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Research Achievements

Contemporary society, and the academic community, evinces an increasing interest in aspects of cultural identity, memory and social cognition and transformation and an encouraging willingness to traverse traditional boundaries of subject, region and period. Alongside this, however, is a resurfacing of tension between what is often over-simplistically presented as superstition / faith / resistance to empiric knowledge and absolute scientific and humanistic rationalism. The more complex the interaction and overlap of these spheres, the greater the tendency to retreat into black and white, either / or, rather than exploring the subtler and more revealing interconnections and shades of grey. Areas of research that seek to question and explore such issues are therefore of tremendous academic import and current social relevance.

The Centre for the Study of Cultural Heritage of Medieval Rituals seeks to contribute to our comprehension of the modern culture of Western Europe by examining the continuing impact and perception of medieval church rituals in post-medieval culture and the arts. This goes right to the heart of the aforementioned dichotomy and challenges a revisionist imposition of a statute of limitations upon history and cultural memory in which medieval religiosity and is superseded by secularization and enlightenment in the post-Reformation era. This is to misunderstand the nature of the enduring interplay between human reason and the spiritual impulse and the role of ritual and recurring narrative and semiotic resonance in shaping and developing cultural identity. This also impacts negatively upon the understanding of the nature of truly radical historic and cultural transformations. If Aquinas and Darwin are not to become mere ciphers for opposed, polarised views of what it means to be human, and to mutually constrain the evolution of our self-perception, then work such as that of the Centre is imperative and
opportune. In this, it forms part of a growing community of scholars across the humanities and sciences who are concerned with bridging the divide between the ‘two cultures’ and who are developing interdisciplinary methodologies and dialogues.

The research strategy of the Centre was well structured from its inception and is contextualised within contemporary discourses of ‘cultural studies, intermediality, and medievalism’. It consists, broadly speaking, of two prongs. Firstly, the identification and implementation by individual staff members of subprojects grounded in specialist disciplines such as theology, literature, musicology, the visual and performing arts, architecture and archaeology. Secondly the imposition of a common framework comprising key questions of methodology and of cultural and historical perspective. Issues of regionalism and centrality, of authority of dissemination and audience reception, of the history of ideas, of the roles of tradition and innovation in shaping culture and the processes by which history legitimises ideas and ritual practices all served to inform and shape the work of the Centre in well-grounded yet innovative ways. A welcome aspect of this innovation is the Centre’s interest in narrowing the gap between the historical study of areas of human creativity and their current perpetuation. This significantly enhances and enriches its cultural relevance and contemporary contribution. Personally, I would welcome the extension of the historical continuum into more recent times, and even up to the present.

The manner in which the Centre has approached the structuring of the three-year extension period of its funding is exemplary, building upon subprojects of the preceding phase to widen and / or deepen their perspectives. These have been supplemented by further projects, undertaken in collaboration with external scholars.

Throughout both periods, the work of the subprojects has been carried forward by weekly meetings of the academic staff, to share presentations, readings of source materials, of disciplinary and methodological perspective and of problem sharing. The invitation of external speakers from Denmark and from the international arena have enriched this discourse.

Members of the Centre have been able to arrange conferences and seminars on their specific areas of interest and have attended other conferences and undertaken research trips. The five major conferences have been held at the Centre, and to enhance international awareness of the project further members of the Centre itself also organise sessions at the larger international conferences of relevance.

If there is any constructive criticism to be levelled at this praiseworthy and productive initiative it is, perhaps, that it sometimes focuses in rather sharply on the local and northern European, but this is not to the exclusion of the broader perspective. Much of the work of the subprojects requires such focus, and the Centre quite rightly seeks to avoid grand narratives and generalisations thereby. There is therefore a quite justifiable focus upon Scandinavian material and participation by Scandinavian scholars. but in some areas an even wider dialogue with and keying into the international community and its interests is valuable. Participation in large international conferences, such as the
International Congresses of Medievalists at Kalamazoo and Leeds, has rightly played a key role in this. Still further collective visibility for the Centre is to be encouraged by its representation at external conferences and by forging further relationships with other projects (eg DIAMM – the digital image archive of medieval music, the Book as Icon Symposium at Syracuse University, the Reversed Thunder project on the Psalms in theology, art and music at St Andrew’s University, the Christianity and the Arts Project at King’s College London, etc). The information provided concerning the forthcoming work of the Centre indicates that these concerns are being addressed and international participation is being nurtured and extended. It remains the case, however, that the Centre lacks a substantive parallel as a research group of high standing in this area.

The publications programme of the Centre has interacted extremely well with this method of dissemination and debate. Rather than publish the proceedings of its conferences per se, the editors of the four impressive books that have resulted constructed book plans on the back of them and selected or commissioned reworked versions for publication. Their publication by Brepols speaks to their calibre and has ensured the requisite international distribution and reception. The Centre is to be warmly congratulated on these volumes and upon negotiating a contract with Brepols that led to the 2004 volume – *The Appearance of Medieval Rituals: The Play of Construction and Modification* – forming the basis of a book series, *Ritus et Artes: Traditions and Transformations*. This is based upon the research ideas of the Centre but is open to other scholars and thus forms a valuable international meeting ground for developing common concerns and approaches. The editorial committee, consisting of three senior members of the Centre and three senior externals, from W. Michigan University, Stockholm University and the British Library, demonstrates the consideration that has been devoted to ensuring representative coverage of expertise and of building international relationships. The roll call of those senior and upcoming international scholars, and their institutions, that have participated in seminars, conferences and publications of the Centre attest to the high regard in which it is already held.

Further volumes are in progress, within and without the Ritus series, and already they are providing a valuable outlet for publishing a large part of the PhD research of one of the Centre’s postgraduate students, Margrete Syrstad Andås, in Ritus vol. III, *The Medieval Cathedral of Trondheim: Architectural and Ritual Constructions in their European Context* (2007). This has been grounded in the work of her subproject and has benefitted from this. The health problems that Margrete has faced during this time have not impeded this significant achievement, which in itself may speak for the support and supervision offered to young researchers at the Centre. Such a case demonstrates the significant nature of the opportunities offered to postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers at the Centre which means that it has already become an attractive recruitment option. Another PhD student at the Centre, including Martin Wansgaard Jürgensen has demonstrated progress with his dissertation research and has already published and organised an international workshop in collaboration with a fellow PhD student from Aarhus. These opportunities are invaluable to early career researchers and are increasingly few and far between. They are to be applauded.
Taking all of this into account, I am of the opinion that the work of the Centre for the Study of Cultural Heritage of Medieval Rituals at the University of Copenhagen has been making a most valuable contribution in this area of international, interdisciplinary study over the past eight years, since its foundation in 2002 and that the scoping, phasing and structuring of the programme of research and its dissemination has been professionally and academically well-managed and implemented.

**Organisation and Management of the Centre**

Any research group that seeks to bring together and maintain a centre of excellence faces challenges of initial recruitment and construction of external relationships. The difficulties surrounding this become greater when the interdisciplinary nature of the work entails the investment of substantial time at start up in developing shared vocabularies and methodologies. Establishing visibility in a competitive international academic forum, across a series of disciplines, is demanding.

In view of this, the Centre has done very well in terms of its management of the organisation and structuring of the programme. The division into subprojects has worked well, as has the allocation of senior and postgraduate student staff to these projects. They have received a pleasing level of empowerment to reach out from this nexus to undertake representation and to build relationships internationally, and through events and publications grounded at the Centre.

The success of the Centre in establishing a coherent, dynamic and creative research environment is amply demonstrated by the events it has hosted and those that it has organised or participated in elsewhere, and, most of all, in its highly impressive series of publications. The books, the *Ritus* series and the numerous articles published by its staff and associates over the seven years in question (which included the start up period) are impressive and indicate how fruitful the lines of research, the working methods and the selection of staff and collaborators has been. One instance in which a collaborator experienced difficulty in accepting an integrated research model has been signalled. It is, frankly, remarkable that there was only one, for establishing a consensus and common modus operandi across such a wide-ranging field and group of subject specialists is invariably fraught with such risks. They appear to have been well-managed in this instance.

There have been health problems that have slowed down the work in places, but this does not seem to have been allowed to impact too greatly upon the programme or upon the careers of the individuals in question, including one postgraduate student who, despite such difficulties, has successfully pursued and published her PhD research.

I am unable to comment in detail on the administration of funds, on the basis of the information supplied, although the balance sheet seems entirely satisfactory. However, the planning and structuring of the programme of research, the construction and
maintenance of the human resource and the phasing of the project, with investment in common strategies and methodologies during the first two years and the growth of research, international and local dialogue and dissemination of the fruits of these labours during the second phase seems eminently sensible and admirable and has achieved its objectives. The financial management strategy and practice therefore seem sound. A need for greater transparency in aspects of decision making has been identified and addressed and management courses have been attended to develop skills in this area. In a comparatively small unit such as this there is limited need for hierarchy and strong leadership can be an advantage. Benign dictatorship is to be avoided, however, as the advantage of such a structure is that it can permit greater collective management and planning roles, as well as those that encourage academic leadership. It would seem that these issues have been acknowledged and it is to be hoped that this will lead to further steps towards full collaboration and sharing of responsibility and vision throughout the team, in appropriate measure.

Only a generous level of funding, sustained and planned across a set period or periods of time can enable an ambitious and complex initiative such as the Centre to take root and grow. The Danish National Research Foundation is to be congratulated in facilitating this in such a liberal fashion.

**Social Value of the Grant**

The grant has been effective in permitting an initial two-year start up phase, during which staff were recruited, external relationships explored and developed and common methodologies and modes of discourse established. This sound basis meant that the funding of the second period worked to maximum effect, enabling the perpetuation of the seminars and conferences held at the Centre and greater participation in large international meetings. Relationships were developed further and a valuable contract was concluded with leading academic publishers, Brepols. This has permitted a significant body of valuable research that traverses traditional boundaries of time, place and discipline to be brought to the attention of the international scholarly community and to contribute to its working practices and perspectives.

Some internet dissemination has been undertaken, via the Centre’s website and an internet forum established by a member of the Centre. More work of this nature is to be encouraged.

The opportunities for career development that the Centre offers to the postgraduate and postdoctoral students working there, and those whocollaborate with it, are of tremendous value in nurturing a new generation of scholars whose perspectives transcend and challenge traditional boundaries, whilst understanding their nature in some detail. The postgraduate courses offered by the Centre have also played a significant part in this
career and scholarly development. This is bound to impact to the good on the wider academic community and on Danish national life.

The centrifugal / centripetal model underlying the modus operandi of the Centre means that it is helping to influence the line of thinking in a number of research fields that it embraces or with which it overlaps: musicology, theology, art history, drama, literature, architecture and archaeology. It is thus affecting many areas of social relevance and serving to broaden, deepen and enrich our collective cultural memory.

Members of the Centre are aware of the advantages that extending their dialogue and interaction beyond the sphere of the research community to embrace the museum and heritage sectors, theatres, musical and church institutions could bring both to its work and to national and international cultural life. The provision of exhibitions and concerts in conjunction with conferences is an important step in this direction, as are collaborations with groups and institutions such as the Danish National Opera. There is an evident wish to communicate the import of the Centre’s work to cultural and heritage administrators, politicians and policy makers, but a lack of awareness of how best to pursue this. Perhaps the construction of conferences or seminars that brought together people from across these constituencies, coupled with events that increased public awareness and PR might help in this, as would professional training in social entrepreneurism. This area is one that is worthy of concentration and growth in the future work of the Centre, building significantly upon the existing desirable if somewhat limited forms of public outreach - in which music has figured well, but which could be extended into the performing and visual arts and into contemporary religious and secular life. This will make the Centre of much greater immediate import to a wider community, as well as the core academic audience for which it currently caters, and will increase its visibility and impact. Work with undergraduates and senior school groups, with educators, curators, exhibition and events organisers and administrators will all serve to evolve an integrated community with an informed social and cultural memory and an ability to challenge and analyse received narratives and histories. This will be to the good, nationally and internationally.

All of the above speaks to the success of the Centre and its management in establishing, maintaining and implementing its distinctive and valuable programme and to the enlightened funding programme of the Danish National Research Foundation.