Kaja M. H. Hagen

Chapter 18

Heavenly Agent and Divine Disclosure: The Holy Cross at Borre

During the Late Middle Ages, there were reports across Western Christianity of miraculous, wonderworking crosses, and crucifixes that moved, spoke, bled, and wept or interacted with the worshipper. In medieval Norway, several crosses were treated as animate objects possessing power, will or agency. In the small village of Borre in southeastern Norway, a wooden cross is known to have received gifts and to own land and livestock. Also, in two late medieval wills, “the Holy Cross” at Borre is referred to as a site of pilgrimage, mentioned together with Jerusalem and the holiest places in Christendom. This chapter will explore the material aspects of the Borre cross as well as its potential of agency, in search of answers that can explain why this cross, in the periphery of the Christian world, was included in a holy topography that had Jerusalem at its centre.

Pilgrimage to the Holy Cross from Borre

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Borre cross was a renowned pilgrimage site (Fig. 18.1).¹ The cross owns much of its fame to two preserved diplomas from 1405 and 1411. In 1405, Queen Margrethe of Denmark and Norway lent 1000 *nobler* to the Cistercian monasteries in Sorø and Esrom. If the queen was to die before the loan was repaid, the above-mentioned amount was to fund pilgrimage. The first pilgrim destinations the queen mentions are Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and other *loca sancta* in the Holy Land, where six men were to travel. Additionally, seven would visit the holy graves in Rome. Nine would go to the shrine of the Virgin in Aachen, three to Santiago de Compostela, three to St Louis in France, and yet another three would go to the tomb of St Thomas in Canterbury. The list continues thus: the shrine of St Magnus in Orkney, the shrine of the three magi in Cologne, the graves of

¹ The Borre cross is kept at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, inventory number C.6130. M. Blinheim dates the cross to 1240–1255, while A. Anderson and E. Hohler date the cross to 1275–1300, see Martin Blindheim, *Gothic painted wooden sculpture in Norway 1220–1350* (Oslo: Messel Forlag, 2004b), 130; Aron Andersson, “English Influence in Norwegian and Swedish figuresculpture in wood 1220–1270” (Doctoral Thesis, University of Stockholm, 1949), 200; Erla B. Hohler, “Borre-korset,” in *Fra hammer til kors. 1100 år med kristendom* (Borre: Borre historielag, 1994).

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Fig. 18.1: The Borre cross, c.1250–1300. 301cm x 214cm. Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.

St Francis in Assisi, St Lawrence, St Nicholas in Bari and St George, the relics of St Christopher in addition to a range of other saints. Furthermore, five men were to travel to the holy blood in Wilsnack, seven to the churches dedicated to Our Lady in

Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, and one man to St Michael's Church in Tønsberg. At the end of the document, we find that pilgrims were also to visit five *holy crosses* in the north: Solna in Sweden, Hattula in Finland, Randers and Kiplew in Denmark, and Borre in Norway, "Thet hælgaē koors i Borraē hoos Twnsbergh."²

The places mentioned in the diplomas can be regarded as a map of holy topography in late medieval Europe. As the list starts with distant Jerusalem and the Holy Land and ends with local sanctuaries; it indicates a movement from the far to the near, and suggests a hierarchy of sanctity from the *axis mundi* of Jerusalem to the more modest position of Scandinavian *holy crosses*. Nonetheless, the document links

2 DD, 1405. 12. April, Sorø. "Wy abbot Salomon i Esrom oc abbot Niels i Soræ oc bothe conuent i the samme stædher kænnes meth thettæ wort opne breff foræ alle the nw æræ oc the komme scule/ at wy aff mæchtich førstinnæ war nadheghe frue drotning Margretæ anamet oc vntfonget haue thusænde nobele i ræt tro oc i swa dan made som her æfter følgher/ swa at nar hwn thøm i gen kræfuer oc haue wil/ tha scal hwn thisse forscrefne thusænde nobele genist i gen fongæ i swa dan made oc tro som hwn os thøm nw fongit oc til trot hauer frii oc wbeborne wtæn længer tøfring Schedhe thet oc swa/ at fornempde war frue drotning Margrete dōthe oc aff ginge før æn hwn thisse forscrefne nobele kræfthe oc i gen finge tha scule wy oc woræ æfterkomeræ schifte the samme thusænde nobele til pelegrims færther i alle made som heræfter følgher/ oc at the pelegrims færther worther alle fulkompne oc ænde innen twaar næst æfter forde war frues drotning dōth swo som ær først siæx mæn til Iherusalem oc til Bethleem/ oc til the hælghæ stadher ther vm kring ligge oc til sanctæ Katherinæ Item siw mæn til Rom at ga vm kring the kirker ther æræ. oc søghe the hælghæ mæntz grafuer ther ligge. bathæ apostole oc andræ Item ni mæn til Var frue til Aken item thre mæn til sanctæ Iacop/ itemthre mæn til sanctæ Lothwic i Franckarike item thre mæn til sanctæ Thomes aff Cantelbergh i Ængland item een man til sanctæ Magnus i Orkanø item thre mæn til the hælghæ thre konunge i Kolne item thre mæn til sanctæ Iwold i Danen/ oc thre mæn til sanctæ Franciscus i Assies item een man thiit som sanctæ Laurens ligger item een man thiit som sanctæ Niclawes ligger i Baor item een man thiit som sanctæ Iurghen ligger/ oc en man thiit som sanctæ Cristoffer ligger item een man thiit som sanctæ Iohannes baptistæ ligger/ oc een man thiit som sanctæ Iohannes ewangeliste ligger item thre mæn til sanctæ Mathies item een man thiit som sanctæ Pæther ligger/ oc een man thiit som sanctæ Pael ligger/ oc een man thiit som sanctæ Andreas ligger item een man thiit som sanctæ Maria Magdalena ligger/ oc een man thiit som sanctæ Elsebe ligger item een man thiit som sanctæ Dorothea ligger/ oc een man thiit som sanctæ Barbaræ ligger/ oc een man thiit som sanctæ Margaretæ ligger/ Item fæm mæn til thet hælghæ blodh i Wilsnak item een man til sanctæ Vincencium/ oc een til sanctæ Antonium/ oc een man til sanctæ Fabianum oc Sebastianum item een man til sanctæ Gerthrudh/ oc een til sanctæ Seuerin i Kolne/ oc een man til sanctæ Birgittæ/ oc een man til sanctæ Olaff/ oc een man til sanctæ Erik/ oc een man til sanctæ Knwt Item syw stæther ther som war frue kirker æræ i Danmark Swerighe oc Norghe item een man til sanctæ Mikels bergh i Tunsbergh item fem stæther til thethelghe kørs i thisse righe swosom til thet hælghæ kors i Solnæ with Stokholm. til thet hælghæ kors i Borraē hoos Tunsbergh/ til thet hælghæ kors i Hattil i Fintland/ til thethælghæ kors i Randers/ oc til thet hælghæ kors sanctæ Hiælp Item wy forde abbate/ oc conuent bindæ os oc woræ æfterkomeræ til/ meth thettæ breff/ at wy oc woræ æfterkomeræ with. thisse forscrefne thusænde nobele swo gøræ wele. oc meth thøm alle thisse forscrefne pelegrims reyser i alle made swo fulkomme lataē wele som herforescreuet star wten all forsy-melse swo som wy welæ antware for gudh oc forde war frue drotningen os til tror Oc til meræ bewaring alle thisse forscrefne stickes tha haue wy forde abb[ate]1 oc bothæ conuent woræ incigle methwilghe oc witscap hængt for thættæ breff/ Oc til witnesbyrdh ærlich fathers biscop Pæther i Roskilde incigle."

the cross of Borre, at the outskirts of Western Christianity, to the religious epicentre of the world, Jerusalem.

Six years later, in 1411, another diploma confirms that the queen's loan was repaid. This document shows that the queen still wanted the pilgrimages to be carried out, and that she at this point donated money to the abbots of Sorø and Esrom. The same holy places are listed in both diplomas, and *the holy cross* from Borre was still to receive pilgrims on behalf of the queen.³ In both sources, the cross is referred to as a *holy cross*, but the two diplomas contain no information that can help us understand *why* this cross was considered to be a *holy cross* and a pilgrimage destination.

From the fifth century onwards, the cross emerged as the prime Christian symbol. Crosses and crucifixes were consecrated and placed in churches and on altars, omnipresent in Western Christianity. A depiction of a cross incorporated the whole history of salvation; the past was visualized in the present with a promise of future salvation. The cross was a kind of rhetorical "distillate," in which a large amount of content was compressed.⁴

Today, 170 Norwegian medieval wooden polychrome crosses, crucifixes, and Calvary groups are preserved.⁵ All crosses were at some level considered to be holy. However, in medieval wills, listings of ecclesiastical properties, in vernacular saga literature as well as post-reformation sources, we find more than 40 references to *holy crosses*. The holy crosses mentioned in the sources seem to have been elevated above or holier than other similar depictions as they were pilgrimage sites, received gifts, were bestowed in wills, and owned land and livestock.⁶ According to Hans Belting, some images "were lifted by an aura of the sacred out of the material world to which they otherwise belonged" and could take on real power.⁷ No matter how much medieval theologians and intellectuals insisted on venerating not the image but that to which it pointed, images were sought out, revered, and had offerings made to them. Based on

3 DD, 1411. 8. December, Kalundborg. The cross from Borre is also mentioned in two separate wills, from c.1350 and 1398. See DN, vol. 11, no. 41; DN, vol. 11 no 82. The cross is also listed under *Borra kirkia* in Bishop Eystein's annals from around the same period. *Biskop Eysteins Jordebog (Den røde Bog). Fortegnelse over det geistlige Gods i Oslo Bispedømme omkring Aar 1400*, ed. H.J. Huitfeldt, Christiania: J. Chr. Bogtrykkeri, 1879. This source places the cross in Borre Church.

4 Henning Laugerud, "Memory: The Sensory Materiality of Belief and Understanding in Late Medieval Europe," in *The Saturated Sensorium: Principles of Perception and Mediation in the Middle Ages*, ed. Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, et al. (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2015), 248.

5 Erla B. Hohler, "Medieval Wooden Sculpture in Norway," *Collegium Medievale. Interdisciplinary Journal of Medieval Research* 30 (2017): 47–55. In addition there are crosses or crucifixes in present-day Sweden that once formed a part of the medieval Norwegian territory. Ninety of these crosses are kept in churches, while eighty are found in national and international museums.

6 A complete survey of *holy crosses* mentioned in medieval and post-Reformation sources will be included in my forthcoming PhD thesis.

7 Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 7.

Fig. 18.2: Detail of the Borre cross: a square-shaped convex panel beneath the carved quatrefoil in the intersection of the cross arms.

Queen Margrethe's diplomas and other surviving medieval documents, the Borre cross can be understood as a divine manifestation in the late medieval material world.⁸

Form, Iconography, and Missing Relics

The cross from Borre has an unusual iconography with no marks left by nails or other means of fixings for a Christ figure. This bare-cross iconography has no preserved parallels in Scandinavian wooden sculpture. Measuring 301 cm in height and 214 cm in width, the cross is also one of the largest surviving wooden crosses from medieval Norway. It consists of two horizontal beams joined at half wood fastened to the larger vertical beam. The red-painted rims of the cross are flat, while the middle part, that today has traces of blue-green paint, is slightly convex.⁹ A central tendril of a golden

⁸ DN, vol. 11, no. 41; DN: 11 no 82; *Biskop Eysteins Jordebog*: 1879, 79.

⁹ Examinations show that the cross has been over-painted.

Fig. 18.3: X-ray of the convex panel in the intersection of the cross arms.

colour dominates the apex. From the tendril, shorter stems rhythmically spread out to both sides before curling and ending in three or five pointed leaves. In the intersection where the cross arms meet, is a carved quatrefoil from where the tendrils form a large X (Fig. 18.2).

At the outermost part of each cross arm are carved trefoils. Three of four trefoils carry carved Evangelists' symbols; the ox, the eagle, and the lion. At the foot of the cross, we would expect to find the symbol of Matthew, but instead of Matthew's conventional symbol, a (winged) man, the fourth cross arm has a depiction of *Christ Harrowing Hell*.¹⁰ Although unusual, neither the lack of a corpus, nor the missing evangelist symbol of Matthew can explain why the cross was referred to as a *holy cross*.

Scholars have previously wondered if the cross from Borre contains, or at one point did contain, a relic.¹¹ There are indeed several examples of medieval sculptures containing remains of saints or other forms of *holy matter*, and the inclusion of a relic

¹⁰ At the Horg II crucifix in Vitenskapsmuseet in Trondheim are fragments of what is most likely a depiction of *Christ Harrowing Hell* at the foot of the cross. All cross arms have been cut off leaving only parts of the bottommost motive. It is thus impossible to determine if this depiction is an addition or replaces an evangelist symbol as found on the cross from Borre.

¹¹ See, for example, Hohler, "Borre-korset".

could have shed light on the extraordinary sanctity of the Borre cross.¹² However, an x-ray examination of the cross performed in January 2018 showed that the Borre cross neither contains a relic nor holds a cavity that could have contained one in the past (Fig. 18.3).¹³ However, the square-shaped convex panel beneath the carved quatrefoil at the junction of the four cross arms is unsymmetrically and crudely cut compared to the other carvings of the cross. This might suggest that something at one point was fastened to the cross, and that a removal of such an attachment might have affected its present design. The sources are regrettably silent on this issue and the material traces are difficult to interpret.

Made in the Shape of the True Cross

As Kristin B. Aavitsland and others have convincingly argued, divine measurements mattered for medieval Christians.¹⁴ Renderings of the footprints from the ascension of Christ, the height of the Virgin, and accurate measurements of the length of Christ's body were displayed in churches throughout Christendom.¹⁵ But how could a measurement be regarded as a divine disclosure? What was believed to be accurate renderings of the size or shape of divine objects contributed to an understanding of the Holy Land reflected and represented, perhaps even present, in local objects, serving as what the German art historian Anna Boroffka has labelled *metric relics*.¹⁶ Such relics served as proof or reliable witness of truth, and were tangible evidence of the sacred drama that had once unfolded in the Holy Land. Presented to the local worshipper, these objects ensured a sacred connection between past and present, centre and periphery.

12 An example of relics being inserted into medieval sculpture is the Gero crucifix, see Robin M. Jensen, *The Cross: History, Art and Controversy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 163. For the crucifix in Sorø Abby church, see DK Sorø: 68. For the Virgin from Viklau, see Håkan Lindberg, "Some Notes regarding the Conservation of the Viklau Madonna (Gotland, Sweden)," in *From Conservation to Interpretation: Studies in Religious Art (c.1100–c.1800) in Northern and Central Europe in Honour of Peter Tångeberg*, ed. Justin E.A. Kroesen, et al. (Leuven: Peeters Verlag, 2017), 11–22; Lena Liepe, "The Presence of the Sacred: Relics in Medieval Wooden Statues in Scandinavia," in *Paint and Piety*, ed. Noëlle L.W. Streeton and Kaja Kollandsrud (London: Archetype Publications, 2014).

13 A complete report of the x-ray examination of the Borre cross will be included in my forthcoming PhD thesis.

14 Kristin B. Aavitsland, "Jerusalemkoden i nordisk middelalder: Det helliges målestokk," *Årbok / Det norske videnskaps-akademi* (2016).

15 For numerous examples of such depictions, see Anna Boroffka, *Die "Laenge Christi" in der Malerei: Codifizierung von authentizität im intermedialen diskurs* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017). Well-known Scandinavian examples are the renderings of the height of the Virgin found in the churches at Ringsted, Vigersted, and Køge.

16 For the term "metrisch Reliquie", see Boroffka, *Die "Laenge Christi"*, 11.

There are several medieval testimonies of crosses revered as *metric relics*. One example is found in an Icelandic manuscript from the end of the thirteenth century.¹⁷ Among travel descriptions from twelfth-century Scandinavian pilgrims is a list of relics present in Hagia Sophia. The church housed many relics: fragments of the True Cross, relics associated with the passion of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the apostles, as well as a silver cross measuring the exact height of Christ.¹⁸ The relic was, in other words, not a bodily remain or a contact relic, but a cross regarded as holy matter by virtue of its measurement. This reflects a cultic devotional practice labelled by Boroffka as “Körperspurensuche,” a search for bodily traces.¹⁹

Not only the measurement of Christ, but also the measurement of the True Cross could serve as a devotional object and *metric relic*. In a fourteenth-century *Arma Christi* illumination in the National Library in Prague, the cross and other instruments of the passion are depicted, accompanied by a measuring stick, offering the viewer a ratio of Christ, the cross, and the passion instruments (Fig. 18.4). There are several other examples of how an exact rendering of what was believed to be the appearance of the True Cross seems to have been valuable and significant for the medieval worshipper: According to Snorri Sturluson, King Sigurd the Crusader brought home a splinter of the Holy Wood from Jerusalem and kept it in his newly built church at Kungahälla.²⁰ In his survey on Scandinavian crusades to the Holy Land, Paul Riant states that Sigurd placed the cross relic in a reliquary shaped like the True Cross: “(. . .) dans un grand reliquaire de la forme même de la Vraie Croix.”²¹

The same form of metric devotion is found in several late medieval amulets that a worshipper would carry on his or her body for healing or protection. The length or height of Christ or the cross was represented graphically as a line or bar. The length of the line would be multiplied by a given number, often fifteen or twenty, in order to gain what was believed to be the true length of Christ or cross. In an amuletic context, these holy measurements were not only devotional tools, they also had an apotropaic or healing potential.²² During the Middle Ages, the

17 Carl Christian Rafn et al., *Antiquités russes d’après monuments historiques de islandais et des anciens scandinaves*: 2 (Copenhagen: Brdr. Berling, 1852), XIV.

18 “silfrkross jafnlångr líkama Crists,” Rafn et al. 1852, *Antiquités*: 416.

19 Boroffka 2017, *Die “Laenge Christi.”* 11.

20 Pål B. Svenungsen, “Norge og korstogene: En studie av forbindelsene mellom det norske riket og den europeiske korstogsbevegelsen, ca. 1050–1380” (PhD Thesis, University of Bergen, 2016), 70. See also Chapter 8 (Lukas Raupp), 156–65; Chapter 11 (Denys Pringle), 201–2; and Chapter 14 (Øystein Ekroll), 287.

21 Paul Riant, *Expéditions et pèlerinages des Scandinaves en Terre Sainte au temps des croisades*, 2 vols. (Paris: impr. de A. Lainé et J. Havard, 1865–1869), 209. Riant does not disclose which version of Snorri’s saga he employs for his account of the design of the reliquary, and there is a possibility that this is Riant’s own interpretation.

22 Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006,) 142–3.

Fig. 18.4: *Arma Christi* with crucifix, instruments of the passion and measuring stick, 1312–1321. *Passionale quod dicitur Cunegundis abbatissae*, Ms XIV A 17, fol. 10r, National Library, Prague.

popularity of the cult of St Olav lead to a wide distribution of the legends about his wonders and miracles. In Harald Hardrada's saga is a story of a chieftain named Guttorm, who invoked St Olav for help and protection when facing a battle where his own forces were outnumbered. The saint came to Guttorm's rescue, and as a sign of his gratitude, Guttorm erected a silver *róða*, a cross or a crucifix.²³ This votive offering was made "of the same height as himself or his forecandle man, and that image is seven ells high."²⁴ Depending on whether the ell or *alen* refers to *alenstikke* (47.4 cm) or *tommelalen* (55.3 cm), both commonly used measures in medieval Norway, the sculpture measured between 331.8 cm and 373.1 cm. A plausible interpretation of Guttorm's votive offering is that this was a crucifix: a large silver cross carrying a Christ figure with what was believed to be an accurate rendering of His height. The story of Guttorm also appears in an Old Norse homily. In this version, the *róða* that Guttorm erects is explicitly a great cross, "in all ways larger and taller than the height of a man."²⁵

As mentioned above, with a height of 301 cm, the Borre cross is one of the largest surviving wooden crosses from medieval Norway. It is thus possible that the sanctity of the Borre cross is related to its size, reflecting what was believed to be an exact rendering of the True Cross.

Several of the preserved wooden crucifixes in Norway are significantly smaller than the Borre cross, measuring between 150 cm and 180 cm, leaving the Christ figure considerably smaller than life size. Another *holy cross* from Norway is the famous Røldal crucifix. This is a representative example of the smaller crucifixes, the cross measuring 157 cm and the Christ figure only 89 cm. The smaller *holy crosses* could thus have rendered the height of Christ like the relic in Hagia Sofia. Another cross referred to in written medieval sources as *a holy cross* is the crucifix from Norderhov Church.²⁶ A cross from this church still exists, and although the cross arms have been sawn off leaving its current height at 255 cm, it is clear that this must have been a monumental cross that, like the Borre cross, may have mirrored what was believed to be the size of the True Cross, a cross capable of carrying a man.

Not only the size, but also the design might have affected the medieval worshipper's understanding of the Borre cross as a representation of the True Cross. The design of the Borre cross, where flat rims and a convex middle are covered in stems and

²³ See Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog*, second ed., 3 vols. (Kristiania: Den norske Forlagsforening, 1886–1896), 521, s.v. *róða*. *Róða* could also refer to a sculpture of a saint.

²⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 3 vols, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes, London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 2016, vol. 3, *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, chs 54 and 55: "eptir vexti sínum eða stafnbua síns"; "ok er þat líkneski víi alna hátt."

²⁵ "alls costar er hon lengri oc mæiri en manzvaxtar", *Acta et processus canonizationis b. Birgitte*, ed. Isak Collijn, Samlingar utgivna av Svenska fornskriftsällskapet, Ser. 2, Latinska skrifter, Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell boktryckeri, 1924–1931, 113.

²⁶ DN vol. 23, 69.

leaves, may have connotations for the cluster of legends and beliefs surrounding the cross of Christ during the Middle Ages. In this volume, Kristin B. Aavitsland refers to some of the topological legends and interpretations of the wood of the True Cross that circulated in the North during the High Middle Ages. The wood was believed to have originated from the garden of Eden, made from three different species: cedar, cypress, and pine.²⁷ The Borre cross is cut from pine, but formed so as to resemble three different joining components: the rims, the middle, and the living tendrils as described above. This may be an attempt to allude to the three types of wood joined together, as a reference to the wood of the True Cross. Similar carvings with a rim, a convex middle, and tendrils are indeed found on several other crosses from medieval Norway.²⁸

Based on this brief discussion, there is reason to assume that the cross from Borre was regarded as an authentic representation of the True Cross. The size of the cross was most likely not based on a random measurement, but may have reflected what was believed to be the size of the cross of Christ. The tripartite wooden carvings of the cross, cut to allude to the trees from Eden, also contributed to an understanding of the cross as a visual testimony, an authoritative argument, or even a reality transported from Jerusalem to the local church in Borre.

***Lignum Vitae* – the Living Tree in Borre**

The stems and leaves carved on the Borre cross makes it not only a convincing representation of the True cross, as seen above, it also alludes to the Tree of Life, mentioned in Genesis 2:9 together with the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. Eve and Adam eating from the latter caused the Fall of Man and hence necessitated salvation, whereas the Tree of Life was commonly interpreted as a prefiguration of the cross. Hence, it became a symbol of resurrection and eternal life. In the Book of Revelation, the Tree of Life is mentioned again, and its fruits are often interpreted to represent the body and blood of Christ present in the Eucharistic species, bringing “healing to the nations” [*ad sanitatem gentium*] (Rev 22:2). Several of the preserved medieval wooden crosses from Norway are indeed carved and painted to resemble a living tree, thereby conforming to an iconographical trait which became increasingly popular in western Christianity during the thirteenth and fourteenth century.²⁹

The perhaps most famous example of crosses depicted as the Tree of Life is Taddeo Gaddi’s fresco in Santa Croce in Florence. Here, the fusion between tree and crucifix is complete. The vertical beam of the cross is at the same time the trunk of

²⁷ See Chapter 20 (Kristin B. Aavitsland), 443–8.

²⁸ See, for example, the crucifix from Nesland in Telemark, Hedalen in Oppland, Hof in Vestfold, or Tretten I in the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, inventory number C3014.

²⁹ Jensen, *The Cross*, 130.

the Tree of Life upon which Christ is crucified. St. Bonaventure is depicted at the foot of the cross with a scroll which reads *O crux, fructex salvi(ficus)*,³⁰ words from his *Lignum Vitae*, meditations of the life of Christ.³¹ In this work, Bonaventura seeks to immerse the sufferings of Christ by contemplating each step of the Passion, hoping that God will let him be “fixed with my beloved to the yoke of the cross.”³² The cross is addressed directly in vocative, *O cross*, both in Bonaventure’s text and in Gaddi’s fresco, emphasizing the intermediality and intertextuality of text and image.³³ The devotion encompasses both Christ and cross, expressing a belief that not only Christ – but also the cross – has the capacity to bring healing to the devout.

As mentioned above, the Borre cross’ bare-cross iconography is the only one of its kind in the extant corpus of Scandinavian medieval art. Understood as the *Lignum Vitae*, the absence of a Christ figure contributes to an accentuation of the cross itself. In Borre, the Tree of Life leads the faithful to salvation and healing. As seen in devotional meditations, the cross could be addressed directly, indicating that the cross was believed to be an object of immanence with its own power or agency.

The Animated Cross

From the many legends about *holy crosses* in Norway as well as on the Continent, we learn that numerous crosses could be perceived as wonder-working or miraculous. In the later Middle Ages, stories of animated crosses and crucifixes abound, reporting them to be moving, speaking, bleeding, weeping, and sweating.³⁴ In his book *The Power of Images*, David Freedberg employs the concept “cognitive reality” to explain the countless medieval reports of people experiencing images that seemingly came alive.³⁵ According to Freedberg, explaining these phenomena as literary exaggerations or psychological projections of the viewer is inadequate.³⁶ Rather, Freedberg suggests that a supernatural potential for animation is part of the images’ ontology, a potential that can be fulfilled under given circumstances. In these cases, “[. . .] the sign has become the living embodiment of what it signifies. [. . .] what is

30 For a thorough examination of Taddeo Gaddi’s *Lignum Vitae* fresco in Santa Croce in light of Bonaventure and memory, see Laugerud, “Memory”.

31 Laugerud, “Memory,” 254.

32 Jensen, *The Cross*, 150.

33 Laugerud, “Memory,” 256.

34 See, for example, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 12.

35 David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 291.

36 Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 303.

represented becomes present.”³⁷ In other words, the worshipper in Borre church could have experienced his or her meeting with the cross as a meeting with the prototype, the True Cross.

Theories of agency of things were first introduced in the humanities in the late 1970s.³⁸ Agency or animation as an approach to the study of medieval art is an attempt to remedy the inadequacy of merely aesthetic or iconographical perspectives. During the Middle Ages, miraculous and wonder-working crosses and crucifixes were treated as though they were alive. Such crosses or crucifixes were not merely illustrations of a biblical event, or tools to fulfill human intention or liturgical purposes.³⁹ A cross could potentially shape the reality of the beholder, serving as a mediator between God and humans. Studying the *holy crosses*’ potential for animation or agency is not limited to discussing movable heads, limbs, or other mechanical devices inserted to make the sculptures move. The approach of agency or animation also considers the impact that the cross or crucifix has on the beholder and the interaction between beholder and object.

Based on Freedberg’s ideas, Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen focuses on the principles behind the animation of images and draws up a taxonomy of three not mutually exclusive types of animation: *mechanical animation*, *magical animation*, and *phenomenological animation*.⁴⁰ In the case of the Borre cross, the last two categories could be useful concepts for exploring a possible understanding of the cross as an animated object. Both *magical* and *phenomenological animation* recognize the cult image as potentially alive. The difference between the two categories can be traced by searching for *where* the power is believed to stem from: magical animation is considered to stem from the image itself, as a force within or an inherent property of the image, making it act on the basis of its own agency. Phenomenological animation is seen as a result of the believers’ perception, projection, and interaction

37 Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 28 and Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, “‘Toys that ask for love’. En animationsteori for teknobilleder, biobilleder og kultbilleder,” *Kunst og Kultur* 3 (2016): 171.

38 See, for example, W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Freedberg, *The Power of Images*; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Bjørnar Olsen, *In Defence of Things: Archeology and the Ontology of Objects* (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2010); Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013); Caroline van Eck, *Art Agency and Living Presence: From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object* (Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter, 2015); Grażyna Jurkowlaniec, Ika Matyjaszkiewicz, and Zuzanna Sarnecka, *The Agency of Things in Medieval and Early Modern Art: Materials, Power and Manipulation*, Routledge Research in Art History (London: Routledge, 2017); Jørgensen, “‘Toys that ask for love’” and Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, “Live Matter and Living Images: Towards a Theory of Animation in Material Media,” *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift / Journal of Art History* 86, no. 3 (2017).

39 Jurkowlaniec, Matyjaszkiewicz, and Sarnecka, *The Agency of Things*, 5.

40 Jørgensen, “Live Matter and Living Images,” 261.

Fig. 18.5: Detail of the Borre cross: *Christ Harrowing Hell*. When the cross was included in the collection of the Museum of Cultural History at the end of the nineteenth century, a small medieval coin was found wedged in between the carved figures.

with the object. The animation in the latter case is understood as the experienced reality of the medieval worshipper.

When examining the possible phenomenological animation of the cross, there is a possibility that the Borre cross was connected to cult legends passing on stories of the worshippers' experiences of movement or other miracles, but no such legends have survived. Although no written sources remain, material traces in the object may reveal information regarding the medieval usage of the cross. When the cross was included in the collection of the Museum of Cultural History at the end of the nineteenth century, a medieval coin was discovered, wedged into the carving depicting *Christ Harrowing Hell* at the foot of the cross (Fig. 18.5). The insertion of the coin offers a glimpse into a likely medieval perception of the cross. Presumably, the coin was given as a votive offering. This action may testify to a medieval practice in which the cross was considered a living, animated object. The money was not inserted into a money block, placed on an altar, or given to the priest. This was an offering to the object itself. The Borre cross was not a mere representation of Christ's cross – the cross could be understood as a mediator bestowed with life. The donation was given to Christ's intercessor on earth as an expression of gratitude or in hope of help or salvation.

An attempt to place the Borre cross in both a local and a wider European context may shed light on its possible agency interpreted as what Jørgensen has termed *magical animation*. Below, two different written sources, a poem and a prayer, will be examined in order to shed light on the potential embedded in medieval crosses to act as active agents in medieval society.

The famous poem *The Dream of the Rood* was written in the late tenth or early eleventh century.⁴¹ The poem is divided into three parts. In the first part, a narrator recounts a dream or a vision he has had about the cross of Christ. Suddenly, the narrator sees that the cross starts to bleed on its right side and he hears the cross speak. In the second part, the cross speaks to us in the first person. The cross tells its tale of how it was once as a tree in the woods, and was made into a cross that Christ later climbed onto and embraced. The tree was trembling, as Christ was trembling, but it did not dare to bow to the earth. As Christ's fate was to die on the cross, so the fate of cross was to stand erected and to carry the Saviour.

After the death of Christ, the cross declares in triumph:

(. . .) Now the time has come
when far and wide over the earth
and all this splendid creation, men do me honour;
they worship this sign. On me the Son of God
suffered for a space; wherefore now
I rise glorious beneath the heavens and I can heal
all who fear me.⁴²

In the third and last part, the narrator from the first part awakens, urging the reader to seek the tree and to honour it well. The narrator longs for the resurrection:

(. . .) and each day I look
for the time when the Lord's cross,
which erstwhile I saw here on earth,
will fetch me from this fleeting life,
and bring me then where there is great gladness.⁴³

According to the narrator, it is not Christ or God who will lead him to resurrection on the Last Day, it is *the cross* that will fetch him. Throughout the poem, there is a fusion between Christ and the cross: the cross is also pierced with nails and drenched in blood. They even share the same side wound. The Cross, as Christ, understands its role in the salvation of humankind and despite the pain, it must not bend or break. The cross

⁴¹ A larger part of this poem is inscribed in runes on the Ruthwell stone cross from the eighth century in Northumbria in present-day Scotland.

⁴² Martin Lehnert, ed. *Poetry and prose of the Anglo-Saxons 1: Texts* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1960), 125f. (80–6).

⁴³ Lehnert, *Poetry and prose of the Anglo-Saxons*, 128 (135–8).

promises to heal the faithful. In the absence of Christ's relics on earth, God has left us the cross, as a substitute, deputy, or perhaps ambassador for Christ himself. According to the poem, the cross is *the living cross*, with its own power and capacity to act.⁴⁴

This famous insular poem expresses a belief in the inherent power and hence the animation and agency of the cross, a similar conception expressed in a prayer found in Torpo in the valley of Hallingdal in Norway, written down during the last half of the fifteenth century.⁴⁵ The prayer was written on a small piece of paper and used as an amulet. The text consists of two prayers, one to St Dorothy and one to the cross. The latter prayer, called the cross-prayer, was known throughout Western medieval Europe. Despite the chronological and geographical distance between the cross-prayer from Torpo and *The Dream of the Rood*, both texts express the same perception of the cross as a living object:

Crux Christi sit mecum et ecclesia nostra
 crux Christi est enim quam[. . .] adoro
 crux Christi est vita salus
 May the Cross of Christ be with me and our church
 for the Cross of Christ is that which I (always) honour
 The Cross of Christ is life salvation (. . .)

This part is followed by the pious addressing the cross directly:

*Crux Christi auferat a me omne [. . .] l[. . .] um crux Christi saluet me
 se et hodie super me ante me post [...] ante me et post
 me et vbique me
 May the cross of Christ take all evil away from me.
 The Cross of Christ saves me [. . .] and today over me before me behind [. . .] before me and
 behind me and everywhere [. . .]*⁴⁶

⁴⁴ See also Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 35f.

⁴⁵ DN vol. 12, 266: "Crux Christi sit mecum et ecclesia nostra crux Christi est enim quam [. . .] adoro crux Christi est vita salus crux Christi superat gladium crux Christi [. . .] nt vincula mortis crux Christi admirabile signum crux Christi sit mihi [. . .] crux Christi sit mihi via virtutum cuper cruciem Christi aggrediar omne [...]r crux Christi expandit omne bonum crux Christi auferat a me omne [. . .] l[. . .] um crux Christi saluet me se et hodie super me ante me post [. . .] ante me et post me et vbique me viderit antiquus hostis [. . .] [fu]giat a me jn nomine domini nostri Iesu Christi benedicat me Ihesus [. . .] [sem-] piternus rex Judeorum [. . .] per medium illorum ibat [. . .] s Ihesus Christus crucifixus et filius dei viui benedicat me erigat. [. . .] studiat Christus defendat me et dominus auertat a me omne [. . .] um jn nomine patris et filii et spiritus sanctus amen."

I wish to thank Halfdan Bådsvik and Vemund Blomkvist for assistance with the translation from Latin. See also Kaja M. H. Hagen, "Crux Christi Sit Mecum: Devotion to the Apotropaic Cross," *Religions* 10(11) (2019): 603.

⁴⁶ In comparison, the Celtic prayer *Patrick's breastplate* includes a strikingly similar phrasing, but instead of addressing the cross, the prayer is directed to Christ: "Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me." Oliver Davies and

Fig. 18.6: Parchment with a prayer to St Dorothy, the Holy Cross, and Christ, from Torpo church in Hallingdal. 1450–1500. DN vol. 12, 266. National Archives of Norway (Arkivverket).

The prayer indicates that not only God, Christ, or the saints, but also the cross has the ability to protect and keep the faithful. Interpreted in this sense, the cross serves as a living and active object and a mediator between man and God (Fig. 18.6).

There are several sources testifying to the belief in the cross as an animated object, in addition to several cult legends of crosses and crucifixes that came alive, and offered healing or expressed will or power. Such legends are found both in European and Norwegian material. One type of animation are present in legends of *holy crosses* addressing the pious in dreams or visions. The most famous example is perhaps St Francis vision when Christ spoke to him from the cross he was praying in front of. A more local example is the vision of Jón Ögmundsson (1052–1121), bishop of Hólar in Iceland. According to *Jóns saga*, the bishop had, after reading a story of Jews torturing an image of Christ on the cross, a vision of a bleeding

Thomas O'Loughlin, *Celtic Spirituality*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 120. This indicates an understanding that the cross's protective powers could be seen as analogous to that of Christ.

crucifix.⁴⁷ Another type of animation are crosses or crucifixes with healing or miraculous capabilities. The above-mentioned crucifix from Røldal is perhaps the most famous Norwegian example, renowned for emitting healing liquid once a year on midsummer's eve.⁴⁸ Sverris saga offers yet another example of a miraculous cross and mentions a *holy rood* placed in what is referred to as the Stone church, the now lost Columba church in Bergen, serving as an intercessor between God and the righteous, capable of helping the supplicant, to ward off evil, and to miraculously staying flames (Sverris saga, chapters 102 and 150).⁴⁹ A third type of animated crosses and crucifixes are found in preserved legends of crosses, often of supernatural origin, expressing a distinct will, such as the two crucifixes from Røldal and Fana who demanded to be placed in their respective churches.⁵⁰

These cult legends testify to a potential miraculous animation or agency of a cross. In spite of no records of similar stories in either category being preserved in the case of Borre, these examples show that during the Middle Ages, a cross could be treated as if it was alive with some form of personhood. It seems reasonable to suggest that the cross from Borre, venerated and bestowed with gifts and land, was also believed to be an animated object. But, was the animation a part of the cross's own agency, that is *magical animation*, or was it based on the worshippers' projections, that is *phenomenological animation*? The distinction between the two categories can be difficult to differentiate. The taxonomy is based on an analytic approach to the study of agency, useful for the modern scholar, but not relevant for the devout medieval worshipper. For the faithful, there would be no difference between magical and phenomenological animation; the power would in both cases stem from God. Miracles, wonders, or healings performed by the cross were of divine character, not understood as experiences projected upon the object by the onlooker. This brief discussion makes it clear that current research is in need of a more precise and nuanced vocabulary when examining the different categories of medieval animated sculptures.

⁴⁷ *Saga of Jón of Hólar*, trans. Margaret Cormack, ed. Thomas Head, *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, New York: Routledge, 2001, 595–626. This story has parallels in a wider European context, see, for example, Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 158.

⁴⁸ Jacob T. Larsen, *Fana bygdebok: 1: Fra de eldste tider til 1665* (Bergen: Fana bygdeboknemnd, 1980), 175.

⁴⁹ *Sverris saga etter Cod. Am 327 4°*, ed. Gustav Indrebø, Kristiania: Den Norske historiske kilde-skriftkommission, 1920, chapters 102 and 150.

⁵⁰ Larsen, *Fana bygdebok*, 175; Knut Dalen and Alma Dalen, *Røldal Bygdebok* (Røldal: Røldal kommune, 1960), 74. For examples of cult legends where Byzantine images express the will to be placed in specific Roman churches, see Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 63.

Conclusion: The Holiness of the Cross from Borre

The holiness of the Borre cross may be due to its measurement and shape: its vast size, the alluding tripartite wooden construction, and lack of a Christ figure could imply that the cross was believed to be an accurate rendering of the True Cross. This accuracy in depiction and measurement could have facilitated a sliding from representation to presence, the thing that was represented became the thing itself, expanding the boundaries between relic and image, between archetype and reproduction. As a *metric relic*, the cross offered the worshipper a visual testimony of accuracy and truth, transported all the way from Jerusalem to Borre.

When studying devotional literature, prayers and poems it seems clear that a cross was considered to be more than a symbol. A cross had the potential of being an animated object, Christ's intercessor on earth, bringing healing and salvation to those who prayed in front of it. Regrettably, no cultic legends connected to the Borre cross have survived through the centuries. However, we know that the cross was sought out, that it received gifts and owned land. We also have a material trace, a coin, a votive gift offered directly to the cross. In Borre, pilgrims could interact with a sacred cross believed to be a powerful agent, potentially influencing on his or her life and salvation. Perhaps the dichotomy between center and periphery is best understood as a modern construction. Medieval Europe consisted of multiple *loca sancta*, and one was to be found in the small village of Borre.