

Pious gifts in medieval Stockholm in the context of Baltic towns, c. 1315–1530

At the end of the Middle Ages Stockholm was the undoubted political center of the Kingdom of Sweden and an important trading node for Hanseatic merchants operating in the Baltic region, despite the fact that it was not a metropolis that could rival the large cities of Western Europe. In the late Middle Ages, Stockholm also became a vibrant center of religious life. Although not an episcopal see, Stockholm offered its burghers many places of worship in their town, including the Parish Church of St. Nicholas, three monasteries, several chapels and charitable ecclesiastical institutions.

An important expression of piety in the medieval Christian world was the giving of donations to churches, monasteries, the poor and the sick. Donations were meant not only to support their recipients financially, but also to provide donors with intercessory prayers offered in return as an expression of gratitude. Pious gifts in the Middle Ages could take the form of simple, one-time donations (for example, a sum of money or goods donated to a given church) or more complex and long lasting “foundations”. Foundations were endowments of property or incomes granted by “founders” in exchange for perpetual prayers for the salvation of the founder’s soul. This was felt to be crucial in view of the perceived need to reduce one’s time in Purgatory by ensuring that prayers of commemoration (often referred to by the Latin term *memoria*) continued beyond one’s death.

In the late Middle Ages, practices connected with the commemoration of the deceased and pious gifts were adopted not only by monarchs, aristocrats and ecclesiastical officials, but also by town dwellers. Based on the information contained in surviving historical sources, it is clear that Stockholm burghers frequently donated to ecclesiastical institutions and the needy. However, it remains unknown to what extent these pious gifts in Stockholm were typical of the Baltic region, and to what extent they reflected the local and unique character in the town. The main goal of this research project is to answer these questions.

On the basis of substantial but previously unexplored medieval sources, an analysis of gifts donated for pious purposes in Stockholm will be carried out. The findings will broaden our current knowledge of religious life in the Baltic region in past centuries. Moreover, the project will make a pioneering comparative analysis of the Stockholm data, putting it in the context of the towns of the Baltic region. The Stockholm data will be compared with the results of parallel research on gifts and foundations in north German, Prussian and Livonian towns. This broad-based comparative perspective will allow the identification and analysis of both common and unique practices that characterized religious and social life in Stockholm. It will make manifest the impact of, on the one hand, universal Christian ideas and practices, and supra-regional trends, and on the other hand, local factors, laws and customs, that shaped pious giving in Stockholm. The results of the research project, presented in a comprehensive and analytical way, will lay the groundwork for the development of future comparative research in this field of study.

It must be emphasized that the research questions included in the scope of the project are not limited to religious issues. The study of pious gifts also encourages reflection on, among other things, social relations in medieval Stockholm, contacts between Stockholm burghers and residents of other Baltic (Hanseatic) towns, and issues of authority, prestige and social promotion. Key research questions asked by the project will address these diverse points, and then synthesize the results in order to develop a deep understanding of the pious practices of Stockholm burghers in situ within the narrow-to-broad context of the local society, town and region within which they dwelled. The chronological framework of the project includes the period from the first known pious donation made by a Stockholm burgher, recorded in an historical source of the early fourteenth century, to the triumph of the Protestant Reformation in the Kingdom of Sweden, which in the early sixteenth century brought significant changes to religious life and the practice of giving pious gifts.

The implementation of the project will marry novel comparative and whole-society approaches with the advance of a few well-established research trends. These include historical research into the commemoration of the deceased (*memoria*), especially in the Middle Ages, interdisciplinary studies on foundations that appeared in different cultures through subsequent historical epochs, as well as the investigation on the concept of gift exchange and reciprocity (e.g. a prayer understood as a gift), popular among cultural anthropologists. The use of these diverse and recent methodologies will enable the project to discard – with critical self-awareness – some outdated assumptions and theories (e.g. treating a foundation as a one-time legal act). Advancing the field of study, it will shed a new light on pious gifts in medieval Stockholm and the Baltic region.