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## Look Underneath, Look Above, and Look Beside. On Three Wise Men, Kings and Priests Gazing at the Infant's Genitalia

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### Introduction

The question of displaying Infant's genitalia is complicated by the variety of contexts in which it has been presented. A distinction can be made between the sacrificial sense, which refers to the first wound, and the notion of intimate places as proof of the fullness of the Incarnation. The issue of the King's gaze, which was directed toward the delicate body, is intriguing. Sometimes the Kings gazed at the miraculous face of God, and at other times they looked at the hand or foot on which they placed a kiss. Sometimes their gaze wandered to the figure of Mary, who was presenting her Son. In some depictions, their humble gaze wandered to other areas such as the forearm, calf, abdomen, or genitalia. The infant's genitalia was often included in late medieval artworks that took up the motif of the *ostensio Christ*. A phenomenon in the history of iconography was the depiction of the Magi's Adoration, paying homage to a completely naked Christ Child.

Despite the fact that the discussed iconographic motif originated in the Middle Ages, it was accurately and clearly captured by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in his depiction created in 1546 (National Gallery in London).<sup>1</sup> In the painting is presented

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Stechow, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 82; Charles D. Cuttler, *Northern painting from Pucelle to Bruegel: fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries* (Holt, Rinehart and New York: Winston, 1968), 476; Yona Pinson, "Bruegel's 1564 Adoration: Hidden

Mary holding the Infant on her lap. The Christ Child back is covered with cloth, while his arms, belly, and legs remain clearly visible. The whole scene is extremely crowded; in addition to the Holy Family and the Magi, there are numerous armed warriors in the background. The most significant element of the entire depiction is the exposed tiny body of the little Christ. It is this that attracted the attention of the Magi. A grey-haired old man, one of the biblical rulers, kneels before the Christ Child. His gaze is pointed directly between the Baby's thighs. From the viewer's perspective, the anatomical details are impossible to see because of being hidden behind a plump leg. However, the old man moves his head so close to the Child that no detail can escape his attention. Why does he look between the thighs and not at the tiny feet or the wondrous face of God?

The history of the depictions of the Three Kings is a well-recognised subject in both history and art history.<sup>2</sup> Research has focused not only on the development of iconography, but also on the cultural and political implications of this theme. Subsequent scholars have emphasised the propaganda dimension of the topic, as, in the Middle Ages, stories about the biblical Kings were used to talk about earthly power: both secular and religious.<sup>3</sup> However, not enough attention has been given to the discussed group of works that appeared in the late Middle Ages. This is because these depictions go beyond the basic meaning of the iconography of the Wise Men and the Child himself, combining them in unexpected ways.

In this article, I analyse the meaning of the depiction of genitalia in representations of the Adoration scenes and the act of gazing at them. To capture their meaning, I trace the development of this subject back to its early sources. This is because

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Meanings of Evil in the Figure of the Old King," *Artibus et Historiae* 15, 30 (1994): 109–127; Perez Zagorin, "Looking for Pieter Bruegel," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64, 1 (January 2003): 73–96.

<sup>2</sup> Hugo Kechrer, *Die Heiligen drei Könige in Literatur und Kunst*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann, 1908); Hans Hofmann, *Die Heiligen drei Könige: zur Heiligenverehrung im kirchlichen, gesellschaftlichen und politischen Leben des Mittelalters* (Bonn: Röhrscheid, 1975); Richard Trexler, *The Journey of The Magi. Meanings in History of a Christian Story* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); *Die Heiligen Drei Könige: Mythos, Kunst und Kult, Katalog zur Ausstellung im Museum Schnütgen, Köln, 25. Oktober 2014 – 25. Januar 2015*, eds. Manuela Beer et al. (Munich: Hirmer, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Ilene Haering Forsyth, "Magi and Majesty: A Study of Romanesque Sculpture and Liturgical Drama," *The Art Bulletin* 50, 33 (September 1968): 215–222; Sergio Bertinelli, *The King's Body: Sacred Rituals of Power in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, transl. R. Burr Litchfield (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); Ursula Nilgen, Renate Franciscano, "The Epiphany and the Eucharist: On the Interpretation of Eucharistic Motifs in Mediaeval Epiphany Scenes," *The Art Bulletin* 49, 4 (December 1967): 311–316; Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016); Robert Deshman, "Christus rex et magi reges: Kingship and Christology in Ottonian and Anglo-Saxon Art," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 10, 1 (1976): 367–405; Sylvia Harris, "The «Historia Trium Regnum» and the mediaeval legend of The Magi in Germany," *Medium Aevum* 28, 1 (1959): 23–30; Peter Lang, "The «Three Kings of Cologne» and Plantagenet Political Theology," *Mediaevistik* 30 (2017): 61–85; *The Three Kings of Cologne: An Early English Translation of the Historia Trium Regum*, ed. C. Horstmann (London, Early English Text Society by N. Trübner: 1886).

the issues of identification, social roles, and ideas of gender and power that developed in early Christianity provide the foundation for interpreting these depictions.<sup>4</sup> Although the idea of Christ's body as spiritually and physically sinless and chaste comes to mind at an almost intuitive level, in the Middle Ages it drew slightly different connotations than it does today. Also deserving of attention is the specific tension that was created in the sphere of identifying the depicted persons. Who was watching whose body? The answer to this question is complicated. The secular ruler and the clergy perceived themselves both as successors to the Three Kings, but also as reflections of Christ himself. It is impossible to provide an exhaustive response to these questions within the framework of a short article; nevertheless, I hope that this sketch will contribute to a better understanding of the issues related to the depiction of the body in the Middle Ages.

### Who were the three Magi/Kings?

For writers who lived in the first centuries of Christianity, the identity of the persons who adored the Baby was unclear. At first, the Magi were written about, whose numbers varied from two to twelve.<sup>5</sup> In the writings of Tertullian or Caesarius of Arles, the persons who came to pay homage to the Child were referred to as Kings.<sup>6</sup> They recognised the authenticity of God through the star that led them to His birthplace, the miraculous light emanating from the Child, and His mature and commanding demeanour.<sup>7</sup> The arrival and sighting of the Child was significant insofar as it offered an eyewitness confirmation of the dogma of the Incarnation. But more importantly, in early Christianity the whole scene was already interpreted in the context of power and government. The newborn Christ was seen as

<sup>4</sup> Among many works dedicated to the topic of understanding the body and gender in the Middle Ages, the following should be mentioned: Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); *Gender and Holiness. Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, eds. Sam Riches, Sarah Salih (New York–London: Routledge, 2005); *Negotiating Clerical Identities Priests, Monks and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jennifer D. Thibodeaux (New York: Macmillan, 2010); Lynda L. Coon, *Dark Age Bodies. Gender and Monastic Practice in the Early Medieval West* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011); *The Meaning of Nudity in Medieval Art*, ed. Sherry C. Lindquist (New York: Routledge, 2012); *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Dawn M. Hadley (New York–London: Routledge, 2014); Andrew J. Romig, *Be a Perfect Man. Christian Masculinity and the Carolingian Aristocracy* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Marek Starowieyski, *Wstęp ogólny do apokryfów Nowego Testamentu, Apokryfy Nowego Testamentu*, Vol. 1: *Ewangelie apokryficzne*, cz. I: *Fragmety. Narodzenie i dzieciństwo Maryi i Jezusa*, ed. Marek Starowieyski, (Kraków: WAM, 2017), s. 33, 343.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 343–344.

<sup>7</sup> Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian art*, Vol. 1 (New York: Greenwich Graphic Society, 1971), 101.

a king, and the royal condition was evidenced by the gold offered to him. Information about the precious metal is found in Matthew's gospel (Mt. 2, 11). Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons clearly indicated that gold was brought to the Child just as it was brought to pagan rulers.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 1. Bartolo di Fredi, *The Adoration of the Magi*, ca. 1390 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), inv. number 1975.1.16

One of the early examples of depictions of the Adoration of the Three Kings is the mosaics from the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, which date back to the 30s and 40s of the fifth century.<sup>9</sup> The way the white tunic-clad Child is depicted is full of splendour. Christ is seated on a purple cushion placed on a large

<sup>8</sup> Starowieyski, *Cykl o Trzech Magach*, in *Apokryfy*, Vol. 1, 345.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret T. Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics: Triumphal Christianity and the Jews," *The Harvard Theological Review* 86, 2 (April 1993): 155–175; Schiller, *Iconography*, 102–103; Trexler, *The Journey*, 30.

throne, in front of which is a jewel-encrusted footstool. Behind the headrest stand angels reminiscent of real royal guards. However, the Kings, clad in colourful robes, do not seem interested in the Child Himself. Their gaze is directed toward the star, which can be seen above the throne. The mosaic captures the sense of homage as a ceremonial gesture that was connected with court rituals.<sup>10</sup>

While Mary stands next to the Child in the Santa Maria Maggiore mosaic, the more common type used is the *Maiestas*.<sup>11</sup> In this visual scheme, Mary remains unmoved and is shown frontally with the Child sitting on her lap. She serves as a throne (*sedes sapientiae*) for the Son and encourages believers to pay homage to the Christ Child.<sup>12</sup> Depictions of this type referred in content to the Adoration, representing it as an isolated moment. Early examples include the *Maiestas*-type statue of Mary from Clermont-Ferrand, which is known from a drawing (the sculpture was melted down in 1793),<sup>13</sup> and a slightly later statue of the Golden Madonna of Essen, which was a popular object of worship.<sup>14</sup> The connection between representations of the Madonna and the iconography of the Adoration can be seen clearly in the Clermont-Ferrand figure. This sculpture, due to its composition, corresponds to the Madonna depicted in the scene of the Adoration on the south portal of Notre-Dame du Port Basylica.<sup>15</sup> The viewers, that is, the general majority of the believers, were placed in a situation of reenacting the act performed by the Kings. A tradition based on the exclusivity and personalization of the depiction has been distanced from this type of iconography. Within its framework, concrete persons were directly identified with the Kings.

Christian rulers held their position by the will of God, which required the approval of the Church. This approval was expressed by the practice of anointing the emperor. The first ruler to take office assisted by clerics was Emperor Marcian, who was crowned by the patriarch himself in 450.<sup>16</sup> In the West, the practice was

<sup>10</sup> The close connection between the real ruler and the Three Kings is shown in the mosaics from the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, which were finished in 547. One scene features the figure of Empress Theodora, striding majestically with the ladies of the court and a pair of eunuchs toward the fountain of living water – and, by extension, toward the altar. The representation is oriented in such a way that the figures face east. On the bordure of the empress's robe, three figures of the Kings heading towards the Christ Child with gifts are discernible. The depiction of the Wise Men on the empress's robe emphasises the imperial dimension of their iconography. See Nilgen, Franciscono, "The Epiphany": 313; Irina Andreescu-Treadgold, Warren Treadgold, "Procopius and the Imperial Panels of S. Vitale," *The Art Bulletin* 79, 4 (December 1997): 708–723; Anne McClanan, *Representations of early byzantine empresses* (New York: Macmillan, 2002), 121–148.

McClanan, *Representations*, 133–134.

<sup>11</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 104.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 341.

<sup>13</sup> Forsyth, "Magi and Majesty": 218–219.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Belting, *Obraz i kult*, transl. Tadeusz Zatorski (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2010), 342; Frank Fehrenbach, *Die goldene Madonna im Essener Münster* (Ostfildern: Edition Tertium, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Forsyth, "Magi and Majesty": 218.

<sup>16</sup> Bertinelli, *The King's Body*, 177.



Fig. 2. Rogier van der Weyden, Columba Altarpiece, c. 1455 (Alte Pinacotheca in Munich), inv. number WAF 1189

adopted by Pepin, whose anointing took place in 751.<sup>17</sup> Just as the Wise Men were approved by the Child, the Church approved the ruler.<sup>18</sup> The tradition of anointing was adapted on the grounds of the Church hierarchy probably at the end of the ninth century.<sup>19</sup> During a similar period, the practice of the coronation of popes began. At that time, the head of the Church received tribute on the model of the honours paid to secular rulers.<sup>20</sup> As a result, clerical power was equated with secular

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, 177.

<sup>18</sup> To emphasise the union between earthly and divine power was not limited to a symbolic act. The emperor, in certain circumstances, reenacted the homage paid directly to God. As an example, one can mention the Feast of the Arrival of the King in the Byzantine Empire. See: Trexler, *The Journey*, 45–49.

<sup>19</sup> Bertinelli, *The King's Body*, 177.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 178–179.

power – bishops became princes and the pope became the king of the Church.<sup>21</sup> The ruler in this perspective was not only a follower of biblical figures, whose authority was legitimised by the will of God. As such, the secular king himself acquired a divine nature and gained the status of *christomimētēs*.<sup>22</sup>

The possibility of finding a reflection of oneself in the figures of the Three Wise Men was not reserved for bishops, emperors and rulers. Also clergy themselves were allowed to pay homage in the likeness of the Kings during liturgical dramas.<sup>23</sup> The Adoration of the Kings as the stable was included in works called *Officium Stellae*. Works of this type began to be used during the feast of the Epiphany in the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>24</sup> Accompanying the celebration of the feast, the hymns sometimes ended with a short scene in which cantors dressed as Three Kings, offered sacrifices on the altar.<sup>25</sup> At the end of the eleventh century, clerics reenacted the scene during the Mass.<sup>26</sup> It was not only the act of repeat adoration and bowing that made it easy for the clergy to identify with the Kings.

From the perspective of medieval writing, the story of the Epiphany enjoyed great popularity especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>27</sup> One of the most important works that dealt with the theme of the Nativity was *Meditationes vitae Christi*, probably written between 1256 and 1283 by John de Caulibus.<sup>28</sup> Describing the Adoration of the Kings, he argued that although they saw a little boy before them, they gave him the royal honour and worship due to God.<sup>29</sup> The Infant showed his approval of the Kings, who then paid homage to him by kissing his little feet.<sup>30</sup>

While the Kings were never formally consecrated, it is pointed out that the legend telling about them was included in almost all hagiographic works written in German-speaking areas. Among the various versions, the most significant was that known from the Golden Legend, compiled by the Dominican Jacob de Voragine in the the second part of the thirteenth century.<sup>31</sup> The version of

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 178; Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 42–43.

<sup>22</sup> Deshman, “Christus rex,” 367–405; Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 42–61.

<sup>23</sup> Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 217.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, 219–220.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, 220–221. Plays performed on the occasion of the Epiphany were further discussed in Heinrich Anz, *Die Lateinischen Magierspiele; Untersuchungen und Texte zur Vorgeschichte des Deutschen Weihnachtsspiels* (Liepzig: J.C. Heinrichs, 1905).

<sup>26</sup> Nilgen, Francisco, “The Epiphany”: 312.

<sup>27</sup> Harris, “The «Historia Trium Regnum»”: 24.

<sup>28</sup> Jan de Caulibus, *Rozmyślenia o życiu Jezusa Chrystusa*, transl. A. Lubik (Katowice: Wydawnictwo św. Augustyna, 1932), 29–30.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Starowieyski, “Cykl o Trzech Magach”, 343.

the legend presented here was a compilation of popular stories of an apocryphal nature.<sup>32</sup> James of Voragine's version was relied upon by, among others, Hermann von Fritzlar in his work *Heiligenleben* written in 1343–1349.<sup>33</sup> The most significant work was the *Historia Trium Regum* written by John of Hildesheim, a Carmelite and prior of a monastery in Kassel and Strasbourg.<sup>34</sup> John described events from Balaam's prophecy to the bringing of the Kings corpse by Empress Helena to Constantinople, the subsequent transfer of the relics to Milan and finally to Cologne.<sup>35</sup> Even though events numerous and distant in time are described here, the Adoration of the Christ Child was the centerpiece of the entire narrative. The transfer of the Three Kings' relics was a political act – the possession of the relics confirmed power.<sup>36</sup> Also, the *Historia Trium Regnum* was used in the process of consolidating royal power. The work was used intensively in the conflict over supremacy and independence that the rulers at the time had with the Church.<sup>37</sup> In the later period, too, rulers, and sometimes even aristocrats, did not avoid emphasising analogies between themselves and biblical figures. At the end of the Middle Ages, the “game,” or “play,” in Kings became highly popular and well-liked.<sup>38</sup>

### The three wise men worshipping the perfect infant

Despite the division emphasised in the Old Testament between the masculine and the feminine, the myth of androgyny was long a part of thinking about God.<sup>39</sup> The Supreme Power ascended beyond the sexual distinction, integrating both elements in a perfect way. According to the theologians of the time, also Adam created “in the image of” was originally a sexless being. Also, the human soul itself was considered identical in the case of men and women. “Sameness” was a rather complicated

<sup>32</sup> Harris, “The «Historia Trium Regnum»”: 25–26.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Jerzy Kaliszuk, “Kult Trzech Króli w Polsce późnego średniowiecza,” *Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne* 72 (1999): 446–447. The article was created as part of the research published in Jerzy Kaliszuk, “Mędrcy ze Wschodu,” *legenda i kult Trzech Króli w średniowiecznej Polsce* (Warszawa: Tow. Nauk. Warszawskie, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Harris, “The «Historia Trium Regnum»”: 26.

<sup>36</sup> The interest of the Kings was also connected with the spread of the cult of relics in Western Europe, which until 1162 was located in Milan, and after the conquest of the city by Frederick Barbarossa, was transported to Cologne, Starowieyski, “Cykl o Trzech Magach,” 343; Rolf Lauer, *Der Schrein der Heiligen Drei Könige* (Köln: Kölner Domverlag, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> Björn Weiler, “The Rex renitens and the Medieval Idea of Kingship, ca. 900–ca. 1250,” *Viator* 31 (January 2000): 1–41; Lang, “The «Three Kings of Cologne»,” 61–85.

<sup>38</sup> Trexler, *The Journey*, 118–122.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Boyarin, “On the History of the Early Phallus” in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, eds. Sharon Farmer, Carol Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 3–12.



category. Clement of Alexandria argued that the soul transcends biological division, and that women's souls are identical to those of men.<sup>40</sup> However, Clement believed that the soul only becomes gender-neutral when it resembles the male soul before the fall, devoid of desire and homogenous. This masculinity is the original state. However, a human was able to approach the perfect state from before the fall to some extent too. Maintaining virginity and celibacy, for both men and women, was a way to exist beyond sex.<sup>41</sup>

The myth of Androgyny was heavily represented in Gnostic communities.<sup>42</sup> An interesting remark about celibacy can be found in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, which was probably written at the end of the second century in Edessa.<sup>43</sup> In logion 37, it is mentioned that God will come again when the followers-disciples reject their garments and forget their feelings of shame, like children.<sup>44</sup> In the original apocryphal text, the word used to describe followers-disciples referred, in its meaning, to celibacy and social isolation.<sup>45</sup>

While the Gnostic movements had limited reach, the concept of chastity was highly valued and promoted within lively monastic communities.<sup>46</sup> During this time, virginity was regarded as a distinct state of being, characterised by its unique societal role (abstaining from marriage) and spiritual attributes (following Christ). Preserving sexual abstinence equalised the sexes, a belief that was especially popular among the clergy of the Carolingian period.<sup>47</sup> After a prolonged effort to exclude women from participating in the Church, the notion of chastity underwent revision. Although women who kept chastity were still esteemed, men who practiced celibacy became the most significant group.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, 7–8; Klemens Aleksandryjski, *Wychowawca*, transl. Marian Szramach (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2012), 25.

<sup>41</sup> Boyarin, "On the History," 6–7.

<sup>42</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *History of Religions* 13, 3 (February 1974): 193–196.

<sup>43</sup> "Ewangelia Tomasza," transl. Wincenty Myszor, Albertyna Dembska, eds. W. Myszor, Marek Starowieyski, in *Apokryfy*, 180–181; Robert M. Grant, "Notes on the Gospel of Thomas," *Vigiliae Christianae* 13, 3 (September 1959): 170–180.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, 191.

<sup>45</sup> The Gospel of Thomas was well known in the Middle Ages, and it was referred to by, among others, Thomas Aquinas – Simon Gathercole, "Named Testimonia to the «Gospel of Thomas»: An Expanded Inventory and Analysis," *The Harvard Theological Review* 105, 1 (January 2012): 76–77; Meeks, "The Image": 194.

<sup>46</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, "Sexual Equality and the Cult of Virginity in Early Christian Thought," *Feminist Studies* 3, 3/4 (spring–summer 1976): 151–156. The analysis of the importance attached to sexual abstinence can be found in Coon, *Dark Age Bodies*; Georges Duby, *Rycerz, kobieta i ksiądz. Małżeństwo w feudalnej Francji*, transl. Hanna Geremek (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1986).

<sup>47</sup> Coon, *Dark Age Bodies*, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, "The Herrenfrage, The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050–1150" in *Medieval Masculinities. Regarding Men in The Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 5.

The educated monastic community held the position that sexually temperate men were superior to those with wives and children.<sup>49</sup> Thus, celibacy and male gender ensured the highest position in the spiritual hierarchy.<sup>50</sup>

The relationship between chastity, celibacy, and spiritual perfection was a common theme. The story of Abelard is a famous example of this. But in this case abstinence was not the result of his own will, but imposed upon him by others. In the writings, the castration he underwent was reinterpreted as a miraculous gift, allowing him to regain control over his sinful body.<sup>51</sup> In Abelard's case, the issue of abstinence took an extremely literal form. Celibacy was also praised in slightly more subtle and metaphorical ways. St. Thomas Aquinas viewed celibacy as a miraculous gift aided by angels who restrained his genitals every night in a belt of chastity.<sup>52</sup> Hagiographical writings dedicated to Thomas emphasised his avoidance of contact with females.<sup>53</sup> Also legends about saints of both sexes who risked their lives to pursue chastity were a popular theme.

The capture of this type of content in works of fine art seems to have been quite difficult. In early Christian and Romanesque representations of the subject, the Three Wise Men from the East are shown keeping a respectful distance from Christ. Later, the relationship between the Kings and the Infant began to develop and intensify. This is visible, for example, in the frescoes covering the walls of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, which were painted by Giotto around 1304–1305.<sup>54</sup> In the scene of the Adoration, we can see the old King kneeling before the Child, held upright by the seated Mary. The tiny body is hidden under swaddling bands, with an additional cape cinched over the Infant's shoulders. Although the swaddling bands cover the Christ Child tightly, this does not prevent the kneeling old man from touching the swaddling clothes and bowing his head in a kissing gesture to the Child's invisible feet. Remarkably, as the figure of the kneeling King one can find the figure of Enrico Scrovegni, the founder of the chapel and a member of the Cavalieri Gaudenti knightly order.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, 5–6.

<sup>50</sup> The way of building hierarchy based on gender and sexuality is well visible in the Rule of St. Bernard. In the rule, purity was mainly expressed through speech and the organs associated with it, and the men at the top of the hierarchy had the most rights to speak. You can read about the Benedictine hierarchy in Coon, *Dark Age Bodies*, 79–97.

<sup>51</sup> Jacqueline Murray, "Mystical Castration. Some Reflections on Peter Abelard, Hugh of Lincoln and Sexual Control" in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities. Men in the Medieval West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray (New York–London: Routledge, 2011), 76–80, 84.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, 84.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, 84–85.

<sup>54</sup> Robert H. Rough, "Enrico Scrovegni, the Cavalieri Gaudenti, and the Arena Chapel in Padua," *The Art Bulletin* 62, 1 (March 1980): 24–35; Anne Derbes, Mark Sandona, "Barren Metal and the Fruitful Womb: The Programme of Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua," *The Art Bulletin* 80, 2 (June 1998): 274–291.

<sup>55</sup> Rough, "Enrico Scrovegni": 24, 32.

Bartolo di Fredi developed the themes of nearness and intimacy in his work at the end of the fourteenth century.<sup>56</sup> Executed c. 1390 the panel painting (Metropolitan Museum of Art) depicts a crowded scene: the three Kings kneel in front of the Holy Family, with three squires and horses behind them. The significance of Mary's gesture, as she slightly spreads the infant's legs while he is sitting on her lap, is key to the depiction. The old King kneels in the act of kissing, with his gaze directed towards the space between Christ's legs. However, the genitalia are covered with a precious cloth. The meticulous delineation of the gazes suggests that this is not a coincidence. Yet it is also not a direct gaze, as the textile obstructs the King's view.

Was hiding Christ's intimate areas under precious cloths related to the idea of sexual purity and chastity? At the end of the century, when the child's body was shown exposed and the naked shoulders and chest could be seen, the genitals still remained humbly veiled. The question of looking at the Christ Child was revisited when the tiny body began to be depicted completely naked. The development of depictions of the naked Christ Child occurred on a wide scale in the fourteenth century and by the end of the Middle Ages, it had become the pictorial standard.<sup>57</sup> Émile Mâle, while exploring the development of iconography, found that the representational scheme in which the Kings adored the unclothed Child was proposed by artists active in Bohemia and Alsace.<sup>58</sup> Depictions of the Three Kings Adoration functioned in many variants. Of the various different types, there was a group of depictions in which the Wise Men paid special attention to the exposed genitals of the Infant Jesus. However, the mere fact of exposure seems insufficient to raise questions about the essence of the representations at all. There are many possible interpretations of the Child's naked body that do not address the issues at hand. It appears that only when the artist directly indicates the genitals can one consider more broadly the intentions behind the depiction. The design of the direction of the gazes of the depicted figures was used to emphasise specific content.

An interesting example is the altar settee from Bad Wildungen, which was made by Konrad von Soest.<sup>59</sup> The inscription on that work indicates that work on the altar-piece was finished in 1403. In the lower part of the left wing we can find Mary holding

<sup>56</sup> John Pope-Hennessy, *The Robert Lehman Collection*, Vol. 1: *Italian Paintings* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987), 30–32, no. 13; Patricia Harpring, *The Sienese Trecento Painter Bartolo di Fredi* (New York: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993), 136–141.

<sup>57</sup> Leo Steinberg, *Seksualność Chrystusa. Zapomniany temat sztuki renesansowej*, transl. Mateusz Salwa, ed. Marek Walczak (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), 167.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 71, 160–161.

<sup>59</sup> Klaus Niehr, "Das Flügelretabel aus Bad Wildungen" in *Mittelalterliche Retabel in Hessen*, Bd. II: *Werke, Kontexte, Ensembles*, hg. v. Ulrich Schütte, Hubert Locher, Klaus Niehr, Jochen Sander, Xenia Stolzenburg (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2019), 146–149; Helmut Wöllestein: *Von Angesicht zu Angesicht – Der Wildunger Altar des Conrad von Soest* (Kassel: Evangelischer Medienverband, 2003), 7–21, 42–47; Brigitte Corley, *Conrad von Soest: Painter Among Merchant Princes* (London: Brepols Publishers, 1996), 29–31, cat. 1.

a completely naked Christ Child. Instead of genitalia, the artist showed a Y-shaped indentation. The kneeling king leans forward to gently kiss the hand of the little Christ, touching it with his fingertips. The old King, however, does not stop at kissing the hand and gazes at the body. It is unclear whether his gaze is directed towards the hand he is holding, or towards the abdomen and crotch of the Infant. The way Christ is depicted makes both possibilities likely. The main scene of the altarpiece is devoted to the theme of the Crucifixion. The fine perizoma covering Christ's hips reveals a characteristic indentation, but no sexual organs. The main link between the depiction of the Infant and the Crucified Christ is the absence of genitalia, and therefore purity and divine supernaturality.

It is difficult to doubt the direction towards which the King's gaze is directed on Mary's altar made by Konrad von Soest around 1420 for the church in Dortmund.<sup>60</sup> This temple functioned as a parish gathering the city's patricians, so the foundation was of a luxurious character.<sup>61</sup> It is also known that the artist belonged to a confraternity organised at the church.<sup>62</sup> The Adoration scene is depicted on the left wing. Mary is seated frontally on an architectural throne, supporting the half-lying body of the Child. The tiny red-haired Christ Child lays across her legs at calf height. Although the small body is completely naked, only the outline of the groin can be seen instead of genitals. It is in the triangle between the thighs where the King, kneeling at Mary's left side, gazes. Despite the fact that the old man is depicted in the gesture of laying a kiss on Christ's foot, his gaze clearly follows higher, towards the empty field between her thighs. The second King kneels at Mary's right side places a kiss on the baby's hand and looks up at the Child's face. The transgendered (or overgendered) nature of the Christ is an important element of the depiction. After all, Mary gave birth not to a Son, but to a divine Infant who stands out among humans. The extraordinary nature of the Child, born of Mary as a divine Infant, sets an important object of worship and moral standard for the wealthy and educated faithful, especially males. However, the altar's depiction also emphasises Mary's role as a mother, making her figure just as important as the Child's body itself.

### The three Kings worshipping the boy

In a period similar to that of the altars in Bad Wildungen and Dortmund, was created a famous manuscript which was commissioned by Jean de Berry. At about the same time as the altars in Bad Wildungen and Dortmund were created, a famous manuscript was commissioned by Jean de France, Duc de Berry

<sup>60</sup> Corley, *Conrad von Soest*, 195–202, cat. 2.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, 16–17.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*.

(MS 65 in the Musée Condé, Chantilly, France).<sup>63</sup> On page 52v, we find a crowded scene of the Adoration of the Three Kings, who, together with an extremely rich and sumptuous retinue, arrived at the stable indicated by the star. Mary is holding the Child on her left knee in such a way that the small body is turned in profile to the viewer. The King kneeling in front of the Child is holding his leg through a cloth and lifting it slightly. His lips move closer to the tiny foot. However, the King's gaze seems to follow further. The Child's rising thigh reveals the genitals, which seem to be the proper object of the old King's interest. The interpretation of the depiction is dictated by the context of the entire work, as well as the card next to it (fol. 51v), which depicts the meeting of the Three Kings at the crossroads. This scene relates to the narrative known from the *Historia Trium Regnum*.<sup>64</sup> On the horizon, in the case of both illuminations, we can find the outline of the characteristic buildings of Paris: the towers of the cathedral and the block of the Saint Chapelle. This depiction explains the genesis of earthly power and points to the ideal of the Lord over lords, which is the perfect and pure man.

Monastic circles were interested in consolidating and emphasising the ideal of spiritual and physical chastity. At the same time, another idea rooted in ancient tradition was also developing. According to this idea, power was placed by God in the hands of men understood in a broader way than the monks wanted. The two traditions were intertwined – in both cases there was a need to affirm masculinity.<sup>65</sup> Only by being a man could one achieve spiritual perfection. The typological prediction of Christ's birth as a boy was based on the words found in the Book of Isaiah. The miraculous sign to be given to humans by God was revealed in the prophecy that a virgin would conceive and bear a son (7, 14).<sup>66</sup> This prophecy is repeated in the Gospels of Luke<sup>67</sup> and St. Matthew (21, 21). The Child was presented as a being created directly by the spiritual power of creation, the Logos.<sup>68</sup>

As in the case of the myth of androgyny, reflection on the male gender as the ruling one was also based on a crucial founding tradition. For Christian thinking about gender, important sources were the Greco-Roman tradition, as well

<sup>63</sup> Krystyna Secomska, *Godzinki księcia de Berry* (Warszawa: Arkady, 1979); Timothy B. Husband, *The Art of illumination. The Limbourg Brothers and the Belles Heures of Jean de France, Duc de Berry* (New York–Yale–London: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008); *The Limbourg Brothers. Reflections on the Origins and the Legacy of Three Illuminators from Nijmegen*, eds. Rob Dückers, Pieter Roelofs (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2009).

<sup>64</sup> Michael Bath, "Imperial renovation Symbolism in the «Très riches heures»,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 17, 1 (1984): 13–15.

<sup>65</sup> As I mentioned earlier, asexuality or gender neutrality, has been often interpreted as belonging to the male gender.

<sup>66</sup> Vida J. Hull, "The sex of the Savior in Renaissance Art: The «Revelations» of Saint Bridget and The Nude Christ Child in Renaissance art,” *Studies in Iconography* 15 (1993): 78.

<sup>67</sup> Janice Capel Anderson, "Mary's Difference: Gender and Patriarchy in the Birth Narratives,” *The Journal of Religion* 67, 2 (April 1987): 190–191.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, 189–190.

as the Hebrew tradition. The link between the two was Philo of Alexandria.<sup>69</sup> Although he belonged to the Greek-speaking Jewish elite of the time, his writings were not valued by this group. However, they were received with interest by Christians.<sup>70</sup> Philo, following the Aristotelian tradition, argued that the spirit and Logos belonged to the privileged male sphere.<sup>71</sup> According to this tradition, only the spirit possessed the ability to create and call to life. This view can be found, among others, in the writings of St. Jerome, who argued that woman differs from man like matter from spirit.<sup>72</sup> However, these reflections did not seem to apply to everyday life at the time in the same way as they would later. During the first millennium, women held a prominent place in the Christian community, and reflections on masculinity had a slightly symbolic and metaphorical meaning.

At the beginning of the second millennium, the discourse on gender underwent a crisis. In the writings of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, we can observe an intensified emphasis on the distinction between genders and the dominant role of men in the social hierarchy.<sup>73</sup> However, the discussion took place not so much within the general society, but in the circles of the educated clergy. The renunciation of sexual activity (and hence the element associated with creation) in favour of celibacy led to questions about what defines masculinity: belonging to the male sex was evidenced by possessing a penis.<sup>74</sup> Thus, distinguishing oneself by biological characteristics and simultaneously remaining celibate was considered the attainment of the highest level of perfection.<sup>75</sup>

In an effort to legitimise a new way of thinking about the meaning of masculinity, some groups rejected the myth of Christ's asexuality. The question of the nature of God was reconsidered.<sup>76</sup> St. Anselm of Canterbury was among the first to consider what gender to assign to the Trinity. The fact that the role of the father in human genealogy was more important than that of the mother, led him to assign the entire Trinity a masculine identity. Another argument in support of the male gender of the Christ Child was the use of the term "God" – not "Goddess."<sup>77</sup> The term "Son of God" began to be interpreted more broadly and literally than before. Within the discussion of the gender of the Saviour, an important argument pointing to his role as the second Adam (created in the likeness of a male God)

<sup>69</sup> Susanna Asikainen, *Jesus and Other Men. Ideal Masculinities in the Synoptic Gospels* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2018), 37–39; Vern L. Bullough, "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages" in *Medieval Masculinities*, 32.

<sup>70</sup> Asikainen, *Jesus and Other Men*, 37.

<sup>71</sup> Boyarin, "On the History," 10–11; Bullough, "On Being a Male," 32.

<sup>72</sup> Bullough, "On Being a Male," 32.

<sup>73</sup> McNamara, "The Herrenfrage," 3–5.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, 5.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, 5–12.

<sup>76</sup> Joan Gibson, "Could Christ Have Been Born a Woman? A Medieval Debate," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, 1 (Spring 1992): 66.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*.

must have also conditioned the gender of the Child.<sup>78</sup> The issue of the male nature of the Child was also raised in sermons and homilies, as exemplified by St. Bernard of Clairvaux. He invoked Isaiah's prophecy concerning the birth of a Son and the patrilineal roots of Christ<sup>79</sup> and promoted a model of secular masculinity based on the renouncing of sinful sexuality and avoidance of feminisation.<sup>80</sup>

The answer to the question of the gender of Christ, who was born in human flesh, was not always as simple as in Anselm's reflections. Theologians such as Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure pointed out the theoretical possibility of Christ's existence as a woman. In the final conclusion, the masculine gender was considered more appropriate in most cases of considering this problem.<sup>81</sup> Arguments in favour of Christ's masculinity are not surprising in scholastic circles, where familiarity with the ancient tradition was strong. St. Bonaventure believed that the male sex had a more important function for the human race. After all, all are descended from one man, Adam, and so also in a spiritual sense the Saviour had to be a man.<sup>82</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas held that since Christ undertook roles considered masculine, such as those of a teacher, ruler and defender of mankind, he must himself be of the male sex.<sup>83</sup>

The depiction of the naked Christ Infant in works of fine art on a large scale is not captured until the late fourteenth century. At the same time, the writings of St. Bridget of Sweden were gaining popularity. While the nature of the visions she described is regarded as secondary to the iconography,<sup>84</sup> her writings are significant in revealing a broader way of thinking about representations of the naked Child. The interesting passage in her case, however, is not the description of the Adoration of the Three Kings, but the arrival of the shepherds.<sup>85</sup> They were announced by the angels that God had been born, and they could recognise him by the fact that he was a newborn boy. The Kings, on the other hand, as scholars, were guided by the prophecy and the star. Bridget's writings show how the gesture of looking at the intimate parts of the body was understood at the time – viewing the genitals of the Child made it possible to recognise him as God. The popularity that the *Revelations* gained meant that both the iconographic motif and the way it was

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*, 68–69, 73–74.

<sup>79</sup> *Pisma św. Bernarda*, transl. and ed. Stanisław Bohusz-Szyszko (Wilno: T. Glücksberg, 1849), 166–167, 217, 257–258, 266, 277.

<sup>80</sup> Andrew Holt, "Between Warrior and Priest: The Creation of a New Masculine Identity during the Crusades" in *Negotiating Clerical Identities Priests*, 187–191.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*, 71–72.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, 73–77.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>84</sup> Maria H. Oen, "Iconography and Visions: St. Brigitte's Revelation of The Nativity of Christ" in *Locus of Meaning in Medieval Art*, ed. Lena E. Liepe (Berlin: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018); Hull, "The sex of the Saviour": 79.

<sup>85</sup> Św. Brygida, *Objawienia. Księga Pierwsza*, rozdz. 10, <https://tiny.pl/dl1px>, accessed on 20 January 2023.

interpreted were known practically throughout Europe.<sup>86</sup> It seems that Isaiah's prophecy about the birth of a boy was an enduring motif at the time, which influenced the iconography on various levels.

The gesture of gazing at the Child was depicted on the altarpiece of St. Columba, painted by Rogier van der Weyden around 1450–1455 (Alte Pinacotheca in Munich).<sup>87</sup> The central panel depicts the scene of the Adoration of the Three Kings. A grey-haired old man kneels very close to the Child, touches the tiny forearm with his fingers, and brings his mouth to his hand. The Child's other hand is held by Mary with a firm gesture – she seems to be showing the material body of her Son. Although anatomical details are visible between Christ's thighs, the King stares intensely into the face of the Infant. Therefore, Rogier's work is significant in providing a starting point for subsequent paintings. While it seems that on Weyden's altarpiece the genitals are not the subject of the King's direct contemplation, later artists repeating the scheme proposed here have made some intriguing modifications to the depiction scheme.

The depiction proposed by Weyden was referenced by, among others, Hans Memling (ca. 1435–1494) when he painted a triptych in 1470–1472 (Museo del Prado in Madrid).<sup>88</sup> Many analogies can be pointed out between the two paintings, but also quite a few differences. As with the original, the King kneels while leaning toward the feet of the Child held by the cloth. Although the old Kings falls with humility to Christ's feet, his gaze is directed more toward the genitals (which are not visible to the viewer), than toward the feet. The Child Himself looks at the kneeling Wise Man and makes a gesture of blessing toward him. The scheme of the Adoration proposed by the Netherlandish was also referred to by an anonymous artist on a work dating to around 1460–1470 (Museo del Prado in Madrid).<sup>89</sup> The scheme remains largely faithful to the original. The entire scene depicts the inside of a crumbling building used as an animal barn. The Child held by Mary is shown so that his naked body is visible to both the kneeling King and the viewer. Clad in rich robes, the King touches the infant's leg. The tiny feet rest

<sup>86</sup> *The translation of the works of St Birgitta of Sweden into the medieval European vernaculars*, eds. Bridget Morris, Veronica O'Mara (Turnhout: Brepolis, 2000).

<sup>87</sup> Felix Thürlemann, *Rogier van der Weyden: Leben und Werk* (München: C.H. Beck, 2006), 77–80; Bernhard Ridderbos, "Objects and Questions" in *Early Netherlandish Paintings: Rediscovery, Reception and Research*, eds. Bernhard Ridderbos, Henk Th. van Veen (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 36–42.

<sup>88</sup> Till Holger Borchert, "Hans Memling and Rogier van der Weyden" in *Invention: northern renaissance studies in honour of Molly Faries* (London: Brepols Publishers, 2008), 86–93.

<sup>89</sup> John Oliver Hand, "Maître de l'Adoration du Prado. «Trois fragments d'un retable»" in *L'héritage de Rogier van der Weyden. La peinture à Bruxelles 1450–1520, exhibition catalog: L'héritage de Rogier van der Weyden. La peinture à Bruxelles 1450–1520, 12 octobre au 21 décembre 2013, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* (Tiel: Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts de Belgique, 2013), 128–131; Jeltje Dijkstra, "Technical Examination" in *Early Netherlandish Paintings*, 314–315, 319; "The Adoration of The Magi," Museo Nacional Del Prado, <https://tiny.pl/dlft>, accessed on 14 February 2023.



on the cheek of the kneeling man. Christ's right hand is raised in a blessing gesture directed toward the kneeling figure. The King's gaze travels directly to the Child's small genitals. The Christ's glance, however, is directed not toward the King, but toward the viewer. Although the artist had a somewhat less prestigious workshop than the Dutch masters and one that was of a lower quality, the composition is marked by careful planning of the relationships established between the figures through their stares. Is the Child inviting us to follow the example of the kneeling man? The artwork schema emphasises the body part that catches the attention of the biblical King, who communes with God by recognising him as a little boy.

As aforementioned, according to the Church authorities, there was a consensus on the gender of the clergy – the ruler and the king were to be male. Similarly, God was to be portrayed as male, spreading care over his faithful, just as a man was to care for his followers.<sup>90</sup> This concept is reflected not only in the realm of the theology and iconography of the time but also in the specific practices of kings and the papacy.

Based on antique customs, the pope's coronation ritual included an intriguing ceremony involving sitting on three thrones.<sup>91</sup> The newly elected pope had to utter traditional formulas as he moved between successive thrones, called *sedia stercoraria*. He was also then given his proper regalia, such as the keys to St. Peter's Basilica. The third and final throne on which he sat was used to test his anatomical features. After examining the pope's sex, the deacon would announce that: "pontificalia habet et bene pendentes."<sup>92</sup> The entire procedure was treated with great discretion, appropriate to intimate matters. As a result of the careful handling of the matter, few direct reports of the ceremony have survived. Among the few clear accounts relating to the process are the writings of Robert d'Uzes.<sup>93</sup> In one chapter of his work, he described a dream in which the Spirit of God miraculously transferred his soul to Rome and showed him a porphyry throne on which the pope sat to confirm his sex. The ceremony was abolished in the sixteenth century when Pope Pius V considered it a superstition unworthy of continuation.<sup>94</sup> The meaning behind the gesture shown in the paintings may be explained by the fact

<sup>90</sup> Discussing the masculinity-centered idea of power that was preferred in some circles in the Middle Ages, one should keep in mind the equally numerous examples of concepts that leaned toward the idea of matriarchy. For instance, the body of Christ was sometimes metaphorically referred to as a female body that fed his followers. Additionally, representatives of the clergy compared themselves to women in the spiritual sphere, which enabled them to assume the role of the mystical Bride. See, among others; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>91</sup> Robert T. Ingoglia, "«I Have Neither Silver nor Gold»: An Explanation of a Medieval Papal Ritual," *The Catholic Historical Review* 85, 4 (October 1999): 531–540; Bertinelli, *The King's Body*, 179–184.

<sup>92</sup> After: Bertinelli, *The King's Body*, 181.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*, 184.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem*, 181.

that the ritual of presenting the penis of a newborn male descendant of a king was derived from the iconography of the naked infant, popular in the Middle Ages.<sup>95</sup> In such circumstances, the child's genitals were interpreted as evidence of his ability to rule.<sup>96</sup>

### In conclusion: Bruegel's mockery

The figures of biblical Kings were a point of reference for the high clergy and secular authorities – as mentioned, the figure of the Child himself was also a point of reference. The simultaneous occurrence of two different planes of identification, as well as the attention given to reflections on masculinity, led us to consider such a specific group of depictions. When looking at the Child, one was also seeing oneself – at pure, perfect men, rising above sin through controlling one's sexuality. According to a theory popular with the social groups in question, only the possession of genitalia guaranteed stature and power, and confirmed "being in the likeness" of Christ. The gesture of the Kings looking at the genitals of the Child accounted for the origin of power as it was perceived in that time.

A late example, but one that aptly illustrates the issues at hand, is the Adoration of the Kings, mentioned in the introduction, painted by Bruegel in 1546. The tiny body of the Christ Infant emerges from under a wrapping cloth in front of a kneeling old man. The King brings his face very close to the Child's slightly parted knees. As viewers, we cannot see the object of his interest. Also the other King clad in a rich red robe, leans forward to see what the old man is watching. The gesture of gazing at the Saviour's intimate areas captured here seems ostentatious and exaggerated. The directness with which Bruegel portrayed the gesture of watching the infant and the note of mockery make one think about the subject of the painting.

The very gesture of looking at the body, the delicate leg or belly of the little Christ, can be linked to the constant affirmation of the truth of the Incarnation. The possibility of recognising Christ as man and as God was based on the group of works under discussion on recognising him as a physically existing boy. Recognising himself as king and priest also required seeing himself as a man. The conclusions drawn from the analysis of the discussed representations of the Child cannot be easily transferred to other types of works. The nakedness of the Child in itself certainly did not involve direct associations with gender and masculinity. However, even in works where other subjects matters were emphasised, nudity often remained an important component. Another intriguing problem is the ways in which images of the Child were used by other social groups, which often rivalled

<sup>95</sup> The meaning and role of the gesture of showing the royal son's penis were discussed in detail in chapters 9 and 11 of: *ibidem*, 151–170, 177–190.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem*, 165.

wealthy, controlling men. In the “popular” sphere of medieval culture, in turn, the penis was associated with apotropaic properties, as well as with laughter and ridicule. Complicated theological and philosophical discussions did not seem to have much relevance to the wider society. To what extent did scholarly discourse reach the uneducated masses of the faithful? This problem remains largely open. Bruegel’s work, however, is extremely exclusive and, as such, is directly relevant to the group of works under discussion.

So, what was Bruegel mocking? At the end of the Middle Ages, the practice of checking the pope’s genitals was not well understood by the Christian clergy.<sup>97</sup> Protestants also vigorously joined the criticism of the ceremony. They viewed that there was a link between the ceremony and the debauchery that was believed to reign in papal Rome.<sup>98</sup> The specific meaning of the representation is supported by the astrological signs and mythological figures that can be seen on the robe of the kneeling old King.<sup>99</sup> Yona Pinson, analysing the meaning of the robe’s ornamentation, pointed out that they refer to the demonic nature of the King, who is a servant of Satan. Although the circumstances of the creation of the work are quite mysterious, it can be assumed that a reflection of the doubts plaguing the critics of the Church at the time was captured here. Rome as the New Babylon deviated, as the reformers understood it, from the preached standards. The model of a clergy following Christ in its spiritual and physical purity lost its connection to reality in their eyes. By looking at the Child-Eucharist and the perfect and pure Christ Child they were supposed to imitate, were they not committing an act of hypocrisy? The Child’s genitals are not visible to us. Does this indicate a change in sensitivity and the emergence of a reluctance to include such intimate details in works of art? These are, of course, hypotheses. Nevertheless, with further study of the phenomenon of nudity in medieval art, it will be possible to answer these questions more comprehensively.

#### SUMMARY

The theme of this article focuses on a specific group of visual artworks created during the late Middle Ages. This group is characterised by the use of the Adoration of the Three Kings iconography, with the key aspect of the composition being the act of gazing at the genitals of the Infant Jesus. The article has reviewed the medieval cultural and theological model of thinking about the naked body of the child as both sexless and male.

The origins of Christian views on the biological nature of man can be traced back to Hebrew and ancient culture and the concept of Logos. The relationship between creation, male sexuality, and the ideal of physical perfection was vividly taken up by medieval

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*, 184–185.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>99</sup> Pinson, “Bruegel’s 1564 Adoration”: 121.

theologians, and also reflected in fine art works. The formation of the iconography of representations of the Adoration and the understanding of how secular rulers and representatives of the clergy were viewed is also an important theme. The group of depictions in question seems to serve to explain the origins of power and to indicate moral standards. The use of the depiction of the naked body of the Child to demonstrate the genesis of earthly, secular, and clerical authority was specific to the late Middle Ages.