baptism : rituals, norms and practices in Scandinavia : ca 1050-ca 1250  
**Autor:** Bramer Solhaug, Mona  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869543>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 07.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

---

MONA BRAMER SOLHAUG

THE ARCHITECTURAL SETTING OF BAPTISM:  
RITUALS, NORMS AND PRACTICES IN SCANDINAVIA  
*ca 1050–ca 1250*

The history and the concepts of baptism, and how they came to be reflected in the context of the architectural and symbolic settings of the baptismal ritual, have been recurring themes in medieval scholarship of recent years.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this essay is to discuss the practice in the Scandinavian countries, with special attention directed to Norway, *ca 1050–ca 1250*.<sup>2</sup> The period starts with the completion of the adoption of Christianity, when the conversion of Norwegian adults was fulfilled and the baptism of infants had become the normal procedure. The period terminates before the extensive reconstruction and refurnishing of the churches was carried out, primarily as a result of the liturgical changes initiated by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

I have three main questions to discuss: first, how the theological concepts of baptism were reflected in the ritual practices; second, how the changes of the

\* Acknowledgements: In 2015 Svein H. Gullbekk invited me to join the research project *Religion and Money* and investigate the relationship between baptism and money-offerings in Norwegian medieval churches, based on my studies about baptismal fonts and baptismal rituals. This paper makes clear that there is hardly any archaeological or historical evidence for connections between the rituals of money-offering and baptism in medieval Norway, a conclusion that is of importance for the general understanding of the use of money in devotional religious practice in the Middle Ages. My contribution has been presented and discussed at several workshops within the framework of the project.

<sup>1</sup> E.g. N. H. PETERSEN, *Ritual and Creation: Medieval Liturgy as Foreground and Background for Creation*. in: S. R. HAVSTEEN – N. H. PETERSEN – H. W. SCHWAB – E. ØSTREM (eds.), *Creations – Medieval Rituals, the Arts, and the Concept of Creation. Ritus et Artes*, vol. 2 (Turnhout 2007a), pp. 89–120; N. H. PETERSEN, *Baptismal Practises and Understanding in Medieval Nidaros*, in: M. S. ANDÅS – Ø. EKKROLL – A. HAUG – N. H. PETERSEN (eds.), *The Medieval Cathedral of Trondheim. Architectural and Ritual Constructions in their European Context* (Turnhout 2007b), pp. 291–307; A. DOIG, *Liturgy and Architecture. From the Early Church to the Middle Ages* (Aldershot 2008); E. PALAZZO, *Performing the liturgy*, in: T. F. X. NOBLE – J. M. H. SMITH – R. A. BARANOWSKI (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 3. *Early Medieval Christianities, ca 600–ca 1100* (Cambridge 2008), pp. 472–488; E. PALAZZO, *Art, Liturgy, and the Five Senses in the Early Middle Ages*. *Viator* 41–1, 2010. pp. 25–56; A. R. BLOCH, *Baptism, Movement, and Imagery at the Baptistry of San Giovanni in Florence*, in: N. ZCHOMELIDSE – G. FRENI (eds.), *Meaning in Motion: The Semantics of Movements in Medieval Art* (Princeton 2011), pp. 131–160.

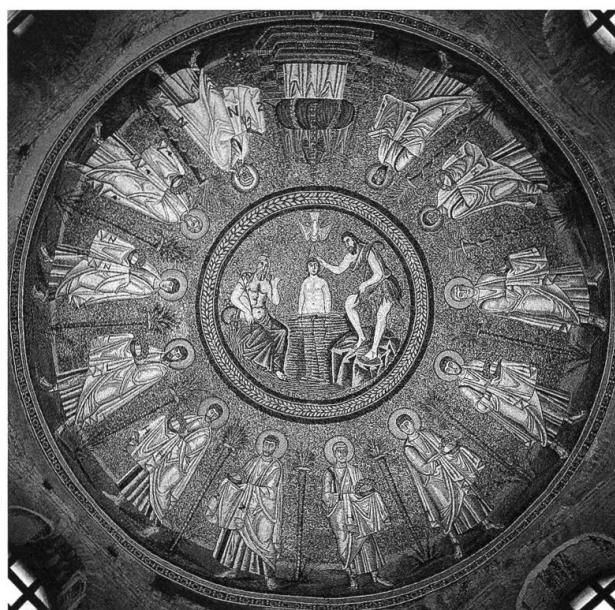
<sup>2</sup> «Scandinavia» covers Denmark, Norway and Sweden, while «Nordic» covers the geographical and cultural region of Northern Europe. «Norse» refers to the old culture of language.

baptismal ritual were incorporated in the planning of the architecture of the church; and third, how the spiritual and physical transitions of the infants, outside to inside, were manifested by the baptismal rituals in the liminal zones.

The sources are scarce; my survey will consequently be an interdisciplinary scrutiny of written documentation, such as ecclesiastical rituals, secular law texts, cartularies and sagas, plus architectural and archaeological evidence, in addition to imagery and, obviously, the surviving baptismal fonts themselves.

*Theological concepts reflected in the performance of the baptismal ritual*

Christian baptism was given a prominent position by the apostle Peter at the very inauguration of the Church on the first Pentecost, when he and a small group of believers received the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> Still, the source from which all theological contemplations on Christian baptism and its rites emerge is the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan; the conventional formula displays the Saviour standing in the running stream, while John the Baptist pours water over his head, and the Holy Spirit – in the shape of a dove – descends upon him (*Fig. 1*). And yet, the scriptures of the New Testament offer neither any ideal norm nor any ritual for the initiation sacrament.<sup>4</sup>



*Fig. 1* Mosaic of the Baptism of Christ by John the Baptist, encircled by a procession of saints in the dome of the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna, made 493–526. Photo: Wikimedia.

<sup>3</sup> See Ac 2:1–13. But see also Ac 2:38, where Peter preaches the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit as results of baptism.

<sup>4</sup> The baptism of Christ by John the Baptist occurs in all Gospels: Mt 3:13–17; Mk 1:9–11; Lk 3:21–22; Jn 1:29–34.

The terms «liturgy» and «ritual» have been subject to a variety of historical meanings and notions. Both terms are normally employed in modern medieval scholarship,<sup>5</sup> though the concept of liturgy was not used during the Middle Ages; the notions of liturgy and ritual often seem to merge in the Western Church.<sup>6</sup> The main implication of the terms in this essay is the connection between the normative doctrines and the devotional practice. The association is aptly conveyed by Nils Holger Petersen: «By way of symbolic acts, medieval liturgy has been seen to provide a bridge between ecclesiastically defined social norms and values on the one hand and the experiences of individual participants on the other.»<sup>7</sup>

The idea of baptism as a liturgical bridge and means of redemption by which each human might be delivered from the original sin brought into the world by Adam was set forth by the Church Father St Augustine (354–430). Later, his view became important for the early scholastic thinkers of the Middle Ages, including Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), who saw the act of christening as the act of God,<sup>8</sup> a sign of his infinite love – *agape* – and a mark of salvation.<sup>9</sup>

Several of the succeeding scholastic theologians, such as Hugh of St Victor (1096–1141), Peter Lombard (1100–1160), Bonaventure (1221–1274) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), were concerned with the idea of what the sacraments confer, and they fervently articulated their somewhat different perceptions of the «Sacramental Economy» in their writings. The term is the heart of the theology which in Christian tradition is generally referred to as the «Economy of Salvation».<sup>10</sup> The word «economy» derives from *oikonomia* in Greek, and literally means «household»; «Divine Economy» thus deals with God's household, his creation and management of the world and the trust of his flock in him. This understanding, according to the teachings of the Catholic Church, embraces the fruit of salvation achieved by Christ's sacrifice and triumph over death and his presence in the celebration of the Eucharist. Nonetheless, the initial sacrament is

<sup>5</sup> For fairly recent publications discussing the medieval use of the term «liturgy», see e.g. B. D. SPINKS, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism. From the New Testament to the Council of Trent* (Aldershot 2006); DOIG 2008 (note 1); PALAZZO 2008 (note 1); PALAZZO 2010 (note 1); PETERSEN 2007a (note 1); N. H. PETERSEN, *Ritual. Medieval Liturgy and the Senses: The Case of the Mandatum*, in: H. L. JØRGENSEN – H. LAUGERUD – L. K. SKINNEBACH (eds.), *The Saturated Sensorium: Principles of Perception and Mediation in the Middle Ages* (Aarhus 2015), pp. 181–205; M. S. ANDÅS, *Imagery and Ritual in the Liminal Zone. A study of Texts and Architectural Sculpture from the Nidaros Province ca 1100–1300*. Publication 43. Faculty of Theology (Copenhagen 2012).

<sup>6</sup> «Liturgy», *leitourgia*, a composite Greek word originally meaning public service by a citizen. Christian use of «liturgy» meant the public service of the Church, like in the Temple in the Old Law, as established in the New Covenant, see Lk 1:23; Heb 8:6. «Ritual», «rite» (*ritus*, Lat.), a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order. «Liturgy» means «rite» in the Western Church, but has a different meaning in the Eastern Church. See *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. «Liturgy». «Rite». See also PETERSEN 2007a (note 1), pp. 90–91.

<sup>7</sup> See PETERSEN 2007a (note 1), p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> See SPINKS 2006 (note 5), pp. 64–67. ;

<sup>9</sup> See John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 13:1–8; 1 John 4:8, 16.

<sup>10</sup> See *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. «Salvation». «Mediator». «Christ the Mediator».



baptism; it opens up a life in the Church, gives access to the other sacraments, and consequently to the promise of salvation.

The spiritual or inner implication of baptism is visualized in the outer performance of the act. The concept of baptism and the baptismal ritual are hence organically interrelated, since the performance expresses the idea of the sacrament. Every repetition of the sacred act through the centuries led to a tradition, which came to be collected in written formulas for the ritual.<sup>11</sup> When Christianity was adopted in the North-European countries, the baptismal rituals of the established Roman Church were inherited. And yet, since there was no such thing as one single *Urtext*, it is quite normal to find subtle liturgical transformations of the written sources. It was, for instance, not unusual for each diocese or even district to maintain their local usages and variants, though within fairly uniform rituals.<sup>12</sup>

The Christian Laws (*kristinréttir*) of the Old Norse regional law texts are central sources of information on the general baptismal practice in medieval Norway, even if most of these laws represent situations in hours of need, and not ordinary conditions.<sup>13</sup> The oldest of the Christian Laws originate from the eleventh century,<sup>14</sup> and the picture that we get confirms, by and large, a traditional practice, performed as it had been for centuries in the Western Church. The surviving Swedish and Icelandic Christian Laws from about the same period are normally in accordance with the Norwegian ones.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Documents for various medieval liturgical services of the Roman Church, *e.g.* the celebrations of Mass and baptism, are known as *Ordines Romani* (Roman Orders). About 50 are collected in *Les Ordines Romani du haut moyen âge* by Michel Andrieu. *Ordo Romanus XI* became important also for North-European countries. Decrees for baptism are recorded in *Ordo XI* and *Ordo XV*, see M. ANDRIEU, *Les Ordines Romani du haut moyen âge*, *Ordines I–XIII*, vol. 2 (Leuven 1948), pp. 415–447; M. ANDRIEU, *Les Ordines Romani du haut moyen âge*, *Ordines XIV–XXXIV*, vol. 3 (Leuven 1951), pp. 79–125.

<sup>12</sup> See SPINKS 2006 (note 5), p. 134; O. TVEITO, *Gudstjenestens historie. Liturgi, kirkeår og kirkehus gjennom 2000 år* (Oslo 2013), p. 101; various rituals in E. C. WHITAKER, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, in: M. E. JOHNSON (ed.), *Alcuin Club collections* 42 (London 2003).

<sup>13</sup> The *kristinréttir* is the body of ecclesiastical regulations included in the laws of the four Norwegian regions predating the law revision of the 1270s by King Magnus Håkonsson, «the Law-mender» (r. 1263–1280). The laws were not given, but accepted, by the Church.

<sup>14</sup> Extensive debate on the date of the regional laws is still proceeding. Old Gulathing Law, Old Borgarthing Law, and Old Eidsivathing Law are considered to date from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The oldest surviving manuscripts are dated to *ca* 1200. Revisions were made until the New Christian Laws were introduced. See M. RINDAL, *Liv og død i kyrkjens lover. Dei eldste norske kristenrettene*, in: M. RINDAL (ed) *Fra hedendom til kristendom*, KULTs skriftserie, 46 (Oslo 1996), pp. 141–149; E. HALVORSEN – M. RINDAL, *De eldste østlandske kristenrettene. Norrøne tekster*, 7 (Oslo 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Both Swedish and Icelandic medieval laws open with regulations concerning early baptism of infants and baptism in cases of emergency. For Old Västergötland Law (*Äldre Västgötalagen*), compiled early in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, see Å. HOLMBÄCK – E. WESSÉN, *Svenska landskapslagar tolkade och förklarade för nutidens svenskar. Äldre Västgötalagen. Yngre Västgötalagen. Smålandslagens kyrkobalk och Bjärköarätten*, Femte serien (Stockholm 1946), p. 3, §1. For the Old Christian Law of Iceland, probably written in the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, see Grágás. *Staðarhólsbók*, *Efter det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift*,

Despite the occurrence of some local peculiarities, two essential elements of the baptismal ritual were invariably present: the words (*forma*) and the water (*materia*). The words of the Trinitarian formula were crucial and consistent: «I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit....», as a consequence of Christ's Great Commission.<sup>16</sup> The phrase might be recited in Latin, but more often in Old Norse since this was what most Norwegians grasped: *Ec skiri þic. N. i nafne faður. oc sunar. oc anda heilax*.<sup>17</sup> The priests were responsible for giving people the proper instruction in administering correct baptism in cases of emergency. This kind of baptism was only to be confirmed in the church later on.<sup>18</sup>

The various writers of the New Testament make multiple references as regards the immersion and transformation in the water. The two most celebrated views, which emphasize the connotations between water and baptism, were set forth in the writings of Paul and John. Paul presents an image of baptism as a mystical, typological ritual participation in the death and resurrection of Christ and hence sees a close bond between baptism and the Crucifixion,<sup>19</sup> while John identifies baptism with purification and spiritual rebirth.<sup>20</sup> The two concepts also led to traditions in which the font was regarded both as a tomb, based on Paul's analogy between baptism and dying, and as the womb of the Mother Church, because to emerge from the water was like the rebirth, maintained by John.<sup>21</sup>

How the elements of the water and the words identify the baptismal sacrament, were issues of concern to Hugh of St Victor in his work on the sacraments, and to Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*. Both follow St Augustine in that there can be no sacrament until the Word (Mt 28:19) is added to the element of water, though they expand their interpretations rather differently. Hugh considers baptismal water to be a visual element, while Aquinas believes it to be a spiritual one. Their identification of what sacraments are, resulted in a scholastic theology which developed alongside and in some ways independent of the ritual.<sup>22</sup> The main issue for both, however, is that baptism holds the first place among the sacraments as the door to the spiritual life of the Church, and that we can not enter into the kingdom of Heaven without being cleaned of sin and born again of water and the Holy Ghost in the fountain of life, the *fons vitae*. Literary evidence verifies that baptismal fonts were considered to symbolize *fons vitae* from early

334 fol. Reprint of Vilhjálmur Finsen's ed (Odense 1879/1974), vol. 1–2, §1.

<sup>16</sup> The universal, apostolic mission, in Mt 28:19: «Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.»

<sup>17</sup> E.g. in Old Gulathing Law, see NGL: E. HERTZBERG – R. KEYSER – P. A. MUNCH – G. STORM (eds.), *Norges gamle love indtil 1387* (Christiania 1846–1895), vol. 1, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> See TVEITO 2013 (note 12), p. 195.

<sup>19</sup> Rm 6:3–4: «You cannot have forgotten that all of us, when we were baptised into Christ Jesus, were baptised into his death. So by our baptism into his death we were buried with him, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glorious power, we too should begin living a new life.» See also Col 2:12; 2 Co 5: 17; Ga 6:15.

<sup>20</sup> Jn 3:5: «Jesus replied: In all truth I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born through water and the Spirit.» See also Tit 3:5; 1 Co 6:11; Eph 5:26; Ac 2:38; 22:16.

<sup>21</sup> See J. G. DAVIES, *The Architectural Setting of Baptism* (London 1962), pp. 14, 21; SPINKS 2006 (note 5), pp. 39–47, 158.

<sup>22</sup> See SPINKS 2006 (note 5), pp. 135–147, 156.

times; the perception is substantiated for instance by the inscription from *ca* 440 in the Lateran baptistery of San Giovanni in Fonte.<sup>23</sup>

Two aspects are especially relevant to the present discussion of baptismal practice in medieval Scandinavia. The first is the shift to baptism of infants. The change gradually introduced new periods of initiation such as Pentecost and Easter. Baptism within eight days of birth became the established practice in the Church in the course of the 1100s.<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas explicitly maintains that baptism of children should not be deferred, because of the danger of death and eternal damnation.<sup>25</sup> The short interval was one reason for frequent baptisms at home. The second aspect is that the various stages of the baptismal ceremony were celebrated at one time – «the rite was telescoped», as Bryan Spinks put it so fittingly.<sup>26</sup>

### *The baptismal ritual: the fonts and the architecture of the church*

The physical arrangements for the various stages of the baptismal liturgy involved set positions in the church. In the following section first the stages of the medieval rite will be described, followed by an examination of the relationship between the positions of the stages and the architectural planning of Scandinavian churches, *ca* 1050–*ca* 1250. The section ends with some reflections on the performance of baptism and surviving fonts in Norway.

#### *The stages of the ritual*

The baptismal ceremony consisted of three main parts: the preliminary primesigning,<sup>27</sup> the actual baptism and the closing rites. Five surviving Norwegian

<sup>23</sup> The inscription (Latin): *Fons hic est vitae, qui totum diluit orbem*, i.e. «This is the Fountain of Life, which purifies the whole world.» from P. A. UNDERWOOD, *The Fountain of Life in Manuscripts of the Gospels*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 5, 1950, pp. 42–264, att. 54–55. See also F. NORDSTRÖM, *Mediaeval Baptismal Fonts. An Iconographical Study* (Stockholm 1984), pp. 11–14.

<sup>24</sup> King Edgar of England states in his law of 967 that all infants may be baptized whenever wanted, at the latest 37 days after birth. The *Decretum Gratianum*, canon laws collected in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, maintain baptism at Easter and Pentecost, except when in danger of death. Archbishop Peckham declares at the Council of Reading in 1279 that infants are to be baptized within 8 days, see W. J. CONWAY, *The Time and Place of Baptism. A Historical Synopsis and a Commentary*, *Canon Law Studies*, 324 (Washington 1954), pp. 26–31; J. D. C. FISHER, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West. A Study in the Disintegration of the primitive Rite of Initiation*, *Alcuin Club Collections*, 47 (London 1965), pp. 86–87, 110–113.

<sup>25</sup> See *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. «Summa Theologica III, 68»; see also SPINKS 2006 (note 5), p. 147.

<sup>26</sup> See SPINKS 2006 (note 5), pp. 109–158, att. p. 156.

<sup>27</sup> «Primesigning», *primsigning* (Old Norse), from *primum signum* or *prima signatio* (Lat.), the first mark of the sign (of the cross of Christ). Originally part of the catechumenate. See A. STENZEL, *Die Taufe. Eine genetische Erklärung der Tauf liturgie* (Innsbruck 1958), pp. 55–61.

baptismal rituals are preserved in a priest's manual, the so-called *Manuale Norvegicum*; the contents may primarily be of Norwegian provenance, from the period between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries.<sup>28</sup> These rituals, together with the *Ordo nidrosiensis ecclesiae*,<sup>29</sup> and the Old Norse Christian Laws are the main sources for the performance of baptism.<sup>30</sup> The *Ordo nidrosiensis ecclesiae*, created in the last decades of the twelfth century, uncover, however, that there was not a uniform liturgy in the Nidaros Church province.

The baptismal ceremony appears moreover to have been celebrated in all categories of Norwegian churches for a fairly long period. The assertion is founded on the nomenclature of the Old Norse Christian Laws, which does not have a fixed set of terms for different categories of churches. Thus, the term «baptismal church», though frequently used on the Continent and in The British Isles, does simply not exist as regards the Norwegian medieval churches. The laws rather indicate that the Church acquired a varied structure in Norway, at least during the first two hundred years or so.<sup>31</sup>

I have emphasized above that a baptismal cleansing ritual was a prerequisite for entry into the church. The preliminary, relatively long-lasting primesigning was administered in the porch or on the stairs if there was no porch, in any case outside the space of the church.<sup>32</sup> The doorway of the church hence was given an explicitly essential position in the architectural setting of the ritual.

The main aim of the primesigning at the door was purification by exorcisms. This ceremony reflected liturgical conservatism and included rituals which had

<sup>28</sup> *Manuale Norvegicum* (Presta Handbók) based on 3 manuscripts, is not a cohesive book. The texts appear in many cases to have been copied in the region of Trøndelag. Published by H. FÆHN (ed.), *Manuale Norvegicum* (Presta Handbók) ex tribus codicibus saec. XII–XIV. Libri Liturgici Provinciae Nidrosiensis Medii Aevi, vol. 1 (Oslo 1962). For further discussion, see *e.g.* PETERSEN 2007b (note 1), pp. 297–303; ANDÅS 2012 (note 5), pp. 61–62, 142–143.

<sup>29</sup> *Ordo nidrosiensis ecclesiae*, published with an introduction by L. GJERLØW ed., *Ordo Nidrosiensis Ecclesiae* (Orðubók). Libri Liturgici Provinciae Nidrosiensis Medii Aevi, vol. 2 (Oslo 1968). For further discussion, see *e.g.* PETERSEN 2007b (note 1), pp. 291–296; ANDÅS 2012 (note 5), pp. 50–61.

<sup>30</sup> Printed formulae preserved from the Danish dioceses of Slesvig (1512) and Roskilde (1513) and Swedish printed rituals preserved in *Manuale Upsalense* (1487), *Manuale Aboense* (1522), *Manuale Lincopense* (1525), and *Brevarium Scarense* (1498), plus a handwritten manual from Hemsjö Church in Skara diocese (*ca* 1400) are for the most part in accordance with the Norwegian ones. See Th. EKELOUND, *Bidrag til dopritualets historia. Med särskild hänsyn til svenske kyrkan*, vol. 1 (Karlstad 1909), pp. 60–79; H. JOHANSSON, *Hemsjömanualet. En liturgi-historisk studie. Samlingar och studier till svenske kyrkans historie* 24 (Stockholm 1950); H. FÆHN, *Fire norske messeordninger fra middelalderen. Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi. Skrifter. 2 Historisk-Filosofisk klasse* 1952:5 (Oslo 1953).

<sup>31</sup> I have discussed this elsewhere and argued against the erroneous application of the term «baptismal church» by some scholars, see M. B. SOLHAUG, *Middelalderens døpefonter i Norge*. 2 vols. Dr. philos. theses, art history, University of Oslo. Series of dissertations 89 (Oslo 2001), vol. 1, pp. 35–41.

<sup>32</sup> See R. MORRIS, *Baptismal places 600–800. People and Places in Northern Europe 500–1600* (Woodbridge 1991), pp. 15–24, att. 18.



earlier belonged to the catechumenate.<sup>33</sup> Although the texts reveal some diversity, the sequence and essence of the baptismal rite was normally as follows:<sup>34</sup> The child was brought to the church by the family, the godparents and friends.<sup>35</sup> The priest met the baptismal party at the door and began the rite with brief interrogations and admonitions. He then breathed three times in the face of the child<sup>36</sup> before he marked the child with the sign of the cross, *prima signatio*, the imprint of Christ, followed by a prayer for the candidate. The priest laid his hand on him to denote that he was now the property of God.

Thereafter grains of salt were put in the mouth of the child,<sup>37</sup> and exorcisms performed to liberate the child from the impure spirit. The priest touched the child's ears and nose with *salvia* in the ceremony of the *Effata*, while reciting: «Be opened».<sup>38</sup> The child was next asked through the godparents to renounce the devil and all his deeds, and the godparents' knowledge of the *Pater Noster*, *Credo* and *Ave Maria*, which they were expected to teach the child, was tested. This preliminary section of the ritual ended with saying prayers and a Gospel reading, normally «the Gospel for Children».<sup>39</sup>

The priest then laid his stole on the child and it was led into the nave of the church. The baptismal procession proceeded to the font where the next part of

<sup>33</sup> For the elaborate initiation rites of a catechumen, see WHITAKER 2003 (note 12) pp. 211–243. The elements survived as the first part of the baptismal office, termed *Ordo ad Faciendum Catechumenum*, see DAVIES 1962 (note 21), p. 61. For discussion of the flexible status achieved by primesigned Nordic catechumens dealing with trade in foreign countries, see SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31), vol. 1, pp. 29–30.

<sup>34</sup> The plurality of Scandinavian practices reflects the often local and quite special liturgical traditions in other Roman areas, until the end of the Middle Ages. An official liturgy for the whole Roman Church, the *Rituale Romanum*, did not appear until 1614, see JOHANSSON 1950 (note 30), p. 53; SPINKS 2006 (note 5), pp. 155.

<sup>35</sup> The mother had to go through a cleansing ritual before re-entering the church after childbirth. The purification ritual was not obligatory in the medieval West, but appears to have been widely practised in Norway. The churching was a passage ritual, starting outdoors like baptism. For further discussion, see M. S. ANDÅS, Art and Ritual in the Liminal Zone, in: M. S. ANDÅS – Ø. EKROLL – A. HAUG – N. H. PETERSEN (eds.), *The Medieval Cathedral of Trondheim. Architectural and Ritual Constructions in their European Context* (Turnhout 2007), pp. 47–126, att. 62–64; ANDÅS 2012 (note 5), pp. 147–152. But see also DAVIES 1962 (note 21), p. 55, who suggests baptism of the child was also an occasion for the purification of the mother.

<sup>36</sup> To William (Gulielmus) Durandus (*ca* 1230–1296) the triple insufflatio was a symbol of the triple effect of the Holy Spirit: purification from vices, decoration of virtues, and crown of eternal life. Like many medieval, liturgical exegetes, he suggested liturgical understanding centred on biblical symbolism, see PALAZZO 2008 (note 1), p. 473. For closer study, see W. DURANDUS, *The Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments. A Translation of the first Book of the Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* (London 1843) (J. M. Neale and B. Webb transl.).

<sup>37</sup> Salt was thought to be cleansing as well as preserving, according to the admonitions of Christ, see Matthew 5:13–16; Mark 9:50.

<sup>38</sup> *Salvia* was assumed to have apotropaic effect, *e.g.* Mark 7:33–34: «... put his fingers into the man's ears and touched his tongue with spittle. Then looking up to heaven he sighed; and said to him, «Ephphatha,» that is «Be opened.»

<sup>39</sup> *Evangelium Infantium* was included in the rituals from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards. Norwegian rituals use texts from Matthew 19:13–15, or 11:25–30.

the ceremony was administered. The baptismal water was ready, infused with the Holy Spirit of the chrism in the *benedictio fontis* ritual, which was normally completed on the night before Easter Sunday.<sup>40</sup> The image of the *benedictio fontis* of the Bari Benedictional displays the very moment when the Holy Spirit, by the symbol of the dove, descends into the water as the lighted Easter candle is immersed and the water becomes holy by the procedure of the bishop (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 The image of the *benedictio fontis* illustrates the very moment when the Holy Spirit is infused into the water, in the Benedictional of Bari Cathedral, from 11<sup>th</sup> century. In Bari Cathedral Archives. Photo: agefotostock®.

All those attending the baptismal ceremony then recited the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. The priest made an additional prophylactic exsufflation and renunciations before he anointed the naked child on the breast and between the

<sup>40</sup> A long version of the *benedictio fontis* is inserted here in Norwegian rituals, while it is placed separately in other Nordic rituals. The ritual had several parts, the most frequently used were prayers and chanting of Psalm 42: «As a deer yearns for running streams, so I yearn for you, my God», plus various acts as to the water, such as division in the sign of the cross, exorcisms, blessing, triple dipping of the Easter candle, and infusion of oil and chrism. For the procedures of the ritual e.g. in Old Eidsivathing Law, see NGL (note 17), vol. 1, p. 394. For closer study, see L. EISENHOFER, *Handbuch der katholischen Liturgik*, vol. 1, Allgemeine Liturgik (Freiburg im Breisgau 1932), vol. 1, p. 545, but also ANDRIEU 1948 (note 11), esp. Ordo I, 42 and Ordo X, 21.



shoulders with *oleum sanctum*.<sup>41</sup> He asked about the desire for christening and for the child's name, and then the threefold immersion in the threefold name in the consecrated water was completed.<sup>42</sup>

The third and final part of the baptismal ritual included several prayers and ceremonies. These were gradually reduced as time passed, but the anointing of the child with *chrisma*, the investing of the neophyte in a white garment, the giving of a lighted candle, and the dismissal were generally retained.<sup>43</sup>

*Positions of fonts and entrances: theories and research*

The architecture of the church was planned to take into account the different ceremonies, including the baptismal rite. The position of the main entrance was, literally, the starting point for the baptismal celebration. Questions of the architectural characteristics and the location of the entrances, especially in relation to the position of the font, have been studied and discussed by English scholars, perhaps most meticulously by John G. Davies. He suggests that the position of the font often indicates where the main entrance of the church was in the Middle Ages and gives several examples. Davies' theory is that fonts were differently positioned, because the main entrances of the churches were differently sited.<sup>44</sup>

His theory consequently challenges the idea that the font was to be situated close by the west wall of the nave, an assertion which has been postulated and repeated as an accepted fact, although without substantial verification, by a range of authors through previous decades. In order to examine the validity of Davies' theory with regard to Scandinavian churches, have I scrutinized archaeological excavations of the medieval churches in these countries to see what they might uncover about the position of fonts and of entrances in the period *ca* 1100–*ca* 1250. I located the original positions of six fonts in Norway, based on

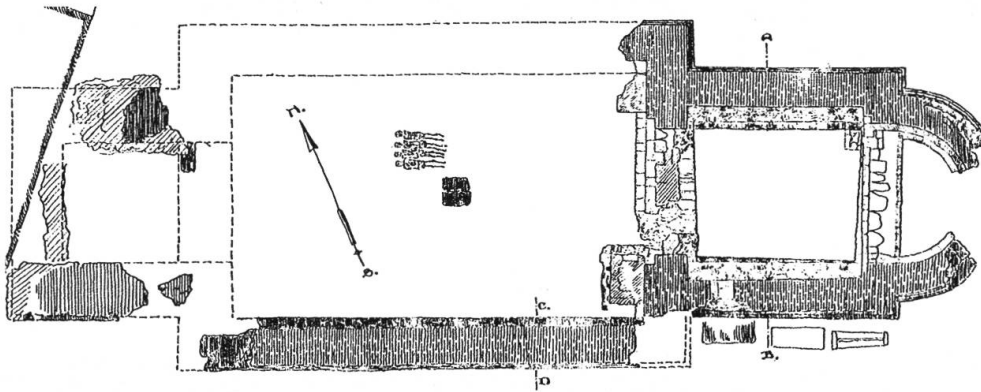
<sup>41</sup> Three consecrated oils were used: *Chrisma* for consecration of the church, altar, *vasa sacra*, and baptismal water, in addition to baptism, confirmation, and ordination. *Oleum sanctum* (also named *oleum cathecumenorum*) for primesigning and baptism. *Oleum infirmorum* for sick and dying people. For consecration of the oils, laws of their keeping, and surviving containers (*chrismatories*), see SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31), vol. 1, pp. 50–51.

<sup>42</sup> It has misguidedly been assumed that total submersion was the custom from the time of the Early Christian Church, based on theological theories and on interpretation of literary texts. For clarification of baptism by partial immersion of the naked candidate combined with affusion over the head, see SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31), vol. 1, pp. 22, 47, 183, 212; J. BLAIR, *The Prehistory of English Fonts. Intersections: The Archaeology and History of Christianity in England, 400–1200*, in: M. HENIG – N. RAMSAY (eds.), *Papers in Honour of Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle*, BAR British Series, 505, 2010, p. 149. But see also J. CORBLET, *Histoire dogmatique, liturgique et archéologique du sacrement de baptême* (Paris 1881), vol. 1, pp. 223–235.

<sup>43</sup> For comparative texts of local variations from the 12<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries, see SPINKS 2006 (note 5), pp. 136–139.

<sup>44</sup> Several examples from the Continent and England confirm different positions of the font, but all close to the main entrance, in DAVIES 1962 (note 21), pp. 61–63.

the excavations of their respective churches.<sup>45</sup> The results of this groundbreaking research were published in 2001.<sup>46</sup> However, the fallacies of the past are still repeated; erroneous ideas and misleading myths are obviously not easily discarded.<sup>47</sup>



*Fig. 3* St Nicholas' Church ruin in Sarpsborg, Østfold. Base for baptismal font in the central axis of the nave. Drawing from by G. FISCHER, *Ruinparken i Sarpsborg*, Foreningen til norske Fortidsminnesmerkers Bevaring, Årbok 1916, p. 100.

Key results of my research were above all that the font had a dominant position in the central axis of the nave in two Norwegian churches, St Nicholas and Hvaler in Østfold (*Fig. 3*), and this position was practically a standard in the churches of the Danish regions of Scania, Zealand and Jutland (*Fig. 4*), and occurred in several churches of the Swedish regions of Västergötland and Gotland. Accordingly, all regions in the investigation reflected this position.<sup>48</sup> The font was nearly always

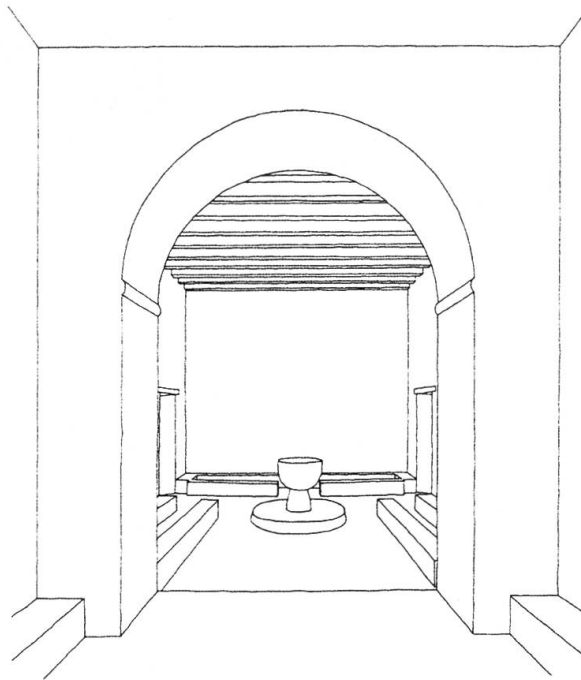
<sup>45</sup> St Nicholas' Church ruin in Sarpsborg, Østfold; Hvaler in Østfold; Nes in Akershus; St Peter's in Tønsberg, Vestfold; Ringeby in Oppland; Lunner in Oppland. The interpretation of Lunner is vague, without corresponding match, and not included in the present discussion, see SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31), vol. 1, pp. 65, 70.

<sup>46</sup> SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31). For comprehensive discussion concerning the position of fonts in Norway, Sweden and Denmark, see esp. vol. 1, pp. 61–72, but see also M. LINDGREN, *Medeltidens konst i tid och rum. Den romanska konsten. Signums svenska konsthistoria* (Lund 1995), pp. 27–33, att. 33.

<sup>47</sup> For some fairly recent, but unfortunately outdated, non-documented statements by Norwegian scholars referring to the position of the font, see ANDÅS 2007 (note 35), p. 65; J. E. A. KROESEN – R. STEENSMA, *The Interior of the Medieval Village Church* (Leuven 2012, 2. ed.), p. 303; S. H. GULLBEKK, *The Church and Money in Norway ca 1050–1250: Salvation and Monetisation*, in: G. E. M. GASPER – S. H. GULLBEKK (eds.), *Money and the Church in Medieval Europe, 1000–1200. Practice, Morality and Thought* (Farnham 2015), pp. 223–243, att. 233.

<sup>48</sup> Norway: Borg Church ruin and Hvaler Church; Sweden: examples in Västergötland (Lovene Church ruin), Gotland (Västergarn, Garde, and Bunge churches); Denmark: examples in Zealand (Højby, Blistrup, and Ishøj churches). Some Danish examples indicate that the font was moved westwards, as from the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, because of rebuilding of the churches, see B. A. HANSEN, *Arkæologiske spor efter døbefontens placering i kirkerummet gennem middelalderen*, *Hikuin* 22, 1995, pp. 27–40, att. 38–39.

positioned slightly east of a line drawn across the nave, tangential to the eastern jambs of the doorways; entrances situated north and south in the nave were moreover practically basic in these cases.<sup>49</sup>



*Fig. 4* Perspective drawing, reconstructing the Romanesque nave of Butterup Church, Jutland. Seen towards west with the font centrally positioned. Drawing from B. A. HANSEN, *Arkæologiske spor efter døbefontens placering i kirkerummet gennem middelalderen*, Hikuin 22, 1995, p. 32, fig. 10.

On the other hand, the Norwegian archaeological excavations also introduced an alternative, possible option for the position of the font, namely in the north-western part of the nave, based on finds in the churches of Nes at Romerike and Ringeby in Gudbrandsdalen (*Fig. 5*).<sup>50</sup> In these cases the main entrance was situated in the west and a smaller door was placed in the south of the nave. This alternative north-western positioning of the font may possibly indicate a potential convention in churches which had their main entrance in the west and where there was no north entrance. Nevertheless, assumptions founded on results from so few churches are rather unstable.

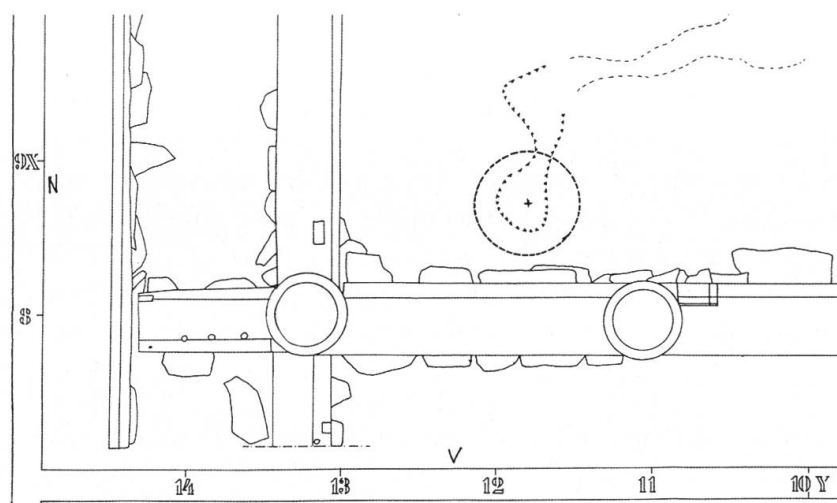
All in all, the results of my research have first and foremost substantiated the theory presented by John G. Davies: the position of the baptismal font is connected with the location of the entrances of the church. Secondly, the results

<sup>49</sup> West entrance occurred in addition in a few churches: Højby, Västergarn, Hvaler and possibly St Nicholas' Church ruin.

<sup>50</sup> Results from excavations of St Peter's Church in Tønsberg are less easy to interpret, but may indicate similarities with the Nes church ruin.

have manifestly corroborated both national convergences and divergences as to the place of fonts and nave entrances in Scandinavian churches *ca* 1050–*ca* 1250.

The positions are most consistent in Danish churches: they have north and south entrances and fonts located in the central axis. The positions are partly consistent in Norwegian churches: they have west, south, plus north entrances in special cases, and fonts located either in the central axis or in the north-western part. The trends are even less distinct in Swedish churches: they have north, south, plus west entrances in special cases, and fonts normally located in the central axis of the nave.



*Fig. 5* Ringebu stave church. Sediments caused by water, probably from the drainage of the font placed in the north-western part of the nave during the Middle Ages. Drawing by Architect J. H. Jensenius. Author's ownership.

#### *Reflections on the performance of baptism and the surviving fonts*

The altar and the font were the most important fixtures of the church, and their settings were not unintentional. The central and frequently raised position of the baptismal font added to a spiritual and aesthetic elevation of the sacred act, as well as making it physically easier for the churchgoers to participate in the ceremony. The font thus became a visual and symbolic merging point in the nave,<sup>51</sup> and simultaneously a weighty counterpart to the altar at the east end. This impact gave further emphasis to the close sacramental connection between baptism and the Eucharist.

The central axis of the church accentuated the visual link between the two sacraments, although a chancel screen drew attention to the physical and mental

<sup>51</sup> Circular podiums are practically standard furnishings, like altars and wall benches, in Danish medieval churches, see H. GRÆBE – B. A. HANSEN – H. STIESDAL, *Gundsømagle kirke. En bygningshistorisk undersøgelse*, Nationalmuseets Arbejdsmark 1990, pp. 141–156, att. 145. Swedish fonts are raised on circular or square supports. Two Norwegian churches, Borg and Hvaler, substantiate the use of square plinths, and a late medieval two-step podium survives from the Cathedral of Trondheim, see SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31), vol. 1, pp. 58–59.

division of the space of the church: the chancel and the nave.<sup>52</sup> One result of the screen was that the celebration of Mass was gradually reduced to a performance; the Holy Communion was rarely distributed to the churchgoers through most of the Middle Ages.<sup>53</sup> It became an epiphany, an act of seeing and hearing demonstrated for the receivers, who could hear the tolling *sanctus* bell in the chancel indicating the moment of transubstantiation.<sup>54</sup> Openings in the chancel screen of the wall gave some visual access to the chancel and the consecrated Host. The celebration of the christening in the nave, conversely, included the people attending worship, who could watch while a new Christian was transformed in the *fons vitae*, and the neophyte was embraced by the Church.

The relationship between baptismal liturgy and architecture – between worship and the space in which it occurs – has a rich history in Christian tradition. Numerous baptisteries are known in Western Europe, also north of the Alps.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the realities of the situation were often more problematic than they appear in normative sources, since celebrations were also performed outside the building, sometimes in the open air, sometimes in tents.<sup>56</sup> One well-known Norwegian event is when King Olaf Tryggvason (r. 995–1000) organized Mass to be celebrated in the tents after his landing on Moster in Rogaland, in 995.<sup>57</sup> This is one of the numerous accounts in the sagas by Snorri Sturluson

<sup>52</sup> For the perception of space and sensoriness in medieval churches, see H. H. JØRGENSEN, *Middelalderens rum og sansning: om sanselige strukturer i middelalderens kristne og islamiske rumdannelser*, in: O. HØIRIS – P. INGESMAN (eds.), *Middelalderens verden. Verdensbilledet, tankningen, rummet og religionen* (Aarhus 2010), pp. 169–192.

<sup>53</sup> For a clear display of the screen, see the video *Medeltidsmässan i Endre kyrka* (Medieval Mass in Endre Church), Linköping diocese, ca 1450.

<sup>54</sup> Among many statements, see LINDGREN 1995 (note 46), fig. 15; H. L. KESSLER, *Seeing Medieval Art. Rethinking the Middle Ages*, vol. 1 (Peterborough, Ont. 2004), p. 121; E. DUFFY, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England ca 1400–1580* (New Haven – Conn 2005), pp. 95–98; JØRGENSEN 2010 (note 52), pp. 173–174; K. B. AAVITSLAND, *Incarnation. Paradoxes of Perception and Mediation in Medieval Art*, in: H. H. L. JØRGENSEN – H. LAUGERUD – L. K. SKINNEBACH (eds.), *The Saturated Sensorium: Principles of Perception and Mediation in the Middle Ages* (Aarhus 2015), pp. 72–90, att. 77–78. For Scandinavian stone churches with chancel screens, see K. BERG, *Gamle Aker kirke. En undersøkelse av kirkerommet som liturgisk funksjonsrom*, MA. Thesis Art History, University of Oslo (Oslo 2010), pp. 32–59, 68–70.

<sup>55</sup> Baptisteries with sunken piscines made for adults appeared after the conversion of Emperor Constantine (r. 306–337) and the issue of the Milan edict in 313, see R. KRAUTHEIMER, *Introduction to an «Iconography of Medieval Architecture»*, in: *Studies in Early Christian, Medieval and Renaissance Art* (London 1971), pp. 115–150. For fonts in baptisteries, see SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31), vol. 1, pp. 24–29; H. M. SONNE DE TORRENS, *De fontibus salvatoris: A Survey of Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Baptismal Fonts Ornamented with Events from the Childhood of Christ*, in: H. COLUM (ed.), *Objects, Images, and the Word. Art in the Service of the Liturgy* (Princeton 2003), pp. 105–137, att. 110, notes 31, 32.

<sup>56</sup> J. BLAIR – R. SHARPE, *Introduction*, in: J. BLAIR – R. SHARPE (eds.), *Pastoral Care Before the Parish, Studies in the Early History of Britain* (Leicester 1992), pp. 1–10, att. p. 8; PALAZZO 2008 (note 1), pp. 476–478; but see also J. F. ROMANO, *Liturgy and Society in Early Medieval Rome* (Farnham 2014), pp. 146–147.

<sup>57</sup> Snorre Sturlasson, *Norges kongesagaer*, A. Holtsmark and D.A. Seip transl. (Oslo 1968), p. 161, ch. 47, the Saga of Olaf Tryggvason.



(1178/79–1241) that reflect compromises of norm and practice during the period of conversion. He obviously made his accounts 200–300 years after they occurred, yet, his descriptions of the Christianization seem to be historically plausible. The narrative in the Saga of Saint Olaf of the baptism of four hundred men ahead of the battle at Stiklestad in 1030 is one example of open air baptism instructed by the king in the years of Christianization in Norway.<sup>58</sup> It is, moreover, possible that temporary arrangements for baptism were made in connection with assemblies on established sites, such as thing-meetings. Icelandic records mention this kind of practice in the early phase of conversion. In the summer of the year 1000 Christianity was adopted by the *Alþing* (the National assembly) at the site of Þingvellir, but people refused *en masse* to be immersed in cold water; so they were all baptized in the hot springs of Reykjalaug in Laugardalur after the meeting.<sup>59</sup>

No fonts or traces of them have been found in the remains of Scandinavian churches from the eleventh century. It is also a puzzle that the naves of the early, earth-fast, wooden structures were rather small compared to the estimated amount of people attending worship.<sup>60</sup> The size and function of these churches have been keenly discussed, and it has been suggested that they may not have included baptism.<sup>61</sup> This I dispute, essentially for two reasons. Firstly, there is no document or record which indicates that the Roman Church excluded baptism from any church because of its size. It seems most unlikely that the Church would deny anyone the initiation rite on such grounds – in fact, the Old Norse Christian Laws from the first half of the twelfth century do not limit baptism to any special kind of church. Secondly, since wooden baptismal vessels might be portable, is it not possible that the priest included the font as a part of his travelling equipment, in a similar way as a portable altar?<sup>62</sup>

Though none of these earliest Norwegian fonts have survived, we can assume that they may have looked like those depicted from the era of Christianization. Simple cooped tubs or barrels with hoops keeping the staves together appear to have been regular types. One well-known Nordic illustration is the image of the baptism in a barrel of King Harald Bluetooth of Denmark (r. *ca* 958–*ca* 986) in the 960s, though the image on the copper plate was crafted more than 200 years later (*Fig. 6*). Another example is the drawing of a child held over a stave built tub,

<sup>58</sup> Snorre Sturlasson. HOLTSMARK – SEIP 1968 (note 57), pp. 445–446, ch. 204, the Saga of Saint Olaf.

<sup>59</sup> See J. SIGURÐSSON – G. VIGFÚSSON (eds.), *Biskupa sögur*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen 1858).

<sup>60</sup> Size of nave in some earth-fast churches: Urnes, Sogn og Fjordane: 33 m<sup>2</sup>; Høre (Hurum), Oppland: 13 m<sup>2</sup>; Bø, Telemark: 52 m<sup>2</sup>, see H. E. LIDÉN, *De tidlige kirkene. Hvem bygget, hvem brukte dem og hvordan? Møtet mellom hedendom og kristendom i Norge* (Oslo 1995), pp. 129–130.

<sup>61</sup> For discussion of the problem, see A. BOLVIG, *Kirkekunstens storhedstid: om kirker og kunst i Danmark i romansk tid* (Copenhagen 1992), pp. 44–45, 76–87; LIDÉN 1995 (note 60), pp. 135–139.

<sup>62</sup> For discussion of the theory in Anglo-Saxon England, see S. FOOT 1992: «By water in the spirit»: the administration of baptism in early Anglo-Saxon England, in: J. BLAIR – R. SHARPE (eds.), *Pastoral Care Before the Parish* (Leicester 1992), pp. 171–192, att. 183; BLAIR 2010 (note 42), p. 175.





*Fig. 6* Baptism of King Harald Bluetooth by Bishop Poppo. A gilded copper plate from Tamdrup Church, Jutland, made *ca* 1200. In Copenhagen, National Museum of Denmark, DNM.801. Photo: National Museum of Denmark.

on an initial in an Icelandic Christian Law Code (*Fig. 7*).<sup>63</sup> The widespread use of wooden fonts was in accordance with the regulations of the Church, which did not demand specific material for the fonts, but required that they were waterproof.<sup>64</sup>

Practically all baptismal fonts in Western Europe from *ca* 1100 onwards were designed for children. No North-European font dated before this time has survived.<sup>65</sup> Fonts of stone were introduced in Norway during the first half of this century, with a considerable increase in the last quarter. This coincides with the period when the economy of the Norwegian Church gradually became more firmly organized, undoubtedly as a result of the establishment of the *Ecclesia Nidrosiensis*, the Nidaros Church province, in 1152/53.

<sup>63</sup> For further North-European records and depictions of barrels used for baptism in the Middle Ages, see SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31), vol. 1, p. 211.

<sup>64</sup> The Council of Lerida of 546, canon 23, advised fonts be made of stone or metal and demanded fonts of porous wood or stone be furnished with a metal lining, see Eisenhofer 1932 (note 40), vol. 1, p. 386. The regulation was repeated *ca* 1150 in *Decretum Gratianum* with reference to the Council of Jelda. See also SONNE DE TORRENS 2003 (note 55), p. 110, note 36.

<sup>65</sup> See SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31), vol. 1, pp. 104–105, 189; BLAIR 2010 (note 42), p. 155.

However, money or material economy does not seem to have been involved in the actual baptismal ceremony in medieval Scandinavia. Accumulations of coins or other items have not been found in the zones of baptism in the churches, neither at the door nor by the font. The negative finds are intriguing. They imply that it was not a normal practice to donate money to the priest for his baptismal service. This would be in line with the decrees ordained by the Third Lateran Council of 1179, repeated by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which stated that the sacraments must be given for free.<sup>66</sup> The Council needed to reaffirm this statement because of the greed of certain priests had been discovered in some places.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, bearing the problem of norms and devotional practice in mind, it is still possible that «free» gifts were given, perhaps even expected by the priest, at some appropriate time as a token of gratitude from the family of the child to the priest for administering the initiation ceremony.



Fig. 7 Baptism in a stave built tub with hoops. Historiated initial A in *Kristinréttir* of Bishop Árni's *Jónsbók*, from 14<sup>th</sup> century. In Reykjavík, Árni Magnússon Institute, MS AM Gl.kgl.sm. 3269a, 4°. Photo: Árni Magnússon Institute.

<sup>66</sup> See The Catholic Encyclopedia. «Third Lateran Council», canon 7. «Fourth Lateran Council», canon 66. C. W. BYNUM, *Christian Materiality. An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York 2011), note 67.

<sup>67</sup> E.g. traditions in pre-Conquest England, see MORRIS 1991 (note 32), p. 16.

About 224 baptismal fonts produced in medieval Norway have survived.<sup>68</sup> Only 192 of these are extant within today's boundaries of the country, though it is most likely that just about all of the estimated 2000–2500 Norwegian medieval churches were in possession of a font.<sup>69</sup> The low frequency of surviving medieval fonts in Norway may above all be explained by the Norwegians clinging to the tradition, from the period of Christianization, of using wooden vessels.



*Fig. 8* Baptismal font of pine tree in Veggli Church, Buskerud.  
Dated to *ca* 1150–1250 by <sup>14</sup>C-analysis. Photo: M. B. Solhaug.

To verify this theory I had a <sup>14</sup>C-analyses project set up to examine a limited group of estimated medieval date. The results proved that six Norwegian wooden fonts and one font cover were made in the Middle Ages (*Fig. 8*). The fonts are of different types: barrel shaped, rectangular and hourglass shaped stumps.<sup>70</sup> Surviving medieval fonts of wood in Norway, Sweden, Finland and the British Isles

<sup>68</sup> Eleven dioceses, five on mainland Norway and six on island territories were included in the Nidaros Church province; the archdiocese was the widest in geographical extent in medieval Europe.

<sup>69</sup> My former discussion of frequency *e.g.* in SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31) is no longer relevant, a large number of unrecorded farm churches have been discovered since then.

<sup>70</sup> Verified medieval fonts of pine tree: barrel shaped, Øye in Oppland; rectangular, Nore in Buskerud; hour glass shaped, Åmotsdal in Telemark plus Veggli, Uvdal, and Rollag in Buskerud. Font cover: Lomen in Oppland. For details of the project, see SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31), vol. 1, pp. 207–221.

substantiate an on-going tradition in Northern Europe.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the impact of wooden fonts is noticeable on stone fonts; scholars have long since observed that some of the earliest European fonts of stone show signs of skeuomorphism deriving from the hoops of wooden tubs or barrels.<sup>72</sup>

*Spiritual and physical transitions: the liminal zones of baptismal rituals*

The progress from the outside world into the sacred space of the church, physically and spiritually, is explicitly evident in the architectural setting of the medieval baptismal rite. I have ascertained above that Norwegian infants were admitted by the Church through the transformation they underwent in fonts made for them from the twelfth century. At the same time the child was included as a full social member of the local Christian community, by whose norms and laws he was to live his whole life. In medieval Norway this implied various social and economic privileges, such as the rights to inherit<sup>73</sup> and to be buried in Christian soil.<sup>74</sup> The act of conversion was thus closely attached to the person's social identity. The different parts of the church were adapted to theological, liturgical and practical concepts.

The church interior subsequently came to determine the performance of liturgical rites within specific ritual zones; well-defined spaces were specified for baptism, all through Antiquity and in the Middle Ages. The act of immersion in Nordic medieval churches required a space wide enough for the priest to administer the ritual, and a raised position for the font so that the people attending could see; their presence was by definition to witness and to confirm the act.

The transformation of the child by the baptismal sacrament by two stages and in two successive zones has been stated above. The initial zone was by the threshold when the child was exorcised and conferred the sign of the cross, parted with the outside world, and made ready to enter the inside of the church. The final zone

<sup>71</sup> For wooden fonts in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, see SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31), vol. 1, pp. 207–221 with references; for Finland, see J. G. DAVIES, *The Architectural Setting of Baptism in Finland*. Research Bulletin. Institute for the Study of Worship and Religious Architecture (Birmingham 1980), pp. 39–46; for England, see F. BOND, *Fonts and Font Covers* (London 1908), pp. 62, 76; DAVIES 1962 (note 21), p. 64; MORRIS 1991 (note 32), pp. 15–17; BLAIR 2010 (note 42), pp. 149–177, esp. p. 152 with reference to Solhaug's research.

<sup>72</sup> See BOND 1908 (note 71), pp. 123–124; MORRIS 1991 (note 32), p. 17, note 16; SOLHAUG 2001 (note 31), vol. 1, p. 210, note 980. For English stone fonts as skeuomorphs of earlier wooden vessels, see esp. the comprehensive article by BLAIR 2010 (note 42), pp. 149–177.

<sup>73</sup> Put into effect in Norwegian laws from the 1270s, in the Norwegian Law revision of King Magnús the Law-mender, see NGL (note 17) vol. 2, p. 80; Bjarkøyretten (Town Law for Trondheim), see NGL (note 17) vol. 2, p. 231.

<sup>74</sup> Stated e.g. in Old Gulathing Law, see NGL (note 17) vol. 1, p. 12 and Old Frostathing Law, see NGL (note 17) vol. 1, p. 132. Repeated several times, e.g. in Old Eidsivathing Law, see NGL (note 17) vol. 1, p. 392; the Norwegian Law revision of Magnús the Law-mender, see NGL (note 17) vol. 2, p. 84; New Borgarthing Law, see NGL (note 17) vol. 2, p. 296; New Gulathing Law, see NGL (note 17) vol. 2, pp. 314, 330.



was at the font, when the child was immersed in the consecrated water, re-born as a Christian in the fountain of life, ready to get admission to the Church. The white clothes of the neophyte gave weight to the conclusive transformation.

The zones of transition were so-called «liminal spaces». The term *limen* designates a space in between, an area of transmigration from one zone to another and a stage in which the subject changes status. However, the stages at the *limens* of the door and by the font were not only moments of transformation; they were also basic starting-points for a process. The anthropologist Victor W. Turner focuses on the liminal stage in rites of passage in terms of «betwixt and between». He perceives the subject of the passage as being in a state of ambiguity and paradox in what he describes as «the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both», and the passage to be an abnormal stage between two normal stages, though he sees the intrinsic potentials in the growth persisting in the transitional stage. Turner admits, however, that he is drawing on Arnold van Gennep's influential work *Les rites de passage* from 1909.<sup>75</sup>

Some theologians have perceived the ritual of transition and passage from the doorway to the baptismal font as a parallel to the celebration of the Resurrection in the Easter procession, where the holy encounter, by the command of Christ, takes place at Galilee. A sermon for Easter Day in the *Old Norse Book of Homilies*, transcribed ca 1200, interprets the term of Galilee as *transmigratio*, referring to the transition which carried the Lord from death to life, from suffering to victory. The idea of transmigration likewise includes those who turn away from vice to virtue in baptism.<sup>76</sup>

Spaces are generally understood in purely visual terms, and the visual impact on the churchgoers was unquestionably great. However, the nature of spaces, such as the celebration of the Eucharist and baptism, was multi-sensory; this was an essential characteristic of the liturgy and religious culture of the Middle Ages. The very nature of the baptismal ritual addressed simultaneously a range of senses, such as sight by light and multi-coloured items and imagery, hearing by words, music and chant, smell by incense and holy oils, taste by salt, touch by salvia, anointing and water.

The role of the portal as a limit and separation, which emphasized the elements of outside-inside and the implications of evil-good, rests on the often cited passage from the Gospel according to John 10:9: «I am the gate. Anyone who enters through me will be safe: such a one will go in and out and will find pasture.»<sup>77</sup> Bible citations like this have inspired the ornamental decoration framing the doorways of countless churches to emphasize the experience of

<sup>75</sup> See V. W. TURNER, *Betwixt and Between. The Liminal Period in «Rites de Passage»*, in: W. A. LESSA – E. Z. VOGT (eds.), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*. (New York 1979), pp. 235–237.

<sup>76</sup> See att. PETERSEN 2007b (note 1), pp. 303–306 with references. The sermon is obviously inspired by Easter sermons of Gregory the Great (r. 590–604); the connection between Easter procession and baptism was set forth by the Benedictine theologian Rupert of Deutz, ca 1110, see E. GUNNES (ed.), *Gammelnorsk homiliebok* (Oslo 1971), pp. 90, 172.

<sup>77</sup> Important here is also Mark 16:16: «Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved; whoever does not believe will be damned.»

entering the House of God. Sculpted images of *Maiestas Domini*, the Lord in Glory on the Day of his Second Coming, frequently flanked by the «four living creatures», which came to be identified as the evangelist symbols, embellish the liminal zones of quite a few church entrances and occasionally the fonts (*Fig. 9*).<sup>78</sup> Pictorial programs or single motifs of the theme are unambiguous reminders of baptism as the entrance to salvation.



*Fig. 9* The Lord in Glory on the baptismal font in Skjeberg Church, Østfold. Square shape, of local soapstone, made ca 1175–1200. Photo: M. B. Solhaug.

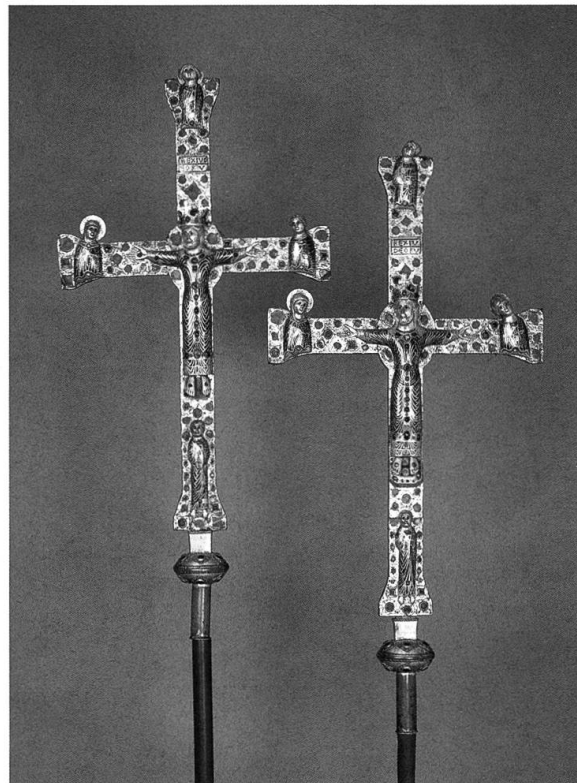
The choreography of the ceremonies, such as the way medieval processions were planned inside or outside, accentuated the spatial experience, and the processional performances shared a common inclusion of the church entrance as a key element in the liturgy. The doorway as the border to the sacred was made especially explicit in the baptismal ritual when the child was introduced by the priest into the nave of the church, normally with the formula: *ingredere in templum Dei*, «enter into the temple of God.»

The link between baptism and Crucifixion was set forth by the apostle Paul, and crucifixes were carried at the head of the procession, always on Easter Day,

<sup>78</sup> See M. B. SOLHAUG, *I himmel og på jord. Døpefonten i Skjeberg kirke*, in: I. PEGELOW (ed.), *Ting och tanke: Ikonografi på liturgiska föremål. Det 15. nordiske ikonografiske symposium 1996 på Undersvik, Hälsingland, Sverige, Antikvariska serien 42*, Kungl. vitterhets-, historie och antikvitetsakademien (Stockholm 1998), pp. 27–46.



generally at other feast days according to tradition, and normally as visual markers in front of the baptismal processions throughout the year. Specific crosses for the baptismal ceremony are documented in church inventories; they are designated «baptismal crosses» in the cartularies (*máldagar*) of Iceland. These crosses are lost, unfortunately, but generally considered to be of polychrome painted wood, though enamelled exemplars are also recorded in the Icelandic cartularies. The processional Limoges twin crosses from Nävelsjö Church in Sweden may have had a corresponding function (*Fig. 10*).<sup>79</sup>



*Fig. 10* Processional twin crosses from Nävelsjö Church, Småland. Made *ca* 1220 in Limoges, France. In Stockholm, Museum of National Antiquities, SHM 10603:1–2.

Photo: Museum of National Antiquities, Stockholm.

Liminal rites have lately been debated by Continental and Scandinavian writers who are intrigued by the fundamental significance of the access to the church. Annabelle Martin deals with the Cathedral of Sens, and Margrete Syrstad Andås deals with the churches in the Nidaros Church province; they examine how a complex set of architectural sculpture was planned to create liturgical and symbolic connections in the liminal space of medieval liturgy. Both explore the iconographical program and passage ritual, but they do not include the definite

<sup>79</sup> For the lost fontkross smelltur (enamelled baptismal cross) recorded from Hvamm Church, see J. SIGURÐSSON *et al.* (eds.), *Diplomatarium Islandicum. Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn* (Copenhagen/Reykjavík 1857–1972), vol. 5, 534 (*ca* 1470).

position of the door or of the font. However, the actual route of the ritual context is a main concern for Amy Bloch in her research on San Giovanni in Florence; she explores the decoration and liturgy as a contemporary participant in the baptismal ritual, moving in and around the space of the baptistery. By referring to the physical route, step by step, of the baptismal ceremony, she communicates an unusually rare and rich context of the imagery and of the corporeal movements of the participants.<sup>80</sup> The perception of the body and its movement through the space from one liminal zone to another was a distinguished feature of medieval liturgy; this served to deepen the experience of the performance.

The Church accorded enormous significance to places, persons and objects, along with music, aromas, and indeed to light and images – accompanied by words – in the multidimensional context of the liturgical performance. The sensory dimensions of the medieval liturgy have attracted growing attention among scholars. The awareness is devotedly conveyed by Éric Palazzo, who furthermore calls attention to Hrabanus Maurus (780–856) as the first among several theologians and commentators to express precisely how the relation between art and the rituals of the medieval church subsisted in a multifaceted unity: elements of the baptismal ritual addressed the senses as well as the intellect, and the interplay contributed to increasing the message and meaning of the ceremony.<sup>81</sup>

Notions like these are of special interest to writers who are engaged in the materiality of liturgical items and in the theological contemplations on anagogy.<sup>82</sup> Although the items were primarily made to serve their ritual functions, they were also created to please the senses, not only the eye; they clearly uncover haptic qualities as well. Items like the font, the chrismatory, the book, the candlesticks, the cross, the censer and the textiles had different tactile surfaces. The vibrant light of the gilding, gems and enamel turned into a sensuous reflection of divine beauty and allegories of spiritual and material glory, and thus into symbols of the Heavenly City, in line with the Revelation to John.<sup>83</sup> All medieval churches were, in a sense, understood to be symbols of the Heavenly Jerusalem, yet, some invoked its imagery more literally. Illustrated passages of the Bible, such as in the Commentary on the Book of Revelation by the Spanish monk and theologian Beatus of Liébana (*ca* 730–*ca* 800), depict a vision of an angel measuring the ideal

<sup>80</sup> See A. MARTIN, *The St John Portal and Baptistery at St Stephen's Cathedral, Sens*, in: H. M. SONNE DE TORRENS – M. A. TORRENS (eds.), *The Visual Culture of Baptism in the Middle Ages. Essays on Medieval Fonts, Settings and Beliefs* (Farnham 2013), pp. 31–48; ANDÅS 2012 (note 5); BLOCH 2011 (note 1).

<sup>81</sup> See PALAZZO 2008 (note 1), PALAZZO 2010 (note 1), and E. PALAZZO, *Les cinq sens au Moyen Âge: état de la question et perspectives de recherche*, *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 55, 2012, pp. 339–366; P. FLORENSKY, *The Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts*, in: N. MISLER (ed.), *Beyond Vision. Essays on the Perception of Art* (London 2002), pp. 97–111; PETERSEN 2015 (note 5), p. 182.

<sup>82</sup> E.g. BYNUM 2011 (note 66); KESSLER 2004 (note 54); PALAZZO 2010 (note 1) and 2012 (note 81). For Scandinavian publications, see K. B. AAVITSLAND, *Visual Splendour and Verbal Argument in Romanesque Golden Altars*, in: K. B. AAVITSLAND – T. K. SEIM (eds.), *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia*, vol. 24 (Rome 2011), pp. 207–225; AAVITSLAND 2015 (note 54); PETERSEN 2015 (note 5).

<sup>83</sup> Revelation 4:3–4; 21:16–21.

architecture of the Heavenly City with a rod; the intention seems to be to assign celestial significance to the dimensions and proportions of terrestrial church architecture.

Inscriptions and images served to accentuate baptism as the entrance to Paradise. The inscription in the baptistery of San Giovanni in Fonte at the Lateran is mentioned above to substantiate that the baptismal font was considered to symbolize *fons vitae*. The connection between the baptismal performance and the meaning of the sacrament is manifestly established in the Bari Benedictional by the vertical axis of the enthroned Christ, the blessing hand of God and the dove; together they complete the presence of the Trinity in the baptismal water (*Fig. 2*).

The early Christian theme of the Fountain of Life is relatively rarely found in imagery; the so-called Godescalc Evangeliary, a luxurious manuscript and one of the masterpieces of Carolingian illumination from 781–783, made for Charlemagne and Hildegard, is an extraordinary exception. The full-page painting of the Fountain of Life has a quite complex iconography, and may be interpreted by its several levels of coded meanings, connected with the teaching, practice and liturgy of the baptism. The painter has deliberately merged symbols of human thirsting for salvation with the image of the heavenly Paradise. The implication is significantly connected to the heading of the page, which is like a *titulus*. The text relates the birth of Christ as the source of the Fountain of Life and furthermore to be linked with the faithful's rebirth in baptism.<sup>84</sup> The parallelism of baptism and Paradise is constantly emphasized in medieval catechesis and in the rites of baptism; the connection between the immersion and the rebirth of the baptisand at the moment of baptism thus turns into a sign of the Resurrection to come.

The believers bring to God their praise and prayers; these are messages of their faith and veneration, given with the aim of attaining communion with him. In return they are offered eternal life by divine grace through Word and sacrament. The mystery of the holy water of *fons vitae* thus becomes a theophany, a manifestation of the Economy of Salvation delivered by the baptismal ritual.

<sup>84</sup> PALAZZO 2010 (note 1), pp. 42–45 has been especially important reading. But see also UNDERWOOD 1950 (note 23), pp. 42–264; NORDSTRÖM 1984 (note 23), pp. 10–20, 35–38.

### *Abstract*

The essay is concerned with the manifestation of the «Economy of Salvation» in medieval Scandinavian baptismal rituals. It examines how the ritual was integrated with the doctrines of the Church and with the architecture of the buildings. The main sources are surviving documents and law texts plus archaeological evidence. It makes clear that the sacrament of baptism opens the door to spiritual and physical transitions. Accumulations of coins have not appeared in the sacred spaces of the font. The «Economy» related to baptism is not about material economy or money as such, but about eternal life assigned by divine grace.

### *Zusammenfassung*

Dieser Aufsatz beschäftigt sich mit Erscheinungsformen der «Wirtschaft der Erlösung» in mittelalterlichen skandinavischen Taufritualen. Dabei wird untersucht, wie solche Rituale in die Kirchendoktrin und die -architektur integriert wurden. Hauptquellen bilden Dokumente und Gesetzestexte sowie archäologische Befunde. Daraus wird klar, dass das Sakrament der Taufe als Türöffner für spirituelle und physische Übergänge dient. In den heiligen Bereichen der Kirchenfront wurden keine Münzkonzentrationen festgestellt. Dieser mit der Taufe verbundene «Handel» bezieht sich nicht auf materielle Güter oder Geld als solches, sondern auf das durch göttliche Gnade verliehene ewige Leben.

### *Résumé*

Cet article s'intéresse à la manifestation de «l'économie du salut» dans les rituels de baptême scandinaves médiévaux. Il examine comment le rituel s'est adapté aux doctrines de l'Église et a été intégré à l'architecture des bâtiments. Les documents et les textes de loi, ainsi que les preuves archéologiques, demeurent les sources principales. Il est clair que le sacrement du baptême ouvre la voie à des changements spirituels et physiques. Des concentrations monétaires n'ont pas été mises au jour dans les espaces sacrés des fonts baptismaux. «L'économie» liée au baptême ne concerne pas les biens matériels ou l'argent en tant que tel, mais la vie éternelle assignée par la grâce divine.

Mona Bramer Solhaug  
Museum of Cultural History  
University of Oslo  
Oredalsåsen 20  
N-1613 Fredrikstad  
monabso@extern.uio.no

