

Function of the priest's door in the medieval churches in Finland

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1. Introduction

The intention of my paper is to introduce some aspects which illustrate the function of the priest's door in the medieval churches of Finland. This paper does not include churches of which I did not get complete information, but it includes four churches which are today in ruins (Mustasaari [Korsholm], Pälkäne, Rauma [Raumo], Vihti [Vichtis]),¹ and also one church which is totally destroyed (Saloinen in Raahe). It was possible to include these churches because I was able to get all the necessary information about them.² I also included the church of Alatornio (Nedertorneå) in Tornio (Torneå) in my study, although it did not belong to the medieval diocese of Turku (Åbo). Then there are two churches (Föglö and Hammarland) which I had to count twice, because the situation of the priest's door and the chancel in these churches had changed in medieval times, so that both of them could be counted as two.³ Also the churches of Porvoo (Borgå) and Inkoo (Ingå) changed totally in medieval times, but there is no information left about their former state.⁴ The cathedral of Turku I had to count as three because of its changes in medieval times.⁵ The total number of the churches studied for this paper is then 82 (Appendix 1).

With the term *priest's door* I mean the door which is or was situated in a southern wall, quite near the

east gable of the church building. It would also have been possible to use the term *chancel door*, but this term could have been somewhat misleading, because chancel door can also mean a door in a chancel screen inside the church. Besides, priest's door is a fixed term both in the Swedish and Finnish languages, and also for example in Dutch.⁶

All the information comes from my studies. I had to draw some hypothetical conclusions because we do not have exact information of how the chancel was situated in the church in medieval times. However, I had certain criteria for drawing conclusions.⁷

2. Priest's door in the churches of Finland in medieval times

51 medieval churches in Finland (out of 82) had a priest's door and 31 churches did not (Appendix 2). It is interesting to notice that eight churches out of nine built in the 13th century had a priest's door⁸ 75% (18 churches) of the churches built in the 14th century and about 51% (25 churches) of the churches built in the 15th and the 16th century had a priest's door.

When I studied the geographical distribution of the priest's door I noticed that the differences between the provinces were noticeable. First of all, in the Åland Islands seven churches had a priest's door and six did not. A priest's door was built in eve-

ry church in the 13th century (5 churches), to one out of two in the 14th century, but only one church out of six built in the 15th century had a priest's door.

In Finland Proper (Egentliga Finland) 16 churches had a priest's door and 10 did not. In the 13th and the 14th century a priest's door was built in 11 churches while only five churches were left without one. Five of the churches built in the 15th century had a priest's door and five did not. In Uusimaa (Nyland) there was a priest's door in 12 churches, and only three churches were left without it. Those three churches were built in the 15th century just like the most churches in the area. In Ostrobothnia (Österbotten) seven churches had a priest's door, and only one did not. That only exception, church of Keminmaa, was built at the beginning of the 16th century. In Satakunta (Satakunda) every church had a priest's door. The churches in Satakunta were built in the 14th century, except the church of the Franciscan monastery in Rauma, which was built in the 15th century. And finally, in Häme (Tavastland) only three churches had a priest's door but 11 churches did not. Those three churches were built about 1500.

When you look at Finland as one area, it seems that in the beginning building a priest's door in a church had been a rule, but this rule got its first exceptions in the 14th century in Finland Proper (4 churches) and in the Åland Islands and Häme (1 church each).⁹ However, it was not until the early 16th century that more than half of the churches were left without a priest's door. In Ostrobothnia and in Uusimaa priest's doors were still built in churches until the end of medieval times, but in Finland Proper the situation changed in the 14th century, so that about every third church did not get a

priest's door, and this development continued in the 15th century, so that half of the churches were left without a priest's door. In the Åland Islands the break is clearest: one church out of two was left without a priest's door in the 14th century, but only one church out of six got a priest's door in the 15th century. The medieval churches of Häme were built in the 15th and 16th centuries – except the church of Hattula – and only three of these 13 churches (14 with the church of Hattula) got a priest's door.

It seems that the priest's door had a special meaning and function in Finnish churches in the 13th century, but the priest's doors built after that time may have been only a survival of this old practice without any special function, or its function had changed. But when comparing different areas of Finland, you can see quite large local differences. This led me to look at the subject from a different point of view. Actually only in the churches of Häme, the latest medieval churches of the Åland Islands, and in one third of the churches of Finland Proper there was no priest's door. Therefore I assume that the main reason for not building a priest's door was the builders and their own building tradition. For example, the earliest stone church architecture of the Åland Islands came mostly from Gotland (an island near the Swedish coast) in the 13th century. Builders of the churches of the Åland Islands also came from there, and their tradition included building a priest's door.¹⁰ Later in medieval times church builders came from elsewhere – probably from Sweden – and then it was not so usual to build a priest's door. The churches of Häme were influenced by Denmark or Southern Balticum.¹¹ Only very few medieval churches in Denmark got a priest's door,¹² just like the churches of Häme. It seems that the

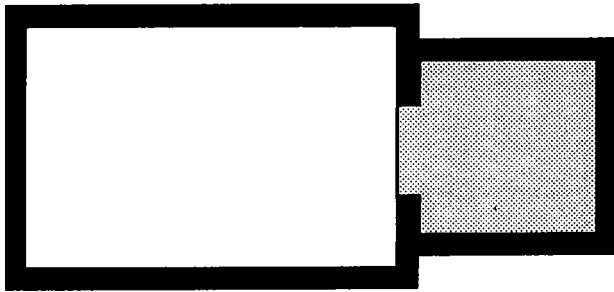


Figure 1. First type chancel in the medieval churches of Finland.

building date of the church is not so important to my study as the area in which the church is situated. That also makes more difficult to find a theological ground to the priest's door. However, I try to find some hypothetical ideas about that.

3. *Importance of the chancel to the priest's door*

When we think about the function of the priest's door in the medieval churches of Finland, we also have to find out how the chancel was situated in the church. I found two general types of the place of the chancel in the nave. In the first type the chancel fills the eastern part of the church in its whole breadth (Figure 1.). In the second type the chancel is nar-

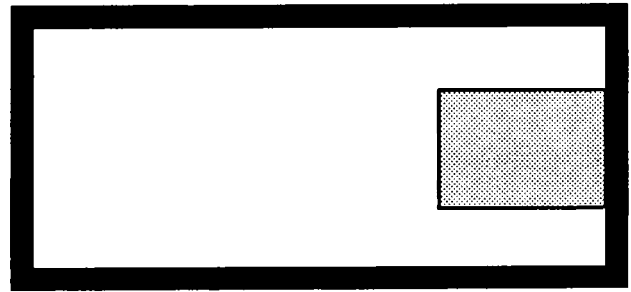


Figure 2. Second type chancel in the medieval churches of Finland.

rower than the nave (Figure 2.). This type imitates great Gothic cathedrals and their chancels.

The churches built in the 13th century (8 churches out of nine) seem to belong to the first type, 10 churches built in the 14th century to the first type, and 14 churches from the 14th century to the second type. Twenty-eight churches from the 15th and early 16th century seem to belong to the first type and 22 churches to the second type.

When comparing the provinces, I found some interesting results. Every church in the Åland Islands belonged to the first type, so only the priest's door was left out in the 15th century. In Finland Proper the change took place in the 14th century: four

churches seem to be first type and nine churches second type. Only one first type church out of four was left without a priest's door, while six of the second type churches had a priest's door and three did not. Almost half of the churches built in the 15th and early 16th century (four churches) seem to belong to the first type but most (seven churches) belong to the second type.¹³ Four second type churches out of seven were left without a priest's door, while two first type churches out of four had one.

In Uusimaa most of the churches seem to be of the second type. Only one of them is a first type church, and it has a priest's door. Eleven second type churches have a priest's door and three do not. All three churches without a priest's door were built in the 15th century.

In the churches of Ostrobothnia the chancel is the first type in five churches out of eight, and only one church does not have a priest's door. The situation in Satakunta looks almost the same, except that all churches there have a priest's door and five churches out of six have the first type chancel. Also the churches in Häme seem to belong to the first type. There seem to be only two second type churches (Hattula and Hollola). The only priest's doors – three of them – were found in the first type churches of Hauho, Lammi (Lampis) and Sysmä.

It seems that placing the chancel in the church has been an important factor. There were no big differences in one province, but differences between provinces were quite obvious. Also building a priest's door seems to be a similar type of factor. Twenty-seven first type churches out of 50 (54%) had a priest's door, and 24 second type churches out of 33 (about 73%) had a priest's door.¹⁴ There seem to be quite clear connection between chancel type and building

a priest's door to the church. That may be because of the size of the church: it was more common to build a priest's door to a big church than small one. The second type chancel, too, was more common in big churches. It may be so that priest's door has been a survival of some earlier tradition, where it has had a special meaning and function, but – again – I have to remind about local differences. When we look at the churches of the Åland Islands and Finland Proper, we could say that in earlier times the priest's door quite obviously had a special function, but later on that function disappeared or weakened. But when we look at the churches of Uusimaa or Ostrobothnia, we have to think the opposite way. Again we have to make the conclusion that the date of the building does not matter when we are looking for the function of the priest's door; instead, the most significant factor seems to be the area where the church is situated and also the size of the church.

4. Theological aspects of the function of a priest's door

When we think about the function of the priest's door in the medieval churches of Finland, we have to consider the reason for not building a priest's door. The term 'priest's door' leads us to think about ministry of the church. Has there been any connection between the concept of ministry and building a priest's door? It is also important to consider the status of the main altar in the nave, because the priest's door opened straight to the chancel or very near it. In this chapter I concentrate to these two aspects.

Hierarchy of priests was characteristic of the ministry in the medieval church, but theologically ministry was still one. Christ himself was the head of the

church, and he was the one who conducted holy ceremonies, taught and governed through the Church. In the parishes of the medieval diocese of Turku there were practically two clerics: priest and precentor. A precentor, who had a lower dedication, was a contact between the priest and his parishioners.¹⁵ This shows what a great distance there was between the priest and ordinary people, and one – although not the greatest – expression of this distance was the priest's door. The priest had his own door to or near the chancel of the church and people had their door to the nave of the church. The change which seems to have taken place as to building a priest's door in some parts of Finland in medieval times was probably very strong in the minds of ordinary people. Suddenly the priest came into the church through the same door as all the other people, because he did not have a door of his own any more. It is likely that after this the priest was no longer such a distant person as before.¹⁶

However, it is impossible to find a reason for this change from the aspects of the concept of ministry, although there have been opinions that late medieval times and especially Gothic architecture brought more democracy to the church. But it is possible to try to find the reason from the status of the main altar and the chancel in the church, and from the changes in this status. In the churches built in the 13th century the chancel was usually narrower and stood very clearly apart from the nave.¹⁷ The churches built in the 14th century and later were usually rectangular, and the distance between the chancel and the nave was not so wide as earlier, because the chancel was a part of the nave. This change was a consequence of the change in architectural styles: the Romanesque style changed to the Gothic style.

There are still some exceptions to this rule, namely the churches of Föglö and Hammarland. These churches got a new, narrower chancel in the 15th century, but only the church of Föglö got a priest's door which it did not have before, while the church of Hammarland did not get a priest's door in its new chancel, although it had had one its older chancel.¹⁸

There were a main altar and side altars in the churches, but the importance of the side altars started to grow in Europe from the 13th century, much because of the development of the doctrine of the purgatory. It was discussed in the Councils of Lyon in 1245 and in 1374 and in the annual council of Florence in 1439, but the doctrine was formulated in the Council of Trent in 1563. According to the doctrine of the purgatory, the Church and its members could help the sufferings of those who were in purgatory by intercessory prayers, which could be indulgences, alms, fasts and especially Mass offerings.¹⁹ Priests started to hold special Masses on behalf of the dead at the side altars. By indulgences and alms it was possible to build more side altars, where priests could conduct masses for the dead.

This development probably lowered the status of the main altar and the chancel in the minds of ordinary people, and the status of the priest changed, too. He had to come out of the chancel to a side altar to hold a Mass on behalf of the dead. People also had to contact the priest more often, when they ordered Masses. It is probable that this development brought priests and ordinary people closer to each other. The distance between the priest and the people was not so wide as before. This development probably had the result that priest's doors were no longer built so often at the end of medieval times in some parts of Finland.

5. Conclusion

It is very difficult to find the function of the priest's door. The building date of the church does not seem to be a significant factor in building a priest's door. Actually only local reasons, like the builders of the church, seem to be truly significant.

The priest's door in the medieval churches of Finland reflects the different hierarchical values between the priest and ordinary people. In practice this distance diminished because the people and the priest had more contacts with each other. When a priest came to hold Masses on behalf of a dead per-

son at a side altar, he came away from the distant chancel. As priests held masses and were more than before in the midst of ordinary people, it was not so important to build a priest's door any more. However, local differences were considerable. It was possible for a priest to enter the church through the same door as the other people. It seems that the priest's door was a phenomenon which had its origin in the concept of ministry, but the reason for not building priest's doors any longer was practical and social. This accounts for local differences.

Appendix 1. Medieval parish churches in Finland

	priest's door	no priest's door	type of the chancel	date of the church ²⁰	Province in Finland
Eckerö	X		1	around 1300	Åland Islands
[Eckerö, Signildskär		X	?	1100's	Åland Islands] ²¹
Espoo	X		2	end of the 1400's	Uusimaa
Finström		X	1	1400's	Åland Islands
Föglö I		X	1	1300's	Åland Islands
Föglö II	X		1	1400's	Åland Islands
Geta		X	1	second half of the 1400's	Åland Islands
Halikko	X		2	1440	Finland Proper
Hammarland I	X		1	around the 1250's and 1260's	Åland Islands
Hammarland II		X	1	1400's	Åland Islands
Hattula		X	2	second half of the 1300's	Häme
Hauho	X		1	turn of the 1400's and 1500's	Häme
Hollola		X	2	around 1480	Häme
Huittinen	X		1	1340's ²²	Satakunta
Hämeenlinna, Vanaja		X	1	1480-1490	Häme
[Inkoo I	?		1	end of the 1200's	Uusimaa]
Inkoo II	X		2	around 1500	Uusimaa
Isokyrö	X		2	turn of the 1300's and 1400's	Ostrobothnia

Janakkala		X	1	1510's	Häme
Jomala	X		1	mid of the 1200's	Åland Islands
Kalanti	X		2	turn of the 1300's and 1400's	Finland Proper
Karjaa	X		2	around 1470	Uusimaa
Keminmaa		X	1	around 1520	Ostrobothnia
Kemiö		X ²³	2	turn of the 1300's and 1400's	Finland Proper
Kirkkonummi	X		1	end of the 1200's	Uusimaa
Kokkola, Kaarlela	X		1	1400's	Ostrobothnia
Korppoo	X		1	second half of the 1300's	Finland Proper
Kumlinge		X	1	around 1480	Åland Islands
[Kökar monastery		?	1	1400's	Åland Islands]
Laitila	X		2	around the 1460's and 1480's	Finland Proper
Lammi	X		1	1490's	Häme
Lemland	X		1	end of the 1200's	Åland Islands
[Lemland, Lemböte		X	1	?	Åland Islands]
Lempäälä		X	1	beginning of the 1500's	Häme
Lemu	X		2	around the 1450's and 1460's	Finland Proper
Lieto		X	2	between the 1300's and 1330's	Finland Proper
Lohja	X		2	1480's	Uusimaa
Masku	X		1	first half of the 1300's	Finland Proper
Mustasaari (ruins)	X		2	second half of the 1300's	Ostrobothnia
Mynämäki	X		2	around 1300-1305	Finland Proper
Naantali convent		X	1 & 2 ²¹	1443-1462	Finland Proper
Nauvo		X	2	beginning of the 1400's	Finland Proper
Nousiainen	X		1	around the 1280's and 1290's	Finland Proper
Närpiö	X		1	mid of the 1400's	Ostrobothnia
Parainen		X	1?	1320's	Finland Proper
Pedersöre	X		2	mid of the 1400's	Ostrobothnia
Pernaja	X		2	1390's	Uusimaa
Perniö		X	2	around the 1460's and 1480's	Finland Proper
Pertteli		X	1	mid of the 1400's	Finland Proper
Pohja	X		2	around the 1460's and 1480's	Uusimaa
[Porvoo I	?		1	end of the 1200's	Uusimaa]
Porvoo II	X		2	mid of the 1400's	Uusimaa
Pyhtää		X	2	mid of the 1400's	Uusimaa
Pälkäne (ruins)		X	1	1480's	Häme

Raahe, Saloinen (destroyed)	X		1	beginning of the 1500's	Ostrobothnia
Raisio	X		1	first half of the 1300's	Finland Proper
Rauma monastery	X		1	mid of the 1400's	Satakunta
Rauma (ruins)	X		1	1300's	Satakunta
Renko		X	1	beginning of the 1500's	Häme
Rusko	X		1	mid of the 1400's	Finland Proper
Rymättylä	X		1	first half of the 1400's	Finland Proper
Saltvik	X		1	end of the 1200's	Åland Islands
Sauvo		X	2	mid of the 1400's	Finland Proper
Sipoo	X		2	1400's	Uusimaa
Siuntio	X		2	1460's	Uusimaa
Sund	X		1	1280-1300	Åland Islands
Sysmä	X		1	turn of the 1400's and 1500's	Häme
Taivassalo	X		2	1300-25	Finland Proper
Tammela		X	1	around 1500	Häme
Tampere, Messukylä		X	1	first half of the 1500's	Häme
Tenhola		X	2	1400's	Uusimaa
Tornio, Alatornio	X		1	1400's	Ostrobothnia
Turku cathedral I		X	2	1280's	Finland Proper
Turku cathedral II	X		1	end of the 1200's ²⁵	Finland Proper
Turku cathedral III	X		2	from 1340's to 1360's	Finland Proper
Turku, Kaarina		X	2	mid of the 1300's	Finland Proper
Turku, Maaria	X		2	1300's	Finland Proper
Tuulos		X	1	turn of the 1400's and 1500's	Häme
Ulvila	X		1	mid of the 1300's	Satakunta
Valkeakoski, Sääksmäki		X	1	turn of the 1400's and 1500's	Häme
Vammala, Karkku	X		2	mid of the 1300's	Satakunta
Vammala, Tyrvää	X		1	second half of the 1300's	Satakunta
Vantaa, Helsingin pitäjä	X		2	1494	Uusimaa
Vehkalahti		X	2	mid of the 1400's	Uusimaa
Vehmaa	X		2?	around 1300	Finland Proper
Vihti (ruins)	X		2	1400's	Uusimaa
Vårdö		X	1	1400's	Åland Islands

Appendix 2. Medieval churches of Finland and their priest's doors

	1200's		1300's		1400's & 1500's		together
	priest's door	no priest's door	priest's door	no priest's door	priest's door	no priest's door	
Finland Proper	2	1	9	4	5	5	26
Häme	0	0	0	1	3	10	14
Ostrobothnia	0	0	2	0	5	1	8
Satakunta	0	0	5	0	1	0	6
Uusimaa	1	0	1	0	10	3	15
Åland Islands	5	0	1	1	1	5	13
Whole Finland	8	1	18	6	25	24	82

Noter

- Gårdberg 1951; Pettersson 1955, 617-620; Hiekkanen 1988; Knapas 1990. The ruins of the chapel of Signildskär in Eckerö I could not include in my paper because there was no possibility of solving its chancel type. Neither could I include the ruins of Lemböte chapel in Lemland, because the date of the chapel is not known.
- Pettersson 1987.
- Dreijer 1967; 1978; 1979, 338-345, 350-355.
- Kronqvist 1938; Kartano 1950; Knapas 1987.
- Rinne 1941.
- In Swedish the term is »prästdörr«, in Finnish »papiovi«, and in Dutch »priesteringang« (look Steensma 1984, 49.).
- I studied the architectural elements of the churches like the places of windows and doors, and maps and vaults, as well as mediaeval wall and roof paintings and their programs. After these studies I made my conclusions.
- The chapel of Signildskär in Eckerö in Åland Islands, built in 11th or 12th century, did not have a priest's door. Haapio & Luostarinen 1980, 19.
- In the church of Hattula in Häme there was a porch where usually should have been a priest's door. Also it is necessary to remember the chapel of Signildskär in Eckerö in Åland Islands which was built in 11th or 12th century. There was no priest's door in it.
- Lagerlöf & Svalnström 1966, pictures in pages 16, 93, 97, 103, 118, 120, 121, 138, 144, 165, 172, 184, 195, 198, 208, 226, 233, 237, 255, 258.
- Kronqvist 1948, 28-30, 76-78.
- Jes Wienberg's verbal message to the author 11th September 1993.
- The church of the Brigittine convent of Naantali has been counted twice, because this church had two chancels.
- In this case there are 83 churches, because the church of Naantali has been counted twice. Look notes 13 and 24.
- Parvio 1976, 51-54.
- Wienberg expressed the idea that the change in the churches from Romanesque style to Gothic style (»gotisering«) in Denmark meant more democracy in the church, but mostly between the churchgoers, not between the priests and churchgoers. Wienberg 1993, 40-41, 44, 64.
- Figure 1, upper example. These churches were Inkoo I, Jomala, Kirkkonummi (Kyrkslätt), Turku cathedral II, and possibly Porvoo I.
- Dreijer 1966 says about the church of Föglö that its nave was built in the 14th century. Only one year later he says (Dreijer 1967, 28, 30.) that the nave of Föglö and its narrower chancel was built at the same time, about 1310. In 1979 Dreijer says that the nave and chancel of Föglö were built at about 1300 (Dreijer 1979, 353-354.). The general opinion is that the nave was built in the 14th century and the narrower chancel in the next century. Suomen kirkot ja kirkkotaide 2 1980, 30.

About the building history of the church of Hammarland Haapio & Luostarinen 1980, 35. Matts Dreijer has different opinion. He says that the nave and chancel of Hammarland were built in latter half of the 12th century. Dreijer 1978, 8-11; 1979, 340-341.

19. Parvio 1975, 36, 38.
20. Information about dates of the churches comes from Haapio & Luostarinen 1980, if there is no mention about another source. There is a great deal of discussion and also new information about the dates of the medieval churches of Finland, but that information was not yet published at the time when I collected the information for this paper.
21. Gardberg 1987, 52-53.
22. Kronqvist 1948, 59.
23. There was a priest's door in the church of Kemiö, but it opened to the south wall only after 1786-1788. Nikula 1975, 105, 107-108.
24. The church of the Brigittine convent of Naantali had two chancels: one – first type chancel – on the western side of the nave, and one – second type chancel – on the eastern side of the nave. Lilius 1969 and 1972.
25. Gardberg 1987, 52-53.

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