

# Destruction of a Sacrosanct Past: Iconoclasm and Norse Revival in Post-war Norway

---

TONJE HAUGLAND SØRENSEN

University of Bergen, Norway. Email: [Tonje.Sorensen@uib.no](mailto:Tonje.Sorensen@uib.no)

Central to this reflection upon the interconnectedness between the destruction of a monument in Norway after the Second World War and iconoclasm will be work by Swiss art historian Dario Gamboni who, in *The Destruction of Art* (1997), argues that any understanding of modern and contemporary iconoclasm must be contextualized via the redefinition of art and its actual autonomy. In so doing, this article will open a twofold reflection concerning iconoclasm as an act of destruction, while also reflecting as to whether or not the very term ‘iconoclasm’ is perhaps best understood by what Dutch scholar Mieke Bal (2002) has called a ‘travelling concept’. The latter will hopefully allow for a consideration of iconoclasm through interdisciplinary cultural analysis, and, as such, enrich our understanding of the term and its practices in both historical and contemporary perspectives.

## Introduction

In May 1945, a photographer in the small rural community of Stiklestad, in central Norway, snapped a picture, depicting a group of people – what looks like men and young boys – gathered around a large stone monolith half buried into the ground. The stone, which stretches across most of the image, is broken in half. Around what must have been the top half, a metal chain is visible. It seems likely that the chain was used to pull the stone monolith into the freshly dug ditch it now occupied, in which case it matters that the chain was not padded in any way. Chains and pulleys are frequently used to move large statues and monuments, but they are always padded to avoid scraping and damaging the object being transported. That is, in so far as the goal of transportation is to preserve the object at hand. When the goal is destruction,

padding is superfluous. The photograph shows an aftermath: when the stone monolith had actually been pulled down, collapsed and broken into the awaiting hole. The haphazardly thrown up mounds of earth surrounding the broken monolith will surely be used to cover the stone completely. Broken and buried, the monolith will disappear from view.

Yet, if the goal was to destroy and/or hide the stone, why document it via a photograph? Why create a visual trace? Pursuit of that question requires a deeper assessment not only of the monument torn down, but also of its relationship to the performative logics of iconoclasm. The latter is a term with a long historical genealogy, but of concern here is the modern understanding of the term. In his work *The Destruction of Art*, Swiss art historian Dario Gamboni (Gamboni 1997) argues for a significant change regarding the conceptualization of iconoclasm brought about by the upheavals of the French Revolution and through the development of the modern idea of the autonomy of art. Gamboni posits that there is a difference between vandalism and iconoclasm, even though both acts are concerned with destruction.

The field of destruction attributed to ‘vandalism’ tends to refute the likelihood that the destruction of art is a specific phenomenon. By contrast, ‘iconoclasm’ and ‘iconoclast’ have the advantage of implying that the actions and or attitudes thus designated have a meaning (Gamboni 1997: 24). While vandalism can be understood as a gratuitous action, iconoclasm implies ‘an intention, sometimes a doctrine’ (Gamboni 1997: 23). Uncovering that intention requires more than just a photograph. It requires considering the wider historical background and assessing the different players and places involved. Let us then begin with the monolith itself.

### Written in Stone

Since the monolith is collapsed into the ground, the front of the stone is not visible in the photograph. Had it been, it would have shown a circle with a cross – the sun cross used by Norwegian National Socialists – as well as a quote from a poem:

<p><i>Mannen kann siga; men Merket det maa i Noreg si Jord som paa Stiklestad staa. Og det er det stora, og det er det glupa, at Merket det stend, um Mannen han stupa.</i></p>	<p>While the man may fall: the banner must stand on Norway’s soil And on Stiklestad’s land. That is the great and that is the grand, that the man he may fall, but the banner will stand.</p>
---	---

This is the last stanza of a poem entitled *Tord Foleson* by Norwegian poet Per Sivle (1857–1904). It describes the death of Tord Foleson, the standard-bearer of the medieval King Olaf II Haraldson (reign 1015–1030). In 1030 both Foleson and King Olaf died in The Battle of Stiklestad. Olaf would later be sanctified, and his cult would go on to be one of the most important in medieval Norway. Ever since that historical battle and the sanctification of the dead king, Stiklestad has been a place with a

deeply symbolic topography, and it is in part this commemorative power that Sivle's poem reflects upon (Eriksen 2020).

However, the monolith was not there to commemorate Sivle or Foleson. To some degree it was not even there to commemorate St Olaf. Instead, it was intended to celebrate the Norwegian National Socialist Party *Nasjonal Samling* (literally 'National Unity'), which had commissioned the monument and celebrated its unveiling in 1944. At that time, German forces had occupied Norway (since 9 April 1940) and the *Nasjonal Samling* (hereafter NS) had collaborated with the Nazi occupation force since day one. This collaboration had taken many forms, but one was the active use of arts and visual culture to spread national socialist ideology (Fure and Emberland 2009; Jensen and Dahl 2005). In its propaganda art, NS was particularly fond of drawing upon medieval and Viking history. Founded by Vidkun Quisling (1887–1945) in 1933, the party had used the sun cross – also called Olaf's cross – as an emblem all the way back to its beginnings. As NS had laid claim to a particular affinity with St Olaf, during the 1930s and early 1940s it had arranged large-scale celebrations at Stiklestad on the date of St Olaf's death on 29 July (also known as *Olsok*, from the Old Norse 'ólafsvaka').

The monolith, which was only one part of a much larger monumental construction, had been commissioned for such a celebration, and was thus unveiled on 29 July 1944. In front of the monolith was a rostrum decorated with a stone relief depicting the death of the sanctified king. Branching out from the monolith were stone stairs and low walls that made the site resemble a large stage. It was a layout that made sense considering NS's tradition of large, open-air gatherings. It also ensured that NS architecture and art completely dominated the site.

After the liberation of Norway on 8 May 1945, there was widespread destruction of Nazi artworks and propaganda, and this included the NS monumental grounds at Stiklestad. Most of the stage was destroyed and/or moved. The monolith, being too large to move, was torn down and buried. Clearly, this was the most practical solution. The breaking of the monolith fits with Gamboni's point about iconoclasm being the destruction of images done with a specific intention, which in this case concerned the intent to engage in an act of destructive retaliation against a symbol of a tyrannical regime. The photograph, with its image of broken stone and group of bystanders, can thus be understood as a snapshot of just that process. However, the photograph is more than merely a representation of an act of destruction. It is also a documentation of that very act and, to some extent, of the monolith as well. The photograph is indicative of how the act of iconoclasm is, to some extent, only one stop in what is a rather long visual and commemorative genealogy. But before engaging more thoroughly with the matter, it is necessary to expand on the commemorative legacy of Stiklestad as a site.

### **A Semiotic Landscape and Traditional Iconography**

The NS members and followers were not the first to erect a monument at Stiklestad. Folklorist Anne Eriksen has argued that, in a Norwegian context, Stiklestad as a place has such a long and complex historical and commemorative history that it

is best described as a ‘semiotic landscape’. Eriksen argues that, seen through the prism of semiotic landscapes, historical places are ‘equally the result of processes that have happened after the events the place is connected with, and that these processes must proceed more or less continuously so that the historical place shall keep its importance’ (Eriksen 2020: 14).

Eriksen further expounds on how this process continuously shaped and reshaped Stiklestad. As early as 1180 a Romanesque stone church had been erected on the site. After the Protestant Reformation of 1536, official veneration of the cult of St Olaf became difficult, although visitors still came. Sometime during this period, a wooden cross had been erected on the site (Risåsen 1994: 342). Eriksen shows how, during the eighteenth century, antiquarian historians became increasingly interested in the site, an interest that, among other things, led to the construction of new monuments (Eriksen 2020: 26). In 1710, the Danish-Norwegian nobleman Johan von Lemfort (1650–1710) erected a stone pyramid in place of the cross. Known as the ‘Lemfort pillar’ (*Lemfortstøtta*), it was joined in 1807 by the ‘Olaf pillar’ (*Olafstøtta*) designed by Captain Ole Lyng and made by Nicolai Dajon (1748–1823), a Danish sculptor and professor at the Copenhagen Academy of Fine Arts (Musum 1930). In 1879, the Lemfort pillar was taken down, most likely due to it being in a poor state (Heiberg *et al.* 1969: 198). From then on, the Olaf pillar was the only monument on the site, and in the earliest celebrations arranged by NS, it is the Olaf pillar that was the centre for their gatherings. However, the Olaf pillar was removed when NS erected their own shrine in 1944. NS also published a national socialist historical work about the story of St Olaf, *Olavstanken fra Stiklestad til Stiklestad*. The book purported to tell the ‘true’ story of St Olaf which, according to NS, had been obscured for too long by Marxist historians (Mehle *et al.* 1944: 143). The work was a blend of scientific racism, esotericism, and a rather speculative use of historical source material, creating a version of St Olaf that was very supportive of national socialist ideology.

In some ways NS’s reinterpretation of Stiklestad was in line with Eriksen’s argument that the conceptualization of a historical place is always a process. However, NS differed from the antiquarian historians that Eriksen’s reflected upon, in that they actively removed objects from the site while also denying substantial aspects of prior scholarship. It can therefore be tempting to say that the first act of iconoclasm on Stiklestad was perpetrated by NS, when they tore down the Olaf pillar. However, such an argument would run the risk of obscuring the emphasis on iconographical tradition that was central in all of NS’s art and propaganda.

Creating a monument with the formal characteristics of a monolith and the relief showing King Olaf being killed in battle was a well-established artistic expression, the antecedence of which far preceded any use the NS made of the *topos*. While there existed medieval depictions of King Olaf at Stiklestad, the NS monument particularly invoked the images developed during the nineteenth century. In this period, the national Romantic movement had been strong in Norway and had effectively functioned as a formative aesthetic and cultural part of the country’s growing independence movement. A central act in this growing national movement was the

publication of national histories and/or the translation of Norse sagas into modern vernacular language to allow for a general readership. It was common that these publications were lavishly illustrated. The best-known examples of such a tradition were the illustrations of King Olaf at Stiklestad made by the artist Peter Nikolai Arbo (1831–1892) for the work of historian Peter Andreas Munch (1810–1863), and later works done by the artist Halfdan Egedius (1877–1899) for an 1896 edition of the *Heimskringla* (the collection of sagas about Swedish and Norwegian kings). It is therefore possible to speak of an ‘established iconography’ concerning Olaf’s death that the Stiklestad monument built upon.

Moreover, the artist behind the monument, Wilhelm Rasmussen (1879–1965), had, since 1921 held the position of Professor of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Oslo, where he was a staunch defender of classical, figurative art and placed an emphasis on the need to study the so-called ‘Old Masters’. However, as early as 1933, he had also held a membership of NS, and during the Nazi occupation of Norway he had taken on an active role in the wider cultural reorientation of national-socialism. This clearly demonstrates that Rasmussen was not a struggling artist forced to work for the national-socialist government, but was rather an integral part of the establishment. In photographs from the monument’s inauguration, in 1944, he is shown sitting next to Quisling during the unveiling.

All in all, this presented the NS monument as part of a continuity, although with an emphasis on NS as a logical culmination of a larger historical process where NS actively sought legitimacy by evoking historical heritage. When it was torn down, it was not due to considerations of formalist or aesthetic value. Neither was Stiklestad abandoned as a site. It is in fact significant that, after the NS-monument was demolished in 1945, the locals responsible re-erected the old Olaf pillar on its former site. The site soon looked much the same as it had done prior to 1944, though with the difference that the pillar now stood on a piece of ground which contained the remnants of the NS-monolith. Thus, more historical layers were added to what Eriksen called Stiklestad’s semiotic landscape.

### **The Paradox of Iconoclasm?**

As an iconoclastic act, the tearing down of the monolith in 1945 connects to a wider historical framework where statues and artworks are transformed into the monuments of their own degradation (Gamboni 1997: 81). Gamboni charts a similar development in the tearing down and destruction of the many Soviet monuments in Eastern Europe, and to this could be added the example of the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Bagdad’s Firdos square in 2003. To some extent, these actions, particularly when dealing with portraits and statues, resemble the Late Antiquity concept of *executio in effigie*.

However, they differ from these historical examples by their reliance on the modern concepts of cultural heritage and the ideas of the autonomy of art. While each modern toppling of a statue is defined by its particular set of historical circumstances,

certain common and recurring patterns can be discerned. The first is what to do with the statues and monuments once they have been debased, and the second concerns the mediation of the iconoclastic act and its reverberations. These are both questions of acute value to the Stiklestad monolith.

As the 1945 photograph indicates, the broken stone was buried where it fell, and, while being unearthed for a short period of time, it has since been covered with earth anew. The question as to whether or not it should stay in the ground or be dug up and put on display is an ongoing one. It has been suggested that the monolith should be unearthed and exhibited as a form of pedagogical tool to warn about the dangers of Nazism (*Aftenposten* 2013). However, several politicians as well as people working at the *Stiklestad National Cultural Centre* (a centre responsible for the heritage management of Stiklestad), have been wary of this approach (*Trønder-avisa* 2015). They fear that, more than a warning, the unearthed monolith would become a beacon for right-wing extremists. Another possible scenario would be to unearth the stone and, much as Communist statues and monuments were moved to special parks and museums, transport it somewhere else. However, this would remove the monolith from the semiotic landscape that makes up Stiklestad, and thereby rob the stone of most of its historical context. Then there is the quirk that if the monolith is unearthed it would go against and partly invalidate the iconoclastic act perpetrated in 1945.

The current solution employed by the *Stiklestad National Culture Centre* has been to display photographs, including the one of the toppled monolith taken in May 1945, as part of its dissemination programme. In so doing, these photographs become part, albeit on a small scale, of the iconographic tradition of image violation. Such documentation is, as Bruno Latour and Dario Gamboni have argued, a central part of iconoclasm, and one which ensures that monuments and statues that are attacked become better known, through photographic mediation, than they had previously been. If so, iconoclasm is not about the destruction of an object, so much as about its violent and often degrading alteration. It is also an alteration which revitalises the monument attacked, by providing it with a new context.

In his unfinished novel *The Man without Qualities*, Austrian author Robert Musil (1880–1942) argues that all monuments risk a strange fate where they become inconspicuous due to familiarity. Without being constantly reinvented, monuments can fade into the background. Monuments and statues have to be seen and re-seen so as to remain imbued with meaning and, in our modern age of mechanical reproduction, media play a central part in such a process. Photographs and films of monuments, as well as of the famous and important people visiting and interacting with them, ensure that the monument itself is still being seen. Photographs of the monument are therefore not just ‘mere’ representations, but rather part of a complex image ecology that helps perpetuate and reactivate the monument as such. In this view, iconoclasm is not about being or not being, but rather about the layers upon layers of violent alterations – where each layer carries with it its own historical context.

In this case, we believe that the constant reiterations and re-monumentalizations of Stiklestad are illuminating. The historical topography of the place is deeply layered, and in a sense contains within it several acts of iconoclasm and – keeping with

the often paradoxical nature of iconoclasm – at the same time contains several acts of commemoration. Grappling with iconoclasm becomes then engaging with how it is, in part, an ongoing performative act which concerns the participants and sites involved as much as the objects that are eventually destroyed. The goal is then not to destroy images – because in an age of mechanical reproduction the question could well be whether that is even possible – but about *controlling the narrative*. This concerns not only the object that is destroyed, but also the much wider question of who gets to define public spaces and, subsequently, the idea of the public sphere.

## References

- Aftenposten* (2013) Skal nazibautaen avdekkes? In *Aftenposten* 29 July 2013. Available at <https://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/i/JoW06/skal-nazibautaen-avdekkes>
- Bal M** (2002) *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Gamboni D** (1997) *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Eriksen A** (2020) Stiklestad – historisk grunn. *Tidsskrift for kulturforskning: TjK* 19(2), 13–28.
- Fure JS and Emberland T** (2009) *Jakten på Germania: fra nordensvermeri til SS-arkeologi*. Oslo: Humanist.
- Heiberg B, Berg A and Sinding-Larsen E** (eds) (1969) *Fremtid for fortiden: fortidsvern i 125 år*. Oslo: Grøndahl.
- Jensen TB and Dahl HF** (2005) *Parti og plakat: NS 1933-1945* Ny, forøket utg. Røyken: Historisk forl.
- Mehle E, Eggen T and Vik T** (1944) *Olavstanken fra Stiklestad til Stiklestad*. Oslo: Centralforl.
- Musum E** (1930) *Verdalsboka: en bygdebok om Verdal: 3-5, 3: Gårds- og slektshistorie Verdal: Verdal kommune, Bygdeboknemnda*.
- Risåsen GT** (1994) Olavsstøtten. In Forseth T (ed.), *En reise gjennom norsk byggekunst: Fortidsminneforeningens eiendommer gjennom 150 år*. Oslo: Riksantikvaren og Fortidsminneforeningen, pp. 282–285.
- Trønder-avisa* (2015) En haug med flere historier. In *Trønder-avisa* 10 July 2015.

## About the Author

**Tonje Haugland Sørensen** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies at the University of Bergen. Sørensen is an art historian and film scholar, whose transdisciplinary work centres on the reception of history and cultural heritage. She has a particular focus on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her postdoctoral research will take the form of a monograph tentatively titled ‘Overview – the art of the aerial’, and deals with the ideas of the aerial and aerial perspective in the early modern to contemporary western society.