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Medieval
Seminar
Series

Workshop: Cannibalism and the Eucharist in
medieval literature



Wednesday 15th June, 5pm-7pm
Wolfson 3

Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostsanen, *Man of Sorrows*, first half of 16th century, oil on panel, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp.



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There is one Universal Church of the faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation. In which there is the same priest and sacrifice, Jesus Christ, whose body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine; the bread being changed (transsubstantiatio) by divine power into the body, and the wine into the blood, so that to realize the mystery of unity we may receive of Him what He has received of us.

[Canon 1, the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, Medieval Sourcebook
<http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp>]

The process of transubstantiation, by which the bread and wine of the Eucharist is transformed into the body and blood of Christ, would have been familiar to all medieval Christians. Yet even as it formed an essential part of Christian ritual and an important means of constituting the Christian community, it remained a point of contentious debate and profound anxiety for many medieval writers. What did it mean to eat the human flesh of God? To digest it? How was this consumption different to the consumption of animal flesh, or the bodies of other humans? What does eating God do to the body of the consumer?

From representations of the Eucharist in devotional literature in which the celebrant explicitly consumes flesh and blood to tales of cannibals in far-off lands whose customs eerily echo the Christian rite, throughout the literatures of medieval Europe these questions were not just a source of doctrinal anxiety, but a spur to imaginative reflections on and reformulations of a cannibal Eucharist. This workshop will discuss the various ways this imagery of cannibalistic consumption might have resonated with the medieval Christian, and how it reshapes the familiar sacrament of taking Communion.

The extracts to be discussed have been divided into two broad sections. The first, Eating God, engages directly with depictions of the Eucharist in which the fleshy nature of the sacrament is revealed. The second considers two very different reflections on the cannibal nature of Eucharistic consumption, exploring the diverse ways this motif is absorbed throughout medieval literary production. Each text is followed by a translation into modern English.

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Part One: Eating God

L'Estoire del Saint Graal: Imagining the first Communion

This anonymous text (1220-1230) represents the first of the long prose romances that make up the great Lancelot-Grail cycle (first, that is, in terms of the cycle's internal chronology, rather than composition). The cycle narrates the adventures of Arthur's court, from the king's early years, through the quest for the Holy Grail, to the collapse of the kingdom and Arthur's death. *L'Estoire del Saint Graal*, composed around 2 decades after the main body of the cycle, fills in the 'prehistory' of the Grail quest. It weaves a quasi-Biblical narrative into the foundations of the Arthurian world, explaining the origins of the Grail and how it came to be in Britain, as well as tracing the ancestry of such central figures as the Fisher King, Galahad, Lancelot and Gawain back to the first post-crucifixion converts. The tale centres on Joseph of Arimathea, who collects Christ's blood in the 'escüele' that becomes the Grail, and his son, Josephé, the first ordained priest and Grail-guardian who leads an evangelising mission to Britain, bringing the Grail to these shores.

In the following passage Josephé, having just been consecrated as priest by Christ himself, leads the first ever communion amongst the small band of devotees who have followed himself and his father on their mission of conversion to pagan lands. This evangelising community carry the Grail with them in a wooden Ark, which miraculously expands and opens to reveal an altar, paten and chalice with which to carry out the ceremony. The text dwells on the process of transubstantiation, and explores the potentially horrifying implications of the real presence of flesh and blood in the sacraments.

Excerpt taken from *L'Estoire del Saint Graal*, ed. by Jean-Paul Ponceau, 2 vols. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997), I (1997), p.86-88.

134.

... Laiens fist Josephés le premier sacrament qui oncques fust fais en chelui pule, mais il l'ot mout tost acompli, car il n'i dist ke ches paroles seulement ke Jhesucris dist a ses disciple en la chaine, quant il lor dist : « Tenés, si mangiés, che est li miens cors, qui pour vous et pour maintes gens serra livrés a tourment. » Et autresi lor dist il du vin : « Tenés tout et si buvés, car che est li sans de le novele loy, li miens sans meïsmes qui pour vous sera expandus en remission des pechiés. » Ches paroles dist Josephés sour le pain ke il trova tout aparilliet sour la platine du calisce, ensi com li contes a dit la u il parla de l'autel qui estoit en l'arche. Et quant il les eut dites sour le pain et sour le vin qui el calisce estoit, si devint tantost li pains chars et li vins sans.

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Et lor vit Josephés tout apiertement ke il tenoit entre ses .II. mains un cors autresi comme d'un enfant et li sanbloit ke chil sans qu'il veoit el calisce fust cheüs del cors a l'enfant. Et quant il le vit ensi, si en fu mout durement esbahis, si ke il ne savoit sous chiel ke il peüst faire, anchois se tint tous chois et commencha mout angoisseusement a souspirer du cuer et a plourer des iex pour la grant pavour ke il avoit. Lors li dist Nostre Sires : « Josephé, il te convient desmembrer chou ke tu tiens, si ke il i ait trois pieches. » Et Josephé li respondi : « Ha ! Sire, aiés pitié de vostre serf, car mes cuers ne porroit souffrir a desmembrer si biele figure ! » Et Nostre Sires li dist : « Se tu ne fais mes commandemens, tu n'aras point de part en mon hyretage. »

[p. 87] Lors prist Josephés le cors, si mist la teste a une part et dessevra del bu tout autresi legierment comme se la chars de l'enfant fust toute quite, en tel maniere com on quist char ke on a oublie sour le fu. Apres chou fist .II. parties du remanant a mout grant paour, comme chil qui mout durement souspiroit et plouroit. Ensi com il commencha a faire les parties, si chaïrent tout li angele qui laiens estoient devant l'autel a terre et furent tout a coutes et a genous tant ke Nostre Sires dist a Josephé : « Quel chose atens tu ? Rechoif chou qui est devant toi et si l'use, car che est tes sauvemens. » Et Josephés se mist a genous et bati son pis et cria merchi en plourant de tous ses pechiés.

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Et quant il fu redrechiés, se ne vit devant soi sour la platine ke une pieche en samblanche de pain et si le prist, si le leva en haut et, quant il eut rendu grascas a son Creatour, si ouvri la bouche et vaut metre dedens. Et il regarde, si voit ke che restoit uns cors tous entiers. Et quant il le vaut traire arriere, si ne paut, aïsn sentoit c'on li metoit tout dedens la bouche, anchois qu'il le peüst clore. Et quant il l'eut usé, si li fu avis ke toutes les douchours et les suatumes ke on porroit nomer de langue li fuissent entrees el cors. Apres rechut une partie del saint boire sacré qui estoit el calisce.

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Et quant il eut che fait, si vit ke uns angeles prist la platine et le calisce, si les mist ambedeus en la sainte escüele, l'un sour l'autre, et sour chele platine, si vit plusours pieches en samblanche de pain. Et quant li angeles eut prise l'escüele, si vint uns autres, si leva la platine en haut et che qui estoit sus avoec, si l'enportoit entre ses .II. mains hors de l'arche ; et li tiers angeles prist le calisce, si le porta apres chelui en autrestel manière. Et chil qui portoit la sainte escüele fu tous li daarrains.

[p. 88] 138.

Et quant il furent hors de l'arche tout troi, si ke tous li pules les veoit, si parla une vois, qui dist : « Mes petis pules novielement renés de l'espiritel naissenche, je t'envoi ton sauvement, che est mes cors qui pour toi souffri corporel naissenche et corporel mort. Or garde dont ke tu aies vraie creanche a si haute chose recevoir et user, car, se tu crois parfitement ke che soit tes Sauveres, dont le recheveras tu au pardurable sauvement de l'ame ; et si tu ne crois enterinement, tu le recheveras au pardurable dampnement del cors et de l'ame, car qui « usera mon cors et buvera mon sance et il n'en sera dignes, il mangera son detruisement et buvera » ; ne nus n'en puet estre dignes, se il n'est vrais creans : or garde donques ke tu le croies. »

Lors vint li angeles qui portoit la platine devant Joseph, et Joseph s'agenoilla, si rechet, jointes mains, son Sauveour tout visaument, et chascuns des autres autresi, car il estoit a chascuns avis, quant on li metoit en la bouche la pieche en samblanche de pain, ke il veïst entrer en sa bouche un enfant tout fourmé.

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Translation

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Joyfully, Josephé performed the first sacrament that was ever made amongst that people, although he completed it very quickly, for he only said those words that Jesus Christ spoke to his disciples at the last supper, when he said to them: “Take, eat, this is my body, which, for your sake and for that of many people, will be delivered to torment.”¹ And likewise he said to them of the wine: “All of you take and drink, for this is the blood of the new covenant, my very own blood, which will be spilt for you in remission of your sins.” Josephé spoke these words over the bread that he found prepared on the paten² of the chalice, as the tale has mentioned when it described the altar that was inside the Ark. And when he had spoken these words over the bread and over the wine that was in the chalice, without delay the bread became flesh and the wine, blood.

135.

And then Josephé saw clearly that he held between his two hands a body like that of a child, and it seemed to him that the blood he saw in the chalice had fallen from the child’s body. And when he saw it in this way, he was greatly frightened, so that he didn’t know what on earth to do, before he silenced himself and began with great anguish to sigh from his heart and weep from his eyes because of his great fear. Then Our Lord said to him: “Josephé, you should dismember that which you hold, so that it is in three pieces.” And Josephé answered him: “Ah! Lord, have pity on your servant, for my heart could not bear to dismember such a beautiful figure!” And Our Lord said to him: “If you do not follow my commandments, you will have no share in my inheritance.”

Then Josephés took the body, he put the head to one side and severed it from the torso as easily as if the child’s flesh had been completely cooked, like when one cooks flesh that has been forgotten on the fire. After that he very fearfully made two parts from the rest, sighing and weeping most severely. As he started to make the divisions, all the angels who were there joyfully came before the altar, fell to the ground and prostrated themselves on their elbows and knees as Our Lord said to Josephé: “What are you waiting for? Receive that which is

¹ Matthew 26: 26-27, Mark 14: 22-23.

² A small plate or dish used to hold the Eucharistic bread.

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before you and eat it, for it is your salvation.” And Josephés got to his knees and beat his chest and, weeping, cried for mercy for all his sins.

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And when he had stood back up, he saw nothing before him on the paten but a piece in the appearance of bread, and he took it, he raised it up to the sky and, when he had given thanks to his Creator, he opened his mouth and wanted to put it inside. And he looked at the piece, he saw that it remained a whole entire body. And when he wants to pull it back out, he cannot, as he feels that it is being placed whole inside his mouth before he can close it. And when he had eaten it, he thought that that all the sweetnesses and softnesses that one could put into words had entered into his body. After, he received a piece of the holy sacred drink that was in the chalice.

137.

And when he had done this, he saw that an angel took the paten and the chalice, and placed them together in the holy grail, one on top of the other, and on the paten he saw several pieces in the appearance of bread. And when the angel had taken the grail, another came and raised the paten up high, and another angel who was also there carried it in his two hands out of the arc; and the third angel took the chalice, and carried it after the other in a similar manner. And the one who carried the holy grail was last of all.

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And when all three were out of the arc, so that all the people could see them, a voice spoke, saying: “My small people newly reborn in spiritual birth, I send to you your salvation, this is my body which suffered bodily birth and death for your sake. Now ensure that you have true belief to receive and eat such an exalted thing, for, if you believe perfectly that this is your Saviour, then you will receive it for the eternal salvation of your soul; and if you do not believe entirely, you will receive it for the eternal damnation of body and soul, for he who ‘eats my body and drinks my blood and is unworthy of it, he eats and drinks his own

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destruction”³; no one can be worthy of it if he is not a true believer: therefore ensure that you believe it.”

Then the angels who carried the paten came before Joseph and Joseph kneeled, with hands clasped he visibly received his Saviour and all of the others likewise, for it was the opinion of each that when the piece in the appearance of bread was placed in the mouth, he saw a fully formed child enter into his mouth.

³ 1 Corinthians 11: 27-29

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Dangerous visions? The Host as flesh and blood

The motif of the miraculous transformation of the Host into visible flesh or blood, to quell doubts about the doctrine of real presence or to reward a particularly devoted worshipper, appears in a vast number of accounts, and is particularly popular in the later Middle Ages. Caroline Walker Bynum has written extensively on these miraculous transformations, in particular in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992) and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Recently, she has summarised much of her research in a short article that traces the historical development of the motif throughout the Middle Ages, and considers why the Eucharist became such a potent focus for worship. We have also selected two very different examples of visions of consuming God's flesh to explore the wide range of ways this motif is deployed, as punishment and comfort, public and private.

Caroline Walker Bynum, 'The Animation and Agency of Holy Food: Bread and Wine as Material Divine in the European Middle Ages', in *The Materiality of Divine Agency*, ed. by Beate Pongratz-Leisten and Karen Sonik (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), pp. 70-85.

[See end of booklet for photocopy of article]

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Bread made flesh in text and image: The Mass of St Gregory

In this version of the transforming Host motif, recorded in the *Golden Legend* (c.1260), a portion of Christ's flesh appears while St Gregory performs Mass before a doubting congregation member. The association of Gregory and a miraculous Eucharist flourished into a major iconographic motif in the later Middle Ages and into the sixteenth century. The identity of the doubter and the appearance of Christ's body shifts in these later representations: the doubter is no longer a lay woman, but a deacon, and Christ's body becomes whole. Like the *Estoire*, this tradition emphasises the corporeality of the sacraments and explores the ideas about bodily wholeness and partition at the centre of the Eucharist.

Excerpt from Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. by Th. Graesse (Leipzig: Impensis Librariae Arnoldianae, 1850), pp. 197-198.

Cap. XLVI. De sancto Gregorio

[...]

Matrona quaedam singulis diebus dominicis beato Gregorio panes offerebat, cui cum per missarum sollemnia corpus domini offerret et diceret: corpus domini nostril Jesu Christi proficiat tibi in vitam aeternam, lasciva subrisit. Ille continuo dexteram ab ejus ore convertens partem illam dominici corporis super altare deposuit, postmodum coram populo interrogavit, quam ob causam ridere praesamserit? At illa: quia panem, quem propriis minibus feceram, tu corpus dominicum appellabas. Tunc Gregorius pro incredulitate mulieris se in oratione prostravit et surgens particulam illam panis instar digiti carnem factam reperit et sic matronam ad fidem reduxit. Oravit iterum et carnem ilam in panem conversam vidit et matronae sumendum tradidit.

[...]

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Translation

Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. by William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), I (1993), pp. 179-180.

46. *Saint Gregory*

[...]

A certain woman used to bring altar breads to Gregory every Sunday morning, and one Sunday, when the time came for receiving communion and he held out the Body of the Lord to her, saying: "May the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ benefit you unto life everlasting," she laughed as if at a joke. He immediately drew back his hand from her mouth and laid the consecrated Host on the altar, and then, before the whole assembly, asked her why she had dared to laugh. Her answer: "Because you called this bread, which I made with my own hands, the Body of the Lord." Then Gregory, faced with the woman's lack of belief, prostrated himself in prayer, and when he rose, he found the particle of bread changed into flesh in the shape of a finger. Seeing this, the woman recovered her faith. Then he prayed again, saw the flesh return to the form of bread, and gave communion to the woman.

[...]

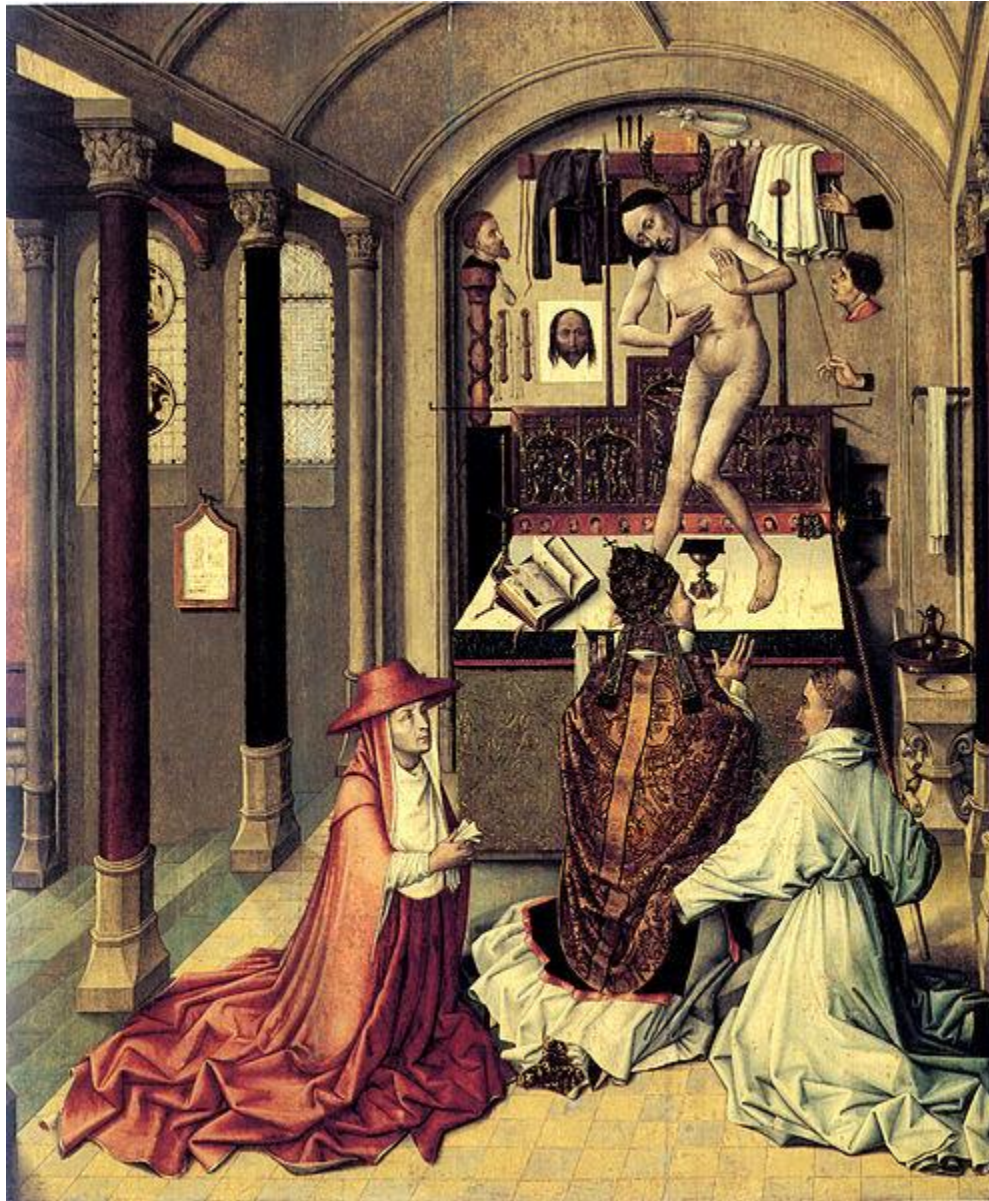


Figure 1. Robert Campin, Mass of Saint Gregory, 1440, oil on panel, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.



Figure 2. Mass of Saint Gregory at the beginning of the passion according to Saint John, 1469, f.126r, *The Prayer Book of Charles the Bold*, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. A. De Schryver, *The Prayer Book of Charles the Bold A study of a Flemish masterpiece from the Burgundian court* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008) via <https://historyofbooks.wordpress.com/2010/03/22/>



Figure 3. *The Mass of St. Gregory*, c. 1480, limewood, original colours, Bode-Museum, Berlin.

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Cannibalism in the Convent: Adelheid of Katharinental.

The *Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch*, from which Adelheid's vision is taken, is a collection of short recountings of significant events in the lives of the sisters of the Swiss convent. The brief stories might be read as something of a memorialisation, as the events are drawn from the lives of the nuns who have died, recorded by the convent's current sisters. While the events discussed in the stories are likely to date from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the earliest manuscripts of the *Schwesternbuch* can be dated to the fifteenth century. The story of Adelheid is just a few paragraphs in length, and includes a viscerally literal interpretation of the act of consuming the divine body, in which Christ rips the skin from his hand and gives it to her as the Eucharist.

Das „St. Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch“. Untersuchung. Edition. Kommentar, ed. by Ruth Meyer (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1995), p.105-106.

20. Adelheit von St. Gallen

Ein swester dú hiess swester Adelheit von Sant Gallen, dú was gar ein andächtigú swester. Vnd an únsere frowen tag der [24b] liechtmis, do halff si der cvstrinen. Vnd do nach der complet ward vnd sú den altär abnamen, do ward si gar müd von den arbeiten. Vnd gieng an ir gebett vnd naigt sich für únsere herren vnd sprach: ‚Herr, ich opffren dir einen müden lib, ein minnend sel vnd ein begerendes herz.‘ Do hort si ein stimme, die sprach: ‚Du bist min allerliepste tochter.‘

Disú sällig swester was ze einem mäl gar krank vnd lag an ir bett in dem dormiter. Do sach [25a] si einen herren zü ir gän, der sass nider zü ir für das bett vnd brach ein fleischli vss siner hant vnd gab ir das in ir mund vnd sprach zü ir: ‚Dis ist mein fleisch und mein blüt.‘ Vnd do sah si sin nit me. Si hat der erbermd werch vil geübt vnd hat den swestren vil gedienet. Darnach do ward si gar siech vnd viel ir in von menschlicher krankheit, das si dunkt, die swestran den si vil gedienet hat, daz ir die in iren [25b] siechtagen nüt als getrúwlich tetin als si in hat getän. Vnd das bewagt si an ir herten. Do rett únsere frowe mit ir vnd sprach: ‚Alles, daz du dinen swestran häst gedienet, das hest du getän dur min kint vnd dur mich. Wa von begerest du denn wider dienstes von in?‘

Es was en erbú burgerin ze Costentz, do der ir vatter starb, do kam si her zü swester Adelheit, die was ir sippe, vnd gab ir pfenning [26a] vmb einen beltz. Dar nach do batt die

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fröw einen behefften menschen, das er ir etwas seiti von ir vatter sele. Do sprach der vyend vsser dem menschen: ‚Frag die nonnen ze Dissenhouen, der du den beltz hest gen, die kan dir wol von im sagen.‘ Do kam si her. Do batt si vast, das si ir ettwas seiti. Do wolt si ir nützet sagen, wan das si sprach: ‚Du solt got wol getrüwen, das er an der statt si, da im schier wol [26b] werde.‘

[p.106] In einer metti do man von únsere fröwen sang die antiphon ‚Aue stella‘, do sah disú sálig swester, das únsere fröw dur den kor gieng vnd trüg únsere herren an ir arm vnd neig yeglicher swester. Vnd do si zú den singenden swestram kam, do gab si das kindli yeglicher swester an ir arm.

Translation

The Sisters of the Convent of Saint Katharinental, ‘Selections from the St. Katharinental Sister Book’, trans. by Amiri Ayanna, *Asymptote* (January 2016), <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/sisters-of-the-convent-selections-from-the-st-katharinental-sister-book/>

There was a sister called Sister Adelheid von St. Gallen who was an extremely contemplative, devoted sister. And on the day of Candlemas, she helped the sacristan. And then, after compline and after they had taken away the altar, she became very tired from the work. And she went to her prayers and bowed herself before our Lord and said: “Lord, I offer to you a tired body, a loving soul, and a desiring heart.” Then she heard a voice that said: “You are my most beloved daughter.”

This holy sister was at one time very ill and lay in her bed in the dormitory. There she saw a man come toward her, who sat down to face her beside her bed, broke off a piece of his flesh from his hand, gave it to her in her mouth, and said to her: “This is my flesh and my blood.” And then she saw him no more. She performed works of mercy very often and served the other sisters very well. After this she again became very sick and fell so deeply into a human sickness that it seemed to her that the sisters she had served so well and so often were not serving her in her sick days as loyally as she had served them. And that thought moved her in

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her heart. Then our Lady spoke with her and said: "Everything that you have done to serve your sisters you have done through my Child and through me. Why do you desire service from them in return?"

There was a worthy, high-born woman in Constance, and when her father died she came to Sister Adelheid, who was her relative, and gave her silver coins for a pelt. After this, the woman asked a person possessed by evil to show her something of her father's soul. Then the devil spoke from out of this person: "Ask the nun at Diessenhofen to whom you have given the pelt. She can surely tell you something of him." Then she arrived there. She urgently asked Adelheid to reveal to her some news of her father's soul. She did not want to say anything, so she only said this: "You should wholly trust that he has been brought to the place where he may very soon become entirely well and whole."

During a mass, when the antiphon Ave Stella was sung for our Lady, this holy sister saw our Lady walking through the choir carrying our Lord in her arms, and she bowed to each sister. And when she came to the choir sisters, she handed the child Jesus into the arms of each sister in turn.

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Part Two: Reflections of the Eucharist

The Doctrine of the Hert: Domesticating cannibalism

The Doctrine of the Hert is a fifteenth-century Middle English translation of a thirteenth-century Latin devotional treatise, directed towards readers in the religious orders. The Middle English text, of interest to our discussion today, is an abridged version of the Latin, its content adapted for a readership of enclosed nuns. The *Doctrine* is split into seven books, each of which details the pairing of the heart with a particular spiritual ‘gift’, as the reader works towards achieving union with God. The culinary reworking of Eucharistic imagery is drawn from Book One, which makes extensive use of domestic spatial allegory in order to frame the reader’s devotional practice. The scenes that we will examine today are preceded by gruesome metaphors of self-flaying and self-roasting, the reader encouraged to share the agonies of Christ’s Passion in the most visceral terms.

Excerpts taken from *The Doctrine of the Hert*, ed. by Christiania Whitehead, Denis Renevey, and Anne Mouron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2010).

Book 1, pp. 768-777.

He was flayn whan his clopis were take from hym and was put naked upon þe crosse. He was rostid upon þe spite of þe crosse be þe Jues, þe wiche were his kokis, in gret tribulacioun. But he was not brennyd because þe þrid wanted not, þe wiche was þe fatnes of charite that flowid oute be þe fyve gret holis of his body. What was ellis þe blood flowyng oute of his woundis, but þe holy anoyment of charite? Good sister, put undir þe panne of thin hert and gadre inow of þis precious oynement, and þan schalt þou lakke no lardir in tyme of tribulacioun.

Translation

He was flayed when his clothes were taken from him, and he was put naked upon the cross. He was roasted upon the spit of the cross by the Jews, who were his cooks, in great tribulation. But he did not burn... because of the fat of charity, which flowed from the five great wounds of his body. What else was the blood that flowed out of his wounds, other than the holy anointment of charity? Good sister, put the pan of your heart under the wounds and gather enough of this precious ointment, and then you will lack no larder during times of tribulation.

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Book 1, pp. 637-652.

He hath yiven himself to the passioun for us, into a grete price for oure rawnsom. Thus seith Seint Poule: Empti enim estis precio magno. ‘Ye ben bought’, he seith, ‘with a gret price’. Also, he hath yiven his blissed body in the sacrament of the aughter for oure meete, as for þe most worthiest yifte þat ever he yaf to mankynde, as he seith himself: Caro mea vere est cibus: et sanguis meus, vere est potus. ‘My flessh’ he seith, ‘is very gostly mete, and my blode is very gostly drynke.’ This is an excellent shewyng of love to mankynde: it passith al his oþer yiftes. Thus shalt þou considere þe excellent benefices of the sacrament of the aughter... He hath yiven himself for þi mete; yive þou now þiself for his mete.

Translation

He gave himself to the Passion for us, paying a great price for our ransom. As St. Paul says... you have been bought... with a great price. Also, he has given his blessed body in the sacrament of the altar for our meat, as the worthiest gift that has ever been given to mankind, as he says himself... my flesh... is very holy meat, and my blood is very holy drink. This is an excellent display of love for mankind, surpassing all his other gifts. Thus you will consider the excellent benefits of the sacrament of the altar. He has given himself for your meat, now you give yourself for his meat.

Book 1, pp. 716-720.

And whan þou art... flayn, þou must rost þin hert at þe fire of tribulacioun. Sister, whan þou entrest first þe cloyster of þi religioun, þou puttist þin hert into Godis kychyn, þer for to be rosted in þe fire of tribulacioun.

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Translation

And when you have been flayed, you must roast your heart in the fire of tribulation. Sister, when you first entered the cloister, you placed your heart in God's kitchen, to be roasted there, in the fire of tribulation.

Excerpt taken from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Holkham Misc. 42, a manuscript of the French version of the *Doctrine*, fol. 24v.

Entent donc quel es choses ont met deuant toi en la table de lautel. Sest venisons dou ciel delicieuse. Car tes sires Ihesu Criz fist venisons de son propre cors por ce que il donnast a toi delicieuse refection. Car il fu fustez ausi com venisons de sengler. Quant il fu chaciez de Pylate a Herode et de Herode renuoiez a Pylate.

Translation, Mouron, p. 195.

Notice then what things are put in front of you on the table of the altar. This is delicious venison from heaven. For your Lord, Jesus Christ, made venison of his own body, so that he might give you delicious restorative food. For he was hunted like wild boar venison, when he was driven away from Pilate to Herod and from Herod sent back to Pilate.

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Confronting the cannibal other in Jean de Mandeville's *Livre de merveilles*

In the account of his supposed travels in the Holy Lands and a fantastical, exoticised East, (1357-71), Mandeville encounters a range of different cannibal peoples, from ferocious giants to those who trade in human flesh and breed people like livestock. Alongside this depravity and violence, he describes a number of peoples for whom cannibalism plays an important ceremonial role in the formation of their communities. The following passages describe the cannibalistic funerary rites of two different societies (Dondia and Byboth). The descriptions of the elaborate religious ceremonies surrounding the consumption of human flesh, a focus on communal incorporation and exclusion, on re-enactment and commemoration, invite comparison to and interrogation of the terms of the Eucharist. As in so much of medieval literature, descriptions of the foreign and the alien reflect back on the anxieties of the Christian community.

Jean de Mandeville, *Le Livre des merveilles du monde*, ed. by Christiane Deluz (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2000).

Chapter XXII, pp. 356-357.

De ceste isle en alant par mer vers mydy y a un autre isle grande et lee qe ad noun Dondia. En celle isle sont gentz de diverses natures, si qe le piere maunge le filz et le filz le piere, et le marit la femme et la femme soun marit. Et s'il avient qe ly piere ou la mere ou ascuns des amis soit malades, tantost ly filz vait al prestre de lour loy et ly prie qu'il voille demaunder a lour ydole si son piere morra de celle maladie ou noun. Adonques ly prestre et ly filz par ensemble vont devant l'ydole et s'agenoillent moult devoutement et font lour demaunde, ly diable qe est dedeinz l'ydole respount et dit q'il ne morra mie a ceste foiz et lour enseigne coment ils le devient garrir. Et lors ly filz retourne ariere et sert le piere et luy fait ceo qe l'ydole ly ad devisee tanques il soit garriz. Et ensy font les femmes pur lour maritz, et ly maritz pur les femmes, et ly amis l'un pur l'autre. Et si l'ydole dit qe il doie morrer, adonques ly prestre vait ovesquez ly filz ou ovesquez la femme al maladie et ly met un pain sor la bouche pur estoupper l'aleyne et ensy l'estuffe et occist. Et puis ils copent tout le corps par pieces et font prier touz lour amiz a venir manger de celuy mort, et font venir touz les menestrierz q'ils poient avoir, et le mangent a grant feste et a grant solempnité. Et quant ils ont mangee la char, ils prignent les os et les ensevelissent et chaudent et font grant melodie, et touz les parentz et amis qe n'ount esté a celle feste sont reprovez et vergondez et ount moult grant doel qar jamès après homme ne les tendra pur amys. Et dient ly amis q'ils

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mangent ensy la char pur ly delivrer de peine, qar si ly vermes le mangeoient en terre l'alme soeffreroit grant peine si come ils dient.

Translation

From this island, travelling south by sea, there is another large, wide island named Dondia. On this island there are peoples of strange natures, for the father eats the son and the son, his father, the husband his wife and the wife her husband. And if it happens that the father or the mother or any friend is ill, the son goes immediately to a priest of their religion and requests him to ask their idol if his father will die from this illness or not. The priest and the son then go before the idol together, kneel with great devotion and make their request. The devil that is inside the idol answers, and says that the father will not die this time and instructs them how they must heal him. The son then returns home and serves his father and does what the idol has shown him until his father is healed. And the women do the same for their husbands and the husbands for their wives and friends for one another. And if the idol says that the sick person is going to die, then the priest goes with his son or his wife and places a cloth over his mouth to prevent him from breathing and so he suffocates and kills him. Then they cut the body up into pieces and ask all their friends to come and eat the deceased. And they assemble all the minstrels they can, and they eat the deceased with great celebration and solemnity. When they have eaten the flesh, they take the bones and bury them and sing and make great melodies. And all the relatives and the friends who have not been at the celebration are reproached and shamed, and they are greatly grieved, for they will never again be considered friends. And the friends say that they eat the flesh in this way to prevent the deceased from suffering, for, as they say, if worms ate him in the ground, his soul would suffer great pain.

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Chapter XXXIV, pp. 474-475.

En ceste isle ount ils un custume par tout le pays qe quant ly piere d'ascun moert, et il voet faire grant honour a soun piere, il fait maunder touz ses amis et parentz et religiouns et prestres et de menestriers grant foysoun. Et puis porte homme le corps sur une montaigne a grant feste et a grant joye menant. Et quant ils ount porté jusquez la, ly plus grant prelat ly cope la teste et la met sur un grant plateau d'or ou d'argent, s'il est si riches hommes, et puis il baille la teste al filz. Et ly filz et ly autres parentz chantent a Dieu mult des oreisouns. Et puis ly prestres et ly religiouns detrenchent toute la char du corps par pieces, et puis dient lous oreisouns. Et ly oysealx du pays qe ount bien apprise celle custume de long temps vieignent volant par dessure, come vautours, aygles, et touz autres oysealx qe mangent char. Et ly prestres lour gectent des pieces de la char, et ils la portent un poy loingz et la mangent. Et puis aussi come les chapellains par decea chaudent pur les mortz : « Subvenite sancti Dei etc », auxi cils prestres la chaudent adonques a haut voiz en lour langa ge : « Regardez come prudhomme cis estoit qe ly anges Dieu le vieignent querre et le portent en Paradis. » Et adonques semble il al filz q'il est mult honorez quant ly oysealx ount mangé soun piere. Et cil ou il avera plus grant nombre des oysealx est ly plus honorez. Et puis ly filz remeigne ses parentz et ses amis a l'hostiel et lour fait grant feste et touz ly amis tieignent lour compte coment ly oysealx vindrent cea V, cea X, cea XX, et se glorifient mult forment au parler. Et quant ils sont a l'hostiel, ly filz fait mettre cuyre la teste soun piere et en donne a chescun des plus especials amis un poy de la char en lieu de entremes. Et de testeau il fait faire un hanap et en cely il boit et les parentz aussy a grant devocioun en remembrance del seint homme qe ly oysealx ount mangé. Et celle hanap le filz gardera et bevera dedeinz toute sa vie pur la remembrance du piere.

Translation

On this island [Byboth] they have a custom throughout the whole country that when the father of someone dies and his son wants to do great honour to his father, he sends for all his friends and relatives and clergymen and priests and a great number of minstrels. And then they carry the body up a mountain, with great celebration and great joy. When they have carried it there, the greatest prelate chops off his head and places it on a great plate of gold

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or silver, if the man is rich, and delivers the head to the son. And the son and the other relatives sing many prayers to God. And then the priest and the clergy chop all the flesh of the body into pieces and then say their prayers. And the birds of the country, which have learnt this custom a long time ago, arrive flying overhead: vultures, eagles and all the other flesh-eating birds. And the priests throw them the morsels of flesh; the birds carry them a little further away and eat them. And then as the chaplains below sing for the dead, “Subvenite sancti Dei etc”,⁴ then these priests sing out loud in their language “See how wise and valiant this man was, that the angels of god come to seek him and take him to Paradise”. And then it seems to the son that he is very honoured when the birds have eaten his father. And he who has the greatest number of birds is the most honoured. Then the son brings his relatives and friends back to his home and holds a great celebration for them and all the family count how many birds have come, this one five, this one ten, this one twenty, and they boast strongly in speaking of it. And when they are in the house, the son has his father’s head cooked and gives each of his most special friends a bit of the flesh as a part of the meal. And he has a goblet made from the skull, from which he and his relatives drink with great devotion in memory of the holy man that the birds have eaten. And the son will keep this goblet all his life and drink from it for the sake of his father’s memory.

⁴ Mass for the Dead: ‘Come to his assistance, ye Saints of God...’
<http://missale.heliohost.org/requiem.html>

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The Materiality of Divine Agency

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With contributions from
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DE GRUYTER



Caroline Walker Bynum

The Animation and Agency of Holy Food: Bread and Wine as Material Divine in the European Middle Ages

Abstract: This essay uses the Christian Eucharist, in which bread and wine are understood literally to become the body of God, as a case study to raise questions about the nature and historical situating of the material divine. Noting that Europe between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries saw the proliferation of miracles in which the stuff of the Eucharist transformed into visible blood or bloody flesh and remained as such, providing a locus of pilgrimage and devotion, Bynum argues that the emergence of such miracles cannot be explained simply as the reflection of theological developments, as responses to the power of consecration exercised by a priestly class, or as the expression of a basic need for an anthropomorphic divine lodged in human cognitive structures. She explains that the miracles preceded the theology that theorized them, that religious objects in the later Middle Ages sometimes animated in the absence of or in opposition to clerical control, and that Christians had access to more obviously anthropomorphic holy things, such as statues and relics, that also sometimes came alive but were less highly charged religiously than Eucharistic miracles. Placing the emergence of Eucharistic transformation miracles in the context of a European culture that possessed a newly urgent sense of the lability of matter even outside areas of religious experience, Bynum argues that examples of divine materiality should be examined and explained in the context of their specific historical backgrounds. She also points out that western medievalists have in general ignored the fact that the central Christian rite is a food ritual and suggests that the appearance of the divine in food is a phenomenon in need of cross-cultural exploration.

Keywords: agency, animation, anthropomorphism, *Daerwunder*, Eucharist, food ritual, materiality, material divine, miracle, transformation miracles

Ever since the groundbreaking work of the German scholar and Jesuit Peter Browe in the 1920s and 30s, specialists in the western European Middle Ages

have known about the great increase in Eucharistic miracles between the twelfth and the early sixteenth century (Browe 1929a: 137–69; 1938).¹ Even non-medievalists have heard stories about bread and wine turning into visible red stuff and have perhaps been exposed to various naturalizing explanations of such transformations, the favorite being a particular kind of red mold (*Micrococcus prodigiosus*) that grows on damp bread (Browe 1929b: 332; Bauerreiss 1931: 20; Löffler 1931: 9). But these occurrences are far stranger than we are accustomed to recognize, and strange in two senses. First, it is strange that over the long course of the development of Christianity it should be food stuffs that came to be the most intense and literally “true” meeting place with the divine. After all, both relics (body parts of dead holy people and objects in contact with them) and icons (two-dimensional representations of holy people) were prominent in medieval Christianity, western and eastern, and each can be understood as a more obvious point of intersection with the divine, the icon because it is anthropomorphic and representational in the sense of iconic (that is, it looks like the saint to be worshipped) and the relic because it is indexical (that is, it derives from, or has been in contact with, a holy body).² Second, it is strange that, in the later Middle Ages, these food stuffs, which were theorized by theologians exactly as invisible transformations, came sometimes to be visibly changed, and visibly changed into living bodily stuff – that is, into freshly bleeding flesh. In other words, these objects were by no means merely the sort of highly charged objects Lorraine Daston (2004) has influentially called “things that talk” – a category that includes anything a historian can analyze as having special cultural power. They were non-anthropomorphic material that was understood literally to animate – that is, to reveal itself to be living, organic material of the human body – and therefore to act as God.

Such Eucharistic miracles, in all their strangeness, relate directly to the topic of the material divine and its agency. They do so by raising a number of questions about how something is understood to “become holy” in the Christian tradition: How important is anthropomorphism or some sort of “likeness”? How crucial is ritual to inducing the holy to appear or to finding it in matter? What is the role of theological and spiritual traditions – and of controversy about them – in heightening the belief that the divine is present? What is the relationship between the visible and the invisible in religious understanding?

¹ For a different approach to some of the questions asked in this paper and different medieval texts used to explore them, see Bynum 2013.

² Although it usually does not look like the whole person it stands in for, a relic is the holy person’s bodily remains or an object that has touched them.

Bread and wine were theorized by Christian theologians, at least from the early thirteenth century on, as literally but invisibly becoming the flesh and blood of Christ (who is both God and human). But bread and wine do not "look like" flesh and blood, so there is no simple question of similitude here. The miracle makes them "look like" flesh and blood, but the miracle occurs only exceptionally. The bread and wine are "made holy" by a ritual, done by a priest, which is called consecration. But consecration does not make the stuff transform visibly. Indeed to some theologians, the doctrine of transubstantiation means that the *invisibility* of the divine is necessary for presence after consecration. Moreover, there were other objects in the Christianity of the later Middle Ages that were not consecrated but that nonetheless animated or underwent transformation: for example, statues (that are not consecrated or even in some cases blessed) and relics (that may be authorized as holy by being moved into an altar but are not in any technical sense consecrated). There were also holy objects known as sacramentals (such as oil and water) and church furnishings (such as the top of the altar but not the pedestal) that were consecrated yet did not transform. Why then did bread and wine increasingly manifest divine presence in the period between 1150 and 1500?

I shall suggest that the sacrality of bread and wine in the later Middle Ages is not, in any simple sense, a case of the anthropomorphism often claimed by cognitive scientists to be central to religious discourse, art, and practice (Guthrie 1980: 181–94; 1993; Barrett and Keil 1996: 219–47).³ Nor can the animation and agency of the Eucharistic elements be attributed directly to a need on the part of the devout to encounter "likeness" to God. In churches filled with crucifixes and pietàs, images of the Crucifixion and the Last Judgment, the human face of God was immediately and multiply present already. I shall also argue that historians cannot rely either on theological statements by medieval figures or on the presence or absence of certain ritual acts to account for moments when divine presence changes from invisible to visible. Nor can they rely on these to indicate which objects metamorphose. Although the ritual performance, the historical tradition, and the theology that situate holy matter play a role in our understanding of the agency of transformed objects, we must also consider the philosophical and scientific assumptions of the period and even aspects of local history in order to ascertain why certain objects in certain places animated and acquired agency, and why they transformed in specific ways. I begin with some background on the development of these miracles. There are a few early medieval accounts of the bread and wine used in the central

Christian rite of the mass turning into visible flesh and blood. But it is important to note, first, that some of these supposed early accounts are later interpolations into earlier texts; second, that they tended to have a certain negative overtone (that is, to be seen as occurring because people of lower spiritual development doubted and therefore needed visible assurances); and third, that the proper response to these stories was thought to be prayer requesting that the visibly transformed material revert as quickly as possible to its earlier form.

I give two examples. In Paschasius Radbertus's *De corpore et sanguine Domini* (830–833), a later redactor has inserted a particularly graphic story, borrowed from the Lives of the Fathers, in which "a certain Scythian who was great in active life [i.e. in works of piety] and simple in faith" sees an angel descend to the altar, slaughter a boy spread out there with a knife, catch his blood in a chalice, and then break his body into pieces.⁴ Once the doubting Scythian has received his vision, however, he is instructed by his more sophisticated companions that God knows human nature cannot eat raw flesh; thus, this compassionate God transforms the boy's body into bread and his blood into wine so that faith can receive it. It is almost as if the reverse transformation, not the initial vision, is the important miracle. A second such tale is included in two lives of pope Gregory the Great (d. 604), written about two hundred years after his death. In this account, a woman is said to have laughed during mass, claiming that the bread could not be the body of Christ because she had baked it herself. When the pope prayed for a sign, a finger appeared in the chalice. As a result, the woman believed in the physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and Gregory then prayed for the bloody finger to revert to bread and wine so the congregants might take communion.⁵

In the twelfth century, we find a fundamental change in the pattern of such stories. First, their number increases (and this does not seem to be a result simply of better reporting or of the survival of a larger number of texts). Second, although they continue sometimes to be accusatory in implication (that is, they respond to doubt, to ritual impurity, or to abuse and violation), they come to have a much wider range of functions: they support various sorts of resistance to clerical authority (especially on the part of women); they serve as rewards for faith (rather than as antidotes to lack thereof); they become more

4 Radbertus 1969: 88–89. This story is a later interpolation, but borrowed from an early text. It is sandwiched between the story of Gregory and the finger in the chalice and the story of Plegilis, both of which Radbertus apparently added to his own manuscript.

5 The earliest version of the story is found in the 8th century life of Gregory by Paul the Deacon and was repeated in the 9th century one by John the Deacon. On the motif of the Gregorymass, see Meier 2006; Gommans and Lenters 2007.

explicitly apotropaic (as living matter, they ward off disease, decay or death); and they serve as weapons to persecute outgroups, especially Jews, sometimes to the point of justifying or inciting pogroms. Third, these miracles last. They are what German historians call *Dauerwunder*. Instead of accepting that the transformation is visionary or, if physical, momentary, or indeed praying that the miraculous stuff revert to ordinary form as soon as possible so that it may be consumed, people (both ecclesiastical authorities and the ordinary laity) preserve it, place it in precious and elaborate containers, translate it into churches, and venerate it. It becomes the focal point of pilgrimage.

I give one twelfth- and two fifteenth-century examples. The first comes from the historian and ethnographer, Gerald of Wales, who tells of a host in Flanders, half of which changed into flesh while the other half (the part held by the priest's fingers) retained the appearance of bread. Kept in a crystal container, it was verified, we are told, by "faithful and honest clerics of the French king." People streamed to the spot. Gerald reports that he journeyed through the region eight days after the miracle and scrutinized it for himself (Gerald of Wales 1862: 40–41).⁶ Fascinated by the stories of transformation he collected, some of them quite improbable, Gerald is careful to frame and authenticate this account by asserting himself to be an eyewitness.

By the time we reach the fifteenth-century miracles, documentation of such cases of the "material divine" is both more extensive and much more varied. The trial and execution of 27 Jews and a Christian priest for host desecration at Sternberg in 1492 is reported in accounts of the torture and confession of the Jews spread throughout the area in Latin and German broadsheets. For contemporaries, the abuse and its consequences were documented as well by the objects (nails and a blood-soaked table top) allegedly used to torture the host – objects that were adduced into the trial as evidence and survive until today in a chapel of the little church where the bleeding host was installed and became the center of a very successful pilgrimage. The miraculous material itself, attacked explicitly by Luther in 1520, disappeared in the early years of the Reformation (Bynum 2007: 69–72). At Zehdenick, in the neighborhood of Sternberg, where there was an active pilgrimage to a supposed blood miracle about 1500, the only early evidence is a pilgrimage badge, which bears a blood-spotted wafer. But the account, written as anti-Catholic propaganda in the later sixteenth century although drawing on older oral tradition, tells of a woman who stole a host to bury under her beer keg "so that people would prefer to drink her beer." The host bled – whether as protest or as revelation is not clear – and the bleeding earth, collected in vessels by the people and carried

into the church, performed healing miracles (Bynum 2007: 58–59). My point here is not to explore the complex questions of evidence raised by these objects. My point is the shift from the devotional and doctrinal lesson that is the moral of the early stories to the later focus on the presence of the stuff itself. Why did the bread and wine of the Christian mass assert itself, so visibly and so abruptly, to be transformed into flesh and blood – and why did it remain as such? The standard explanation western historians have given for such miracles is theological.⁷ As is well known, the bread and wine that was central to the Christian rite of the Eucharist was understood, already in the early church, to be the place where Christ's body was "really present" once the words of consecration were said by the priest. According to the Gospel of Matthew, on the night before he was crucified,

Jesus took bread and blessed and broke and gave to his disciples and said: Take ye and eat. This is my body.

And, taking the chalice, he gave thanks and gave to them, saying: Drink ye all of this. For this is my blood of the New Testament, which shall be shed for many unto remission of sins.

(Matthew 26:26–28)

The ritual of the mass, modeled on this supper, was understood to be a sacrifice of God offered by God to God for his adherents. It was a communal meal that bound Christians together. It was also a way of participating in the incarnate divine by taking it into oneself. For all the talk of sign and sacrament, type and symbol, no early writer doubted that a sacred reality lay behind the bread and wine, which were increasingly referred to as the "body of the Lord." As an early hymn put it:

[We are] looking forward to the supper of the lamb ... whose sacred body is roasted on the altar of the cross. By drinking his rosy blood, we live with God ... Now Christ is our Passover, our sacrificial lamb; his flesh, the unleavened bread of sincerity, is offered up. (Walpole 1922: 350–51)

Exactly how Christ was "really present" in the bread and wine was not a question that engaged early theologians. But in the late eleventh century, as a result of theological controversy, lines were drawn more sharply between those who understood the bread and wine as symbols and memorials – triggers of reverence, so to speak – and those who argued that the elements literally (albe-

6 For another account, see Herbert of Clairvaux 1866, Col. 1370.

7 Western medievalists are blessed – or maybe cursed – with a great deal of textual material from the period that itself interprets religious phenomena. And it is from this that an explanation has been constructed.

it invisibly) became the physical body and blood of Christ at the words of consecration. In 1215, at the Fourth Lateran Council, a technical formulation was required of the faithful:

Jesus Christ himself is both priest and sacrifice, and his body and blood are really contained in the sacrament of the altar under the species of bread and wine, the bread being transubstantiated [a technical term using Aristotelian categories] into the body and the wine into the blood by the power of God, so that to carry out the mystery of unity we ourselves receive from him the body he himself receives from us. (Denzinger and Schönmeier 1976: 260)

The explanation usually given for the proliferation of Eucharistic miracles after 1100, and for the fact that they came to take the form of *Dauerwunder*, has been that such miracles were the result of this definition of the Fourth Lateran Council. In other words, the church said that these things literally became God's body in substance or nature, although the appearance remained unchanged. People had trouble accepting this. Miracles that made manifest the substance under the accidents erupted in order to prove that the transformation was real and to quell widespread anxiety about doubting it (Browe 1926: 167–97; Langmuir 1996: 287–309). Such miracles also supported the role of consecration by the clergy in creating such holy stuff and hence were part of the clericalization of religion that is a major characteristic of post-Gregorian Reform Christianity.⁸

To historians and art historians who study other cultures (especially cultures where there is little or no indigenous theoretical material available and other sorts of interpretation must perforce prevail), strictly theological explanations will seem inherently implausible. And they have always seemed so to me (although I confess that I have always been fascinated by theological ratiocination). The reasons for rejecting purely theological explanations, or even explanations restricted to a religious context, are numerous. First, the chronology is wrong. The definition given by the Fathers of the Fourth Lateran Council comes after *Dauerwunder* have already begun to appear (as is evident from the account given by Gerald of Wales mentioned above). It seems clear that the need for a definition of Eucharistic presence came not only because of earlier controversy about what the ritual of the Eucharist meant but also because of the growth of a piety that supported such miracles. In other words,

enthusiasm for material manifestations of the divine produced a need to theorize them. Indeed, it could be argued that the definitions of ecclesiastical authorities both in the eleventh century and at the Fourth Lateran Council could not have caused the surge in such miracles after 1100 precisely because they were an argument against them. “Transubstantiation” means that the change is not seen. In general, western theologians, who treated relics and images as objects that point to God's power and presence, not as full instantiations of the divine, tended to want to keep Eucharistic change invisible, however ontologically different the Eucharistic elements might be from relics or images (Browe 1929b). Although some theologians strove to account for the plausibility of visible eruptions of flesh and blood (in what was often extremely convoluted argumentation), many rejected such miracles in favor of a deeply interiorized spirituality that is one of the roots of the reformations of the sixteenth century (Browe 1929b; Bynum 2007: 85–111).

A second, and even more important, argument against theological causation is this. Broad and deep changes in performance – in what both priests and people were doing in and even outside the mass – led to and framed such miracles.⁹ A number of developments between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries tended to move the Eucharist away from a communal meal and toward a mystery whose impact came when a hidden something was revealed. The words of consecration, said in Latin, which was a language ordinary people did not understand, became less audible. The priest now stood in front of the altar with his back to the congregation. By the thirteenth century, screens that (because they were pierced) functioned to focus as well as to hide the ritual were erected between the ordinary laity and the apse where the altar was located (Jung 2000: 622–57). By the fourteenth century, elaborate altarpieces that opened and closed depending on the day of the liturgical year provided a backdrop for the ritual performed in front of them. The focal point of the mass came to be not the moment of consecration but the moment when the priest elevated – that is, lifted up – the host.¹⁰ All this tended to privilege revelation – the moment of seeing the wafer – and that wafer was no longer the home-baked bread offered by housewives (as described in the story of Gregory and the bloody finger) but a flat, thin, almost transparent disk, often stamped with an image of the crucified Christ.¹¹ Nor was the revelation of the host only vi-

9 On the importance of performance and sensation in creating religious response, see Morgan 2010: 9–12.

10 The piety of the period around 1200 focused on what an influential early study called “the desire to see the host,” see Dumoulet 1926.

11 Earlier wafer designs – even for unleavened bread – more often had simple monograms. On changes in Eucharistic practice and host veneration, see Jungmann 1979.

8 The period after the Gregorian reform movement of the late eleventh century, also called the Investiture Controversy, saw the growing separation of the clergy from the laity by differences in lifestyle (for example, clerical celibacy) and the enhanced power of clerics and, increasingly, of the papacy.

sual. Through incense, music, genuflections, and candles, all the senses – smell, hearing, taste, and touch as well as sight – were awakened. Increasingly then, the central Christian ritual, the mass, involved a kind of synesthesia. Moreover, the consecrated host, paraded in Corpus Christi processions or exposed on the altar outside the mass in gorgeous crystal and gold monstrances, became a holy object in and of itself, inspiring terror as well as devotion. Eucharistic miracles involved tasting blood in the mouth, hearing angelic music or threatening voices, feeling blessed or flooded with sweetness, as well as seeing Christ. Whether or not the experience was one of sensible transformation, what was in play was an intense, reverberating presence. Hence it was at least as much the performance of the liturgy as the words of clerical consecration per se that induced the holy to descend into matter.

A third problem with seeing Eucharistic theology as the trigger for miracles of transformed hosts, chalices, and altar linen is the fact that these miracles were part of a much larger class of things that, so to speak, “came alive.” Or – to put it another way – they were one among many types of animation that were undergirded by no theology of “real presence” or “transubstantiation.” Since the early Middle Ages, there had been stories of bleeding or oozing or otherwise fertile or living relics. But in the later Middle Ages such stories were on the increase, and often the relics predate the miraculous metamorphosis by hundreds of years. (In Naples, for example, the blood of Januarius – supposedly a fourth-century martyr – began to liquefy only in the fourteenth century.) From the fourteenth century well into the early modern period, claims proliferate of paintings and statues that bleed, weep, glow, wink at viewers, or even come down off their walls or pedestals and walk around (Thunø and Wolf 2004).

Moreover, the acquiring of agency by such objects – agency to heal, to pacify conflict, to increase fertility, even to wage war – was not necessarily linked to clerical consecration or even clerical control. As I said above, statues and paintings were not in any simple sense consecrated, although they were sometimes blessed. Relics can perhaps be understood as consecrated when the saint’s body is translated into an altar, but especially in the early Middle Ages, as Julia Smith (2010; 2012) has emphasized, the laity (independent of clerical authorization or direction) simply collected material that was in contact with, or actually was, the body of a holy person as a means of access to the power of the divine. Moreover, statues, relics, and Eucharistic elements sometimes animated in support of clerical or lay authority but sometimes in defiance of it. Hosts supposedly became bleeding flesh to accuse Jews of genocide, heretics of wrong belief, or corrupt priests of licentious behavior or impure ritual practices, thus underlining the authority of prelates, lay lords, and of the dominant

culture. But women, children, the poor, even criminals received visions in which Christ bypassed altar and Eucharist to come directly to the lowly; pictures and statues spoke to marginal people and those at work in ordinary tasks. Indeed debate over some of the most famous miracle hosts (such as those at Wilsnack) raised the issue of whether the miraculous matter had been consecrated at all. As Peter Browe himself underlined in his work in the 1930s and historians such as Charles Zika and Hartmut Kühne have emphasized since, the specific social and political circumstances of miracles of transformation and agency must be studied for clues as to when and where specific transformations occur (Browe 1938; Zika 1988: 25–64; Kühne 1999: 51–84). Objects that had been neglected sometimes manifested divine agency in order to renew the prestige of their site or to provide the area with a competitive locus of pilgrimage. For example, once the cult at Wilsnack blossomed in the fifteenth century, almost a hundred similar sites appeared in competition and imitation; preachers extolled them as inducements to devotion and local lords encouraged them as casting special protection over border areas.¹²

In the later Middle Ages, the art of Europe in all its many forms seems increasingly to call attention to the materials of which it is made. An example is provided by the almost innumerable winged altarpieces, which were usually flat on the outer wings (and sometimes painted in grisaille – i.e. grey) but three-dimensional and gilded when the wings were opened on feast days and the inner shrine revealed. With such objects, the further one penetrates toward the central frame of the ritual, the more tactilely insistent the object is. The miracle of stigmata, which first emerged around 1200 (no early medieval claims are known), provides another example of the increasing charge felt to be present in the very stuff of things. A literal manifestation of the wounds of Christ in the body of a believer, stigmata came to be described in texts and depicted in images as the “incising” or “imprinting” by a crucifix (a devotional *object*) into the believer who sees it (Bynum 2011: 112–16). Moreover, touching and feeling as well as seeing objects induced the experience of a living God. A nun at the convent of Emmerich said she felt God’s body when she clutched cloth against her breasts; a chronicle from the convent of Katharimenthal in Switzerland told of a sister who touched the hands and feet of a Christ statue lying in a sarcophagus and felt them to be “flesh and blood as if a living person were lying here.”¹³ Such experiences parallel Eucharistic ones. For example, several Low Country women tasted sweetness in their mouths when they re-

¹² On north German sites, see Bynum 2007: 25–81.

¹³ For the example from Katharimenthal, see Hamburger 1998: 85, 485 n. 243; for Emmerich, see Van Engen 2008: 279.

ceived the host; Colette of Corbie saw the host as chopped meat on a platter.¹⁴ In all this, there is a close relationship between materiality and visible signs of living presence. In other words, some material objects – whether felt or seen, whether anthropomorphic or not, whether consecrated or not – come to insist on their own materiality as alive under fingers, before eyes, in mouths. Yet one cannot argue that naturalism of representation or anthropomorphism accounts for animation, since many of the speaking wall paintings of the later Middle Ages are in no way more realistically rendered than their silent neighbors, and the Eucharistic elements that sometimes, but only sometimes, appeared as human flesh are not *stricto sensu* anthropomorphic.

Indeed the more one knows about the later Middle Ages, the clearer it becomes that the entire culture, secular as well as religious, courted the animation of objects – that is, the visible or sensible manifestation of life in them. The period from the twelfth to the sixteenth century in Europe saw an increasing fascination with animated matter in senses too numerous to go into fully here. I cite efforts on the part of aristocrats – both ecclesiastical and lay – to construct mechanical objects that mimicked life: dragons that belched fire, statues that spoke, mechanical singing birds, and various sorts of chambers of special effects (Kieckhefer 1989; Eamon 1983: 171–212). I also note that it was in this period that alchemy, basically rejected by intellectuals in the twelfth century, flourished and gained greater and greater credibility; that astrology flourished also and along with it complex theories of a world soul (that is, of a completely animate universe); and that werewolves and other animal-human metamorphoses became increasingly common in the literature of fantasy and entertainment and, more important, gained support and sometimes rather frantic polemic in favor of their facticity. Even an object such as the magnet, which was explicitly theorized as “not alive” in the twelfth century, was re-theorized as animate in the sixteenth century. And in ways I have discussed elsewhere, matter itself was increasingly conceived under various paradigms that assumed it to be organic or closely analogous to the organic. *Dauerwunder* were the transformation phenomena that received the most sophisticated theorizing, but enthusiasm for radical transformation was everywhere (Bynum 2011: 217–65).

This observation brings me to the point where I can return to the theological and devotional context of transformation miracles but in a much broader sense. Historians of Christianity have paid so much attention recently to the prominence of the human Christ in late medieval devotion and theology that

they have failed to underline sufficiently the emphasis on the manifestation of God in all of creation. Yet theologians such as Bonaventure and charismatic reformers such as Francis of Assisi saw God's footprints in the entire created world. Francis, as is well known, preached to birds and wolves and, as is less well known, urged his brothers to smear the walls of the church with meat on Christmas so that the very building would feast on the day of the Lord's birth (Thomas of Celano 1926: 244). The Provençal visionary Marguerite of Oingt (1965: 101) saw Christ as a mirror reflecting all of creation. Nicholas of Cusa, a political theorist, theologian, and mystical writer who emphasized the incomprehensibility of God, not only saw Christ as the human conduit leading the entire universe back to the divine but also saw creation as the unfolding of the infinite in the finite and particular. In his *De visione Dei*, Nicholas wrote:

“[O God] ... no one can approach you because you are unapproachable ... [H]ow will you give yourself to me if you do not at the same time give me heaven and earth and all that are in them? ... [H]ow will you give me yourself if you do not also give me myself?” (Nicholas of Cusa 1997: 246–47)¹⁵

Eucharistic transformation miracles may be seen as, in some sense, the “return of the [anthropomorphic] repressed.” The human figure or bleeding flesh that sometimes appeared in bread and wine moved the material in which the divine inhered from food stuff to human-shaped or at least human-associated matter. But when it was visually encountered as a *Dauerwunder*, it was almost invariably organic not anthropomorphic. And to theologians, those who recorded miracles, and the Christian devout who went on pilgrimage, it was also understood as standing for, including, and encompassing the entire created universe. Even when liturgists paid attention to the symbolism of the Eucharistic elements as both body and food, they tended to emphasize body as community and in-gathering, not just as Christ's flesh. Why, they asked, had God chosen bread and wine for his Passover? Because the wafer is made up of many grains, as the body of Christ – that is, the church – is made up of many Christians. Grapes crushed into wine signify those same Christians in community as well as a gift offered back to God in thanksgiving for his offering of life to his children.

Thus far, I have explained the sort of visible and insistent transformation we find in Eucharistic miracles both by citing the development, from New Testament times on, of the centrality of the stuff of the Christian ritual meal and

¹⁴ For Low Country examples, see Bynum 1987: 115–29. On Colette, see Peter of Vaux 1966: 584, 560–62.

¹⁵ And see the sensitive discussion by H. Lawrence Bond in his Introduction to Nicholas of Cusa 1997: 18.

by underlining the presence in the later Middle Ages of a greatly increased cultural desire (among intellectuals and the wider populace alike) for the experience of many kinds of animated matter. Nonetheless, there is, as I said at the beginning of my essay, something counter-intuitive here that medievalists, who regularly study miracles, have almost ignored. Despite the naturalistic explanations that might be given (such as mold or hallucination or outright fraud), despite New Testament support for giving the Christian version of the Passover meal central importance, despite everything we know from anthropological comparisons about the importance of commensality, it is odd that food became the premier place of divine manifestation. Christ was understood to be God incarnate in a human body. But it is odd that divine presence was thought to become sensibly, visibly, tactilely present as human flesh and blood – not mystically or symbolically or ritually present but literally present – in something that in no obvious way “looks like” or represents, iconically or indexically, the incarnate God. In other words, not only is it odd that bread and wine became invisibly flesh and blood, it is also odd that what sometimes became visible and palpable flesh and blood was bread and wine. Indeed, whether or not the bread and wine were visibly transformed, they were understood to have extreme power. Transformation miracles were a tiny minority of the encounters clergy and laity had with divine matter, which was mostly received as, at least visually, ordinary bread. The woman at Zehdenick, like others we know of who put consecrated wafers in fishponds or sprinkled them on cabbages, believed the hosts they stole induced fertility even before they bled or glowed or reassembled themselves out of crumbled bits. Those who first revered the bleeding wafers found after the fire at Wilsnack in 1383 resisted the effort of the local bishop to re-consecrate the elements. Early accounts of the veneration that emerged almost immediately after the burning of the church claim that the hosts bled anew in order to deflect the bishop’s action, thus either asserting themselves to be already consecrated or, more radically, asserting that they did not need consecration (Bynum 2007: 26). Transformation miracles were the visible insistence of food stuff on divine power it possessed invisibly.

The prominence of food as divine presence, divine agency, and indeed divine identity raises several larger questions that lurk behind many of the papers for this volume. Does it matter whether an object in which sacrality inheres – and in particular an object that is claimed to come alive visibly and sensibly – is human-shaped or has human or bodily or organic attributes? How far is the control of a specialized priestly class necessary to the appearance and agency of the material divine? Why does the material divine tend to transform visibly at certain periods and in certain contexts more than in others? How does the particularity of the material – the stuff – of holy objects figure

in their power and in their tendency to animate? The Christian Eucharist – God dwelling and acting in the product of grain and grape – raises these questions acutely. Scholars of comparative religion and cognitive scientists interested in explaining the particular form in which divine agency is embodied would do well to pay more attention to the broad range of organic and inorganic stuff in which the holy is understood to appear.

In this paper I have functioned as a historian, asking a historian’s question: Why did a particular sort of thing occur in a particular historical period? I have explained that a certain kind of miracle erupted in a particular form at a particular historical moment in the later Middle Ages: I hope I have, at least in part, explained the timing as owing not only to long-standing religious traditions but also to aspects of the wider culture. But the deeper issue is twofold and, as I have suggested, I am not satisfied with the answers usually given – if indeed the questions are raised at all. First: why is it bread and wine that is the instantiation of God? And second: why was there such eagerness for the visible, tactile, sensible appearance of the divine as human body? Why was an invisible presence, especially if enhanced by incense, candlelight, and other aspects of performance, not enough? Most theologians in the later Middle Ages asserted the invisibility of Eucharistic presence. Some also attempted to explain away literal appearances. Moreover, there were inherent problems involved in attempting to preserve transformed material stuff as if the transcendent and unchangeable endured in it. Even supposedly miraculous material decays and hence eventually ceases to display the divine.¹⁶ Such decay of the ostensibly sacred creates problems both for those who manage and worship at cult sites and for those who theorize the nature of the miraculous. Nonetheless, at a particular period in the later Middle Ages, not only were bread and wine thought to be the place above all others where the divine inhered but that divine was also thought at least sometimes to appear in food as visible, sensible, living flesh and blood.¹⁷ Western medievalists have, by and large, explained this away by naturalizing it or have reduced it to a consequence of theology. Perhaps the oddest thing of all, then, is that medievalists have not found it odd.

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¹⁶ For elaboration of this point, see Bynum 2011: 26–65, 284–86.

¹⁷ For recent attention to the Eucharist as food, see Wierzbina 2011; Grumett 2012: 26–27.

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