

Lost St Swithun reliquary found in Stavanger Cathedral

In 1539, Henry VIII's commissioners pulled down the reliquary of St Swithun in the Cathedral's retroquire, stripping its silver and dispersing its relics. It had only been in existence since 1476, in succession to the reliquary, a container for holy relics, which had been placed in the feretory soon after Swithun's relics were translated from the Old Minster in 1093.

The fate of Swithun's relics has been called "uncertain" but they have not been found in the near-five centuries since 1539. At a similar time, reformers in other parts of Western Europe, notably Scandinavia, had been removing icons and relics from Catholic churches and destroying them.

In 1517, on St Swithun's Day, the last Catholic bishop of Stavanger in Norway, Hoskuld, conducted an audit of his cathedral's relics in the presence of witnesses. Most notably, the list contained a reliquary containing the fragment of an arm bone of the city's patron saint, St Swithun of Winchester.

At a date soon after, it was believed that this reliquary, along with other relics and precious items, was sent to Denmark and melted down during an early phase of the Reformation.

In May, according to a statement from the University of Stavanger, archaeologists from its Museum of Archaeology, announced that they may have found the remains of Swithun's Norwegian reliquary in the cellar at the base of Stavanger Cathedral's north tower.¹ This cellar was beneath the cathedral's sacristy.

The find comprises a gilded copper panel measuring 5cm x 10cm (2in x 4in). It has small nail holes along the edges which indicate that it may have been attached to a larger wooden object. Also found were a gilded silver medallion decorated with an animal motif and bearing similar nail holes and several decorative glass ornaments. (See Photo 1)

An X-ray examination of the copper panel showed a church building with a tower and roof, columns and windows. The archaeologists have attributed these finds to the reliquary of St Swithun.

¹ News release, "Cathedral lost treasures recovered", University of Stavanger, 23 May 2024, <https://partner.sciencenorway.no/archaeology-cathedral-university-of-stavanger/cathedrals-lost-treasures-uncovered/2368484>



Photo 1 – The University of Stavanger archaeologists link these findings to St. Swithun's reliquary – The gilded copper panel (R), silver medallion (lower L) and glass ornaments (upper L)

The St Swithun relic would have been placed on the cathedral's high altar. Stavanger senior researcher, Margareth Hana Buer, said the arm bone was valuable and "would have been carefully wrapped in beautiful cloth and then placed in a gold casket with precious stones in beautiful colours."²

These findings may indicate that some of the cathedral's treasures were hidden in the cellar to save them from destruction. The idea that Stavanger cathedral was robbed of its high value liturgical items and sent to Denmark "is probably based on an analogy to such events happening elsewhere at the time," says Ms Buer. "Clearly, this view needs to be reconsidered."³

² *Ibid*, p. 2.

³ Margareth Hana Buer, Notes on the medieval framework of the shrine, the cult of St Swithun, and the Winchester-Stavanger connection.



Photo 2 - The west end of Stavanger Cathedral in Norway

The now-Lutheran cathedral in Stavanger is a 'partner in mission' of Winchester Cathedral and there is continuing contact. (Photo 2) The link between Winchester and Scandinavia goes back to the early medieval period when missionaries came from Wessex, particularly Winchester and associated houses, to bring the good news to people who are often referred to as Vikings.

Eventually, a see was established at Stavanger in the mid-late 1120s by a Bishop Rainald (or Reinald). It was dedicated to St Swithun and known to have possessed a relic of the Winchester saint. It is accepted widely that Rainald was from Winchester and brought the arm bone relic with him. Michael Lapidge notes that a Rainaldus was listed as a lay brother (*conuersus*) at Hyde Abbey at the time of Abbot Osbert (1124-35) and implies that he may have been the missionary bishop named Rainald.⁴

Another connection between Winchester and Stavanger has been identified in a twelfth century rhymed office (prayer) which links the two cathedral cities. It is preserved in a

⁴ Michael Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, Oxford 2003, p. 56, n. 198.

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printed breviary, dated to 1516, from Nidaros (modern Trondheim), where Swithun was also culted. Lapidge contends that it was written for use in Stavanger but most likely composed in Winchester. Translated from Latin, the antiphon (a short verse sung before or after a psalm, canticle or hymn) for the First Vespers reads:

Rejoice, people of Winchester, be joyful, people of Stavanger, since the revolutions of the sun bring back the feast-day of our patron saint, called Swithun by name, mighty in faith and deed; through the merits of his good life he ascended to the heavenly realms.⁵

The archaeologists' find came by chance. The first object recovered was a 700-year-old ivory figurine of Melchior, one of the Three Wise Men, which was found in 2023. As well, an ivory figurine representing the Virgin Mary was also unearthed. These carvings are of very high quality, with traces of paint and gilding. They date to the fourteenth century and were likely created in England or France. Also found was a carving of Jesus' foot from a crucifix. (Photo 3)

Visitors will be able to see these treasures and other items in the Museum which celebrates the cathedral's 900th anniversary in 2025.

The archaeologists have also provided background notes (see below) about the archaeological contexts of a find that archaeologist Dr Sean Denham calls, "a sensation for the cathedral and the city."⁶ He added: "In terms of quantity and significance, the finds in the basement have exceeded all expectations and reflect more than 1,000 years of Stavanger's history. They demonstrate the cathedral's and city's clerical wealth and contact with Rome in a way not previously seen in the archaeological material."⁷



Photo 3 – Ivory figurines – Melchior (L), Virgin Mary (R) and Christ's foot from a crucifix (Lower R)

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128

⁶ News release, p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

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The archaeological context of the finds

Dr Sean Denham

- In association with the ongoing restoration work on Stavanger Cathedral, I was asked to sort through the material in the cellar of cathedral's north tower (beneath the sacristy) to see if there might be anything of historical or archaeological significance. This cellar has been used for various purposes over the centuries, most recently storage.
- Most of the material related to activity in the first half of the 20th century. But at the very last minute a fourteenth century ivory figurine depicting Melchior (likely carved in France or England) was recovered. The figurine originally belonged to a portable altarpiece depicting various New Testament scenes. This caused somewhat of a sensation as there are no known parallels in Norway, perhaps even in Scandinavia.
- This find provided the opportunity to undertake a more thorough investigation of the cellar. The room is small, 13-14 m², and although it appears to have had both stone and wood flooring at various points, the current surface was a mixture of soil/sand and stone to a depth of up to 30cm (apart from the burial chamber, which was cut deeper into the ground).
- This upper surface contained all the finds recovered. Unfortunately, the layer was heavily mixed, meaning the artefacts from various periods were found jumbled together, and making it extremely difficult to identify the various phases of activity in the cellar.
- The amazing thing for me, as an archaeologist, is seeing artefacts representing the entirety of Stavanger's history, from its origins in the Late Viking Period straight through into the Modern Period, in this incredibly confined area.
- The main copper panel that we associate with the reliquary was found redeposited in the burial chamber, while the other pieces were recovered from the surrounding surface layer.
- The more elaborate finds seem to cluster in date around the 13th/14th centuries (in the case of the papal seal we know the exact dates of Boniface VIII's reign, 1294-1303) and may perhaps be associated with a rededication of the cathedral after the Gothic update/extension of the choir ca. 1300 AD.

The shrine and cult of St Swithun, and the Winchester –Stavanger connection.

Margareth Hana Buer

- The idea that the cathedral in Stavanger was robbed of all its high value liturgical items at the Reformation and sent to the king of Denmark is probably based on analogy to such events happening elsewhere at that time. This may have been a reasonable assumption until now, but clearly, this view needs to be reconsidered.
- The engravings on the panel are Gothic in style which probably means that the arm bone relic of St Swithun was translated to a new reliquary as part of the reconsecration of the

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cathedral/new choir after a fire in 1272. The style of the new reliquary, placed on the high altar of the rebuilt choir, would have reflected the grand gothic architecture of the new cathedral choir.

- The Swithun reliquary – the most precious item in the cathedral's possession and would have been an elaborately adorned relic casket with similar panels covering the entire wooden box, shimmering in gold, silver, and jewels. Such a high-quality reliquary would certainly not hold any other relic than that of the cathedral's patron saint.
- The Wessex – Norway connection had been an ongoing royal relationship for at least 400 years by the time the new Gothic reliquary was installed on the high altar (in 1272/after the fire). By the time of the cathedral's foundation in c. 1125 this relationship was not only focusing on royal and strategic alliances, but also on trade between Wessex and the west coast of Norway. A natural way to expand this already encompassing relationship was to develop the ecclesiastical bonds between the two ancient kingdoms by dedicating the new cathedral in Stavanger to the saint of Wessex and placing an English bishop at the Seat.
- The cult of St Swithun became popular in Norway but did by no means surpass the cult of St Olaf, the king and saint. Although St Swithun's popularity may have been somewhat confined to south-western Norway his cult was indeed considered of high importance and both the *Natale* and *Translatio* were celebrated in Mass throughout the Nidaros Church province. Without any doubt the sequence *Psallat Ecclesia* would have been sung in Stavanger, echoing the shrine in Winchester.

Photographs

Photo 1: The University of Stavanger archaeologists link these findings to St. Swithun's reliquary – The gilded copper panel, silver medallion and glass ornaments. (Photo: Annette Øvrelid / Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger)

Photo 2: The west end of Stavanger Cathedral (Helge Høifødt, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

Photo 3: Stavanger ivory figurines – Melchior (left), Virgin Mary (right) Christ's foot (lower right). (Photo: Annette Øvrelid / Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger)