

# Danish Medieval furniture – regional or international?

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It was in the later Middle Ages (in Scandinavia the Middle Ages is defined as the period c. 1050–1550) that furniture came to play an important role in everyday life in Denmark. Moveable furniture – *møbler* in Danish, cf. German *Möbel* and French *meubles*, ultimately from Latin *mobilia*: something moveable – came to dominate living rooms, at least in towns, where they seem to have been arranged according to the standards used in more southern parts of Europe – in Flanders, for example. It also seems that the furniture itself in almost all respects reflects the types, constructions and decoration fashions known there – that it reflects a common European life-style.

The only local (Scandinavian) element, which has so far been convincingly diagnosed on medieval furniture in Denmark, relates to beds: a round extension to the top of the head-posts, and this observation is mainly based on pictorial evidence (Haastrup, forthcoming). Beds were status symbols and display objects, and this particular element would appear to have ancient roots: related forms are seen on some of the 9th and early 10th century beds from the Oseberg and Gokstad burials in southern Norway, where the extensions are shaped as rounded animals' heads.

The generally international character of Danish medieval furniture (as we know it) does, however, contrast with some of the Medieval furniture from Norway and Sweden (Anker 1968; Karlsson 1928) – in 1968 altogether c. 120 pieces were known from Norway (Anker 1968, 8). Some furniture in both countries are decorated in distinctive ancient styles reminding us of late versions of Viking Age animal styles or the Romanesque style. Other furniture is dated to the 12th or 13th century on

the basis of construction. In Denmark we know not a single piece with carved decoration in, or reminding of Romanesque or older art styles, and no preserved furniture other than fragments seems to be older than the 14th century.

This distinction between the preserved medieval furniture from Denmark on one side and Norway-Sweden on the other side raises several questions, of which some will be discussed below. In all three countries the vast majority of the preserved furniture comes from churches, and the time of production can never be established by means of written sources, while dating by dendrochronology has not been tried; all are dated by the style of decorative carvings or iron mounts (including lock-plates) and/or by the type of construction used.

## Furniture in Denmark

There is no comprehensive survey of medieval furniture from Denmark, and the quantity of preserved pieces is unknown but surely moderate (general surveys, see Jensen 1911; Liebgott 1975; Roesdahl 1999, 99–106; compare Windisch-Graetz 1982, *passim*). Written sources (particularly from the late Middle Ages) and pictorial evidence (particularly from late medieval murals) add considerably to our knowledge of what is lost, while furniture preserved in other countries (Falke 1924; Eames 1977; Windisch-Graetz 1982) also help us understand the preserved pieces. Information on how furniture may actually have been arranged within a Danish house comes mainly from excavated houses, which sometimes provide information on room divisions, entrances,

heating technique, built-in benches etc., or from rooms in late medieval brick-built houses, and also from late medieval written inventories, as compared to late medieval paintings from Flanders and elsewhere.

Elaborate pieces of furniture were known already in the Bronze Age: fine stools found in burials (Jensen 2002, 266–269). From the Viking Age – the period c. 800–1050 – there are remains of (partly quite simple) stools, chests, a shelf, chairs including a child’s chair (and some miniature chair models), and a small table. Most of this comes from pagan graves (Roesdahl 1982, 114–19; Roesdahl/Wilson (ed.) 1992, cat. no. 562 and passim). Furniture from medieval times has mainly been preserved in churches (*Danmarks Kirker* 1933 ff., passim), and much of it is still there, though some has been transferred to museums. In recent years a small but steadily growing number of furniture fragments (other than iron mounts) have appeared from excavations. The material consists of mainly iron bound or carved chests and cupboards; these are known from churches, chests also from excavations. Stools and chairs are known only from excavations, which have provided a few examples (all fragments, including a child’s pot-stool) and also the gable of a cradle and a possible table fragment. A single bench has survived in a church. It seems that the oldest chests from churches are of 14th century date, while all cupboards and the bench are from the 15th century or later. For reasons mentioned above, all dates of furniture from churches are tentative. But there can be no doubt that the vast majority of chests and cupboards from churches were of the same types as those used in se-cular contexts.

The spread of international furniture fashions into Denmark (and other European regions) undoubtedly followed the normal cultural patterns of the period, such as trade, travels, gifts, dowries, etc., and in the latest part of the period printed furniture designs accelerated the process (Jervis 1974).

The main reason why early medieval (12th – 13th century) furniture is known from Norway and Sweden and not from Denmark is surely that ‘old’ Danish pieces have been substituted with new ones to a larger extent than there – as late as in the 1980s discarded medieval furniture has been identified on church lofts. The reason why this did not happen to the same extent in Norway and Sweden is probably partly economic, but there may also be certain elements of conservatism involved, perhaps linked to nationalism. Besides, some of the ‘medieval’ furniture in Norway and Sweden are possibly revivals of ancient types (cf. Anker 1968, 17 and passim). This was certainly the case with two well-dated, well-provenanced and quite elaborate mid-16th century chairs from Iceland: with regard to construction, shape and decoration they have close affinities to Romanesque chairs (Karlsson 1928, 21 and Pl. V; Liebgott 1975, 5). The question of such early ‘revival furniture’ – in Scandinavia and elsewhere – can now (often) be solved by exact dating through dendrochronology. But a series of such exact furniture dates is also necessary if we wish to construct normal typological series of European medieval furniture and to obtain a better understanding (from an archaeological point-of-view) of the various furniture types and how this important cultural phenomenon spread.

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