

The Re-engraved Matrix: Bishop v/s Chapter in Nidaros around 1300

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A bronze matrix representing St. Olav in the museum in Trondheim did once belong to the chapter of Nidaros Cathedral. It has two roses engraved in the background; the earliest impressions (1263–1264, 1277, 1281) from this matrix do not have roses; these appear only in impressions from 1307 and later. The explanation is found in the famous battle between the archbishop and the chapter during this period; from documents it appears that the archbishop among other affronts sequestered the seal matrices of the chapter. On return, the canons had the roses engraved in the matrix. Another matrix, near-identical, was used in the meantime, but apparently discarded after 1307, when the original was restituted.

The attributes of St. Olav are presented, and the stylistic distinctions of the figure in the matrix evaluated. The chapter's major seal is presented, and the relative dates of the two is discussed.

This is a story about a matrix which was re-engraved. Basically, there is nothing surprising in this. There are any number of examples, known from all countries and periods. Old matrices received new legends, reconstructions were made when the original was lost, or new ornaments were added. Or there are deliberate fakes.¹ Most of the time we do not know why these things happened. Here we have, however, a case of re-engraving where we can reconstruct very well why it happened.

In the archives of The Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters in Trondheim was a bronze matrix, apparently found in the river bank in the 1870s. It is now exhibited in the Museum of Natural Science and Archaeology (Videnskapsmuseet) in Trondheim.² It has a diameter of 57 mm., and a loop on the back, and the legend in the beaded ring reads (normalized): SIGILLUM CAPITULI ECCLESIE SANCTI OLAVI REGIS ET MARTIRIS (seal of the chapter of the church of St. Olav, king and martyr). The figure is crowned and enthroned, and carries an orb and a sceptre. (Fig. 1)

So this is the seal of the Chapter of the cathedral in Trondheim. The town was called Nidaros in the Middle Ages, and it was the centre of the archdiocese of the

¹ See e.g. Norberg 1970, and Trættestad 1970.

² T. 1504, Rygh 1875.



Fig. 1. Bronze matrix, T. 1504. Impression 1998. Videnskapsmuseet, NTNU, Trondheim..

same name, which included not only Norway, but also Iceland, Greenland, Orkney, Shetland and the Isles.

There is no doubt who the figure represents. Olav Haraldsson was king of Norway from 1015 until he was killed in battle in 1030. He was claimed as a martyr and saint only five years later, and he became by far the most popular saint in the North, where a large number of sculptures, paintings etc. are still preserved. Most often he is represented as an enthroned king. He was enshrined in Nidaros cathedral, so it was perfectly reasonable that the chapter should have chosen him for their seal; many

of the archbishops did, too, and a large number of churches, religious foundations, or guilds in Scandinavia, England, Poland or Germany had him as their patron saint.

On this matrix, the saint, carrying an orb and a sceptre and flanked by a five-petalled rose each side, is seated on a throne. His crown has a low ring and wide-spreading fleurons in the 13th century manner. He appears to be wearing a sub-tunic with narrow sleeves, and above this a tunic with short and wide sleeves, falling in soft thin folds held in by a belt. The mantle, fastened with a chain across the chest, has been draped from his left knee across to the right in distinct folds. The drapery belongs to the thin “troughed-folds” or «Muldenfalten-» type of the first half of the 13th century, rather than to the later “broad fold” type, which reached Norway c. 1270–1280.³ The throne has corner posts with projecting lily-shaped crests, and is decorated with tall, round-headed arches. On the seat is a cushion with a criss-cross pattern. The legend, framed by beaded rings, is easily readable, but the cross at the top is not aligned with the crown.

The earliest known impression with this picture of St. Olav is attached to a letter from 1263 or 1264.⁴ This date fits reasonably well with the style. It also fits quite well with the fact that the chapter, for various reasons, apparently had their economy vastly improved in the 1250s,⁵ and may have felt that they could afford a little extravagance, such as a new seal matrix.⁶

The attributes are interesting. The orb is quite common in representations of St. Olav, but the sceptre appears unusual; Olav is normally represented as holding an axe. He was killed with an axe, and so that is a symbol of his martyrdom. This is the usual explanation given, but it has also been suggested that the axe is simply a symbol of royal power, since so many Norwegian kings selected this axe for their own seals or banners, and that the royal axe should refer to St. Olav’s position as eternal king of Norway.⁷

But the sceptre as Olav’s attribute is not unknown. It appears on the seal of the Dominicans in Oslo,⁸ and on the seal of the guardian of the Franciscans in Bergen, where he holds both the axe and the sceptre.⁹ Here, the sceptre is crowned by a hand,

³ See Morgan 2004: 26 for a discussion of the development of drapery folds in Norway.

⁴ NRA, AM 5.1.

⁵ Åmodt 1981: 63–71.

⁶ The seal/matrix has been discussed by many writers: Fett 1903: 67–68, Kielland 1927: 124, Trættestad 1953 no. 29, Hamre 1958, Trættestad 1958: 204, Fjordholm 1996: 90–93 Dybdahl 1999a: 100, and 1999b: 50. n. 62, Adorsen 2006: 112.

⁷ Lange 1967, Trættestad 1976, Lidén 1999: 214–219, Røthe 2004: 286–287.

⁸ Trættestad 1977 no. 59.

⁹ Trættestad 1968 no. 28.

a *Main de Justice*, well-known from representations of kings. A drawing of a Swedish 13th century gilt metal fitting, now lost, also shows him with a sceptre.¹⁰

Nearly all the wooden St. Olav sculptures from the 13th and 14th century show him enthroned like this. But they have lost their attributes; normally the right arm is stuck out as if holding something, but the hands are mostly broken off.¹¹ However, the hand of St. Olav from Tanum is preserved; he holds his hand up in such an elegant way that there is no grip for an axe handle – a sceptre is much more likely (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. St. Olav, Tanum church, Vestfold, 1270–1280.

¹⁰ Lidén 1999: fig. 01.

¹¹ Stang 1997: 65.

And very few have any mark or hole in the gown or on the plinth which indisputably proves an axe; a small hole on the knee may equally have supported a sceptre. Later restorations of these sculptures have normally given them axes, and in the later Middle Ages the axe appears to be the only attribute known.

This seal was not the first in Nidaros. We have an earlier seal, which also contained St. Olav with a sceptre.¹² The only preserved impression is attached to a document from 1225, and is badly damaged; the legend is lost (Fig. 3).¹³ The picture is



Fig. 3. Seal NRA, AM 1.1. 1225.

¹² NRA, AM 1.1; Trættestad 1953 no. 26.

¹³ DN I, 8, RN I 529.

quite like the preserved matrix, but the figure is much less robust, the mantle is drawn across the knees in the opposite direction, and the right arm is bent in a different way. The legend is missing, but the document text, although ambiguous, refers to the “korsbroedra” (choir-brothers) of the “stadhr” (place) of St. Olav. This may refer to the cathedral, or to the chapter; presumably a chapter at Trondheim was instituted in the 12th century.¹⁴ So a tradition was established, probably already in the 12th century. The canons selected St. Olav as their symbol: he was represented as an enthroned king, and he carried a sceptre, not an axe.

But the preserved matrix contains more than just an enthroned king with a sceptre: there are also two roses in the background. This is where the story begins.

The earliest impression of the chapter seal with this particular representation of the enthroned St. Olav with orb and troughed folds is, as stated above, attached to a document from 1263 or 1264 (Fig. 4).¹⁵ But here are no roses in the background.¹⁶



*Fig. 4. Seal NRA, AM 5.1.
1263–1264.*

¹⁴ Åmødt 1981: 63–71; Hamre 2003, Dybdahl 2003: 294.

¹⁵ DN I, 59, RN II, 8

¹⁶ Trættestad 1953 no. 27.

However, it is definitely impressed with the very matrix that we have preserved – the dimensions are the same, and all the details, such as the round-headed arches on the throne and the misaligned cross, are identical. Decisive is the positioning of the letters in the legend, where the capital L and I radiate from the bottom right-hand corner of the throne. All features are identical – except for the roses.

There are two other impressions preserved from the matrix without roses. One is from 1277, and the last is from 1281.¹⁷ In the latter document it is used only as a counterseal, for the Chapter is here also employing a larger seal (Fig. 5).¹⁸ This is 84 mm. in diameter, and has a motif of a fairly common kind, known from many ecclesiastical seals all over Europe: an unspecified or abstract church front, containing Christ in a niche, with the clergy below. Judging from the details in this seal, such as



Fig. 5. Seal NRA, AM 5.11. 1281.

¹⁷ NRA, AM 5.11, DN III, 16, RN II, 261.

¹⁸ Trätteberg 1953 no. 27.

the rather rudimentary Gothic architecture, this should also have been made in the second half of the 13th century. (see Supplement).

So there is evidence that at least in 1281 the Chapter owned two matrices, one minor, with the enthroned St. Olav, and one major, with architecture and clergy. And both were plain, without any roses.

The next preserved Chapter seal turns up in 1303.¹⁹ In fact, there are two impressions from this year. At first glance, they would appear to be from the same matrix as in 1281. They show the same seated St. Olav as the previous ones. But on the best preserved of the two, there is a star on the dexter side of the King (Fig. 6).²⁰ There may have been another on the sinister side, but there is not enough left of either of these two impressions to say for certain. And on further scrutiny, they are clearly impressed by another matrix. This is 2 mm. wider, the throne appears to have Gothic pointed arches, not round-headed, and the letters in the legend are differently placed, with the S at the corner of the throne. Trifling differences, but again decisive.

After a new interval, the next preserved impression of the Chapter's seal dates from 1307, four years later.²¹ Here the St. Olav is again employed as a counterseal, with the larger seal on the obverse (this is broken). But now, this is a real impression from the preserved matrix in the museum: the one which has the roses added. And all later impressions from now on until the Reformation are made with this rose-decorated matrix.²²

To recapitulate: the Chapter had a matrix, without roses, last documented in 1281 (Fig. 2). From 1307 on, they used the same matrix, but with two roses added. (Fig. 1) But at some time during this interval, a second matrix had been made; this is documented in 1303. (Fig. 6) The changes are noted by Trætteberg in his shortlist of Nidaros seals (1953), but he does not comment on them. What was going on?

The state of preservation of Norwegian medieval documents and written sources is not very satisfactory, compared to most other European countries. A great deal has been lost. But most of the remaining documents were put into print in the *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* (DN) from 1847 on, and the seals were carefully drawn for The National Archive (Riksarkivet) by hired professional artists. And miraculously, enough written material survives from the period just before and after the year 1300, so that we can in fact follow what went on in the Nidaros Cathedral establishment at the time. There was a tremendous battle going on between the Archbishop and

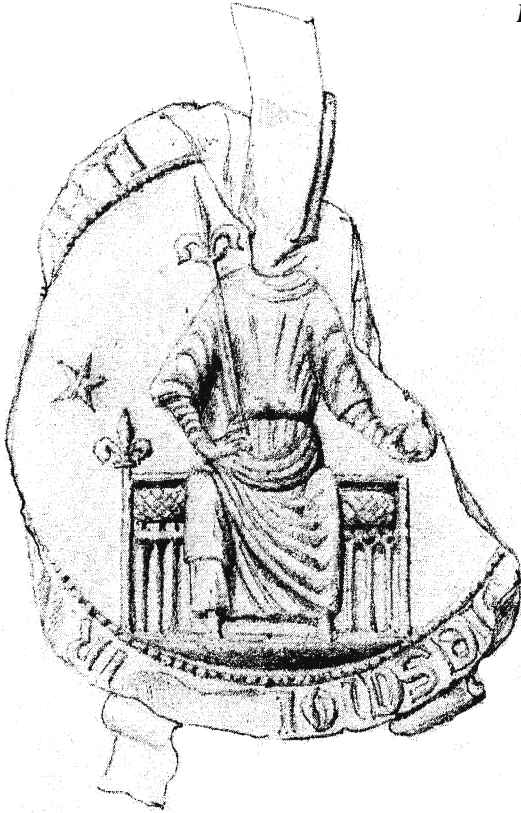
¹⁹ NRA, AM 30.7, NRA, AM 7.8.

²⁰ Trætteberg 1953 no. 32.

²¹ NRA, AM 7.21.

²² Trætteberg 1953 no. 30.

Fig. 6. Seal NRA, AM 30.07. 1303.



his canons. This battle has aroused quite some interest (and a certain amusement) among historians,²³ but nobody has noticed that there is also tangible evidence, in the form of seals.

Archbishop Jon, (1268–1282) had been on collision course with the King about the power of the archiepiscopal administration. He had to some extent been quite successful, and the chapter had benefited very well from this. As a consequence, the canons became quite ambitious, perhaps a bit above themselves. There was a five

²³ See Schøning 1762: 246–259, Keyser vol. II 1858: 71–82, 89–91, 94–103, 126, Munch 1859: 301–310, 379–391, Daae 1897: 77–94, Joys 1955: 342–361, Blom 1956: 198–202, Hamre 2003, Åmodt 1981: 82–105.

years' vacancy before they got a new archbishop, and by then they had apparently become used to taking on all the administration, also that which rightly should belong to the bishop: appointments of priests and canons, jurisdiction and collection of fines, incomes from land, everything. But now, the new bishop, Jørund (1288–1309), was apparently determined to put a stop to all this. He was appointed by the Pope, and did not belong among the local canons since he came from the diocese of Hamar, and he clearly intended that the bishop should take back all these responsibilities unto himself, without consulting the Chapter.

The belligerent canons did not take this one lying down. From the documents preserved, we can see the battle going on. (I have selected a few, but there are in fact about 20 letters preserved which relate to this.) The earliest is from the Pope in 1292, from which we gather that Jørund had complained to him that some "clerics" had exercised violence against other ecclesiastical persons.²⁴ In 1293, the canons and many local clerics issue a statement listing all the rights which the Chapter had at the time of the previous bishop, and claim that they alone shall be in charge of the Cathedral's inventory.²⁵ Several letters from other ecclesiastical institutions in the bishopric bear testimony to the previous rights of the canons, which they explain that Jørund has ignored. In return, the Archbishop fines the whole Chapter a large sum for not having turned up at a meeting to which he had called them (the meeting, as a matter of fact, was planned to take place in the north of the diocese (Vågan?), a very long and uncomfortable distance away, and the summons may have been regarded as pure provocation by the canons.²⁶) And in other letters from the Pope, or from his nominated Official, the bishop of Bergen, we learn continually about riots in the streets, public excommunications during church services, and other humiliations on both sides.

Additional to these letters, there is the Icelandic Bishop Laurentius' saga. Laurentius Kalfsson spent some years in Nidaros as a young man, was taken under Archbishop Jørund's wings, and became wholly his man. In his saga, written soon after his death and apparently a near-autobiography, he describes these incidents seen from the Archbishop's end; Jørund certainly had his points, too.²⁷

From 1297 there is a letter from the Pope, trying to sort things out.²⁸ An agreement between the parts in the same year (Tautraforliket) states, among the other rights of the Chapter, that the canons shall keep their various incomes, the Chapter's

²⁴ DN VI, 61, RN II, 662.

²⁵ DN III, 32, 34, 35, RN II, 772–773.

²⁶ Keyser vol. II 1858: 75, RN II, 764, and DN III, 36, RN II, 780.

²⁷ «Laurentius' saga» 1948, Pollestad 2001.

²⁸ DN III, 38, RN II, 857

thesaurarius shall be in charge of their property: their gold, their table ornaments etc., where two canons shall be in charge of the necessary keys.²⁹

But in 1299 we see that this was all in vain. Inquisitors appointed by the Pope now write to the archbishop that he shall hand back to the chapter all the money he has impounded, and the things he has confiscated. Among the objects listed in this letter is their seal matrices, *sigilla ipsius capituli* (plural). He had clearly taken both the minor and the major matrix.³⁰ It cannot be known precisely when this confiscation had taken place – the letters from this early turbulent period have all lost their official chapter seals. The agreement from 1297 carried the Chapter's seal, but this is hopelessly damaged.³¹

Then in 1303 we find these two letters from the Chapter mentioned above, with seals attached. The canons have written to the various diocesan bishoprics, enclosing copies of the Pope's judgment on the matter.³² And it is one of these letters which has the seal with a star in the background.³³ (The other letter is a document related to somebody's gift to the church, but here the seal is so damaged that it cannot be properly evaluated.³⁴ Presumably this was also the matrix with a star.) From this evidence, it would seem that the Chapter, tired of waiting for the Archbishop to do as he is told, must have commissioned a new matrix.

In September 1303, yet another message to the Archbishop arrives from the Bishop in Bergen, the Pope's Official, again insisting firmly that all the Nidaros canons' properties must to be given back to them.³⁵ The Archbishop presumably caved in after that. He went away to Bergen, and later moved to Oslo, as is evident from other documents. By 1308 he was back in Nidaros, where he died in 1309.

As for the Chapter, there are no seals preserved after 1303 until we get to the year 1307. Here is a letter with seal attached. This is a perfectly ordinary and peaceful document: it acknowledges an endowment of 100 marks to the Chapter from King Håkon V and his queen.³⁶ And here they have now used the old matrix, the one that was confiscated by the Archbishop. It is clearly back in its righteous place, with the Chapter. But the canons have had two roses engraved in the empty spaces above the saint.³⁷ They clearly want to make quite sure that no-one makes any mistakes here!

²⁹ DN III, 39, RN II, 876, Hamre 2003: 205–211.

³⁰ DN II, 50, RN II, 981.

³¹ Ill. in Hamre 2003: 206.

³² DN IV, 57, RN III, 106.

³³ Trættestad 1953 no. 32.

³⁴ DN II, 68, RN III, 108.

³⁵ DN III, 54, RN III, 116.

³⁶ DN II, 87, RN III, 428.

³⁷ Trættestad 1953 no. 28.

But what about the large matrix, the Chapter's main seal, with the church building and the clergy engraved? This was also confiscated, as the admonition from the Pope in 1299 indicates, and presumably also handed back?

There are impressions from 1307 (where it is used as the main seal on the document related to King Håkon's gift) and from 1359; both unfortunately incomplete. But the third, the only reasonably well preserved impression from after the incident, from 1448, was drawn for the National Archive in the 19th century. At this time there was certainly at least one rose to be seen there (Fig. 7).³⁸ This particular part of the seal is lost today, but cannot really be an invention by the artist.³⁹ The canons must have felt the need to safeguard this major matrix, too, after their horrible experience.

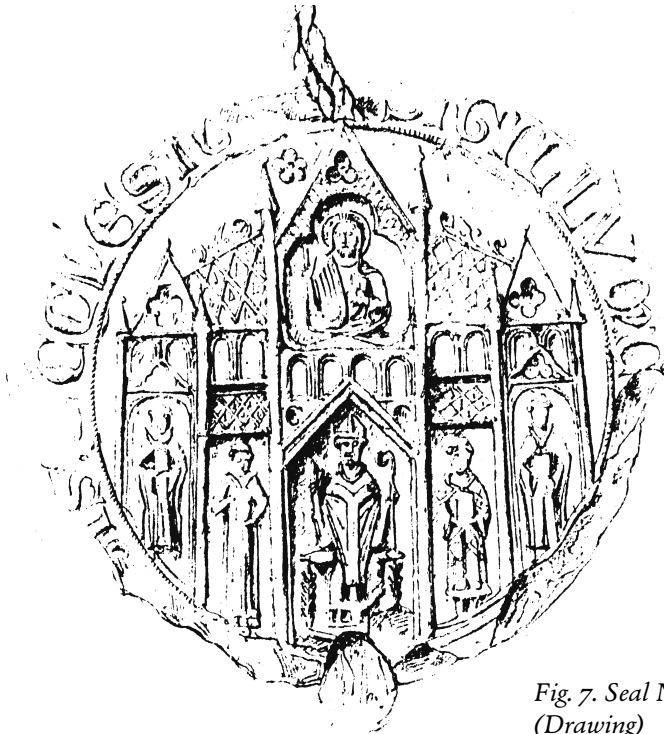


Fig. 7. Seal NRA, AM 16.4. 1448
(Drawing)

³⁸ Trættestad 1953 no. 28.

³⁹ My great gratitude goes to Halvor Kjellberg, Riksarkivet, who looked at this and the other impressions with me, and discussed them.

So that is the story. Thanks to all these documents, the fate of the preserved matrix has been reconstructed.

But why did the canons go back to using the old matrix, when the new one with the star, presumably made around 1300, was clearly both more elegant and more up-to-date, stylistically speaking? Several papers in the 2007 conference “Good Impressions. Image and Authority in Medieval Seals” in The British Museum 2008 demonstrated how new matrices could be commissioned in order to demonstrate ambitions, or to keep up with stylistic developments;⁴⁰ the canons of Nidaros clearly did not care. Were they unusually conservative, or do we see here a triumphant gesture on the part of the Chapter?

Supplement: The dates of the two matrices.

The earliest Chapter seal (the “stadhr”) is known from 1225 (see note 13). The present matrix must therefore be later than this. The earliest known impression is dated 1263 or 1264, but the Early Gothic type of St. Olav’s drapery folds is found throughout the period in Norway, as in all other countries, and it was clearly familiar in Nidaros; Archbishop Sørle’s seal from 1253 has the same thin and soft folds.⁴¹ The round-headed arches in St. Olav’s throne seem however like a stylistic survival from earlier times. And what about the major matrix, the one with the church model?

The architecture depicted on the major seal is of a fairly general kind; it certainly shows no relation to the real Cathedral in the 13th century, nor should we expect this; architecture on seals is usually wonderfully anonymous. Christ, archbishop, canons, gables, roofs, turrets; all are here as one would expect. The only dating evidence is afforded by the arches: they are basically round-headed, but there are a few quatrefoil windows, and the gables and spires are sharply pointed.

What is really remarkable about this seal is the low quality of the goldsmith’s work. He has tried to employ the whole of the circular area; the result is a hopelessly unstable building, where aisles and gables appear on the point of falling down. The gables are not aligned, nor the clumsy niche where Christ appears. The stiff and old-fashioned poses of Christ and the Archbishop are difficult to evaluate from the preserved impression only, but they appear quite different from the calm and erect position and the well-planned garment drapery of St. Olav on the minor matrix. The immediate impression could be that of an untrained goldsmith, trying his hand in a new field, while the man who made the minor matrix produced a much more accomplished work.

⁴⁰ Good Impressions 2008.

⁴¹ Archbishop Sørle’s 1253 seal is the earliest preserved.

Dating works of art by quality is dangerous. But a practical question arises: would the Chapter not have commissioned the major seal first? And only later found the need for a minor seal? This might accord with the difference in artistic horizon between the two. Putting the date of the minor matrix back to Sørle's time or earlier, the major one should be earlier still. Without more evidence, I cannot get any further than this.

As a postscript, it is worth noting that Archbishop Jørund's seal, presumably made around 1288 when he was elected, was of excellent quality. Seated on a throne with lions' heads, his garments are sculpted in the then fashionable «broad folds», and the body is now, however slightly, curved in a "gothic" position.⁴² Various canons' seals from the end of the century⁴³ with standard reverent canons in prayer below an attending Virgin with Child, also suggest that the local goldsmiths now appear to have had both architecture and drapery design well under control.

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⁴² The drawing in Hamre 2003: 192 is imprecise on this point.

⁴³ Illustrated in Dybdahl 1999a (some drawings also unpublished)

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DN: *Diplomatarium Norvegicum I–XXI*. Christiania–Oslo 1849–1976.

NRA: Det Norske Riksarkiv.

RN: *Regesta Norvegica I–*. Ed. Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskriftinstitut. Oslo 1980–(in print).

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Sammendrag

Seglstampen T. 1504 i Videnskapsmuseet i Trondheim, funnet i elvesanden i byen, har tilhørt Nidaros domkapitel, og avtrykk er kjent fra 1263–1264 og inntil 1281, i det siste dokumentet er stampen brukt som kontrasegl. Deretter kommer et avtrykk fra en lignende, men ikke identisk, stamp i et dokument fra 1303. Etter 1307 har man igjen tatt i bruk den eldre stampen, men nå har denne fått to roser inngravert. Denne stampen ble brukt helt frem til reformasjonen (da noen kastet den i elven?)

Dette er et materielt vitnesbyrd fra en velkjent episode i norsk historie: striden mellom erkebiskop Jørund og hans domkapitel, dokumentert i en rekke diplomer fra perioden 1288–1307. Det handlet om økonomi, om bestemmelsesmyndighet, og om personlige uoverensstemmelser. Paven ble trukket inn, og flere forsoningsmøter ble holdt, uten at det hjalp. Erkebiskopen konfiskerte kannikenes eiendom og

kostbarheter, og blant dem kapitlets to seglstamper; vi vet ikke nøyaktig når. Men fra seglet som er dokumentert i 1303 kan vi slutte at domkapitlet hadde fått laget seg et «erstatningssegl», iallfall for det lille seglet. Fra dokumenter i 1307 kan vi deretter se at man da hadde fått tilbake det gamle seglet, men nå med to roser inngravert – det samme kan vi slutte om kapitlets store segl, selv om dette ikke er dokumentert før 1488: også her er det roser inngravert. Men seglet fra 1303 virker egentlig som et meget bedre og mer «moderne» arbeide – hvorfor beholdt man ikke dette, men gikk tilbake til å bruke den gamle stampen? Sier det oss noe om holdninger og ambisjoner?

Det korte tillegget er et forsøk på å datere de to stempene via kunsthistoriske betraktninger; begge har alderdommelige, «romanske», trekk til tross for at de klart tilhører første halvdel av århundret. Det lille seglet er et meget bedre arbeide; mulig er det yngst av de to.

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