

[Recepción del artículo: 25/07/2022]  
[Aceptación del artículo revisado: 19/10/2022]

## ALTAR AS *ATELIER* IN THE MIDDLE AGES EL ALTAR COMO TALLER ARTÍSTICOS EN LA EDAD MEDIA

ADEN KUMLER  
Universität Basel  
aden.kumler@unibas.ch  
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9137-7916

### ABSTRACT

Taking as its point of departure the suggestive framing of image-making, scribal art, and the celebration of the Mass within a sequence of images dedicated to human labor in the early thirteenth-century so-called *Reiner Musterbuch* (Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. 507), this essay explores how Christian altars were employed and conceptualized as productive sites—*ateliers*—in the Middle Ages. Among the many transformations worked upon Christian altars, legal *acta* represent a particularly potent and telling tradition; one of the aims of this essay is to suggest that they too informed, and were informed by the altar's status as a productive site. From the making of diagrammatic images out of the host to the legal transformation of property and people, medieval actions at and upon altars collectively reveal a long-lived conception of the Christian *mensa* as a site and surface for the exercise of a sacramental mode of creativity.

KEYWORDS: altar, artist, Eucharist, fraction, inscription, epigraphy, law, manumission, Eucharist, Reiner Musterbuch, Gospel Books, transformation, creativity.

### RESUMEN

Tomando como punto de partida el sugerente encuadre de la creación de imágenes, el arte de los escribas y la celebración de la misa dentro de una secuencia de imágenes dedicadas al trabajo humano en el llamado Reiner Musterbuch (Viena, ÖNB, Cód. 507) de principios del siglo XIII, este ensayo explora cómo los altares cristianos fueron empleados y conceptualizados como lugares productivos -*ateliers*- en la Edad Media. Entre las muchas transformaciones realizadas en los altares cristianos, las actas legales representan una tradición particularmente potente y reveladora; uno de los objetivos de este ensayo es sugerir que también informaron y fueron informadas por el estatus del altar como lugar productivo. Desde la creación de imágenes diagramáticas a partir de la hostia hasta la transformación legal de la propiedad y las personas, las acciones medievales en y sobre los altares revelan colectivamente una concepción de larga

duración de la mensa cristiana como lugar y superficie para el ejercicio de un modo de creatividad sacramental.

PALABRAS CLAVE: altar, artista, Eucaristía, fracción, inscripción, epigrafía, ley, manumisión, Eucaristía, Reiner Musterbuch, Evangelionario, transformación, creatividad.

In the Constitutions that Bishop Robert Grosseteste issued for the diocese of Lincoln, likely in 1238 or 1239, one statute addressed how altars in his diocese should be made and they should *not* be used.<sup>1</sup>

*Superaltaria quoque sint honesta et congruentis magnitudinis, firmiter fixa in circumdante ligno ut non moveantur ab ipso; neque usurpentur ad alios usus quam ad divinatorum celebrationem ut, videlicet, non molantur super ea colores, vel aliqua fiant in eis consimilia.*<sup>2</sup>

[Altar-stones should be decently made, of suitable size, and firmly fixed in the wood surrounding them to prevent their removal. And they are not to be used for purposes other than the celebration of divine service, *as, for example, grinding pigments on them* or other similar uses.]<sup>3</sup>

Grosseteste's prohibition is quite startling, not because of its concern for the proper construction, state, and use of altars, but rather because of the specific example of mis-use it references. Although from the Carolingian era forward, bishops legislated against improper behavior and practices upon or near altars, to the best of my knowledge, no other bishop expressly prohibited pigment-grinding upon altars. This statute strongly suggests that Grosseteste was provoked to address a specific, concrete problem. Apparently, in the diocese of Lincoln in the first half of the thirteenth-century the notion that altar-tables might serve as work-surfaces for painters had arisen, and the bishop felt compelled to respond officially and unequivocally.

It is not so improbable that an altar might, to a painter working in a church, look like a great place to grind the pigments necessary to his art. As Cennino Cennini (b. ca. 1370) noted, preparing pigments for painting required a stone surface.

...there are various kinds of stone for grinding pigments, like porphyry, serpentine, and marble. Serpentine is a soft stone and is not good, marble is worse, because it is too soft, but porphyry is

<sup>1</sup> For their collaborative contributions to my research and writing, I thank my research assistants Vanessa Gonzalez and Julia Karrer. I am also grateful for the generous critiques of the two anonymous colleagues who kindly took on the peer-review of this article; I regret that exigencies of time have prevented me from responding to their comments as fully as I would wish. An earlier version of this paper was presented to Prof. David Ganz's Forschungskolloquium at the Universität Zürich: I am grateful to Prof. Ganz, the members of his research team, and his students for their constructive feedback. The organizers of, and participants in the Ars Mediaevalis 2022 conference offered their many inspiring comments, questions and contributions to my thinking, for which I thank them. Finally, it is a pleasure to thank Vincent Debais and Herb Kessler both of whom generously helped me with obtaining images.

<sup>2</sup> C. R. CHENEY and F. M. POWICKE, *Councils & Synods, II: A.D. 1205-1313. Part I: 1205-1265*, Oxford, 1964, pp. 268-269 [4] (emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> Emphasis added. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

superior to them all. And if you take one of the very, very bright ones it is better; one of the ones that is not polished totally, totally smooth and half a braccio [i.e., 0.25 meter] across and square is better.<sup>4</sup>

Pieces of porphyry and serpentine were often employed as the central upper surfaces in medieval portable altars and the *mensae* of fixed altars were often made from slabs of marble.<sup>5</sup> Given the unsuitability of marble noted by Cennino Cennini, one wonders what competent painter in thirteenth-century England would have ground his pigments on an altar table made of this stone. Nonetheless, Grosseteste's statute seems to target exactly such a practice.

Grosseteste was not the first person to envision the stone altar table as a work-surface for grinding pigments. Predating Grosseteste's statute by less than a century, the second volume of the Dover Bible (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 4) includes an initial in which this notion is given beautiful, form.<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 1) The large painted initial Z that opens the first word of John's first epistle (f. 242v), is represented as a work in progress. In its left half, we see the figure of a lay painter at work on the letter. As Dodwell observed, this figure "takes up the stance of a wall painter, holding a paint-pot in one hand and with the other painting the diagonal of the initial as if it were a sloping wall."<sup>7</sup> Re-scaled by the figure of the painter, the letter becomes a monumental form, more wall painting than illuminated initial. To the right, we see a second male figure depicted in the act of grinding pigment. Holding a spatula in his right hand, with his left he grinds pigment upon the flat upper surface of a large stone block with a muller.<sup>8</sup> Outlined with a black contour line, the rectangular field of this stone block is filled with a splattered and scumbled application of orange-red pigment that contrasts with the even fields of color that surround it. The stone block has been carefully painted to resemble a variegated, colored stone, likely porphyry. Like Cennino Cennini, the illuminator of this initial knew the kind of stone best suited to his art.

The text of John's first epistle offers little in the way of textual motivation for this scene—really a double self-portrait—of two men involved in painting the manuscript. Accordingly, modern scholars have tended to see it as an expression of artistic self-awareness, even self-assertion, smuggled into a major, monumental illuminated bible.<sup>9</sup>

The image certainly proposes a vision of artistic making and makers that deserves our attention, not least because of the carefully rendered stone block upon which the labored

<sup>4</sup> Translation quoted from Cennino Cennini, *Cennino Cennini's Il Libro Dell'arte: A New English Translation and Commentary with Italian Transcription*, trans. L. BROECKE, London, 2015, p. 57 [c. 36].

<sup>5</sup> On medieval portable altars, see E. PALAZZO, *L'Espace rituel et le sacré dans le Christianisme: La liturgie de l'autel portatif dans l'Antiquité et au Moyen Âge*, Turnhout, 2008, pp. 119-135, 153-180; M. BUDDE, *Altare portatile: Kompendium der Tragaltäre des Mittelalters 600-1600*, Münster, 1997; J. BRAUN, *Der christliche Altar in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung: Arten, Bestandteile, Altargrab, Weihe, Symbolik*, vol. 1, München, 1924, pp. 419-517. For the material constitution of fixed altars see BRAUN, *Der christliche Altar* 1, pp. 101-124.

<sup>6</sup> A full digital facsimile, with extensive bibliography, is available from the Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge: <https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/fn354xs7634>.

<sup>7</sup> C. R. DODWELL, *The Pictorial Arts of the West, 800-1200*, New Haven [Conn.], 1993, p. 352.

<sup>8</sup> Here I part ways with Dodwell, who describes this figure as "pound[ing] up the lapis lazuli for the rich blues of his master's palette": an appealing interpretation, but one that I think misidentifies the muller: DODWELL, *The Pictorial Arts*, p. 354.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, DODWELL, *The Pictorial Arts*, pp. 353-355.



Fig. 1. Initial for the opening of the first Epistle of John in the Dover Bible (vol. 2) c. 1155-65 CE; Canterbury (England) Cambridge, Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, MS 4, f. 242v (detail) Photo: Parker Library, Corpus Christi College Cambridge

preparation of the artist's colors is taking place. This block's elaborate support invites us to see it as a *mensa* supported by a single *stipes*: that is as an altar. As Josef Braun demonstrated in his still unsurpassed *Summa* on Christian altars, such "Tischaltäre" with a single central support are well attested from late antiquity through the Middle Ages.<sup>10</sup>

Within the fiction of the initial in the Dover Bible, the artist's labor in preparing the materials of his art is elevated, in all senses of that word.<sup>11</sup> Working upon a surface that suggestively resembles an altar, the Dover Bible's pigment grinder prepares the colors that beautifully give body to the letter of the sacred word.

<sup>10</sup> BRAUN, *Der christliche Altar*, Vol.1, pp. 129-157.

<sup>11</sup> I cannot, in the space of this essay, address the larger issue of artistic self-conception and representation in the Middle Ages, and the related historiographic debates that have circled around the putative freedom or lack of freedom, sense of the worth or lack of worth of artistic labor in the period; suffice it to say that much of the art historical literature has, in my view, approached these questions in a profoundly ahistorical manner, over-determined by post-medieval conceptions of both the work of art and the artist. As helpful points of entry into this very large and complex constellation of questions, see P. C. CLAUSSEN, "Künstlerinschriften", in A. LEGNER (ed.), *Ornamenta ecclesiae: Kunst und Künstler der Romanik: Katalog zur Ausstellung des Schnütgen-Museums in der Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle*, 3 vols., Köln, 1985, Vol. 1, pp. 187-230; A. LEGNER, "Illustres manus", in *Ornamenta ecclesiae*, Vol. 1, pp. 187-230; A. LEGNER, *Der Artifex: Künstler im Mittelalter und ihre Selbstdarstellung: eine illustrierte Anthologie*, Köln, 2009; P. C. CLAUSSEN, "Früher Künstlerstolz: Mittelalterliche Signaturen als Quelle der Kunstsoziologie", in K. CLAUSBERG and D. KIMPEL (eds.), *Bauwerk und Bildwerk im Hochmittelalter. Anschauliche Beiträge zur Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte*,



The Dover Bible's scene of artistic activity within and upon the sacred page is a remarkably self-reflexive image, but its suggestive appropriation of the form of the altar as a part the *chaîne opératoire* of painting is not a unicum. Indeed, the alignment of the creative space of the *atelier* and the sacred space of the altar recurs in a manuscript produced between 1208-1213 CE in the Cistercian Abbey of Rein, outside of Graz in modern-day Austria.<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 2)

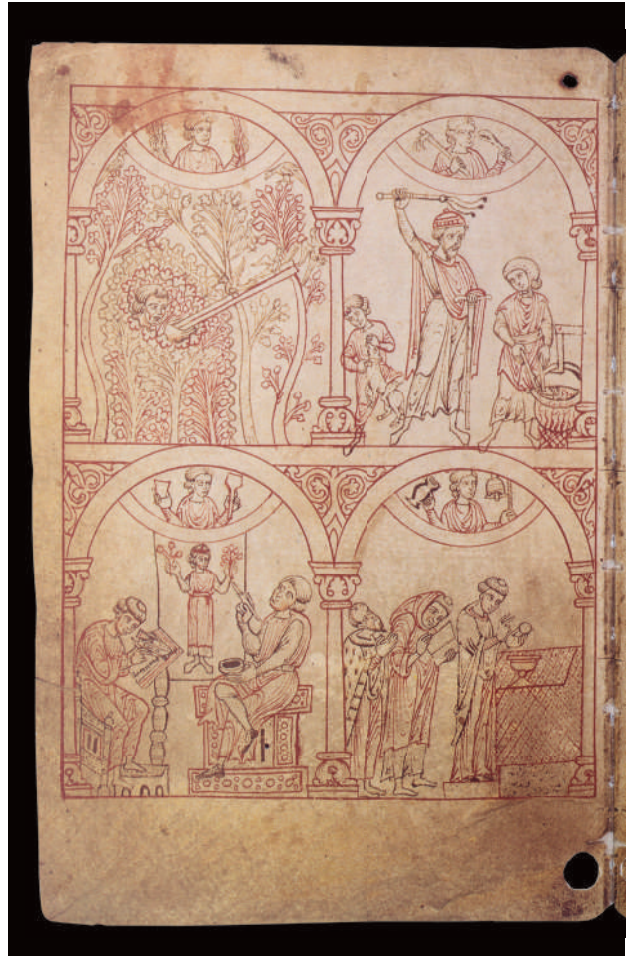


Fig. 2. So-called "Reiner Musterbuch"  
c. 1208-1213 CE; made at  
Rein Abbey, outside of Graz  
(Austria)  
Wien, ÖNB, Cod. 507, f. 2v  
Photo: "ÖNB/Wien, Cod. 507"

Giessen, 1981, pp. 7-34; R. BERLINER, "The Freedom of Medieval Art", *Gazette Des Beaux-Arts* ser. 6, 28 (1945), pp. 263-288; X. BARRAL I ALTET (ed.), *Artistes, artisans et production artistique au Moyen Age: colloque international, Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Université de Rennes II, Haute-Bretagne, 2-6 mai 1983*, 3 vols., Paris, 1986; J. F. HAMBURGER, "The Medieval Work of Art: Wherein the 'Work'? Wherein the 'Art'?", in J. F. HAMBURGER and A.-M. BOUCHÉ (eds.), *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, Princeton, 2006, pp. 374-412; B. FRICKE, "Artifex and Opifex – The Medieval Artist", in C. RUDOLPH (ed.), *A Companion to Medieval Art. Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, 2nd. rev., 2019, pp. 45-70; E. CASTELNUOVO (ed.), *Artifex bonus. Il mondo dell'artista medievale*, Rome, 2004; P. SKUBISZEWSKI, "L'intellectuel et l'artiste face à l'oeuvre à l'époque romane", in J. HAMESSE and C. MURAILLE-SAMARAN (eds.), *Le travail au Moyen Âge: Une approche interdisciplinaire: Actes du colloques internationales de Louvain-la-Neuve 21-23 mai 1987*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1990, pp. 263-321.

<sup>12</sup> For a recent critical point of entry into scholarship on the manuscript, particularly concerning its dating and localization, with extensive citation of antecedent publications, see F. SIMADER, "Das so genannte 'Reiner Musterbuch': Notizen zum Forschungsstand", in A. SCHWOB and K. KRANICH-HOFBAUER (eds.), *Zisterziensisches Schreiben im Mittelalter. Das Skriptorium der Reiner Mönche. Beiträge der Internationalen Tagung im Zisterzienserstift Rein. Mai 2003*, Bern, 2005, pp. 141-150.

## LABORING AT THE ALTAR IN THE REINER MUSTERBUCH

Before I examine the juxtaposition of painting and Eucharist, atelier and altar, in this image, a few words are in order about the manuscript to which it belongs. Although Vienna, ÖNB, Codex 507 is often called the “Reiner Musterbuch,” it is, as Friedrich Simader has argued, more aptly characterized as a “Lehrbuch” or “Lehrbehelf”.<sup>13</sup> Following the first 13 folia, filled with images unaccompanied by text or else, as in the *Physiologus* section of images, by short *tituli*, the manuscript’s remaining 136 folia are filled with a series of Latin-language texts familiar from the twelfth-century monastic curriculum, including Honorius Augustodunensis’s *Imago mundi* and *Philosophia mundi*, Hugh of St Victor’s *Didascalicon*, and a number of shorter texts treating a range of topics fundamental to medieval monastic education, including the *computus*. Over time, other didactic material was added to this collection of twelfth-century educational texts, including additions to the lists of Popes and Rulers which reveal that the core of the manuscript was completed between 1208-1213.<sup>14</sup> Thus, as Friedrich Simader has observed, the manuscript was clearly composed and enlarged with monastic *Bildung* in mind.<sup>15</sup> The codex’s first thirteen folia of drawings were likely intended from the start as teaching material suited to the monastic curriculum, a curriculum in which the liberal arts held pride of place and the mechanical arts appeared more in the form of theory than practice.<sup>16</sup>

This last point brings us back to the suggestive juxtaposition of atelier and altar that concludes the sequence of twelve scenes housed within arcades stretched over three pages at the start of the manuscript. (Fig. 3) In the lower half of f. 2v, two activities are depicted. On the left, a tonsured scribe sits before a writing desk, fixing the sheet spread upon the desk with the penknife in his left hand, while with his right hand he inscribes the phrase *heinricus imp*, (“Henry Emperor”) with a stylus. Inclining his head toward the canted surface of the desk, the monk-scribe sits upon an impressive chair and rests his left foot upon the footrest set before him. These elaborate pieces of scribal furniture express the dignity and decorum of the art of writing.

In the right half of the scene, a painter practices his art. Un-tonsured, this figure is certainly a lay man. Seated upon an imposing, jeweled piece of furniture, to which I will return, the painter wears a belted overgarment, and pointed brown shoes. Despite the elegant, worldly insouciance of his cross-legged posture, the figure of the painter is a study in absorption. Holding a dish filled with brown pigment in his left hand, he holds a paintbrush in his right hand, its diagonal form directing our attention to his work at the center of the composition.

<sup>13</sup> SIMADER, “Das so genannte ‘Reiner Musterbuch’”, pp. 142-143 et passim.

<sup>14</sup> A full inventory of the manuscript’s textual contents is available from *manuscripta.at – Mittelalterliche Handschriften in Österreich* (published online by the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften): [https://manuscripta.at/hs\\_detail.php?ID=9873](https://manuscripta.at/hs_detail.php?ID=9873). On the dating of the manuscript, based on internal criteria, see SIMADER, “Das so genannte ‘Reiner Musterbuch’”, pp. 149-150.

<sup>15</sup> SIMADER, “Das so genannte ‘Reiner Musterbuch’”.

<sup>16</sup> As Johannes Zahlten has trenchantly noted, the scenes of productive work in Cod. 507 do not correspond to medieval taxonomies of the *artes mechanicae*, including the famous scheme presented in Hugh of St Victor’s *Didascalicon*, a text included in the manuscript: J. ZAHLTEN, “Humana inventa. Zur künstlerischen Darstellung der *artes mechanicae*”, in I. CRAEMER-RUEGENBERG and A. SPEER (eds.), *Scientia und ars im Hoch- und Spätmittelalter. Albert Zimmermann zum 65. Geburtstag*, Berlin & Boston, 1994, pp. 1008-1022 at 1015.



Fig. 3. So-called “Reiner Musterbuch”, c. 1208-1213 CE; made at Rein Abbey, outside of Graz (Austria). Wien, ÖNB, Cod. 507, f. 2v (detail). Photo: “ÖNB/Wien, Cod. 507

Framed on three sides by brown lines, this work of art is a depiction of a standing figure whose clothing re-iterates the dress of its maker. Holding two flowering or budding plants aloft in each of its hands. The figure’s body is frontally disposed, but its head is slightly turned to the left, so that it seems to regard its maker.

The painter, however, does not look at his painting. His gaze is directed diagonally upwards and to the left, paralleling the strong diagonal of the brush held before him. The object of his attention is not the painting he is in the process of making, or has, perhaps, just completed, but rather the bust-length figure who occupies the apex of the scene. Here, within, a field bounded by arcing red lines, a third male figure appears. Staring out of pictorial space to the right, like the figure in the fictive painting immediately below, he also echoes the bent-elbow posture of the painted figure. However, rather than holding up flowers, his hands ostentatiously grasp two of the medieval painter’s tools: the spatula and muller that we already encountered in the Dover Bible initial. Separated from the atelier scene below by red bounding lines and differentiated by its half-length form, this figure not only presides over the arts of writing and painting but personifies them.

If we turn our attention now to the right arch in this lower half of the page, we encounter a scene that would seem, at first glance, to have very little to do with the artistic workshop with which it is paired on the page. The tonsured figure of a priest stands before an altar, covered with patterned cloth delineated in red. The very bottom of the altar block is exposed:

its surface, speckled with brown ink, conjures the appearance of variegated stone. Upon the *mensa*, an imposing chalice, described in thicker red lines, stands upon its splayed foot, perilously close to the foreground edge of the altar. The paten is not depicted as a separate object upon the altar, but the eucharistic wafer cannot be missed.<sup>17</sup> Held aloft in the priest's left hand, with the extended, crooked index and middle finger of his right hand he gestures over or toward it. The moment depicted would have been clear to a beholder familiar with the conduct of the Mass in Europe the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: the priest is making the sign of the cross over the host within the consecration, a gesture of benediction that accompanies the word "benedixit" spoken by the priest *in persona Christi*.

Further confirmation that the depicted action taking place upon the altar is the consecration, comes in the form of the half-length personification who occupies the lunette-zone at the apex of the arch. This male figure grasps the handle of a vessel with his right hand and the rope of a small bell with his. It seems very likely that this bell, presented as one of the personification's pieces of equipment, should be seen as the bell rung during the consecration, a practice that became widespread in the thirteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

Although no acolyte or deacon assists him, the priest performing the consecration at the altar is not alone. Behind him stand a heavily cowed monk bent over an open book, and, behind him, a bearded man, dressed in a fur mantle presses his hands palm-to-palm before his chest in a gesture of prayer as he directs his eyes to the bust-length personification above. This third figure is a lay man: his presence in the scene stands metonymically for the larger community of the faithful who are the recipients of the sacerdotal labor of the Mass and whose offerings to the altar and its servants were of crucial importance throughout the medieval period, a point I will return to later.

Conjoined by the architectural conceit of the arcade that frames them in the lower half of the page, the scenes of art-work and altar-work are presented to the beholder as the culmination of a longer sequence of scenes of productive labor. I want now very briefly consider that sequence of vignettes, before returning to the final scene and its presentation of the altar as a productive site, a kind of sacred atelier.

The suite of twelve scenes begins in folio 1v and continues through 2r. (Fig. 4) The first scene, situated in the upper left corner of f. 1v, presents a kind of labor never counted among the "mechanical arts" in the medieval period; namely, the work of sexual reproduction.

Flanked by two leafy trees, a veiled woman and a man embrace as they sit upon a heavily draped piece of furniture; not a bench, but a bed. The intense intimacy of the two figures' mutual regard and tight embrace, coupled with their elegant, sumptuous clothing invites comparison with contemporary depictions of *sponsa* and *sponsus* from the Song of Songs. In this

<sup>17</sup> I think it is possible that the rectangular form at the top of the chalice should actually be understood as the paten resting upon the chalice. For an analogous depiction of a chalice covered by a paten, see the depiction of the Mass of Saint Gregory in a single leaf (c. 1181/1200 CE) from Weingarten Abbey in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago (Kate S. Buckingham Endowment, 1944.704), reproduced and discussed in A. KUMLER, "Manufacturing the Sacred: The Eucharist and Other Works of *Ars*", *English Language Notes*, 53 (2015), pp. 9-44 at 9-12.

<sup>18</sup> On the advent of this practice in the early thirteenth century, see J. A. JUNGSMANN, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development (Missarum Sollemnia)*, F. A. BRUNNER (trans.), 2 vols., New York, 1951, Vol. 1, pp. 207 (n. 30), 209-210.





Fig. 4. So-called "Reiner Musterbuch", c. 1208-1213 CE; made at Rein Abbey, outside of Graz (Austria). Wien, ÖNB, Cod. 507, ff. 1v-2r. Photo: "ÖNB/Wien, Cod. 507

image, however, the union of bride and bridegroom produces not exegetical fruit, but rather the swaddled infant lying in an ovoid, jeweled bed that inexplicably floats above the ground-line on the right of the composition. Standing behind the baby, a small female figure with a long braid and uncovered head makes a dramatic and enigmatic gesture. Reaching behind the infant's head with her left hand, she stretches out her right arm to the left; the strong diagonal formed by the figure's arms energetically signals the infant's origin in the couple seated on the bench. Rounding out the scene, the half-length male figure in the semi-circular field above balances two objects upon his hands. Sepp Walter proposed that these are a drinking bowl and a wooden plate: vessels involved in nourishing the *corpus humanum*.<sup>19</sup>

Each of the following scenes is dedicated to a different kind of skilled work. Moving from left to right through the scenes presented on f. 1v, we encounter a scene of animal husbandry, depicted with some irony. In the scene below and to the left, three male figures are engaged in plowing. The bust-length figure above, who holds a shovel and hoe can be readily identified as a personification of *agricultura*, but the female figure standing erect upon the plow remains quite mysterious. The final scene on this page depicts two different groups of skilled workers: smiths laboring at an anvil and carpenters, busily constructing a building. The facing page (f. 2r), is filled with depictions of textile work, specifically weaving, leather working, fishing, and

<sup>19</sup> *Reiner Musterbuch: Faksimile-Ausgabe im Originalformat des Musterbuches aus Codex Vindobonensis 507 der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek*, Graz, 1979, p. 53 ("Nachtrag" by Sepp Walter).

hunting. Exhibiting an informed knowledge of contemporary technologies and techniques, each scene is replete with incident that rewards close looking.

Turning the page, we return to the verso housing the scenes of scribal and painterly effort and the *opus divinum* of the Mass. (Fig. 2) In the upper two arched spaces of this page, the labor of the fowler, or bird trapper, is represented on the left, and, on the right, we encounter a rather violent epitome of the art of cookery.

There is much more to be said about this Cistercian manuscript's twelve-part visual commentary on human activity and work; in this context I must limit myself to observing that the manuscript's synoptic view of productive labor is utterly original. Starting with the production of a physical *corpus*—the child created by the amorous couple—this visual celebration of human transformations of materials culminates in the priest's labor at the altar, that is in the confection of Christ's sacramental body and blood and, through them, the *corpus mysticum* of the church united with Christ in the Eucharist. The penultimate scene, the compositional pendant to the depictions of the celebration of the Mass, presents us with the making of writing and of images. The implication is visually clear: the altar is also a productive site, a place of labor and transformation, a sacred atelier or *officina*.

As Pierre-Alain Mariaux and Didier Méhu have brilliantly elucidated, a conception of the priest or the bishop as a kind of artist acquired real currency in the Romanesque period and, by means of a theoretical-theological feedback loop, laid the groundwork for conceiving of the artist as a quasi-sacerdotal figure by the close of the medieval period.<sup>20</sup> In addition to the central significance of eucharistic consecration to this trope, the ritual marking of sacred space during the liturgy for the dedication of churches offers another a well-studied in case in point. During the liturgical dedication of a church, the officiating bishop traced either the Latin alphabet twice, or, as in most post-Carolingian rites, the Latin and the Greek alphabets on the pavement of the church in the form of a Chi- or "Greek" cross; he anointed the altar with chrism applied in the form of multiple crosses, and he likewise applied chrism to the church's walls in the form of crosses, a Chrismon, and/or the Greek letters alpha and omega.<sup>21</sup> These ritual

<sup>20</sup> P.-A. MARIAUX, "Quelques hypothèses à propos de l'artiste roman", *Médiévales. Langues, Textes, Histoire*, 44 (2003), pp. 199-214; P.-A. MARIAUX, "'Faire Dieu.' Quelques remarques sur les relations entre confection eucharistique et création d'image (ixe-xiii siècles)", in D. GANZ, T. LENTES, and G. HENKEL (eds.), *Ästhetik des Unsichtbaren: Bildtheorie und Bildgebrauch in der Vormoderne*, Berlin, 2004, pp. 95-111; P.-A. MARIAUX, "Art, artiste, moine à la période romane: quelques réflexions", in D. RUSSO, C. SAPIN, D. IOGNA-PRAT, M. LAUWERS, F. MAZEL, and I. ROSÉ (eds.), *Cluny. Les moines et la société au premier âge féodal*, Rennes, 2013, pp. 185-195; D. MÉHU, "L'évidement de l'image ou la figuration de l'invisible corps du Christ (ixe-xie siècle)", *Images Re-vues. Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l'art*, 11 (2013), <http://imagesrevues.revues.org/3384?lang=en>; P.-A. MARIAUX, "The bishop as artist?: the Eucharist and image theory around the Millennium", in ed. S. GILSDORF, *The Bishop. Power and piety at the first Millennium*, Münster i. W., 2004, pp. 155-167.

<sup>21</sup> Although I cannot fully explore the salience of these components of the liturgy for the consecration of churches here, I concur with one peer-reviewer's suggestion that these aspects of the dedication rite warrant greater consideration; for further discussion, with extensive additional bibliography, see MÉHU, "L'évidement de l'image"; D. M. POLANICHKA, "Transforming Space, (Per)Forming Community: Church Consecration in Carolingian Europe", *Viator*, 43 (2012), pp. 79-98; B. BEYS, "La valeur des gestes dans les miniatures de dédicace (fin du xive siècle - début du xvie siècle)", in *Le geste et les gestes au Moyen Age*, Aix-en-Provence, 1998, pp. 71-89; E. PALAZZO, *L'Évêque et son image: L'illustration du pontifical au Moyen Age*, Turnhout, 1999, pp. 307-356; C. TREFFORT, "*Opus litterarum*.

actions—the cruciform tracing of alphabets and the elaboration of signs upon the altar and the walls with chrism—marked the church’s interior (and in some regions, also its exterior walls) in a fashion that was understood to be durably sanctifying, although the visible and material traces of these markings were ephemeral.<sup>22</sup>

Considered in this light, the Reiner Lehrbuch’s juxtaposition of artistic and sacramental scenes can be understood as participating in a broader, long-lived theorization of the sacramental labor of the clergy and the work of the artist in resonant relation. In the remainder of this essay, I aim to offer a complimentary perspective, by considering a few ways in which the altar was a site for image- and text-making—a “work-surface” and “workshop”—long before the Romanesque period, when the textual and visual trope of the *sacerdos* as *artifex* comes into clear focus. What follows makes no claims to inventory the ways in which Christian altars were understood as productive sites in the medieval period. Rather, I offer only a series of fragmentary glimpses of the transformative actions worked at and upon altars in the Middle Ages. Among the many acts of transformation worked upon Christian altars, legal *acta* represent a particularly potent and telling tradition; one of the aims of this essay is to suggest that they too informed, and were informed by the altar’s status as a productive site. From the making of images to the legal transformation of property and people, medieval actions at and upon altars collectively reveal a long-lived conception of the Christian *mensa* as a site and surface for the exercise of a sacramental mode of creativity.

#### EPHEMERAL IMAGES UPON THE ALTAR: FRACTION AS COMPOSITION

During the celebration of the Mass in some regions of early medieval Europe, the altar’s surface was a site of artful composition, of visible image-making. We can glimpse this practice already in the third canon issued by the Council of Tours in 567 CE: “that the body of the Lord upon the altar should be arranged not in an arbitrary order, but under the *titulus* of the

L’inscription alphabétique et le rite de consécration de l’église (IXe-XIIIe siècle)”, *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 53 (2010), pp. 153-181; D. MÉHU, “The Colors of the Ritual: Description and Inscription of Church Dedication in Liturgical Manuscripts (10th-11th Centuries)”, in B. BEDOS-REZAK and J. HAMBURGER (eds.), *Sign and Design: Script as Image in Cross-Cultural Perspective (300-1600 CE)*, Washington, D.C., 2016, pp. 259-277; P. S. BROWN, “The Chrism and the Liturgy of Dedication in Romanesque Sculpture”, *Gesta*, 56 (2017), pp. 199-223.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that in the Middle Ages “consecration crosses” were also executed in pigment or as incrustations in mural surfaces, preceding the ritual consecration of the church; although the chrism applied to these crosses would fade from view, these cross signs remained visible. In his influential *Rationale*, Durandus discusses both chrism crosses and painted crosses (*Sane crismato altari, duodecim cruces in parietibus ecclesie depicte crismantur. Depinguntur autem ipse cruces...*): GUILLAUME DURAND, *Guillelmi Duranti Rationale divinarum officiorum. I-IV*, A. DAVRIL and T. M. THIBODEAU (eds.), Turnhout, 1995, p. 73 (I, VI, 27). For two recent examinations of painted consecration crosses, with citation of antecedent literature, see A. SPICER, “‘To Show That the Place Is Divine’: Consecration Crosses Revisited”, in K. KODRES and A. MÄND (eds.), *Images and Objects in Ritual Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Northern and Central Europe*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013, pp. 34-52; Á. PAZOS-LÓPEZ, “Pintura mural y liturgia: el trazado de las cruces de consagración en los rituales de dedicación de iglesias de Occidente y sus representaciones iconográficas en el arte bajomedieval”, in S. MANZARBEITIA VALLE, M. AZCÁRATE LUXÁN, and I. GONZÁLEZ HERNANDO (eds.), *Pintado en la pared. El muro como soporte visual en la Edad Media*, Madrid, 2019, pp. 241-262. I am grateful to one of the peer reviewers for bringing Pazos-López’s illuminating article to my attention. As Cécile Treffort has discussed, in certain medieval churches alphabetic inscriptions were durably incised in stone; whether these inscriptions evoked or in some fashion reiterate the original ritual alphabetic inscriptions is far from clear: TREFFORT, “*Opus litterarum*.”

cross.”<sup>23</sup> The phrasing of this canon would be enigmatic, if no other evidence concerning the practice that it addresses had survived. Happily, such evidence *does* survive and reveals that diagrammatic images were composed upon the surface of some early medieval altars with the eucharistic bread.

The *Revelatio* of Eldefonsus, an account of divine instructions concerning the Eucharist purportedly received in 845 CE, prescribes how eucharistic hosts should be arranged upon the altar in the celebration of the Mass.<sup>24</sup> In Vat. Lat. 1341, a ninth-century manuscript produced at the Abbey of Corbie, drawings of these arrangements punctuate the text.<sup>25</sup> (Fig. 5) The arrangement of hosts in the Easter Mass is presented in a drawn *figura* following the text’s verbal account of this disposition of hosts upon the altar: “On Easter, namely the Lord’s Resurrection... 135 breads should be offered in the manner of a cross in the three Masses, that is 45 in each and every MASS, THUS...”<sup>26</sup> Subsequent drawings within the text on f. 188r detail the compositions of hosts to be created upon the altar at the major feasts of Christmas and Pentecost, and, in the bottom right corner of the page, the arrangements to be made on Sundays and saints’ feast days.

Although Eldefonsus claims a divine origin for all of the prescriptions concerning the Eucharist that he conveys, if we compare the arrangements of the hosts upon the altar in the *Revelatio* with early medieval Irish practices and the so-called “Old Hispanic” or “Mozarabic” rite, we find that the *Revelatio*’s altar-top compositions are not eccentric, unprecedented creations.

<sup>23</sup> *Ut corpus Domini in altari, non in imaginario ordine, sed sub crucis titulo componatur*. J. D. MANSI (ed.), *Sacrorum conciliorum nova, et amplissima collectio*, Florence & Paris, 1759, Vol. 9, col. 793. For a different interpretation of this canon, i.e., that it refers *not* to the disposition of particles on the altar, but instead to the celebration of the Eucharist not in the presence of images, but rather in the presence of the cross alone, see M. WERNER, “The Liudhard Medalet”, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 20 (1991), pp. 27-41 at 39.

<sup>24</sup> The text has yet to attract the attention it deserves. To the best of my knowledge the only serious discussions of the text to date are R. E. REYNOLDS, “Christ’s Money: Eucharistic Azyme Hosts in the Ninth Century According to Bishop Eldefonsus of Spain: Observations on the Origin, Meaning, and Context of a Mysterious Revelation”, *Peregrinations. Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture*, 4 (2013), pp. 1-69 (<https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol4/iss2/1>); H. WITTHÖFT, “Maßgebrauch und Maßpraxis in Handel und Gewerbe des Mittelalters”, in G. VUILLEMIN-DIEM and A. ZIMMERMANN (eds.), *Mensura. Maß, Zahl, Zahlensymbolik im Mittelalter*, 2 vols., Berlin, 1983, Vol. 1, pp. 234-260; H. WITTHÖFT, “Maß und Gewicht im 9. Jahrhundert. Fränkische Traditionen im Übergang von der Antike zum Mittelalter”, *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 70 (1983), pp. 457-482; R. E. REYNOLDS, “Eucharistic Adoration in the Carolingian Era? Exposition of Christ in the Host”, *Peregrinations. Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture*, 4-2 (2013), pp. 70-153 (<https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol4/iss2/2>); H. L. KESSLER, “Medietas / Mediator and the Geometry of Incarnation”, in W. MELION and L. PALMER WANDEL (eds.), *Image and Incarnation*, Leiden & Boston, 2015, pp. 17-75.

<sup>25</sup> Vatican, BAV, MS Vat. lat. 1341, f. 188r. I follow Bischoff’s dating and localization: B. BISCHOFF, *Katalog der festländischen Handschriften des neunten Jahrhunderts (mit Ausnahme der wisigotischen)*. Teil III: *Padua-Zwickau*, B. EBERSPERGER (ed.), Wiesbaden, 1998, p. 447 (no. 6855). The Vatican copy is one of three known witnesses to the text; the other two extant copies are Paris, BnF, MSS lat. 2855 and lat. 2077.

<sup>26</sup> *«In pascha scilicet d(omi)nica resurrectione... centu(m) xxx<sup>a</sup> (et) v panes sunt offerendi in crucis modu(m) per triu(m) missaru(m) officia uidelicet xl (et) v in una quaeque MISSA ITA...»*: Vatican, BAV, MS Vat. lat. 1341, f. 187v. The PL publication of the text (after Mabillon) should be employed with care; it diverges at points from the manuscript readings: J. P. MIGNE (ed.), *Revelatio quae ostensa est venerabili viro hispaniensi Eldefonso episcopo, in Spiritu Sancto, mense septimo*. PL 106, Paris, 1864, cols. 881-890.





Fig. 5. Diagram of arrangements of hosts upon the altar for different feasts. Eldefonsus hispaniensis, *Revelatio*, late 9th century CE; made at the Abbey of Corbie (Picardy, France). Vatican City, BAV, MS Vat. Lat. 1341, f. 188r. Photo: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

The old Irish tract on the Mass in the Stowe Missal, likely created in the first half of the ninth century, demonstrates that similar compositions were made on altars in early medieval Ireland. In it we learn, that a primary host, the priest's host, is broken so as to produce three particles, according to a quite imagistic logic:

The host upon the paten [is] the flesh of Christ on the tree of the cross. The fraction on the paten [is] the breaking of the body of Christ with nails on the cross. The joining with which the two halves are joined after the fraction [is] a symbol of the wholeness of the body of Christ after [the] resurrection. The submersion with which the two halves are submerged symbolizes the submersion of the body of Christ in his blood after [his] wounding on the cross. The particle that is broken from the bottom of the half on [the] left hand symbolizes the wounding with the lance in the armpit on the right, for Christ's face was [turned] westwards *on the cross, that is towards the city*, and *Longinus'* face was [turned] eastwards. That which was on the left for the latter is that which was on the right for Christ.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Translation quoted from: L. B. Nooij, *A New History of the Stowe Missal: Towards an Edition of the Stowe John and the Irish Tract on the Mass*, PhD Diss., Maynooth, 2021, pp. 247-248, <https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/14931/> (§13-16). In Nooij's translation italics indicate Latin words within the Old Irish text. Nooij also presents

As the Irish Mass Tract continues, it explains how the particles of the host are to be arranged at the two great feasts of Easter and Christmas:

The arrangement of the fraction of Easter and Christmas [consists of] thirteen particles in the stem of the crosses, nine in their crosspieces, twenty particles in their circle-wheels, five particles [in] each angle, and sixteen both [in] the circle and [in] the body of the crosses, that is four [in] each part. The middle particle is that to which the one who celebrates mass goes; it symbolizes the breast with its mystical meanings. [Those particles] which are up from [the latter] to the shaft [are] for bishops. The crosspiece on the left hand [is] for priests. The one on the right [is] for all subgrades. The [particles] down from the crosspiece [are] for anchorites [and people] of penance. Those which are in the upper-left angle [are] for true clerical students. [Those in] the upper-right [are] for innocent children. [Those in] the lower-left [are] for people of penance. [Those in] the lower-right [are] for people of lawful marriage and for people who do not go to communion before.<sup>28</sup>

In sum, then, the Stowe Missal's Tract on the Mass details how as many as 65 particles of the host should be arranged. These compositions are made by the priest, who works upon the altar table to create abstract visible representations charged with ecclesiological and soteriological significance.

The diagrammatic mimesis of the compositions upon the altar described in the Irish Mass Tract resonates with a quite similar, if comparatively minimalist practice in the so-called Old Hispanic rite, a liturgy which seems to have been well established in Iberia by the end of the seventh century.<sup>29</sup> In the Old Hispanic Mass, the fraction of the host was performed so as to produce seven particles; five of these particles seem to have been arranged on the altar in the form of a cross, with the remaining two particles placed next to the cross.<sup>30</sup> Each particle within the cross-form is identified with an event from Christ's life; the two adjacent particles are designated as Christ's "glory" and "rule."<sup>31</sup>

a diplomatic and a normalized transcription of the Old Irish Mass Tract in NOOIJ, *A New History*, pp. 239-245. For further discussion of this text, see also L. B. NOOIJ, "The Irish Material in the Stowe Missal Revisited", *Peritia*, 29 (2018), pp. 101-110.

<sup>28</sup> Translation quoted from NOOIJ, *A New History*, pp. 248-249 (§19-20).

<sup>29</sup> For an introduction to the Old Hispanic rite (also known as the Mozarabic or Old Spanish liturgy) and its two "traditions", as attested in the earliest extant liturgical manuscripts, see E. HORNBY and R. MALOY, *Music and Meaning in Old Hispanic Lenten Chants: Psalmi, Threni and Easter Vigil Canticles*, Woodbridge [U.K.], 2013, pp. 1-25; R. GÓMEZ-RUIZ, *Mozarabs, Hispanics, and the Cross*, Maryknoll, N.Y., 2007; M. FÉROTIN, *Le liber ordinum: en usage dans l'église wisigothique et mozarabe d'Espagne du cinquième au onzième siècle*, Paris, 1904, pp. ix-xxxvii; D. M. RANDEL, "The Old Hispanic Rite as Evidence for the Earliest Forms of the Western Christian Liturgies", *Revista de Musicología*, 16 (1993), pp. 491-496.

<sup>30</sup> The oldest reference to this practice known to me is the marginal notation in the late tenth- or early eleventh-century *Liber ordinum* of San Millán de la Cogolla: Madrid, Real Academia de Historia, MS Aemil 56, f. 139r. A full digital surrogate of this manuscript is available at: <https://bibliotecadigital.rah.es/es/consulta/registro.do?id=65>. For an introduction to, and edition of the manuscript, see FÉROTIN, *Le liber ordinum*. For further discussion of the *Liber ordinum*, see M. DELS SANTOS GROS PUJOL, "El Ordo Missae de la tradición hispánica A", in *I Congreso internacional de estudios mozarábes, Toledo, 1975. Ponencias y comunicaciones presentadas. Serie D, 1: Liturgia y música mozarábes*, Toledo, 1978, pp. 45-64; F. M. CABROL, "Le *Liber ordinum* et la liturgie mozarabe", *Revue des questions historiques*, 77 (1905), pp. 173-184.

<sup>31</sup> The designations given to each of the particles (*signacula*) in the *Liber Ordinum* are: *Corporatio*, *Nativitas*, *Passio*, *Mors*, *Resurrectio*, *Gloria*, *Regnum*: San Millán de la Cogolla: Madrid, Real Academia de Historia, MS Aemil 56, f.

Collectively, these sources reveal that from at least the sixth century, if not earlier, altars in many parts of Europe were sites of active, visible, abstract, sacred and symbolic image-making during the celebration of every Mass.

### MARKING THE *MENSA*

Although the geometric compositions of eucharistic particles created on early medieval altars were ephemeral images destined to disappear as the Mass unfolded, other activities left durable marks upon the surfaces of altars in the Middle Ages. Numerous dedication inscriptions survive incised in medieval altars. These epigraphic interventions typically indicate the date of the altar's consecration, the name of the bishop or archbishop who performed the consecration, and list the relics enclosed in the altar.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to such formal epigraphic texts, certain medieval altars bear the traces of yet other acts of mark-making upon their *mensae*. As Cécile Treffort has discussed, the surfaces of many altars were employed as a medium for charged acts of inscription, most notable for the engraving, scratching, or inked inscription of names.<sup>33</sup> Upon the fragmented tenth-century altar table from the Abbey Church of Saint-Jean north of Vagnas (Ardèche, France) Treffort was able to decipher more than thirty names, from a much larger number of incised letter forms in a range of scripts worked into the slab's surface.<sup>34</sup> So too, the famous altar slab from the church of St Peter and St Paul in Reichenau-Niederzell still bears more than 400 names incised into its stone surface and written upon it in ink.<sup>35</sup> In a 2004 publication, Treffort identified close to

139r. A variant practice involving nine particles is attested in the *Missale Mixtum* published by Migne, where it is accompanied by a diagram in which two additional particles, integrated into the form of the cross, are designated *Circumcisio* and *Apparitio*: J.P. Migne (ed.), *Liturgia Mozarabica Secundum Regulam Beati Isidori in Duos Tomos Divisa. Missale Mixtum*, PL 85, Paris, 1862, vol. 1, cols. 118 & 557. On the Old Hispanic fraction and arrangement of particles, with further discussion of analogous practices in other rites see REYNOLDS, "Christ's Money"; JUNGSMANN, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, vol. 1, pp. 302-303; E. A. MATTER, "The Pseudo-Alcuinian *De Septem Sigillis*. An Early Latin Apocalypse Exegesis", *Traditio*, 36 (1980), pp. 111-137 at 118-122 (esp.).

<sup>32</sup> For further discussion, see A. GAGNÉ, *Iste locus fulget: les inscriptions d'autel (France, XIe-XIIIe siècles) ; l'écriture et la matière dans l'église*, MA thesis, Quebec City, 2010, <http://www.theses.ulaval.ca/2010/27553/>; J. MICHAUD, "Culte des reliques et épigraphie: l'exemple des dédicaces et des consécration d'autels", in E. BOZÓKY and A.-M. HELVÉTIUS (eds.), *Les reliques. Objets, cultes, symboles. Actes du colloque international de l'Université du Littoral-Côte d'Opale (Boulogne-sur-Mer) 4-6 septembre 1997*, Turnhout, 1999, pp. 199-212; J. MICHAUD, "Epigrafía y liturgia. El ejemplo de las dedicaciones y consagraciones de iglesias y altares", *Estudios humanísticos. Geografía, historia y arte*, 18 (1996), pp. 183-207; A. GAGNÉ, "L'écriture et la matière dans la construction de l'écclesia (France, XIe-XIIIe siècle): Mémoire de Maîtrise en histoire du Moyen Âge à l'université Laval, Québec, sous la direction de Didier Méhu, 2010", *Bulletin du Centre d'études médiévales d'Auxerre*, 15 (2011), pp. 425-437. I regret that I was not able to consult J. MICHAUD, *Les Inscriptions de consécration d'autels et de dédicace d'églises en France du 8e au 13e siècle: épigraphie et liturgie*, PhD Diss., Poitiers, 1979.

<sup>33</sup> C. TREFFORT, "Les 'graffitis' sur tables d'autel aux époques pré-romane et romane. Note à propos des inscriptions de l'autel de Gellone", in X. BARRAL I ALTET & C. LAURANSON-ROSAS (eds.), *Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert. La fondation de l'abbaye de Gellone. L'autel médiéval. Actes*, 2004, pp. 137-146.

<sup>34</sup> TREFFORT, "Les 'graffitis'", p. 138; R. FAVREAU, J. MICHAUD, and B. MORA, *Corpus des Inscriptions de la France médiévale. Vol. 16: Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, Hautes-Alpes, Ardèche, Drôme*, Paris, 1992, p. 94 (No. 39, Figs. 56-57).

<sup>35</sup> D. GEUENICH, K. SCHMID, and R. NEUMÜLLERS-KLAUSER, *Die Altarplatte von Reichenau-Niederzell*, Hannover, 1983.

fifty high medieval and Romanesque-era altars with such “graffiti”-like inscriptions in Europe.<sup>36</sup> The majority of the inscribed altars she identified are from Southern France and Catalonia; from these identified examples, it seems that the practice of writing into or directly upon altars may have more or less ceased by the early thirteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

As Treffort and others have emphasized, the inscribing of names into the upper surfaces of altars was part of a larger complex of commemorative practices connected with the celebration of the Eucharist from the start to the end of the medieval period.<sup>38</sup> To simply call these practices “commemorative,” is, perhaps misleading. The naming of the living and the dead within the celebration of the Mass, a practice that reaches back to late antiquity, was a profoundly present- and future-oriented, indeed eschatological act.<sup>39</sup> Named aloud, or made present in the Mass through inscriptions, the persons named were understood to receive numerous soteriological benefits from the sacrament and the prayers offered up at various points in conduct of each Mass.

### **IN CORNU EVANGELII: LEGAL ACTS AT THE ALTAR**

The conviction that the inscribing of names and the placing of artifacts upon the altar did powerful work was widely held in the early and high Middle Ages. It is this conviction that underwrites another crucial aspect of the altar’s function in the medieval period: namely the altar’s role as a place of legal transformation and creation.<sup>40</sup>

The inscription of legal *acta* in immediate spatial relation to altars is a case in point.<sup>41</sup> In the abbey Church of Sant’Antimo in Tuscany an unusually lengthy inscription fills the steps leading up to the altar and continues on a composite column immediately to the north of the altar. (Fig. 6) The inscription details a complex legal transaction in which Bernard, a count, ceded all of his land holdings and legal rights of *usufruct* in Italy to another layman, Ildebrand, Ildebrand, apparently acting as a middleman, then offered these extensive properties and rights to the monastery of Sant’Antimo. According to the inscription, the transfer of the property and rights was formally concluded in 1118.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup> TREFFORT, “Les ‘graffitis’”, pp. 141-143.

<sup>37</sup> TREFFORT, “Les ‘graffitis’”, p. 141.

<sup>38</sup> C. TREFFORT, “Inscrire son nom dans l’espace liturgique à l’époque romane”, *Les cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa*, 34 (2003), pp. 147-160; TREFFORT, “Les ‘graffitis’”; JUNGSMANN, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, Vol. 2, pp. 159-179.

<sup>39</sup> JUNGSMANN, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, Vol. 2, pp. 159-179.

<sup>40</sup> For a broader perspective on the medieval altar as a “Rechtsstätte” (with further bibliography), see S. VIEK, “Der mittelalterliche Altar als Rechtsstätte”, *Mediaevistik* 17 (2004), pp. 95-184.

<sup>41</sup> Often designated as “stone charters” or “chartes lapidaires,” such epigraphic texts should not simply be assimilated to, or conflated with legal documents on papyrus, parchment or paper, not least because of their broader communicative address: for further discussion, with extensive bibliography, see V. DEBIAIS, “Urkunden in Stein. Funktionen und Wirkungen urkundlicher Inschriften”, in K. BOLLE, M. von der HÖH, and N. JASPERS (eds.), *Inchriftenkulturen im kommunalen Italien: Traditionen, Brüche, Neuanfänge*, Berlin, 2019, pp. 65-90; R. FAVREAU, *Épigraphie médiévale*, Turnhout, 1997, pp. 32-42.

<sup>42</sup> For further discussion, with a transcription of both sections of the inscription, see W. KURZE, “Zur Geschichte der toskanischen Reichsabtei S. Antimo in Starciatal”, in J. FLECKENSTEIN and K. SCHMID (eds.), *Adel und Kirche. Gerd Tellenbach zum 65. Geburtstag dargebracht von Freunden und Schülern*, Freiburg i. Br., 1968, pp. 295-306.





Fig. 6. Inscription starting at the foot of the altar, continuing upon the altar steps, and concluding on adjacent column in the Abbey Church of Sant'Antimo, Castelnovo dell'Abate, Montalcino (Tuscany, Italy), c. 1200? CE.

Photo: © Federico Busonero, Abbazia di Sant'Antimo, Castelnovo dell'Abate, Montalcino

The inscription cut into the altar *gradus* and the paving stones immediately before the altar-block, not only employs legal phrasing, but also notes a series of extra measures taken to ensure that Bernard's brother would not attempt to wrest back the lands and rights from the abbey; this included obtaining a confirmation of the transaction from Emperor Henry V.<sup>43</sup> The continuation of the inscription on the adjacent column, takes the form of an eschatocol, the concluding section of a legal document: witnesses to the act are named as is the notary

<sup>43</sup> KURZE, "Zur Geschichte der toskanischen Reichsabtei", p. 306.

involved, the various procedures employed to confirm the written *instrumenta* and to hand them over to the abbey are identified, and the date of the conclusion of the transaction is stated.<sup>44</sup>

Although the inscribed stone steps before the altar at Sant'Antimo have undergone alterations since they were first installed, it is clear that the inscription was originally sited immediately west of the altar block.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the inscription ensured that the names of Bernard and Ildebrand, and their legal acts benefitting the abbey, were present at the center of every Mass celebrated at the altar. That the inscription continues and concludes on a column adjacent to the altar is also significant.

This column occupies a location identified in medieval liturgical sources as *in cornu evangelii*; that is, adjacent to the northwestern corner of the altar, the corner of the altar table where the Gospel book was placed during the Mass, and close to the space in the chancel from which the Gospel lection or pericope was read aloud in each Mass. The legal conveyance's conclusion with the Gospel book placed on the altar and the reading of the Gospel pericope during the Mass is not a unicum.

An inscribed marble plaque that was once embedded in the northwest chancel wall of the church of Sainte-Croix at Montélimar makes explicit reference to the Gospel book's role in the securing of legal *acta*.<sup>46</sup> (Fig. 7) In the concluding lines of this inscription, closely following the phrasing of a charter, two donors of land to the church, Geraldus Aemarius and Lambertus, confirm and secure their donations by swearing upon and touching a Gospel book: "that we should faithfully observe and at no time contravene all that was written, touching the most sacred Gospels, we swear."<sup>47</sup> From early and high medieval sources, we know that swearing upon the Gospels, like swearing upon relics, was a widespread practice.<sup>48</sup> When lay people made donations of land to monasteries and churches, many early medieval legal codes required that their acts be given written form, that they be witnessed, and finally confirmed or "strengthened" (the verb *firmare* is often employed) by placing the legal *carta* upon the altar and/or swearing upon a Gospel book.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> KURZE, "Zur Geschichte der toskanischen Reichsabtei", p. 306.

<sup>45</sup> See the detailed discussion in KURZE, "Zur Geschichte der toskanischen Reichsabtei", pp. 297-298.

<sup>46</sup> On this inscription see DEBIAIS, "Urkunden in Stein," pp. 75-77; FAVREAU, MICHAUD, and MORA, *CIFM* 16, pp. 150-152 (No. 39, Fig. 97).

<sup>47</sup> *ut omnia sicut superius scripta sunt fideliter observemus et nullo tempore contraveniamus tactis sacrosanctis evangelis juramus*: transcribed and discussed in DEBIAIS, "Urkunden in Stein," pp. 76-77.

<sup>48</sup> On late antique and medieval swearing on the Gospels, see P. HOFMEISTER, *Die christlichen Eidesformen. Eine liturgie- und rechtsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, München, 1957, pp. 36-54 (esp.).

<sup>49</sup> For further discussion, see A. ANGENENDT, "Cartam offerre super altare", *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 36 (2002), pp. 133-158; A. STIEDORF, "Die Magie der Urkunden", *Archiv für Diplomatik* 55 (2009), pp. 1-32; R. MCKITTERICK, *The Carolingians and the Written Word*, Cambridge & New York, 1989, pp. 66-72; M. T. CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, Cambridge, MA, 1979, pp. 204-206 (et passim); H. BEYER, "Urkundenübergabe am Altar. Zur liturgischen Dimension des Beurkundungsaktes bei Schenkungen der Ottonen und Salier an Kirchen", *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 38 (2004), pp. 323-346; B.-M. TOCK, "Altare dans les chartes françaises antérieures à 1121", in J. HAMESE (ed.), *Roma, magistra mundi. Itineraria culturae medievalis. Mélanges offerts au Père L. E. Boyle à l'occasion de son 75e anniversaire*, 3 vols., Louvain-La-Neuve, 1998, Vol. 2, pp. 901-926.

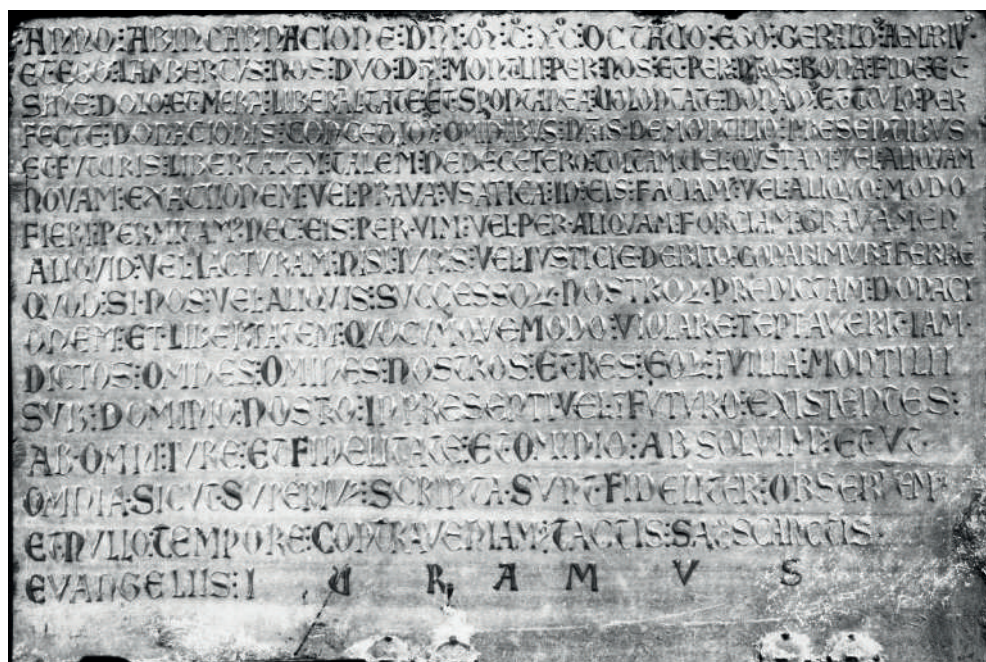


Fig. 7. Inscription from the church of Sainte-Croix, Montélimar (today preserved in the salle d'accueil of the Hôtel de Ville, Montélimar), c. 1198-1200 CE; Montélimar (Drôme, France). Marble, with red and blue pigment; 88 x 64 cm  
Photo: © CIFM/CESCM · J. Michaud

The act of placing a document upon the altar (*super altare*), presenting it at the altar (*ad altare/ad aram*), or else of swearing upon the Gospel Book was sometimes registered in legal instruments themselves. The Montélimar inscription is an epigraphic example of this phenomenon. In its original location, the plaque, inscribed in the first-person plural, permanently reiterated Geraldus's and Lambertus's oaths in direct relation to the altar where, it seems quite likely, these two laymen had bound themselves to respect the donation they made and, in so doing, had bound the church of Sainte-Croix to themselves.

#### ARCHIVES OF *ACTA SUPER ALTARE*: GOSPEL BOOKS

The important role Gospel books played in Christian cultures over the course of the Middle Ages, hardly needs emphasis. Gospel books were crucial to the sacramental and soteriological work of the Mass. Every Mass involved the reading aloud of a Gospel and the Gospel book itself manifested Christ's presence, even before the bread and wine were consecrated on the altar. Beyond the formal conduct of the liturgy, Gospel Books played yet another role in early and high medieval conceptions of the altar as an atelier for the working of soteriologically powerful transformations. As numerous extant Evangelaries and Evangelistaries reveal, Gospel Books were employed as sacred archives, repositories in which legal acts of worldly and



spiritual significance were recorded and preserved, often in a fashion that echoes the practices I have already discussed in relation to the altar itself.<sup>50</sup>

Many of the early and high medieval Gospel books known to art historians as monuments in the history of medieval book painting were important legal *monumenta* in the medieval period. The St. Augustine's Gospels (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 286), a manuscript famous for its putative role in the conversion of Southern England and for its two surviving full-page paintings is a case in point. Rarely mentioned in art historical discussion of this manuscript, is the text added to f. 74v, facing the *Argumentum* for Mark. (Fig. 8)

This inscription, written in Old English in an insular hand, preserves a legal act: a certain Ealhburg's donation of renders of land to St Augustine's Abbey.<sup>51</sup> It is one of ten legal texts added to the manuscript, all of which concern transfers of land or agreements about land use. When the St. Augustine's community enshrined these land conveyances in the pages of

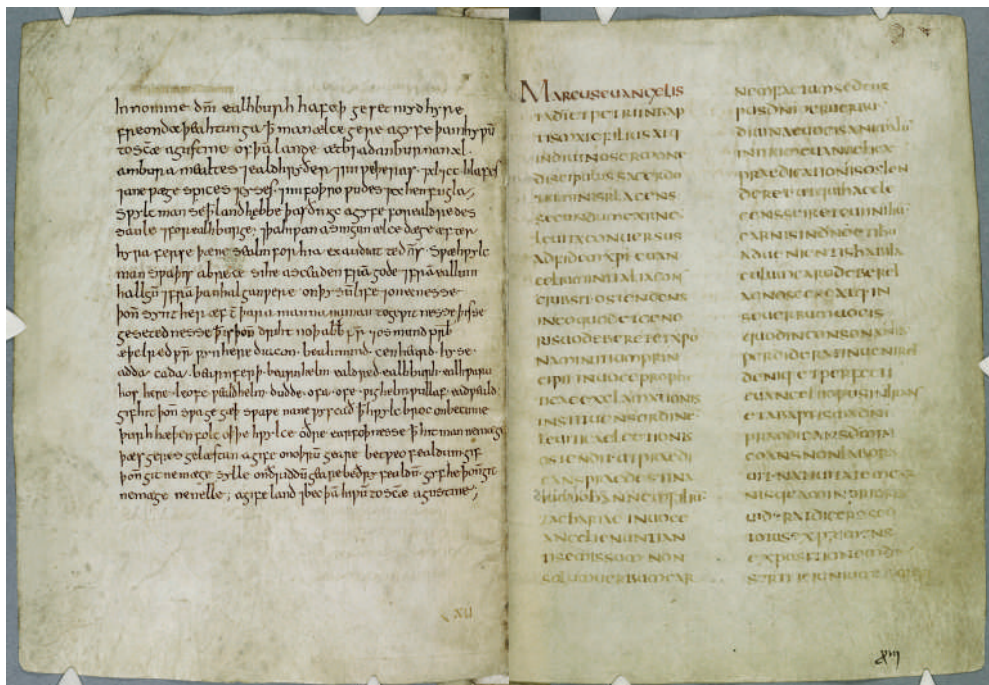


Fig. 8. St. Augustine's Gospels. Verso: Ealhburg grants renders of land at Brabourne, Kent to St Augustine's Abbey, c. 850 CE. Recto: Argumentum ('monarchian prologue') for the Gospel of Mark, c. 500-599 CE. Cambridge, Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, MS 286, ff. 74v-75r. Photo: Parker Library, Corpus Christi College Cambridge

<sup>50</sup> On the Gospel book as "archive", see E. TREHARNE, *Perceptions of Medieval Manuscripts: The Phenomenal Book*, Oxford, 2021, pp. 62-87. On the safekeeping of documents within sacred objects and sacred space, see CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record*, pp. 125-128.

<sup>51</sup> See *The Electronic Sawyer* record (S 1198), with further bibliography: <https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/chapter/1198.html>



a Gospel Book, they chose their oldest, most venerated book to serve as a sacred archive. Indeed, the St. Augustine's Gospel book was revered as a relic of the evangelist to the English already in the ninth century. With other book-relics of St. Augustine of Canterbury it was stored above the altar of St Ethelbert within the abbey's church. In Thomas Elmham's wonderful drawing of the east end of the church, we see the "six books sent by Gregory to Augustine," accompanied by two arm reliquaries, in their place of honor *super altare*.<sup>52</sup> (Fig. 9)



Fig. 9. Gospel books and arm reliquaries *super altare* in St. Augustine's, Canterbury. Thomas of Elmham, *Historiae Abbatiae S. Augustini*. After 1414 CE; St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury (Kent, England) Cambridge, Trinity Hall Library, MS 1, f. 77r  
Photo: courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Trinity Hall, Cambridge

<sup>52</sup> For further discussion of this image and the manuscript, more broadly, see A. HIATT, "The Cartographic Imagination of Thomas Elmham", *Speculum*, 75 (2000), pp. 859-886.

The St. Augustine's Gospel book is but one example of a much larger pattern of inscribing legal acts in stupendous, precious Gospel Books.<sup>53</sup> On the one hand, this practice reveals how ecclesiastical institutions made use of written documents to secure their acquisitions of lands and land rights in a period in which the cartulary had not yet been invented and many legal actions involved spoken words, gestures, transfers of symbolic objects, witnesses, but not written *instrumenta*.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, however, the charters and other *acta* inscribed in Gospel Books reveal that lay men and women wanted not only their land conveyances and other donations to churches, but also legal transactions with other lay persons to be inscribed in Gospel Books and to be confirmed or actualized through placement upon the altar.<sup>55</sup>

Manumissions were among the many important legal actions that took place at medieval altars and left traces in Gospel Books. The medieval practice of freeing slaves in churches (*manumissio in ecclesia*) continued a pre-Christian Roman practice of formally releasing people from servile status in pagan temples and other public fora; it was established in Roman law under Constantine and included in the Theodosian Code (IV, 7, 1) and the Code of Justinian (I, 13, 1-6).<sup>56</sup> In the early Middle Ages, Christian altars were thus sites at which the transformation of the legal status of human beings was worked and we find records of manumissions in numerous early medieval Gospel books.<sup>57</sup> One such record, in the eighth-century Gospel Book known today variously as the St Chad, St Teilo, Lichfield, and Llandeilo Gospels (Lichfield, Lichfield Cathedral Library, MS 1), offers a powerful glimpse of how the altar and the Gospel book were involved in the work of manumission.<sup>58</sup> (Fig. 10)

<sup>53</sup> This phenomenon is well known, but, to the best of my knowledge, it has yet to be the object of the sustained, interdisciplinary study it certainly deserves.

<sup>54</sup> The *locus classicus* on the use of symbolic objects in legal actions, including but not limited to investiture, remains: J. LE GOFF, "Le rituel symbolique de la vassalité", in *Pour un autre Moyen Âge. Temps, travail et culture en Occident: 18 essais*, Paris, 1978, pp. 349-420. For further discussion see also O. KANO, "Pour l'histoire d'un symbole juridique: la festuca dans le haut Moyen Âge", *Bulletin de la Société nationale des antiquaires de France*, (2015), pp. 159-176; STIEDORF, "Die Magie der Urkunden"; S. L. LUTHER, *Gifts and Giving in Architectural Sculpture of the Holy Roman Empire, ca. 1150-1235*, (PhD Diss., New Haven, 2015, pp. 146-208; M. TANGI, "Urkunde und Symbol", in *Festschrift für Heinrich Brunner zum siebzigsten Geburtstag dargebracht von Schülern und Verehrern*, Weimar, 1910, pp. 761-773.

<sup>55</sup> As points of entry into a vast body of scholarship, see STIEDORF, "Die Magie der Urkunden"; McKITTERICK, *The Carolingians and the Written Word*, 66-72; W. DAVIES, "The Latin Charter-Tradition in Western Britain, Brittany and Ireland in the Early Mediaeval Period", in D. WHITELOCK, R. McKITTERICK, and D. N. DUMVILLE (eds.), *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes*, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 258-280.

<sup>56</sup> On *manumissio in ecclesia* and the legal obligations to the church it usually entailed in late antiquity and the early and high Middle Ages, with further bibliography, see A. RIO, *Slavery after Rome, 500-1100*, Oxford, 2017, pp. 75-134, et passim; S. ESDERS, "Early medieval use of late antique legal texts: The case of the *manumissio in ecclesia*", in O. KANO (eds.), *Configuration du texte en histoire (Proceedings of the Twelfth International Conference on Studies for the Integrated Text Science)*, Nagoya, 2012, pp. 55-66; S. ESDERS, "'Because Their Patron Never Dies': Ecclesiastical Freedmen, Socio-Religious Interaction, and Group Formation under the Aegis of 'Church Property' in the Early Medieval West (Sixth to Eleventh Centuries)", *Early Medieval Europe* 29 (2021), pp. 555-585; D. A. E. PELTERET, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England: From the Reign of Alfred until Twelfth Century*, Woodbridge, 1995, pp. 131-163 (esp.).

<sup>57</sup> On the inscription of manumissions in insular Gospel books see RIO, *Slavery after Rome*, pp. 119-122; PELTERET, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England*, pp. 131-151 (esp.).

<sup>58</sup> On the Lichfield/Llandeilo/St Teilo Gospels, with citations of further bibliography, see TREHARNE, *Perceptions*, pp. 74-80; M. P. BROWN, "The Lichfield/Llandeilo Gospels Reinterpreted", in R. KENNEDY and S. MEECHAM-JONES (eds.),



Fig. 10. Portrait of Luke and Four-Symbols page with added inscription in the St. Chad/St Teilo/Lichfield/Llandeilo Gospels. 8th century. Lichfield, Lichfield Cathedral Library, MS 1, pp. 218-219. Photo: © Lichfield Cathedral

It is necessary to write a text [showing] that the four sons of Belddri—Gwrtheyrn, Cyfwich, Ed[...], Arthwys—granted freedom to Bleiddudd son of Sulien and his descendants for ever, in exchange for a price. And this is the confirmation that he gave for his freedom four pounds and eight ounces [of silver] before the following appropriate witnesses: of the laity, Rhiwalon son of Cyffro, Gwen[...] son of [...],r, Guoluic [son of ...]dan, Ov[...] son of *Gurcinnim*, Merchwyn son of *Salus*, Arthan son of Cyfwlch, Idri son of Idnerth; of the clergy, Nobis, bishop of Teilo, Sadyrnwydd, *sacerdos* of Teilo, Dyfrin and Cuhelyn, son of the bishop, Sadyrnfyw, *Camibiau*, and Sulien the scholar, who accurately wrote [it down]. Let the person who has maintained this decree of freedom for Bleiddudd and his offspring be blessed; but let the person who has not maintained it be cursed by God and by Teilo in whose Gospel Book it has been written; and let the whole people say “Let it be so, let it be so” [*Fiat, fiat*].”<sup>59</sup>

Inscribed in the outer margin of p. 141 next to the hieratic figure of the Evangelist Luke, the text is also witnessed, as it were, by the apocalyptic evangelist symbols on the facing recto.

*Authority and Subjugation in Writing of Medieval Wales*, New York, 2008, pp. 57-70; D. JENKINS and M. E. OWEN, “The Welsh Marginalia in the Lichfield Gospels. Part I”, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 5 (1983), pp. 37-67; D. JENKINS and M. E. OWEN, “The Welsh Marginalia in the Lichfield Gospels. Part II: The ‘Surexit’ Memorandum”, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 7 (1984), pp. 91-120; P. JAMES, “The Lichfield Gospels: The Question of Provenance”, *Parergon*, 13 (1996), pp. 51-61.

<sup>59</sup> Translation (with minor modification) quoted from T. M. CHARLES-EDWARDS, *Wales and the Britons, 350-1064*, Oxford, 2013, pp. 247-248 (italics in original).

The manumission of Bleidudd and his offspring — purchased with silver — was not simply recorded in St. Teilo's Gospel Book: it was witnessed, confirmed, and enforced by the power of God, of St. Teilo, and the *fiat* of the Christian community. Bleidudd's transformation from slave to freed man, was a transformation worked not only by payment and a legal instrument, but also by St. Teilo's Gospel Book and, it can be inferred, by the altar where St. Teilo, in his relics, worked.

#### ACTS OF CREATION *SUPER ALTARE* IN LATER MEDIEVAL CENTURIES

Early medieval conceptions of the Gospel Book and the altar as spaces of transformative soteriological work continued into the high and later Middle Ages. In the Kremsmünster *Codex millenarius maior*, a ninth-century Evangeliary made in Mondsee or at Benedictine Abbey of Kremsmünster itself, the originally blank rectos of the book's Evangelist portraits were filled in the twelfth century with meticulous re-scripts of diplomas issued by the Carolingian kings and emperors Arnolf von Kärnten and Charlemagne and Embricho, Bishop of Würzburg.<sup>60</sup> (Fig. 11)

Within the codicological architecture of the Evangeliary, the transcribed diplomas are situated like prefaces to the portraits of the Evangelists as inspired scribes and the images of their symbols. Granted this privileged place within the sacred structure of the Gospel Book, the legal substance of the diplomas was enshrined and effectively sanctified. Thus, starting in the twelfth-century, Arnulf and Charlemagne — remembered for their benefactions and made present in the form of the legal *signa* of their monograms — were granted a prominent place not only in the Gospel book, but also upon the altar in each Mass celebrated with the *Codex millenarius maior*.

The altar's role as a work-surface for transformative acts involving living people also continued past the early and high Middle Ages. A striking case in point concerns the placing of living people upon the altar as a way of confirming and making known their change in status. As Michail Bojcov has shown, in the German-speaking lands this practice was widely employed as part of the process of electing and installing kings, bishops, abbots and abbesses.<sup>61</sup> The new office holder, following their election, was brought to a church and physically elevated and set upon an altar. This ceremonial act was frequently accompanied by the singing of the *Te Deum* hymn.<sup>62</sup> The earliest identified explicit reference to this practice takes the form of an inscription below an image of the *Altarsetzung* of Henry VII of Luxembourg following his election as

<sup>60</sup> On the manuscript, see W. NEUMÜLLER and K. HOLTER, *Der Codex Millenarius*, Graz & Köln, 1959. The added diplomas are found on f.17r (Arnulf of 22 Oktober 893; Hagn Nr. 14), f. 109r (Arnulf of 4 January 888; Hagn Nr. 9), ff. 173v-174r (Charlemagne of 3 January 791; Hagn Nr. 2). Additionally, a rescript of a diploma of Embricho, Bishop of Würzburg was added to f. 277v (from 1140; Hagn Nr. 31). For transcriptions of the diplomas from the manuscript, see T. HAGN, *Urkundenbuch des Benedictiner Stiftes Kremsmünster, seiner Pfarreien und Besitzungen vom Jahre 777 bis 1400*, Linz, 1852.

<sup>61</sup> M. A. BOJCOV, "Warum pflegten deutsche Könige auf Altären zu sitzen?", in O. G. OEXLE and M. A. BOJCOV (eds.), *Bilder der Macht im Mittelalter und Neuzeit. Byzanz, Okzident, Rußland*, Göttingen, 2007, pp. 243-314.

<sup>62</sup> BOJCOV, "Warum pflegten".



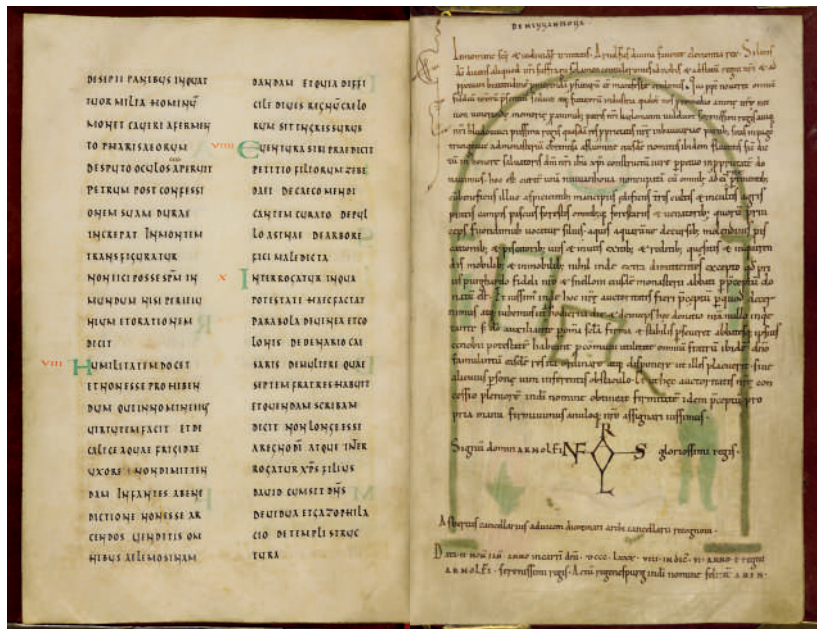


Fig. 11. Re-script of a diploma issued by Arnolf von Kärnten added to the Kremsmünster *Codex millenarius maior* followed by opening composed of full-page Evangelist and Evangelist-Symbol portraits. Gospel book made in the 9th century; Mondsee oder Kremsmünster (?) Text of diploma added c. 1150 CE. Kremsmünster, Benediktinerstift, CC Cim. 1, ff. 108v-109r & ff. 109v-110r. Photo: courtesy of the Benediktinerstift, Kremsmünster

“King of the Romans” in Frankfurt in 1308 that is included in the Codex Balduinus (Koblenz, Landeshauptarchiv, Bestand 1 C 1, f. 4r), a copiously illuminated copy of *Kaiser Heinrichs Romfahrt* produced for Henry’s younger brother, Balduin, Archbishop of Trier.<sup>63</sup> (Fig. 12)

Inscribed immediately beneath the image of two electors placing the not-yet crowned Henry VII upon the altar, the text states: *Electus super altare locatur per septem electores anno predicto VIII<sup>o</sup>* (Having been elected, [Henry VII] is positioned upon the altar by the seven electors in the aforementioned eighth year [*i.e.*, in 1308]). In parallel to the passive phrasing employed in the Latin text, the image invests Henry’s figure with a marked passivity: hands crossed in his lap, the seated king resembles an inert sculpture as he is grasped and placed upon the altar by the standing male figures who flank him. Positioned between depictions of Henry’s election and the 1309 CE coronation of Henry and his wife, Margaret of Brabant, in Aachen, the image presents the *Altarsetzung* as an important step in the process of transforming Henry into a *Rex Romanorum*.



Fig. 12. Electors place King Henry VII upon the altar  
Kaiser Heinrichs Romfahrt in the Codex Baludineus, c. 1340 CE. Koblenz, Landeshauptarchiv, Bestand 1 C 1, f. 4r. Photo: courtesy of the Landeshauptarchiv, Koblenz

<sup>63</sup> Discussed in BOJCOV, “Warum pflegten”, pp. 244-246. On Koblenz, Landeshauptarchiv, Best. 1C Nr. 1, also known as the Codex Balduini Trevirensis, see M. MARGUE, M. PAULY, and W. SCHMID (eds.), *Der Weg zur Kaiserkrone: der Romzug Heinrichs VII. in der Darstellung Erzbischof Balduins von Trier*, Trier, 2009.

## CONCLUSION

In the early and high Middle Ages, it was at and upon altars that Christ's sacramental body was visibly, if ephemerally composed into soteriologically-charged abstract images, marks were made in pursuit of salvation, and legal *acta* were ceremonially "strengthened" and reiterated as durable epigraphic *monumenta*. So too, enslaved people were legally transformed into freed Christian subjects at altars, benefactions and benefactors were made present in the very substance of Gospel Books brought to, and read aloud near altars, and elected kings, bishops, abbots, and abbesses were displayed like sacred objects upon altars. And this inventory of transformative acts surely does not exhaust the productive, creative work undertaken before and upon altars in the medieval period.

Implicitly, the confecting of Christ's Eucharistic body and blood, a transformative act in which the priest labored *in persona Christi*, seems to have served as a paradigm and the soteriological *sine qua non* for all the other ways that medieval altars functioned as sacred ateliers or workshops. A place where bonds between the living and the dead, between lay people and the church, and, not least, between terrestrial and celestial economies were forged and made visible, the Christian altar was a productive site, whose role in the crafting of medieval conceptions of the economy of salvation cannot be overstated. And in this connection, it bears emphasizing that the altar *mensa* served as a worksurface for a range of transformative actions long before transubstantiation acquired a privileged role in theological discourse and "popular" piety.

It is precisely the altar's role as a paradigmatic creative, transformative work-space within a broader panorama of productive human activity that the Reiner Lehrbuch's architecturally framed suite of twelve scenes celebrates. (Figs. 3-4, 2) A long medieval tradition of understanding and, indeed, of using the altar as a productive site underwrites and conceptually frames the juxtaposition of writing and painting with the sacrament of the altar as the conclusion and culmination of the twelve-part series of images.<sup>64</sup>

With the altar's role as a site for transformative *acta* in mind, the figure of the monk-scribe writing the phrase *heinricus imperator* in the penultimate scene acquires a new salience. (Fig. 2) The letters spelling out name and titlature are positioned along the long front edge of the writing support, oriented away from the scribe so that they can be easily read by a person holding the Reiner Lehrbuch in their hands. The *ordinatio* of this inscription makes

<sup>64</sup> Length constraints prevent me from adequately revisiting the full suite of twelve vignettes pictorially exploring productive labor in ff. 1v-2v of the manuscript. Here I will simply note that the twelve-part architectonic structuring of the sequence of scenes, as well as specific compositional and iconographic elements, clearly invite comparison with medieval calendrical schemes and canon tables. As Virginia Ebert observed, the fictive figural painting in the penultimate "bay" of the arcade (f. 2v) certainly evokes visual depictions of the labor/occupation for the month of May (or April); she specifically references the figure for May in a thirteenth-century program of the occupations of the months painted on the intrados of the triumphal arch of Notre-Dame de Pritz (Mayenne), an apt *comparandum* that should prompt further consideration of how the terrestrial and the celestial were understood to converge *super altare* in the celebration of the Eucharist: V. W. EGBERT, *The Mediaeval Artist at Work*, Princeton, 1967, p. 38. Likewise, the cookery scene situated directly above the depiction of the Mass in the Reiner Lehrbuch is highly suggestive; on *conficere* and its vernacular cognates in relation both to the Eucharist and culinary confections, see MARIAUX, "The bishop as artist?", pp. 159-160.

very little sense, if the figure of the scribe is supposed to be working on a bifolium; that is, if he was represented at work on a codex. But this fictive scribe is not producing a book; he is making an imperial diploma. In the document he writes, the emperor's name appears just where it should: at the end of the text, inscribed parallel to the lower long edge of the sheet. The monk-scribe is preparing a legal instrument, in the name of an Emperor Heinricus; a diploma that, we can safely infer, will benefit the monastic community. For an early thirteenth-century Cistercian beholder at the Abbey of Rein, the visual implication of this detail would have been unmistakable: the Abbey's Scriptorium had, for at least a generation, been an atelier for the making of documents, as well as codices.<sup>65</sup>

The Reiner Lehrbuch presents the writing of a legal document as a pendant to the painting of an image, only to lead the beholder onward from these two creative acts to the celebration of the Mass. Within the longer sequence of images, writing, painting and sacramental confection are positioned as the culmination of a twelve-part exploration of human productive action. Like the celebration of the Eucharist and the making of a painting, the crafting of a legal document worked a profound transformation, turning material, physical *realia* given to the church into soteriological goods. When such a legal act was transcribed in a Gospel Book or inscribed within the sacred space of the chancel, the benefactor's name, and with it their *memoria*, were similarly transmuted: they became integral presences in the ongoing sacramental, soteriological work of the Eucharist.

Thus, at the close of the Reiner Lehrbuch's visual celebration of human labor, the transformative power of art and of law are framed in a resonant relation to the priest's work at the altar. No mere juxtaposition, this pictorial composition conceptually frames a mutual relation between these creative acts: like the scriptorium and other artistic and artisanal workshops, the altar is also a work-place, a site for acts of creative transformation. And like the skilled labor of writing and painting, the confection of the Eucharist was an *opus* that exceeded or transcended the sum of its material parts. This conception of the altar as a paradigmatic and paramount sacred atelier is given unusually explicit visual expression in the Reiner Lehrbuch, but its conceptual foundations had been established in medieval practice long before the manuscript was made.

<sup>65</sup> P. Othmar Wonisch observed that main scribe of the Reiner scriptorium in the second half of the twelfth century (Wonisch's scribe "RA", attested in documents up to the year 1202) was both an experienced writer of diplomatic script and documents and responsible for a series of codices: P. O. WONISCH, "Über das Urkundenwesen der Traungauer", *Zeitschrift des Historischen Vereins für Steiermark*, 22 (1926), pp. 52-149 at pp. 67-68 (esp); SIMADER, "Das so genannte 'Reiner Musterbuch'", p. 147. To the best of my knowledge, no diploma issued by an "Emperor Heinrich" for Rein Abbey survives, but given the internal dating of the manuscript (see n. 14 above), it is conceivable that the emperor named in the fictive diploma should be identified as Henry VI, Emperor from 1191-1197 CE.