

# Interpreting an anomaly: the encounter of Olga Alice Nygren and Carl Axel Nordman with the crowned Saint Anne<sup>1</sup>

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*Saint Anne, beloved mother  
Spin me a thread of red  
stretch me a thread of blue  
with an iron spinning wheel,  
between two rocks with a brass spindle  
in a hollow below three hills.*

Incantation for Sprains<sup>2</sup>

The first doctoral dissertation within the discipline of art history in Finland was in 1878 and concerned late medieval polyptychs in central European collections.<sup>3</sup> Three decades later Karl Konrad Meinander (1872–1933) defended his doctoral thesis which, in turn, highlighted medieval wood sculptures and altarpieces in Finland.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of the previously published article: Elina Räsänen, 'Reviewing the Research on Medieval Wood Sculptures: The Encounter of Olga Alice Nygren and Carl Axel Nordman with the Crowned Saint Anne', Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, ed., *The Shaping of Art History in Finland*, (Taidehistoriallisia tutkimuksia–Konsthistoriska studier [TT] 36), Helsinki: Taidehistorian seura, 2007, 214–227. I am thoroughly grateful for the editors and acknowledge the privilege of the opportunity to revise my earlier formulations and update the research. Warm thanks are directed also to my former colleague Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, editor of the original publication, for her long-time support.

<sup>2</sup> 'Santta Anni, armas muori / kehrää mulle punainen lanka / sinilanka siuvuttele / rautaisella rukkilalla / kahen kallion välissä vaskisella värttinällä / kolmen vuoren konkelossa.' A part of traditional chant, "Incantation for Sprains" (Niukahduksen luku), documented in 1890. Translation Leila Virtanen. *Suomen kansan vanhat runot [SKVR] VI,2: Savo*. Helsinki 1936, no 4592. Accessed also by the online SKVR database [<https://skvr.fi/>].

<sup>3</sup> Eliel Aspelin, *Siipialttarit. Tutkimus keskiajan taiteen alalla*, Helsinki, 1878. On Aspelin and his scholarship, see Hanne Selkokari, *Kalleuksia isänmaalle. Eliel Aspelin-Haapkylä taiteen keräilijänä ja taidehistorioitsijana*, (Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja–Finska Fornminnesföreningens Tidskrift [SMYA] 115), Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Konrad Meinander, *Medeltida altarskåp och träsniderier i Finland*, (Finska Fornminnesföreningens Tidskrift XXIV:2), Helsingfors: Finska Fornminnesföreningen, 1908. On the discipline of art history in Finland, see Sixten Ringbom, *Art History in Finland before 1920*, (The History of Learning and Science in Finland 1828–1918, 15 b), Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1986; Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, ed., *The Shaping of Art History in Finland*, (TT 36), Helsinki: Taidehistorian seura, 2007; Dan Karlholm, Hans Dam Christensen

This article concentrates on two researchers, working mainly in the middle of the twentieth century, and their interpretations of one rather exceptional, late-medieval polychrome wood sculpture. The leading personages here are Carl Axel Nordman (1892–1972) and Olga Alice Nygren (1898–1981). The former was a distinguished scholar and State Antiquarian, whereas the latter was a relatively unnoticed art historian and remains so.<sup>5</sup>

Although the approach of this article is historiographical, at its core is a work of art. My initial inspiration for this derives from the scholarship of art historian Michael Ann Holly, who has theorized how it is possible to detect reciprocity ‘between the visual rhetoric of the image and the rhetorical and textual strategies of its interpreters’.<sup>6</sup> The work of art in my case represents an iconographical motif of St Anne with the Virgin and Child, i.e. *Anna Selbdritt*.<sup>7</sup> The

and Matthew Rampley, ‘Art History in the Nordic Countries’, *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe. Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, ed. Matthew Rampley et al., (Brill’s Studies on Art, Art History, and Intellectual History 4), Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012, 423–427.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Fredrik Meinander, *Carl Axel Nordman*, (Skrifter utgivna av Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland 569, Levnadsteckningar 11), Helsingfors: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, 1991. Nordman’s biography was published by the Swedish Literature Society in Finland, in which Nordman was a prominent figure; he was a member of its Board of Directors for forty years, and at different times he held the posts of secretary, vice-chairman and chairman of the Society. Nygren’s bibliography has not been gathered, but some information, connected to her activities in Roman Catholic circles, is found in Kalevi Vuorela, *Finlandia Catholica. Katolinen kirkko Suomessa 1700-luvulta 1980-luvulle*, Helsinki: Studium Catholicum, 1989. The study which goes beyond simply mentioning Nygren’s work in a footnote is by Helena Edgren, *Mercy and Justice. Miracles of Virgin Mary in Finnish Medieval Wall-Paintings*, (SMYA 100), Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys, 1993, 84–85. Edgren characterises Nygren as a significant pioneer in the study of Marian paintings, but due to the focus of her study, she covers only a small section of Nygren’s scholarship, that is, the interpretations of wall-paintings in the parish churches of Hattula and Lohja.

<sup>6</sup> Holly examined Erwin Panofsky’s agenda through a canonical Early Netherlandish painting. See Michael Ann Holly, ‘Witnessing an Annunciation’, *Past Looking. Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1996, 149–169; esp. 151.

<sup>7</sup> The visual representations of Saint Anne with the Virgin and Child motif are in the research literature on the English language occasionally called by its German name *Anna Selbdritt* or anachronistically, but in accordance with other languages, Saint Anne Trinity/Trinitarian. A number of contributions on the various aspects of the cult and imagery of St Anne have appeared during the last few decades; these include: Virginia Nixon, *Mary’s Mother. Saint Anne in Late Medieval Europe*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2004; Marlies Buchholz, *Anna selbdritt. Bilder einer wirkungsmächtigen Heiligen*, Königstein: Die blauen Bücher, 2005; Elina Räsänen, *Ruumiillinen esine, materiaallinen suku. Tutkimus Pyhä Anna itse kolmantena -aiheisista keskiajan puuveistoksista Suomessa*, (SMYA 116), Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys, 2009; Elina Räsänen, ‘Late-Medieval Wood Sculptures as

particular object in focus, a medieval wood sculpture, is dated to c. 1520, and what is peculiar in its portrayal of the maternal lineage of Christ is that the figure of St Anne is wearing a crown on top of her veil (fig.1). Nygren's brief account of the sculpture was published in 1945 in her doctoral dissertation, and Nordman's even shorter rendering twenty years later in his extensive monograph on medieval sculptures in Finland.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 1 *Crowned Saint Anne. Detail of the Saint Anne with the Virgin and Child*, c. 1520. Polychromed wood sculpture. Lokalahti parish church. Photo: Elina Räsänen.

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Materialized Saints: the Embodiment of Saint Anne in Northern Europe', Johanna Vakkari, ed., *Mind and Matter—Selected papers of Nordik 2009 Conference for Art Historians*, (TT 41), Helsinki: Taidehistorian seura, 2010, 50–65.

<sup>8</sup> Olga Alice Nygren, *Helgonen i Finlands medeltidskonst*, (SMYA XLVI:I), Helsingfors: Finska Fornminnesföreningen, 1945, 27; Carl Axel Nordman, *Medeltida skulptur i Finland*, (SMYA 62), Helsingfors: Finska Fornminnesföreningen, 1965, 535–536. Nordman also mentioned the sculpture in the *Kulturhistorisk lexikon för nordisk medeltid*, 'Anna', 22 vols, Helsinki, 1956 (Vol I), cols. 151–153. In addition, the sculpture is outlined laconically in Tove Riska, *Turun arkkikiippakunta. Vehmaan rovastikunta*, (Suomen kirkot—Finlands kyrkor I). Helsinki: Museovirasto, 1959, 46. See also Tove Riska, 'Keskiajan puunveisto ja maalatut alttarikaapit', *ARS Suomen taide 1*, Helsinki, 1987, 221–222.

To start, I will outline the methodological domains of the two scholars under discussion. Subsequently, I elaborate on their interpretations of the Lokalahti Saint Anne grouping, and what I will examine here is the process of approaching medieval sculpture, of observing and contextualising it. To illuminate the agendas of Nygren and Nordman – and the larger domains these belong to – I investigate how they approached the questions evoked by the unusual crown motif, and how their perspectives reflect their respective scholarly trajectories. Although I do not subscribe to the explanations of either scholar, but instead provide my own tentative proposal for the crown, I suggest that Nordman's answers, based on the carver master, lead us astray, whereas those of Nygren, based on the cult of St Anne, offer more promising routes to follow. I further suggest that Nygren's approach resonates intriguingly with recent contributions to studies focused on the Late Middle Ages.

In addition to drawing scholarly attention to one little-known medieval sculpture, this article sheds light on the subtle mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion which underlie the construction of professional careers in the field of art history. It offers observations on the history of research into medieval sculptures accomplished in Finland and the methodological movements surrounding and preceding the protagonists, Nordman and Nygren. Finally, I will discuss the position of oral tradition (such as the charm cited at the start of this article) in the study of medieval imagery, arguing that it should not be completely dismissed even though the data would have been collected and written down at a much later date.

## Two scholarly trajectories

Carl Axel Nordman was an active agent in museum circles and heritage management for half a century (fig. 2). Only after retiring from the post of the Director of the State Archaeological Commission (which he held for twenty-five years) did he finish his *opus magnum* covering most of the surviving medieval sculptures in Finland. According to his calculations, this material exceeds 800 pieces.<sup>9</sup> Nordman's study supplemented the earlier-mentioned doctoral thesis published by K.K. Meinander fifty years earlier. Both studies were ground-breaking as they listed previously unknown sculptures and attempted to categorize and date individual pieces. Though Meinander's accomplishment has been praised as being

<sup>9</sup> Nordman, *Medeltida skulptur*, 619. On Nordman, in addition to his biography (note 5), see Katri Vuola, 'Lundomästaren – Från anonymitet till en konstruerad identitet', *Finskt Museum* 2013–15, 81–104. See also Helena Edgren, 'Nordman, Carl Axel', in the electronic National Biography of Finland, Kansallisbiografia-verkkójulkaisu, *Studia Biographica* 4, Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1997– [<http://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:sks-kbg-008171>], accessed 27 February 2019.

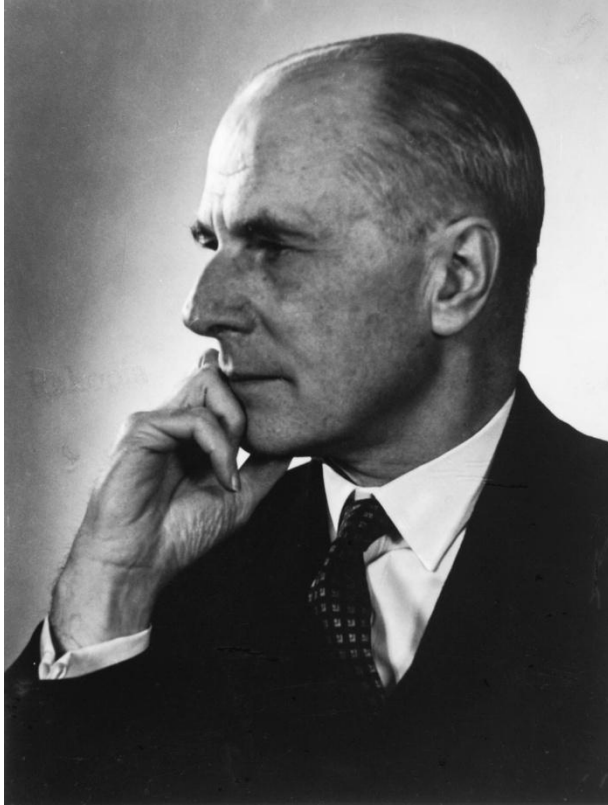


Figure 2 *Carl Axel Nordman (1892–1972)*. Photo: Svenska Litteratursällskapet i Finland, photographer and year unknown.

indispensable,<sup>10</sup> Nordman did correct some of Meinander's errors and, furthermore, was able to introduce research carried out by his daughter, Tove Riska (1923–1995) and add new material: restarted church inventories had revealed sculptures hitherto unknown or displaced.

Among the 'new findings' was the sculpture under discussion in this article, the Lokalahti St Anne with the Virgin and Child, as K.K. Meinander had not found it during his visit of the church in 1906.<sup>11</sup> However, he had included the work with four other sculptures at the same church on his list, but only by trusting an earlier inventory. This had been undertaken by Eliel Aspelin in 1874, when the Finnish Antiquarian Society had made its expedition to the northern coastal part of Finland Proper.<sup>12</sup> The failure of Meinander's own journey is somewhat understandable in light of the church archives: all the sculptures had been removed to the church's

<sup>10</sup> Ringbom, *Art History in Finland*, 86.

<sup>11</sup> Meinander, *Medeltida altarskåp*, 354.

<sup>12</sup> On the expedition, see Leena Valkeapää, 'Suomen muinaismuistoyhdistyksen taidehistorialliset tutkimusretket Suomessa 1871–1902' *Tahiti-Taidehistoria tieteenä*, 1/2018, 5–27, [<https://tahiti.journal.fi/issue/view/4835>], accessed 27 February 2019; Elina Räsänen and Leena Valkeapää, 'Sukupuolten tulkintoja ja "venäläisiä tyyppejä" – Kalannin alttarikaapin varhaisesta tutkimushistoriasta', *Suomen Museo*, 2013, 5–31.

woodshed and unfortunately, Meinander did not look there.<sup>13</sup> They were still there when the then research assistant, later the Director of the National Museum, Riitta Pylkkänen (1910–1982) carried out a new inventory in 1945.<sup>14</sup> Today the Saint Anne grouping is conserved and it is attached to the church wall on the right side of the choir.<sup>15</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries, Carl Axel Nordman studied medieval sculptures and altarpieces from a formal point of view, using comparative stylistic analyses to ascertain their geographical origins and dating. He was a precise scholar, and thus he was able to handle vast amounts of data before the era of information technology. Indeed, most of his classifications of the sculptures by their age have proved to be accurate, although recent research focusing on the species of wood has forced a readjustment of many of the questions regarding the origin or the works.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, he was also aware of the limitations of comparative stylistic analysis; in his view, due to the mobility of the craftsmen and their workshops, the origin of the sculptures could not be verified only by their formal elements.<sup>17</sup> Nordman's methods were based on his studies in archaeology; in 1919 he had earned a doctorate on Stone-Age barrow graves in Denmark.<sup>18</sup> For various reasons, most likely due to his interest in cultural history, he left archaeology and moved to the discipline of art history.<sup>19</sup> Nordman thus aimed to promote historical contextualisation, and especially in his articles, which focused on the sculptures of a particular period or geographical area, he sought to consider the material in

<sup>13</sup> All the sculptures had probably been removed from the church in the decades after the 1874 expedition, but unfortunately the archives do not provide a more precise timing. In the record of inventories, the listing from the year 1867 reported 'some ancient images of saints' to exist under the western gallery. *Inventaarikirja 1867–1931*. Archives of the Lokalahti parish church, Lokalahti.

<sup>14</sup> *Inventointikertomus 14 August 1945*. Topographic Archives (Lokalahti), Section of History, National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki. For more on the scholarship of Dr. Riitta Pylkkänen, see the obituary by Torsten Edgren, in *Suomen museo*, 1983, 137–139.

<sup>15</sup> Conservation was done by Jaana Paulus in 2004, see the conservation report by Paulus (2004), Archives of the Lokalahti parish church, Lokalahti. The present Lokalahti church itself is not medieval, but was built in 1763. However, there was a medieval chapel on the site, built c. 1490, see Räsänen, *Ruumiillinen esine*, 178.

<sup>16</sup> See Vuola, 'Lundomästaren', and Katri Vuola, 'Puusta vuollut, värillä elävöitettyt. Puuveistosten valmistamisesta keskiajalla', Sanna Teittinen, ed., *Pyhät ja pakanat. Ihmisyyden kuvia*, Helsinki: Museovirasto, 31–41.

<sup>17</sup> Carl Axel Nordman, *Eget och främmande i Finlands medeltida konst. Föredrag inför Finska vetenskaps-societen vid tillträddandet av ordförandeskapet den 29 april 1954*, (Societas Scientiarum Fennica. Årsbok – Vuosikirja XXXII B no 4), Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1956, 3–15.

<sup>18</sup> The subject was proposed by his father-in-law, the Director of the Danish National Museum, Sophus Müller. See Meinander, *Carl Axel*, 30, 46–49.

<sup>19</sup> Meinander, *Carl Axel*, 67–68, 82–85, seems to suggest that Nordman's change of disciplines was also due to better career possibilities.

connection with its historical circumstances.<sup>20</sup> Hence, his method was not purely formalistic.

When Olga Alice Nygren presented her doctoral dissertation, *Helgonen i Finlands medeltidskonst* (1945), she was only the second woman to gain this degree in the discipline of art history in Finland. Her thesis came out immediately after the Second World War, a time defined by isolation and inauspicious circumstances, as conveyed in the preface of the work. In her study, Nygren aimed to present an overall picture of the representations of saints in medieval art in Finland, concentrating on wall-paintings and wood sculptures. Despite her academic achievement, her career never took off; she taught art history at the Swedish Adult Education Centre in Helsinki, and was a senior lecturer in history at the Laguska skolan, a private Swedish-language school for girls (fig. 3a).<sup>21</sup>



Figure 3a *Olga Alice Nygren (1898–1981) among her students.* Photo: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, SLSA 1063, photographer and year unknown.

Olga Alice Nygren was a practising Roman Catholic and active within the small Catholic community in Helsinki. She was one of the founding members of the *Academicum Catholicum* society in 1936. Her friend Jarl Gallén (1908–1990), another medievalist, but a considerably more renowned scholar, became the first chair, with

<sup>20</sup> He touched upon merchant routes, the dating of relevant churches, as well as the few written sources telling of acquisitions of art works. See, for example, Nordman, *Eget och främmande; Medeltida skulptur*, 373–376; C.A. Nordman, 'Pohjanmaan keskiaikaista veistotaidetta', *Suomen museo*, 1947/48: LIV–LV, 86–103; C.A. Nordman, 'Urdialaskåpet och Sääksmäkimestare', *Finskt museum*, 1949, 38–40.

<sup>21</sup> Obituary of O.A. Nygren in *Hufvudstadsbladet* 14 February 1981.

Nygren as the secretary.<sup>22</sup> Within this circle, she was ambitious. She wrote articles, organised conferences, held public lectures and formed contacts with medievalists abroad. Thanks to her international contacts, she was also able to travel throughout Europe, which was a privilege at the time. For instance, in 1937 she did a long bicycle tour in England, Normandy and Brittany.<sup>23</sup> If indeed Nordman's intellectual endeavour was facilitated by his professional status, Nygren's was supported by her lively Catholic network (fig. 3b).



Figure 3b Members of the *Academicum Catholicum* in 1951. Olga Nygren is in the front row wearing a white beret, and the last person on the right is Jarl Gallén. Photo: Archives of the Catholic Diocese of Helsinki, photographer unknown.

Nygren published four monographs. The most widely distributed study (1951) addressed the material intentionally left out of her doctoral thesis, namely, representations of the Virgin Mary in the medieval art of Finland. This study was

<sup>22</sup> Vuorela, *Finlandia Catholica*, 141, 170–172, 322–328. Jarl Gallén, later the Professor of History at Helsinki University, published his thesis concerning the Dominican Order in 1946. On Gallén's academic merits, see, for instance Kauko Pirinen, 'Jarl Gallén 1908–1990', *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 3/1990, 285–286.

<sup>23</sup> See Runa Nordenstreng, 'Olga Nygren in memoriam', *Fides* 3/1981, 14; Vuorela, *Finlandia Catholica*, esp. 233, 323. Incidentally, Nygren was a member of the Society of St Anne as well. This ladies' society within the Roman Catholic Church in Finland, however, was not especially dedicated to honour St Anne. See Vuorela, *Finlandia Catholica*, 164–167, 335–337.



even translated into German.<sup>24</sup> From the 1930s to the early 1960s, she also published articles and reviews in Roman Catholic outlets, as well as in the main Swedish language newspaper in Finland, *Hufvudstadsbladet*, but, to the best of my knowledge, nothing else in academic forums.<sup>25</sup>

Nygren was an iconographer interested in the substance and religious meanings of medieval art, contrary to the pursuits of Nordman. This complementary character of their undertakings was acknowledged early on.<sup>26</sup> Significantly, it was the lack of iconographical perspective which motivated contemporary criticism of Nordman's monograph in 1966. In his review, Sixten Ringbom (1935–1992), then a younger art historian, reminded the author of the advantages of the iconographical approach. Ringbom argued that references to current research, more interested in the meaning than the formal aspects of the work of art, would have enriched Nordman's accomplishment in two ways. Firstly, he stated, the stylistic and iconographic methods complement each other in solving the problems of provenance and dating, and secondly, 'our sculptural treasures may offer important additions to the commonly known iconographical features.'<sup>27</sup> It is this latter point that I have sought to raise here.

### Approaching the crowned St Anne in the Lokalähti church

The sculpture in focus, *Pyhä Anna itse kolmantena*, is 88 cm high and made of hardwood (fig. 4).<sup>28</sup> It belongs to the small Lutheran parish church of Lokalähti, situated on the west coast of Finland. The majestic St Anne is standing in a long dress and robe, wearing a wimple covering her neck. A naked baby Jesus is perched

<sup>24</sup> Olga Alice Nygren, *Gudsmodersbilden i Finlands medeltidskonst*. Helsingfors 1951; Olga Alice Nygren, *Muttergottesbilder aus Finnlands mittelalterlicher Kunst*. M. Gladbach, 1954.

<sup>25</sup> Olga Alice Nygren's publications include: *En medeltida frälsningspegel*, Tammerfors 1957; *Barna da Siena*, Helsingfors 1963; 'Madonnabilden i Sveriges och Finlands medeltida träskulptur', *Vox Romana*, 1934, 13–16; 'Den heliga Birgittas julvision och dess spår i konsten', *Vox Romana*, 1935, 18–21; 'De tre konungarna i konsten', *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 1 January 1938; 'Apostlarna i konsten och legenden', *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 1 December 1940; 'Medeltidens miljö och andliga förutsättningar', *Katolska perspektiv. Jubileumskrift utgiven av Acedemicum catholicum*, Helsingfors, 1947, 37–54; 'Några blad ur änglarnas ikonografi', *Documenta*, 1956, 124–131.

<sup>26</sup> See the review of Nygren's *Gudsmodersbilden i Finlands medeltidskonst* by B.T.S. in *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 18 February 1952.

<sup>27</sup> Sixten Ringbom, 'Medeltida skulptur i Finland', review in *Finsk tidskrift*, 1966, 332.

<sup>28</sup> Previously considered to be of birch, see Riska, *Turun arkkihiippakunta*, 46. The wood material has not been scientifically analysed. It was a common misconception in Finnish scholarship to label wood sculptures made of lime tree or alder as made of birch; this sculpture, too, is most likely of alder. On this problem, see Katri Vuola, 'Wood Species and the Question of Origin: Reassessing the Sculpture Production in the Diocese of Turku (Åbo) during the 14th Century', *Baltic Journal of Art History*, Vol 18, 2019, 75–104.

on the palm of her left hand, while the object she has held between the fingers of the right hand – perhaps a bunch of grapes – has vanished. The Virgin Mary, slender and dressed in a somewhat courtly manner, is standing to the right of her mother, glancing upwards to the baby Jesus (fig. 5). There is a lot of secondary polychrome, but some original has also been preserved.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 4 *Saint Anne with the Virgin and Child*, c. 1520. Polychromed wood sculpture.  
Lokalahti parish church. Photo: Elina Räsänen.

Figure 5 *Saint Anne with the Virgin and Child*, detail, c. 1500. Lokalahti parish church. Polychromed wood sculpture.  
Photo: Elina Räsänen.

As acknowledged by both Nygren and Nordman, there are two sculptures in Finland representing a crowned St Anne. The other is from the parish church of Rusko (today in the collections of Turku Museum Centre, Finland). Nordman was not familiar with this feature existing anywhere else in Europe, and the same situation remains today. As far as I am aware, these two are the only medieval wood sculptures depicting St Anne with the Virgin and Child wearing a crown.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> More description and discussion of the object is in Räsänen, *Ruumiillinen esine*, 137–138; 178–179. On the colouring and repainting, see the conservation report by Jaana Paulus (note 15).

<sup>30</sup> It may be remarked here that the crown of the silver reliquary of St Anne in Düren, Germany, is a later addition; see, for instance, Beda Kleinschmidt, *Die Heilige Anna. Ihre Verehrung in Geschichte, Kunst und Volkstum*, (Forschungen zur Volkskunde, Heft 1–3), Düsseldorf: Druck und Verlag von L. Schwann, 1930, 377–378; Angelika Dörfler-Dierken,

Consequently, this theme has not been covered in earlier studies concerning the imagery of St Anne.<sup>31</sup> Nordman attributed both sculptures to a local workshop.<sup>32</sup> There are definite formal similarities, such as the folds of the veil, between the sculptures, and I believe the two works are connected in one way or another. Their local manufacture, however, remains vague.

How, then, did these two medievalists attempt to explain the anomaly of the crown? Nygren connected it to the apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. This early Christian text, one of the 'Marian gospels', was a crucially influential source for the pictorial arts, not to mention for the whole formation of the cult of St Anne.<sup>33</sup> It tells the story of the infancy of the Virgin Mary, which is recalled in the Chapter on the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary in *Legenda Aurea*. According to the legend, St Anne belonged to the House of David; the royal lineage of Christ through Mary, not Joseph, as the apostles had stated it, is particularly alluded to:

Matthew and Luke do not set forth the lineage of Mary but that of Joseph – who had nothing to do with the conception of Christ – because the usage of the sacred writers is said to have been to weave the series of generations of males, not of females.<sup>34</sup>

Nygren was convinced that the apocryphal tradition, which gave a noble and wealthy background for St Anne, was the cause of the crowned visualisation of the holy grandmother. She understood it to be a unique addition to the iconography of the theme. In the French résumé of her thesis she claimed that the crown should

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*Vorreformatrice Bruderschaften der hl. Anna*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1992, 82. See another example of a later crown in Peter Paul Maniurka, *Mater Matris Domini. Die Heilige Anna Selbdritt in der gotischen Skulptur Schlesiens*, Altenberge: Oros Verlag, 2001, 224–225.

<sup>31</sup> In addition to the literature in notes 7 and 30, see Merike Kurisoo, 'Sancta Anna ora pro nobis. Images and Veneration of Saint Anne in Medieval Livonia', *Acta Historiae Artium Balticae*, 2007: 2, 18–34; Pamela Sheingorn, 'The Wise Mother. The Image of Saint Anne Teaching the Virgin Mary', *Gesta*, XXXII/1, 1993, 69–80; Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, eds., *Interpreting Cultural Symbols. Saint Anne in Late Medieval Society*, Athens (Georgia): University of Georgia Press, 1990; Ton Brandenburg, 'Saint Anne: A Holy Grandmother and her Children', *Sanctity and Motherhood. Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anneke Mulder-Bakker, New York: Garland Publishing, 1995, 31–65.

<sup>32</sup> Nordman, *Medeltida skulptur*, 535.

<sup>33</sup> On this vast subject, see e.g. David R. Cartlidge and Keith J. Elliot, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, 21–46.

<sup>34</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend. Readings on the Saints*, Vol II, translated by William Granger Ryan, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, 149.

be seen as a localised novelty.<sup>35</sup> Yet, in the conclusion of her thesis Nygren seems to put this assumption aside, even though she explicitly refers to images of St Anne:

In the long line of the presumably domestic wooden sculptures – apostles, deacons, images of St Anne or other representations of saints – one can fairly often meet that rustic and robust type, but in the strict *iconographic* meaning something particularly new or national can hardly be found.<sup>36</sup>

Nygren's view regarding the effect of the apocryphal tradition was opposed by Nordman. According to him, this hypothesis would imply that the wood carver in the Turku region was 'theologically learned'. While he did not consider this completely impossible, instead he believed it was more likely that the crown was a mistake made by an illiterate master.<sup>37</sup> But, how could the poor carver have made such a peculiar mistake?

### Understanding the materiality of polychrome sculptures

To solve the consequential question, Nordman proposed a 'broken telephone' solution: he juxtaposed the Lokalahti sculpture to an image of a sculpture from Muchow, Mecklenburg, which shows St Anne wearing a round headdress. In a footnote he formulated: 'Anne [from Muchow] wears an upward widened headdress, which may be thought to have given the idea of depicting her with a crown.'<sup>38</sup>

It is possible that some misunderstanding could have happened and the word-of-mouth information conveyed by a pilgrim or a merchant might have been misleading. Both large turban-like headdresses and sumptuously folded veils became extremely popular in the St Anne imagery at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>39</sup> The crown, however, was not a trivial detail, but carried strong

<sup>35</sup> 'Deux bois, de Rusko et Lokalax respectivement, figurant sainte Anne couronnée, appellent l'attention par ce détail inusité, qui peut avec une grande vraisemblance être désigné comme une contribution finlandaise à l'iconographie de cette sainte. Ces images sont en effet de facture indigène, bien primitives d'ailleurs.' Nygren, *Helgonen*, 225.

<sup>36</sup> 'I den långa raden av sannolikt inhemska träskulpturer: apostlar, diakoner, S. Annabilder och övriga helgonframställningar återfinns man visserligen ofta just denna rustika och robusta typ, men något i strängt *ikonografisk* bemärkelse nytt och nationellt finner man däremot knappast.' Nygren, *Helgonen*, 221. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>37</sup> Nordman, *Medeltida skulptur*, 535.

<sup>38</sup> Nordman, *Medeltida skulptur*, 535, n. 81. The Muchow sculpture is in the collection of the Museum of Schwerin, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, the figs. 23, 53, 76, 77, 89, 103, 110, 113 in the exhibition catalogue *Heilige Anna, grote moeder. De cultus van de Heilige Moeder Anna en haar familie*, Nijmegen: SUN / Museum voor Religieuze Kunst, 1992. Examples of the large headdress in the material remaining in Sweden are also numerous; for a few, see the figs. 130, 141, 172, 173 in Aron

connotations of both heavenly virginity and earthly power. Nordman's suggestion of the accidental crown becomes even more unlikely if we attempt to imagine how the gilded crown of the Lokalahti St Anne looked before its more or less sharp and decorated finials vanished: it probably did not at all resemble the round headdress of the Muchow sculpture. What is more, black-and-white photographs of deteriorated sculptures bear little resemblance to their original appearance. This pinpoints how the material and tactile elements are *sine qua non* in the proper analysis of such works as medieval sculptures. As the art historian Thelma K. Thomas has remarked with originality:

Understanding objects involves reading their material clues, reconstructing experiences of them at various moments in the entire span of their existence, and recognizing that our own disciplinary expectations are historically contingent, based upon available knowledge, training, and practices, and further shaped by the places and modes of our encounters with the objects.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, when Nordman's biographer concluded that his main interest was in factual objects, their age, origin, milieu and the anonymous masters who carved them,<sup>41</sup> I would argue that Nordman was not, in fact, attentive to the 'factual objects', but more on how they looked and how they were related to each other. When Nordman wrote the historiography of Finnish archaeology in his late years, in 1968, he described himself as a dissident from the typologizing school of the Swedish archaeologist Oscar Montelius, and thus distant from the evolutionist trends.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, it has been suggested that in fact he was more inclined to evolutionist archaeology than he himself maintained.<sup>43</sup> From an art historical point of view, on the whole, Nordman's methodology was indeed based on making typologies of image types and stylistic features as well as constructing progressive lines from one pictorial trait to another, such as those that link headdress to crown.

Nordman's refusal to accept the role of the apocryphal tradition disregarded the status and popularity of the saints in the late Middle Ages – it was by no means

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Andersson, *Medieval Wooden Sculpture in Sweden, Vol III, Late Medieval Sculpture*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1980.

<sup>40</sup> Thelma, K. Thomas, 'Understanding Objects', *Reading Medieval Images. The Art Historian and the Object*, Elisabeth Sears and Thelma K. Thomas, eds, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Meinander, *Carl Axel*, 130.

<sup>42</sup> —' (...) he [Nordman] became a representative of the Danish approach to Archaeology influenced by cultural history, in contrast to the Darwinian line of the Swedish school.' Carl Axel Nordman, *Archaeology in Finland before 1920*, (The History of Learning and Science in Finland 1828–1918, 14 a), Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1968, 58. Nordman co-operated extensively with his Swedish colleagues, mainly Johnny Roosval, see Vuola, 'Lundomästaren'.

<sup>43</sup> Meinander, *Carl Axel*, 31–35.

necessary to be theologically learned to know the stories of the saintly personages, who in many ways took part in the life of a commoner. The assumption that the laity was generally aware of the *vitae* of the saints had been advocated by Nygren in her dissertation, but it had not been accepted, it seems, by her opponent, Professor Onni Okkonen, who protested it in the public defence of Nygren's doctoral thesis.<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, historical documents reveal aspects of the devotion of the saints in everyday life in the Turku region. Essential to our discussion is that St Anne was very much in favour in late-fifteenth-century Turku: the Cathedral had an altar dedicated to her, and a confraternity of St Anne was active in the town. Her feast day, exceptionally, on 15 December, was graded *totum duplex* and it was thus celebrated by all, not only the clergy. Most importantly, at one point she was declared one of the three patron saints of the whole diocese, i.e. medieval Finland, the Eastern part of the Swedish Realm.<sup>45</sup> All the archival information, including mentions concerning different saints, was easily accessible to Nygren's opponents since it had come out in print long before. Several studies covering the medieval sources had also been available for decades, and indeed some of these appear in the bibliography of Nordman's *Medeltida skulptur i Finland*. Thus, the reason for his refusal to accept the context of popular piety was not in obscure documents or unobtainable secondary literature but was in his own choice of what to read from the sources.

One seminal study went largely unnoticed, 'The Sacred Shrine' (1912) by Yrjö Hirn (1870–1952), Professor of aesthetics and modern literature at the University of Helsinki. His book explored the visual art and poetics of Western Christianity in a comprehensive, synthetic manner.<sup>46</sup> The study received international attention – still maintained – when it was published in English a couple of years after the original Swedish language edition, and it was even reprinted in the late 1950s.<sup>47</sup> Hirn allocated a whole chapter of his book to the

<sup>44</sup> Information on Okkonen's protest is hand written in the margins of Nygren's published thesis (p. 11) by an attendee, most likely Tove Riska. This volume is in my ownership, for which I wish to specially thank Phil.lic. Marja-Terttu Knapas, who sparked my interest in Olga Alice Nygren.

<sup>45</sup> The other two were St Birgitta of Sweden and the martyred bishop St Henrik (Henry). For a comprehensive account on the cult of St Anne in the Turku diocese, see Räsänen, *Ruumiillinen esine*, esp. 94–107.

<sup>46</sup> Yrjö Hirn, *The Sacred Shrine. A Study of the Poetry and Art of the Catholic Church*, London: MacMillan, 1912; reprinted in 1957 by Beacon Press; *Det Heliga skrinet. Studier i den katolska kyrkans poesi och konst*, Helsingfors: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1909.

<sup>47</sup> For Hirn's contribution to art history, see Ringbom *Art History in Finland*, 79–83. On the connection with the Swedish medievalists, see Allan Ellenius, 'Kring den moderna konstvetenskapens begynnelse i Sverige', (TT 9), Helsinki: Taidehistorian seura, 1986. See also Jan-Ivar Lindén, *Sinnliga frågor: Om och kring Yrjö Hirn*, Paris: Eithe, 2010. Jukka Cadogan is working on a PhD thesis concerning Hirn's psychological and anthropological

devotion around the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, and the role of the mother Anne in this process. He investigated in detail the late-medieval conception, promoted for instance by the Abbot of Sponheim Johannes Trithemius in 1490s, of St Anne as a holy mother free of original sin, which reflected, of course, the status of her daughter.<sup>48</sup> Neither Nygren nor Nordman took up Hirn or this issue in connection with the crown.<sup>49</sup> One reason for Nygren to dismiss Hirn might have been the disapproving response of the study in Catholic circles.<sup>50</sup>

The implicit idea behind Nordman's theory, based on the erroneous carver master, is that a lay worker would have decided what images were to be produced for the churches. This emphasis on the single agent has in recent decades given way to wider discussion about patronage and the whole process of the acquisition of wood sculptures.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly enough, in her thesis Nygren offered a lengthy clarification of the conventions of ecclesiastical acquisitions, anticipating usage that only later reappeared in the art historical vocabulary. Unlike many of her contemporaries, she did not emphasise the master, but accentuated the role of the ecclesiastical authorities in the procedure of choosing subjects for devotional images. She maintained that final decisions were never left to the donor or to the hired master.<sup>52</sup> Nygren put emphasis on the broader understanding of the subject under investigation, an inclination which at least partly derived from her religious commitment. Thus, if there was indeed a misled person in the Turku diocese, it was not the craftsman, but the vicar or perhaps a whole circle of lay donors and clergymen.

### **(Dis)regarding popular belief**

If St Anne's crowning was connected to the widespread stories promulgating the genealogy of Christ and theological debates around it, why did it come up in the Turku region? Nygren suggested the impact of popular belief, citing the renowned

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approach to art: *Origin and Modernity – Contextualizing Yrjö Hirn's Psychological Art Research* (forthcoming from the University of Helsinki).

<sup>48</sup> Hirn, *Heliga skrinet*, 204–237. On Trithemius' devotion on St Anne, see, for instance, Angelika Dörfler-Dierken, *Die Verehrung der heiligen Anna in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, 177–186.

<sup>49</sup> Nordman was well aware of Hirn's work, of course, but seems to have had some general misgivings regarding Hirn's expertise on the field of medieval art; see Vuola 'Lundomästaren', 88.

<sup>50</sup> On the reviews in the international press, see Irma Rantavaara, *Yrjö Hirn 1879–1910*, Part I, Helsinki: Otava, 1977, 208–212. However, Nygren did cite him in her later research in 1951 (see note 24).

<sup>51</sup> On the research concerning the donors and acquirers of wood sculptures, see, for example Carina Jacobsson, *Bäställare och finansörer. Träskulptur från 1300-talet i gamla ärkestiftet*, Visby: Ödins förlag, 2002.

<sup>52</sup> Nygren, *Helgonen*, 11–13.

Finnish folklorist Kaarle Krohn (1863–1933), who had investigated oral tradition linked to the Christian saints. In the charms, St Anne, *Annikki*, appears as a mighty matron of a wealthy rural household and/or she is connected to forests and to successful hunting.<sup>53</sup> Nygren did not claim that this oral tradition itself would give the answer, but nonetheless wished to add it to the sources; she was interested in exploring folklore in the research on saints and devotional practices.<sup>54</sup> Is this scholarly approach more accepted today than it was in the 1940s? I would argue yes; iconographical research is fully aware of the potential of performative or vernacular traditions and interpretations.<sup>55</sup>

Some medieval traditions are merged in Finnish folklore, which was collected and conveyed into written form mainly in the nineteenth century. Therefore, the problem in combining this tradition with medieval images is that of an anachronism. Moreover, oral tradition was mainly collected in Karelia and was thus more or less influenced by the conceptions of the Eastern Church. Many traits from the Roman Church may, nonetheless, be discerned as well. The incantation addressed to St Anne, quoted at the beginning of this article, concerns the healing of sprains. It contains the term '*Santta*', or saint, and this directs attention to the Latin influence, as the word does not belong to the liturgical language of the Eastern Orthodox Church, nor obviously to Lutheran practices.<sup>56</sup>

Another variant of the same charm used in the practise of healing sprains, tells how St Anne comes to help Jesus, Mary and their horse, who are all hurt on their way to mass.<sup>57</sup> This charm calls St Anne a lovely maiden, '*Santta Anni, armas neito*'. According to Kaarle Krohn, the wording echoes the parallelism between St

<sup>53</sup> Nygren, *Helgonen*, 27; Kaarle Krohn 1914. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura & WSOY, 1914, 176–184. See also Martti Haavio, *Suomalaisia legendoja ja rukouksia*, Helsinki: Suomen kirja, 1946, 212–214. For more recent exploration of the role of St Anne in Finnish folklore, see Irma-Riitta Järvinen, 'Provider of Prosperity. The Image of St Anne in Finnish and Karelian Folklore', *The Performance of Christian and Pagan Storyworlds. Non-Canonical Chapters of the History of Nordic Medieval Literature*, Lars Boje Mortensen, Tuomas M.S. Lehtonen and & Alexandra Bergholm, eds., Turnhout: Brepols, 2013, 273–294.

<sup>54</sup> Nygren, *Helgonen*, 11.

<sup>55</sup> See my discussion on iconography today: Elina Räsänen, 'The Panopticon of Art History: Some Notes on Iconology, Interpretation, and Fears', Lena Liepe, ed., *The Locus of Meaning in Medieval Art: Iconography, Iconology and Interpreting the Visual Imagery of the Middle Ages*, (Studies in Iconography: Themes & Variations) Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2019, 46–66.

<sup>56</sup> Krohn, *Suomalaisten runojen*, 178. On other popular beliefs linked to St Anne, see Francesca Sautman, 'Saint Anne in Folk Tradition: Late Medieval France', *Interpreting Cultural Symbols* (see note 31).

<sup>57</sup> Charm documented by F.F. Ahlman in Leppävirta, Savo, in 1858. *Suomen kansan vanhat runot VI,2: Savo*. Helsinki 1936, no 4591. Accessed also by the online SKVR database [<https://skvr.fi/>].



Anne and her daughter *Maaria*.<sup>58</sup> What if the connection of the crown to popular belief, if such an alliance is to be sought, is not related to St Anne being a mighty matron as evoked by Nygren, but instead to the twinning of Anne and Mary? I am thus suggesting that the pairing and identifying of St Anne with the Virgin underlies the crown motif.

All in all, even if the charms cannot explain the images, Finnish folklore, which is strongly connected to earlier ethnic religion, may provide – together with other sources whether literary or visual – some insights into the various possible responses of the medieval viewer.<sup>59</sup> This secondary information is all the pre-Reformation vernacular tradition we can operate with, as the Finnish language was considered to be ‘plebeian slang’<sup>60</sup> and it is highly uncommon in the surviving medieval written documents.

Nordman did not comment on Nygren’s reminder of the local cult of St Anne. He was certainly aware of the folklore connected to the saints, having published with the ethnologists engaged with the theme.<sup>61</sup> He also had personal interest in folklore, but it was focused on the heritage of the Swedish-speaking population; he was a founding member of *Folkkultursarkivet*, Archives of the (Swedish language) Folk Culture, as well as its chair for several years.<sup>62</sup> It is possible that he was reluctant, or, in another view, unable to cross disciplinary boundaries, due to his firm position on the map of research domains. It should be noted here that although Nordman did not hold a post at the university, but instead was a museum professional, he was a leading academic authority in the study of medieval artefacts, as the research concerning this material was unofficially located on the premises of the National Museum.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, stepping beyond the bounds of one’s own discipline was probably more acceptable for outsiders, such as Nygren, who did not threaten established academic roles.

<sup>58</sup> Krohn, *Suomalaisten runojen*, 179–180, 226.

<sup>59</sup> On the use of folk tradition in the interpretation of medieval images, see also Edgren, *Mercy and Justice*, 62–64.

<sup>60</sup> This is my re-usage of Michael Camille’s description of the status of the English language after the Norman Conquest; see his ‘The Language of Images in Medieval England, 1200–1400’, *The Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200–1400*, Jonathan Alexander and Paul Binski, eds, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1987, 33.

<sup>61</sup> Nordman wrote, for example, to *Kulturhistorisk lexikon för nordisk medeltid* coverage ‘Anna’ concerning St Anne in Finland with the ethnologist Kustaa Vilkuuna, in *KLNM*, Helsinki 1956, vol I, cols. 147–153. See also the contributions in the anthology *Novella plantatio*, Suomen kirkkohistoriallisen seuran toimituksia 56, Helsinki: Suomen kirkkohistoriallinen seura, 1955.

<sup>62</sup> Meinander, *Carl Axel*, 134–135, 164.

<sup>63</sup> See Ringbom *Art History in Finland*, 87.

## Radiating objects

'Research in art history', says the art historian Michael Ann Holly, 'is in pursuit of something it can never catch, but that is also part of its charm. The observer on the other side of time must struggle to make the objects of the past continue to shine even as he or she dulls them with the rhetoric of analysis.'<sup>64</sup> I hope I have been able to increase the gleam of one such object, or, following the (heavenly) astronomical metaphors used by Holly, to let the light of a dead star shine a bit more vibrantly from a distant galaxy, i.e. the historical past.<sup>65</sup>

By intertwining two differently inclined scholars and weaving together elements of biography, historiography and the interpretation of the devotional object, I have elucidated Nygren's scholarship, which has largely faded into oblivion, as well as refined earlier accounts on Nordman's methodology. Unwittingly, he had blind spots regarding historical contextualisation and the tactility of sculptures. Regardless of his accuracy on details such as folds of the drapery, he encountered the Lokalahti sculpture without fully recognising its material clues. But, as he voiced himself, the aim of his work was to provide an enduring basis, the material itself, for further questions concerning the devotional cults or other cultural features of the late Middle Ages.<sup>66</sup> Nygren's approach was simultaneously confident and hesitant; she trusted that the apocryphal tradition explained the crown motif, but remained unsure of its significance, or connection to folklore. Yet emphasising reception, oral tradition and procedures of patronage, instead of autonomous artists, she echoed later shifts in art historical thinking.

Nygren did not form a career in art history. Were the reasons, on the one hand, linked to her age, gender, background, or religious commitment, or, on the other hand, to her scientific approach, which did not follow the positivist ideals of the time, and may have even been considered to be outdated? Further elaboration of these notions would require illuminating the life and actions of Olga Alice Nygren much more than has been possible within this study. Paying more attention to outsiders and unfamiliar texts not only widens academia, but it also helps to draw out plausible interpretations of remote yet still shining works of art, as I deem our case, the crowned figure of St Anne.

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<sup>64</sup> Michael Ann Holly, 'What is Research in Art History Anyway', *Rakkaudesta kaupunkiin – For Love of the City. Festschrift to Riitta Nikula*, (TT 28), Helsinki 2004: Taidehistorian seura, 224.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 220–224.

<sup>66</sup> Nordman, *Medeltida skulptur*, 622.

articles published in peer-reviewed journals and collections such as *The Locus of Meaning in Medieval Art: Iconography, Iconology and Interpreting the Visual Imagery of the Middle Ages* (2019), *Finskt Museum* (2018), and *Journal of the History of Collections* (2019). Her work includes co-editing *Meister Francke Revisited. Auf den Spuren eines Hamburger Malers* (2017) and *Kauneus, arvo ja kadonnut menneisyys. Näkökulmia Klaus Holman muistokokoelmaan* (2017). Her current research concerns breakage, iconoclasm and the treatment of Medieval art in Early Modern Finland.

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