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Sacred or Scandalous?: How to Approach Depictions of Genitals in Medieval Art

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Miniatures depicting the Wounds of Christ figure in many medieval manuscripts (fig. 1).[1] These fascinating images look weird and alienating when shown without the body they were inflicted on. They also invoke the feeling we are looking at something scabrous because of their similarity to a vulva. It is uncomfortable: these are the Wounds of Christ, a sacred matter. They shouldn't be associated with something vulgar. Is this strange resemblance maybe the product of a dirty mind? Much has been written about eroticism and religious experience in the Middle Ages.[2] In late medieval women's monasteries in particular, eroticism and religiosity were closely linked.[3] This female spirituality found expres-

[1] Other examples are the side wound of Christ and instruments of the Passion on f. 331r in the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg, New York, Metropolitan Museum MS 69.86 and the wound of Christ, accompanied by a short prayer ("[q]uinque vulnera dei sint medicinam mei/" may the five wounds of God be medicine for me) on f. 4v in a Book of Hours, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Lat. Lit. f. spacja2.

[2] Ian Frederick Moulton, *Eroticism in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Magic, Marriage, and Midwifery*, Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Vol. 39 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016).

[3] Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*, Library of Medieval Women (Boydell Press, 1992); Julie B. Miller, "Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women's Mystical Literature: A Call for a Feminist Critique," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15, 2 (1999): 25–49; Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century" in *eadem*, *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books: 1991), 119–150; *eadem*, *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of Carolina Press, 1982), especially *Women Mystics in the Thirteenth Century: The Case of the Nuns of Helfta*, 170–262; Ulrike Wiethaus, "Sexuality, Gender and the Body in Late Medieval Women's Spirituality: Cases from Germany and the Netherlands," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7, 1 (1991): 35–52.

Fig. 1. Side wound of Christ ("life-size") and Christ as Man of Sorrows. Book of Hours, Verdun (?) and Paris (?), ca. 1375, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.90, f. 130r, https://tiny.pl/dlfwp

sion in art, created by the women in the monasteries, but we see these thoughts depicted outside the monastery walls, as well. Images of the side wound of Christ, as depicted in the Book of Hours in the Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.90, need to be seen in context with the medieval fascination with the eucharist.[4] Bread and wine becoming the body and the blood of Christ made people think about it, reflect on it, and meditate on it. This generated a need to depict these thoughts. As an illustration, as an explanation, but also as a mean to get a grip on this miracle of transubstantiation.

[4] Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval* Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Godefridus J.C. Snoek, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist: A Process of Mutual Interaction* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood. Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Roger S. Wieck, *Illuminating Faith: The Eucharist in Medieval Life and Art* (New York: The Morgan Library & Museum in association with Scala Arts Publishers, 2014).

The Legend of the Mass of St Gregory is a perfect example of this. The well-known legend dates from the eight century.[5] Pope Gregory the Great was saying Mass when a woman present started to laugh at the moment the celebration of the Holy Communion begins. She could not believe that transubstantiation had taken place. The bread, minutes ago blessed by Pope Gregory, was about to be handed out as the body of Christ. But it was her who had baked the bread. How could this humble bread suddenly be the heavenly body of Christ? Pope Gregory prayed for a sign to convince the doubting woman, and – oh miracle! – the bread turned into a bleeding finger. In the thirteenth century this legend became more widespread. In the meantime, the story had been modified: the doubting woman had become one of the deacons who assisted Pope Gregory at Mass. The bread no longer turned into a bleeding finger, but into Christ himself. There are many depictions of this legend in which we see Gregory saying Mass, and Christ appearing as the Man of Sorrow.[6] Soon all kind of details were added to the appearing Christ, indicating his suffering during the Passion, such as the dice, hammer, nails, crowing rooster, and even above Christ's head a handful of hair, pulled from the divine head. It had become very crowded at the altar. In a panel, now at Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, we see besides St Gregory and his deacons, the commissioner of the altarpiece and patron saints (fig. 2). On the altar and behind the altar, the space is filled with numerous references to the Passion of Christ. Most striking here is Christ himself (fig. 3). He is no longer the passive Man of Sorrows. Here we see a Christ actively engaged in filling the chalice, which is standing on the altar. He is pouring his blood by pressing hard on the wound in his side. A large stream of blood is filling the chalice. As a result of this depiction, the actions at the altar, where the Eucharist is celebrated, become more than clear.[7] Needless to say, the wound of Christ plays an important role in it. The relationship between a chalice and the wounds of Christ is not new. At depictions of the crucifixion, we often see angels appearing, flying in and holding a chalice under the wounds of Christ to collect his blood (fig. 4).[8]

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[5] John the Deacon, Johannes Hymonides, *Life of Saint Gregory the Great*, in L. Castaldi, *Johannes Hymmonides Diaconus Romanus. Vita Gregorii I Papae. I. La tradizione manoscritta* (Florence 2004), 370–386.

[6] J.A. Endres, "Die Darstellung der Gregoriusmesse im Mittelalter," *Zeitschrift für christlichen Kunst* 11/12 (1917): 146–156; Caroline Walker Bynum, "Seeing and Seeing Beyond: The Mass of St Gregory in the Fifteenth Century" in *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, eds. Jeffrey F. Hamburger, Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006), 208–240; Uwe Westfehling, *Die Messe Gregor des Grossens. Vision-Kunst-Realität, Katalog und Fuhrer zu einer Ausstellung im Schnüttgen Museum der Stadt Köln* (Cologne 1982).

[7] Wendelien A.W. van Welie-Vink, *Body Language. The Body in Medieval Art* (Rotterdam: NAi010, 2020), 12, 28–30.

[8] *Ibidem*, 14, 30–32; Clifford Davidson, "Sacred Blood and the Late Medieval Stage," *Comparative Drama* 31, 3 (1997): f436–458, especially 446ff.

Fig. 2. Mass of St Gregory; German, Master of the Heilige Sippe, 1486, Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, ABM s33, photo Ruben de Heer.

Fig. 3. Christ, pouring out his blood by pressing his side wound, detail of Mass of St Gregory; German, Master of the Heilige Sippe, 1486, Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, ABM s33, photo Ruben de Heer.

The growing interest in the Wounds of Christ inspires special prayers to these wounds. Various writings by church scholars and theologians influenced this trend. Their writings soon established thinking about the Passion of Christ. For example, the twelfth-century *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became a Man), written by Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, became very influential. Because of this

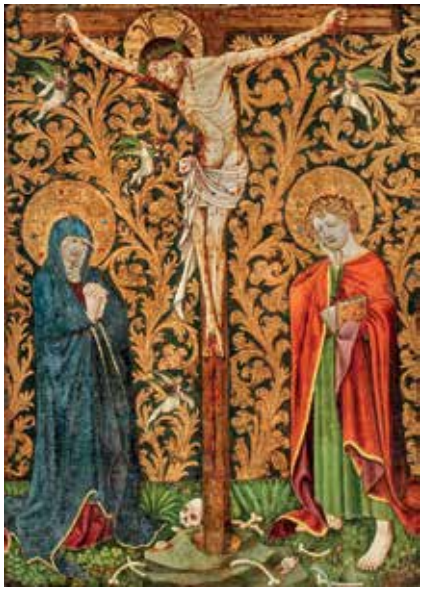

Fig. 4. Crucifixion with angels, collecting the Blood of Christ in chalices; German, Master of Lamentation of Christ at Lindau, ca. 1430–1439, Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, ABM s34, photo Ruben de Heer.

new way of thinking about the Passion of Christ, more and more texts on the suffering of Christ were emerging.[9] The authors of these texts urge believers to experience Christ's suffering as fully as possible through meditation.[10] Very influential was the fourteenth-century *Meditationes Vitae Christi* by Pseudo-Bonaventure. The work had a wide spread: more than two hundred manuscripts have been handed down to us, seventeen of which contain illustrations. Text and illumination exerted a great influence on church art.[11] Many details of Christ's suffering were explored in great detail, including the wounds.[12] Veneration for Christ's wounds also increased rapidly among the Franciscans, with *imitatio Christi*, the emulating of Christ and his sufferings, playing a major role.[13] The reception of the stigmata by Francis of Assisi can be seen as the most extreme form of *imitatio*. Meditative texts like *Imitatio Christi* by Thomas à Kempis encouraged the faithful to follow the suffering of Christ as closely as possible. Every wound on Christ's body had to be meditated on in order to experience His suffering to the maximum degree. To encourage meditation, images began to play an important role.[14]

[9] Van Welie-Vink, *Body Language*, 141–150.

[10] One of the most influential authors is Geert Grote (1340–1384). Within his Modern Devotion movement, meditating on the Passion of Christ is one of the focal points.

[11] Isa Ragusa, Rosalie B. Green, *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

[12] For an overview of the development of depicting the Passion of Christ, see James H. Marrow, *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance. A Study of the Transformation of Sacred Metaphor into Descriptive Narrative* (Kortrijk: Van Ghemmert 'publishing Company, 1979).

[13] Kathryn M. Rudy, *Rubrics, Images, and Indulgences in Late Medieval Netherlandish Manuscripts* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 80; Van Welie-Vink, *Body language*, 145.

[14] Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 81–82; Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland circa 1300* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 51; John M. Hand, *Women, Manuscripts, and Identity in Northern Europe, 1350–1550* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 105.

Within these developments, a series of prayers to the five wounds of Christ became very popular.[15] Each wound has its own prayer. Included in prayer books and books of hours these prayers serve for personal devotion. Images, which illustrate these prayers, also focus on the wounds of Christ. They no longer depict the suffering Christ, but only that body part with the wound that is central to the corresponding prayer (fig. 5). Numerous images arise, in which Christ himself is no longer depicted. Just his wounds are shown. These miniatures with body parts

Fig. 5. Prayer to the Holy Wound in Christ's right hand. Book of Hours, Southern Netherlands, ca. 1430–1450, The Hague, Royal Library, MS 131 G 41, f. 60r, https://tiny.pl/dlfw4

[15] Gerhard Lutz, "The Drop of Blood: Image and Piety in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 4, 1, special issue: Animating Medieval Art (2015): 37–51; Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Blood of Christ in the Later Middel Ages," *Church History* 71, 4 (2002): 685–714.

Fig. 6. Prayer to the Five Wounds of Christ. Loftie Hours, The Netherlands, middle of the fifteenth century, Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum MS W.165, f. 110v, https://tiny.pl/dl15g

are macabre-looking. They mark a shift of attention: it is about the Passion of Christ, but it is his wounds we are focusing on. This shift of attention finally leads to this: just the bleeding wounds (fig. 6). Because the wounds no longer belong to a body, they become very abstract. They are no longer real wounds, but icons, symbols of the Passion of Christ.

Being detached from the body, the side wound of Christ, caused by the spear of the Roman centurion, starts to take on a life of its own. The wound can be depicted as an independent item amidst the passion tools, such as the nails, the crown of thorns and the spear (fig. 7). Amidst all these passion instruments, the sheer size of the wound draws the eyes of the faithful observer directly to it. This enormous size of the side wound is not accidental. In a French Book of Hours, the side wound is combined with an image of Christ as the Man of Sorrows (fig. 1). The

Fig. 7. Bohun Psalter and Hours, England, ca. 1370–1380, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. D. 4. 4, f. 236v, https://tiny.pl/dl15r

wound is many times larger than Christ himself. It is surrounded by a white border with text, in which is written: "Ci est la mesure de la plaie du coste nostre seigneur qui pour nous souffrist mort en la crois" ("This is the size of the wound of the cut of our Lord who suffered and died for us on the cross").[16] So the wound is depicted

[16] Another example of a wound of Christ in its actual size is a fifteenth-century woodcut, pasted in a manuscript in the Rosenwald Collection in the National Gallery of Art, Washington. The depiction of the wound is accompanied by a lengthy inscription, which reads: "Das ist die leng vnd weite der wŭnden Cristi die Im in sein h. Seitten gestochen wart an dem Creitz wer die mit reŭ vnd laid aŭch mit andacht kŭsset als oft er das thŭet hat er 7 jar ablas von dem pabst Innocentio" ("This is the length and width of Christ's wound which was pierced in his side on the Cross. Whoever kisses this wound with remorse and sorrow, also with devotion, will have as often as he does this, seven years indulgence from Pope Innocent"); and: "Das Creitzlein das in der wŭnden Cristi stet zu 40 maln gemesen das macht die leng Christi in seiner Menschait wer das mit andacht kŭsset der ist den tag behiet vor dem gächen tott vnd vor ein schlag" ("This little cross standing in Christ's wound measured 40 times makes the length of Christ in his humanity. Whoever kisses it with devotion shall be protected from sudden death or misfortune"). Peter Parshall and Rainer Schoch, *Origins of European Printmaking: Fifteenth-Century Woodcuts and Their Public* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2005), 259.

in its true size. It is quite a wound, measuring 13 by 10 cm. It is in keeping with the medieval believer's need to get as close as possible to the Passion of Christ, to empathise as much as possible with the suffering, Christ has endured for our salvation. The large, and in his eyes real, size of the wound makes the believer realise even more how much Christ suffered and brings it all very close. The wound is no longer just a part of Christ: the wound is Christ.

A fifteenth-century Book of Hours contains a miniature in which two angels are holding a shroud with the Holy Wound (fig. 8). The text below the miniature

Fig. 8. Two angels holding a shroud with the Holy Wound, Book of Hours, Central France (Le Mans?), ca. 1480–1500, The Hague, Royal Library, MS 131 H 18, f. 167v, https://tiny.pl/dl15d

assures us we are looking at the real wound in its true size: "Cest cy la mesure de la benoiste playe du couste precieux" ("This is the size of the benign wound of the precious cut"). The way the side wound is shown here had been derived from a type of image that was not unknown at the time the Book of Hours was produced. Quite the contrary. The medieval observer will have had an immediate association with St Veronica. In the Middle Ages, St Veronica was well known

and venerated, as was her veil with Christ's face on it (fig. 9).[17] According to the legend, St Veronica witnessed Christ carrying the Cross. Her heart was filled with pity of his suffering, and she cleaned his face with her veil. Later she discovered

Fig. 9. Two angels holding the Veil of St Veronica, Bruges, Master of Saint Ursula Legend, ca. 1475–1500, Antwerp, The Phoebus Foundation, https://tiny.pl/dl15p

a print of his face was left on the veil, leaving her with the first image of the face of Christ. In the early thirteenth century, pilgrims started to talk about a cloth they had seen in Rome, called the *Vera Icon*. Pope Innocent III (1161–1216) recognised the power of this relic and its story. By promoting it, he hoped to inspire faith among the people.[18] Paintings, miniatures and sculptures depicting this miracle

[17] Van Welie-Vink, *Body Language*, 57–62.

[18] Rebecca Rist, "Innocent III and the Roman Veronica: Papal PR or Eucharistic Icon?" in *The European Fortune of the Roman Veronica in the Middle Ages*, eds. A. Murphy, H.L Kessler, M. Petoletti, E. Duffy, G. Milanese (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 114–125.

became very popular. Their purpose was twofold: they aided in venerating Veronica as a saint, and in venerating the True Face of Christ. The legend of Veronica's veil became so well-known and widespread that just showing the veil with the face of Christ was enough to remind the medieval viewer of the passion of Christ. It was no longer necessary to depict Veronica holding the veil. Actually, the focus had shifted to the "true face" of Christ.

The face of Christ on Veronica's cloth is the representation of the search for the way the "true" Christ looked. Because Veronica had pressed her veil against the face of Christ during his walk to Golgotha, people believed that with the relic of this veil they had a real representation of Christ during his Passion. Seeing an image of Veronica's cloth made the believer witness the passion. In fact, one could not get any closer to Christ.

By replacing his face here with the side wound, the "true" image of Christ's face is transferred to the wound. The wound thus becomes a "true witness" of the Passion of Christ.

Images of Christ's wounds without his body seem to occur only in miniatures. They illustrate texts in prayer books and books of hours. They are part of a larger illustration cycle, and it is important to take that into consideration, as it can help to understand how the medieval believer looked at these images. This can be demonstrated by the cycle of illustrations in the Psalter and Book of Hours of the young Bonne of Luxembourg (1315–1349), a Bohemian princess who married John, duke of Normandy, who would become John the Good, king of France.[19] Books like this one were intended for personal use, and the images in them were for private use, meant for one pair of eyes. This in contrast to an altarpiece, at which several people could look at the same time. Prayers and images in the manuscript were intended to help the faithful meditate.[20]

Bonne's psalter contains miniatures with scenes which are common in these kinds of manuscripts, for example David and Goliath at the opening of Psalm 1 and the Trinity at Psalm 110). The miniatures, likely made by Jean le Noir and his daughter Bourgot, are of high quality.[21] But in terms of iconography, most of the

[19] Florens Deuchler, "Looking at Bonne of Luxembourg's Prayer Book," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 29, 6 (1971): 267–278; Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 140–43; Margaret M. Manion, "Women, Art and Devotion: Three French Fourteenth-Century Royal Prayer Books" in *The Art of the Book: Its Place in Medieval Worship*, eds. Bernard J. Muir, Margaret M. Manion (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1998), 21–40.

[20] Susan Groag Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture," *Signs* 7 (1982): 742–68; Valerie Edden, "The Devotional Life of the Laity in the Late Middle Ages" in Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden, Roger Ellis, *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts* (Cambridge, 2005), 35–49; Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*, 140–43; M. Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago 2011), 111–207.

[21] Karin Gludovatz, Michaela Krieger, "La Contesse de Bar, Jean le Noir, Enlumineur, et Bourgot, sa Fille, Enlumineresse de Livres: Zu Konzeption und Ausführung der Heures de Flandre," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 64 (2003): 103–104, 109–113.

images are standard, without any surprising iconographic detail. This also seems to be the case with a miniature depicting the Crucifixion (fig. 10). We see Christ on the cross. At the foot of the cross Bonne and her husband John are kneeling. However, looking more closely – something Bonne will undoubtedly have done, because the miniatures are meant to assist in meditation – we see a remarkable detail. Christ actually addresses Bonne and her husband. He even detaches himself slightly from the cross for this purpose. His right hand is no longer nailed to the cross, but points to his chest, to his side wound. Bonne's and John's gaze is therefore focused on the wound. A few pages later, the next miniature appears. It is a depiction of a huge wound in Christ's side, amidst the passion tools (fig. 11). The size of the wound compared to the passion instruments suggests that the wound

Fig. 10. Bonne of Luxembourg and her husband John, duke of Normandy (who would become John the Good, King of France) kneeling at the Cross, Psalter and Book of Hours, Paris, likely by Jean le Noir and his daughter Bourgot, before 1349, New York, The Cloisters, f. 382r, https://tiny.pl/dl158

Fig. 11. The side wound of Christ amidst the passion tools, Psalter and Book of Hours, Paris, likely by Jean le Noir and his daughter Bourgot, before 1349, New York, The Cloisters, f. 331r, https://tiny.pl/dl158

is depicted at full size. The white border surrounding the wound probably should have included text that underscored this, as we saw above in the French Book of Hours, where the side wound was combined with an image of Christ as the Man of Sorrows (fig. 1). In the Crucifixion miniature, Christ personally urges Bonne

and John to meditate on His side wound. This actively addressing the believer is not uncommon. In a panel of Christ as Man of Sorrows by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, Christ helps us to focus by drawing attention to his side wound (fig. 12).[22] Blood is flowing profusely, especially from the side wound. The gesture of the right hand supporting the wound, also directs the viewer's attention where it should be: all attention should be focused on the wound in Christ's side.

Fig. 12. Christ as Man of Sorrows. Painting, Haarlem, Geertgen tot Sint Jans, ca. 1485–1494, Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, ABM s63, photo Ruben de Heer

All the examples of wounds of Christ discussed above are images with a strong connection to the Eucharist. These are images which no longer depict Christ with his wounds, but only the side wound, which represents Christ as a *pars pro toto*.

[22] Henri Defoer, "Geertgen tot Sint Jans' Christus als Man van Smarten" in *Gezien met eigen ogen! Topstukken uit de Middeleeuwen in Museum Catharijneconvent*, eds. Wendelien van Welie--Vink, Klara Broekhuijsen (Amersfoort: Bekking & Blitz Uitgevers, 2014), 69–72; Friso Lammertse, Jeroen Giltaij, *Vroege Hollanders: schilderkunst van de late Middeleeuwen* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2008), 92–94.

There is something strange about these wounds, though. When the wound is depicted on Christ, inflicted on his body, the wound is depicted horizontally (figs. 3, 10, 12). If the wound is on its own, the wound has been rotated 90 degrees, and is depicted vertically (figs. 1, 7–8, 11). By doing so, suddenly the wound starts to look different. This is no coincidence. As demonstrated above, people have a pictorial memory, and artists can appeal to it. Are the artists, who depicted these wounds vertically instead of horizontally, also exploiting the pictorial memory of the medieval observer? Which visual tradition is then appealed to?

There exist some lead pins, depicting the vulva in a very weird way (figs. 13–14). In terms of material and size, they look very much like the so-called pilgrim's badges. These are cheap pins made of lead or tin, and their images are

Fig. 13. Vulva figure walking on stilts wearing a phallic crown, badge of lead-tin, origin unknown, ca. 1375–1424, Collectie Familie Van Beuningen, Nr. 1715, https://tiny.pl/dl112

Fig. 14. Vulva figure dressed as pilgrim wearing wooden sandals, pilgrim's hat holding staff crowned with phallus in one hand and rosary in the other, badge of lead-tin, origin unknown, ca. 1375–1424, Collectie Familie Van Beuningen, Nr. 2184, https://tiny.pl/dl118

related to the several shrines, churches or sacred places along the pilgrim's routes. Available as merchandise at the holy shrines and places, they were often bought and worn by pilgrims as a small souvenir to take home. In addition to this group, numerous pins have been found with profane subjects, such as birds, hearts, flowers, etc. Both secular and religious pins were worn: on clothing, pinned to hats, and used as charms on a bracelet.[23] The vulva pins belong to a larger group represent-

[23] Jos Koldeweij, Annemarieke Willemsen, Heilig en profaan: laatmiddeleeuwse insignes in cultuurhistorisch perspectief (Amsterdam: Van Soeren & Co., 1995), 19; H.J.E. van Beuningen, Jos

ing erotic subjects.[24] There are peculiar specimens in this group. Amongst them are badges with a winged phallic animal wearing crown and bell around its neck, or a phallus on a spit, with a vulva underneath as a dripping dish.[25] There is much debate about the meaning of these pins. They are not associated with any place of pilgrimage. Are they fertility symbols? Are they meant to ward off evil? Or are they an illustration for poems or stories with erotic content? In a thirteenth-century scabrous fable by Jean Bodel (ca. 1165 – ca. 1210) is a woman after several months finally reunited with her husband. She longed for him immensely. Unfortunately, her husband is so tired that, once in bed, he immediately falls asleep. Frustrated, the woman also eventually falls asleep, whereupon she has an erotic dream. She dreams of a market with stalls filled with phalluses of all shapes and sizes.[26] Bodel is not the only author to write such erotic fables and poems. It is a common genre during the Middle Ages.[27] In a society that is familiar with such erotic work, the lead badges with their erotic images fit perfectly. In the current literature on these badges, there seems to be a sharp line between the religious badges on the one hand and the profane and erotic ones on the other. Yet this is not entirely the case. As shown above, some vulvas are decked out as pilgrims, with hat, rosary and pilgrim's staff (fig. 14). Is this satire? Or do they convey a more serious message: Do they warn of the temptations that are lurking along the long pilgrimage route?

What about a procession where a crowned vulva is carried around on a bier by phalluses (fig. 15)? Processions were a very common phenomenon during the Middle Ages. It was certainly not uncommon for an image of the Virgin Mary or a statue of saints to be carried along during such a procession. A medieval onlooker, when seeing this badge, must have had the association with a crowned statue of Mary, carried along in procession. The purpose of these erotic pins is

Koldeweij, Heilig en profaan. 1000 Laatmiddeleeuwse insignes uit openbare collecties en particuliere collecties (Rotterdam 2001), 263; Jos Koldeweij, "Notes on the Historiography and Iconography of Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges" in From Minor to Major. The Minor Arts in Medieval Art History, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton 2012), 194–216; Jos Koldeweij, "Pilgerandenken und profane Tragezeichen" in Tragezeichen – Social Media of the Middle Ages, eds. Felicia H. Sternfeld, André Dubisch (Lübeck 2020), 178–209; Ann Marie Rasmussen, Hanneke van Asperen, "Introduction: Medieval Badges," The Mediaeval Journal 8, 1 (2019): 1–10.

[24] Willy Piron, "Walking Vulvas and Flying Phalluses: Late-medieval Sexual Badges and Their Function" in Felicia Sternfeld, André Dubisch (Lübeck 2020), Badges – Social Media des Mittelalters, 270–290; Willy Piron, "Late-medieval Sexual Badges" in Sign of the Times: Understanding Insignia in a World of Flux (e-book Zeeuws Museum, 2016), 49–57; Theo Toebosch, "Digging the Fantastical," Archaeology: A Publication of the Archaeological Institute of America 55, 1 (2002): 39.

[25] For more examples, see the Kunera database (a research project at Radboud University in Nijmegen), with more than 26,000 late medieval badges and ampullae, https://tiny.pl/dl1j3, accessed on 1 October 2022.

[26] Jacques E. Merceron, "Rêves érotiques: humour, désir et anxiété sexuelle dans les fabliaux *Li Sohait des Vez* et *Le Moigne*," *Le Moyen Âge* 121 (2015): 409–431.

[27] Sarah Melhado White, "Sexual Language and Human Conflict in Old French Fabliaux," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, 2 (1982): 185–210.

unclear. But there are many of them. Perhaps we should interpret them the way illustrations in the margins of medieval manuscripts are interpreted. Sometimes they underline the text, sometimes they mock the nature of the text, sometimes they add an extra explanation to it, and sometimes they are just for fun.[28]

The pins were common, and by their cheap nature were accessible to all. Above, the pictorial memory, used by artists, has been discussed. Familiar iconographic compositions were used to evoke associations in the medieval viewer. It cannot be a coincidence that there is a resemblance between these pins and some of the wounds of Christ depicted in miniatures.

Fig. 15. Procession of three phallic figures carrying a crowned vulva on a bier, badge of lead-tin, origin unknown, ca. 1375–1424, Collectie Familie Van Beuningen, Nr. 0967, https://tiny.pl/dl116

As mentioned before, especially in many women's monasteries, religious worship often had erotic overtones. Was there really an intention to make Christ's wound look like a vulva? The rotation of the position of the wound does seem to indicate that. Already in the first centuries AD, the comparison is made between Eve being created by God from the rib of Adam and the birth of the Church, *Ecclesia*, from Christ.[29] The Creation of Eve serves as a prefiguration of the Birth of Ecclesia: as Eve is born from the side of Adam, so Ecclesia is born from the side wound of Christ.[30] This idea is literally illustrated in some manuscripts of the Bible Moralisée, lavish picture books made in the thirteenth century (fig. 16). In these manuscripts episodes from the scripture are paired with allegorical interpretations, depicted in eight *medaillons* per page.[31] The birth scene of Ecclesia

[28] Michael Camille, *Images on the Edge. The Margins of Medieval Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992); Lilian M.C. Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

[29] For example, church fathers and scholars as Tertullian, Origen, Augustine and Jerome.

[30] Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd edition): No. 766: "The Church is born primarily of Christ's total self-giving for our salvation, anticipated in the institution of the Eucharist and fulfilled on the cross. The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of the crucified Jesus. For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church. As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam's side, so the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross."

[31] John Lowdon, *The Making of the Bibles Moralisées*, 2 vols. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 2000), Vol. 1, pp. 11–54. More than thousand miniatures are framed in *medaillons*.

Fig. 16. Roundel on top: God pulls Eve up out of Adam's side; roundel below: God delivering Ecclesia from the Wound in Christ's side (detail), Paris, 1225–1249, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Han. Cod. 2554, f. 2v, https://tiny.pl/dl113

is very chastely depicted. No side wound looking like a vulva. But the red dress of Ecclesia suggests blood surging from the side of Christ. This highlights not only the suffering of Christ, but also the reality of a birth. In mystical literature, the birth of Ecclesia is actually described as a birth:

> My dear Lord […] are you not my mother and more than my mother? […] For when the hour of your birth came, you were laid on the hard bed of the cross […] and your nerves and all your veins were broken. And it's really no surprise that your veins burst as you gave birth to the whole world in one day […] Ah, dear Lord Jesus, who has ever seen a mother endure such childbirth?[32]

Although this miniature in the Bible Moralisée lacks an erotic connotation, there is clearly a relationship between Christ's side wound and a vulva.

In the so-called Rothschild Canticles, a very extensively illuminated manuscript that was clearly intended for meditation, there is a strange miniature of a naked Christ (fig. 17). He is surrounded by passion tools. We have encountered Christ in this way before, either as a Man of Sorrows or as a newly-risen Christ. However, this Christ does not fit into that picture. He is leaning in a laid back manner on the whipping post and on the cross. At the same time he seems about to walk away. He stands in a twisted position so that his genitals are not visible. He is pointing with his right hand at his side wound accented with red. However, there is no one on the page for whom this pointing at the wound could be intended, as seen in the miniature with Bonne of Luxembourg and her husband John kneeling at the cross (fig. 10), nor does Christ look at the viewer. He casts a glance over his shoulder. If we follow the direction of his gaze we end up on the left-hand page (fig. 18).

[32] Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 97; *Les Oeuvres de Marguerite d'Oingt*, eds. Antonin Duraffour, Pierre Gardette, Paulette Durdilly (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1965), 77–79.

Fig. 17. Christ surrounded by Passion Tools, Flanders or Rhineland, ca. 1300, Yale University Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, MS 404, f. 19r, https://tiny.pl/dl1jq

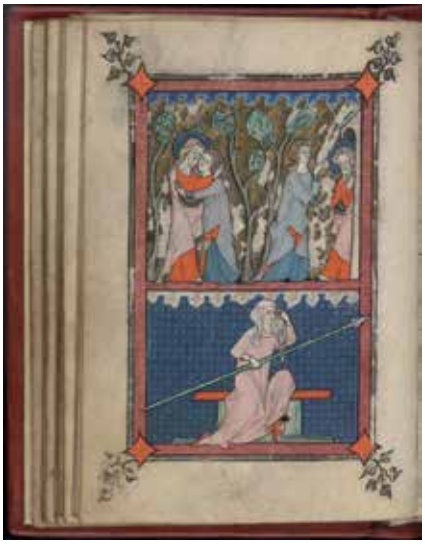

Fig. 18. Christ and Ecclesia; Woman with lance, Flanders or Rhineland, ca. 1300, Yale University Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, MS 404, f. 18v, https://tiny.pl/dl1jq

In the adjacent miniature a woman is sitting on a bench, holding a lance – she of the spear-bearing Longinus in Crucifixion scenes. The spear is angled upwards. The spear is pointing directly at the wound of Christ. Does Christ point to his wound to encourage us to meditate? Or is he inviting the woman to insert the spear into the wound? According to Jeffrey Hamburger, the latter explanation is exactly what is happening.[33] So as a result, we are looking at a very sensual miniature. According to Hamburger, this is stressed by the scene depicted above the lady with the spear. These are the bride and groom from Song of Songs; Sponsus and Sponsa. The Song of Songs is known for its erotic connotations. There is actually no doubt that the scene has an erotic interpretation. Maybe the lady with the spear could be identified with Ecclesia, as the combination of Sponsus and Sponsa with this risen Christ and Ecclesia is common.

The depiction of Christ's wound can be very complex. Usually it just looks like a side wound, albeit a sometimes very bloody one. But as soon as the wound is shown in a vertical position instead of horizontal: that is the moment at which room is created for a different interpretation. There is a similarity with the vulva. Whether this was a very strong association is questionable. If we assume that the

[33] Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland circa 1300* (Yale: Publications in the History of Art, 1991).

badges possibly had a fertility function, then perhaps the same interpretation was applied to the wound of Christ: the Church could be born from his side. Nor can we exclude the apotropaic meaning: the suffering of Christ serves to deliver humanity from evil. The wound as vulva seems to assume that function. To the modern viewer, these ideas and depictions may look uncomfortable and strange, but at that time, they didn't. They were meant to stand out, but not in a scandalous way.

SUMMARY

Miniatures depicting the Wounds of Christ figure in many medieval manuscripts. These fascinating images look weird and alienating, without the body they were inflicted on. They also invoke the feeling we are looking at something scabrous because of their similarity to a vulva. It is uncomfortable: these miniatures depict a sacred matter, the Wounds of Christ. There shouldn't be an association with something vulgar. Is this strange resemblance maybe a product of a dirty mind. The article attempts to answer the question: How should one approach depictions of the Wounds of Christ in medieval art? Are such depictions sacred, or scandalous?