Inventory of the medieval choir stalls in Scandinavia

Denmark

Catholicism reached the Danish coast around 960 AD. The last three Viking kings embraced the new faith and Denmark gradually became a Christian monarchy. With this, the Viking period came to an end. The Swedish provinces nearest to Denmark today – Skåne, Blekinge and Halland – were at that time also part of the Danish realm.\(^1\) Between 1520 and 1540, the Reformation wiped out Catholicism in Scandinavia and many church buildings were adapted to the demands of the new faith. From then on, religion was an affair of the Crown. In Denmark that resulted in Catholic murals being whitewashed (they have been uncovered since the end of the 19th century) and Catholic interiors being removed from churches. Much of that has now disappeared. In the larger churches, choir stalls continued to be used, but as school desks for boys from the Latin school. Overall, people did not show much respect for their Catholic heritage.\(^2\)

The archbishopric of the Danish monarchy was established in the (now Swedish) town of Lund where the cathedral houses the largest choir stalls in Scandinavia and the stalls in the Danish towns of Roskilde (cathedral) and Ringsted (Sankt Bendt Kirke) are based on these.\(^3\)

Boeslunde, Kirke
Oak
South side 1400-1499, 7 seats
North side 1510-1525, 4 seats
Misericords in the shape of consoles
No arm rests on north side\(^4\)

Faaborg, Helligåndskirken
Oak
Circa 1500
The choir stalls formerly consisted of 26 seats. There are now 25 seats left because in the 19\(^{th}\) century 1 seat on the south side had to give way to make room for an entrance to the staircase. Dorsals and canopy date from 1857-1858. Tip-up seats were renewed in the 18\(^{th}/19^{th}\) centuries. Armrests were removed in 1817 because they were believed to be unsuitable for the religious health of the monks. They were re-installed in the 20\(^{th}\) century, but their order is arbitrary.\(^5\)

Fig. 1) Armrest with dog’s head, Helligåndskirken, Faaborg. Arnold Mikkelsen, 2012 (https://samlinger.natmus.dk/DMR/asset/210782)
Haraldsted, Kirke
Oak
Dated 1520
May not be a part of a choir stall; it could also be a fragment of a bench in the choir.

Helsingør, Sanct Mariæ Kirke (now in Bymuseum, Helsingør)
Oak
1485-1499
Bench end
The bench end was part of choir stalls in Saint Mary’s Church in Helsingør that have disappeared.

Horsens, Klosterkirke
Oak
Circa 1500
Before the Reformation, this church was part of a Franciscan monastery. Originally the choir stalls were slightly larger. The choir contained probably 10 or 11 seats on both the northern and southern sides, whereas now there are only 9 on each side. Elsewhere in the church there is a bench that may be part of the choir stalls, although it is different in style. Altogether, the church possessed about 30 seats.6

Karup, Kirke
Oak
1500
Paul Ulf carved 12 seats for the choir stalls in 1500. Of those, only 8 bench ends survive, of which 4 are preserved in Karup and another 4 in the Church of Sjørslev. The remaining 4 have disappeared.7

Karup, Kirke (now in Sjørslev Kirke, Sjørslev)
Oak
1500
4 bench ends from Karup Church. In 1500, Paul Ulf carved 12 seats for the Karup choir stalls. Of those, only 8 bench ends survive of which 4 are preserved in Karup, another 4 in the Church of Sjørslev and 4 have disappeared (see note 6).

Kolding, Sankt Nikolai Kirke
Oak
Dated 1520
Originally the choir stalls contained 22 seats. Only 12 are left, in 3 rows. The old stalls were taken apart by carpenter Jens Hansen in 1738 and it is likely that he also cut up the bench ends. On the north side there are 2 rows of 4 seats, while the south side has only 1 row of 4 seats. The seats on the north side have been replaced, but the medieval ones on the south side remain. The dorsals date from 1858, the original dorsals and canopy having disappeared. The bench ends remain, but the tops have been cut and assembled into one screen in front of a row of stalls on the north side.
The bench ends were probably made in the workshop of the German carver Claus Berg.8
Løgumkloster, Kirke
Oak
1502-1514
This is the church of a former Cistercian monastery. The choir stalls no longer stand in the chancel but are found in the northern and southern side chapels. There may have been 38 seats but only 9 have survived. The canopy is modern. The misericords are console-shaped, some of them new.9

Nykøbing Mors, Dueholm Klosterkirke (now in Sankt Clemens Kirke, Nykøbing Mors)
Oak
1500
The choir stalls originate from Dueholm Minster. Only 5 seats remain and they were extensively restored at the end of the 19th century.10

Næstved, Herlufsholm Kirke
Oak
Circa 1500
This is the church of former Benedictine monastery. In 1811-1812, the chancel was extensively renovated and its ramshackle rood screen from around 1500 taken apart. Some of the reliefs were reused in the altar piece and the choir stalls (as dorsals).
In the past, the choir stalls consisted of 30 seats. In 1811-1812, 6 seats from the lower rows were removed to create more room around the altar and it is not known where they are now. The 24 remaining seats were placed on a wooden dais.
According to the article in Danmarks Kirker of 1938, each side had 8 seats. Today, only 2 rows of 3 remain. These 6 seats are related to the choir stalls in the Church of Saint Peter, also in Næstved. Further east in the chancel, 8 more rows of 8 seats are found.11

Næstved, Sankt Peders Kirke
Oak
Circa 1500
In 1933-1935 there were 2 rows of 7 seats, according to Danmarks Kirker. Originally there were more. Today there are 7 seats on the north side and only 6 on the south side.12

Odense, Domkirke (Sankt Knuds Kirke) (Cathedral)
Oak
Circa 1475
Until 1813, the choir stalls consisted of 26 seats, 13 on both sides. Currently there are only 2 groups of 7 left. In the course of the centuries, the stalls have seen many changes. Dorsals and canopies were sold at auction in 1751 after a clear out in the church. Partitions and columns near the elbow-rests and the tip-up seats are still the originals.13

Odense, Gråbrødre Kirke (now in Vor Frue Kirke, Odense)
Oak
Circa 1500
These stalls were taken in 1806 from Gråbrødre Kirke which no longer exists. Bench ends, misericords and armrests have been removed and it is unclear what happened to them.
Today there are 2 rows of 6 seats although there used to be more. It is not known whether there were also dorsals and a canopy.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Ribe, Domkirke (Cathedral)}
Oak
1500-1524
These 16\textsuperscript{th} century choir stalls replace much older ones from 1291 of which nothing is left. During the renovation of the chancel in 1843 and 1903, the choir stalls were subjected to many changes. Until 1843 the stalls had 21 seats. Now only 20 remain. There were probably return seats as well. The misericords have disappeared but had the shape of simple Gothic consoles.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Ribe, Sankt Katharina Kirke}
Oak
Circa 1500
This church was part of a Dominican friary that was dissolved during the Reformation. Around 1750, the choir stalls were altered extensively: dorsals, canopy, bench end and a couple of seats were taken away. Only 14 seats are left today and they have console-shaped misericords.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Ringsted, Sankt Bendts Kirke}
Oak
1420-1429
The Ringsted choir stalls are based on the style of those of Roskilde (Cathedral) which are, in turn, engrafted onto the stalls of the Cathedral in the Swedish town of Lund. Most misericords date from around 1300 and are taken from earlier choir stalls. 5 out of 26 seats are not equipped with misericords and 2 seats are modern but are fitted with medieval misericords. Remnants of polychromy are found on the stalls. The stalls are for the most part in their original state and the canopy frieze is fitted with scenes from the Old Testament and from the life of Christ.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Roskilde, Domkirke (Cathedral)}
Oak
1420
These choir stalls are amongst the most important in Scandinavia because of their size and because they survived the Reformation almost without a scratch. The stalls are based on those in the Cathedral in the Swedish town of Lund in the archbishopric of Denmark. Formerly there were 48 seats: 2 groups of 19 seats and 2 rows of 5 return stalls. Currently there are 46 seats: 2 rows of 23. As in Ringsted, we see a canopy frieze with scenes from the Old Testament and scenes from the life of Christ.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Skælskør, Kirke}
Oak
Date unknown, Gothic
Only a photograph of a stall with 3 seats has been found. It used to have dorsals. In the church there is also a two-seater and a stall with 4 seats.\textsuperscript{19}
Slagelse, Sankt Peders Kirke
Oak
1425-1524
Only 2 seats are left from more extensive choir stalls. They may originate from the monastery of Saint John of Jerusalem in Antvorskov, just outside Slagelse, that fell to the Crown after the Reformation. The church was pulled down in 1722.20

Sorø, Klosterkirke
Oak
Late Gothic period
A bench end with Apostle Matthias is all that remains.21

Store Heddinge, Sankt Katharina Kirke
Oak
Circa 1520
This bench with 3 seats is referred to as a choir stall in Danmarks Kirker and a celebrant stall on the following website: https://www.storeheddingekirke.dk/kirken-og-kirkegaard/kirkens-historie/kirkens-inventar/ (December 2020).22

Sæby, Kirke
Oak
Circa 1500
The church was formerly part of the Carmelite Monastery in the town. 20 seats (10 on each side) are all that are left of the 32 choir stalls, together with bench ends and a few misericords. The carver may be the Ajstrup Master. After the Reformation, the church was used as a schoolroom and the pupils carved the stalls with their knives. In particular, the depiction of boats on the stalls is very interesting for its reference to the shipping history as described in the article by Christensen, 1969.23

Fig. 2) Misericord with female head, Sæby Kirke, Sæby. Unknown photographer from Sæby Kirke
Sønder Vissing, Kirke (now in Museum Aarhus, Århus)
Oak
1400-1449
Bench end from the church of Sønder Vissing. It may originate from Vissing Priory or Voer Abbey.²⁴

Tunø, Kirke
Oak
1500-1524
The bench ends from the choir benches (only the north sides) may originate from the choir stalls in the Århus Cathedral.²⁵

Århus, Domkirke (Cathedral)
Oak
Circa 1508
Originally there were 18 seats on both sides (among which were 3 return stalls). Today we find only 15 seats. The stalls have been shifted around in the Cathedral in the course of the centuries and have been renovated. The return stalls were removed in 1775 and sold to Skivholme Kirke. Their whereabouts are now unknown. Arm rests are mostly from the 19th century. West-side bench ends are copies made in 1871, as are the dorsals and canopy. The misericords are console-shaped.
The medieval artist is probably from Northern Germany.²⁶
Sweden

The part of Sweden that did not belong to the Danish monarchy in the Middle Ages was also a kingdom. After the Reformation, most churches, monasteries and convents were governed by the Crown which spread the new faith. There was no huge demolition of churches and their interiors in rural Sweden. Iconoclasm was focused on the religious buildings in the cities and towns and did not last very long. Early in the 16th century it was forbidden to destroy religious heritage and legal action was taken against reformers to prevent vandalism. From a psychological point of view, the government thought it wiser to introduce the new faith gradually so that the population had time to get used to it. That approach doubtlessly created a certain clemency towards Catholic movable property. It looks as though rural churches were adapted to the new faith without a destructive mania. Dissolved convents and monasteries served as schools and orphanages. As in Denmark, murals were whitewashed and only rediscovered in the last 150 years.27

Please note that in Swedish different terms are used to indicate chairs or benches in the chancel. These terms do not always refer to choir stalls as they are defined in English. Sometimes it is hard to verify what is meant exactly. One thing we know for sure is that during Swedish Lutheran services, chairs and benches were used in the chancel as seats for dignitaries and sometimes elements of choir stalls were reused in these chairs and benches.

Burs, Kyrka (now in Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm)
Fir
1300-1399
Originating from Burs Church.
The function of this piece of furniture is unclear. It does not seem to be a choir stall but rather a chair in the chancel for dignitaries. It may be composed of parts of choir stalls.28

Dalby, Heligkorskyrka
Oak
1400-1499
2 seats29

Dalby, Heligkorskyrka (now in Historiska Museet, Lund)
Oak
1500-1524
Bench-end with Saint Veronica30

Fig. 3) Saint Veronica. Lund, Historiska Museet. Probably from Heligkorskyrka at Dalby. Photograph taken from: http://medeltidbild.historiska.se/medeltidbild/visa/foremal.asp?objektid=94092056&g=1
Dalby, Heligkorskyrka (now in Historiska Museet, Lund)
Wood
Two bench-ends with coats of arms of Denmark
Circa 1370\textsuperscript{31}

Dalhem, Kyrka
oak
1300-1349
The choir stalls here underwent transformations in the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries. The screen or desk in front of the seats and the canopy frieze date from the 17\textsuperscript{th} century. The paintings on the screen, dorsals and the cornice belong to the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.
The north side has 6 seats and 4 return stalls, with no seats on the south side. Only the bench ends and seats with armrests date from the 14\textsuperscript{th} century. It is as yet unknown if there were any misericords.\textsuperscript{32}

![Fig. 4) Bench end with foliage and two lions whose tails end in foliage, Dalhem Kyrka, Dalhem. Rebecka Svensson 2006](image)

Gothem, Kyrka
Oak
Circa 1330
Choir stalls turned into a bench for church dignitaries. Currently there are 8 seats left of what were originally 10 or more seats. The bench ends are medieval, but the casing with the paintings date from the 17\textsuperscript{th} century. The polychromy on the bench ends seems original. Most of the choir stalls are in oak except for the dorsal with painting which is done in fir. The painting on dorsal was made around 1330.\textsuperscript{33}
Leksand, Kyrka
Fir
1475-1499
Only a bench end has survived.34

Lund, Domkyrka (Cathedral)
Oak
1365-1370
These are the most important choir stalls in Scandinavia. The high stalls on both sides consist of 24 seats each. The base stalls on the north side have 16 seats and there are 18 seats on the south side. On the southern canopy frieze, the labours of the months are depicted, alternating with prophets, and on the north side are scenes from the Old Testament. The choir stalls have been shifted a few times over the centuries. The choir stalls in Roskilde Cathedral (Domkirke) and in Saint Bendt’s Church (Sankt Bendts Kirke) at Ringsted are based on the Lund choir stalls.35

Lund, Domkyrka (now in Historiska Museet, Lund)
Historiska museet in Lund preserves several items taken from the choir stalls, also some early 16th century additions.36

Nederluleå, Kyrka
Fir
1400-1524
7 seats. No misericords.37

Odensala, Kyrka (now in Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm)
Fir
Medieval
Bench end from Odensala Church.
A seat and a desk seem to have been attached to this bench end. According to the Swedish historian, scholar and antiquarian Johan Peringskiöld (1654-1720), the bench end is dated 1531. He also mentions that the choir stalls were taken out in the early 18th century.38

Skanör, Sankt Olof Kyrka
Oak
1300-1399
Bench built from choir stall elements in 1580-1589. It is unknown to the author of this inventory whether there were any choir stalls at all in this church and if so, how many seats they included.39

Skara, Domkyrka (now in Västergötländsmuseum, Skara)
Oak
Probably 14th century
Bench end from Skara Domkyrka (Cathedral). This bench end seems to be the only proof that there were choir stalls in Skara Cathedral. Robin Gullbrandsson from Västergötland museum has sent an email in which he states that, as far as he knows, there are no remains of choir stalls in the Skara Cathedral. Therefore a question presents itself: was this bench end taken
from choir stalls or from a church pew in the chancel (‘korbänk’ in Swedish) or perhaps from stalls or pews belonging to another church.  

**Skattunge, Kyrka**  
Oak  
Medieval  
Fragment of choir stalls.  

**Svinnegarn, Kyrka**  
Oak  
1400-1499  
2 partitions used in a bridal bench. It is not known where they come from nor what happened to rest of the choir stalls.  

**Söderköping, Drothems Kyrka** (now in Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm)  
Oak  
Circa 1350  
Bench end from Söderköping, Drothems/Drottens Church. Only remnant of choir stalls.  

**Trelleborg, Klosterkirka** (now in Sankt Nikolai Kyrka, Trelleborg)  
Oak  
1400-1499  
These choir stalls consisted of 24 seats and probably originate from the dissolved Franciscan monastery at Trelleborg. The town turned Protestant in 1532, and in that year the choir stalls were transferred to the Church of Saint Nicholas to serve as school desks. In 1881, extensive changes were made to the stalls. Tip-up seats were fixed. Today there are 2 rows of 11 seats and the misericords have been taken away. Their whereabouts are a mystery.  

**Trelleborg, Klosterkyrka** (now in Historiska Museet, Lund)  
Wood  
Two bench-ends  
1500-1524  

**Uppsala, Gamla Uppsala Kyrka**  
Wood  
Medieval  
2 tops of choir stall bench ends or church pew bench ends.  

**Vadstena, Klosterkyrka**  
Oak and fir  
1400-1499  
As the church of a Bridgettine abbey for both men and women, this church would have had rather extensive choir stalls, but only 2 rows of 2 seats survive. Erik Sellin wrote in 1890: ‘with the renovations from 1829 the west altar and the stalls were taken away’. The misericords are console-shaped.  

**Valö, Kyrka** (now in Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm)
Fir
1315-1325
Small fragment from Valö Church, possibly from a choir stall.48
Veckholm, Kyrka
Oak
Circa 1500
On the south side of the chancel are choir stalls with 7 seats. There would probably have been a similar bench on the north side.49

Vreta, Klosterkyrka
Oak
Medieval
4 seats with 3 original misericords in the shape of simple consoles. A fourth fir misericord has been added recently. The chances are that the former choir stalls were a lot larger and that they were fitted with dorsals and a canopy.

Västerås, Domkyrka (Cathedral)
Oak
Medieval
In Saint Mary’s chapel, on the south side, we see 2 choir stalls: one with 5 seats, and one with 7 seats from which each end lacks a seating board. In Köping Museum there are 4 bench ends that may be part of these choir stalls. Elsewhere in the Cathedral there are some bench ends that may be parts of choir stalls or church pews.50

Västerås, Domkyrka (Köping, Köpings Museum)
Oak
Medieval
4 bench-ends originating from Västerås Cathedral (see note Västerås Cathedral)

Ystad, Klosterkyrka (now in Historiska Museet, Lund)
Wood
Wooden canopy panel with inscription
Circa 137051
Finland

During the Middle Ages, Finland was a Swedish colony. The influence of the colonizer was extensive, particularly in the south-east. Many people in that coastal area still have Swedish as their mother tongue. From 1809 onwards, Finland was part of Russia and only became an independent country in 1917.

Finland was converted to Christianity in early medieval times. People practised their faith mainly in wooden churches that have not been preserved. Because of (severe) weather conditions, wooden churches do not last long and they also easily fall prey to fire. There were 103 medieval stone churches built in the south eastern coastal areas, of which 70 remain unaffected by the ravages of time. Some of these were equipped with choir stalls but only a few remains survive. The Reformation reached Finland in the early 16th century, brought by the Swedes.52

Helsinki, National Museum of Finland

Wood
1480
Chair, composed of choir stall fragments

Fig. 5) Bench end with Saint Olaf, tondo with coat of arms (Stjernkors family) and fabulous animal on top. Helsinki, National Museum of Finland. Photograph taken from https://www.finna.fi/Record/museovirasto.

Hollola, Pyhän Marian Kirkko (Church of Holy Mary)

Fir
Circa 1500
Bench end found underneath the wooden floorboards in the church’s chancel. No other part of the choir stalls was recovered. The theme of the head of Christ is uncommon in Finland.53

Kalanti, Pyhän Olavin kirkko (Church of Saint Olaf) (now in National Museum of Finland, Helsinki)

Wood
1450-1499
Artist: Nicolaus Justisa. It is not certain whether these bench ends are parts of choir stalls or of church pews.54
Norway and Iceland

Christianity spread throughout Norway from the beginning of the 11th century. Until 1397, Norway was an independent kingdom. After that it formed a union with Sweden and Denmark that lasted until 1521. In that year it became a Danish province, and from 1814 it was part of Sweden, regaining independence in 1905. There were probably medieval choir stalls in Norway but nothing has survived. As in Finland, most Norwegian churches were made of wood and these are not weather and/or fire proof. Around 300 stone churches were built in the Norwegian Middle Ages, but half of them were lost because of two ukases.

The Reformation came first. Many churches, monasteries and convents were destroyed together with their movable property. Then, the final blow was a law enacted in 1851. It obliged churches to offer at least 30 per cent of the population a place in church during services. Most churches were too small to accommodate that number of people and opted for extensive renovations or the construction of a new building.55

Iceland was declared Christian in the year 1000. Around 1540-1550, Protestantism spread all over the island. Many relics of the old faith were destroyed: churches, monasteries etc. Currently the majority of Icelandic churches are made of wood. Presumably that also goes for the medieval churches that did not make it into the 21st century.56

No choir stalls are found in Norway or Iceland.

One wonders why there are so few wooden churches in Denmark and Sweden for wood is available in abundance. One reason could be that geologically both Denmark and Sweden are more hospitable than Norway, Iceland and Finland. Because of geological barriers in these latter countries (fjords, lakes, snow and ice), communities are far more isolated than in countries such as Sweden and Denmark where travel is easier. Trade therefore has a better chance of flourishing and communities become wealthier. Stone churches may be a sign of that.

How many choir stalls existed in Scandinavia before the Reformation is still unknown. The (remains of the) choir stalls leads one to expect that there were more than we see today. So far there has been little research into choir stalls in the north. This subject certainly merits more investigation.

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4 Danmarks Kirker, V, band 2 (1938), p. 761
5 Danmarks Kirker, X, cahiers 7-8 (2014), pp. 712-714
6 Danmarks Kirker, XVI, volume 10 (2004-2005), pp. 5849-5860
7 http://www.karupkirke.dk/26-historie.html (November 2020)
8 Danmarks Kirker, XVII, parts 7-9 (2009), pp. 699-702
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48 http://www.kringla.nu/kringla/objekt?text=Val%C3%B6&filter=fromPeriodName%3Dmedeltid&filter=province%3Dup&referens=shm/object/117221 (October 2020)
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51 Information according to Andreas Manhag from Historiska Museet Lund (26-2-2021)
53 Hiekkanen, Markus, *A fragment of a choir-stall in Hollola church - an archaeological addition to art-historical material*, Fennoscandia Archaeologica 1997/XIV, pp. 47-51
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55 https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norske_middelalderkirker_i_stein (December 2020)