Saints and Sainthood around the Baltic Sea

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STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN CULTURE
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Identity, Literacy, and Communication in the Middle Ages

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Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Culture LIV
MEDIEVAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo
ONE OF THE FASCINATING aspects of saints in medieval societies is their ability to adapt. Not only did they perform in the liturgical sense, in ecclesiastical space; they also “flowed” to other surroundings. One important context in which saints played a central role was the medieval guild. Merchant guilds, crafts guilds, and religious fraternities all venerated a particular saint or saints as their patron/s. As the guild institution grew in importance during the Middle Ages and more and more brotherhoods were established, either in towns or in the countryside, there was a corresponding rise in the demand for saints not already adopted as patrons of extant guilds.

The church could offer a great variety of saints; some were only known locally or regionally, others were of a universal nature. Seen from a retrospective point of view, local saints seem to have had the greatest appeal during the early Middle Ages, whereas the universal ones became more attractive as the Christian institutions became culturally dominant. The exact time of this shift may vary from region to region in Europe. Interestingly, the old local saints seem to have had a kind of revival at the end of the Middle Ages. One way to explain these fluctuations might be found in the newly competitive environment that most of the guilds found themselves in from at least the end of the fourteenth century onwards. And this was not the only way the internal competition among the guilds made an impact. It is likely that it affected the very way saints were used within the guilds. On the one hand, a great deal of representational material depicting saints is found among the belongings of the guilds in the fifteenth century; on the other hand, it is also clear that guilds were forced to reconsider how best to use their patrons in their communication with God and society.
This chapter will focus on a particular medium in this process, namely the guild seals. Seals were essential for guilds in so far as a seal expressed that the guild that possessed it was recognized as a legal agent. By sealing a document, guilds sanctioned that they had approved a transaction or had given their consent to a certain action. Or, if the guilds were the initiators, they informed others about decisions taken, property bought or sold, etc. In that sense, the very existence of the guild was expressed by the seal. From this vital function, one might formulate the hypothesis that the writing and the images on the seal were at the core of the identity of the guild.

This study will investigate the guild seals of medieval Denmark. In most European countries, guild seals are well documented and preserved. They have survived in different ways and for different reasons. Firstly, guilds themselves took care of the seals. They invested in boxes to keep the seals safe and thus guarantee the legitimacy of their documents. From time to time seals were changed. This might occur if the old matrix was broken, if its image had gone out of fashion, or simply because the seal had been lost. Former seals still might survive hanging under documents in the archive of the guilds or in the magistrate’s archives. When nineteenth-century historians sought out different archives in search of seals to be published in large editions, they found several among the craft guilds themselves.

Secondly, seals in general were popular objects among the antiquarians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some antiquarians acquired whole collections of seals, whose seemingly peculiar or exotic qualities, especially if the guild no longer existed, made them particularly attractive. In Denmark, some of the oldest guild seals, from the end of the thirteenth century, have survived due to the effort of antiquarians. A variant of this is drawings of no-longer-extant seals, reproduced by the antiquarians. Unfortunately, it was often only the inscriptions that were copied, while the image was omitted and described in words. A third group comes from modern findings. Archaeological excavations of medieval towns or royal castles have contributed a small but significant group of seals. Frequently, these seal matrices are damaged, but from time to time an intact example emerges. Some seals have also been found by chance. The most remarkable case in the Danish material took place in 1927, when some local fishermen outside the town of Hobro brought up a zinc bucket in their net, and in it found a medieval seal matrix testifying that the town had had a guild of St. Knud, like so many other towns. Fifty-seven
different seals from extinct guilds have survived from Denmark. To this must be added the seals from surviving craft guilds.

This short description of the material makes it clear that the existing seals have been compiled and brought together from all possible sources and situations. The disparate nature they represent makes it difficult even to give a precise dating of the seals. Poul B. Grandjean, the cautious editor of the Danish seals, would likely have avoided any attempt at dating, had he not been under serious pressure. Under these circumstances it would be daring to try to contextualize the individual seals. Instead, the focus here will be on some general characteristics and shifts to be found in the overall development of the seals.

The First Guilds with Saints as Patrons:

St. Knud’s Guilds

Danish historiography on guilds has never questioned the close connection between saints and guilds. In the nineteenth century, the inherent Protestant tradition was so strong that saints were simply viewed as a Catholic fabrication, unworthy of too much attention. Saints were registered as part of the package that came with Christianity, and although some of the surviving guild statutes did go back to the late twelfth century, and cast a rare light on the first Christian period, historians more or less neglected this because they were much more interested in whether the guild material could contain traces of pre-Christian Nordic culture. This approach was complicated by the work of the German scholar, Max Pappenheim. He postulated an institution of sworn brotherhood among the ancient Germanic peoples, and had spotted the early Danish guild statutes as a possible means of proving it. On the other hand, more recent scholarship on guilds has emphasized the nationalistic nature of this older approach, arguing that the patron saint signaled a clearly Christian institution, first seen in the Carolingian burial guilds and later in merchant guilds from Brabant and Flanders.

This approach is quite different from that of political historians, who have written extensively on how the idea of sanctity entered Danish political discourse at an early point. This first occurred around 1100, when the Danish king Knud IV was canonized by the pope less than two decades after he was violently killed in a church in Odense in 1086. Modern literary scholars and theologians have also stressed the ability of local saints to
reconcile and unite different groups. Of particular importance were the translations of the relics of local saints to newly built churches of their own. It has been argued that such occasions functioned as grand rituals entering the collective memory as a point of no return.11

This argument may seem convincing, but it does not explain why only some of the local holy persons had lasting success, nor, indeed, why some of them later saw a revival. According to a recent survey of Scandinavian holy men and women, eight local saints appeared in Denmark before St. Knud did in 1100, and another eight after him.12 Some of the early ones have indeed long been forgotten. In a recent study on St. Knud it is argued that even though the canonization of Knud was well planned and his vita was given an international touch, it did not prevent his cult from losing much of its attractiveness within a century.13 The major reason for this was that the new alliance in power in Denmark under King Valdemar I (r. 1157–1182) clearly distanced itself from the old dynasty and thereby from St. Knud. In fact, Valdemar sought to promote a martyr from his own family line. The choice was obvious, because one of the triggers to the newly ended civil wars (1137–1157) had been the betrayal and murder in 1131 of Valdemar’s own father, Knud Lavard. During his lifetime, Knud Lavard had served as duke of Schleswig and seemingly also become knes [king] of the Abodrites in 1126. His canonization was crowned by success in 1169.

If there ever was a mythopoietic moment14 in medieval Denmark, it took place in 1170, when the relics of Knud Lavard were translated to the newly erected Church of St. Mary in Ringsted, a few miles from the place where Knud had been murdered twenty-nine years earlier. In the presence of the entire Danish establishment, King Valdemar’s son, who bore his grandfather’s name, was designated heir to the throne, while the liturgy proclaimed the will of God behind the dynasty.15

For our purposes, it is noteworthy that guilds dedicated to the new saint arose in the sources almost immediately. In a document from ca. 1177, it is stated that Knud Lavard was celebrated by brotherhoods (fraternalitas/societas) that held the feast for the saint (convivium beati Kanuti celebratur) in all towns of the realm (uniuersis ciuitatibus regni nostri).16 King Valdemar himself chose to be a member of at least one of these guilds, that of the Gotland traders. All the guilds were at the same time obliged to send yearly offerings to the saint’s shrine in Ringsted (eleemosynae annuales). This implies an early, well-organized guild structure, which is later stressed in a fragment of statutes, dated 1231, that aldermænni de convivio
s. Kanuti had compiled in Ringsted. This could be interpreted to mean that a superstructure existed above the different local guilds. Whether or not this was the case, we are later informed that eighteen aldermen from different guilds of St. Knud met in the commercial town of Skanør in 1256.

The extraordinary arrangement of this religious guild structure, royally protected and promoted, as it were, comes to light if it is compared with other contemporary guilds and their use of patronage of local saints. Except for the later St. Erik guilds whose patron was King Erik Plovpenning (r. 1241–1250), briefly mentioned in the second half of the thirteenth century, none of the local Danish saints ever came to be guild patrons. This was true even of the old King Knud, the first royal saint in Denmark. Although the antiquarians were convinced that the patron for the St. Knud’s guilds must have been the old King Knud, their assumption was refuted by a thorough investigation into the surviving statutes, which demonstrated that the feast days celebrated by the guilds were those of Knud Lavard and not the calendar days of King Knud. However, what really complicated the matter was an apparent shift in mentality as the Middle Ages progressed, because in the fifteenth century the saint venerated by the guilds was without doubt King Knud the martyr. According to Petersen it was easy to mix up these two members of the royal family, both with the same name and both canonized. We will return to other arguments later.

Though the promotion of Knud Lavard might well have been inspired by the success of St. Olav in Norway, none of the devotional and popular elements that were so characteristic of both the early and later Olav cult seem ever to have been achieved by St. Knud. Strikingly few depictions of St. Knud have been found in Danish murals in parish churches. Secondly, the martyrdom of St. Knud is not generally depicted in retables, though that form was highly popular from the end of the fourteenth century and onward. Thirdly, only one of the guild altars described in the sources is specifically said to have been dedicated to Knud Lavard. When Knud Lavard finally appears in one or two murals and retables around 1500, it is probably more correct to describe this as part of a general trend, in which high medieval saints are reintroduced, rather than reflecting a specific interest in the saint.

It is hard to evade the conclusion that the guilds of St. Knud from the beginning were special constructions in which the saint and the guild idea were deliberately matched. Whatever purpose they served—modern
scholars have mostly pointed at mercantile interests, but crusading ideology has also been suggested—the combination of saint and guild proved to be a success. In fact, St. Knud Lavard outshined all other saints with respect to patronage of guilds in Denmark. In sheer numbers, this local saint even overshadowed the Virgin Mary. A recent study refers to forty-seven guilds in his honor in Denmark and seven in Sweden. It is a paradox that such a widespread organization had so little impact on devotional life. So far, this question has not been addressed by historians.

The Seals of the Guilds of St. Knud

More seals have survived from the guilds of St. Knud than from any other guilds. In the editions of Grandjean, some thirty seals are registered. To this should be added the seals found in Sweden and Finland, especially the one from the Åland Islands, which has been suggested to originate from Allinge on Bornholm.

Moreover, these seals are exceptional in several ways: (1) They are without exception large seals, almost comparable to royal seals; (2) The saint is depicted with royal attributes; (3) The seals are quite old and come from a period when other guilds not yet had obtained the right to seal documents.

The size of the surviving seals ranges in diameter from 54 mm to 85 mm. Compared with late medieval seals, this is twice or three times the normal size (see below). The largest seal stems from Malmö, the smallest from the small island of Læsø. Many of the seals are known from matrices mostly fabricated in bronze, a few in an iron alloy, and a single one is made of brass, another one of lead. Royal seals from the time before 1340 generally measure between 70 mm and 90 mm. Royal seals are in other words slightly larger, but it should be remembered that half of the guild seals are actually larger than 70 mm. The difference is narrowed by the fact that the majority of the surviving royal seals are wax seals, and seal impressions are by nature a few millimeters larger than matrices. All in all, the seals from the St. Knud’s guilds are almost equal in size to the royal ones.

What is even more important is that the composition of royal seals and guild seals devoted to St. Knud is identical. The shape is round and the inscription runs along the rim. The focal point in the middle depicts, in the one case, a ruling king and, in the other, a ruling saint. Their appearance is much the same. They sit on a throne/bench, they wear a royal
crown, and they both have royal insignia such as an orb or a scepter. Recently the similarities between the two kinds of seals have been used to give a more precise dating to some of the guild seals (figures 9.1 and 9.2). The striking similarity must have been deliberate. The ecclesiastical seal tradition, which was developed in the same period, often showed representations with a similar combination of inscription and a saintly patron, as seen on the seals from the guilds of St. Knud. But the saint appears differently here. In the seal from Roskilde Chapter, St. Lucius, the patron of the cathedral, is encircled by the very buildings he is expected to protect, and which his spirit should fill and enrich (figure 9.3). This represents another understanding of the saint, which could also have been meaningful for the guilds of St. Knud, and which these guilds could have chosen. But they did not. They preferred or were ordered to operate within a strict royal tradition, already established. For later ecclesiastical seals, the main difference from royal seals is found in their shape. Bishops preferred oval seals up to the end of the fourteenth century (figure 9.4).

The exclusive character of the guilds of St. Knud is first and foremost shown by their early legal right to seal documents. This right was, for example, not obtained for the English guilds before the end of the fourteenth century. So far, this element has hardly played any role in the historiography of the Danish guilds, which is regrettable. Historians have thus missed the importance of contemporary discussions on legal rights for guilds. There seems to have been tension surrounding this matter both in Norway and in Denmark in the second half of the thirteenth century. The issue must have been whether or not to allow citizens the right to organize in guilds. At first, kings and bishops tried to ignore this demand, which was finally granted in the beginning of the fourteenth century. The condition seems to have been that guilds must be registered either with the church or, in towns, with the magistrate.

At the same time that the legal basis of guilds in general was being debated, the old guilds of St. Knud flourished as if they belonged to another world. Written statutes exist from the early 1190s in the city of Flensburg, and the seal from the guild in the town in Schleswig is dated to around 1200–1220. In the middle of the century comes the next group of statutes and seals, with eminent examples from Odense on Funen, Store Heddinge on Zealand, and Malmö in Scania. At least eighteen St. Knud’s guilds existed in the year 1256, as already mentioned. However, it is from the second half of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century that the majority of seals stem.
Figure 9.1 The royal seal of King Erik Menved, 1286–1319, wax. *Danske kongelige Sigiller*, Petersen and Thiset, p. 2f. and Plate 19a.

Figure 9.2 The seal of the guild of St. Knud in Aalborg, ca. 1275. *Danske Gilders Segl*, Grandjean, p. 23 and Plate 3a.

Figure 9.3 The seal of the Roskilde Cathedral Chapter cut in walrus tooth, ca. 1100–1150. *Gejstlige Sigiller*, Petersen, p. 18 and Plate XIII, no. 192.

Figure 9.4 The oval seal of Stigotus, bishop of Roskilde, 1277–1280. Inscription: STIGOTUS DEI GRATIA ROSKILDENSIS EPISCOPUS. *Gejstlige Sigiller*, Petersen, p. 15 and Plate X no. 152.
A Shift of Patron

The dispersal of the seals from the guilds of St. Knud over time is not to be neglected. It raises the important question of which saint we meet at the focal point in the middle of the seal: St. Knud the Duke or St. Knud the King? Grandjean evaded the problem in his magisterial edition of seals by consistently designating the saint “the king.” In his introduction he explains that both duke and king are likely candidates; Knud Lavard had acquired a royal title [knes], so it could be he, whereas King Knud IV was a possibility for obvious reasons. Historians have followed Grandjean, or they have accepted the previous reading given by Petersen that the two saints were confused with one another. Only in recent years has the explanation proposed in 1957 by the Swedish historian Salomon Kraft been given due attention.

Kraft pointed to the new political situation in Denmark in the second half of the thirteenth century. Once again, a Danish king had been murdered, this time Erik Plovpenning (r.1241–1250), and once again his descendants tried to have him canonized. However, the success of the past was not repeated this time, probably because of strained relations between the papacy and Denmark. Erik’s brother, Christoffer I, had usurped power in 1252, and he had Erik’s remains translated to Ringsted in 1258. At the same time, he played down the role of Knud Lavard. New guilds dedicated to St. Erik were soon established on Zealand with statutes that we know were copied directly from the guild of St. Knud. Whether they replaced the guilds of St. Knud or whether they existed side by side has yet to be answered fully. However, the situation in the 1250s was different than it had been in 1170. In the late twelfth century, the idea that the promotion of a saint might occur through a guild dedicated to that saint was quite new. Just under a century later, the guilds of St. Knud were well established and enjoyed a life of their own. How did these guilds react to the signals from the king and to the renewed political unrest?

According to Kraft, questions like these were sadly ignored by Weibull and his followers, whom Kraft accuses of a static perception of the Middle Ages. Weibull understood the guilds of St. Knud as state trade organizations and assumed that they had existed unaltered from 1177 on. It may be noted concerning Weibull’s state trade point of view that earlier Danish historians often explained the urban development in the high Middle Ages as a result of initiatives taken by kings. The era 1157–1241 was characterized by a strong centralized regime that did its best to mod-
ernize the old Nordic kingdom and bring in European standards, for example regarding ecclesiastical affairs. During this period, several new towns were also laid out, some with castles, others centered on a central market place. But the urbanization did not stop in 1241; in fact, there may be reason to believe that it even became stronger up to the arrival of the Black Death in 1350. This possibility was neglected by older historians, simply because the period from 1241 to 1340 was characterized as one of political unrest, which did not fit in with their a priori understanding of growth.

If the towns had been tied to the king during the years of centralization, new possibilities now arose in establishing municipalities with councils (råd) and mayors as front figures, while legal rights could be assured in laws inspired by Lübeck (stadsret). It is in these new circumstances that we have to understand the new context for the guilds of St. Knud. What might have started as royal pressure to replace their patron was in fact the beginning of a lasting transformation of the guilds.

Whether the guilds actually increased in number, as the many new seals may indicate, is difficult to say. The new seals, and thus the guilds that are now mentioned for the first time, may, in fact, arise from the policies of Christoffer I. But if the crown was attempting to promote Erik as the new patron—and it is remarkable that eighteen guilds of St. Erik are mentioned in 1266 as eighteen guilds of St. Knud were in 1256—the regime did not have a lasting success. In the long run St. Knud the King became the new patron.

Returning to the guilds seals themselves, it will now be clear that only the two eldest of the many seals from the guilds of St. Knud depict Knud Lavard, while all the rest show King Knud (figure 9.5 and 9.6). This means that the decisive moment occurred in the 1250s, when the conflict over Knud Lavard was at its height. The importance of this is evident. St. Knud the King can no longer be interpreted as a compromise achieved in the end of the conflict; rather, he had been a possibility from the beginning. It would appear that there was uncertainty concerning royal policy on the old St. Knud’s guilds. The seals from the guilds of St. Erik would support such an interpretation. Two seals have survived. The one represents an original interpretation of Erik’s murder in heraldic form; the other is almost an exact copy of the new type of seals for the guilds of St. Knud (figure 9.7 and 9.8). Only the name differed. In other words, the royal policy was not consistent. In the long run, it helped the guilds to evolve in different directions, depending on the specific situations in the individual towns.
Figure 9.5  The seal of the guild of St. Knud in Schleswig, ca. 1200–1220. Inscription: SIGILLVM CONFRATRUM SANCTI KANVTI DVCIS DE SLESWIC. Danske Gilders Segl, Grandjean, p. 10, Fig. 1.

Figure 9.6  The seal of the guild of St. Knud in Odense, ca. 1245. Inscription: SIGILLUM CONVIVARUM OTHENSIUM SANCTI KANUTI DE RINGSTAD. Danske Gilders Segl, Grandjean, p. 27 and Plate 5d.

Figure 9.7  The seal of the guild of St. Erik in Røddinge, ca. 1275. Inscription: S’ CONVIVARUM SANCTI ERICI REGIS IN KALWEHAV. Danske Gilders Segl, Grandjean, p. 20 and Plate 1c.
Guilds of St. Knud and Castles

Another point of departure for evaluating what was at stake is to consider the royal castles. Several new castles were erected during the reigns of Valdemar I, Knud VI, and Valdemar II, from 1157 to 1241. Often the castles seem to have been planned as part of a town. This was the case in Kalundborg, Søborg, Nyborg, and slightly later in Vordingborg. Søborg, however, remained just a castle and no town emerged. Nonetheless, Søborg had a guild of St. Knud like other Danish towns. No statutes have survived from Søborg, only the seal reveals the guild’s existence. A similar situation is found for the locality of Lykkesholm. Where Lykkesholm lay or what exactly it was is not known, but it certainly was not a town with laws of its own. The most likely possibility is that it was a castle. The existence of a seal demonstrates that Lykkesholm also had a guild of St. Knud. This raises the question of why guild and castle appear to be related. An answer might be that the earliest guilds of St. Knud also functioned as a means for the king to retain his rights over towns, exercised through his castles.

If that was the case, it would explain why King Valdemar I could state so openly in his letter from ca. 1177—only a few years after the canonization of his father—that Knud Lavard’s feast was held in all towns of his realm, because the royal castles were indeed directly under his control. The king was also entitled to order that alms and gifts given during the guild drink should be sent to the saint’s shrine in Ringsted, a demand that could otherwise be seen as interfering with the duty to the Church and Christian obligations in general. As for the interpretation of Knud Lavard himself, he might have been what in Byzantium was called a military saint. The concept of the military saint had reached Rus’ in the late eleventh and early twelfth century. This would fit in with the background of Valdemar (the Danish name is derived from the Russian Vladimir), and can likewise explain why so few images of the saint (Knud Lavard) have survived in ordinary churches from the early period: the saint was primarily venerated in the castles.

I am not suggesting that the guilds of St. Knud were mainly castle guilds. That would be a most narrow interpretation. Many hints of trade activity are found in the sources right from the beginning, and it would not serve any purpose to deny it. But what I am suggesting is that in the end of the twelfth century it is difficult to separate religious duties, royal control, town government, and trade considerations from each other. And
very likely the people at that time did not make that intellectual distinction. The elasticity of the guild concept could be of great help in uniting different purposes. The success of the concept relied on its ability to bring people together. Moreover, of course, the goal could differ. The essential point is that the concept of the guild offered a platform through which different groups of people could meet in peace. Based on the statutes that have survived, the guild laws deal mainly with guild gatherings. Important topics include how and when the guild drink should take place, which religious activities were expected to take place, and how members should behave. The right of members to invite their own guests to the guild drink is recorded for the first time in 1256. The way it happens indicates that the guest procedure was well known and that there was nothing new about it. Interestingly, the exclusivity of the St. Knud's guilds is stressed at the same time. New stipulations were added in Odense between ca. 1245 and 1300, stating that no baker could hereafter be a member of the guild. This may indicate that Odense was on its way to allowing more than one guild.

As the process of urbanization continued, the many different functions of the St. Knud's guild were split up. What began as a royal attempt to change the patron of the guild in the 1250s gave the guilds the opportunity to adapt and modernize. In some of the major towns of the duchy of Schleswig, the St. Knud's guild henceforth appeared as “the highest guild” in town, which probably meant that it had some/all responsibility for governing. A similar situation may be seen in Tallinn. The only difference here is that the St. Knud's guild happened to be registered among the lower-ranking guilds. In Danish towns outside the duchy of Schleswig, the exclusivity of the guilds of St. Knud was maintained by regulations in the town laws. These stipulated that in legal cases, members of the guild required only half the number of men to swear themselves free that a non-member would have required. The transformation was accomplished in the end of the fourteenth century, when new guilds, exclusively for merchants, were established. The guilds of St. Knud had become a relic of times past.

Many historians have suggested that the heyday of the guilds of St. Knud is to be found in one action or period. However, this implies that the guilds had only a single function. This approach neglects the guilds' formidable ability to adapt: in the first period the military saint, Knud Lavard, best represented their function; beginning in 1256, St. Knud the King was chosen, because he better expressed the notion of royalty. The
temporary shift to St. Erik as guild patron probably represented a short desperate interregnum; but in the long run, as the guilds turned into social guilds for the upper layers of a town and its hinterland, St. Knud the King was the obvious choice. Most guilds remained wealthy in the later Middle Ages, but some reports of impoverishment are also found. The use of shifting Danish royal saints as guild patrons is indeed exceptional, and makes the guilds of St. Knud different from all later guilds.

New Urban Guilds

The general urbanization led to the establishment of a variety of new guilds. When and how the individual guilds entered the civic scene is difficult to establish precisely, because the sources are scant, but some general points can be made concerning their development. The arrival of the mendicant orders in Denmark in the 1220s and 1230s undoubtedly put a great deal of pressure on the traditional guilds. The Dominican and Franciscan brotherhoods placed an emphasis on Christian obligations that expanded the old guilds’ promise of common burial and yearly commemoration of deceased members. Such new guilds often take the form of confraternities, and from the end of the thirteenth century they occur in wills as recipients of bequests. The confraternities, however, did not reject the institution of the convivium and, in that respect, they may still be regarded as a branch of a broad guild concept.

Some of the early seals from around and shortly after 1300 have adopted the oval form, which indicates an inspiration from the church authorities. The very word confraternitas is actually found on one of the seals from the island of Gotland (figure 9.9). Next to Lübeck and Rostock, Visby was one of the largest cities in northern Europe. Also from Visby comes an oval seal from a guild of St. Lawrence, dated ca. 1300. St. Lawrence seldom appears as a guild patron. One of the few such instances occurs in the will of a canon employed in the Archdiocese of Lund. He left bequests to two sodalicii in Lund: the one dedicated to the Holy Sepulchre, the other one to St. Laurentius. The context indicates a religious guild. The will is not dated, but stems from the years 1361–1375. This supports the interpretation of the oval seal from the St. Lawrence guild in Visby as an indication of the devotional nature of that guild (figure 9.10).

Although town authorities, as they developed, had no interest in granting confraternities the right to use a seal, the church did have such an interest. Bequests and even civic property could be handed over to
Figure 9.9  The seal of the guild of St. Nicholas, Gotland, ca. 1325. Inscription: S' CONFRATERNITATIS SANCTI NICHOLAY IN GOTLANDIA.
_Danske Gilders Segl_, Grandjean, p. 34 and Plate 9f.

Figure 9.10  The seal belonging to the guild of St. Lawrence in Visby, ca. 1300. Inscription: S’ FRATRUM DE CONVIVIO SANCTI LAURENCII.
_Danske Gilders Segl_, Grandjean, p. 31f. and Plate 8c.
the confraternities, especially if their membership included priests who could celebrate masses to benefit the souls of donors. The precise nature of the dispute that took place between the bishop and the guilds in the town of Copenhagen during the 1290s is not known. However, in his attempt to negotiate a compromise, the bishop could have used the conflict as an opportunity to put confraternities on the same footing as traditional guilds. Another opportunity for cooperation between ecclesiastical authorities and the laity arose when members of the clergy gained the right to organize in guilds of their own. Such guilds, known as calendae, are registered in the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein in the beginning of the fourteenth century. They were common all over Denmark in the fifteenth century.

An integral part of the urbanization process was the establishment of craft guilds. Crafts are mentioned as parts of households in the eleventh century and in larger numbers during the twelfth century. How and when they formed their own guilds is disputed, but it seems, roughly speaking, to have happened between 1200 and 1400. One of the earliest craft seals comes from the smiths in the town of Horsens in Jutland (figure 9.11). This seal has very likely borrowed its composition from seals belonging to the guilds of St. Knud. The bronze matrix is round, the inscription is set in a broad rim, and the patron of the craft guild, St. Peter, sits on a throne with a tiara on his head. Apart from keys, papal attributes are rarely depicted together with St. Peter, who is generally shown as a standing apostle. This fact suggests that the depiction in this case was a deliberate choice. For reasons unknown, neither Nyrop nor Grandjean attempted to date the seal. There is little documentation of the circumstances under which this matrix was discovered, at the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, archaeological evidence cannot give any support for the dating of the seal. The inscription is written entirely in capital letters, which usually indicates an early dating, as does the similarity to the seals of the guilds of St. Knud. St. Peter’s rich papal garb may also refer to the ongoing strife between kings and church, which took place from 1245 to 1320. Therefore, an early dating, around 1300, is quite possible. If that is the case, the smiths in Horsens formed the oldest known Danish craft guild.

A few other seals stem from the first half of the fourteenth century. We know nothing about the guilds to which they belonged. Among these is the seal of a guild from the village Färlöv in Scania, dedicated to St. Peter. Here, St. Peter is depicted standing, holding a key as identification. This was most probably a parish guild. Three other seals exist from guilds
that had St. Mary as patron. On these seals, Mary is depicted enthroned, with the Christ Child in her arms, in a pose that echoes the composition of the seals of the guilds of St. Knud. However, thrones are not uncommon in Marian iconography, so the connection to the guilds of St. Knud is not necessarily intended. The towns involved are all coastal (Rønneby, Sølvitsborg, and Køge), the latter planned as a market town in 1288. The seals probably stem from craft guilds or merchant guilds.

The scarce material does not allow us to be too specific in drawing conclusions, but some general trends can be pointed out. It is important to note that the connection between saint and guild was not severed when the old guilds of St. Knud split into smaller units, and new religious confraternities reached Denmark at the end of the thirteenth century. However, a major change can be observed in the saints chosen as guild patrons. Beginning in this period, the universal saints of the Latin Church came to be popular patrons for many different kinds of guilds, while Scandinavian saints, except for St. Olav, no longer led in popularity. Local saints appar-
ently signaled the interference of others, infringing on the freedom the new guilds had won. However, the influence from the guilds of St. Knud was also marked in a more positive way. These large and impressive seals seem to have influenced the composition of the seals of the new guilds. Some oval guild seals, however, also suggest the influence of the church.

Seals and Guild Identity

Historians generally agree that guilds flourished in the late medieval period, and no doubt a notable growth in surviving seals from this period can be observed among the Danish guilds. A count of surviving seals has never been attempted. This may, perhaps, be explained by the difficulty of identifying the craft guilds, many of which survived the Reformation of 1536, and many of whose seals are first recorded after the change of confession. Some of these seals show medieval features, while others do not, and no study has so far tried to separate the one group from the other. Indeed, it would be difficult to do so. This problem probably explains why Grandjean did not attempt to date any of the craft seals.

Overall, late medieval guild seals seem to show an increase in ecclesiastical influence. This probably coincides with the increasing freedom of guilds as institutions from 1250 to 1350, and the struggle of these guilds to distance themselves from the dominant guilds of St. Knud. It is notable that the seals of these newer guilds were much smaller than those of the guilds of St. Knud; moreover, even seals belonging to wealthy merchants’ guilds in the late Middle Ages were only half the size that comparable seals had been in the second half of the fifteenth century. The smaller size of the matrices can be explained by the expansion in the circulation of legal documents, to which the guilds were party. In this new environment, the older, larger seals went out of fashion, and no less importantly, they were far too expensive to use in daily business. Wax was a commodity in short supply.

The main motif on the seals continued to be the patron saints. Saints could be depicted as figures, or replaced by a proxy. Saint’s attributes seem to have been so well known that an attribute by itself could represent a patron saint. This is the case for the seals of the shoemakers’ guilds in Odense and Svendborg (figure 9.12). In addition to the depictions of the saints themselves, new motifs were added, which stressed moments in the lives of holy persons, or aspects of Christian dogma. The use of these motifs was not restricted to the confraternities; they were also popular among guilds with worldly power and purposes. For example, the merchants in
Odense depicted the Holy Trinity on their seal, while the merchants in Aalborg had organized themselves under the protection of Corpus Christi (figure 9.13). Nor were the choices of confraternities and guilds limited to the new iconographical motifs when their seals were cut or pressed; images of well-known saints such as the Virgin Mary or St. Nicholas remained available to them.\(^{67}\) This diversity of imagery is a sign of an established Christian culture. In retrospect, it also underscores the exceptional nature of the guilds of St. Knud. For no other guilds is it possibly to pronounce on their functions by examining their choice of saint alone. The independent choice of patron saint was part of the culture of guilds as free associations.\(^{68}\) In this regard, the only other saint similar to St. Knud is St. Gertrud. Her guilds were often related to travel, and provided accommodation to foreigners.\(^{69}\) So far they have not been examined in Scandinavia.

Interestingly, craft guilds showed a tendency to depict their patron saint with attributes of the craft they practiced. This is the case for

Figure 9.12 The seal of the shoemakers in Svendborg. The pilgrim’s scallop, the attribute of St. James. Camillus Nyrop, “For og imod Odense. En Lavskamp,” *Tidsskrift for Industri*, 1902, p. 47.

Figure 9.13 The seal of the merchant guild in Odense, dedicated to the Holy Trinity, 1476. *Danske Gilders Segl*, Grandjean, p. 35 and Plate 10d.

Figure 9.14 The seal of the shoemakers in Visby, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, 1476. *Danske Haandwerkerlaus Segl*, Grandjean, p. 75 and Plate 31a.
St. Eligius, whom many goldsmiths or smiths of other kinds had as guild patron. On fifteenth-century seals, he is given a hammer and tongs, as if to stress that he could help smiths of all kinds, not only the goldsmiths who shared his craft. But it did not stop there. Even saints with no particular connection to a specific craft were shown on the seals with workmen’s tools. The tailors in Roskilde had St. Paul as a patron, and next to his sword and holy book in their seal is a pair of scissors. Even the Virgin Mary, crowned and holding the Christ Child in her arms, was depicted with the addition of two knives on the seal belonging to the shoemakers’ guild in Visby, on the island of Gotland (figure 9.14).

Although some ordinary smiths appear to have distrusted St. Eligius, the same can hardly be said of the Virgin Mary. She was the most popular of all saints, yet a workman’s tool was nonetheless added to her image. To explain this, we will have to touch upon two different topics: legal interests and guild identity.

In large towns such as Visby, the shoemakers were not the only ones who had chosen the Virgin Mary as their patron. At least one other guild was dedicated to her, though we do not know that guild’s function. A similar situation could be seen in other towns. In Stockholm and Odense, two and three guilds respectively were dedicated to St. Mary, and in Flensburg in the duchy of Schleswig, where we are particularly well informed about the guilds, no fewer than five guilds had Mary as their patron in one way or another. The counting is hampered by the fact that the sources often simply refer to the guilds by their trade, with no information provided about the patron saint of the guild. Thus, coincidences of identical patrons might be even more common than we are able to show.

Seen from a legal point of view, two guilds with the same name had to have different seals. We know nothing about the rules of governing how guilds with identical names avoided identical seals. Generally speaking, town authorities tried to keep administration simple and as each guild had an interest in not being mistaken for another guild, one might guess that the responsibility to avoid confusion was theirs. One way to avoid confusion could be to add some characteristic of the specific guild to the depiction of the patron on the seal. In that respect, depicting workmen’s tools alongside the guild patron was a splendid solution, not least because it would touch upon the guild’s identity.

Like the confraternities, the craft guilds inherited the convivium from earlier guilds. On the occasion of the yearly feast (the guild drink),
the patron saint was venerated and deceased members of the guild were commemorated. This function was vital for all the different guilds that merged between 1250 and 1400. One might interpret the continuation of depictions of saints in the center of the seal as a reference to the importance of the *convivium*, the inherited guild identity, one may say. On the other hand, no guild identity can in the long run refer only to the past as its raison d'être. Somehow it has to incorporate daily routines and activities as well.

The depiction of workmen’s tools on seals occurred gradually. They might be compared to what in liturgy is called *adiaphoron* or in the plural *adiaphora*, meaning “indifferent things.” But in fact they were very important as recognizable signs. Heraldry is by nature conservative and sticks to old established forms longer than most media. In that sense, it resembles liturgy. Thus, even small alterations on the seal might signal that something essential was being expressed.

Support for this interpretation might be found in the fact that once the workmen’s tools had found their way into the seals they remained there, and their use expanded. Like children they grew up and replaced their mother and father, and within a few generations saints simply disappeared from the seals. This does not mean that all seals were changed in a steady stream, because in general most guilds retained their old seal if it was not corrupted or broken. But if guilds were caught in a situation where they had to invest in a new seal, they tended to prefer the new heraldry with workmen’s tools to the old one with a patron saint.

The sources do not allow us to follow the process in detail. The seals referred to above, which combined a patron saint with workmen’s tools, belonged to the fifteenth century, probably the second half of it. If we turn to the beginning of the sixteenth century, an interesting diploma from Copenhagen has been preserved. In 1525, several craft guilds in the town authorized the mayors (Copenhagen had four mayors) to sell a plot of land within the town to the king, so the town could be better fortified. Quite a few of the craft guild seals appended to the document have survived, including those of the bakers, the furriers, the harness makers, the shoemakers, the tailors, and the butchers (figures 9.15–9.18). Of these seals, only that of the shoemakers remains loyal to their patron saints, St. Crispinus and St. Crispianus, and depicts them. All of the other guilds had in fact turned their backs on their patrons in favor of the everyday tools of their particular crafts. Is it too daring a statement to say that they finally had freed themselves from the guild patrons and found their own identity?

Figure 9.18 The sealed letter from February 17, 1525. Photo: Courtesy of Københavns Stadsarkiv.
Conclusions

The old Protestant skepticism toward saints has long since been abandoned, but in specialized fields such as the study of guilds, an unspoken heritage seems to have lived on in the assumption that saints were viewed as empty or vestigial symbols. However, the saints’ roles varied from century to century, and it is precisely by focusing on their role as patrons that we can identify some specific features of the guilds of St. Knud in the first century of their existence.

The saints played quite a different role, an equally instructive one, for the many guilds in the competitive environment of late medieval towns. Images of saints were ubiquitous, and as a consequence, seal communication without saints offered an attractive alternative. This raises the interesting question of whether it is possible to detect some skepticism toward saints at the eve of Reformation. But that is quite another matter and demands an investigation of its own.

NOTES

1 André Vauchez, La Sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Âge (Rome 1988).
4 Camillus Nyrop was the great compiler of Danish craft guild seals, but he published them separately in different journals and magazines. Half a century later, Poul Bredo Grandjean edited two large series, Danske Gilders Segl fra Middealderen (København, 1948), and Danske Håndwerkerlavs Segl (København, 1950). Nyrop and Grandjean sometimes differ concerning the individual seals.
5 Danish examples include Ole Worm during the seventeenth century, Jakob Langebek in the eighteenth, and Bishop Münter in the nineteenth. There is similar case in Finland, kindly told to me by Tuomas Lehtonen. In the nineteenth century a professor of church history, Wilhelm Lagus, stole a great number of seals from the National Archives of Finland, where they are now designated “the Lagus collection.”
7 Danske Haandwerkerlavs Segl, preface.
8 For a survey, see Bisgaard, De glemte altre, pp. 19–23.

The literature is immense. Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Tore Nyberg and Niels Oxenvad, eds., Knudsbogen: Studier over Knud den Hellige (Odense, 1986) is a good starting point.


Mortensen, Sanctified Beginnings.


Diplomatarium Danicum, 1 Series, 3. vol. (Copenhagen 1977), no. 63, pp. 92–95.


26 The Malmö seal is represented by a drawing in Grandjean’s *Danske Gilders Segl* (Plate 5a), but he later became aware of an existing one in wax, which he reproduced among the seals from craft guilds in *Danske Haandverkerlavs Segl*, Plate 34g.
27 *Danske Gilders Segl, the town of Hobro* (Plate 3c). The seal of lead is now lost. Ibid., p. 20.
28 *Danske kongelige Sigiller samt sønderjyske Hertugers og andre til Danmark knyttede Fyrsters Sigiller 1085–1559*, Henry Petersen and A. Thiset, eds., (Copenhagen, 1917), Plate 1a–35. The edition reproduces the seals 1:1, but gives no information about measurement, material etc. The measurements are mine.
29 Falsterbo, Kolding, Landskrona, Malmö, Nyborg, Odense no 2, Randers, Ribe, Slagelse, Stege, Tommarp, Vordingborg and two unidentified. *Danske Gilders Segl*, and *Danske Haandverkerlavs Segl*.
32 Ibid., p. VI.
34 Christoph Anz, “Gildernes form og funksjon i middelalderens Skandinavia,” in *Gilder, lav og broderskaber i middelalderens Danmark*, ed. Lars

35 *Danske Gilders Segl*, Fig. 3a–8a.


40 The only modern historian I know of who has argued for guilds dedicated to St. Knud the King in the period 1101–1170 is Erik Wiberg, *Sankt Knuts gille i Ystad* (Ystad, 1937).


43 Hybel and Poulsen, *The Danish Resources*, p. 228, Table 4. Sixty-three out of 114 towns founded between 1000 and 1550 belong to the period 1200–1350.

44 *Danmarks Gilde- og Lavskraaer*, p. 66, § 41. See also the editor’s comments on pp. 57f.

45 In the new heraldry of St. Knud the King, his scepter ends in a lily, almost a fleur-de-lis. This was later attributed to the town of Odense, where King Knud was buried and his shrine worshipped, where the lily was added to the city’s coat of arms. For a different interpretation, see Henry Petersen, “En Altertavle som Mindesmærke om Biskop Jens Andersen Bældenak,” *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndiged* (1889), p. 91. See also Niels G. Bartholdy, “Sankt Knud Konge og Odense-liljen,” in *Knudsbogen*, ed. Bekker-Nielsen, pp. 93–99.

46 In 1969 a seal from the castle town of Stege was found, see Fritze Lindahl, “To middelalderlige seglstamper fra Stege,” *Nationalmuseets Arbejdsmark*, 1969, 107–19.

47 Monica White, “Byzantine Saints in Rus’ and the Cult of Boris and Gleb,” in *Saints and Their Lives on the Periphery. Veneration of Saints in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe (c.1000–1200)*, ed. Haki Antonsson and Ildar H. Garipzanov (Turnhout, 2010), p. 101 and pp.105ff. Valdemar was married to Sophia of Novgorod. He was named after his mother’s grandfather, grand duke Vladimir.


49 Ibid., 1:86.
54 This can be shown for the town of Kalundborg from which a list of guild members has survived. Lars Bisgaard, “Skt. Knuds gildet og andre gilder i Holbæk og Kalundborg,” in Fra Nordvestsjælland 2011, ed. Nils Wickman (Kalundborg, 2012), pp. 85–105.
56 “Convivium caritatis”. Bisgaard, De glemte altre, p. 268.
57 Ibid., pp. 24–29.
58 Danske Gilders Segl, p. 34 and Plate 9f. Inscription: S’ CONFRATERNITAS SANCTI NICHLAY IN GOTLANDIA.
61 Hybel and Poulsen, The Danish reources, p. 264.
62 Danske Haandverkerlavs Segl, p. 60 and Plate 22l.
63 Danske Gilders Segl, p. 35 and Plate 10a.
64 The new study by Haugland has considerably augmented the sheer numbers of late medieval guilds in Scandinavia.
65 Two have survived from the merchants in Odense. The diameter is 36mm. Danske Gilders Segl, p. 35 and Plate 10c and d.
66 Danske Haandverkerlavs Segl, p. 50, 52, Plate 17a and 17n.
67 Danske Gilders Segl, p. 33f. and Plate 9a and 9e.
68 Anz, Gilden im mittelalterlichen Skandinavien very strongly stresses guilds as free associations.
69 Danske Gilders Segl, p. 20f. and Plate 1e and 10e.
70 Danske Haandverkerlavs Segl, p. 60, 62 and Plate 22o and 23h. That is the goldsmiths in Copenhagen and the smiths in Næstved.
71 Danske Haandverkerlavs Segl, p. 56 and Plate 20k. Inscription: sigillum convivii sartorum roskildis.
72 Danske Haandverkerlavs Segl, p. 75 and Plate 31a. This seal and the seal from the Copenhagen shoemakers, dated 1483, are the only craft seals with a year of production inscribed. Ibid., Grandjean, p. 49 and Plate 16a
73 Bisgaard, *De glemte altre*, Plate 4.
74 Haugland, *Fellesskap og brorskap*, p. 400.