Ring of Flesh: Late Medieval Devotion to the Holy Foreskin

by

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the late medieval (c. 1200-c. 1500) veneration of the Holy Foreskin, the relic of Jesus's penis that resulted after his circumcision. I argue that as relics of Jesus's prepuce proliferated throughout western Europe during the late Middle Ages, they engendered both controversy and innovative forms of devotion. Theologians wondered whether earthly relics of Jesus's penis—a part of his body—called into doubt the relevancy of the Eucharist, the bread and wine turned into Jesus's body and blood through transubstantiation. They also worried that relics of the Holy Foreskin imperiled the concept of bodily resurrection: if Christ himself could not be resurrection in bodily perfection, humans had no hope of achieving the same. I also explore as case studies three late medieval holy women who each gave their own interpretation to the Jesus's foreskin: as an acceptable ersatz Eucharist, as a prefiguration of Jesus's Crucifixion (and thereby Resurrection), and as a stand-in for the Christchild himself. I close by examining the paradoxical nature of the Holy Foreskin itself, as a relic of the Jewish practice of circumcision that medieval Christians themselves did not perform. Overall, I argue in this thesis that the body was and continues to be a complicated site onto which religious beliefs can be placed. By exploring medieval beliefs about the Holy Foreskin, we learn not just about a particular type of relic, but also about developments in Christianity during the Late Middle Ages.

For my parents,
James D. White and Denise Smith

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INTRODUCTION: A VERY SPECIAL RELIC

On the Feast Day of the Circumcision (January 1, the eighth day of Christmas) during the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, the Viennese beguine Agnes Blannbekin had an unusual experience. While thinking about where Jesus's circumcised foreskin might be located, "she soon felt on her tongue, with the greatest sweetness, a little piece of skin in the manner of the skin of an egg, which she swallowed." The flesh excised from Jesus's penis reappeared, and she ultimately swallowed it one hundred times at which point "it was said to her that the foreskin was resurrected with the Lord on the day of resurrection."[1] During the 1350s, the future saint Birgitta of Sweden experienced a vision from the Virgin Mary in Rome, confirming for her that Jesus's foreskin existed on earth and was located in the Sancta Sanctorum.[2] Shortly afterward, throughout the 1370s, future saint Catherine of Siena wrote numerous letters to religious women, telling them that Jesus had spiritually married them and had signified the marriage "not with a ring of silver but with a ring of his own flesh. Look at that tender little child who on the eighth day, when he was circumcised, gave up just so much flesh as to make a tiny circlet of a ring."[3]

Although these visions and ideas seem unusual to the modern reader, they are representative of a larger trend in late medieval Christianity: widespread devotion to the Holy Foreskin of Christ. By the early twelfth century, relics of Jesus's foreskin had begun to appear

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[1] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Leben und Offenbarungen der Wiener Beine Agnes Blannbekin* (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1994), ch. 37, pg. 118: "Et ecce, mox sensit super linguam suam parvam pelliculam ad modum pelliculae ovi cum praemaxima dulcedine, quam deglutivit… et dictum est ei, quod praeputium cum domino surrexerit die resurrectionis." All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[2] Birgitta of Sweden, *Sancta Birgitta: Revelaciones, Book VI,* ed. Birger Bergh (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1991), 273.

[3] Catherine of Siena, Letter T221/G152, *Letters, vol. 2*, ed. and trans. Suzanne Noffke (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), 184. For Catherinian sources, I have relied primarily upon Suzanne Noffke's critically translated editions of the texts in English, referring to printed Italian editions from the early 1900s when necessary to confirm key words, specifically regarding gender. See Caterina da Siena. *Le Lettere de S. Caterina da Siena, Ridotte a Miglior Lezione, e in Ordine Nuovo Disposte con Note di Niccolo Tommaseo, a Cura di Piero Misciattelli, 6 vols.* Siena: Giuntini Bentivoglio & Co., 1913-1921.

throughout western Europe. Many of the foreskin relics possessed origin stories detailing a fictional trip to Jerusalem made by the Emperor Charlemagne, who had supposedly brought the relic back with him from the Holy Land; alternate versions have Charlemagne receiving the Holy Foreskin from either an angel or Empress Irene in Byzantium.[4] Although the most famous and most widely acknowledged foreskin was housed in the Sancta Sanctorum in Rome (as confirmed by Birgitta), it became increasingly difficult to find a pilgrimage center *without* a Holy Foreskin as the late Middle Ages progressed. As examples, Antwerp, Liège, and Charroux also boasted relics of the prepuce, as did more than twenty other possible sites.[5]

Knowledge about the Holy Foreskin (like the relics themselves) was widespread enough that it spread into literature. The immensely popular *Book of Sir John Mandeville*, which probably originated in the Anglo-Norman sphere during the late 1300s, is a combined history, travel guide, and catalogue of fantastical peoples. The narrator, Mandeville, briefly appends to his description of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem the following story: "Charlemagne was in this Temple when an angel brought him the Holy Foreskin, the prepuce of Our Lord from His circumcision, and afterwards King Charles had it taken to [Paris.]"[6] Although Mandeville's book notoriously blends fact and fantasy, to the point that even its author/narrator is almost certainly

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[4] See, for example, Ralf Lützelschwab, "Zwischen Heilsvermittlung und Ärgernis—das preputium Domini im Mittelalter," pp. 601-628 in *Reliques et Sainteté dans l'Espace Médiéval*, ed. J.L. Deuffic (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 617-619; Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised: A Study in Early Christian History and Difference* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), ix; and Johan J. Mattelaer, Robert A. Schipper, and Sakti Das, "The Circumcision of Jesus Christ," *The Journal of Urology* 178 (2007): 33.

[5] Robert B. Palazzo, "The Veneration of the Sacred Foreskin(s) of Baby Jesus: A Documented Analysis," in *Multicultural Europe and Cultural Exchange in the Middle Ages*, ed James P. Helfers (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 155-176; and Johan J. Mattelaer, Robert A. Schipper, and Sakti Das, "The Circumcision of Jesus Christ," *The Journal of Urology* 178 (2007): 33-34. Lützelschwab, "Zwischen Heilsvermittlung und Ärgernis," 624, building from Guibert of Nogent, provides an amusing gloss to Birgitta's vision: "Mary had better things to do after the birth of Christ than to concern herself with the conservation of a foreskin."

[6] Sir John Mandeville, *The Book of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. Anthony Bale (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 43-44. I have purposefully placed "Paris" in brackets; as Bale, 142, discusses, according to different manuscripts of the *Book*, Charlemagne took the foreskin relic to Poitiers, Chartres, Aix-la-Chapelle, Liège, or St. John Lateran's Basilica in Rome.

fictional, the laconic nature with which Mandeville describes the relic suggests that his readers would have been familiar with it; certainly, the book's widespread distribution would have informed those readers who had not yet heard of it.[7]

Although the physical relics and devotion to them were widespread among medieval Christians, not everyone in the Middle Ages supported them. Theologians tended to view any relics of Christ—the foreskin, but also his baby teeth or his umbilical cord—as blasphemous and potentially dangerous; at issue was the concept of bodily resurrection. If Christ had not been resurrected with all of his body parts intact, what hope was there for humanity?[8] Further, if Jesus's body already existed on earth, what was the particular need for the Eucharist—and therefore of priests? Christians could encounter and worship the body of Christ directly, in potentially multiple locations.

The debate surrounding the Holy Foreskin—and, indeed, the evidence for the Foreskin itself—springs from Christian Scripture. Luke 2.21 provides for the existence of a foreskin of Christ: "And after eight days were accomplished, that the child should be circumcised, his name was called Jesus, which was called by the angel, before he was conceived in the womb."[9] The very same Gospel, however, also gave ammunition to those who doubted the continued presence of that circumcised foreskin on the earth. According to Luke 21.18, at the time of death, "not a hair of your head will perish," suggesting that Jesus's foreskin would have been restored to him.

The letters of Paul triggered an additional concern regarding the Holy Foreskin: the very existence of this object of late medieval popular Christian devotion, and learned condemnation,

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[7] Bale provides a discussion of Mandeville's identity. See Sir John Mandeville, *Book of Sir John Mandeville*, x-xvi.
[8] For an extended discussion of the theological debates surrounding resurrection, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
[9] All biblical translations are from the Douay-Rheims Bible: "Et postquam consummati sunt dies octo, ut circumcideretur puer, vocatum est nomen ejus Jesus, quod vocatum est ab angelo priusquam in utero conciperetur."

was the result of a Jewish rite. Medieval Christians did not practice bodily circumcision, but instead advocated a spiritual circumcision of the heart, as advocated by Paul (Romans 2.29).[10] While early Christianity had focused more on why Christ had allowed himself to be subjected to the painful, Jewish rite of circumcision, later medieval theologians expressed confidence that circumcision of the heart (achieved through baptism) produced humility and was an act of *imitatio Christi*.[11]

Although late medieval commentators on the difference between the literal Jewish and spiritual Christian circumcisions generally used their platform to denounce the obduracy of Jews,[12] some authors took their invective a step further, claiming that circumcision feminized Jewish men and ultimately contributed to a supposed monthly penile menstruation.[13] Although medieval authors do not explicitly acknowledge it, a paradox has been created here. The circumcising act that feminized Jewish men and served as a continuing reminder of their status as doubters of Christ was simultaneously the ritual that produced the excised foreskin. Indeed, his circumcised penis was the only marker that rendered Christ's body constantly, and irretrievably, Jewish. Nevertheless, the Holy Foreskin—and not his baby teeth, umbilical cord, or hair and nail clippings—was arguably the most popular bodily relic of Christ in the late Middle Ages.[14] Certainly, it was the most prevalent.

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[10] See, for example, Joshua D. Galloway, "The Circumcision of Christ: Romans 15.7-13," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 34.4 (2012): 303-322.
[11] Lützelschwab, "Zwischen Heilsvermittlung und Ärgernis," 603, 606. For early Christianity, see Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*.
[12] For one example, see Lützelschwab, "Zwischen Heilsvermittlung und Ärgernis," 603.
[13] Irven M. Resnick, "Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses," *The Harvard Theological Reivew* 93.3 (2000): 241-263, expanded in Resnick, *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 53-92. See also Willis Johnson, "The Myth of Jewish Male Menses," *Journal of Medieval History* 24.3 (1998): 273-295; and C. Philipp E. Nothaft, "The Meaning of *Judaeus* and the Myth of Jewish Male Menses in a Late Medieval Astronomical School Text," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 7.1 (2013): 73-91.
[14] I except here the Eucharist, sometimes understood during the late Middle Ages as a relic in its own right, despite theologians' opposition. See Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 290-291; and Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle*

Previous Scholarship on the Holy Foreskin

As simultaneously popular and controversial as the Holy Foreskin was during the late Middle Ages, modern scholarship has largely ignored the subject, probably due in part to a papal order in 1900 prohibiting all discussion or writing about the Holy Foreskin, on penalty of excommunication.[15] For that reason, I will present the collected historiography of the relic here, referring to previous works as necessary throughout the rest of this study. The first modern scholarly examination of the Holy Foreskin to appear after the 1900 ban, and also the most recent book-length scholarly treatment of the subject, is Alphons Müller's *Die hochheilige Vorhaut Christi*, published more than a century ago. Müller primarily provides an institutional history of Christ's prepuce, concentrating on locations that held foreskin relics and the theological debates surrounding them. When he discusses the devotion of individuals to the Holy Foreskin, it is with the aim of demonstrating how their veneration of the relic bolstered individual churches' claims to possess it. Birgitta of Sweden provides his key example here.[16] Müller is also concerned with tracing the histories of individual foreskin relics, such as those held at St. John Lateran's Basilica in Rome and at Charroux.[17]

However, Müller's study is problematic; it is informed by prominent confessional concerns. Müller was a former (*ehemalig*) Dominican, and it is clear throughout the monograph that he is attempting to discredit belief in the Holy Foreskin and to shame the Roman Catholic

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Ages, revised ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 28-29, 39-40. The Eucharist was most frequently treated as a relic when the host exhibited miraculous properties, such as bleeding. See Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2004), *passim*; Rubin, *Corpus Christi,* passim; and especially Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

[15] Palazzo, "The Veneration of the Sacred Foreskin(s)," 155.

[16] Alphons Victor Müller, *Die Hochheilige Vorhaut Christi im Kult under in der Theologie der Papstkirche* (Berlin: C.A. Schwetschke und Sohn, 1907), 29.

[17] For St. John Lateran's Basilica, see Müller, *Die Hochheilige Vorhaut*, 61-83. The discussion of Charroux is at 84-107.

Church for ever allowing such belief to exist.[18] Although he seems to provide some concession to medieval devotees of the relic, he is particularly vehement when discussing continued, post-Reformation veneration of the foreskin. For example, after discussing the Jesuit Ferrandus's attempts to explain the multiple relics of the foreskin by suggesting that they were all pieces of Christ's umbilical cord placed in the world by God to encourage belief, Müller expresses his incredulity that such a belief could still exist: "And so wrote a Jesuit, with the endorsement of the general order in Rome, more than one hundred years after the Reformation!!!" [exclamation points original][19] Sentences ending with a string of question marks or exclamation points abound in Müller's work, undermining the scholarship of his study.

Thus, while Müller's monograph does provide some useful references to source material, his conclusions must be regarded with deep suspicion and cannot readily form the basis for further interpretive analysis. The same is true for Stoll's brief discussion of the Holy Foreskin in his 1908 study. Although his biases are not as overt as those of Müller, he does provide his own opinion of the theological debates surrounding Christ's foreskin, firmly deciding that Christ would have regained his foreskin after the resurrection in order to appear corporeally intact. This does, however, leave Stoll with the question of the origin of the regained foreskin: because Christ was circumcised as a child, but died as an adult, his original foreskin would have been too small for him. To borrow Stoll's words for his unanswered question, "Was the original one made large enough through a miracle or did he fashion a new foreskin for himself?"[20] The majority of Stoll's brief discussion is taken up by the relic in Charroux where, Stoll notes, pregnant women made pilgrimages in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the hopes that they would

[18] Otto Stoll, *Das Geschlechtsleben in der Völkerpsychologie* (Leipzig: Verlag von Veit & Comp., 1908), 682. Stoll does not provide an explanation for why Müller was no longer a member of the Dominican Order.
[19] Müller, *Die Hochheilige Vorhaut*, 41.
[20] Stoll, *Das Geschlechtsleben in der Völkerpsychologie*, 683.

receive a blessing for an uneventful delivery.[21] Unfortunately, he provides no analysis of or references for this intriguing historical event.

Following Stoll's discussion of the Holy Foreskin in 1908, a long drought occurs, broken only by brief references to the relic in scholarship. To take two examples, Leo Steinberg and Caroline Walker Bynum both passingly refer to Christ's prepuce in the context of their primary arguments. Steinberg analyzes the portrayal of Christ's body in late medieval and Renaissance art to argue that artists consistently depicted Christ in such a way as to emphasize his masculinity, primarily by drawing repeated attention to his penis via the drape of clothing and gestures by both Christ and other painted figures. For Steinberg, this prominence given to Christ's masculinity serves the theological purpose of highlighting the human nature of Christ. He refers to the Holy Foreskin briefly when discussing the circumcision of Christ and the decision by Renaissance artists to consistently depict an uncircumcised Christ, noting only that the relic existed in the Middle Ages.[22] In her groundbreaking work on the relationship of medieval women to food, Bynum refers to the Holy Foreskin primarily in relation to Catherine of Siena.[23] In the structure of the book, each woman's food-related religious practices are presented individually, followed by an aggregate analysis of all the women whose stories Bynum has told. As noted, the majority of Bynum's references to the foreskin appear when she is presenting information about Catherine. A mention of Christ's foreskin appears once in the analytical section of the book, again in the context of Catherine, when Bynum discusses the devotion of the women she studies to the humanity of Christ.[24]

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[21] Stoll, *Das Geschlechtsleben in der Völkerpsychologie*, 685.
[22] Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 51, 165.
[23] Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 175, 178, 246. In her notes, Bynum mentions that Agnes Blannbekin "was also devoted to the foreskin." See 377 note 135.
[24] Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 246.

Marc Shell's chapter in Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin's edited collection *Jews and Other Differences* provides the next substantive discussion of the Holy Foreskin. Shell, too, however, only emphasizes the bizarre nature of the foreskin relics and their devotion, writing, for example, that "the Pauline call for absolute dematerialization thus encouraged willy-nilly an adoration of the Foreskin among some Christians that, along with the general adoration and handling of bodily leftovers, seems sometimes to border on social pathology." He immediately follows this condemnation of the foreskin relics with the following: "It is worth reporting here the striking claim that, of medical and psychiatric patients in contemporary America who are preoccupied with their absent foreskins to the point of seeking surgical reconstruction or 'uncircumcision,' all are Christian and none is Jewish."[25] Shell's chapter, in general, seems not to have a unifying goal. He does, however, present the interesting information that priests sometimes asked a physician to taste a putative foreskin relic to determine if it really was human flesh; Shell draws a connection here to the medieval Jewish practice of *metzitzah*, the sucking of the circumcision blood.[26]

In 2005, two article-length examinations of the Holy Foreskin appeared. In his study, Ralf Lützelschwab openly acknowledges the polemical stance taken by previous inquiries into the Holy Foreskin.[27] Lützelschwab's own inquiry is far-reaching, but does not contain great depth. He briefly presents the foreskin relics at Charroux and at Coulombs, the latter brought

[25] Marc Shell, "The Holy Foreskin: or, Money, Relics, and Judeo-Christianity," in *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 349. It is important to note, however, that while Shell makes no mention of it in the text of his chapter, he does acknowledge in his notes that none of the patients in the study from which he has obtained this information was Jewish. This renders unclear what goal Shell has by including this study in his discussion. See 356, note 26.
[26] Shell, "The Holy Foreskin," 347.
[27] Lützelschwab, "Zwischen Heilsvermittlung und Ärgernis," 601-602.

supposedly back from the First Crusade by two members of the Villiers-le-Morthiers family.[28] Lützelschwab then briefly discusses Guibert of Nogent, an opponent of the Holy Foreskin, and the three women mentioned above—Agnes, Birgitta, and Catherine—who were foreskin devotees. For Catherine and Birgitta, he provides no new information; concerning Agnes, he does note that her confessor-biographer confirms (at least implicitly) that relics of Christ's foreskin do not exist on earth: the one she experiences on her tongue is of miraculous provenance.[29]

Robert Palazzo's 2005 study eschews any discussion of mysticism associated with the Holy Foreskin and concentrates instead on tracing the appearances and movements of the multiple foreskin relics in the late Middle Ages. Palazzo also discusses Enlightenment-era reactions to the relics, emphasizing the reactions of early modern commentators to the foreskin's uncomfortably sexual nature, particularly in the context of Agnes. His primary contribution is to trace an instance of the veneration of the Holy Foreskin to the early Christian apocryphal "First Gospel of the Infancy."[30]

Two additional scholarly studies are worth mentioning. Because it is a product of circumcision, the Holy Foreskin has occasionally, unexpectedly, been discussed in journals of urology. Most significantly, Mattelaer, Schipper, and Das emphasize that the Holy Foreskin was debated in theology throughout the medieval period. They note, following Steinberg, that Renaissance artists tended to portray Christ as uncircumcised, perhaps as a response to the theological uncertainty. Usefully, they do list twenty-one sites that held relics of the Holy

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[28] Lützelschwab, "Zwischen Heilsvermittlung und Ärgernis," 615-616. Henry V of England (r. 1413-1422) requested the Holy Foreskin at Charroux to help his wife, Catherine of France, in childbirth. After she gave birth, it was sent, for safety reasons, to the Saint-Chapelle in Paris, from which it was taken to the St. Magloire cloister.
[29] Lützelschwab, "Zwischen Heilsvermittlung und Ärgernis," 625.
[30] Palazzo, "The Veneration of the Sacred Foreskin(s)," 163-164.

Foreskin during the Middle Ages.[31] Andrew S. Jacobs has provided a useful history of how the Church responded to the concept of Christ's circumcision during Late Antiquity. His focus, however, is on theological implications of Jesus's circumcision and the ways that early Christians understood that Jewish practice; he only briefly examines the Holy Foreskin itself.[32]

In addition to these scholarly explorations of the Holy Foreskin, there is a further, popular study of the subject. Journalist David Farley's book concentrates on the last known foreskin relic.[33] He chronicles his year of living in Calcata, Italy, the site of the relic, and his attempts to learn more about the Holy Foreskin. Given his book's popular nature, Farley is as concerned with amusing anecdotes about Calcata as he is with actual analysis of the foreskin relic.

Plan of Study

I wish to address the lacunae in scholarship on the Holy Foreskin by shifting the focus away from institutional or European-wide descriptions of the foreskin relics to emphasize instead individual understandings of Jesus's prepuce. By deeply investigating the writings of specific medieval people, we can better understand the role that the Holy Foreskin played in the development of medieval Christianity—its focal points, its contradictions, its developing theologies. Doing so will help us, in the twenty-first century, better understand this relic and its devotion as something more than a curiosity. Instead, we can use the Holy Foreskin as a lens to inquire what mattered to medieval people—both their bodies and their beliefs.

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[31] Mattelaer et al., "The Circumcision of Jesus Christ," 31-33. It is important to note that, because they are not historians, Mattelaer et al. present the Holy Foreskin as something of a curiosity, rather than an object of further, interpretive inquiry.

[32] Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, ix-xi, 90-91, 137-138, 140, 162.

[33] In brief, the Italian hill-town Calcata retained permission after the 1900 papal prohibition to venerate their foreskin relic each year on January 1. In 1983, however, the relic went missing and has not since been recovered. For Farley's presentation of this history, see David Farley, *An Irreverent Curiosity: In Search of the Church's Strangest Relic in Italy's Oddest Town* (New York: Gotham Books, 2009), 1-10.

In Chapter One, I will provide a broader medieval historiography of the Holy Foreskin relics, with the goal of emphasizing how widespread belief in them was. The relics existed throughout central and western Europe, indicating that the foreskin was by no means a local cult. I will examine origin stories for the relics in the abbeys of Conques and Charroux, both in France, to emphasize both the importance of the Charlemagne myth and the translation of relics from one location to another. I will also explore the unusual origin story of the Antwerp relic, whose delivery there had no relation to the Carolingian monarch. The chapter closes with an examination of why late medieval Christians focused on worshiping Jesus's foreskin, rather than any of the other parts of his human body that might presumably have been lost, such as his baby teeth, hair, or nail clippings. I argue that the Lucan reference to Jesus's foreskin—but to no other body part—influenced later devotion.

In Chapter Two, I undertake an extended exploration into controversies surrounding the Holy Foreskin, focusing on three key figures: the twelfth-century Benedictine abbot Guibert of Nogent, the thirteenth-century pope Innocent III, and the thirteenth-century writer and archbishop Jacobus de Voragine. Guibert and Jacobus opposed the very existence of the Holy Foreskin while Innocent III remained cautiously ambivalent about it. As noted above, at issue were concerns about the validity of the Eucharist and Resurrection. The idea of earthly remnants of Christ greatly troubled Guibert's approach to the Eucharist, still not codified in doctrine at the time that he lived. Innocent III, who presided over the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 that did establish transubstantiation as doctrine, took a more measured approach to the Holy Foreskin, identifying concerns about it, but ultimately not committing to whether its existence on earth was real. Writing after Lateran IV, when debates about the Eucharist were no longer a concern, Jacobus was troubled by the foreskin relics in a different way, focusing instead on the

Resurrection. If Jesus was not reunited with his circumcised foreskin when he was resurrected, what hope did humans have for full bodily resurrection?

In the next section, I will pivot away from a direct focus on the Holy Foreskin to examine three of its more ardent devotees, Agnes Blannbekin, Birgitta of Sweden, and Catherine of Siena. We have already seen individual interactions and beliefs that each woman had with the foreskin of Christ, but in these three chapters, I wish to contextualize each woman to understand better the basis for their belief in the Holy Foreskin. Regarding Agnes, a Franciscan-affiliated beguine, I argue that she deviates from typical Franciscan mysticism. Agnes places St. Dominic, founder of the Dominican Order, on the same level as Francis of Assisi. She additionally provides no focus on the common Franciscan theme of poverty, and as we have seen, she seems to eschew earthly relics of Christ—instead understanding the oral delivery of his foreskin to be a miraculous event. Birgitta of Sweden's interaction with the Holy Foreskin is important because her vision, unlike Agnes's interpretation, directly places the prepuce on earth. Birgitta, however, has no direct interaction with the relic, and the foreskin does not appear elsewhere in her numerous visions. Thus, my focus in her chapter is on contextualizing her as an important holy figure, even during her lifetime. Canonized only eighteen years after her death, she enjoyed an intimate mystical relationship with the Virgin Mary, one that contributed to her authority and advocacy for reform within the Church. Finally, and chronologically, I will examine Catherine of Siena. Using James Scott's theory of public and hidden transcripts, I argue that Catherine's numerous letters to male religious officials subtly exert her spiritual authority over them, positioning her to hold unusual beliefs, including the idea that Jesus weds his multiple spiritual brides with rings made from his

foreskin.[34] My focus here will be on her relationship with her confessor, Raymond of Capua, for whom *she* often seems to be the spiritual advisor.

In Chapter Six, I bring these various strands together, placing the women in conversation with each other and examining how they do (and do not) navigate the theological concerns surrounding the Holy Foreskin. In doing so, I explore the meaning that each woman gives to Jesus's prepuce, arguing throughout that they did not interpret the foreskin relics through the sexualized lens that we would today. Instead, Agnes understood Jesus's foreskin as a special type of Eucharist, the body of Christ that was meant to be eaten by Christians. Birgitta, a mother herself, approached the Holy Foreskin through the eyes of the Virgin Mary, from whom she received the vision; although Jesus's circumcision was a religious ritual, it was also a painful one. It prefigured the Passion of Jesus, during which Mary again had to watch her child suffer. The relationship between the Circumcision and the Passion becomes central for Catherine's approach to the Holy Foreskin. The persistent focus on Christ's blood in her writings finds a particular focus here: the blood during the Circumcision was the first blood that Jesus shed, while the blood during the Passion was the last. Catherine's foreskin rings are a symbol of the promise of the Passion and the Crucifixion: salvation.

Finally, I examine the reality that late medieval Christians worshiped the result of a Jewish ritual while themselves producing anti-Jewish writings. All of the people discussed in this dissertation believed that Jews were condemned precisely because they were not Christians. Because this chapter is a departure from the Christian-focused content of the rest of my dissertation, I will provide an overview of important historiography on medieval anti-Judaism before focusing on the belief that Jewish men menstruated/were feminized precisely because

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[34] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

they had been circumcised. I then present a case study of anti-Jewish violence in late medieval Spain to highlight the ways that Jewish bodies were configured as a site of discrimination; although Spain had only a few Holy Foreskin relics, it is a useful location for this analysis because of the centuries-long c*onvivencia* that had existed in society in the Iberian peninsula. The chapter closes by arguing that the figures I have examined throughout the dissertation reconcile Jesus's special circumcision with Jewish circumcision more broadly by appropriating the Jewish ritual for Christian purposes. They empty the ritual of any meaning that it might have for Jews and instead assign it specifically Christian understandings.

The Holy Foreskin is thus a useful tool for understanding late medieval Christianity. It is both an object and an idea. I am less concerned here with the object itself, except insofar as theologians argued against its existence. Rather, I will demonstrate that ideas about the object were contested, and those very arguments provide us insight into how Christianity developed throughout the late Middle Ages. As perhaps the most special relic of all—because it was a piece of Jesus's own flesh—it also created very special devotion and concerns.

CHAPTER 1: MEDIEVAL HISTORIES OF THE HOLY FORESKIN

The foreskin of Christ was a remarkable relic. It purported to be a piece of actual flesh, and not just any flesh, but rather the body of Jesus, the Savior himself. Moreover, it was flesh that was more than a millennium old by the late Middle Ages, but was still (at least purportedly) identifiable as the foreskin of Christ. Although some sources mention it before the late medieval period, it came to prominence at the same time that two important changes in western European Christianity were occurring. First, devotion to Jesus's dual divine/human nature shifted strongly in favor of the latter—that very body from which the foreskin came. Second, as the doctrine of transubstantiation gained theological popularity, medieval Christians were increasingly told that they were consuming the actual flesh of Christ when they took the Eucharist. Jesus's foreskin was not an ancillary part of his body (certainly not for medieval Christians who did not routinely practice circumcision); it was not a baby tooth, a lock of hair, or a fingernail clipping, all of which would perforce be lost over the course of a regular lifetime. Rather, the foreskin was holy flesh itself, on display for all pilgrims to see, a bit of the very body that medieval Christians believed would guarantee salvation and eternal life.

Thus, the relic of Christ's foreskin was remarkable, but it was *not* unique. While we can presume that Jesus's human body had only one foreskin, more than 20 churches claimed to possess a relic of it during the late Middle Ages. Although we have information about some of the reliquaries that contained the foreskin, we do not know how the relics themselves looked.[1] In subsequent chapters, I will delve more deeply into the theological concerns surrounding this

[1] As such, we also do not know out of what material the various relics might have been made. My speculation—and it is only that—is that the multiple relics were made from pieces of human or animal umbilical cords. Robert Palazzo, "The Veneration of the Sacred Foreskin(s)," 165, note 2, suggests that Charlemagne—according to many medieval histories, the first recipient of the Holy Foreskin—may have cut it into multiple pieces to distribute to several churches. I find this argument questionable because of the unlikelihood that a devout medieval Christian would cut up a piece of Christ's holy flesh.

relic, including the shift in devotional emphasis toward Jesus's human nature and the defined doctrine of transubstantiation. Here, however, I wish to present medieval histories of the Holy Foreskin, with a discussion of some of the churches that claimed to possess this multiplicated relic and how they obtained it. As a case study, I will focus on one of the best documented relics, namely the foreskin belonging to the abbey of Charroux, both in France. As such, this chapter will not be primarily analytical; rather, its focus is to bring together disparate primary sources and secondary scholarship about the different sites claiming to possess the Holy Foreskin.

Locations of the Holy Foreskin

More than 20 churches either directly claimed to possess the Holy Foreskin or are cited by medieval authors as possessing the relic.[2] The ultimate number of churches that claimed ownership of Jesus's foreskin is a bit muddled because, as we shall see, the foreskin relics were sometimes relocated, or translated, from one church to another.[3] Regardless, Figure 1.1 provides an overall visual representation of where the Holy Foreskin is said to have existed at various times. It also emphasizes the concentration of Holy Foreskin relics in the heart of the Carolingian empire; I will discuss reasons for this phenomenon later in this chapter. For now, the figure highlights the widespread extent of the veneration of the Holy Foreskin: from northern Germany to central Italy to Spain and England, churches welcomed pilgrims who believed that they could interact with the very body of Christ on earth.

[2] Palazzo, "Veneration of the Sacred Foreskin(s)," 173-174 provides a nicely condensed summary of the sites that either claimed or were claimed to possess the Holy Foreskin.
[3] Although he does not discuss the Holy Foreskin itself, Patrick Geary's *Furta Sacra* remains a classic text for the analysis of translated relics.

Figure 1.1. Locations of the Holy Foreskin

As noted, relics of the Holy Foreskin were sometimes translated from one location to another. Further complicating the effort to identify precise locations of the Holy Foreskin, there are instances in which medieval authors are quite vague about which church owned the relic. In an early twelfth-century treatise railing against terrestrial relics of Jesus, for example, the French monk Guibert of Nogent notes that the monks of St.-Médard claimed to possess one of Jesus's baby teeth. He then states that "others claim to have the umbilical cord [of Christ], cut off at birth, or the circumcised foreskin of the Lord."[4] Simon of Tournai, a late-twelfth century

[4] Guibert of Nogent, *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus*, ed. R.B.C. Huygens, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis (CCCM) 127, 110. Because of library restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, I have been unable to re-obtain Guibert's text from my initial translation of it in order to supply the Latin.

professor of theology at the University of Paris, also argued against earthy relics of Jesus, still without providing their exact location: because Jesus was resurrected in "soundness of substance, therefore nothing of his body is on the earth, not a tooth or the foreskin, which nevertheless certain churches claim to have."[5] Guidonis de Orchellis, an early 13th-century Franciscan friar, makes a similar point. In a discussion of the Resurrection, he writes,

> Consequently, it may be asked what is the truth of human nature. If everything that was of the body is of the truth of human nature, then the foreskin of the Lord, and the teeth, and the umbilical cord are of the truth of human nature. Therefore, nothing of these things that were of the Lord's body remained on earth; on the contrary, they were resurrected with the risen Christ. However, they are glorified by certain churches.[6]

Like Guibert and Simon, Guidonis is aware that some churches possessed the Holy Foreskin, but he does not name them. Although I will delve more deeply into theological opposition to the Holy Foreskin in Chapter 2, with a focus on Guibert whose anti-Foreskin treatise is particularly virulent, it is worth pausing to note here that Guibert, Simon, and Guidonis probably refused to name the location of these relics precisely because they opposed them. Phrases such as "certain churches" or "some churches" allow the men to reject the idea of the Holy Foreskin without publicizing any individual relic. Stating that a relic of Jesus's body could be found at a specified church would have given that church and its relic fame, even if the author's actual intent was to discredit the relic.[7]

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[5] Simon of Tournai, *Les 'Disputationes' de Simon de Tournai*, ed. J. Warichez, Spicilegium (Sacrum Lovaniense études et documents XII 1932), 82: "Si Christus cum integritate substantie resurrexit, nichil ergo de corpore eius in terris est. Ergo nec dens, nec preputium, que tamen dicunt se habere quedam ecclesie."

[6] Guidonis de Orchellis, "De resurrectione," *Tractatus de sacramentis ex eius summa de sacramentis et officiis ecclesiae*, ed. P. Damiani and O. van den Eynde, (New York and Louvain: Franciscan Institute Publications 1953), 230-1: "Consequenter quaeri potest quid sit veritas humanae naturae. Si omni illud quod fuit de corpore est de veritate humanae naturae, ergo praeputium Domini, et dentes, et umbilicus sunt de veritate humanae naturae. Ergo nihil ex iss quae fuerunt ex dominico corpore remansit in terris, immo Christo resurgente cum ipso resurrexerunt; de quibus tamen gloriantur quaedam Ecclesiae."

[7] Nicholas Vincent, *The Holy Blood: King Henry III and the Westminster Blood Relic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and Dawn Marie Hayes, *Body and Sacred Space in Medieval Europe, 1100-1389* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 25-51, provide excellent discussions of how churches could benefit financially and socially from claiming to own relics related to Jesus or the Holy Family.

Elsewhere, however, we do find some medieval sources that precisely identify the location of the Holy Foreskin—although not always with favor. Gervase of Tilbury (c.1150-1220), an English canon lawyer, also opposed the idea of Jesus's foreskin existing on earth, but he named locations that claimed to possess it. After confirming his support for a resurrected (rather than terrestrial) foreskin, he writes in his encyclopedic *Otia Imperialia*:

> Nevertheless, they say of our Master, and the tradition of the Romans holds this, that the umbilical cord of the Lord and the foreskin of the circumcision are in a cross of purest gold adorned with gems and precious stones that is in a certain cypress case that Leo III placed in the oratory of St. Lawrence, which is in the holy Lateran palace. And this cross is anointed with balsam, and every year this same unction is renewed when the Holy Father with his cardinals makes a procession from the chapel in the church of St. John the Lateran, in exaltation of the Holy Cross. On the other hand, the Gauls relate that the foreskin of the Lord was bestowed upon Charles the Great by an angel in the temple of the Lord, and was first hidden away by him at Aachen, and afterwards was moved by Charles the Bald to Charroux.[8]

Thus, Gervase has identified not one, but three locations for the Holy Foreskin—Rome, and then according to the Gauls (the French), first Aachen and later Charroux. As such, he not only names locations claiming to possess Jesus's foreskin, but he also identifies that there were competing claims. Gervase notes that there was a translation of the French relic from Aachen to Charroux, but he also presents the French tradition in opposition to the Roman one. Because Gervase opposed the foreskin relics, this is perhaps an additional effort to negate them. If there were competing claims, perhaps neither was true.

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[8] Gervase of Tilbery, "Otia Imperialia," *Scriptores rerum Brunsvicensium*, ed. Gottfried Leibniz (Nicolai Förster: Hanover, 1707), 967: "Dicunt tamen Magistri nostri, et hoc tenet Romanorum traditio, quod umbilicus Domini et praeputium circumcisionis sunt in cruce de auro purissimo adornata, gemmis and lapidibus pretiosis [quae] est in quadam capsa cyprissina, quam Leo III. posuit in oratorio S. Laurentii, quod est in sacro palatio Lateranensi. Haec quoque crus uncta est balsamo, et singulis annis eadem unctio renovatur, quando Dominus Papa cum Cardinalibus suis facit procesionem ab oratorio illo in ecclesia S. Johannis Lateranensis, in exaltatione S. crucis. Et contra tradunt Galli, quod praeputium Domini delatum est ab angelo Carolo M. in templo Domini, et ab eo apud Aquisgranum primo reconditum, postea a Carolo Calvo fuit apud Carosium translatum."

During the 1100s, John the Deacon of the Lateran states that the Lateran possessed the Holy Foreskin, including in his treatise a description of the reliquary in which the relic was housed. Like Gervase, he writes that the container was renewed with balsam oil each year during a procession of the relic; however, he also notes two additional, important relics in the Lateran: a piece of the True Cross and Jesus's sandals.[9] The future Pope Innocent III states in the late 1100s (with some theological reservation) that the Foreskin can be found in the Lateran Basilica in the Sancta Sanctorum in Rome.[10] The 13th-century author of the *Legenda Aurea* (*Golden Legend*), Jacobus de Voragine, states (with great theological reservation) that the relic was originally in Aachen, was translated to Charroux, and is now in Rome in the Sancta Sanctorum; thus, Jacobus provides us with another example of the relic's translation.[11] Jean Gielemans, who compiled saintly biographies in the fifteenth-century, provides an unusual origin story involving an exiled king and bishop, to be analyzed shortly, for the Holy Foreskin relic that Antwerp had begun to claim by the late fifteenth century.[12] Scholar Robert Palazzo also notes that in the early 1400s, a foreskin relic in Coulombs was sent to England with King Henry V's bride, Catherine of Valois. The relic eventually returned to Coulombs in the 1460s by way of Sainte-Chapelle in Paris.[13]

Origins of the Holy Foreskin Relic

The most common origin story for the Holy Foreskin involves the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne. According to the most frequently recounted legend, the Virgin Mary preserved Jesus's foreskin and passed it on to one of her son's followers upon her death; that follower later

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[9] John the Deacon, "Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae," *Codice Topografico della Città di Roma*, ed. Roberto Valentini and Giuseppe Zucchetti. Vol 3 (Rome: Tipografia del Senato, 1946), 356.
[10] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *PL* 217: 876-877.
[11] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, BnF Nal 1747, 36v. As with Guibert of Nogent, we will examine Innocent III's and Jacobus de Voragine's theological concerns regarding the Holy Foreskin in greater depth in Chapter 2.
[12] Jean Gielemans, *De Codicibus Hagiographicis Iohannie Gielemans* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1895), 429-430.
[13] Palazzo, "Veneration of the Holy Foreskin(s)," 165.

either buried the foreskin or also passed it along for some time in a chain of additional followers.[14] During a (fictional) ninth-century trip by Charlemagne to Jerusalem, however, the relic resurfaced through divine intervention.[15] Charlemagne then brought the relic back to Europe where he gave it to one of a number of different churches (depending on the source).

That divine intervention came in the form of either an angel or a small boy, usually understood to be a manifestation of Jesus. We have already seen that Gervase of Tilbury states that an angel gave the relic to Charlemagne. The eleventh-century prologue to the foundation story of the Abbey of Conques also states that Charlemagne gave the Holy Foreskin to the abbey upon founding it.[16] The earliest known manuscript (1183) of the much-copied *Historia Scholastica*, a type of biblical textbook written by Parisian theologian Peter Comestor, makes the same point. In its expansions upon and paraphrases of biblical texts, the text states that "it is said that the foreskin of the Lord was bestowed by an angel to Charles the Great in the Temple of the Lord [the Holy Sepulchre] and was taken by him to Aachen and later placed by Charles the Bald in the Church of the Savior at Charroux."[17] The 1183 manuscript presents the Holy Foreskin's location as an indented marginal gloss (indented to the left) on the main text restating the biblical

[14] The exact follower varies. Palazzo, "Veneration of the Holy Foreskin(s)," 158, notes that some sources claim the follower was Mary Magdalene. The 14th-century saint, Birgitta of Sweden, however, had a vision in which Mary gave the foreskin to John the Evangelist. Birgitta also leaves the Charlemagne narrative out entirely. See Birgitta of Sweden, *Sancta Birgitta: Revelaciones, Book VI,* ed. Birger Bergh (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1991), 273. Some sources remain vague and mention only "a follower."

[15] P. Saintyves, *Les reliques et les images légendaires* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1912), provides an uncited claim that the Byzantine empress Irene gave Charlemagne the Holy Foreskin as an engagement ring during a potential courtship. Saintyves does not provide any information about how Irene might have obtained the foreskin herself.

[16] Amy G. Remensnyder, "Legendary Treasury at Conques: Reliquaries and Imaginative Memory," *Speculum* 71.4 (1996): 891-892. Remensnyder notes that the prologue is difficult to date, but was probably written in the twelfth century as the Charlemagne legend continued to grow. In popular memory, Charlemagne actually displaced his son, Louis the Pious, as the actual founder of the abbey. Amy G. Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past: Monastic Foundation Legends in Medieval Southern France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 153, argues that this displacement by Charlemagne of his heirs in monastic foundation stories was not unusual.

[17] Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica*, BnF Latin 16943, 143v: "Dicitur quod praepucium [sic] domini delatum est ab angelo Karolo Magno in templo domini et translatum ab eo aquasgrani et postea Karolo Calvo positum in ecclesia salvatoris apud Carolisum."

narrative that Jesus was circumcised and given his name when he was eight days old. This suggests that Comestor was aware of the Holy Foreskin and wanted to include mention of it; the passive "it is said [dicitur]" perhaps also indicates that he had doubts about the relic, but unlike Guibert, Simon, or Gervase, Comester still wanted to make readers aware of it and its location.[18]

By contrast, an origin story for the abbey of Charroux's foreskin relic includes the Charlemagne story, but there is no angel involved. Instead, on the trip to Jerusalem, Charlemagne is praying in the Holy Sepulchre; when the priest consecrates and lifts the body of Christ, a small boy appears to the right of Charlemagne. The boy tells Charlemagne, "O, most noble prince, accept this piece of my true flesh and blood." The text does not specifically clarify that Charlemagne received the Holy Foreskin during this encounter, but it does note that whatever Charlemagne received subsequently brought a dying soldier back to life.[19] Although the text is not explicit, the clear implication here is that the young boy was Jesus himself, miraculously manifested on earth and personally delivering his foreskin to Charlemagne.

The question remains, though: why Charlemagne? Why did so many places that claimed to possess the Holy Foreskin trace the roots of their relic, either directly or indirectly, to him? Folz argues that although Charlemagne did not actually make a trip to Jerusalem, his good rapport with the Patriarch of Jerusalem and with the Caliph Haroun al-Rachid may have

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[18] Later copies of the *Historia Scholastica* vary in how they treat the placement of the Holy Foreskin text. BnF Latin 5121, 10r, from the fourteenth century expands on the Circumcision narrative itself, but integrates the same information about the Holy Foreskin into the main text of the manuscript. On the other hand, BnF Latin 5114, 155r-v, also from the fourteenth century, returns to a shorter description of the Circumcision. It contains the same information about the Holy Foreskin, but now again as a gloss in the margin—although here the Holy Foreskin margin is on 155r while the main text about the Circumcision is on 155v, two different pages.

[19] D. P. de Monsabert, ed., *Chartes et documents pour servir à l'histoire de l'abbaye de Charroux* (Poitiers: Société française d'imprimerie et de librairie, 1910), 8: "cumque sereno vultu conspiceret rex piisimus, astitit parti dextere benignissimus parvulus, et dixit pio ore, audientibus omnibus: O nobilissime princeps, accipe hoc munusuculum ex mea vera carne et sanguine. Suscipiens ergo rex sanctam virtutem in manibus oravit in celum extensis manibus. Cumque ab oratione cessasset, et cum gaudio ad propria [9] remeasset, uni ex militibus soluta est anima ex carne. Videns itaque quod vitam finisset, signaculum Christi impressit eius ore et revixit vivens a morte."

contributed to the Jerusalem legend.[20] He additionally notes that although the religious diplomatic exchanges reported in the biographies of Charlemagne were important, they pale in comparison to the idea of a celebrated Christian monarch *not* making a trip to the Holy Land; by the early 1200s, the idea was fixed the Charlemagne did not just travel to the Holy Land, but he also conquered it.[21] Amy Remensnyder also addresses the importance of Charlemagne. Not only did the association with royal patronage and foundation increase the prestige of an abbey claiming to possess the Holy Foreskin, but even having the True Cross itself evoked a royal, imperial, "triumphant Christ and his eternal victory."[22]

Charlemagne's prestige, especially as his medieval legend grew, conferred additional value to the churches possessing Jesus's foreskin. The honor of owning a piece of the Savior was only compounded by the fact that a religious and renowned emperor had bestowed it. The importance of Charlemagne also probably explains the preponderance of Holy Foreskin relics in northern France and the Low Countries, the heart of his empire. If Charlemagne had traveled to Jerusalem, miraculously received the Holy Foreskin there, and bestowed it upon one of the churches in his realm, it would probably have been located in that geographical region. Foreskin relics may have been moved from one location to another, but these translations remained within the Carolingian empire—for example, the references by Gervase of Tilbury and the *Historia Scholastica* to Charles the Bald translating the relic from Aachen to Charroux.

Not all relic stories originated with Charlemagne, however. As noted above, Jean Gielemans's origin story of the Holy Foreskin in Antwerp is unusual because it differs so greatly

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[20] Robert Folz, *Le souvenir et la légende de Charlemagne dans l'empire germanique médiéval* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1973), 135.
[21] Folz, *Le souvenir*, 136-142.
[22] Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past*, 170. I would add that regarding the True Cross, there is also an imperial association with the Roman emperor Constantine and his mother Helena's famous trip to the Holy Land to discover and retrieve relics.

from the usual medieval legend. According to him, Alpheus, the father of James the Less, heard about the birth of Jesus and attended his Circumcision.[23] Alpheus preserved Jesus's foreskin, and centuries later, during a period of "persecution and violence from pagans" in Jerusalem, an unnamed king and bishop were forced to flee the city. The king disappears from the narrative, but the bishop preserved the foreskin in a silver container, which was located in Antwerp by Gielemans's time.[24]

Gieleman's origin story is unusual in several ways. First, he introduces a character, Alpheus, not seen in any of the other legends; instead, it is almost always the Virgin Mary who takes it upon herself to preserve her son's foreskin. Second, other origin stories for the relic do not trace its translation from Jerusalem to western Europe to a time of strife in the Holy Land. It is usually through a diplomatic mission or pilgrimage that Charlemagne acquires the relic.[25] Third, we have a bishop in this version who brings the relic to western Europe. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the relic in Gieleman's version seems to have existed on earth without interruption from the time of Jesus until the period when it arrived in Antwerp.

As we have seen, in the Charlemagne story, the ruler usually receives the relic through some sort of divine means, either an angel or, in the case of the Charroux foundation stories, a miraculous young boy presumed to be Jesus. In our survey of the locations of the Holy Foreskin

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[23] Gielemans, *De Codicibus*, 429: "Alpheus etenim, pater B. Iacobi minoris, qui audierat prophetam esse nasciturum in Iudaea multorum redemptorem, tempore nativitatis Christi circumcisor erat puerorum."

[24] Gielemans, *De Codicibus*, 430: "Et cum iste rex persecutione et violentia paganorum expelli deberet, iste episcopus praeputium in quadam pixide argentea, quae est adhuc Antwerpiae, inclusum corporali semper tenebat." Gielemans does not provide precise dates, but it is probable that by the time he was writing, "pagans" referred to Muslims.

[25] Folz, *Le souvenir*, 138-142, notes that the legend of Charlemagne's trip to Jerusalem developed during a period of eschatological anxiety, which held that one king would reunite the Roman Empire, including the Holy Land, before the apocalypse occurred. Although the legends do not state that it would be the long-dead Charlemagne who would do this, he did provide an example that then-current kings could follow. Notably, the idea of Charlemagne traveling to the Holy Land—and, in some versions, conquering it—was fixed by the early 1200s, the same time that devotion to the foreskin relic(s) that Charlemagne supposedly brought back from the Holy Land was increasing.

above, we have seen that although the relic was widespread, it was not always accepted by Church officials, often because the idea of a perennially terrestrial part of Jesus's body gave them concern about the validity of the Resurrection; we will explore this further in the next chapter. The most common legend, however, with divine delivery of the relic, suggests that Jesus himself allowed his foreskin to remain on earth, thereby removing doubts and legitimizing not only the individual, physical relic itself (in whichever church ultimately claimed to possess it), but also the very idea that it could exist. The foreskin might have been preserved or passed on (or, in some versions, buried) through various means during Jesus's lifetime, but the divine delivery of the relic makes it an acceptable one to possess.

Although it is unclear why Gielemans deviates so significantly from the usual legend, I would suggest that by the 1400s, devotion to the Holy Foreskin had become so widespread—despite some theological opposition—that it no longer needed a miraculous origin story. The existence of Jesus's foreskin on earth was no longer a novel idea, as it would have been during the 1100s and 1200s when churches first began claiming to possess the relic. It had become almost *de rigeur* for churches in important cities, such as Antwerp, to claim ownership of the relic.

A second unusual origin story for the Holy Foreskin perhaps predates the ones I have examined thus far. The Syriac Infancy Gospel, also known as the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior, is an apocryphal text from the early centuries of Christianity that expands upon Jesus's childhood.[26] Drawing on multiple sources, including the Gospel of James, it emphasizes

[26] The composition date of the text is in dispute. Jeremiah Jones, "The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior," *A New and Full Method of Setting the Canonical Authority for the New Testament*, 3 vols (London: J. Clark, 1726), 2: 166, claims that the text was written in the second century. Modern scholars provide later dates: J.R. Porter, *The Lost Bible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 137, argues that the document is from the fifth century. Similarly, J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 100, dates the text to the late fifth or early sixth centuries. Palazzo, "Veneration of the Holy Foreskin(s)," 164, note 50, suggests that many of the stories in the text may have been available to the Prophet Mohammed.

the miraculous healing powers of Jesus, even as an infant; for example, the Virgin Mary uses water in which she has bathed Jesus to exorcise a demon from a young girl.[27] Mary is also able to conduct miracles, curing a sick boy using water that she herself has made holy.[28]

In terms of Jesus's foreskin, the gospel states:

> And when the time of his circumcision was come, viz. the eighth day, on which the law commanded the child to be circumcised, they circumcised him in the cave, and the old Hebrew woman took the foreskin, (others say she took the navel-string) and preserved it in an alabaster-box of old oil of spikenard. And she had a son who was a druggist, to whom she said, 'Take heed thou sell not this alabaster box of spikenard ointment, although thou shouldest be offered three hundred pence for it.' Now this is that alabaster-box which Mary the sinner procured, and poured forth the ointment out of it upon the head and the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ, and wiped them off with the hairs of her head.[29]

Charlemagne is, of course, absent from this text because it was written before he was born. Instead, an "old Hebrew woman" preserves the foreskin.[30] The text is also ambiguous as to the ultimate fate of the foreskin. It tells us that the piece of Jesus's flesh was placed in the alabaster container from which "Mary the sinner" (presumably Mary Magdalene) later drew ointment to wash Jesus's feet, but it does not tell us what happened to the foreskin itself.[31] This is

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[27] Jones, "The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior," 201.
[28] Jones, "The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior," 192.
[29] Jones, "The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior," 171.
[30] It is unclear whether the Hebrew woman performed the Circumcision or was simply present at the event. Although circumcision was usually performed by a male mohel, there was biblical precedent for a woman performing the act. In Exodus 4: 24-26, Moses's wife Zipporah hurriedly circumcises her son in order to prevent God from killing him. For a scholarly analysis of this somewhat confusing biblical passage, see Bonna Devora Haberman, "Foreskin Sacrifice: Zipporah's Ritual and the Bloody Bridegroom," in *The Covenant of Circumcision*, ed. Elizabeth Wyner Mark (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 18-29. Henry Abramson and Carrie Hannon, "Depicting the Ambiguous Wound: Circumcision in Medieval Art," in *The Covenant of Circumcision*, 98-113, note that medieval art sometimes depicted women performing Jewish circumcisions, giving the ritual an aura of emasculation. By contrast, a 14th-century illustrated life of Jesus by Pseudobonaventura positively (and very clearly) states that it was Mary who circumcised Jesus. See Pseudobonaventura, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, trans. Isa Ragusa and ed. Rosalie B. Green (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 44.
[31] John 12: 1-3 is the biblical narrative. Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 18-46, provides a discussion of the different, and ambiguous, Marys mentioned in the Christian New Testament and how their identities shifted in patristic, gnostic, and medieval writings.

perhaps a result of the text's early date, from a time before Christians believed in the foreskin relic and where it might be located.

Charroux: A Case Study

Having examined different locations of the Holy Foreskin relics and their origin stories, I wish now to focus on a particular site: the abbey of Charroux, founded c. 800 by a local count, Roger of Limoges.[32] Both Vigneras and Remensnyder date the development of the Holy Foreskin cult at the abbey to 1082, when Charroux was consecrated with its relics.[33] In addition to Jesus's prepuce, the abbey also claimed to own Jesus's crib, the crown of thorns, and the broken bread that Jesus had given to the disciples.[34] By the early part of the twelfth century, the abbey had a series of (anonymous) foundation stories, all involving Charlemagne and the gift of relics. We have already seen that one version of the story involves the ruler receiving the Holy Foreskin from a small boy, understood to be Jesus.

However, the first version of the foundation story contains no mention of the Holy Foreskin. Instead, Charlemagne is in the region of Aquitaine, which he has conquered; he and Roger together decide to establish an abbey, endowing it with a piece of the True Cross, called "Bellator."[35] The second version, which we have already examined, contains the story of Charlemagne's trip to Jerusalem and the small boy. Vigneras notes that the author of this version wanted to emphasize the Holy Foreskin relic: the True Cross is barely mentioned, and in place of

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[32] L.-A. Vigneras, "L'abbaye de Charroux et la légende du pèlerinage de Charlemagne," *Romantic Review* 32.2 (1941): 121.
[33] Vigneras, "L'abbaye de Charroux," 121; Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past*, 174.
[34] Monsabert, ed., *Chartes et documents*, 5-6.
[35] Monsabert, ed., *Chartes et documents*, 7: "Imperante Domino nostro Iesu Christo et regnante domno rege Karolo, postquam subjugavit suo dominatui omnem Aquitaniam et constituit sibi duces per partes Aquitanie regionis, ex quibus preposuit unum Lemovicensi urbi, domnum videlicet Rotgerium, cui placuit ut constitueret locum in amore et honore salvatoris mundi et ejusdem genitricis, ipso domno Karolo precipiente, constructum suis ditaret honoribus. Quod domnus Karolus ita ditadum accepit locum, cui dedit lignum dominicum quod vocatur Bellator, cum multorum sanctorum reliquiis."

it is the longer narrative in which Charlemagne receives the foreskin relic.[36] Although Roger is still involved in founding the abbey, it is Charlemagne who provides the relics.[37]

By the third iteration of the foundation story, however, Roger has disappeared. The author of this version provides essentially the same relic-receiving narrative as the second narrative, but now it is Charlemagne alone who founds Charroux. Vigneras argues that this change happened c. 1085, just a few years after the foreskin cult had been established at the abbey.[38]

The evolving origin stories for Charroux indicate the importance of Charlemagne. By the late 1100s, Roger, Count of Limoges, no longer mattered; Charlemagne, however, did. The medieval French epic *Le Chanson de Roland*, composed in the late 1100s, in which Charlemagne is portrayed in a mythically heroic role, demonstrates his relevant (and perhaps growing) importance in the popular culture of the time.[39] The different foundation iterations also suggest that the Holy Foreskin was quickly growing in importance: it had become the center of the abbey's origin. Although a piece of the True Cross certainly remained a prized relic, it was also one that was endlessly multiplied. It did not confer upon an abbey the same type of prestige as possessing a piece of Jesus's flesh—still a rarity in 1082 when the cult at Charroux developed.[40] Remensnyder argues that the abbey of Conques may have taken inspiration from Charroux in developing its own foundation story, influenced by the growing devotion to Jesus's foreskin: according to lists of relics there dating to the ninth and tenth centuries, one reliquary contained

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[36] Vigneras, "L'abbaye de Charroux," 123. Remensnyder, "Legendary Treasure at Conques," 896, speculates that the Charroux shrine may have claimed to hold the Holy Foreskin, but actually held the True Cross.
[37] Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past*, 172, notes that in Charroux's foundation document, Pope Leo III tells Charlemagne to Jerusalem specifically to acquire more relics for the abbey.
[38] Monsabert, ed., *Chartes et documents*, 29-30. Vigneras, "L'abbaye de Charroux," 124-125.
[39] *La Chanson de Roland* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1997).
[40] See Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past*, 176, for a similar argument.

"relics of various saints, the Virgin, and even some generic ones from the flesh of Christ."[41] The monks at Conques may have been aware of Charroux's relic; as they thought about their own reliquary that contained unspecified pieces of Jesus's body—and as devotion (and, presumably, pilgrimage) to the foreskin at Charroux grew—they may have determined that they also possessed Jesus's foreskin. They knew that their relics had been given to them by Charlemagne, the legendary emperor who had traveled to Jerusalem and brought back a treasure trove of relics. Why might not their pieces of Jesus's flesh be the true Holy Foreskin?[42]

Conclusion: Why the Foreskin?

The monks at the abbey at Conques knew from their own reliquary lists that they possessed bits of Jesus's flesh. They also may have known that the abbey in Charroux claimed the same—except that the monks at Charroux had identified their relic as a specific piece of Jesus's body: his foreskin. Here perhaps lies the beginning of the multiplication of Jesus's prepuce throughout western Europe. As the monks at Conques began to also claim to possess the Holy Foreskin, gifted to them by Charlemagne, a door opened for other abbeys and churches to do the same. Relic translation narratives allowed the foreskin to end up in multiple places, or for them to claim the relic simultaneously.

In subsequent chapters, I will delve into the meanings that late medieval people attached to Jesus's foreskin, but the question remains: why the foreskin itself? If we presume that Jesus possessed a normal set of baby teeth, why did multiple churches not claim those potential relics, without competition with each other?[43] Why not pieces of Jesus's hair or his fingernail

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[41] Remensnyder, "Legendary Treasure at Conques," 887.
[42] Remensnyder, "Legendary Treasury at Conques," 895.
[43] As noted, Guibert of Nogent, *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus* 110, does state that the monks of St. Médard claimed to possess one of Jesus's baby teeth in the late eleventh century. See also William MacLehose, "The Holy Tooth: Dentition, Childhood Development, and the Cult of the Christ Child," in *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha es et O!*, eds. Mary Dzon and Theresa Kenney (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 201-223.

clippings? I believe that there are several explanations. First, there is the obvious prurient factor; medieval people were certainly aware of sex and genitalia.[44] As I argue later, however, passionate foreskin devotees did not primarily understand Jesus's foreskin in sexual terms. There may also have been an "oddity" component of seeing a circumcised foreskin. Medieval Christians did not usually practice circumcision, believing that Jesus's very presence on earth had obviated that need. Instead, circumcision was practiced by increasingly othered Jews. Thus, most medieval Christians would never have seen a circumcised foreskin; this may even have contributed to the Holy Foreskin's ability to multiply, as most medieval Christians would not have known what the object(s) that claimed to be the Holy Foreskin actually were or would have been able to identify them. This also speaks to the ability of churches to claim a relic for reasons of prestige or patronage, even if the relic itself was not Jesus's foreskin.

Additionally, although we can assume that the historical body of Jesus lost baby teeth or shed hair, the Christian New Testament itself does not state that. Instead, the only part of his body that is specifically lost is his foreskin, through the act of circumcision. As we have seen, several authors, such as Guibert, Guidonis, and Gervase, mention relics of Jesus's umbilical cord, but this relic was never as widespread as the foreskin. Again, although we can perforce assume that by being born Jesus did have a cut umbilical cord, the New Testament itself does not state that. Instead, Luke 2:21 does tell us of a ritual in which a specific piece of Jesus's body was removed, a piece that would invoke both controversy and passionate devotion throughout the late Middle Ages.

[44] Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005) provides an excellent study of sex and sexuality in medieval French literature, focusing particularly on the *fabliaux*.

CHAPTER 2: EMBODIED CONTROVERSIES: THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS ABOUT THE HOLY FORESKIN

In the early twelfth century, the monks of Saint-Médard de Soissons, a Benedictine monastery approximately 100 km northeast of Paris, claimed to possess one of Jesus's baby teeth. We know about this prized relic from a treatise written by the monk Guibert of Nogent in 1115.[1] Guibert does not discuss why the monks alleged to have Christ's baby tooth. He also does not specify how the monks at St.-Médard came to possess their relic. Importantly, as we have already seen, these monks were not the only ones in the early 1100s who claimed to have in their possession certain bits of Jesus's body. Guibert is not specific at this point in his treatise, but he does state that "others claim to have the umbilical cord [of Christ], cut off at birth, or the circumcised foreskin of the Lord."[2] Guibert, thus, provides additional evidence for us that alleged pieces of Jesus's body were circulating around northern France during the early 1100s.

Guibert also provides evidence that not everyone approved of these corporeal, earthly bits of Christ. Far more than simply stating that the Saint-Médard monks possessed Jesus's tooth and that other, unspecified groups claimed his umbilical cord or foreskin, Guibert expends considerable ink arguing that their claims were not only impossible, but also potentially heretical. Simply put, earthly relics of Christ's body were problematic, and as the most common remnant of his body potentially left on earth after the Resurrection, relics of Jesus's foreskin were the most contentious of all. Although members of the laity flocked to see the foreskin relics held throughout western Europe, male theologians tended to see Jesus's multiplied prepuces as controversial; Guibert is but one example.

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[1] Guibert of Nogent, *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus*, ed. R.B.C. Huygens, CCCM 127, 110. See also Josef Geiselmann, "Die Stellung des Guibert von Nogent (d. 1124) in der Eucharistielehre der Friischolastik," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 110 (1929): 66-84, 279-305.
[2] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM 127, 110.

Importantly, male theologians did not see the general cult of saints, and their associated relics, as inherently wrong. Rather, it was the specific relics of Christ that posed problems. As far back as the Carolingians, Charlemagne had used gifts of relics to create ties within his empire, and when Claudius, the bishop of Turin during the 820s, voiced opposition to relics, he was condemned and silenced by Pope Paschal I.[3] Regarding the High Middle Ages, Bethell notes that Reading Abbey in England had amassed 242 relics from its founding in the 1120s to the time that its inventory of relics was compiled in the 1190s, an average of over three newly acquired relics per year.[4] Shortly before Reading Abbey began developing its relic collection, Thiofrid d'Echternach (d. 1110), the abbot of Echternach Abbey in modern-day Luxembourg and one of the few medieval authors besides Guibert of Nogent to discuss the cult of relics directly, argued in a text written c. 1100 that relics should not be overly ornamented.[5] The fact that Thiofrid was primarily interested in arguing against ornamentation indicates that he did not resist relics themselves. Jean-Claude Schmitt has postulated that Jesus's very corporeality helped lead to the relics of saints: the fact that Jesus took on bodily form meant that bodies themselves could be holy.[6] Importantly, even some relics of Jesus were less problematic than others. By the late 1100s, more than twenty churches claimed to possess Jesus's blood shed during his Crucifixion; countless others held a piece of the True Cross. Nicholas Vincent points out that it was not the

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[3] Charles Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 73, 79; Jean-Marie Sansterre, "Les justifications du culte des reliques dans le haut Moyen Age," in *Les reliques: Objets, cultes, symboles: Actes du colloque internationale de l'Université du Littoral-Côte d'Opale (Boulogne-sur-Mer)4-6 septembre 1997*, ed. Edina Bozóky and Anne-Marie Helvétius (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1999), 81-93.

[4] Denis Bethell, "The Making of a Twelfth-Century Relic Collection," in *Popular Belief and Practice: Papers Read at the Ninth Summer Meeting and the Tenth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, eds. G.J. Cuming and Derek Baker (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 61.

[5] Laurence Terrier, *La doctrine de l'eucharistie de Guibert de Nogent* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2013), 146; Michelle Camillo Ferrari, "*Lemmata sanctorum.* Thiofrid d'Echternach et le discours sur les reliques au XII siècle," *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 38.3 (1995): 217-218.

[6] Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Les reliques et les images," in *Les reliques: Objets, cultes, symboles: Actes du colloque international de L'Université du Littoral-Côte d'Opale (Boulogne-sur-Mer) 4-6 septembre 1997*, eds. Edina Bozóky and Anne-Marie Helvétius (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1999), 148-149.

amount of blood in each individual relic that was problematic, but rather the sheer quantity of different relics that raised skepticism.[7]

Within this framework of relics and Jesus's corporeality, it is key that male theologians tended to see the foreskin relics as controversial, rather than simply wrong. There is an ever-present tension in their statements—even those of Guibert—about Jesus's foreskin. Certainly, the theologians examined here do not wholly endorse the foreskin relics; instead, they tend to see them as deeply troubling. A careful analysis of their language, however, indicates that by simply including the relics in their treatises, these theologians do not wholly discount the idea of Jesus's earthly foreskin—or at least, they do not wholly discount the widespread devotion to it. It is also noteworthy that they disagree about *why* the foreskin relics were dangerous: do they impinge on the Eucharist? On priestly authority? On the Resurrection? The theologians examined here have different emphases, indicating that there was not a univocal opposition to relics of Jesus's prepuce.

In this chapter, I wish to concentrate on the views of three theologians on the holy foreskin: Guibert of Nogent (c. 1055-1124), Pope Innocent III (r. 1198-1216), and Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1230-1298). These three men were not the only medieval theologians who discussed the Holy Foreskin, but they are worthwhile case studies for the theological understanding of the relic. They additionally serve as useful bookends, in multiple ways, for understanding the learned reaction to earthly remains of Jesus's foreskin during the Middle Ages.

The Benedictine Guibert of Nogent was active during the early twelfth century and is one of our earliest testaments to the devotion to the Holy Foreskin. The Dominican Jacobus de Voragine, by contrast, completed his major work, the *Legenda Aurea*, a collection of saints'

[7] Nicholas Vincent, *The Holy Blood: King Henry III and the Westminster Blood Relic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 63-65.

lives, during the second half of the thirteenth century, as affective piety was approaching its zenith. Additionally, although Guibert was very well-read and had discussed theology with some of the most preeminent men of his day, his own writings appear to have had little, if any, circulation beyond Nogent-sous-Coucy in northwestern France, where he served as abbot.[8] Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, however, was a medieval bestseller, surviving in over 1000 manuscripts, both in Latin and in various western European vernacular languages.[9] In the middle, we find Pope Innocent III, a scholar who wrote multiple treatises on the Eucharist and who headed the Fourth Lateran Council, which codified the doctrine of transubstantiation and specified how frequently Christians should partake of Jesus's body in the form of the Eucharist.

A Note on Terminology

Before delving into Guibert, Innocent, and Jacobus's views on the Holy Foreskin, I wish to pause and provide a brief clarification on my use of the term "theologian." Although the three figures examined in this chapter are all men, I do not wish to imply that only men could be theologians. Certainly, a number of medieval women also advanced theological ideas of great sophistication that would come to be adopted by the Catholic Church, both during the Middle Ages themselves and during subsequent periods.

Most pertinent to the discussion of the Holy Foreskin is Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), who developed her own understanding of Jesus's prepuce, to be examined in detail later. In her book-length *Dialogue,* presented as a conversation between the Soul (usually understood to be Catherine herself) and God, Catherine additionally advanced an elegant theological

[8] Jay Rubenstein, *Guibert of Nogent: Portrait of a Medieval Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 4.
[9] Sherry L. Reames, *The* Legenda Aurea*: A Reexamination of Its Paradoxical History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 30.

understanding of Jesus as a bridge connecting humanity and the divine.[10] Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) is famous for her wide-ranging contributions to theology, music, and science.[11] In more focused areas, the visions of Juliana of Cornillon (1192/3-1258), combined with her own activism, inspired the feast of Corpus Christi,[12] and Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510) developed an understanding of Purgatory that became standard for Reformation-era Catholicism.[13] The visions of Birgitta of Sweden (c.1303-1373) prompted her to advocate for ecclesiastical reform and found a new order of nuns.[14]

These women are a select few of the examples that could be cited here. The focus of this chapter, however, is on opposition to the Holy Foreskin, and that opposition came predominantly (and perhaps exclusively) from men. It is almost certain that foreskin devotees included men, but it is high-ranking Church officials such as Guibert, Innocent, and Jacobus (as an abbot, pope, and archbishop, respectively) whose writings have survived. Thus, the term "theologian," as it is used in this chapter, derives its gendered nature from the opponents—male—of the Holy Foreskin, and not from the reality of late medieval religion.

Guibert of Nogent and the Holy Foreskin: The Eucharist Imperiled

Born into the minor nobility, Guibert's parents dedicated him to the clerical life after he survived a difficult birth. Following the death of his father, Guibert and his mother moved into

[10] For an English translation, see Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). Catherine was recognized as a Doctor of the Church in 1970, along with the 16th-century Spanish nun Teresa of Avila.
[11] A translation of Hildegard's visions can be found at Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990). Hildegard became a Doctor of the Church, and was also officially canonized, in 2012.
[12] See, in general, Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
[13] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 183-185.
[14] Denis Searby and Bridget Morris, ed. and trans., *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden: Volume 1* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006).

an abbey near Saint-Germer-de-Fly where Guibert initially devoted himself to studying Ovid and Virgil. An encounter with the future Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm of Bec, changed Guibert's focus to theology, and when he was approximately fifty years old, he was chosen to be the abbot of Nogent-sous-Coucy, northeast of Paris. [15] Apart from a treatise on the First Crusade, Guibert spent the remainder of his writing career considering theological matters.[16] As noted above, his writings do not seem to have had much, if any, circulation beyond Nogent. However, although Guibert's writings had very little impact on his contemporaries, they do inform us about the thoughts of a northern French monk during the early 1100s. As Rubenstein argues, Guibert was "very much a product of his world," and "in spite of his limited scholarly impact, we can see in the career of Guibert of Nogent the outlines and origins of the intellectual and literary achievements of twelfth-century Europe."[17]

It is one specific window into Guibert's world with which I am concerned here: his work on the relics of saints. Although the treatise was written partially in response to relic tours undertaken by the clerics of Laon, *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus* (*On Saints and Their Relics*) has as its primary motivator that holy baby tooth held at Saint-Médard.[18] There is no attempt by Guibert to remain neutral when discussing the relic at Saint-Médard; indeed, he fulminates against it, stating that it "threatens us closely," perhaps because of its geographical proximity to

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[15] Guibert's autobiography, termed *The Monodies*, can be found at Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk's Confession: The Memoirs of Guibert of Nogent*, ed. and trans. Paul J. Archambault (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). In his introduction, Archambault discusses the complex lifelong relationship that Guibert had with his mother. Bernard Monod, *Le moine Guibert et son temps (1053-1124)* (Paris: Librairie Hacette et Cie, 1905), 3-99, provides an extended examination of Guibert's life before he became abbot of Nogent-sous-Coucy.

[16] Although a member of the nobility, Guibert himself did not go on the First Crusade. His treatise is thus based on second-hand knowledge from other Crusaders and, especially, on an anonymous Norman work, the *Gesta Francorum*. For an English translation and examination of Guibert's treatise, see Guibert of Nogent, *The Deeds of God through the Franks*, ed. and trans. Robert Levine (Middlesex, UK: Echo Library, 2008).

[17] Rubenstein, *Guibert of Nogent*, 2-3.

[18] Rubenstein, *Guibert of Nogent*, 106, 125. The clerics at Laon undertook their relic tours after their church was burned down by a commune in 1112. Guibert himself saw the communes as problematic, but the results of their action apparently did not warrant specious relic tours.

Guibert and his own monastery.[19] His comments on the tooth are worth quoting at length, as they demonstrate the vehemence with which Guibert detested the alleged relic and provide us with an indication of why Guibert found it so problematic:

> If that principal body, which supplies the material for the accompanying sacrament, remained scattered on the earth and part sailed [provecta] to heaven, what need would it do us to pledge the mystery of another body in this life, when it would be completely sufficient to rejoice over the remnants of his remaining flesh? And certainly, without any intellectual acumen, without any contemplative experience, we could gaze upon the body of the Lord that I mentioned and touch it with our fingers. Nor would it be necessary to exercise the substance of faith, as our apostle says, through the matter of bread and wine, the things that are actually apparent [Heb. 11:1].[20]

With the phrase "that principal body," Guibert is referring to Jesus's body on earth during his lifetime, the body that was born from the Virgin Mary, that walked on water, and that was crucified. By mentioning Jesus's living, principal body, Guibert makes a minor point about the Resurrection here, rhetorically setting up what is to him an unorthodox distinction between parts of Jesus's body that remained "scattered on the earth" and parts that returned to heaven. As Bynum notes, for Guibert, "our resurrection is threatened unless every particle of Christ rose from the tomb."[21] Importantly, however, clarifying the Resurrection is not the main thrust of Guibert's argument in this passage. Instead, he uses it as an introduction to his primary point. When Guibert discusses pledging "the mystery of another body in this life," he is referring to the Eucharist, and it is here that we encounter Guibert's true difficulty with the Holy Foreskin and other purported relics of Jesus's body.

In Guibert's view, the Holy Foreskin, Jesus's umbilical cord, and the Saint-Médard tooth

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[19] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM 127, 110.
[20] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM 127, 111-112. See also Vincent, *The Holy Blood*, 83-84.
[21] Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 140. See also Klaus Guth, *Guibert von Nogent und die hochmittelalterliche Kirche an der Reliquienverehrung* (Ottobeuren: Kommissionsverlag Winifried-Werg GmbH Augsberg, 1970), 74-75.

obviated the need for the Eucharist. If such relics existed, it would be "completely sufficient" to venerate them. Visiting a relic shrine, such as any of the more than twenty celestial foreskins scattered across western Europe, would take the place of consuming the body and blood of Christ through consecrated bread and wine. Moreover, Guibert seems to think that these fleshly relics would act as more convincing bits of Jesus's body than would the Eucharist itself. He notes that "without any intellectual acumen, without any contemplative experience," Christians could look upon Jesus's body and understand it to be what it claimed to be. People could touch the relics, feeling them to be flesh, and there would be no need to "exercise the substance of faith" by believing that bread and wine could be transformed into holy body and blood through the power of a priest's words.

We do not know precisely what objects or pieces of flesh served as foreskin relics, but we can be certain that their physicality—their ability to be seen and touched, and to look and feel like flesh—would have helped make them convincing. The degree to which Christianity penetrated the understanding of the laity during the Middle Ages remains a topic of study and debate, but some aspects of Christianity, as they were told to the laity, remained more or less consistent.[22] Christians had, for centuries, been persuaded of the existence and utility of relics.[23] Specific, individual objects might be called into question, but the underlying concept behind relics was not generally debated by orthodox Christians during the central and late Middle Ages. Individual Christians might not understand the theological details of *why* relics worked or *how* a saint's body part could survive for hundreds of years, but the basic idea was accepted that a relic

[22] The discussion is wide-ranging, but for examples, see Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982); and Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children Since the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Martin Thom (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
[23] See, for example, Geary, *Furta Sacra*; Aviad Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008); and Freeman, *Holy Bones*.

served as a physical connection point to the saint from whose body it came. And the Holy Foreskin, a relic that looked like flesh, felt like flesh, and claimed to be flesh, could be more convincing than a piece of bread that looked like bread, felt like bread, tasted like bread, and yet claimed to be flesh. To use Guibert's words again, understanding flesh as flesh would not require any "intellectual acumen" or "contemplative experience."

Guibert is not explicit with these phrases, but it seems probable that when he mentions the exercise of the intellect and the usefulness of contemplation, he is discussing transubstantiation, the belief that Christ's body is truly—not just symbolically—present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Herein lies a key distinction in the flesh-versus-bread concern around the Holy Foreskin. The cult of saints and their relics may have been a firmly established belief by the early twelfth century, but transubstantiation was an idea that was still in flux. This meant that messages delivered to the laity about the Eucharist could also be in flux; priests could deliver divergent messages, deviating from the idea of transubstantiation.

For a largely uneducated laity, it is quite conceivable that this inconsistency in messages about the Eucharist could engender confusion and uncertainty. Apart from concerns surrounding the authenticity of specific cults, however, relics were held to be what they claimed to be, and the fundamental idea behind them was not generally questioned. The laity during the Middle Ages might be in confusion—or have entirely different ideas, thanks to varying sermons they had heard—about transubstantiation and the physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist. They and their ancestors, however, had been told for centuries that relics were what they were. It did not require sophisticated theological understanding to believe that Jesus had miraculously allowed a piece of his flesh to survive for centuries. It could, however, have been rather more difficult to believe or fully understand the complex metaphysical mechanisms behind transubstantiation.

During Guibert's lifetime, the majority of theologians held beliefs consistent with what would become the doctrine of transubstantiation, confirmed during the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Views on the topic, however, were not uniform. Other scholars have treated the debates surrounding the Eucharist during the central Middle Ages in great detail; I shall summarize them here before proceeding to a more in-depth exploration of Guibert's understanding.

In the early 830s, the abbot of Corbie, Paschasius Radbertus, wrote a treatise that concentrated not on the effects of the Eucharist on the recipient, but rather on the method by which consecration of the bread and wine took place. Paschasius argued that at the moment of consecration, the bread and wine changed into the same body and blood that Jesus received from the Virgin Mary. The outward appearance of the foodstuffs, the *figura* in Paschasius's terms, remained the same, but the substance, the *veritas*, changed into Jesus's flesh and blood. Approximately 10 years later, the monk Ratramnus took the opposite stance, arguing that the bread and wine figuratively represented Jesus's body and blood, but no true change took place in the sacramental items themselves. For Ratramnus, the *veritas* meant that which the senses could perceive; because the bread and wine continued to look and taste like bread and wine, they could not truly be Jesus's flesh and blood (which would themselves look and taste like flesh and blood).[24]

Although Paschasius and Ratramnus took categorically opposing positions, the controversy only became important in later centuries as Paschasius's view became increasingly dominant.[25] The key figure here is the eleventh-century theologian Berengar of Tours, who

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[24] Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event, 1100-1215* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1982), 14-15; Rachel Fulton Brown, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 53-60.

[25] Gary Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist in the Early Scholastic Period: A Study of the Salvific Function of the Sacrament according to the Theologians, c. 1080-1200* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1984), 23-26.

argued that because the senses did not perceive a change in the bread and wine during consecration, then no substantive change to the sacrament could take place. Further, to suggest otherwise would involve Christians in a type of cannibalism, in which Jesus's body was digested; even more troubling, placing Christ's body physically in labile bread meant that it could rot, be eaten by animals, or even by destroyed by fire. Berengar's views faced backlash from the majority-Paschasian clergy, and in 1059, he was forced to renounce his views and sign a statement at the Roman synod, accepting that the Eucharist contained Jesus's body and blood.[26]

Later authors continued to accept the Paschasian view on the Eucharist, arguing frequently against the "heresy of Berengar." Macy points out, however, that the records of people who espoused Berengar's views have been lost, if they even existed; thus, it is unclear exactly whom later writers were arguing against. Exactly who had adopted the "heresy of Berengar?"[27] Macy argues that the proliferation of various heresies, such as the Cathars, during the 1100s provided a sense of urgency to clarifying the nature of the Eucharist.[28]

While Macy's explanation is undoubtedly persuasive, I would add that for some theologians—certainly, for Guibert of Nogent—the presence and growing popularity of the Holy Foreskin also provided an increasingly urgent need to explain exactly what happened to the bread and wine during consecration. As Rubenstein notes, *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus* was written to refute the monks of Saint-Médard, not to develop a theology of the Eucharist; as such, Guibert does not provide a coherent, univocal understanding of the Eucharist, and we must piece his views together.[29]

Most significantly, Guibert advances the common medieval understanding that the part *is*

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[26] Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist*, 36-40.
[27] Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist*, 53.
[28] Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist*, 54.
[29] Rubenstein, *Guibert of Nogent*, 133, 139.

the whole, using an argument based on Jesus's statement, when the unnamed woman with the alabaster jar (understood during the Middle Ages to be Mary Magdalene) anoints him in Bethany, that "you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me" (Matt. 26:11).[30] Guibert asserts that every bit of the Eucharist contains the entirety of Christ's body; he does this with specific reference to the Holy Foreskin and other early relics of Jesus's body. Guibert writes that "if [Christ's] presence is claimed through his tooth or his umbilical cord or, as read, his foreskin, it is a complete lie; because He says 'me,' any aspect of his humanity is covered. But if you deny that this includes small particles of him, perhaps you are ignorant that a part can be put in place of a whole."[31] Guibert proceeds by providing an example that "even the illiterate and commoners" can understand: "If by some chance you hurt your foot or your hand or your nail and if someone asks you what happened, do you not say 'I've hurt myself?' And what part is a nail of the whole. If you do not deny yourself when the smallest part of you is injured, then we must similarly understand the "me" that Christ said we will not always have... Certainly if you have your blood let [sanguinem minuas], cut your hair, or clip your nails, and then someone asks you whose these are, you respond that they are yours or are from you."[32]

Guibert additionally applies these bodily analogies and his understanding of "me" as both part and whole specifically to the Eucharist, by reference to Jesus's statement to the Apostles that "whoever eats me will live because of me" (John 6:57): "If you understand Christ to be eaten such that limbs and pieces of his limbs are distributed in the mouths of those receiving him—for example, this one perceives a finger, that one a part of a finger and one proceeds thusly through

[30] For medieval synecdoche, see Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, generally, and Bynum, *Christian Materiality*. Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 316, discusses the issue with specific reference to Guibert. Again, Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen* examines the medieval understanding of Mary Magdalene.
[31] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM 127, 113.
[32] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM 127, 113.

all the individual pieces and morsels of pieces of his body—the words of Christ certainly do not agree with this interpretation. Because he says 'me,' he means the entirety of the substance that he then was."[33]

For Guibert, every part of our individual bodies *is* us, even when those parts have been removed. And if this is true for human beings, as in his examples, then it must certainly be true for the body of Christ. Jesus's tooth or his umbilical cord or his foreskin remained Jesus even after they had been removed from his body. In Guibert's theology, it is wrong to think that one person might receive a piece of Christ's leg in the sacrament and another a bit of Christ's forearm. Similarly, the size of the wafer that one receives or the amount of wine that one drinks is irrelevant: at the moment of consecration, the entirety of Jesus's body enters each piece of the sacrament. Guibert is quite explicit here. He states that his position

> can be easily understood according to the interior sense, especially when faith in his body is held such that when it is offered bit by bit [minutatim], it is believed that the whole is in the small pieces… Although in the distribution [of the sacrament], not dissimilar to the disparity found in other objects, the pieces possess different sizes, nevertheless according to the measure of the inner eye, he who brings back from the altar everything that has been made there does not obtain more than he who takes the smallest portion.[34]

Although erring humans may make or consume wafers of varying sizes or drink different amounts of wine, Jesus is wholly and unchangingly present in each piece of the sacrament.

This argument highlights one of Guibert's chief concerns about the Holy Foreskin. According to Guibert, no part of Jesus's body is separable from the remainder of his corporeal being. Jesus's foreskin is not his prepuce; rather, it is Jesus's body in its entirety, just like every other part of Jesus's body is his whole body. A piece of flesh that looks like a foreskin or a baby

[33] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM, 115.
[34] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM, 114.

tooth and claims to be that body part calls attention to its partitive nature, to its foreskin-ness or tooth-ness, and detracts from the Christian's ability to recognize the whole of Jesus within that part. Without the "intellectual acumen" or "contemplative experience" that Guibert demands, a Christian might begin to think of the Holy Foreskin as a piece *of* Jesus, rather than *as* Jesus. It is significant that Guibert emphasizes that the entirety of Christ is present in every bite of the sanctioned Eucharist, typically served as either pieces of bread or as wheaten wafers: apart from wafers occasionally stamped with designs in the shape of a cross or a human-like figure, the host in the Eucharist bore no resemblance to the human body. The special challenge of earthly relics of Christ was that if they looked like the pieces of flesh they claimed to be, they could be more convincing than the metaphysical claims than an entire body was contained within every piece of sacramental bread.

Guibert's discussion of the Eucharist indicates that he did not directly intervene in the controversies surrounding Berengar's views. His concerns are elsewhere, and he simply states that the Eucharist is Christ's body, in whole and not in part. Although he does distinguish between the "principal" historical body of Jesus and the "mystical" body present in the Eucharist, this is primarily done so that Guibert can make his key point that the sacrament is the mediator between the principal body and the mystical one.[35] Because of this emphasis on mediation, Macy places Guibert's Eucharistic theology in the realm of Laon because Guibert viewed the sacrament as "a sign of the mystical union of Christ and the believer through faith and love." [36]

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[35] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM 127, 110; Rubenstein, *Guibert of Nogent*, 141. Terrier, *La doctrine de l'eucharistie de Guibert de Nogent*, 155-156, argues that in Guibert's conception, Jesus's real body does not leave heaven when the Eucharistic host is consecrated.

[36] Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist*, 82. It is important to note that Guibert learned his Eucharistic theology from Anselm of Laon.

In Guibert's understanding, the Eucharist is only "operative" through Christian faith, as a mediator between the historical Jesus and the heavenly Jesus.[37] Guibert writes that the sacrament "grows or diminishes according to the intellect that receives it: it diminishes for a vague [obscuriorem] understanding of individual faith, yet the utility of the sacrament is not less, but it increases for the capacity of a clever believer, for whom the salvation of the sacred food is equal to that for the simple believer. The sufficiency of so great a gift is in no way uneven according to the measure of piety granted by God to everyone."[38] Thus, we see again the importance of acumen and contemplation to Guibert. A "clever believer" may receive additional, mystical benefits from the Eucharist, but Guibert's key point is that it is equally salvifically efficacious for everyone who receives it in good faith. In order to do that, a person must be able to at least minimally consider what the consecrated bread and wine mean.

This idea of the believer who is able to genuinely and correctly contemplate her actions plays into Guibert's broader understanding of the utility (and the danger) of relics, including those of Jesus's body. Even if a clever believer can receive additional benefit from taking the Eucharist, no believer is safe from spurious relics. Rubenstein finds that although Guibert was certainly not opposed to relic cults, his greatest concern was that of authenticity.[39] He was particularly troubled by duplicated relics, those that were claimed by more than one church. For Guibert, the pressing question was which location possessed the true relic—and if neither could

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[37] Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist*, 81.
[38] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM 127, 114.
[39] Rubenstein, *Guibert of Nogent*, 126. Colin Morris, "A Critique of Popular Religion: Guibert of Nogent on *The Relics of the Saints*," in *Popular Belief and Practice: Papers Read at the Ninth Summer Meeting and the Tenth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, eds. G.J. Cuming and Derek Baker (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 56, notes that the discovery of the Holy Lance during the First Crusade, for which Guibert provided a chronicle, encouraged the Crusaders' zeal. See also Henri Platelle, "Guibert de Nogent et le *De pignoribus sanctorum*. Richesses et limites d'une critique médiévale des reliques," in *Les reliques: Objets, cultes, symboles: Actes du colloque internationale de l'Université du Littoral-Côte d'Opale (Boulogne-sur-Mer)4-6 septembre 1997*, ed. Edina Bozóky and Anne-Marie Helvétius (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1999), 109-121.

be proven, would the devotees of the false relic be endangered? This concern would certainly be germane to the multiple prepuces that proliferated throughout western Europe, but Guibert highlights the example of the head of John the Baptist, claimed by both Constantinople and the monks of Saint-Jean de Angély, located approximately 200 km south of Nantes.[40] Regarding the Baptist's head, he writes that "both those who are deceived and those who deceive worship unduly that which they mention. And if something unworthy is worshiped by them, behold!, the entire series of people worshiping it is implicit in their deception."[41] Thus, for Guibert, even those who venerate a relic with good intentions are not without blame; presumably, their act of veneration could induce others to perform the same practice, making the initial, ignorant devotees also culpable. Guibert makes clear that ignorance is not an acceptable excuse: "And if it is not John the Baptist but truly some other saint, the sin of duplicity is in no way diminished… He who venerates something from ignorance, even if it is something holy, is never without great danger. Rather, it is great sacrilege."[42]

The Holy Foreskin, the umbilical cord, and the baby tooth at Saint-Médard are clearly specious relics for Guibert. Not only do they call into question the utility of the Eucharist—that whole part of Christ's body available in every piece of bread--but they also simply cannot exist,

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[40] Apart from the legends claiming a bequest from Charlemagne or his sons, acquisition records for the various Holy Foreskin relics are rare. Those that do exist are addressed in Ch. 1. The zenith of affective piety, which occurred long after Guibert's lifetime, however, would indicate that many of the relics came into existence after Guibert had died. Thus, multiple copies of the relic may not have existed during his life. Additionally, it is possible that Guibert was unaware of multiple possession claims, especially in far-flung places.

[41] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM 127, 103.

[42] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM 127, 103. Guibert, however, does provide some excuse for the ignorant. See 108-109: "Someone might ask if God hears every simple person when he is invoked by those who are not truly saints. In response to this, it irritates God when those who beseech him are uncertain, but it placates him if, faithfully believing in that saint who is not really a saint, they beseech him. For comparison, let us imagine that someone believes charity is a sin. If he knowingly practices charity, he truly sins on the regard of his conscience, although what he has done is otherwise good. Thus, clearly, if someone believes someone is a saint whom he hears called a saint, but, if it is agreed, is truly not a saint, if he calls upon that saint with heartfelt faith, then before God, who is the seed and fruit of prayer, the intention of the prayer for intercession [deprecantis] remains true, in whatever way his spirit in its simplicity seems to err about this intercessor."

according to Scripture. To make this argument, Guibert refers to a passage in the book of John in which Jesus discusses the Holy Spirit, stating that "it is expedient to you that I go: for if I go not, the Paraclete will not come to you" (John 16:7).[43] In his interpretation of this passage, Guibert takes a literal stance, understanding Jesus's statement to mean "if I do not take away my corporeal presence."[44] For Guibert, this means that Jesus must already have taken away his "corporeal presence," for the Paraclete does not come unless this presence [Christ's body] is withdrawn, because unless each corporeal piece of him is taken away from memory [a memoria abrogetur], the mind will in no way be lifted up into the faith of contemplating."[45]

Thus, the Holy Foreskin and other bodily relics of Jesus do not just pose as dangerous alternatives to the Eucharist because they might be more straightforwardly comprehensible to the laity. Additionally, they do not just endanger those who purport to possess them and those who ignorantly venerate them, as would be the situation with other spurious relics. Instead, they simply *cannot* exist. For Guibert, their very place on earth imperils the ability of Christians to comprehend the salvific qualities of the Eucharist and to engage in other forms of contemplation.

It is important to briefly pause here and consider that Guibert may have had his own doubts about the Eucharist. Miri Rubin has argued that one way to understand the host desecration and ritual murder charges made against Jews during the late Middle Ages is that the accusations actually provide evidence for Christians' own questions about the Eucharist: if Jews, who did not officially recognize Christ, placed enough validity in the Eucharist to re-enact the Crucifixion or to perform magic with the consecrated bread, then doubting Christians could take

[43] "Expedit vobis ut ego vadam : si enim non abiero, Paraclitus non veniet ad vos."
[44] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM 127, 136.
[45] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM 127, 136.

solace in those supposed Jewish malpractices to bolster their own beliefs.[46] Guibert's statements do not provide proof of this stance, but his stridency against bodily relics of Christ and the threat they posed to the pious are evidence that Guibert may have harbored his own doubts. Although Rubenstein dismisses the interpretation of Guibert by previous scholarship as "a medieval neurotic,"[47] and I would agree with him, it is worth noting that Guibert is at his most vehement when an issue closely touches him, such as his relationship with his mother.[48] It is in these instances that his language is at its most clamorous. When reading his texts, one begins to wonder whether Guibert himself feels a need for that "intellectual acumen," that "contemplative experience" that allows the faithful to disavow the Holy Foreskin and believe fully in the Eucharist. These considerations come into sharper relief when comparing the tone that Guibert uses when discussing the Eucharist with that employed by Innocent III. As we shall see shortly, Innocent also defends the Eucharist, but his approach and tone are wholly different.

In Guibert's understanding (or his desire to understand), the Eucharist is uniquely special. In her study of the sacrament during the central and late Middle Ages, Miri Rubin argues that one impetus for standardizing practice around the Eucharist was that it contributed to the special status of priests in society. Whereas Christians during the early Middle Ages had turned to holy individuals and saints, people increasingly relied on priests to mediate the connection with God as the Church became more hierarchical.[49] The Eucharist was the means through which this happened, and priests were endowed with the power to "effect a singular transformation in the world."[50] By the twelfth century, during Guibert's lifetime, there were attempts to set priests

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[46] Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales*. For an early case of the ritual murder charge, see Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Passion of William of Norwich*, trans. Miri Rubin (New York: Penguin, 2014).
[47] Rubenstein, *Guibert of Nogent*, 2.
[48] Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk's Confession*.
[49] This is not to say, of course, that people *stopped* relying on saints as sources of mediation. If a sincere lay interest in saintly relics had not existed, Guibert's concerns would have had no basis.
[50] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 13.

apart from the laity by standardizing them through dress, customs, and marital status, with the goal of demonstrating the heavenly power of the priests to effect the Eucharist.[51]

Guibert does not directly express his thoughts on this issue, but it may have been an underlying concern for him. The power of the Eucharist came from God, but it was priests who enabled the manifestation of that power on earth. The Holy Foreskin, by contrast, did not require a priest. Instead, it was always already the body of Christ on earth, ready for the faithful to interact with it. The clergy may have controlled *access* to bodily relics of Christ, by placing them on display or withdrawing them from view, but the ordained men of the Church played no mystical role in bringing about Jesus's foreskin, umbilical cord, or baby teeth. Flesh that already belonged to Christ did not need to be consecrated; there was nothing to transubstantiate.

These earthly relics thus called into question the authority of—and even the need for—the clergy at precisely the moment when the role of the priest was being emphasized through the increasing importance placed upon the Eucharist. The Holy Foreskin provided a means around the local priest. A faithful Christian who saw Christ's baby tooth at Saint-Médard or a Holy Foreskin devotee in Couloumbs, Charroux, or Antwerp would not need the priest to perform the Eucharist or to administer it in order to come into the presence of Christ on earth. The Holy Foreskin and the Saint-Médard tooth were evidence that Jesus had never fully left earth.

Importantly, Guibert did not oppose the idea of relic cults; with this stance, he was in agreement with his contemporaries, as we have seen. For example, Freeman notes that Guibert seems to have supported the relic of the Virgin Mary's tunic at Chartres.[52] Vincent points out that the French monk "undoubtedly" accepted the relics of St. Edmund at Bury and St. Arnoul at

[51] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 51.
[52] Freeman, *Holy Bones*,118.

Clermont.[53] Guibert was, however, concerned about authenticity, as we saw in his discussion of the duplicated head of John the Baptist at Constantinople and Saint-Jean de Angély, and he seemed to have conflicting ideas over whether a person venerating a false saint would receive any benefit (or, indeed, would even receive punishment) for doing so. He opposed the breaking apart of saints' bodies, of selling their body parts to the highest bidder, and of layering their tombs in gold and jewels.[54] A properly treated and documented saintly relic, however, seems to have posed no problem for Guibert. Instead, it was those relics that were inauthentic, those that raised doubts or that might lead the pious astray, that caused concern. And for Guibert, no relics were more inauthentic or posed more danger to the pious than the bodily relics of Jesus Christ.

In his discussion of *De pignoribus*, Rubenstein finds that the true danger of the baby tooth at Saint-Médard was that the monks there, in order to glorify their own church, had taken the worship of relics, which was "customary and particular" but not required or salvific, and placed it on the same plane as taking the Eucharist, which was "essential and universal… They had degraded the body of the Lord to the level of relic cults."[55] I would argue, however, that for Guibert, the existence of the baby tooth at Saint-Médard, of Jesus's umbilical cord, and of the Holy Foreskin was much more problematic than that. They did not merely sap the Eucharist of its unique value, and they did not simply render it optional in those places where corporeal relics of Jesus existed, and could therefore be seen and potentially touched by the waywardly faithful. Rather, they endangered the very efficacy of the Eucharist. If the Holy Foreskin and its corporeal ilk existed on earth, then Jesus had not yet gone away. And if he had not yet gone away, then the Holy Spirit had not yet come, and the mind could not be "lifted up into the faith of

[53] Vincent, *The Holy Blood*,83.
[54] Rubenstein, *Guibert of Nogent*, 126.
[55] Rubenstein, *Guibert of Nogent*, 139-140. See also Terrier, *La doctrine de l'eucharistie de Guibert de Nogent*, 22.

contemplating." In Guibert's conception, bodily relics of Christ destroyed the role of the Eucharist to act as the mediator between Jesus's historical body and his mystical body, between his humanity and his divinity, between humans and God.

In the Middle: Pope Innocent III

Located chronologically between Guibert and Nogent and Jacobus de Voragine, Pope Innocent III also represents a middle position between theologians. He lies between those such as Guibert and Jacobus, who vociferously opposed the Holy Foreskin; and people who agreed with and even supported the relic's existence, such as Birgitta of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, and the lay people who visited the numerous foreskin shrines dotted across western Europe. As we shall see, Innocent does not take an explicit position for or against the Holy Foreskin. His writings on the Eucharist, however, detail in great depth exactly how and even when the bread and wine in the Eucharist become the body of blood of Christ. Innocent is also, of course, famous as the pope who presided over the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), during which transubstantiation was made official Church doctrine. Thus, Innocent shared Guibert's concerns about emphasizing the unique nature of the Eucharist, but he did not seem to see the Holy Foreskin itself, or the other bodily relics of Christ, as direct threats to the central sacrament of Christianity.

Born into the nobility in central Italy as Lothar of Segni, the future Innocent III completed his early education in theology in Rome and (possibly) in canon law in Bologna; he subsequently studied in Paris during the second half of the twelfth century under such teachers as Peter the Chanter, Peter of Poitiers, Melior of Pisa, and Peter of Corbeil.[56] His schoolmates in Paris included Stephen Langdon and Robert of Courçon, with whom he probably held

[56] David Frank Wright, "A Medieval Commentary on the Mass: *Particulae* 2-3 and 5-6 of the *De missarum mysteriis* (ca. 1195) of Cardinal Lothar of Segni (Pope Innocent III)" (doctoral thesis, University of Notre Dame, 1977), 1.

theological discussions.[57] Shortly after the death of Pope Alexander III in 1181, Lothar returned to Rome, where he became a cardinal in 1190. During the 1190s, he wrote a series of theological treatises: *De miseria humanae*, a tract on asceticism; *De missarum mysteriis*, in which he explores the Mass; and *De quadripartita specie nuptiarum*, an exploration of the relationship between the clergy and the Church.[58] Following the death of Celestine III in 1198, Lothar became Pope Innocent III. After his election, Innocent focused on restoring and then increasing the power of the papacy, proclaiming himself not only the vicar of St. Peter, but also the vicar of Christ.[59] Although Innocent's reign is often seen as the height of the power of the medieval papacy, during which the pope intervened in secular monarchies, worked to eradicate the Cathars in southern France, and proclaimed the disastrous Fourth Crusade, I am not as concerned here with Innocent's political activities.[60]

Instead, I wish to explore Innocent's activities that touch most closely upon the Holy Foreskin. These include his theological work *De missarum mysteriis*, written while he was still Cardinal Lothar; the decisions of the 1215 Fourth Lateran Council; and an undated sermon on the circumcision of Christ. By examining these three works, we can begin to create an image of Innocent's rather ambivalent stance toward the earthly relics of Jesus's prepuce.

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[57] Jane Sayers, *Innocent III: Leader of Europe, 1198-1216* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), 18.
[58] Wright, 51; John Doran, "Innocent III and the Uses of Spiritual Marriage," in *Pope, Church and City: Essays in Honour of Brenda M. Bolton*, eds. Frances Andrews, Christoph Egger, and Constance M. Rousseau (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 101-114.
[59] Sayers, *Innocent III*,15. Sayers, 16, notes that the idea of the "vicar of Christ" probably originated with St. Bernard of Clairvaux c. 1150, who called the first Cistercian pope Eugenius III, the "vicar of Christ," but the title "had only been employed domestically within papal circles before Innocent III's time. Innocent was the first pope to proclaim publicly that he was the vicar of Christ."
[60] Wright, "A Medieval Commentary on the Mass," 45. A comprehensive biography of Innocent III can be found at John C. Moore, *Pope Innocent III (1160/61-1216): To Root Up and to Plant* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009). An anonymous *Gesta*, which leaves off in 1208, provides much of the information on Innocent III's life. See *The Deeds of Pope Innocent III*, trans. James M. Powell (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

De missarum mysteriis, written between April 1195 and early 1197, is primarily a commentary on the Mass and on what should be said and done during it.[61] It is in this treatise that the future pope expounds his views on the Eucharist, that central element of each Mass. Although David Wright sees Lothar's excursus on the Eucharist as "an interruption" in the rest of the commentary, Miri Rubin calls *De missarum mysteriis* "the classic in the genre" of Eucharistic manuals.[62]

Lothar begins his exploration of the Eucharist by stating unequivocally that during consecration, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ: "For when the priest proclaims those words of Christ, 'This is my body, and this is my blood' (Matt. 26), the bread and wine are converted into flesh and blood by the virtue of those words, as the word became flesh and lived among us (John 1)."[63] He does provide evidence for this position, but unlike Guibert, who almost seemed to disparage his readers for holding divergent beliefs, Lothar instead presents a series of examples from the Gospels and the Pauline letters to support his position, focusing on what he views as the supremeness of God: "It is incomparably greater that God was made man and does not cease to be God than that the bread becomes flesh and ceases to be bread. The former was done once through the Incarnation, the latter continually through the consecration."[64] For Lothar, the routine transformation of bread into flesh pales in comparison to

[61] Wright, "A Medieval Commentary on the Mass," 56.
[62] Wright, "A Medieval Commentary on the Mass," 3; Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 53.
[63] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *Patrologia Latina* (PL) 217: 859: "Cum enim sacerdos illa Christi verba pronuntiat: Hoc est corpus meum et hic est sanguis meus (Matth. XXVI), panis et vinum in carnem et sanguinem convertuntur, illa verbi virtute, qua verbum caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis (Joan. I)."
[64] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *PL* 217: 859: "Incomparabiliter majus est, quod Deus ita factus est homo, quod non desiit esse Deus, quam quod panis ita fit caro quod desinit esse panis. Illud per incarnationem seme lest facum, istud per consecrationem jugiter fit."

the unique miracle of Jesus's birth; God manifested himself on earth, once, as a human child, but the act of transubstantiation took place multiple times each day throughout Europe.[65]

Lothar does briefly address one of the Guibert's overriding concerns, that of the whole and the part. Immediately after confirming, without question, that the bread and wine become flesh and blood during consecration, Lothar writes that "neither when it is eaten, divided into parts, or broken up during the sacrament, as is flesh that is sold in the butcher shop [macello], rather it is accepted inviolate [illaesus] and eaten whole. Having been eaten, he lives, because having been killed, he rose; having been eaten, he does not die, because not having died, he rose again."[66] Later, Lothar restates this point, simply and straightforwardly: "The body of Christ is not eaten by pieces, but ought to be understood as entirely whole… for only the form is divided into parts, and the entire body is eaten wholly."[67] Again, we see that Lothar's tone and emphasis are different from those of Guibert. Whereas Guibert used a series of bodily metaphors to highlight for the reader that, for example, a person's toe is still a part of that person, Lothar merely states the fact that in his view, Christ is present, wholly, in each piece of bread that the communicant consumes; it is only the form, the bread, that is in pieces. Lothar uses the counterexample of the butcher shop, in which a whole animal would be cut into pieces to be distributed: no one would believe that a certain cut of beef contained within it an entire cow. Importantly, however, and again, Lothar addresses this concern with a simple and singular refutation; he does not dwell on the issue, providing multiple and compounding rebuttals, as

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[65] Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist*, l87-90, discusses the methods by which the Eucharist did not become routine for the laity, including lifting the transformed bread so that the laity could view it and ringing bells at the moment of consecration.

[66] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, 860: "Non enim cum manducatur, per partes dividitur, nec laceratur sub sacramento, sicut caro quae venditur in macello, sed et illaesus sumitur et integer manducatur. Vivit manducatus, quia surrexit occisus; manducatus non moritur, quia resurrexit non moriturus."

[67] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, 869: "Quia corpus Christi non manducatur per partes, sed integrum… nam sola forma per partes dividitur, et totum corpus integrum manducatur."

Guibert did. Instead, Lothar moves quickly into what, for him, seems to be a larger concern. He is more eager to highlight the connections between Jesus's life, the Resurrection, and the Eucharist than he is to explore the intricacies of whole versus part.

The passage of time and the concept of audience are important considerations here. It had been eighty years since Guibert of Nogent wrote *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus*, and during that time, belief in Guibert's (and Lothar's) understanding of the Eucharist had solidified; the "heresy of Berengar" had receded almost 150 years into the past.[68] Although non-Berengarian heresies certainly proliferated during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, and as pope, Innocent himself sought to fight them, they were of an entirely different order than otherwise-orthodox Christians who questioned the presence of Christ in the Eucharist or who found devotional solace in visiting a shrine to his foreskin, umbilical cord, or baby tooth. The Cathars, for example, (supposedly) subverted entire priestly orders and worked to establish separate societies within medieval Europe.[69] When addressing those Christians who remained relatively inside the realm of orthodoxy, the future Innocent III no longer seems to see a need to stridently defend the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, or to clarify in great detail that each piece of consecrated bread contained the entirety of Jesus's body. For Lothar, those were simple facts that any right-thinking Christian would believe.

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[68] Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist*, 91.

[69] The literature on Catharism and related heresies is vast. The classic work on the subject, broadly, is Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: the Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, trans. Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent*, *c. 1250-c 1450* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), provides a more recent discussion of the subject. On English Lollards, particularly after Innocent III's reign, see J. Patrick Hornbeck, *What Is a Lollard?: Dissent and Belief in Late Medieval England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Shannon McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420-1530* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995). For the Cathars, specifically, see Mark Gregory Pegg, *The Corruption of Angels: The Great Inquisition of 1245-1246* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Peter Biller, "Cathars and the Material World," in *God's Bounty?: The Churches and the Natural World*, eds. Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2010), 89-110, provides a response to Pegg.

In terms of audience, neither author states explicitly to whom he is writing. We can, however, infer readership from the circles in which each author traveled and from their relative positions. Although Guibert had some training with Anselm of Laon, he did not undertake advanced schooling, such as at the budding cathedral schools of Paris, and was instead educated by a local tutor.[70] At the time that he wrote *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus*, Guibert was the abbot of a small monastery in northwestern France; the fact that his works did not circulate beyond Nogent speaks to the (comparatively) limited nature of his world. It appears that Guibert's text was intended specifically for the monks of the equally small monastery of St.-Médard and potentially for other local clerics, perhaps those under Guibert's purview at Nogent. Lothar, on the other hand, had a larger network and a potentially larger audience. As noted above, he was educated under some of the most famous men of his day, alongside classmates who became equally renowned for their views. At the time of his writing, he additionally held the position of cardinal, as opposed to Guibert's role as abbot of a provincial monastery. Lothar had a more theologically sophisticated audience and a greater reach than did Guibert. He was not writing to a group of, to him, wayward monks in possession of a questionable tooth; rather, his treatise was intended for a broader audience, one that perhaps did not need to be convinced of the truth of transubstantiation as a counterpoint to their own, individual claim to fame. Lothar's treatise expounds on truths believed to universally held, rather than combating specific, potential heresies.

This difference in time and in audience allows Lothar to state his views as fact, rather than as a position that must be defended. Without need of further support, he is able to write that

[70] Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist*, 74. On Guibert's relationship to his tutor, see Guibert of Nogent, *Monodies*. C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950-1200* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), provides a discussion of the cathedral schools that were developing during Guibert's lifetime.

"just as the body of Christ is eaten daily, and neither runs short nor loses influence, so the bread crosses over into the body of Christ daily… For neither flesh nor blood is materially formed from the bread or the wine, but the material of the bread and wine is changed into the substance of flesh and blood."[71]

Because, for Lothar, the concept of transubstantiation was already established, he does not need to address its very occurrence. Rather, he is more interested in *how* and *when* consecration takes place; because he does not have to argue on behalf of its existence, as Guibert did, he is able to delve into details that were beyond Guibert's scope (or ability). The majority of Lothar's discussion on the topic of the Eucharist is devoted to these areas.

Lothar begins his discussion of the intricacies of transubstantiation by examining when, exactly, it occurs during consecration. His basic question here, because during Mass the priest consecrates the bread first and then the wine, is whether there is a time when Jesus's body exists on earth without his blood. He answers with an unequivocal "no": "At no time is the body without blood or the blood without body, just as neither is without a soul, but under the form of the bread, the blood appears in the body, through the change of the bread into the body. And the reverse."[72] He goes on to explain that this is "not because there is bread in the blood, or because the wine is changed into the body, but because neither is able to exist without the other."[73] Lothar thus subscribes to the doctrine of concomitance, according to which Jesus's blood is present in the bread/flesh, and his flesh is present in the wine/blood. As the thirteenth century

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[71] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *PL* 217: 860-861: "Sicut ergo corpus Christi quotidie manducatur, et non deficit nec decrescit, ita panis quotidie transit in corpus Christi.. Non enim de pane vel de vino materialiter formatur caro vel sanguis, sed materia panis vel vini mutator in subtantiam carnis et sanguis."
[72] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *PL* 217: 868: "Nunquam tamen corpus est sine sanguine, vel sanguis est sine corpore, sicut neutrum est sine anima, sed sub forma panis sanguis existit in corpore, per mutationem panis in corpus. Et e converso."
[73] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *PL* 217: 868: "Non quod panis in sanguinem, vel vinum mutetur in corpus, sed quia neutrum potest existere sine reliquo."

progressed, this doctrine would be used to deny the laity regular access to the wine, under the belief that they might spill the increasingly precious blood of Christ; instead, it was proclaimed that the laity could receive the full salvific effects of the Eucharist simply by consuming the consecrated bread, which now also contained Jesus's blood.[74] Writing in the late 1100s, Lothar had not yet begun to consider these results of concomitance. Rather, he is concerned with elucidating the details of the daily miracle of transubstantiation. Again, the fact that he does so, particularly without addressing specific interlocutors in the "you have argued X, but in fact Y is true" model used by Guibert, provides evidence that Lothar harbors no doubts about the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He does not question, and seems not to see even the need to acknowledge any question about, the form in which Jesus's body appears on earth.

Continuing his emphasis on the details of transubstantiation, Lothar moves from discussing the *when* to examining the *how*, in a section that he entitles "On the method of transubstantiation."[75] At this point, however, Lothar seems to reach an impasse; he does not articulate exactly how the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus. Instead, he merely reiterates that they do so, emphasizing that the bread may become the body of Christ, but the body of Christ does not itself come from bread: "although that which is bread is the body of Christ, nevertheless, the body of Christ is not something that was bread, since that which was bread was something else entirely; but the body of Christ is altogether that which it was."[76] He similarly states that "just as the Father and Son are the same, nevertheless, the Father is not the

[74] Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 51-53, provides a discussion of the doctrine of concomitance. See also Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 316-317; and Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 35.
[75] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *PL* 217: 870: "De modo transsubstantiationis."
[76] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *PL* 217: 871: "Quamvis etiam id quod fuit panis sit corpus Christi, non tamen corpus Christi est aliquid quod fuit panis, quoniam id quod fuit panis, est aliud omnino quam fuit; sed corpus Christi est omnino idem quod fuit."

Son, but is that which is the Son."[77] The future pope goes no further in explaining exactly *how* transubstantiation takes place, *how* the bread ceases to be bread and becomes the body of Christ (but the body of Christ was never actually the bread), or *how* the Father becomes the Son (but the Son was never actually the Father).

For Lothar, this seems to be part of the miracle of transubstantiation. The body of the Christian savior cannot be made from bread, but simultaneously, bread can be made into the body of Christ. It is possible that simply stating the marvelous nature of this paradoxical transformation was enough for Innocent. He does distinguish between the conversion of form and the conversion of substance, stating that, for example, the rod of Moses's brother Aaron was converted in its form into a serpent (Exod. 7), but the bread of the Eucharist is converted in its substance into flesh.[78] Apart from this distinction, however, Lothar again seems to view transubstantiation as a fact that does not require interrogation, as a clear-cut (if miraculous) part of daily life. This understanding becomes clearest in one of the analogies that he uses in his exploration of the Eucharist: "The bread is changed or converted or transubstantiated or crossed over into the body of Christ because the body of Christ begins to be in the place of the bread under these same accidents [that is, under the appearance of the bread], just as it is said by grammarians that the 'a' is changed into 'e' when the past 'egi' is formed from the present 'ago' because the letter 'e' is put in the place of the letter 'a.'"[79] The basic rules of Latin grammar become a method by which Lothar can state the unquestionable fact that consecrated bread

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[77] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *PL* 217: 871: "Sicut Pater et Filius sunt idem,non tamen Pater est Filius, sed id quod est Filius."
[78] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *PL* 217: 871: "Substantia vero quandoque convertitur in id, quod sit, et non erat, ut virga in colubrum, et tunc forma convertitur cum substantia. Quandoque convertitur, in id quod erat, et non fit, ut panis in eucharistiam, et tunc substantia convertitur sina forma."
[79] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *PL* 217: 870: "Non desunt qui dicunt, quod ea tratidione dicitur panis mutari, vel converti seu transsubstantiari, sive transire in corpus Christi, quod corpus Christi sub eisdem accidentibus loco panis incipit esse, sicut dicitur a grammaticis quod *a* mutator in *e*, cum a praesenti formatur praeteritum *ago egi*, quia loco hujus litterae *a* ponitur laec littera *e*."

becomes Christ's body. Although he expresses his wonder at transubstantiation, as when he states that "just as it is indescribable that God made man, so is it indescribable that bread becomes flesh," he simultaneously reduces the event to the grammatical shift that a verb undergoes when changing from the present to the past tense—that is, he reduces it to something that is a mere fact, to be accepted and believed by all who understand the topic, be it Christianity or Latin grammar.[80] This is highlighted by the fact that, as we shall see in his discussion of Jesus's circumcision, Lothar also undertakes a more thorough exploration of Latin grammar, but he never questions the grammar or suggests changing it. Rather, he uses it to make theological points.

Before turning to his sermon on the circumcision of Jesus, however, there is one final part of *De missarum mysteriis* to explore: the section in which Lothar finally discusses the Holy Foreskin directly. Toward the end of his discussion of the Eucharist, Lothar includes a short chapter entitled "Whether the risen Christ recovered the blood that he shed during the Crucifixion." He states quickly that Jesus did so before using the question of what body parts Jesus resumed after his resurrection to address the question of bodily relics of Christ:

> What then is to be said about the circumcised foreskin or the cut-off umbilical cord—whether it similarly returned to Christ, to the truth of [his] human substance? Indeed, it is believed to be preserved in the Lateran Basilica in the Sancta Sanctorum. For it is said by certain people that the foreskin of Christ was bestowed in Jerusalem by an angel upon Charlemagne who took it away and placed it in Aachen. But afterwards, it was placed by Charles the Bald in the Church of the Savior near Carosium. Nevertheless, it is better to entrust it all to God, rather than to define it rashly.[81]

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[80] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *PL* 217: 871: Sicut ineffabilis es tilla unio qua Deus factus est homo, sic ineffabilis es tilla conversion qua panis fit caro."

[81] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, *PL* 217: 876-877: "Quid ergo de circumcision praeputii vel umbilici praecisione dicetur? An in resurrection Christi similiter rediit, ad vertitatem humanae substantiae? Creditur enim in Lateranensi basilica scilicet in Sancto sanctorum conservari. Licet a quibusdam dicatur, quod praeputium Christi fuit in Jerusalem delatum ab angelo, Carolo Magno qui sustulit illud et posuit Aquisgrani. Sed post a Carolo Calvo positum est in ecclesia Salvatoris apud Carosium. Melius est tamen Deo totum committere, quam aliud temere diffinire." We see here that Lothar repeats the common Charlemagne legend.

It is here that Lothar is truly "in the middle" between those who were devotees of the Holy Foreskin and those who opposed it.[82] Given his unquestioning stance toward the Eucharist and transubstantiation, it seems clear that he did not view the various bodily relics of Jesus as a threat to the consecrated bread and wine. In terms of organization, this allows him to place his discussion of the Holy Foreskin near the end of his comments on the Eucharist and to devote only a short amount of space to it. The sections of his treatise immediately preceding and following the brief discussion of Jesus's foreskin deal with such issues as the quantity of water to be mixed with the Eucharistic wine and what should be done with the leftover bread and wine after communication has occurred.[83] Unlike Guibert, whose entire treatise was partially prompted by the claims of these relics and who took their threat as an opportunity to put forth (or to reassure) his own understanding of the Eucharist, Lothar treats the Holy Foreskin and Jesus's umbilical cord almost as an afterthought (it is unclear what happened to the tooth at St.-Médard between Guibert's and Lothar's texts). For Lothar, the relics are something that should be addressed because they relate to a question regarding Jesus's resurrection—notably, not directly related to the Eucharist—not because they impinge on the Eucharist and must be refuted. Lothar sees no threat from the Holy Foreskin to the consecrated bread and wine; his emphasis on the details of the metaphysical transformation indicates that the basic fact of transubstantiation is not a debatable subject, and there is no need to reassure his readers (or himself) that it occurs.

Throughout Lothar's brief discussion of the Holy Foreskin, he seems almost reluctant to take a stance for or against it. Its potential threat to the Eucharist is not an issue for him, but the fact that he raises the topic during a discussion of whether Jesus regained his spilled blood after

[82] Vincent, *The Holy Blood*, 86-87, provides a brief summary of Innocent's main points, but he does not include an in-depth analysis of the text.
[83] Innocent III, *De missarum mysteriis*, 875, 877.

his resurrection suggests that the relationship between Jesus's resurrection and his bodily relics might be a source of concern. Although Lothar states clearly that Jesus did regain his spilled blood, the cardinal does not clearly answer the same question for what the prepuce or the umbilical cord might mean for bodily resurrection. Did Jesus regain his foreskin and his umbilical cord, or did he not? Lothar seems to quickly drop any discussion of the holy umbilical cord, but his use of the term "delatum" in his discussion of the Holy Foreskin does provide an indication that he attempted to circumvent the issues it created by suggesting that the angel *gave* the relic to Charlemagne, rather than simply indicating to him its already earthly location, as some medieval histories of the Holy Foreskin portray the scene. Thus, although Lothar finesses the question of whether Jesus regained his foreskin during his resurrection, no definitive answer is provided. Lothar does not state, unambiguously, either that Jesus's foreskin was returned to him or that it remained on earth. This suggests that although the Holy Foreskin did not automatically negate the possibility of bodily resurrection for Lothar, the problem did carry some weight for him.

The language that Lothar uses to discuss the relics is also telling. Focusing on the Holy Foreskin, he states that "it is believed" to be held in the Sancta Sanctorum in Rome. He also repeats the medieval Charlemagne legend, stating that "it is said by certain people." This use of the passive provides some distance between Lothar and the relic's veracity; he is repeating what "certain people" have said about the Holy Foreskin. A more active tone would have indicated that Lothar himself believed in the relic's history. However, the fact that he mentions the story at all—and, again, does not simply refute it—indicates that he may have given it some credence, or at least, that he found it inoffensive enough to include.

It is useful here to turn to the Fourth Lateran Council, over which Lothar, as Pope Innocent III, presided in 1215. Although the council is most famous for making the belief in transubstantiation official Church doctrine and for commanding that Christians should receive the Eucharist at least once per year at Easter after making confession, I wish to focus on one of the lesser known canons that came from the council.[84] Canon 62 concerns saints' relics. In addition to forbidding the sale and indiscriminate display of established relics, the canon also states that "as for newly discovered relics, no one should venerate them unless they have already been approved with the authority of the Roman pontiff." The canon goes further to prescribe that priests "should not permit people who enter their churches, in order to venerate [relics], to be deceived by false stories or documents, as has frequently happened because of the desire for profit."[85]

Regarding Canon 62, Clayton notes that false relic peddlers were a common feature of the Middle Ages; we have already seen that Guibert of Nogent, for example, was greatly concerned with the authenticity of relics.[86] The canon itself tells us that relics with a falsified provenance were a frequent occurrence. The council's attempt to suppress the trade was ultimately in vain (Geoffrey Chaucer immortalized the professional relic salesman in *The Canterbury Tales*, written more than 150 years after the council met), but it does indicate that one of the Church's—and Innocent's—concerns was specifically with newly discovered relics.

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[84] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 84 argues that mandating the practice of confession was an attempt to establish "sacerdotal control over membership in the sacramental community," as part of the growing effort to endow priests with more authority. Macy, 140, makes the important point that the Fourth Lateran Council did not define transubstantiation, but rather codified a term and a belief that had been developing for decades. L. Elliott Binns, *Innocent III* (New York: Archon Books, 1968), 172, traces the earliest occurrence of the term "transubstantiation" to an eleventh-century explanation of the mass attributed to Peter Damian. Sayers, *Innocent III*, 99, notes that no official minutes or reports remain from the council; only the seventy-one Canons that the council issued have survived.

[85] Antonius García y García, ed., *Constitutiones Concilii Quarti Lateranensis una cum Commentariis glossatorum* (Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1981), 39. See also Binns, *Innocent III*, 179 and Hélène Tillmann, *Pope Innocent III*, trans. Walter Sax (Amsterdam and New York: North Holland Publishing Company, 1980), 191.

[86] Joseph Clayton, *Pope Innocent III and His Times* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1941), 181-183.

The distinction between "new" and "newly discovered" is important: just as the body parts of a recently deceased saint would need to be authenticated, so too would freshly unearthed relics belonging to a long-dead figure. Indeed, the latter might need even more verification, as no living person would be able to identify the relics as belonging to a particular saint.

This concern with authenticity, particularly surrounding newly discovered ancient relics, helps explain Innocent's ambivalence toward the Holy Foreskin and makes his inclusion of its supposed provenance even more intriguing. The Holy Foreskin was a relic that came with its own well-known origin story. We have already seen that the Charlemagne legend was in wide circulation before Innocent's lifetime. Further, it gave Jesus's prepuce an earthly history of almost 400 years by the time that the future pope wrote *De missarum*. The details of the story may have changed from one telling to another, but it was most certainly *not* a newly discovered relic. Nor was it one that came with only dubious documentation: that standard university text, the *Historia Scholastica*, contained mention of it, including the Charlemagne story. Further, as a cardinal based in Rome, it could have been difficult for Lothar to suggest that the Sancta Sanctorum itself was falsely promoting the relic "because of the desire for profit."[87]

Lothar was thus unable to refute the existence of the Holy Foreskin by means of its authenticity. And yet, he still does not seem to have wholly accepted it. His use of the passive voice and the way in which he handles the dual questions of whether Jesus regained his foreskin during his resurrection and of how Charlemagne originally received the relic imply that it remained difficult for him. This tension between a potentially authentic provenance and a

[87] García y García, ed., *Constitutiones Concilii Quarti Lateranensis una cum Commentariis glossatorum*, 39.

potentially problematic theological concern led Lothar to essentially take no position on the Holy Foreskin, ultimately concluding that "it is better to entrust it all to God."[88]

Turning from Lothar's direct discussion of the Holy Foreskin to the event that would have produced that excised piece of flesh, the future pope also wrote an undated sermon on the circumcision of Christ. Throughout the sermon, he makes no mention of the Holy Foreskin relic—or even of Jesus's foreskin at all. Instead, he has two focal points: the distinction between Jewish circumcision of the flesh and Christian circumcision of the spirit, and an analysis of the name "Jesus." I will explore the first point, about the nature of circumcision, more fully when we examine what the Holy Foreskin can tell us about relations between Christianity and Judaism during the late Middle Ages. Essentially, however, Innocent repeats the Pauline argument that Christians should be circumcised in the heart, by means of baptism, and should not undergo bodily circumcision (Rom. 2: 28-29), relying on Jesus's statement that he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17).[89]

Lothar's second focus during his sermon on the circumcision emphasizes the nature of Jesus's name. In doing so, he is relying on the full Lucan verse that mentions Jesus's circumcision: "On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived" (Luke 2:21).[90] He notes that this name was not only announced to Mary by the angel Gabriel, but it was also predicted by the Hebrew prophet Habbakkuk: "I will rejoice in the Lord, I will rejoice in my god Jesus" (Habb.

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[88] It is worth noting that this conclusion, hesitant though it may be, does stand in contrast to Guibert's argument that those who venerated false relics committed sacrilege and could be led astray. For Innocent's sometimes lenient stance toward heresies that "did not seem liable to cause widespread or serious trouble," see Binns, *Innocent III*, 113-115; quote at 113.

[89] Innocent III, *In circumcisione domini*, PL 217: 465.

[90] Luke 1:31 contains the text in which the angel Gabriel tells Mary during the Annunciation that she will name the baby Jesus. Matthew 1:21 notes that the baby will be named Jesus, but the surrounding verses indicate that Mary is already pregnant. Neither Mark nor John contains an infancy narrative.

3:18).[91] Lothar uses this predicted nature of Jesus's name to argue in favor of his two natures, divine and human: "Therefore, his name Jesus was appropriate for a divine person, according to human nature; from this, it is consequently inferred that if it is Jesus, it is God; and if it is Jesus, it is man: and through this, if it is Jesus, God is man, and man is God."[92]

For the remainder of his sermon, Lothar uses a linguistic analysis of Jesus's name to argue in favor of Christ's dual natures. We have already seen him employ a grammatical argument when discussing transubstantiation; he uses grammar there to present a straightforward, unquestionable interpretation, simply stating that the Latin "ago" becomes "egi" in the last tense. Here, he expands on his linguistic arguments and begins to make them more interpretive. Lothar writes that "this name Jesus has two syllables and five letters, three vowels, and two consonants, and it has three inflections through which it is declined, as 'Jesus,' 'Jesu,' 'Jesum,' and from these is constructed the word 'sum.'"[93] He does not pursue the meaning of "sum" further, but he is perhaps making a reference here to Exodus 3:14, during the story of the burning bush: "God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said, 'Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel, "He who is, hath sent me to you."'"[94] Returning to a more explicit discussion of Jesus's two natures, Lothar begins a further examination: "Thus, this name Jesus has two syllables, because Jesus has two natures, that is, divine and human; divine from the Father, from whom he

[91] The Hebrew term is yeshua(ti), "salvation/my salvation." Modern translations of this verse across multiple languages (including the English NRSV, the French Nouvelle édition de Genève, the German Schlachter, the Italian Nuova Riveduta, and the Swedish nuBiblen) and Luther's 1545 Bible write "I will rejoice in the god of my salvation" rather than "in my god Jesus."

[92] Innocent III, *In circumcisione domini*, PL 217: 466: "Convenit ergo nomen ejus Jesus personae divinae, secundum naturam humanam; ex quo sequenter infertur quod si est Jesus, est Deus: et si est Jesus, est homo: ac per hoc si est Jesus, est Deus homo, vel homo Deus."

[93] Innocent III, *In circumcisione domini*, PL 217: 466: "Sane hoc nomen Jesus habet duas syllabas, et quinque litteras, tres vocales, et duas consonants, habet etiam tres inflexiones, per quas declinantur, ut Jesus, Jesu, Jesum, ex quibus componitur hob verbum: Sum." In Latin, the name "Jesus" is written "Iesus," with the English consonant "j" replaced by a vowel "i."

[94] "Dixit Deus ad Moysen: Ego sum qui sum. Ait: Sec dices filiis Israel: Qui est, misit me ad vos."

is born without a mother; human from the mother, from whom he is born without a father."[95] He proceeds to demonstrate his point by repeated references to the Book of John (John 1, 10, 14).

As a final example of Lothar's linguistic analysis of Jesus's name, he turns to the individual letters in the name: "Thus by the three vowels, the divinity is meant that although it is one in itself, it echoes three persons; for 'there are three who give witness in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, and these three are one' (1 John 5:7-8). By the two consonants is meant humanity."[96] A similar analysis occurs throughout the remainder of the sermon, in which, for example, Lothar discusses the terminations when the name "Jesus" is declined through the singular Latin cases[97] and the meanings of the individual vowels in the name.[98]

What, then, do we make of this? It is clear that Lothar saw a utility in the unquestionable nature of Latin grammar; it could be used to make theological points based on his readers' own knowledge of the language. His readers knew that the singular name was declined as "I/Jesus" in the nominative case; "I/Jesu" in the genitive, dative, ablative, and vocative cases; and "I/Jesum" in the accusative case. By relating his points to something that was unalterable, he is able to make his theological arguments similarly irrefutable. His analysis does also tell us that this sermon, at least as recorded, was probably not intended for the largely illiterate laity, who would not have understood his grammatical nuances, but rather for a clerical audience, who would have had more familiarity with the Latin language.

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[95] Innocent III, *In circumcisione domini*, PL 217: 466: "Hoc igitur nomen Jesus duas habet syllabas, quia Jesus duas habet naturas, scilicet divinam et humanam; divinam ex Patre, de quo natus est sine matre; humanam de matre, de qua natus est sine patre."
[96] Innocent III, *In circumcisione domini*, PL 217: 466-467: "Per tres igitur vocales significator divinitas quae cum sit una per se, sonat in tribus personis; nam 'tres sunt qui testimonium dant in caelo, Pater, Verbum et Spritius, et hi tres unum sunt (I Joan. V). Per duas consonants signatur humanites."
[97] Innocent III, *In circumcisione domini*, PL 217: 469-470.
[98] Innocent III, *In circumcisione domini*, PL 217: 468.

The sermon also emphasizes that Jesus's circumcision and its resulting foreskin may have been a difficult point for Lothar. The fact that he very quickly passes over the event itself, uses little space to discuss the meaning of circumcision for Christians, and then uses the majority of his sermon to conduct a linguistic analysis perhaps indicates that he did not wish to dwell on the actual circumcision and what might have resulted from it. We see this hesitancy throughout his writings that touch on the Holy Foreskin. Although he explores some of the same concerns that Guibert of Nogent addressed eighty years earlier in *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus*, the future pope's tone is quite different in *De missarum mysteriis*. Rather than stridently defending his position in the face of dangerous bodily relics of Christ, Lothar instead relegates any mention of those relics to the end of his section on the Eucharist. They appear almost as an afterthought that must be addressed, but not combated. Even there, he seems to meet them with ambivalence, unsure of whether to give them credence, and if so, how much support they should garner. Our final theologian, Jacobus de Voragine, also examines Jesus's circumcision, but unlike Lothar, he includes a specific discussion of the Holy Foreskin and presents no hesitancy in denouncing it.

Jacobus de Voragine: The Resurrection of Jesus's Foreskin

Born in Italy in 1230, Jacobus de Voragine became famous as the author of the *Legenda Aurea*, that most popular medieval collection of saints' lives. As a member of the Dominican order, Jacobus served as prior in several northern Italian cities, becoming provincial of Lombardy during the 1270s and representing northern Italy at various church councils during the late thirteenth century. Eventually, in 1292, he became archbishop of Genoa; he spent the last six years of his life in this position, using his time to write a number of short theological works, including multiple treatises on the Virgin Mary.[99]

[99] Reames, *The* Legenda Aurea, 1-4.

By far, however, Jacobus's most famous and widespread work is his collection of saints' lives. Referred to as a "summa hagiographiae," the *Legenda aurea* was as popular as it was massive.[100] Written—or compiled, depending on one's view—in the mid-thirteenth century, the *Legenda* was initially designed to be used as a source of exempla by the clergy when preparing sermons; it quickly became popular among the laity.[101] As Sherry L. Reames notes, the work was conveniently arranged and was generally straightforward in its style.[102] To create his collection of saints' lives, Jacobus appears to have relied upon a variety of previous legendaries: those of his fellow thirteenth-century Dominicans Jean de Mailly and Bartholomew of Trent, as well as Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale*.

Despite its popularity, however, the *Legenda* failed to reflect trends in sainthood that became popular during the late Middle Ages, during and after the time that Jacobus wrote it.[103] The work includes far more saints from the early days of Christianity—martyrs and Church Fathers—than the "modern" saints of the late medieval period. Reames notes that the standards set by the saints of the *Legenda* were generally unreachable by most members of society; Kleinberg adds that Jacobus's saints "resemble angels, undisturbed by… trivialities and more divine than human," particularly in comparison to contemporary Franciscan narratives of saints, which emphasized daily situations and included recognizable human drives such as pride and envy.[104] Kleinberg also notes that "Jacobus's collection looks like a relic from the monastic

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[100]Reames, *The* Legenda Aurea, 5.
[101] Alain Boureau, *La légende dorée: Le système narratif de Jacques de Voragine* (Paris: Cerf, 1984), understands Jacobus as primarily a compiler. For an alternate view of Jacobus as author, see Boureau's mentor, Jacques Le Goff, *In Search of Sacred Time: Jacobus de Voragine and the* Golden Legend, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
[102] Reames, *The* Legenda Aurea, 197-198.
[103] André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birell. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), provides an in-depth analysis of late medieval trends in sainthood.
[104] Reames, *The* Legenda Aurea, 204-209; Aviad Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2008), 242.

centuries when liturgical texts were written for the convinced."[105]

It is not my purpose here to examine the reasons why members of the late medieval clergy and the laity found the *Legenda* useful despite its perhaps outmoded representation of sainthood. It is important, however, that we acknowledge that Jacobus did sometimes tailor his work to a more contemporary audience, particularly in relation to the Holy Foreskin, a relic that did not exist during the period when many of his saintly subjects (allegedly) lived. Jacobus places his discussion of the Holy Foreskin on January 1, the day of the Feast of the Circumcision, eight days after the Nativity in the liturgical calendar, to account for the Lucan verse stating that Jesus was circumcised when he was eight days old. Jacobus is certainly not alone in discussing Christ's circumcision on January 1; the sources on which he seems to have relied for his liturgical chapters also provide entries for the Circumcision, but their entries for the feast are rather shorter, and they do not include a discussion of the Holy Foreskin.[106]

The majority of Jacobus's entry for the Feast of the Circumcision is devoted to an examination of the meanings behind Jesus's circumcision, and it is here that he most clearly earns Le Goff's designation of "theologian."[107] Jacobus begins by noting that the feast is celebrated because it is the first time that Jesus shed blood for humanity. The other four instances are when he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, the scourging, the Crucifixion, and when his side was pierced with the lance. [108] Here, we see the strains of affective piety that focus on

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[105] Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word*, 242.
[106] Pascal Collomb, "Les éléments liturgiques de la Légende dorée," pp. 97-122 in *De la sainteté à l'hagiographie: Genèse et usage de la Légende dorée*, eds. Barbara Fleith and Franco Morenzoni (Geneva: Librairie Droz S.A., 2001), provides a discussion of Jacobus's liturgical sources in relation to the Feast of the Circumcision, with particular emphasis on William of Auxerre's *Summa de officiis ecclesiasticis*. Other sources for Jacobus's liturgical chapters include Honorius Augustodunensis, Jean Beleth, and Prévostin de Crémone.
[107] Le Goff, *In Search of Sacred Time*, xii.
[108] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, BnF Nal 1747, 35r. Notably, Catherine of Siena also understands the circumcision as the first time that Jesus shed blood for humanity. She does, however, seem to frequently forget the bloodletting in the Garden of Gethsemane and the scourging, skipping directly from the circumcision to the Crucifixion. For an example, see Catherine of Siena, Letter T221/G152, in *Letters, Vol. 2*.

Jesus's body and his willingness to suffer for humanity in Jacobus's work, an indication that the *Legenda aurea* was not devoted solely to unrelatable stories of long-dead saints. From this straightforward list of the times that Jesus bled, Jacobus moves into a complicated and multi-layered explanation of why Jesus was circumcised. The majority of this section, which deals with the differences between Jewish and Christian conceptions of circumcision, will be discussed in detail later, but some of the explanations that Jacobus raises are important for the present examination.

According to Jacobus, the first reason why Jesus not only was, but actually *wanted* to be, circumcised was to demonstrate his human nature. As Jacobus writes, "The first reason was for himself, that he might show that he had assumed real human flesh, because he knew that there would be those who would say that his body was not real, but that he had assumed a fantastical body. Therefore, so that he might refute their error, he wanted to be circumcised and thereby shed blood, for a fantastical body does not shed blood."[109] Setting aside Jacobus's attribution of a great deal of agency to an infant, even a celestial one, we see that he, too, is concerned with the dual natures of Christ, as was Innocent III in his discussion of the circumcision. Unlike Innocent, however, Jacobus does not rely on linguistics to prove his points. Because the *Legenda aurea* was written with a lay audience in mind, the intricacies of Latin grammar would have served little purpose. Instead, Jacobus discusses the differences between real and fantastical bodies.[110]

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[109] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, 35v: "Voluit autem dominus circumcidi propter multas rationes. Primo ratione sui, ut veram carnem humanam se assumisse ostenderet, sciebat enim non defuturos, qui decierent ipsum non corpus verum, sed fantasticum assumsisse. Et ideo ut eorum errorem confutaret, voluit circumcidi et sanguinem ibi emitte. Corpus enim fantasticum sanguinem non emittit."

[110] The concept of fantastical bodies, often understood as either angels or demons, was not yet fully developed in the late 1200s, but elemental understandings of what phantasms could and could not do were present. The literature is vast here, but for (contrasting) overviews, see Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); and Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010). See also the discussion of Jacobus's contemporary Christina of Stommeln at Aviad Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country:*

Here, Jacobus has made a clear statement about the nature of Christ, stating that he was emphatically human. Moreover, according to Jacobus, Jesus was both sufficiently concerned that people would deny his humanity and sufficiently knowledgeable about what being human entailed that he allowed himself to be circumcised and to bleed, as a definitive sign of his human nature.

Related to this is a subsequent reason that Jacobus gives for Jesus's willingness to be circumcised. This time, however, it "was for the demons." According to Jacobus, Jesus wanted to ensure that they did not "learn the mystery of the incarnation. Since circumcision was done to counteract original sin, the devil believed that this man, who was circumcised, was similar to sinners and also a sinner who needed the remedy of circumcision." Jacobus gives the same rationale for why Jesus "wished" that Mary, whom he interprets as perpetually virginal, should be married.[111] In this passage, Jacobus reverses Jesus's concerns. Rather than using circumcision and its concomitant bloodshed to demonstrate his humanity to mankind, Jesus is instead using the ritual to *disguise* his divinity from Satan's demonic forces. As such, Jacobus emphasizes Christ's two natures, both divine and human, as well as Jesus's childhood awareness of both of them, within the single procedure of circumcision.

Le Goff argues that one of Jacobus's primary concerns in the *Legenda Aurea* is the passage of time, both liturgical and ordinary, as well as how the two intersect.[112] Although Le Goff gives only scant attention to Jacobus's discussion of the Feast of the Circumcision, the

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Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 71-98.

[111] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legneda aurea*, 35v: "Quarto ratione daemonum, ne scilicet incarnationis misterium cognoscerent. Cum enim circumcision fieret contra originale pcccatum, credidtit dyabolus et hunc, qui circumcidebatur, similiter peccatorem esse, qui circumcisionis remedio indigeret. Propter eandem cansam voluit, ut mater sua virgo perpetua esset desponsata."

[112] See especially Le Goff, *In Search of Sacred Time*, 19-20. For Le Goff's examination of the Feast of the Circumcision, which only includes a cursory discussion of the Holy Foreskin, see 70.

medieval author does devote a considerable amount of attention to explaining *why* the Feast of the Circumcision occurs eight days after the Nativity--and consequently, *why* Jewish circumcision takes place eight days after birth. The first reason cites "Rabbi Moses [Maimonides], a great philosopher and theologian though a Jew," to state that circumcising an infant before the eighth day could be dangerous because the child is still tender from its mother's womb.[113] A related third reason is to "console the parents' grief since very many infants are killed by circumcision."[114] Going back, Jacobus's second reason is to avoid the child remembering any pain from the circumcision.[115] At this point, Jacobus begins a long, explicitly Christian explanation for why Jesus was circumcised when he was eight days old. His rationales include dividing world history into eight ages, culminating in the "age of the resurrection," when presumably, those who have followed Paul's advice and been circumcised in the heart will be bodily resurrected.[116]

It is here, having fully enumerated his explanations for both why Jesus allowed himself to be circumcised and why his circumcision occurred on the eighth day of his life, that Jacobus finally turns to a specific discussion of the Holy Foreskin:

> Regarding the flesh of the circumcision, it is said that an angel carried [attulit] it to Charlemagne, who placed it with honor [honorifice collocavit] at Aix-la-Chapelle in the Church of the Blessed Mary and later transferred it to Charroux. Now, however, it is said to be in Rome in the church called Sancta Sanctorum, where in that very place it can be read: 'Here are the circumcised flesh of Christ and his bright sandals, and here too lives [viget] a precious cutting of his umbilical cord.' For that reason a station takes place at Sancta Sanctorum on this day. But if it is true, it is greatly and certainly to be wondered at [mirabile est.] Since the flesh itself belongs to the true human nature, we believe that when Christ rose, the flesh went back to its glorified place. Some say that this is true

[113] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, 35v: "Nam sicut dicit Rabbi Moyses, maximus philosophus et theologus, licet Judaeus." Elizabeth Wyner Mark, ed., *The Covenant of Circumcision* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2003), provides several discussions of the circumcision, including traditional Jewish rationales for waiting until the male infant is eight days old before the procedure is performed.
[114] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, 36r: "Nam cum ex circumcisione perique parvuli morerentur…"
[115] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, 36r.
[116] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, 36r-36v.

> according to the opinion of those who say that only what is derived from Adam is of the true human nature, and that alone rose. It is to be noted that formerly, many superstitions were observed by pagans and Gentiles on this Kalends [January 1], which the saints were barely able to extirpate from Christians; Augustine relates this in a certain sermon. He says they believed that their leader Janus was some kind of god, to whom they paid much veneration on this day, and that they made his image with two faces, one looking forward and the other backward, because it was the end of one year, and the beginning of the next. Also on this day some of them put on monstrous masks, others wore the skins of animals, still others the heads of beasts, thus showing that they not only dressed like beasts but had bestial feelings. There were even some who clothed themselves in women's clothes, shamelessly showing off their soldierly muscles in feminine clothing. Others followed the auguries so closely that if someone asked for fire from their hearth or some other favor, they would refuse it. The giving and receiving of devilish gifts was also practiced. Others laid out sumptuous tables in the night and left them there all night long, believing that they would enjoy such abundant feasting throughout the year. And Augustine adds: 'Anyone who participates in these pagan customs may well fear that the name of Christian will do him no good. Whoever takes a friendly part in the games of the ungodly may be sure that he also shares in their sins. Therefore, brothers, it is not enough for you to shun this evil. Wherever you see it, denounce it, rebuke it, put it down.' So says Augustine.[117]

Like the future Pope Innocent III, Jacobus places his discussion of the Holy Foreskin toward the end of its relevant section. Unlike Innocent, however, Jacobus does not include it as

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[117] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, 36v-37r: "De carne autem circumcisionis domini dicitur, quod angelus eam Carolo Magno attulit et ipse eam Aquisgrani in ecclesiam Sanctae Mariae honorifice collocavit, Carolus vero illam postea fertur Carosium transtulisse, nunc autem dicitur esse Romae in ecclesia, quae dicitur Sancta Sanctorum. Under et ibidem scriptum legitur: 'Circumcisa caro Christi sandalia clara / Atque umbilici viget hic praecisio cara.' Unde et ea die fit statio ad Sanctam Sanctorum. Sed si hoc verum, valde utique mirabile est. Cum enim caro ipsa sit de veritate humanae naturae, credimus, quod resurgente Christo rediit ad locum suum glorificatum. Aliqui dixerunt, quoc hoc verum sit juxta opinionem illorum, qui dicunt illud solum esse de veritate humanae naturae, quae ab Adam traducta est, et istam solum resurgere. Notandum, quod olim a paganic et gentilibus in his calendis multae superstitions observabantur, quas sancti etiam a Christianis vix exstirpare poterant, quas Ausgustinus in qudoam sermon commemorate. Credentes enim, ut dicit, Janum ducem quemdam Deus esse, eum in his calendis plurimum venerabantur et ei duas facies figurabat, unam post se, aliam ante se, quia erat terminus anni praeteritio et principium sequentis. Rursus in his calendis formas monstruosas assumebant, alii vestientes se pellibus pecundem, alii assumentes capita bestiarum, ex quo indicabatur, non tantum habitum, sed belluinum habere sensum. Alii tunicis muliebribus vestiebantur, non erubescentes inserere tunicis muliebribus militares lacetros. Alii ita auguria observabant, ut focum de domo sua vel aliud quodcunque benefactum cuilibet petenti non tribuerent. Dyabolicas etiam strenas et ab aliis accipiunt et aliis tradunt. Alii in nocte mensas laute praeparant et sic tota nocte manere sinunt, credentes, quod per totum annum convivia in tali sibi abundantia perseverant. Et subdit Augustinus: qui de paganorum consuetudine aliquid observare voluerit, tinemdum est, no nomen christiani ei prodesse non possit. Qui etiam stultis hominibus ludentibus aliquam humantatem impenderit, peccati eorum participem se esse non dubitet: vobis autem, fratres, non sufficiat, quod non hoc malum facitis, sed ubicunque fieri videbitis, arguite, corrigite, castigate. Haec Augsutinus."

an afterthought, or as an issue that can be held in ambiguity. For Jacobus, writing decades after transubstantiation was made an official Church doctrine, bodily relics of Christ posed no threat to the Eucharist. Instead, he advances a different concern: he strongly denounces the Holy Foreskin as a threat to the idea of bodily resurrection.[118]

Jacobus first presents the standard story that Charlemagne received the relic from an angel. Jacobus's use of "attulit" is ambiguous here; it is uncertain whether the angel delivered the relic to Charlemagne from heaven or the angel brought it to him from an earthly location. Jacobus does add to the story the idea that the relic was taken to the "Church of the Blessed Mary" in Aix-la-Chapelle, perhaps reflecting his own interest in Mariology. At the end, however, the relic still ends up in the Sancta Sanctorum in Rome where Jacobus states that it can be read that Jesus's foreskin, his sandals, and his umbilical cord reside. The authenticity question that gave Lothar pause does not seem to detain Jacobus. The Roman relic shrine may exist, but that does not mean that the Holy Foreskin and the umbilical cord should be venerated.

However, the fact that Jacobus states that "a station takes place" on the Feast of the Circumcision provides evidence that people did pay homage to the relic, at least on January 1. He speaks to the popularity of the relic—and the willingness of the Church to condone it—even if he himself did not agree with it. At this point, though, Jacobus's tone changes. He states that if the aforementioned history of the Holy Foreskin is true, "it is greatly and certainly to be wondered at." Jacobus, though, does not use "wonder" in the sense of a marvelous occurrence, but rather in the sense of something to question or suspect. He asserts that "since the flesh belongs to the true human nature, we believe that when Christ rose, the flesh went back to its

[118] Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 309-312, 317, argues that Jacobus is strongly concerned with the idea of part versus whole in his thoughts about the resurrection. The bodies of saints may be split up, but each part of the body represents the entire saint.

glorified place."[119] Here, Jacobus has returned to his original position that by allowing himself to circumcised, Jesus was emphasizing his human nature, rather than his divinity. He also makes a point about Jesus's resurrection. In Jacobus's view, Jesus's foreskin would have been restored to him. He argues that, after Christ at least, resurrection is the natural end fate for human beings, whose flesh will join Christ's in a "glorified place."

It is noteworthy that Jacobus follows this denigration of worshipping Christ's foreskin with a particularly damning point. Immediately after describing the veneration of the Holy Foreskin, he provides a lengthy description of, to him, despicable Roman practices, including paying homage to the god Janus, whose two faces allowed him to see into both the past and the future years. Additional pagan frivolities, according to Jacobus, included wearing masks, dressing in women's clothing, and setting out otherwise unattended feasts on the first night of the year, under the belief that doing so would ensure plentiful food for the future. By including this description of pagan activities, in direct opposition to the veneration of Jesus's foreskin, Jacobus links the unacceptably pagan festival with the improperly Christian devotion. And in case anyone still harbored doubts, Jacobus adds a reference to that unquestionable authority, Augustine. Venerating the Holy foreskin—as an earthly relic of Christ's body—is no more acceptable than paying homage to Janus or engaging in otherwise pagan activities.

Jacobus de Voragine's rejection of the Holy Foreskin reflects the Dominican Order's doubts surrounding purported bits of Christ's body on earth.[120] As Bynum has demonstrated in her study of the blood relics of Christ that proliferated in late medieval Germany, Dominicans generally rejected earthly, bodily relics of Christ.[121] By questioning the veneration of the Holy

[119] The "we" in Jacobus's sentence is unclear. It could refer to merely himself, to the Dominican order, or the all right-believing Christians.
[120] Le Goff, *In Search of Sacred Time*, xii.
[121] Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond*

Foreskin and comparing it to pagan Roman festivals, Jacobus certainly places himself within the theological doctrine of his Dominican order. Although the Benedictine Guibert, writing before transubstantiation was codified, viewed the Holy Foreskin as a direct threat to the Eucharist, Jacobus sees Jesus's foreskin as a marker of his human nature, but rejects the idea that this humanity could have remained on earth, which might imperil bodily resurrection. For Jacobus, the idea that this human element of Christ reunited with his body in glory serves to reinforce the idea that humans, too, will be resurrected in bodily perfection.

Additional Views

Although Guibert of Nogent and Jacobus de Voragine strongly opposed the Holy Foreskin and the future Innocent III expressed ambivalent views regarding it, they were certainly not the only male theologians to discuss the relic of Jesus's prepuce during the Middle Ages. Continuing in the theme of opposition, Guidonis de Orchellis, a schoolmaster in Paris during the last decades of the thirteenth century,[122] argues that although, according to "physics," the extraneous bits of Jesus's body such as his teeth, foreskin, and umbilical cord that were often claimed as relics were "superfluities [superfluitas]" and thus were not of "the truth of human nature," they in fact "were resurrected with the risen Christ."[123] Although Guidonis opposes the Holy Foreskin, his overall concern here is not with Jesus's prepuce itself. Rather, he combines it with both Jesus's teeth and his umbilical cord to make a point about the resurrection of the body. Thus, he echoes Guibert's and, especially, Jacobus's concerns.

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), *passim*, compares the Franciscan and Dominican stances toward blood relics of Christ. See also, however, Caroline Walker Bynum, "Violent Imagery in Late Medieval Piety," *GHI Bulletin* 30 (2002): 23.

[122] Eugène Bernard, *Les dominicains dans L'Université de Paris* (Paris: E. de Soye et fils, 1883), 371-373.

[123] Guidonis de Orchellis, "De resurrectione," 231: "Consequenter quaeri potest quid sit veritas humanae naturae. Si omni illud quod fuit de corpore est de veritate humanae naturae, ergo praeputium Domini, et dentes, et umbilicus sunt de veritate humanae naturae. Ergo nihil ex iss quae fuerunt ex dominico corpore remansit in terris, immo Christo resurgente cum ipso resurrexerunt; de quibus tamen gloriantur quaedam Ecclesiae."

The Czech theologian Jan Hus (c. 1369-1415) opposed corporeal relics of both Jesus and his mother Mary, following lines of argument similar to those put forth by Guibert. Hus wonders which of Mary and Jesus's contemporaries would have bothered to collect her breastmilk or his foreskin and umbilical cord. In an argument reminiscent of Guibert's emphasis on the contemplative experience, Hus asserts that supposed bits of Jesus's body actually endangered their devotees, referring to John 20:29: "Blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed."[124] Hus does go further than Guibert, however; he additionally condemns the various Eucharistic blood relics that had appeared during the late Middle Ages.[125] Although the relics usually claimed to be either wine that had miraculously transformed into Jesus's blood during consecration or Eucharistic hosts that had developed blood spots, Hus argues that they were all fraudulent, usually the creation of profit-seeking priests.[126]

Importantly, however, not all male theologians opposed the Holy Foreskin. Most notable here is Thomas of Chobham (c. 1160-c. 1235), an English theologian and dean of Salisbury who possibly studied under Peter the Chanter in Paris.[127] In his *Summa de arte praedicandi*, written c. 1210, Thomas emphasizes the importance of preaching and places it "among the branches of rhetoric."[128] He additionally provides instruction to preachers on the best ways to address some of their audiences' vices and errors.[129] Thomas's discussion of the Holy Foreskin is noteworthy because he allows for the existence of Jesus's prepuce on earth:

Certain people object that if Christ was resurrected in glory and his whole body was

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[124] "Beati qui non viderunt, et crediderunt."
[125] See Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, for a discussion of Eucharistic blood relics, generally, and of the blood relic at Wilsnack, specifically.
[126] Vincent, *The Holy Blood*, 118-120. Hus's argument against Eucharistic blood relics, such as at Wilsnack, reflects both Guibert's stance against the relic tours of Laon and the justification put forth by Canon 62 of the Fourth Lateran Council.
[127] Gillian R. Evans, "Thomas of Chobham on Preaching and Exegesis," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 52 (1985): 159.
[128] Evans, "Thomas Chobham," 159.
[129] Vincent, *The Holy Blood*, 85.

> glorified, how is it that the Church claims that Christ's foreskin, cut off at the time of his circumcision, still remains on earth? There is an easy response to this, since just as by a miracle the body of our Lord can be at one and the same time in several places, so that same body can exist in several forms. The Lord gave his body to his disciples in immaterial form, although that same body took material form when he sat and ate. If anyone had kept the bread that the Lord gave to his disciples and had stored it in a pyx until the time of his Passion, then although blood flowed from Christ's body during the Passion, it would not have flowed from the pyx. In the same way, Christ's foreskin, glorified as part of his integral body, may exist in another place unglorified. It is not to be said that Christ's foreskin is glorified or not glorified, only that in one place it is glorified and in another it is not.[130]

Thomas does not specify who the "certain people" are who objected to the Church's claim to possess Jesus's foreskin. They are not his focus, however. Rather, he wishes to employ the concept of transubstantiation, which was made Church doctrine a mere five years after Thomas wrote his *Summa de Arte Praedicandi*, to take an unequivocal stance in favor of the Holy Foreskin. Thomas uses the understanding that consecration transforms the bread and wine into the true body and blood of Christ to advance his argument: if consecration happens throughout Europe and if bread is being turned into Jesus's body throughout Christendom, then it must be happening simultaneously. Transubstantiation must be occurring in multiple places at the same time, which means that Jesus's body exists on earth in multiple locations simultaneously. Thomas transfers this argument to the idea of the Holy Foreskin: if Jesus's body can exist in more than one place at the same time, then it can also exist in different forms.[131] It can be in the

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[130] Thomas of Chobham, *Summa de Arts Praedicandi*, ed. F. Morenzoni, CCCM 82, 110-111: Obiciunt tamen quidam, quod si resurrexit in gloria Christus, tutum corpus eius glorificatum est. Quomodo est dixit ecclesia quod preputium Domini, quod in circumcisione eius precisum est, adhuc habetur in terra? Ad hoc facilis potest esse responsio. Quia, sicut corpus Domini per miraculum simul et seme lest in diuresis locis, ita et corpus idem potest esse simul sub diuresis formis. Sicut cum Dominus dedit corpus suum discipulis suis, sub illa forma in qua dedit erat inpassibile, sub illa forma in qua sedit et manducauit erat passibile. Vune, si quis de pane illo quem Dominus dedit discipulis suis reseruasset in pixide usque ad passionem Domini, in passione de corpore eius flueret sanguis, in pixide non flueret. Eodem modo, preputium Domini quid est in corpore eius integro, ibi glorificatum est, eodem modo idem preputium in alio loco existens non est glorificatum. Nec tame nest concedendum quod idem preputium est glorificatum et non glorificatum, sed cum determination, scilicet quod in uno loco est glorificatum, in alio loco non est glorificatum."

[131] Lützelschwab, "Zwischen Heilsvermittlung und Ärgernis," 609, notes that in Thomas's conception Jesus retained his suffering body, indicating that if he could be suffering, he could do so without his foreskin.

form of consecrated bread during the Eucharist, it can exist in a glorified form in heaven, *and* it can exist in an unglorified form on earth as skin excised from Jesus's penis during his circumcision. Thomas's analogy of a hypothetical pyx during the Passion emphasizes that not all parts of Jesus's body are identical: blood would flow from his body during the Passion, but it would flow from the consecrated bread, even though that bread is also understood to be the body of Christ. Thomas ends by asserting that Jesus's foreskin can exist simultaneously in heaven, presumably restored to him during the Resurrection, and on earth.

With these statements, Thomas almost directly contradicts Guibert.[132] Whereas the French abbot saw corporeal relics of Christ as direct threats to the validity of the transubstantiated Eucharist, Thomas uses the very process of transubstantiation to justify the existence of the Holy Foreskin. Similarly, his argument that Jesus's body can simultaneously exist in multiple places and in multiple forms invalidates Guibert's (and what would later be Jacobus's) concerns regarding the Resurrection.

Although he does not specifically mention this, Thomas's stance also explains how there could be multiple foreskin relics scattered throughout western Europe. If Jesus's body can exist in multiple places (both in heaven and on earth, as well as during multiple Eucharist ceremonies), then his foreskin could also be in more than one location. Thomas's focus on the foreskin also indicates that other bodily relics of Jesus were perhaps waning in popularity. Guibert's treatise condemns earthly remnants of Jesus's foreskin, his umbilical cord, and most vehemently, his baby tooth. Writing approximately 100 years later, however, Thomas focuses solely on Jesus's foreskin. It is unclear what happened to the umbilical cord or baby tooth, but Thomas does provide evidence that these relics seem to have disappeared or, at least, to have

[132] Vincent, *The Holy Blood*, 85-86.

seen their popularity drop sufficiently to no longer require defense.

Conclusion: Overlapping Concerns

We see that the male theologians examined here had overlapping concerns, though different emphases, regarding the Holy Foreskin. Guibert of Nogent, the first of the three main theologians chronologically, saw bodily relics of Christ as primarily a threat to the Eucharist: pieces of flesh that claimed to be flesh might have been more convincing than pieces of bread that claimed to be flesh. A related problem for Guibert was the need to preserve increasing sacerdotal authority, which derived its source from that same imperiled Eucharist. More than 150 years later, Jacobus de Voragine had no concern about the consecrated sacrament, but was instead worried about what the Holy Foreskin might mean for the concept of bodily resurrection. If Jesus himself was unable to attain bodily perfection after he rose from the dead, then what hope did mere humans have? In between these two, the concept of Jesus's earthly prepuce seemed to make Lothar uneasy, but he expressed no firm opposition to it. He was interested in firmly defining transubstantiation, but for him, the Holy Foreskin did not impinge on that concept. His discussion of the Holy Foreskin in the context of Jesus's resurrection indicates that this might have been something with which he struggled, but the alleged authenticity of the celestial prepuce perhaps outweighed his hesitancies.

Both Guidonis de Orchellis and Jan Hus echo Guibert's arguments. Importantly, however, neither would have read Guibert's treatise, as it did not circulate beyond his own monastery. Thus, their reflected arguments are incidental, rather than purposeful. The later theologians' arguments differ slightly—they do not stridently defend the very concept of transubstantiation and instead use the foregone doctrinal conclusion to refute the idea of earthly relics of Christ. The overall arguments, however, do indicate that Guibert's stance was not

unique to one French abbot. Rather, his positions represent concerns that multiple theologians developed independently, and over the course of three hundred years. The Holy Foreskin was clearly not a relic that disappeared easily. Instead, it was one that persisted, and one that raised multiple, and repeated, theological concerns. Thomas of Chobham may have argued in favor of the relic, but that seems to have been a minority position among male theologians. His understanding of Jesus's multilocational nature seems to be unique and not one to which later theologians adhered.

As we look at their concerns over time, we do see a shift in theological priorities. During the early 1100s, when Guibert wrote *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus*, the understanding of what happened during consecration was in flux; the concept of transubstantiation was increasingly gaining ground, but it was not yet official doctrine. Moreover, authorities were not yet agreed on exactly how to define the Eucharist.[133] By the time that the future Innocent III wrote *De missarum mysteriis* during the late 1100s, transubstantiation could be asserted as a straightforward fact, with only the details needing to be elucidated; a short time later, in 1215, Innocent presided over a council that codified what many scholars had already accepted and what many priests had already begun to practice.[134] Writing during the late 1200s, Jacobus saw no need to define the Eucharist or transubstantiation in the context of the Holy Foreskin; those concerns had already been clarified. The fact that the *Legenda aurea* was written to appeal to the laity indicates that they, too, had accepted the concept (or, at least, that clerics believed they had).

[133] Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist*, 47-65, provides an overview of how some theologians, who all accepted the basic concept of transubstantiation, still understood the actual process differently.
[134] Thomas of Chobham's treatise, written in approximately 1210, also presumes transubstantiation as an established fact.

On the other hand, the idea of bodily resurrection seems to have been of increasing concern. All of the theologians examined here discuss it, but Jacobus makes it the focal point of his opposition to the Holy Foreskin. He also advances the clearest assertion of what happened during Jesus's resurrection. Whereas Lothar implied that Jesus's foreskin was reunited with the rest of his body but ultimately did not take a firm position on the question, Jacobus states unequivocally that Jesus regained his foreskin. This indicates that as the need to define the Eucharist waned, a different theological concern arose to take its place. Christians knew that Jesus's body was contained within the sacramental wafer, and that his entire body was contained within each piece of bread, but exactly how whole was that body? What, if anything, might it be missing? And if it any part of it was not there, what might that mean for humanity?[135]

We also see that over time, the various bits of Jesus's body circulating around medieval Europe contracted in nature, if not in number. Although the foreskin relics themselves proliferated, other parts of Jesus's body seem to have disappeared from view (or, at least, concern). Neither Lothar nor Jacobus was troubled with the baby tooth that caused Guibert such angst; Thomas does not discuss it either. Although Jacobus mentions the relic of Jesus's umbilical cord in the Sancta Sanctorum, he devotes more attention to Holy Foreskin. As discussed previously, the answer for why the Holy Foreskin became the most prominent relic of Jesus's body probably lies in the Lucan verse. Although we might infer it based on normal human biology, the Gospels do not state that Jesus possessed or shed baby teeth, or that he had an umbilical cord. The Charlemagne legend, with all its variations, also allowed for multiple churches to claim possession of the relic.

[135] Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 229-340, traces the ongoing concerns with bodily resurrection, questions that outlived Jacobus.

As we continue, we shall see that the primary interest in earthly remnants of Jesus's body became his foreskin. Opposition, or at least uneasiness, with this relic from high-ranking churchmen did not preclude devotion to the Holy Foreskin; rather, it continued despite the concerns of an abbot, a cardinal-turned-pope, an archbishop, a dean, and a popular preacher. Shrines to Jesus's prepuce persisted, and as affective piety's emphasis on Jesus's body continued to develop, individual people had intense encounters with the excised piece of Christ's penis. The Christian community, however, did not wholly ignore the thoughts of Innocent and Jacobus.[136] The Holy Foreskin may have continued to exist, but if Christians proclaimed their interest in it, they had to do so in defined terms. Stepping too far outside concerns regarding the Eucharist and bodily resurrection could mean the difference between sainthood and centuries-long censorship.

In the following three chapters, I will put the Holy Foreskin itself in the background and instead examine some of its most devoted (female) adherents: Agnes Blannbekin, Birgitta of Sweden, and Catherine of Siena. Each woman had specific, and at times, intense encounters with this piece of Jesus's body. In these chapters, I will contextualize each woman to provide arguments about their mysticism and how they understood themselves—as women and as laypeople—in their religious roles. Working chronologically, I will begin with Agnes.

[136] I omit Guibert here because his oppositional treatise did not circulate beyond his monastery.

CHAPTER 3: AGNES BLANNBEKIN: CONSUMING CHRIST

At some point during the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, the Franciscan-affiliated beguine Agnes Blannbekin (1244?-1315) had what, to modern readers, is perhaps the most shocking encounter with the Holy Foreskin.[1] On the feast day of the Circumcision (January 1, the Octave of the Nativity), Agnes took communion and, while thinking about Jesus's excised foreskin and where it might be located following the Resurrection, "she soon felt on her tongue, with the greatest sweetness, a little piece of skin in the manner of the skin of an egg, which she swallowed. When she had swallowed it, she felt the skin on her tongue again with sweetness as before, and she swallowed it again. And this happened to her truly one hundred times in succession. And when she felt it that many times, she was tempted to touch it with her finger." As Agnes continued to swallow the object that miraculously, continually appeared on her tongue, "it was said to her that the foreskin was resurrected with the Lord on the day of resurrection."[2]

Unsure of what to do with this experience, Agnes determined not to tell her confessor-biographer about her vision. However, after a few days had passed, she prayed to God on "the fourth day before the epiphany of the Lord" for guidance. Specifically, she requested Jesus to grant her the same experience of "the consolation that I [Agnes] felt from the skin of your [Jesus's] foreskin on the Day of the Circumcision" as a positive sign that she should reveal

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[1] For Agnes's *vita,* I have relied upon Peter Dinzelbacher and Renate Vogeler's Latin-German facing-page edition, with reference to Ulrike Wiethaus's English translation of the *vita* when necessary. Unless otherwise indicated, references in this chapter to Wiethaus's text refer to her introductory material, her critical notes, or the interpretive essay at the end of her translation. See Peter Dinzelbacher and Renate Vogeler, eds. and trans., *Leben und Offenbarungen der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin* (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1994) and Ulrike Wiethaus trans., *Agnes Blannbekin: Viennese Beguine: Life and Revelations* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2002). Organized as a type of religious diary that spans the liturgical year, Agnes's *vita* only rarely provides exact dates for her visions. For an example of a specific date, see Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, ch. 189, pp. 394-396, in which Agnes has a Eucharistic vision in the precisely dated year 1291.

[2] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 37, pg. 118: "Et ecce, mox sensit super linguam suam parvam pelliculam ad modum pelliculae ovi cum praemaxima dulcedine, quam deglutivit. Quam cum deglutisset, iterum pelliculam sensit in lingua cum dulcedine ut prius, quam iterum deglutivit. Et hoc accidit ei bene centum vicibus. Et cum totiens sentiret, tentata est digito eam attingere.… et dictum est ei, quod praeputium cum domino surrexerit die resurrectionis."

everything to her confessor.[3] Jesus obliged, and Agnes relayed the experiences to her confessor, "as always with fear and modesty," because "she believed herself to be entirely unworthy of so many gifts from God."[4]

This vision, while extraordinary, is merely one of the many that fills Agnes's book. Her "*vita*" is less a biography of the holy woman and more a compendium of her divine visions, revealed "under the confession of a certain holy friar of the Franciscan order."[5] Indeed, Anneliese Stoklaska refers to the work as an *Offenbarungsvita* [epiphany *vita*], emphasizing its focus on Agnes's visions rather than on her life.[6] In this chapter, I wish to contextualize Agnes, with an emphasis on her visions. After briefly examining the small amount of firm information that we can glean about Agnes's life, I will discuss her visions within the beguine movement and the late medieval trend of affective piety, ultimately arguing that Agnes's visions were atypical for the Franciscan order. This will serve as necessary context for her encounter with the Holy Foreskin, to be examined in depth in Ch. 6.

Agnes Blannbekin: Viennese Beguine

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[3] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin,* ch. 38, pg. 120: "'Domine, si tibi placet, ut revelem confessor meo ea, quae mihi ostendere dignaris, tunc da mihi hoc pro signo et testimonio, scilicet ut sentiam illam consolationem, quam in die circumcisionis de pellicula tui praeputii sensi.'"

[4] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 38, pg. 120: "Et quamvis tot indiciis confortata a domino, tamen quasi semper cum timore et verecundia mihi referebat et exacta a me precibus frequenter. Reputabat enim omnino se indignam tantis donis domini et cum humilitate se dejiciebat."

[5] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 235, pg. 482: "Et morabatur Wiennae et erat de confessione Minoris cujusdam sancti fratris."

[6] Anneliese Stoklaska, "Die Revelationes der Agnes Blannbekin. Ein mystisches Unikat im Schriftum des Wiener Mittelalters," *Jahrbuch des Vereins für Geschichte der Stadt Wien* 43 (1987): 8. This style is certainly not unique among medieval women. For a discussion of Continental examples, see Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism—1200-1350* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1988), 141-142, who notes that we know far more about the visions of mystics Hadewijch and Mechthild of Magdeburn than we do about their lives. See also Ulrike Wiethaus, "Sexuality, Gender, and the Body in Late Medieval Women's Spirituality: Cases from Germany and the Netherlands," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7.1 (1991): 35-52; and Penny Galloway, "Neither Miraculous nor Astonishing: The Devotional Practice of Beguine Communities in French Flanders," in *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and Their Impact*, ed. Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Leiden: Brepols, 1999), 107-127.

Perhaps because details in the *vita* are so sparse, scholars in general have been quite focused on Agnes's biographical information in an attempt to place her in the religious scene of medieval Vienna. From the *vita* itself, however, we learn almost no biographical information about Agnes. Stoklaska speculates that the surname Blannbekin indicates an ancestry from the lower Austrian village Plambach.[7] Bernard McGinn writes that Agnes was born "about 1244 into a peasant family and lived as a beguine in Vienna from about 1260."[8] Although McGinn cites the *vita* as the source of this information, it is ultimately unclear where he obtains it. As Wiethaus points out, our only source for Agnes is her *vita*, which provides neither a birthdate nor the year when she moved to Vienna.[9] The *vita* does provide a firm death date of 1315; this information is located, logically, at the end of the text. It is appended, however, almost as an afterthought to yet another of Agnes's visions, in which Jesus tells Agnes that God's love is divided into five parts, each corresponding to a Christian virtue.[10] Without a segue following the vision, the *vita* immediately transitions to provide the firmest biographical information that we have for Agnes:

> He who wrote this had the name Ermenrich. In the year of the Lord 1318, minus three years, this virgin Agnes Blannbekin, the daughter of a certain farmer, died on the 10th of May. And she died in Vienna and was under the confession of a certain holy friar of the Franciscan order.[11]

Ch. 39 of the *vita* specifically refers to Agnes as a beguine, stating that she became one so that she could receive the Eucharist more frequently;[12] the uncloistered way in which this religious

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[7] Anneliese Stoklaska, "Weibliche Religiosität im mittelalterlichen Wien unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Agnes Blannbekin," in *Religiöse Frauenbewegung und mystische Frömmigkeit im Mittelalter*, ed. P. Dinzelbacher and D.R. Bauer (Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1988), 165.
[8] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism,* 180.
[9] Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 4.
[10] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 235, pg. 482: "Hoc qui scribebat, Ermenricus nomen habebat. Anno domini MCCCXVIII. minus tribus annis obit haec virgo in X. Kal. Maji Agnes Blannbekin, filia cuiusdam rustici. Et morabatur Wiennae et erat de confessione Minoris cujusdam sancti fratris."
[11] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 235, pg. 482. The scribe Ermenrich's unusual format "1318, minus three years," rather than the simpler "1315," perhaps indicates that he wrote (or copied) the text in 1318. See Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 6.
[12] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, ch. 39, pg. 122.

woman lived her life additionally marks her as a beguine. Throughout the *vita*, we see Agnes visiting a variety of churches. Occasional scenes depict her interactions within the city of Vienna itself.

It seems that Agnes's choice of an uncloistered beguine lifestyle was quite unusual for 13th-century Vienna. Dinzelbacher points out that there is mention of only one other Viennese beguine, from 1314, the year before Agnes's death. He also notes that an unstructured community of religious women was established in Vienna only in 1302.[13] The *vita* notes once that there were other beguines in Vienna, but Agnes seems to have had no interaction with them.[14] There were, however, several communities of cloistered women in Vienna during Agnes's lifetime. According to Stoklaska, the first structured convent for women in Vienna, St. Niklas, was established in 1200. By the time of Agnes's death in 1315, there were six convents in Vienna: St. Niklas, St. M. Magdalena (estab. 1230), Himmelpforte (estab. 1230), St. Jakob (estab. 1236?), St. Laurenz (estab. 1301/02), and St. Klara (estab. 1303/04).[15] Of these, St. Niklas was affiliated with the Cistercians, and St. M. Magdalena initially had Cistercian elements before becoming affiliated with the Augustinians in 1232. St. Laurenz was a Dominican cloister, and St. Klara was established as a branch of the Poor Clares, part of the Franciscan order.[16]

Importantly, however, Agnes was not associated with any of these communities. Ch. 39 of the *vita* states that "when she was eleven years old, she was inflamed with great devotion for the body of the Lord [the Eucharist]," which she thought tasted sweeter than anything else on

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[13] Peter Dinzelbacher, "Die Wiener Minoriten im ausgehenden 13. Jahrhundert nach dem Urteil der zeitgenössischen Begine Agnes Blannbekin," in *Bettelorden und Stadt. Bettelorden und städtisches Leben im Mittelalter und in der Neuzeit*, ed. Dieter Berg (Werl: Dietrich Cölde Verlag, 1992), 183.
[14] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 41, pg. 126. The *vita* simply states here that during a Mass, "there were few people present except some devout beguines" because it was a market day: "Et cum esset dies fori, pauci homines aderant praeter devotas beguinas."
[15] Stoklaska, "Weibliche Religiosität," 168-177.
[16] Stoklaska, "Weibliche Religiosität," 168-176. Stoklaska does not provide institutional affiliations for Himmelpforte or St. Jakob.

earth.[17] From this, Stoklaska speculates that Agnes wanted to join a convent, but did not have the money to do so.[18] Again, however, the *vita* itself is unclear. Additionally, as Gábor Klaniczay has pointed out, religious women being inflamed with desire for the Eucharist at a young age was a common late medieval trope and thus does not seem a useful guide for Agnes's desire to join or not join a convent.[19]

The term used in the text to describe Agnes's father's profession is also unclear. At the end of the *vita*, Agnes's confessor-biographer writes that she was the "daughter of a certain farmer" [filia cuiusdam rustici].[20] From this, her father's means are uncertain; we know nothing of his wealth. Agnes does seem to have been fairly well educated.[21] She did not know how to write, but she could read. She also seems to have thought intensely about deep theological works, such as Bernard of Clairvaux's commentary on the Song of Songs.[22] Regarding one of her visions of the Trinity, her confessor-biographer comments that "she told me some things about

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[17] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 39, pg. 122. See Piero Camporesi, "The Consecrated Host: A Wondrous Excess," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part 1*, ed. Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 221-223, for additional examples of medieval people who thought the Eucharist tasted like honey. Bynum, *Holy Feast*, *passim*, provides further examples.

[18] Stoklaska, "Weibliche Religiosität," 166. Jo Ann McNamara, "The Need to Give: Suffering and Female Sanctity in the Middle Ages," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 199-221, provides an overview of the high cost of entering a medieval convent. Herwig Ebner, "Die soziale Stellung der Frau im spätmittelalterlichen Österreich," in *Frau und spätmittelalterlicher Alltag. Internationaler Kongress Krems an der Donau, 2. bis. 5. Oktober 1984* (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1986), 524, notes that convents in late medieval Austria were primarily for noble women.

[19] Gábor Klaniczay, "Legends as Life Strategies for Aspirant Saints in the Later Middle Ages," *Journal of Folklore Research* 26.2 (1989): 151-171. See also Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 4, for the standard patterns that Agnes's *vita* follows. Peter Dinzelbacher, "Die 'Vita et Revelationes' der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin im Rahmen der Viten- und Offenbarungsliteratur ihrer Zeit," in *Frauenmystik im Mittelalter*, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher and Dieter R. Bauer (Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag, 1985), 158, also contains a brief discussion of tropes in Agnes's *vita.* For the topic of women and the Eucharist, see also Bynum, *Holy Feast* and, less usefully, Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

[20] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannebekin,* ch. 235, pg. 482.

[21] Ebner, "Die soziale Stellung," 547-548, briefly discusses the education of women in late medieval Austria, noting that we know little about women's education outside of the nobility.

[22] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 118, pg. 262. It is important to note here that the confessor-biographer is reading Bernard's text *to* Agnes. We do not know whether he read it aloud in Latin or German.

this [vision] that I was not able to grasp intellectually."[23] We do not know how Agnes learned what she did, but her confessor-biographer makes clear that for a woman of her time, she had an unusual education.[24]

Agnes's general finances are similarly mysterious. Presumably, she lived alone; certainly, she did not enjoy any of the mutual support found in one of the group-based court beguinages that existed in the Low Countries.[25] Additionally, the vita never shows Agnes actually working.[26] She instead spent her time praying, taking the Eucharist at multiple churches, and receiving extended visions from Jesus. Two financial possibilities present themselves: (1) Agnes had enough income from her family to support herself; or (2) she received sufficient support from the Viennese community to sustain herself. Certainly, someone who fasted except on Sundays and did so to a level that she "was tortured by such hunger that she often cried most bitterly when alone" would not require much income maintenance.[27] Importantly, we never see Agnes begging in this *vita* of a Franciscan-affiliated woman.

Based on the paucity of source material about Agnes and the contradictions contained therein, I do not believe that we can know for certain whether Agnes planned to be a beguine or instead sought a cloistered environment and chose the beguine lifestyle as a second-best alternative. In contrast to Stoklaska, I would argue that the former is actually more likely. Certainly, the *vita* in no way indicates that Agnes regretted an uncloistered life. Instead, it shows

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[23] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 137, pg. 306: "De qua mihi aliqua narrabat, quae intellectu capere non potui."
[24] Stoklaska, "Weibliche Religiosität," 166, uses the phrase "nicht alltägliches Wissen" to describe Agnes's education.
[25] Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).
[26] Dinzelbacher, "Die Wiener Minoriten," 183.
[27] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 39, pg. 122: "Sicque vim naturae faciendo, tanta cruciabatur fame, ut frequenter seorsum amarissime fleret."

her moving freely about the city and engaging with its churches and, occasionally, its citizenry.[28] She attended as many masses as possible, apparently all over the city, and seemed to know their schedule.[29] She kissed altars in multiple churches and seems to have known clergy located throughout Vienna.[30] In terms of the laity, Ch. 44, for example, finds Agnes bowing uncontrollably toward the basement of a merchant's house whenever she passes it. Local people, identified as "devout, attentive persons who accompanied her," initially laughed at her, but eventually a group of priests discovered that a "witch [malefica]" living there had hidden a piece of consecrated bread in a wine vessel."[31] The witch confessed and disappeared, after which "the people who had previously laughed praised the Lord in admiration."[32] This passage indicates that Agnes was well-known to the Viennese populace, perhaps as a holy woman, and did not maintain the lifestyle of an uncloistered recluse frustrated by her inadmissibility to a convent. The very fact that people laughed at Agnes's repeated bowing indicates that they knew who she was; they recognized that it was the same woman bowing, day after day, in front of the merchant's window.

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[28] See Wiethaus's interpretive essay at the end of her translation of Agnes's *vita*: Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 163-176, in which she terms Agnes's mobile mysticism "street mysticism," in contrast with the courtly mysticism practiced by the beguines Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch, and Marguerite of Porete.

[29] Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin,* 5. The mention of the priest who was saying Mass later than usual in Ch. 38 of the *vita* provides further evidence that Agnes knew when Masses in Vienna were normally said. See Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 38, pg. 120.

[30] Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 5.

[31] Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 44, pg. 41. For the Latin, see Peter Dinzelbacher and Renate Vogeler, *Leben und Offenbarungen der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin* (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1994), ch. 44, pg. 132-134: "Nam cum hoc bene perfecisset, venerunt sacerdotes de parochial cum vexillis et cum processione cleri et populi, et corpus domini, quod ibi quaedam malefica in vase vini absconderat propter lucrum suum, cum reverentiia, hymnis et caticis asportaverunt." There is little indication here of what a "witch" might be or do other than the fact that she nefariously possesses a piece of consecrated bread. This thirteenth-century woman, however, would seem to be committing a straightforward crime against the Eucharist rather than serving as an early example of the elaborated theory of witchcraft, which developed later. For discussions of people, especially either women or male Jews, maliciously mishandling the Eucharist, see Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

[32] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 44, pg. 134.

As Stoklaska does point out, Agnes's confessor-biographer's use of the term "beguine" indicates that he assumed people would know what he meant, even though the beguine lifestyle was not common in Vienna.[33] Although the *vita* did not receive wide circulation and survives in only two manuscripts, it was clearly written to document the life of this holy woman.[34] Thus, a term that was wholly unknown would have been of little utility. The author's (or scribe's) periodic insertion of German words immediately following their Latin equivalent provides further evidence that the *vita* was written not only to tell, but also to spread Agnes's story, regardless of how unsuccessful that dissemination ultimately was.[35] Beguines might have been rare in Vienna, but people knew what they were, and they recognized this 13th-century woman, who died in 1315, as one.

The Beguines: An Overview

Agnes's choice to live as a beguine (whether determined by financial circumstances or not) may have been unusual in Vienna, but elsewhere in Europe, uncloistered religious women proliferated. Beguines first appeared in the Low Countries at the turn of the 12th century but eventually spread throughout much of western Europe; their numbers were particularly high in the Rhineland. Although some beguines such as Margaret of Ypres (1216-1237) and Lutgard of Aywières (1182-1246) did reside in convents at various points in their lives, most were religious women who lived largely independently of official Church control. As they did not constitute a unified order or have a defined Rule, there was great variety in their practices. Some beguines

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[33] Stoklaska, "Weibliche Religiosität," 184.
[34] Stoklaska, "Die Revelationes," 8. Three manuscripts are known to scholars, but one was destroyed in a fire in 1870. Dinzelbacher, "Die Wiener Minoriten," 183, attributes Agnes's obscurity to her encounter with the Holy Foreskin.
[35] Stoklaska, "Die Revelationes," 9, argues that we cannot actually tell if the text was originally composed in Latin or German because of the German words that are interpolated throughout the text and because of the low quality of the Latin that dominates the *vita*. While interesting, I have not encountered this stance among other scholars, who all seem to agree that the text was composed in (rather poor) Latin. See also Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 7.

lived alone or with a few other women while others, especially in the highly urbanized Low Countries, dwelt in large groups, referred to as court beguinages.[36] Occasionally, we find beguines, such as Agnes, who do not seem to have worked and whose source of income is unclear. More frequently, however, beguines variously tended the sick or worked with textiles to earn money; a few seem to have been beggars, to the chagrin of the institutional Church.[37]

Within these communities, whether large or small, beguines had greater access to the mass than did the ordinary laywoman, which may have made the beguine lifestyle more attractive. In Douai and Lille, for example, there seems to have been a constant of three masses per week specifically for the beguinages in each city.[38] Penny Galloway points out, however, that the more ready availability of the mass did not guarantee greater access to the Eucharist.[39] Indeed, medieval lay people experienced heavily restricted access to the Eucharist, and as devout as beguines were, they had not taken vows and were still technically members of the laity. We find this situation reflected in Agnes's *vita*, despite its claim, which we have already seen, that she became a beguine specifically so that she could communicate more frequently. The *vita* does include many encounters that Agnes had with the Eucharist, but she is more often shown simply attending mass.[40]

Laurie Finke has used Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of the "classical body" and the "grotesque body" to make sense of the variety in practice among beguines. She argues that

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[36] Simons, *Cities of Ladies*; Walter Simons, "The Beguine Movement in the Southern Low Countries: A Reassessment," *Bulletin de l'Institut historique belge de Rome* 59 (1989): 84-85 points out that historiography has tended to view the large court beguinages as the fully-developed form of the beguine lifestyle. Simons is careful to note that small communities and even individual beguines living alone also practiced fully developed lifestyles.
[37] Simons, *Cities of Ladies*.
[38] Galloway, "Neither Miraculous nor Astonishing," 110-111.
[39] Galloway, "Neither Miraculous nor Astonishing," 115-116.
[40] See, for example, Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 61, pp. 156-160; and ch. 178, pg. 368-370. Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin,* 119, note 86, points out that "much of women's paranormal experiences of the Eucharist can be interpreted as compensations for lack of access."

during the Middle Ages, the "classical body" represented "high" (male) culture that was Latinate and homogenous. Spiritual, rather than physical, experiences were emphasized. The "grotesque body," on the other hand, represented "low" (female) culture that was often illiterate and heterogeneous. According to Finke, because beguines were necessarily women[41] and were often poor or illiterate, their cultural practices were naturally varied. This variation was tolerated by the "high" male clerical elites and yet also derided by them.[42]

I find Finke's mapping of "classical/grotestque" bodies onto "high/low" culture to be useful, but the antagonism that she sets up between spiritual and physical mystical experiences is too forceful. Certainly, the heterogeneity of beguine practices combined with the fact that beguines existed largely outside of ecclesiastical control contributed to the disbanding of courtly beguinages at the Council of Vienne in 1311.[43] Many male ecclesiastics, however, valued the strongly physical encounters that spiritual women had with Christianity because it was believed that men were closed off from that type of physicality. If a religious man wanted to experience the somatic side of Christianity, he could do so through the mediation of a woman.[44]

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[41] There was a male equivalent of the beguines, known as the beghards, but they existed in much smaller numbers.
[42] Laurie A. Finke, "Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision," in *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 28-44.
[43] Simons, "The Beguine Movement in the Southern Low Countries," 86-97, actually roots the development of the large court beguinages in secular attempts to control these otherwise ungoverned women, perhaps spurred by the growing Dominican influence in the Low Countries and their willingness to provide some supervision over the beguines. He notes that beguine groups in the Rhineland were more affected by the 1311 Vienne decree because they were smaller than their counterparts in the Low Countries; the Rhineland was less urbanized, and Dominicans were not as widespread there.
[44] Helpful studies here include J. Giles Milhaven, "A Medieval Lesson on Bodily Knowing: Women's Experience and Men's Thought," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57.2 (1989): 341-372; Brian Patrick McGuire, "Holy Women and Monks in the Thirteenth Century: Friendship or Exploitation?" *Vox Benedictina* 6.4 (1989): 343-356; and John Coakley, "Friars as Confidants of Holy Women in Medieval Dominican Hagiography," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 222-246. Galloway, "Neither Miraculous Nor Astonishing," 167-170, also points out that some women also criticized beguines because of their unstructured lifestyles. Birgitta of Sweden, for example, did not approve of beguine remnants that existed after the Council of Vienne.

Indeed, despite working outside of ecclesiastical control and having often physical encounters with Christianity, some beguines formed especially close relationships with men who held official institutional positions. Mary of Oignies (d. 1213), for example, greatly inspired the later cardinal James of Vitry (c. 1160/70-1240), and the Dominican friar and theologian Thomas of Cantimpré (1201-1272) wrote biographies of holy, uncloistered women including a supplement to James of Vitry's *vita* of Mary, the *vita* of Christina the Astonishing (c.1150-1224), and the *vita* of Margaret of Ypres (1216-1237). The Dominican Swedish monk Peter of Dacia (1235-1289) formed an unusually close friendship with Christina of Stommeln (1242-1312), exchanging letters with her and visiting her at least 15 times.[45]

Agnes and her confessor-biographer had a similarly close relationship. Wiethaus points out that it appears as though "much of the [*vita*] was written during or immediately after a meeting" between Agnes and her confessor. Because the text is generally organized by the liturgical year, she concludes that it is a type of diary that shows "the random patterns of town scandals, unrest caused by military conflicts, times of illness and death, emotional ups and downs, and so on."[46] In other words, the *vita* would have been composed over the course of many meetings, during which Agnes told her confessor about her visions. The inclusion of so many precise liturgical dates (although, as noted above, usually not exact years) lends credence to the diary theory; Agnes's visions seem to have been recorded immediately, or at least shortly after, they occurred.

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[45] John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). For an additional analysis of Peter of Dacia and Christina of Stommeln, see Aviad M. Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 71-98.

[46] Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 7.

It is important to emphasize that the *vita* is organized as only a *type* of diary: it pays little attention to the chronological passing of years. Agnes's interaction with the Holy Foreskin, for example, is located immediately before we are told that she became a beguine in order to communicate more frequently. We do not know exactly when Agnes had her ecstatic experience with Jesus's foreskin, but it clearly took place after she became a beguine and had begun to develop a relationship with her confessor: a key component of the vision is her reluctance to tell her confessor about it. I will examine the exact placement of these two sections of the *vita* more fully in Ch. 6; the important point here is the *vita* is structured according to the passage of *the* year, not *multiple* years.

Similarly, we cannot know exactly how frequently Agnes spoke with her confessor, but the aftermath of her encounter with the Holy Foreskin does give us a clue:

> And because it is good to hide the sacrament of God, this person was afraid to reveal to me, her confessor—albeit unworthy, the revelations given to her by the Lord and often resolved in her mind to say nothing further to me. And as often as she firmly resolved this, she began to get sick, such that she was not able to be silent, because the Lord wanted it [sharing the secret]. Indeed, I was excessively [nimium] consoled about this, that the Lord had deigned to show himself in this way to a human, and I desired greatly [to hear about it.] And she herself reported to me that, wanting to receive communion on a certain day when the time [to do so] had already passed and she did not hope to be able to receive communion anywhere, she herself asked the Lord in her heart, saying "Lord, if it is your will that I should communicate to the friar, my confessor, that which you considered worthy to reveal to me, then provide me today with the communion of your holy body, and this shall be as a sign to me." And then she went to a certain monastery, and after the public mass, the chaplain of that community came, who for some reason had neglected to say mass and celebrated it much later than usual, and he gave her communion of the body of the Lord. And there the hand of the Lord soon came upon her, and among other things that she had [habuit] in the revelation, the Lord promised three things to me, [the one] who writes what I have learned from her: first, that no temptation of any kind would prevail over me; second, that the Lord wished to give me an increase of his grace; third, that the Lord wished to give himself to me as a gift. Likewise on the fourth day before the epiphany of the Lord, when she was still afraid to reveal to me the visitations of the Lord, she asked the Lord during mass, saying: "O Lord, if it pleases you that I should reveal to my confessor that which you deigned to show me, then give me as a sign and

> proof that I will feel the consolation that I felt from the skin of your foreskin on the day of the circumcision. Should you not give to me that which you gave then, it will be a sign that this would not please you; and I would rather leave the town than that I should say anything more to him.[47]

Immediately after making this request, Agnes again felt Jesus's foreskin on her tongue.

In this passage, we see Agnes questioning whether to tell her confessor about the revelation three times: immediately after her initial encounter with the Foreskin; before receiving communion in a sort of "deal" with God; and before a second encounter with the Holy Foreskin, again in a bargain with God. The anonymous confessor tells us that this second encounter occurred four days before Epiphany, placing it on either the second or third of January—that is, within one or two days of when Jesus's foreskin first appeared in Agnes's mouth. This passage would thus seem to indicate that Agnes had ready access to her confessor. The practice of hesitating and receiving confirmation from God three times within a period of 24-48 hours indicates that Agnes would have had the opportunity to speak to her confessor multiple (at least three) times within that same period.

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[47] Dinzelbach and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 37-38, pg. 118-120: "Et quoniam sacramentum dei abscondere bonum est, ista persona revelations sibi a domino factas mihi, qui eram suus confessor, licet indignus, timuit revelare et saepe proposuit in animo nihil mihi amplius dicere. Et quotiens hoc firmiter proponeret, tunc incepit infirmary, it aquod non potuit tacere, domino hoc volente. Ego quidem nimium consolabar super eo, quod dominus dignatus est sic se homini manifestare, et multum ardebam audire. Et ipsa retuilit mihi, quod quadam die volens communicare, et jam tempus praeterisset, quod non sperabat alicubi communionem se posse habere, ipsa rogabat dominum in corde suo dicens 'Domine, si est tuae voluntatis, quod ea, quae tu mihi dignaris revelare, ego communicem fratri confessor meo, provideas mihi hodie de corporis tui sacra communion, et hoc sit mihi pro signo.' Et sic venit ad quoddam monasterium, et post publicam missam venit Capellanus illius coenobii, qui ob aliquam causam neglexerat dicere missam et valde tarde praeter solitum celebravit, et dedit ei communionem dominci corporis. Et ibi mox facta est super eam manus domini, et inter cetera habuit in revelation, quod dominus mihi scribenti ea, quae ab ipsa habui, repromisit tria: Primum, quod nunquam tentation aliqua mihi praevaleret, secundum, quod dominus vellet mihi augmentum suae gratiae dare, tertium, quod dominus vellet se ipsum mihi dare in praemium. Item quarta die ante epiphaniam domini, cum adhub timeret mihi revelare vistationes domini, sub missa rogavit dominum dicens: 'Domine, si tibi placet, ut revelem confessori meo ea, quae mihi ostendere dignaris, dunc da mihi hoc pro signo et testimonio, sciliet ut sentiam illam sonsolationem, quam in die circumcisionis de pellicular tui praeputii sensi. Si non dederis mihi hoc, quod tunc dedisti, hoc erit signum, quid tibi non placeat; et ego volo potius recedere de civitate, qua mut aliquid sibi amplius communicem.'"

Later in the *vita*, Agnes has a vision of a nude Christ during mass on the Thursday after the first Sunday following Easter. While Agnes was focusing on Jesus's side wound, in which "fresh blood boiled like a seething pot as it bubbles by the fire, but nevertheless not flowing over," "a certain devout person" nudged her so that she could witness the Elevation of the consecrated bread, and Agnes lost the vision. During another mass the next day, however, the vision returned.[48] The vision, interrupted and carried out over two days, raises the possibility that Agnes spoke with her confessor twice on those consecutive days.

We can thus see that Agnes enjoyed components that we can broadly ascribe to the heterogeneous beguine lifestyle: great religious devotion, the ability to move

[48] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 140, pg. 310: "… in quo sanguis recents bulliebat, quemadmodum olla fervens, cum ad ignem bullit nec tamen superebullit. Visio autem hujus plagae et cruoris non ei praestabat pavorem nec horrem, ut fieri solet ad aspectum hominum mortalium cruentatorum, sed magis aspectus hujus vulneris ei Gaudium spiritus ingerebat.". Nudity has an ambiguous meaning in Agnes's *vita*. Here, Christ is nude and has "desirable" looks, but the emphasis is on the bubbling blood in his side wound. Shortly before this vision, she has one about naked monks, but there is an element of censure here because Agnes is "given to understand" that the monks have loose manners and do not actually edify their postulants. See Dinzelbacher and Voegeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 132, pg. 298. Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin,* 96, n69, notes that "in Blannbekin's spiritual world, nudity can have both negative and positive connotations, depending on the context. This vision [that of the naked monks] must have been somewhat risqué, since the scribe emphasizes in the following chapter that it did *not* take place in church, but at home." We see a further example of a positive connotation later in the *vita* when Agnes has a vision of various unnamed religious figures and Jesus suddenly appears "most beautiful and lovely to behold and entirely naked." Again, however, the emphasis is on "the open and uncovered scars of his wounds" rather than on his nudity. See Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 214-215, pg. 442: "In medio autem hujus turbae apparuit salvator noster Jesus Christus pulcherrimus et amoenissimus aspect et omnino nudus, minibus mediocriter elevatis et palmis extensis in similitudinem sacerdotis stantis in altari. Et cicatrices vulnerum patentes et apertae et lucidissimae maximam jucunditatem intuentibus ingerebant.". Finally, the *vita* relates the story of a friar Erlolf who had been particularly devoted to Agnes. After his death, Agnes has a vision in which he and a large group of virgins are holding hands while performing a ring dance. In the vision, Erlolf and the virgins all wear golden crowns, but are naked. The *vita* notes that their nudity was "not only not unchaste or held to be disgusting to the eyes of the onlookers, but filled the heart of the virgin herself [Agnes] with great happiness, propriety, and joy." See Dinzelbach and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 227-228, pp. 466-472; quote at 468: "Et post hanc virgines vidit innumeras cum dicto fratre Erlolfo, quae errant omnes cornis aureis coronatae, sed nudae, et ipse una cum illis etiam nudus et coronatus apparuit. Illa quoque nuditas non solum non erat indecens vel fastidium intulit oculis in tuentis, sed magnam placentiam, decentiam et laetitiam cordi ipsuis virginis praebeuit.". It is noteworthy that the confessor-biographer repeatedly denies that Agnes's visions involving nudity contain a sexual element, perhaps indicating that he was aware that people might interpret them this way. Importantly, he does not seem to have felt it necessary to mitigate any sexual readings of Agnes's encounter with the Holy Foreskin, implying that he did not anticipate any such reading of that experience.

independently throughout her city, and the opportunity to experience more masses (and, potentially, to communicate more frequently) than the average layperson. Regarding Agnes's close relationship with her confessor, however, we must remember that the beguines whose writings we have, such as Hadewijch and Beatrijs of Nazareth, and the women whose *vitae* we have, such as Mary of Oignies and Agnes, were probably not typical beguines. Galloway points out that there is "no evidence of ecstasy as a routine feature of religious life in the majority of beguines communities."[49] Thus, it would seem that Agnes's bond with her confessor, a male authority figure in the institutional Church who did not directly control her activities but instead acted as a type of sounding board for her visions and mystical experiences, was perhaps typical of select, extraordinary beguines, but was unusual for the majority of the women who chose this uncloistered lifestyle. Similarly, following Anke Passenier, it is important to note that not all women who are called beguines referred to themselves as such.[50] Women whom scholars have labelled beguines were also called a variety of other names during the Middle Ages: *mulieres sanctae* (holy women), *mulieres religiosae* (religious women), and *sorores pauperes* (poor sisters).

Affective Piety: The Devotion to a Human Christ

Agnes's approach to Christianity, and the entire beguine movement more generally, can be placed in the context of a late medieval development referred to as affective, or emotional, piety. The scholarship here is vast; I will concentrate on studies that relate directly to veneration of Jesus's body.

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[49] Galloway, "Neither Miraculous Nor Astonishing," 107.
[50] Anke Passenier, "'Women on the Loose': Stereotypes of Women in the Story of the Medieval Beguines," in *Female Stereotypes in Religious Tradition*, ed. Ria Kloppenberg and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 62.

Caroline Walker Bynum is the scholar most frequently associated with late medieval affective piety. Although her examination of medieval women and their relationship to food is perhaps her most famous study, she previously discussed the gendering of Christ as a nurturing and compassionate female mother by male theologians.[51] In the same vein is her extended response to Leo Steinberg's thesis that Renaissance artists consistently depicted Christ in such a way as to emphasize his masculinity, primarily by drawing repeated attention to his penis via the draping of cloth and gestures by both Jesus and other painted figures.[52] She has also emphasized the violent nature of late medieval piety and its focus on the bleeding wounds of Christ, noting in particular the medieval understanding of metonymy by which the part (e.g., Christ's side wound or his foreskin alone) could represent the whole (i.e., the entire body of Christ).[53]

Although not directly related to affective piety, a great deal of Bynum's scholarship has focused on the medieval concepts of fragmentation and decay, particularly as they relate to the body of Christ during his Resurrection, a question that we have seen was particularly important for theologians concerning the Holy Foreskin. In her study of the medieval concept of bodily resurrection, she argues that people throughout the Middle Ages—both clergy and laity—feared bodily decay and fragmentation and emphasized the divine re-assemblage of body parts following death.[54] By the time of her examination of the emphasis placed on Christ's blood in the Middle Ages, particularly the Holy Blood of Wilsnack, however, her work no longer highlights fragmentation, but continues to focus on decay, arguing that the bleeding hosts were

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[51] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 79-118.
[52] Bynum, "The Body of Christ;" Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*. Steinberg's response to Bynum can be found at 279, 284-285.
[53] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Violent Imagery in Late Medieval Piety," *GHI Bulletin* 30 (2002): 3-36.
[54] Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*.

miraculous precisely because they represented manifestations of Christ's incorruptible body.[55] Her most recent monograph, which concentrates on physical representations of Christian practice, seems to have completely abandoned her earlier viewpoint that medieval people feared fragmentation; indeed, she notes that the fragmented dispersal of saints' bodies only served to increase their intercessory effectiveness, a concept that we have also already seen when earlier examining theologians' views on the Holy Foreskin.[56]

Regarding the rise of affective piety, scholars have proposed varying explanations. In her examination of the feast of Corpus Christi, Miri Rubin sees the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 as eminently important for the development of lay piety. As we have already seen, in addition to mandating confession and communication, the Fourth Lateran Council also made official the doctrine of transubstantiation. Rubin argues that this initiated popular devotion to Christ's body. Simultaneously, emphasis on his humanity and suffering developed. Indeed, Rubin finds Christ's presence in the Eucharist to have been so important for the development of late medieval piety that a lay woman, Juliana of Cornillon, initiated the feast that provides the title of Rubin's study.[57] Rachel Fulton Brown also sees a profound shift in medieval devotion, but she places the change earlier than does Rubin, arguing that the apocalypticism that surged around the year 1000 led people to emphasize Christ's suffering during the Passion. Additionally, devotion to the Virgin Mary grew among both the laity and the clergy, as people began to see her as a compassionate—and also suffering—figure who could serve as a mediator between humanity

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[55] Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*.
[56] Bynum, *Christian Materiality*. Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "Death and the Human Body in the Later Middle Ages: The Legislation of Boniface VIII on the Division of the Corpse," *Viator* 12 (1981): 221-270, explores the topic of religious dismemberment from an institutional perspective.
[57] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*. Juliana is another example of the heterogeneous lives of beguines. Initially the prioress of a canonry, she was driven by political intrigue to seek refuge among various Cistercian monasteries and finally among the local beguines.

and her son.[58] In her first monograph, Dyan Elliott provides a third explanation for the rise of affective piety. Elliott roots the development in the eleventh-century Gregorian reforms, finding that the cult of the Virgin Mary was intimately linked to the reforms and the change in the status of priests' wives. As priests were forced to renounce their wives, they needed to find a safe place to which they could transfer their affections. In Elliott's interpretation, they found that safe location in the Virgin Mary to whom they could be affectionately—perhaps even amorously—devoted without harm. Elliott agrees with Rubin's analysis of the importance of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, as dictated by Lateran IV, but she also argues that the clarification of clerical purity undertaken by the council helped initiate popular devotion to Christ's body.[59]

Regardless of the origins of affective piety, Christ's sufferings during the Crucifixion were central to late medieval religious beliefs. Noting this, Esther Cohen analyzes the religious uses of pain during the late Middle Ages, arguing that martyrs, who had previously been seen as impassible, came to be understood as having endured much suffering; it was only criminals and witches who remained impervious to pain during torture. Cohen draws on Fulton's arguments to explore the empathetic way in which late medieval Christians responded to Jesus's pain.[60] Notably, as we will see later, when medieval theologians discussed Christ's circumcision, they emphasized the pain that he voluntarily endured as a foretaste of the Crucifixion.

Agnes Blannbekin and Franciscan Mysticism: An Imperfect Fit

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[58] Fulton Brown, *From Judgment to Passion*.
[59] Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). It is important to note that unlike Rubin and Fulton, Elliott does not see the developments she analyzes as positive (or at least neutral). She argues that the decline in the status of priests' wives, coupled with the rise of the Virgin Mary, helped to demonize the priests' wives, ultimately leading to the figure of the witch. In this, I think that Elliott overinterprets her sources.
[60] Esther Cohen, *The Modulated Scream: Pain in Late Medieval Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Founded in 1209 by the future St. Francis of Assisi, the Franciscan Order during Agnes's lifetime was well-established in Italy, with formal orders for both men and women (the Poor Clares). It had also clearly spread elsewhere in Europe: we have already seen, for example, that Agnes's *vita* ends by stating that she was "under the confession of a certain holy friar of the Franciscan order," indicating that the Order existed in Vienna, at least by the time of Agnes's death in 1315.[61] This information actually bookends the *vita*; it begins with a preface in the form of a prayer that identifies the text's author as "a poor and unworthy Brother of the Franciscan Order."[62] Recall also that the Viennese convent of St. Klara, established in 1303/4, was a branch of the Poor Clares.[63]

As noted above, exact years are rare in Agnes's *vita*, and we do not know whether she became affiliated with the Franciscans as soon as she took up a beguine lifestyle or if that was a later decision. We can say, however, that Agnes's visions do not fit perfectly into the mystical foci of the Franciscan Order. Some of her visions fit broadly into Franciscan ideas while others seem to contradict basic Franciscan approaches. For the remainder of this chapter, I wish to contextualize Agnes's mysticism.

McGinn writes that Franciscan mysticism contains an "emphasis on the importance of Francis, the centrality of poverty, and the role of the Passion as the mystery that gives us access to God."[64] Franciscan mystics and, as we have seen, women more generally in the affective piety

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[61] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 235, pg. 482.
[62] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, preface, pg. 66: "Igitur venerandae, adorandae et amandae majestati, veritati et bonitati tuae gratias referens, o beata trinitas, ad laudem tuam, gloriam et honorem et ad aedificationem fidei et ad nutrimenum devotionis et ad divini amoris incitamentum, ego pauperculus et indignus frater ordinis fratrum minorum ea, quae a sanctis et fide dignis personis, te, domine, eis revelante, didici vel didicero, conscribere cupio, te patrem luminum invocans, a quo omne datum optimum, et omne donum perfectum est, ut mihi dare velis sedium tuarum assistricem sapitentiam, ut mecum sit, mecum laboret, mecum scribat, ut scribam, quod acceptum sit coram te, et Veritatis limites non excedam.". It is unclear whether the preface was written by the *vita*'s anonymous author or by the scribe Ermenrich.
[63] Stoklaska, "Weibliche Religiosität," 176.
[64] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 112.

movement also highlight the importance of the Eucharist.[65] Agnes's mysticism certainly adheres to the latter two characteristics, particularly the Eucharist.

Focusing first on the Passion, the clearest indication of its importance to Agnes and of the potential influence of her confessor-biographer comes approximately one-third of the way through the *vita* in a series of chapters outlining the benefits humans can receive by contemplating it. The voice of God tells Agnes that the Eucharist exists because of the Passion and proceeds to delineate the advantages of communicating.[66] These include wisdom, a love for heaven, and resistance to future sinning. The section ends with God telling Agnes that by "contemplating the Passion of Christ," a soul can "receive a greater conflagration of love. And she put forth the example of Blessed Francis," implying that Francis of Assisi had achieved such a conflagration of love.[67]

The chapters discussed above may be the clearest explanation of the Passion's importance, but they are not the first time that it appears in the *vita.* Indeed, at its beginning, Agnes takes an extended trip to heaven, where she receives many divine revelations. Among them is a revelation concerning the meaning of each of the five wounds that Jesus received during the Crucifixion: the wound in his right hand represents the gifts that Jesus gives to his followers while the wound in his left hand "holds the saints. Spiritual refreshment flows from the wound at His side," from which Christians drink. The wound in his right foot represents "levity," and the wound in the left foot signifies joy.[68] We see, thus, a very early focus on the wounds

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[65] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 145.
[66] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 110, pg. 250.
[67] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 112, pg. 252: "Dixit quoque vox, quod anima contemplando coelestia et divina majorem potest percipere dulcedinem, sed contemplando passionem Christi majorem inflammationem amoris. Et posuit exemplum de beato Francisco." Throughout the *vita*, the author refers to named saints as "Blessed." Francis of Assisi was canonized in 1228, less than two years after his death and certainly before Agnes would have relayed her visions to her confessor-biographer.
[68] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 6, pg. 72: "Dixit, quod vulnus manus dexterae significant munera, quae largitur Christus sanctis hic et in patria; nulnus sinitris manus tenet sanctos. De vulnere laterali manat

suffered during the Passion: the only preceding chapters in the *vita* address the concept of a human Christ (necessary, of course, in order to suffer pain), the idea that humans can attain grace, and a brief overview of the glory of people in heaven.

Importantly, although the wounds of Christ appear several times in Agnes's visions, they rarely retain the same symbolic meaning. Approximately two-thirds of the way through the *vita*, for example, Agnes has a vision of a wounded right hand, which she interprets as belonging to Jesus. The voice of Christ then tells her that she should learn patience in adversity by focusing on how long he hung from the Cross, wounding his hands.[69] Shortly afterward, Agnes goes to a different church where the vision continues. This time, Jesus reminds her that the wound in the right hand represents patience. From the wound in the left hand, Agnes can learn humility based on how humbly Jesus suffered. The right foot provides compassion while the left foot can teach willing suffering. Agnes can learn love from the side wound: Jesus's bride, the Church, drinks his blood from there.[70]

These wavering meanings attached to Christ's wounds highlight the multivalent nature of symbols in late medieval mysticism: a wound in a left foot can represent both joy and willing suffering. Notably, these meanings can shift even among one person's visions, as Agnes demonstrates.[71] Their signification tends to cluster around core late medieval Christian values of

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refection spiritualis, desideratissima et dulcissima omnibus sanctis in patria et adhuc existentibus in via. Et quidam valde de prope, ore etiam usque ad latus posito, bibunt de dorrente illo voluptatis. Dixit, quod aliqui viatores, adhuc viciniores lateri Christi aliquibus in patria, nectar illud salutare bibunt. Vulnere pedis dextri significator levitas, non ponderositas, sive agilitas. Vulnere pedis sinitrsi significator haberi Gaudium et laetitiam, quod nos vocamus tripudium—non quod ibi sit tripudium vel chorea, sicut importat hoc nomen apud nos convivia—sed aliam similituinem dare non poterat." Wiethaus, 19, note 3, points out that this type of classification system indicates that the confessor-scribe had solid scholastic training and that Agnes also possessed a firm knowledge of scripture and theology. As Wiethaus notes, however, it is impossible to determine the ratio of Agnes and her confessor-scribe's contributions.

[69] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 167, pp. 348-350.

[70] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 168, pp. 350-352.

[71] For a discussion of the multivocality of symbols in late medieval religion, see Caroline Walker Bynum, "Introduction: The Complexity of Symbols," in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 1-20.

charity, love, and suffering like Christ, but the meanings are not identical. The same holds true of Agnes's mysticism surrounding the Eucharist, which figures more prominently for her than does the Crucifixion.

We have already seen that Agnes became a beguine in order to receive the Eucharist more frequently; she also often went to a special, though unspecified, place in the church where she could look at the consecrated bread after the Elevation (implying that she did not communicate at every Mass she attended).[72] As discussed above, when she did receive the Eucharist, she found its taste sweeter than anything else on earth. In addition to its honey-like sweetness, Agnes also emphasizes the wheaten accidents of the Eucharist, claiming to smell a "fragrant scent, similar to a warm, sweetly smelling roll" whenever she is near an altar; the smell is strongest whenever Mass has just been celebrated.[73] We have here a blending of the literal and the figurative: the body-of-Christ-as-bread smells like the bread that it is, but it has a taste that goes beyond the earthly realm.

Notably, this sweet taste is not always present in the Eucharist for Agnes. Her confessor-scribe notes that God sometimes withholds the "sweetness of taste," along with its accompanying "miraculous spiritual sweetness in the soul."[74] The author insists that this happens rarely, but partway through the *vita*, he details an episode in which God withdraws this sensation, interpreted in the text as grace, for fourteen days. The explanation asserts that God does this periodically because it causes the devout to hunger for him even more, making his return even

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[72] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 72, pg. 176.
[73] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 40, pg. 126: "t tunc tantam sensit odoris fragrantiam, quasi ad modum similae calidae suaviter redolentis, sed incomparabiliter suavius. Et dixit, quod aliquando in sero iterum deosculata est altare, quarens refici illo suavissimo odore. Tunc adhuc sensit, sed non tantum sicut in mane, quando missa recenter fuit ibi dicta."
[74] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 39, pg. 124: "Et si contingeret aliqua die, quod dominus ei illam consolationem subtraheret—quod raro, tamen interdum, accidit—tunc nimium desolatur."

sweeter.[75] The more general explanation, rather than one specific to Agnes's situation, implies that this happens to every devout Christian, thus removing the idea that Agnes was somehow at fault. Importantly, we can infer from this episode that Agnes consumed the Eucharist at least three times during this two-week period: once at the beginning, when the sweet taste was first missing; again at some point in the two-week period, when the taste was absent for the last time; and a final third time, when the taste returned.

The Eucharist, for Agnes, could also take on a variety of forms. In addition to the relatively common event of a religious woman receiving the Eucharist miraculously,[76] Agnes also had visions in which the consecrated bread was accompanied by (symbols of) Christ. Probably the most famous medieval miracle related to the Eucharist occurred during a Mass given by Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), when a woman's doubts about the validity of the Eucharist were removed when a bloody finger appeared in the host.[77] Agnes, however, was not quite as literal (or as bloody). For example, just before the Elevation at one Mass, she had a vision of a lamb "clothed in human flesh, naked, with a human face… and a diadem around its head." The lamb kissed the chasubles of the priests before walking over to Agnes and kissing her on the cheeks, causing her to be filled with "sweet fire."[78] Although the text is not explicit, the

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[75] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 104, pg. 240.

[76] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin,* ch. 41, pg. 128. In Agnes's case, when a priest who had taken a woman's virginity was celebrating Mass, Agnes prayed that the priest would only be able to consume the Eucharist if he had a salvageable soul. The priest could not find his piece of the consecrated bread, but Agnes suddenly "felt and truly had the host in her mouth and swallowed it with such sweetness as she was used to while taking communion." Dinzelbacher and Vogeler provide the Latin: Et rogavit dominum dicens: "Domine, rogo te, ut, si esite est de numero salvandorum, non permittas eum tuum sacratissimum corpus sumere!' Et ecce, post pater noster in missa ipsa sensit et habuit hostiam veraciter in ore et deglutivit cum tanta dulcedine, quanta consuevit communicare. Sacerdos vero, quando debuit sumere corpus, respexit hinc inde in altari, sicut quasi aliquid amisisset." See Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 117-142 passim, for additional examples of late medieval women receiving the Eucharist miraculously.

[77] Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 116.

[78] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 154, pp. 330-332: "Et ecce, apparuit ei agnus magnus ad modum vituli anni unius carne hmana vestitus, nudus, habens faciem humanam, et indecens quatuor pedibus, ut agnus facie versa ad terram, et diadema circa caput ejus…Fuit autem agnus mediocriter magnus, qui circuibat omnia altaria, ubi missae legebantur, et ore suo casulaes omnium sacerdoum deosculabatur indecens jocundus. Ipsa autem

idea of Jesus as the "lamb of God" seems to be its clear meaning. In another Eucharistic vision, on All Saints' Day in 1291, a human face, identified specifically as Christ, appears to her when the priest performs the Elevation. This vision is one of the few times that Agnes is frankly admonished by Jesus: his expression contains "a certain resentment." The voice of God tells her that she has become excessively impatient.[79]

Turning now toward areas of Agnes's mysticism that do not fit into Franciscan themes, the theme of poverty can be easily dismissed. As discussed above, we know nothing of Agnes's finances, and the idea of begging or doing without (except voluntarily in the trope of her fasting) is wholly absent from her *vita.* Instead, the most obvious exception to Franciscan mysticism is Agnes's lack of emphasis on Francis of Assisi himself. Franciscan friars appear periodically throughout the *vita*, as would be expected from a woman who was affiliated with the Order and whose confessor was a member of it, but St. Francis himself is addressed only four times. In its simplest occurrence, Francis's name appears as a straightforward marker of time: "after the Octave of Blessed Francis", Agnes has a vision of God telling her about the thrones that the rich and the poor on earth will have in heaven.[80] As we have already seen, the *vita* is organized not by the passage of time through multiple years, but instead roughly by the course of a liturgical year. Thus, Francis appears here as a straightforward dating mechanism, similar to those used

admiration magna est perfuse. Et ecce, subito reperit agnum juxta se stantem, qui genas ejus ore suo deosculabtur, ex cujus contact ipsa fuit suaviter infammata etiam corporaliter."

[79] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 189, pg. 394-396: "Quod vero modicum respexit et mox avertit ab ea faciem, significant, quod justos faciliter tenet apud se et trahit. Quod autem cum indignatione aliqua visus est faciem avertisse, significant, quod deus eidem virgini et fratri suorum secretorum conscio aliqualiter fuit indignatus, pro eo quid uterque in gratia visitationis sibi facta negligenter se haberet, et a desiderio divino tepuissent per incuriam; et propter hoc uterque judicio dei in aliam culpam corruisset: Ipsa quidem in nimiam impatientiam lapsa est, ille vero a gradu humilitatis aliqualiter descenderat et in occupationes superfluas seculars, ita ut interius consolationibus minus potiretur."

[80] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 225, pg. 462: "Post octavam beati Francisci audivit sermonem, et facta est ibi manus domini super eam in lumine magno, et vidit pauperes et divites intrare locum parartum convivio."

throughout the text. We have also already seen that Francis is praised as someone who has presumably received a greater understanding of God's love through his contemplation of the Passion.

Francis's remaining two occurrences in the text are more intriguing. In the first to be analyzed (although the second to appear in the *vita*), Francis himself is still absent; again, only his name is mentioned. In this instance, a friar "preached about Blessed Francis and commended him much too boastfully, preferring him to Blessed Peter and other apostles and saints, so that the audience was scandalized."[81] The exact makeup of the audience is unclear, but we do know that Agnes and other members of the Franciscan Order were present. It is noteworthy that excessive praise of Francis is understood to be a problem here. Certainly, preferring Francis to "Blessed Peter" (presumably St. Peter) and the apostles would have been problematic, but the ambiguous "and saints" raises questions. Because we do not know who those unnamed saints were, we cannot state whether it would have been more common to place Francis above them in a celestial hierarchy.[82] Importantly, however, Agnes does not extol Francis, which McGinn has identified as a general characteristic of Franciscan mysticism. The focus instead is on inappropriately placing Francis above not only Peter, but also other unnamed saints.

As the scene progresses, the custodian of the Order punishes the inappropriate friar, and God uses the event to remind Agnes of the importance of confessing sins in order to receive divine forgiveness.[83] The key message in this chapter, thus, as in so many of Agnes's visions that

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[81] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 92, pg. 214: "Quadam vice praedicavit quidam frater de beato Francisco et nimis jactanter eum commendavit, ipsum praeferento beato Petro et aliis apostolis et sanctis its, ut audientes scandalizarentur."

[82] Agnes and her confessor-biographer seem to have had no problem with divine hierarchies, for the *vita* is full of them. See, for example, Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 8-13, pp. 74-80, in which Agnes describes the hierarchy of various types of saints during her visionary trip to heaven, as well as the next section of the text, in which Agnes discusses a hierarchy of specific saints.

[83] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 92, pg. 214.

follow earthly events, is not the outcome of the events themselves, but rather Agnes's close relationship with God and the lessons that he gives her to impart to the people around her.[84] Francis remains almost an afterthought, merely the catalyst used to bring about the divine lesson. The name of any then-modern saint could have been substituted for St. Francis by the boastful friar, and the same effect could have been achieved. One wonders whether it was only the Franciscan context that led to the inclusion of Francis's name.

The only vision that directly involves Francis is part of Agnes's extended mystical journey to heaven that opens the *vita*. In the middle of describing a twelve-starred crown that the Virgin Mary wears in heaven, Agnes takes a short detour. She states that the eighth star represents the chastity of virgins and notes that "virgins are closest to God." Before continuing on with the meaning of the ninth star, Agnes adds that "other saints who founded and instituted new ways of holiness such as Blessed Benedict, Blessed Bernard, Blessed Francis, Blessed Augustine, and Blessed Dominic are in glory before other saints."[85] As Wiethaus points out, the inclusivity of this list is noteworthy, particularly given the tensions between Franciscans and Dominicans during Agnes's lifetime.[86]

After she enumerates the meaning behind the remaining stars in Mary's crown, Agnes develops a convoluted—and contradictory—hierarchy of saints. She begins by stating that the apostles are foremost among the saints, with the exceptions of Moses and John the Baptist. Paul

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[84] Thomas W. Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy: The Social Dynamics of Prophetic Activity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 45-, 70-71, provides an overview of the role of prophet as intermediary. For a specifically medieval context, see Nanda Hopenwasser, "The Human Burden of the Prophet: St. Birgitta's *Revelations* and *the Book of Margery Kempe*," *Medieval Perspectives* 8 (1993): 153-163.

[85] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 14, pg. 82: "Octava exprimebat castitatem virginum, eo quod ipsa institutrix prima fuerit virginitatis et copiosam habebat turbam se sequentium in virginitatis proposito. Et dixit, quod virgines proximae sunt deo. Et dixit, quod caeteri sancti, qui fuerunt auctores et institutores Novarum sanctitatum, sicut beatus Benedictus, beatus Bernardus, beatus Franciscus, beatus Agustustinus et beatus Dominicus, prae caeteris sanctis sunt gloriosi."

[86] Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 23, note 11.

is placed higher than the other apostles except for Peter, John the Evangelist, and Bartholomew.[87] Francis re-enters the hierarchy here with the argument that he is "greatest in God's view except for the apostles, Blessed John the Baptist, and Blessed Moses." Here, Agnes has broken the inclusivity of her earlier list and has instead made Francis preeminent over the other institutional founders. The explanation given is that "Blessed Francis loved God earnestly and with the strongest and most passionate love, and that the soul of Blessed Francis has those small sacred signs because he burned most intensely in the love of Christ and within the soul; and therefore they appeared visibly on the body."[88] Further, light coming from Jesus's wounds reflects from Francis's stigmata.

Up to this point, the hierarchy is fairly straightforward. Moses and John the Baptist are at the top followed by the apostles. Among that group, Peter, John the Evangelist, and Bartholomew are preeminent; Paul comes after them, presumably followed by the remainder of the apostles. Francis is next, directly after the apostles. Here, however, Agnes's hierarchy becomes contradictory as she states "about Blessed Bernard, Blessed Dominic, and Blessed Nicholas that they are comparable to Blessed John the Evangelist in that they loved God with a most tender and sweet love and that they are the most excellent saints in heaven."[89] If we incorporate this information with previous details of the hierarchy, Francis is now placed *below* other institutional founders, including Dominic.

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[87] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 16-17, pp. 84-86.

[88] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 18, pg. 86: "Dixit de beato Francisco, quod major esset in conspectus dei, exceptis apostolis et beato Johanne Baptista et beato Moyse. Dixit, quod beatus Franciscus fortissimo et ferventissimo amore et seriose deum amavit, et quod anima beati Francisci habeat illa sacra signacula, quia fortissimo ardebat in amore Christi et interius in anima; apparenter et inde in corpore resultabant. Et dixit, quod sancti de hoc magnum habent Gaudium; quia aliquis inter eos est inventus, in quo relucent illa sacra vulnera Christi." McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 59-64, gives an overview of Francis's stigmata.

[89] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 20, pg. 88: "Dixit de beato Bernhardo, beato Dominico et beato Nicolao, quia comparantur beato Johanni Evangelistae in eo, quod deum tenerrime et dulci amore dilexerunt et quod sunt excellentissimi sancti in coelo."

The key to understanding this shift comes from recognizing that, with the exception of Moses, John the Baptist, and the apostles, who are unquestionably at the top of Agnes's hierarchy, each person that Agnes discusses is described as "the most excellent" or "the most significant." We see this borne out later in the same chapter when she describes Augustine of Hippo as "the greatest light before God" and states that Gregory the Great "might be the most beloved saint."[90] Thus, even though Francis *seems* to be demoted from his perch just under the apostles, it appears that this is instead simply a result of Agnes's (or her confessor-biographer's) rhetorical style. The fact that it is only Francis who is given a lengthy description, particularly regarding his stigmata, indicates that, for Agnes, he would be greater than the other institutional founders.

Importantly, however, and as noted above, this is the only instance in which Francis is lauded at length, and even here, the text presents some initial ambiguities. Agnes certainly thought Francis worthy of praise, but he occupies no central position in the mysticism of this Franciscan-affiliated woman. Instead, his role is peripheral--perhaps even tangential. Rather than highlighting Francis, Agnes's visions instead emphasize her own relationship to Jesus—his voice that she hears, his face and sometimes naked body that she sees, his lessons that she receives, his saints whom she sees in glory, his body that she consumes—usually as the consecrated host, but on at least two occasions as his foreskin.

[90] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 20, pg. 88: "Dixit de beato Augustino, quod est maximum lumen in conspectus dei et quod actualiter capax sit beatissimae trinitatis, et hoc ideo, quia hic ingenium exercruit et excoluit intellectum suum tanta fide et amore in tractatibus de sancta trinitate. Dixit de beato Gregorio, quod esset dilectissimus sanctus et quod anima eius sancti Stephani in hac vita extitit vas plenum spiritu sancto et dilectione spiritus sancti et secundum hoc in patria habet influentiam et amoris insignia."

In the next chapter, I will move forward chronologically and contextualize Birgitta of Sweden, who had a key—if less gustatory—vision of the Holy Foreskin, paying particular attention to the importance that she had as a religious figure during her own lifetime.[91]

[91] Agnes does not seem to have had the same complex relationship with her confessor-biographer that Catherine of Siena (and other medieval holy women) had with theirs. Certainly, Agnes's confessor praises her because she has been chosen by God to receive visions, but the only example in Agnes's *vita* in which the confessor-penitent relationship is truly reversed can be found at Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 171, pp. 356-358, entitled "Regarding the Withdrawal of Grace from the Confessor of This Virgin." In contrast to this, there is the much longer episode in which Agnes is hesitant to tell her confessor about her encounters with the Holy Foreskin.

CHAPTER 4: BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN: MOTHERHOOD AS AUTHORITY

I turn now from the obscure Viennese beguine Agnes Blannbekin to one of the patron saints of Europe, Birgitta of Sweden (c. 1303-1373). Birgitta was famous as a mystic during her own lifetime, receiving over 700 revelations, usually from either Jesus or the Virgin Mary. The revelations came between the time that she was widowed in 1346 and her death in the early 1370s. Relayed by Birgitta in her native language, Old Swedish, to her confessors, they were translated into Latin and then read back to Birgitta for approval.[1] Near the end of her life, Birgitta asked her final confessor, Alfonso, to edit and compile the revelations for distribution.[2] Because of the lengthy editing and translation process, which continued even after her death, the visions as we have them today are probably not Birgitta's actual words, but they do likely reflect her ideas.[3] Searby and Morris, editors of a recent critical translation of Birgitta's visions into English, note that Birgitta frequently uses "striking images in unusual juxtapositions," and it is here that we can most probably find Birgitta's own voice.[4]

Out of the hundreds of revelations that Birgitta received, only one deals with the Holy Foreskin. Birgitta's visions are not often dated, but in one that Searby and Morris place in the 1350s while Birgitta was in Rome,[5] Birgitta hears the Virgin Mary, who tells her:

> When my son was circumcised, I protected that membrane [membranam] with the greatest regard wherever I went. For how could I bury [traderem terre=hand over to the ground] something that was born from me without sin? And when the time of my calling from this earth approached, I entrusted it to St. John, my guardian, along with that blessed blood that remained in his wounds when we took him down from the cross. After this, St. John and his successors having been taken from the world, and with vice and treachery growing, the faithful at the time hid

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[1] Denis Searby and Bridget Morris, eds., *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden, vol. 1* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14-15, provide an account of Birgitta's different confessors.
[2] Claire L. Sahlin, "Gender and Prophetic Authority in Birgitta of Sweden's *Revelations*," in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 71.
[3] Sahlin, "Gender and Prophetic Authority," 72.
[4] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 1*, 28.
[5] Searby and Morris, eds., *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden, vol. 3* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 175

> them in an extremely clean [mundissimo] place underground and for a long time, they remained unknown there until an angel of God revealed them to friends of God. Oh Rome, oh Rome, if you only knew, you would certainly rejoice, and if you knew to cry, you would cry incessantly, because you have a treasure that is most dear to me and you do not honor it.[6]

Searby and Morris speculate that Birgitta may have been in the Basilica of St. John Lateran, where Rome's foreskin relic was kept, at the time that she had this vision.[7] They imply, incorrectly, that this was the site of the only foreskin relic during the Middle Ages—an interesting mistake because the primary purpose of Birgitta's vision seems to be to validate the Roman relic. There is no mention of any of the other foreskin relics that existed at the time, and it is unclear whether Birgitta knew about them. However, the replacement of the typical Charlemagne story with the more general "friends of God" who were told where to find the relic perhaps suggests that Birgitta was familiar with other relics. As seen in Chapter 1, the Charlemagne origin story appeared frequently with relics found in French churches, but this connection did not exist for the Roman relic. Thus, the absence of the Charlemagne story may have been an attempt by Birgitta to legitimize the foreskin relic held in the Sancta Sanctorum as the only *true* relic.

A key point here, however, is that the revelation confirms that Jesus's foreskin was still on earth with a fixed line of translation (albeit one that grows increasingly vague after St. John). Birgitta here is making key theological points: that Jesus was not resurrected with his foreskin and that it was viewable by Christians on earth. Given the lengthy translation and compilation process associated with her revelations, we must assume that her confessors—or at least

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[6] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelaciones, Book VI*, ed. Birger Bergh (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1991), 273.
[7] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 3*, 175 note 1.

Alfonso—considered the vision theologically sound.[8] The papal canonization committee must have agreed, or must have thought it was minor when weighed against the mass of Birgitta's other revelations and activities, because she was canonized as a saint in 1391, 18 years after she died.

I will analyze Birgitta's approach to the Holy Foreskin more fully in Chapter 6, when I place her in conversation with other foreskin devotees and with theological objections to the foreskin relics. Here, however, I wish to contextualize Birgitta. Because her interaction with Jesus's prepuce is indirect and not as visceral as those experienced by Agnes or Catherine, I will devote less space to her. However, I do wish to emphasize Birgitta's close relationship with Virgin Mary and the concept of infancy, as well as the stature that she possessed during her lifetime.

Birgitta of Sweden: An International Saint

Birgitta, born as Birgitta Birgersdotter, was the daughter of a lawyer and one of the wealthiest landholders in Sweden. Through her mother, Ingeborg, she was related to the Swedish royal family. As a member of a high-ranking family, she probably learned to read and write during her childhood. While she delivered her revelations in Old Swedish, she did clearly also have some fluency in Latin, although her exact knowledge of the language is unclear.[9] When she was fourteen, she married the nobleman Ulf Gudmarsson, eventually having eight children, six of whom survived infancy. Both Birgitta and Ulf seem to have had strong religious beliefs, including making a pilgrimage trip to Santiago de Compostela in Spain during the early 1340s.

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[8] Kimberley M. Benedict, *Empowering Collaborations: Writing Partnerships Between Religious Women and Scribes in the Middle Ages* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 49.

[9] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 1*, 11-12 provide a discussion of Birgitta's knowledge of Latin. See also Bridget Morris, "Birgittines and Beguines in Medieval Sweden," in *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and Their Impact*, ed. J. Dor, Terry Johnson, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Leiden: Brepols, 1999), 162-163.

Although they had both planned to enter an unnamed monastery, Ulf died in 1344, leaving Birgitta a widow.[10] At this point, Birgitta did not join the nearby royal convent of Vreta, but instead continued to live at the male monastery of Alvastra. Morris argues that this demonstrates that "even at this early stage of her life as a mystic, Birgitta is more secular in a male domain surrounded by men of influence."[11]

While living at Alvastra, Birgitta dispensed of her wealth, making provisions for her children, some of whom were still young.[12] She also began having revelations, although as the vision in which she receives her "calling" from Jesus demonstrates, she did so reluctantly:

> After some days, when the bride of Christ was worried about the change in her status and its bearing on her service of God, and while she was praying about this in her chapel, she became rapt in spirit; and while she was in ecstasy, she saw a bright cloud from which she heard a voice saying to her: "Woman, hear me." Completely terrified, and fearing that it was an illusion, she fled to her chamber; and at once she confessed and received the body of Christ. Then after some days, when she was at prayer in the same chapel, again that bright cloud appeared to her; and from it, she again heard a voice uttering words like those before, namely "Woman, hear me." Then the lady, thoroughly terrified, again fled to her chamber; and she confessed and communicated, fearing as before that the voice was an illusion. Then, after some days, when she was praying, she was indeed rapt in spirit, and again saw the bright cloud and in it a human likeness, who said this: "Woman, hear me; I am your God, who wishes to speak with you." Terrified, therefore, and thinking it was an illusion, she heard again: "Fear not," he said, "for I am the Creator, not the deceiver, of all. I do not speak to you for your sake alone, but for the sake of the salvation of others. Hear the things that I speak; and go to Master Mathias, your confessor, who has the experience of discerning the two types of spirit. Say to him on my behalf what I now say to you: for you shall be my bride and my channel, and you shall hear and see spiritual things, and my Spirit shall remain with you even until your death."[13]

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[10] Morris, "Birgittines and Beguines," 165.
[11] Morris, "Birgittines and Beguines," 165.
[12] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 1*, 7.
[13] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 1*, 7-8. The reassurance provided by Jesus that he was not "the deceiver" was particularly relevant to Birgitta. At certain points in her life, she was accused of being a witch, or a pythoness, who delivered false prophecies, particularly when her revelations advocated for Church reform or rebuked the behavior of the clergy. See Sahlin, "Gender and Prophetic Authority," 82-85. Sahlin notes that certain passages in the revelations that condemn fortune-tellers and diviners are perhaps there in order to counter similar charges made against Birgitta herself.

Birgitta may have initially been afraid to become a prophet for Christ, but that did not stop the visions. For the remainder of her life, she continued to receive them, usually from Jesus or the Virgin Mary, but occasionally from other saints.[14] The visions usually have the divine figure speaking in the first person and referring to Birgitta either in the second person or in the third person as the bride of Christ.[15] In the order in which Alfonso edited and placed the visions, seven books exist; they are not always chronologically presented. The first book of revelations concerns Birgitta's visionary calling and her earliest revelations. Topics vary widely, from reassuring Birgitta about the validity of her visions[16] to Mary discussing her sorrow during the Passion[17] to the unholy state of Birgitta's fellow Christians.[18] The second volume deals largely with political affairs in Sweden.

At this point, Birgitta left her homeland; she traveled to Rome for the 1350 papal jubilee and, apart from a trip to the Holy Land in 1372-73, would spend the rest of her life in Rome.[19] The third book of her revelations primarily dates from her early period in Rome and concentrates on reform of the clergy, perhaps because of her advocacy for the end of the Avignon papacy. For example, in this book, the Virgin Mary praises the life of St. Dominic and the foundation of the Dominicans, but then laments in the following vision that contemporary members of the order do not follow Dominic's Rule.[20] The fourth and sixth books contain revelations from Birgitta's time in both Sweden and Rome. The fifth book of revelations takes the form of a divine debate about

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[14] Mary Dzon, *The Quest for the Christ Child in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 187-245, *187*, emphasizes the "private, feminine discourse" between Mary and Birgitta, in which Mary "reveals intimate details about the Holy Family to another woman in whom she trusts."
[15] Sahlin, "Gender and Prophetic Authority," 74.
[16] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 1*, 87-90.
[17] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 1*, 111-112.
[18] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 1*, 157-158.
[19] Barbara Obrist, "The Swedish Visionary: Saint Bridget," in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), 229, notes that the jubilee took place in Rome while the pope himself was still residing in Avignon.
[20] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 1,* 292-297.

the order of the natural world, and the final, seventh book is an account of visions Birgitta had during her trip to the Holy Land.

Piltz argues that "the process of revelation, in Birgitta's case, is not a kind of delirium, it is a mental activity on the highest possible level of intellectual presence, in close contact with the Bible text. In the biblical narratives… the receptive Birgitta achieved a means of rationalizing and structuring the flood of images and impressions which had invaded her imagination."[21] We see this further with other scholars who have analyzed Birgitta's visions. Searby and Morris find that Birgitta was popular during her lifetime because she articulated what people wanted to hear; they could search her prophecies for messages about reforming society.[22] Sahlin argues that the running theme in Birgitta's many revelations is her obedience to God. They claim authority for her precisely because her actions are for the glory of Jesus, rather than her own desires.[23]

Most importantly, and as I will explore further in Ch. 6, Birgitta associated strongly with the Virgin Mary as a mother. It is important to note, however, that she did also believe in the holy nature of virginity. During a vision in which a monk asks a series of questions about Jesus's birth, he asks the Judge (understood to be Jesus) why he was born from a virgin. The Judge/Jesus replies that after the Fall of Man in the garden of Eden, there "arose a sense of shame" and "there also sprang up a disordered impulse, especially in the reproductive organs."[24] He further states that because Adam and Eve were created from the virgin earth, "not yet polluted by blood," it also befitted Jesus to come from a pure virgin.[25]

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[21] Anders Piltz, "Revelation and the Human Agent: St. Birgitta and the Process of Inspiration," in *Tongues and Texts Unlimited: Studies in Honour of Tore Janson*, ed. Hans Aili and P. af Trampe (Stockholm: Insstitutionen för klassika språk, 2000), 182.
[22] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 1*, 5.
[23] Sahlin, "Gender and Prophetic Authority," 76-78.
[24] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 2*, 298.
[25] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 2*, 298. Birgitta must be thinking here about menstrual or perhaps natal blood, the former understood as a discharge of bodily impurities. As we have seen with Jacobus de Voragine and

A second question in the same vision reconciles the status of Mary as both a holy virgin and a holy mother. The monk asks Jesus "'Why did you not show with a visible sign that she was a mother and a pure virgin?'" Jesus replies that through God the Father, prophets had known about his impending birth; further, Joseph's testimony to Mary's virginity was "sufficient, inasmuch as he was the guardian and witness of her virginity."[26] He subsequently states that even if Mary's virginity had been demonstrated through a miracle, "unbelievers would not out of wickedness have yielded in their blasphemy."[27] Birgitta's vision continues by echoing Jacobus de Voragine's idea that Jesus perhaps wished to keep his birth secret from demons.[28] Ultimately, however, the vision ends by also glorifying Mary's motherhood, with Jesus stating that "now, in fact, I affirm that my mother is truly mother and virgin."[29]

Perhaps Birgitta's most famous vision is one she had during her trip to the Holy Land—and one in which motherhood is key; the account here is a rare first-person one in which Birgitta herself narrates the revelation. While in Bethlehem in 1372, she saw "a most beautiful virgin who was pregnant [and whose belly] was very heavy and swollen, for she was now ready to give birth."[30] The virgin and the "venerable old man" with her enter a cave; the man leaves and returns with a lit candle before leaving again "so as not to be present himself at the birth."[31] Although Birgitta does not name the figures as Mary and Joseph until the end of the vision, their

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will explore further with Catherine of Siena in the next chapter, piety focused around Jesus's blood was popular during the Late Middle Ages.

[26] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 2*, 299.

[27] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 2*, 299. There is an implicit element of anti-Judaism here, since the "unbelievers" would presumably have been Mary and Joseph's fellow Jews. Jesus continues in this section to state that "such people do not believe that a virgin could conceive by divine power, because they do not realize that it is easier for me, God, to do this than for the sun to penetrate glass."

[28] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 2*, 299. A later portion of the vision, 299-300, affirms this, including an answer as to why Jesus and his family fled to Egypt.

[29] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 2*, 299.

[30] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 3*, 250.

[31] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 3*, 250.

identities are clear from the beginning. At the time of the birth itself, Mary begins to pray, and "in the flash of an eye, she gave birth to her son" whose luminescence eclipses the candle that Joseph brought. Birgitta marvels at the speed of the birth: it was "so instant and sudden that I was unable to see or discern how or even with what part of her body [the virgin] gave birth."[32]

Searby and Morris relate the fact that Birgitta did not see with which part of her body the virgin gave birth to the idea of Mary's perpetual virginity; the absence of labor pains connects to Mary's own immaculate conception. She was free from pain in childbirth, a punishment for the actions of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.[33] While this is insightful and highlights Birgitta's knowledge of scripture, I would also argue that her personal experience is equally important. As a woman who had given birth eight times, Birgitta was intimately familiar with the pain—and the dangers—of childbirth. The ease and speed with which Mary gives birth to Jesus in the vision would have differed greatly from the pain and delivery times that Birgitta herself undoubtedly repeatedly experienced. This creates a sharp contrast to how religious virgins, such as Agnes Blannbekin or Catherine of Siena, would have understood the Nativity. Neither had experienced pregnancy or childbirth themselves; thus, although they had devotion to the Nativity, they did not have the same intimate connection that Birgitta would have had.[34]

Birgitta's knowledge of childbirth appears further as the vision continues. Jesus's body is "entirely clean of all filth and impurity," befitting the birth of a deity, but also contrasting greatly with Birgitta's own experiences. She also notes that the afterbirth was lying next to him, conveniently "rolled up and shining." Mary's swollen belly immediately deflates, leaving her

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[32] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 3*, 251.
[33] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 3*, 251, notes 8, 12. See Genesis 3:16 for God's curse on Eve and all subsequent women.
[34] Agnes did once experience a type of swelling, akin to pregnancy, from Christmas until Epiphany, emphasizing her devotion to the Nativity, but of course, she did not experience childbirth itself. See Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 406-410. As the last of her mother's children, it is uncertain whether Catherine was ever present at childbirth.

"wonderfully beautiful and delicate." Jesus reaches for his mother, who comforts him; she then takes hold of his umbilical cord, which breaks off "at once with no loss of liquid or blood."[35] Birgitta's vision closes with a note that Mary "suffered no loss of bodily strength as is normal for other women at childbirth."[36] Again, these are elements of the messy parts of childbirth with which Birgitta would have been familiar—not only the pain of giving birth, but also the newborn who needs cleaning, the disposal of the afterbirth, the bloody removal of the umbilical cord, and the changes to the mother's body.

This type of first-hand knowledge contributed to Birgitta's stature during her lifetime. Not only was she given an extended vision of the Nativity itself, but she was also someone who would have understood exactly how miraculous the event was. The cleanliness and ease of Jesus's birth only highlight how quickly Mary is able to embrace her son, immediately establishing a loving relationship that would ultimately turn to sorrow. Birgitta's knowledge of childbirth and motherhood allowed her to provide miraculous details that other mystics might not have known. Although a dominant theme in Birgitta's revelations is her apostolic mission toward human redemption and reform of the Church, particularly returning the papacy from Avignon to Rome[37], it is this close relationship to the Virgin Mary and the intimate details to which Birgitta was privy that helped give her authority.

In the next chapter, I turn to Birgitta's younger contemporary, Catherine of Siena. Although the two never met, they did perhaps share a confessor. With Catherine, however, we will see not only a closer relationship to the body of Jesus rather than to his mother, but also a

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[35] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 3*, 251. Dzon, *The Quest for the Christ Child*, 197, notes that Jesus's action of reaching for his mother emphasizes his humanity as well as his future suffering.
[36] Searby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 3*, 252.
[37] See, for example, Seaby and Morris, *Revelations, vol. 2,* 248-249, in which Birgitta prophesies Pope Urban VI's death if he returns to Avignon.

more complex relationship with her spiritual authorities. Both Birgitta and Catherine worked closely with their confessors, but whereas Birgitta seems to have collaborated with them on equal terms, we find that Catherine often sought to assert her own spiritual authority.

CHAPTER 5: CATHERINE OF SIENA: FLESHLY WEDDING RINGS

When scholars have, on occasion, discussed the medieval devotion to the Holy Foreskin, the figure most frequently considered in connection with the relics is the fourteenth-century Italian saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380).[1] According to Catherine's confessor and biographer, Raymond of Capua, Catherine experienced a mystical marriage to Christ in the early 1370s.[2] As a symbol of the marriage, Catherine received a ring, the descriptions of which are multiple. In Raymond's account of the event, it was "a gold ring set with four pearls and surmounted by a splendid diamond. With his all-holy right hand he [Christ] placed it on the ring-finger of Catherine's right hand, saying as he did so: 'Behold, I espouse you in faith to me, your Creator and your Savior.'"[3] In her classic study of religious women and their relationship to food in the Middle Ages, however, Caroline Walker Bynum offers a much more sensational interpretation of the celestial ring, arguing that Catherine received "not the ring of gold and jewels that her biographer reports in his bowdlerized version, but the ring of Christ's foreskin."[4] Both Raymond and Bynum agree, however, that the ring was visible only to Catherine.

Yet, as Andrew Jacobs correctly notes, Catherine does not describe the nature of her own ring.[5] While Jacobs's point is accurate, both he and Bynum miss something that is perhaps more

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[1] See, for example, Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 246; Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, ix-x; and Palazzo, "The Veneration of the Sacred Foreskin, 169-171.

[2] Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. George Lamb (London: Harvill Press, 1960), 106-109. Throughout his *vita* of Catherine, Raymond eschews definite dates and does not present Catherine's activities in a strict chronological order.

[3] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 107. Raymond provides a symbolic interpretation of the ring's components: "Notice how the ring itself, by the form it takes, brings out perfectly the ideas it is meant to signify. She [Catherine] had asked for a firm faith. And what is more firm and unyielding than a diamond? The hardness of no other thing can make any impression on it; whilst the hardness of the diamond can overcome and penetrate the hardness of all other things however hard. But there is one thing that can break it: the blood of a kid. So, too, the heart that is firm can overcome and conquer by its firmness all that attacks it; but at the thought of the Blood of Christ it softens and melts. As for the four pearls, they signify the fourfold purity that reigned in Catherine's soul; purity of intention, of thought, of word, and of deed" (107).

[4] Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 246.

[5] Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 192, note 6.

significant: Catherine is also silent about the marriage itself. In her own writings—383 extant letters, a theological treatise that takes the form of a conversation between the soul (presumably Catherine's) and God, and a short book of prayers—Catherine frequently highlights her intimate relationship with Christ and exhorts others to deepen their own understanding of Jesus, but she never discusses a marriage that has occurred between only herself and Christ.[6]

This is not to imply, however, that Catherine resisted the idea of a marriage to Christ. Indeed, she eagerly took part in the bridal mysticism that characterized female piety during the late Middle Ages.[7] Catherine's conception of whom Jesus might marry, however, was rather egalitarian and was not limited to the future saint herself. Drawing upon a long history of medieval thought, she unsurprisingly interpreted the Church itself as a bride of Christ.[8] For Catherine, though, the figure of Jesus's spouse was not limited to the institutional Church. Instead, in her conception, he frequently married individuals and entire groups, usually women who had or were about to devote themselves to a religious life.[9] For example, in a 1377 letter, Catherine tells an abbess and her nuns that she "long[s] to see [them] as true servants and brides

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[6] It is important to note that Catherine's silence about the marriage is not unusual for her. Most of our information about her mystical and ascetic activities comes from Raymond's biography of Catherine. Although images fill her writings, most notably her extended metaphor of Christ as a bridge in her theological treatise, and her language is often mystical in nature, Catherine generally does not discuss her personal relationship with Christ in detail. For important exceptions, see Catherine of Siena, Letter T371/G103, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, *vol. 4*, ed. and trans. Suzanne Noffke (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 359-363; and Catherine of Siena, Letter T373/G102, *Letters*, *vol. 4*, 364-370. Both were written to Raymond on February 15, 1380, approximately two months before Catherine died and are the last letters that she wrote to Raymond. In the latter letter, Catherine does indirectly mention the Holy Foreskin by noting that "God has accomplished such wondrous mysteries from the feast of the circumcision" (365). The feast of the circumcision was traditionally held on January 1, eight days after Jesus's birth was celebrated on December 25. Thus, Catherine's inclusion of the feast in this letter may primarily reflect the date when it was written.

[7] For a good, extended discussion of the differences between male and female piety in the late Middle Ages, see Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 73-112.

[8] For a few examples among many, see Catherine of Siena, Letter T11/G24/DT23, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, *vol. 2*, , 521-526, quote at 521-522; and Catherine of Siena, Letter T295/G96, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, *vol. 3*, ed. and trans. Suzanne Noffke (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007), 148-150, quote at 150.

[9] See, for example, Catherine of Siena, Letter T156/G303, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, *vol. 1*, ed. and trans. Suzanne Noffke (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 299-301, quote at 301.

of Christ crucified, following so closely in his footsteps that [they] would sooner die than violate his dear commandments and counsels," indicating that for Catherine, joining the ranks of Jesus's brides was an attainable goal for those individuals who most fully embraced Christian teachings.[10] Men, as well, could become the spouses of Christ. In perhaps her most famous letter, Catherine envisions a recently executed political criminal as the bride of Christ and exhorts Raymond, the letter's recipient, to become a bride himself; she goes so far as to give him instructions on how to do so: he should "shut [himself] up in the open side of God's Son, that open storeroom so full of fragrance that sin itself is made fragrant." Catherine continues to specify that it is within this very storeroom that "the dear bride rests in the bed of fire and blood."[11]

Additionally, during the course of her numerous letters, Catherine describes the wedding ring(s) that Christ generally gives to his bride(s). Importantly, and (again) although Catherine does not make this claim specifically—and only—for herself, she does significantly state that the wedding rings *are* Christ's foreskin. The first reference in Catherine's writings to the celestial wedding ring occurs relatively early in her epistolary career, and it is here that we also find the most direct reference to Catherine herself as a bride of Christ. Writing to Queen Joanna of

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[10] Catherine of Siena, Letter T79/G149, *Letters, vol. 2*, 551-552. It is important to note that it is unusual to have extant both the male-authored *Life* of a medieval holy woman and voluminous texts generated by the woman herself. For strategies of reading the Catherinian sources, see Karen Scott, "Mystical Death, Bodily Death: Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua on the Mystic's Encounter with God," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 138-167. Although Catherine's various medieval *Lives* contain stories about the miraculous literacy she developed in the late 1370s, it is most likely that Catherine was illiterate. For her correspondences, she utilized a variety of lay scribes, both men and women, all of whom were devoted to her. For a discussion of Catherine's writings as the product of her own mind and as an accurate representation of her words, see Noffke, *Letters, vol. 1*, xxii-xxiv.

[11] Catherine of Siena, Letter T273/G97/DT31, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 85. For a full analysis of this letter and its bridal mysticism, see my "Hungering for Maleness: Catherine of Siena and the Medieval Public Sphere," *Journal of Religious Studies and Theology* 33.2 (2014): 157-171. F. Thomas Luongo provides a differing analysis of this letter, although he too emphasizes its bridal imagery. See Luongo, "Catherine of Siena: Rewriting the Female Holy Authority," in *Women, the Book, and the Godly: Selected Proceedings of the St. Hilda's Conference, 1993*, vol. 1, eds. Lesley Smith and Jane H.M. Taylor (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1995), 89-104; reprinted with some modifications in Luongo, *The Saintly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

Naples in 1375 to solicit support for a new crusade, Catherine begins her letter with her customary longing to see her recipient become a more devoted Christian before shifting into a prayer directed to Jesus: "Oh Jesus, gentlest love, as a sign that you had espoused us you gave us the ring of your most holy and tender flesh at the time of your holy circumcision on the eighth day."[12] This early letter, with its language directed to Jesus, provides the clearest indication that in Catherine's understanding, Christ *intended* his circumcised foreskin to serve as a wedding ring. Again, it also includes the most direct language demonstrating that Catherine numbered herself among the recipients of Jesus's fleshly wedding ring. Given the date of the letter, it is possible that it followed shortly upon Catherine's mystical marriage to Christ, an event still fresh in her mind, but the inexact chronology in Raymond's biography of Catherine renders this unclear.[13] Catherine continues her letter, now addressing Joanna: "You know, my reverend mother, that on the eighth day just enough flesh was taken from him to make a circle of a ring [se si levò tanta carne quanta è un cerchio d'anello]."[14] Here, Catherine continues to insist that Christ's foreskin forms the wedding ring given to his brides, but she begins to slowly remove his conscious will from the procedure. This shift would be characteristic of her later discussion of the foreskin rings.

In 1376, for example, Catherine tells a Pisan nun that she is "a bride and that he [Christ] has espoused you—you and everyone else—and not with a ring of silver but with a ring of his own flesh. Look at that tender little child who on the eighth day, when he was circumcised, gave up just so much flesh as to make a tiny circlet of a ring!"[15] She continues, in ecstatic prayer, not

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[12] Catherine of Siena, Letter T143/G313/DT39, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 147.
[13] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 106-109.
[14] Catherine of Siena, Letter T143/G313/DT39, *Letters, vol. 1,* 147. For the Italian, see Caterina da Siena, *Le Lettere di S. Caterina da Siena, Ridotte a Miglior Lezione, e in Ordine Nuovo Disposte con Note di Niccolo Tommaseo, a Cura di Piero Misciattelli, vol. 2* (Siena: Giuntini Bentivoglio & Co., 1913), 337-338.
[15] Catherine of Siena, Letter T221/G152, *Letters*, *vol. 2*, 184.

only to equate "this bride" with "the human race," but also to extol Jesus's action in direct speech to Christ: "you espoused her with your flesh."[16] The next year, Catherine reminds Caterina di Ghetto, one of her earliest followers, that "God's Son espoused us all at the time of his circumcision, when his flesh was cut [si tagliò] to give us just the tiniest bit of a ring as a sign that he wanted to espouse the human race."[17] In a later letter, written to Monna Tora, a widow contemplating joining the Dominican Order with which Catherine was affiliated as a lay tertiary, she specifies the moment at which Christ made his marriage vows and provided the wedding ring(s): "Gentle Jesus espoused her [the bride] with his flesh (for when he was circumcised as much flesh was removed [tanta carne si levò] as the circle of a ring, signifying that he wanted to wed humankind as our Bridegroom)."[18]

These excerpts highlight the possibility that Catherine retains for Jesus's conscious decision to bestow his foreskin as a wedding ring to his followers ("he wanted to wed humankind"), but they also emphasize the ambiguity of the process. The latter two letters, to Caterina di Ghetto and Monna Tora, in particular demonstrate the procedure's passive nature: Christ's flesh "was cut" and "flesh was removed." Catherine's language leaves open the possibility that the infant Jesus foresaw the use for his circumcised flesh, but the ambiguity remains. It is possible, although again uncertain, that as Catherine began to fully extend her conception of the foreskin ring from her own intimacy with Christ toward a gift given to all of his brides, defined broadly as all those who are completely devoted to him, her understanding of the event shifted.

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[16] Catherine of Siena, Letter T221/G152, *Letters, vol. 2*, 184.
[17] Catherine of Siena, Letter T50/G185, *Letters*, *vol. 2*, 595. For the Italian, see Caterina da Siena, *Le Lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, *vol. 1*, 236.
[18] Catherine of Siena, Letter T262/G322, *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, *vol. 3*, 324. For the Italian, see Caterina da Siena, *Le Lettere de S. Caterina da Siena, vol. 4*, 147.

What is clear, however, is that for Catherine, the ring with which Christ weds his brides—be it symbolic or fleshly, visible or invisible—is his foreskin. Why, then, does Raymond, whose overarching goal in his biography of Catherine was to see her canonized, claim that she received a more prosaic ring composed of gold and earthly jewels? In this chapter, I intend to explore the background behind this discrepancy in Catherine and Raymond's accounts of the celestial wedding ring(s). To do so, I focus on the ways in which Catherine develops her spiritual independence by both resisting and yielding to Raymond's authority; this will serve to establish the context for a close examination of Catherine's wedding rings in the next chapter.

Catherine of Siena: A Brief Life

Catherine was born in 1347, one of a set of twins and the last of the more than twenty children to whom her mother gave birth.[19] Her father and brothers were wool-dyers and seem to have met with some degree of financial success; her father additionally held occasional civic positions in Siena.[20] According to Raymond, our primary source for Catherine's early life, the majority of her youth and teenage years was spent in devotion to Christ and in an increasingly firm conviction to remain a virgin, sometimes to the dismay of her family, who wished Catherine to marry.[21] At an unspecified point in her teenage years, she spent a self-imposed, three-year period of solitude in her bedroom at her parents' house, after which she joined a group of

[19] Rudolph Bell has argued that the death of Catherine's twin prompted lifelong feelings of guilt that prompted Catherine to pursue an ascetic life. His analysis is unconvincing, however, as it fails to account for why any of the other hundreds (or thousands) of young women in late medieval Italy whose twin siblings had died did not also become ascetics. See Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 22-53, for his discussion of Catherine. For additional criticisms of Bell's psychoanalytic approach, see Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 206; Rebecca J. Lester, "Embodied Voices: Women's Food Asceticism and the Negotiation of Identity," *Ethos* 23.2 (1995): 187-222, at 189; and Martha J. Reineke, "'This Is My Body': Reflections on Abjection, Anorexia, and Medieval Women Mystics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58.2 (1990): 245-265, at 261-262.

[20] Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 23-56, provides an account of Catherine's familial background.

[21] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 41-45, relates that in an attempt to avoid marriage, the young Catherine cut off all her hair to make herself unattractive. In this same passage, Raymond also attributes the death of Catherine's older, married sister Bonaventura, who had been attempting to convince Catherine to marry, to the refusal of Christ to have his future spouse taken away from him.

Siennese tertiaries affiliated with the Dominicans.[22] As a tertiary, Catherine was still considered a member of the laity and was not enclosed in a convent. She did, however, wear the Dominican habit and was subject to ecclesiastical oversight, receiving a personal confessor, a local man from Siena named Tommaso dalla Fonte, upon whose lost notes about Catherine Raymond relied when writing her *vita.*

Raymond of Capua became Catherine's confessor in May 1374, when she was twenty-seven, having been assigned to be the "sole authority over her within the Dominican Order" at the meeting of the General Chapter of the Dominican Friars in Florence.[23] At this point, Catherine had already gained some fame in northern Italy for her extreme asceticism, and as Suzanne Noffke states, "the [Dominican] friars would naturally find it in their interest to establish some sort of control over such a woman, since she wore their habit, and her words and actions could bring credit or scandal to the order."[24] The widespread political activities for which Catherine (arguably) became most famous, however, had not yet begun in earnest. Although Raymond cites her marriage to Christ as the event that initiated her public life, Catherine's own writings provide no indication of what prompted her to embark upon a political career.[25] Using a combination of linguistic and historical analysis, Noffke only confidently dates eleven of the 380 extant letters before May 1374, the year when Catherine's marriage possibly took place.[26] None

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[22] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 59, 66-69.
[23] Noffke, *Letters, vol. 1*, liv.
[24] Noffke, *Letters, vol. 1*, 47.
[25] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 107. After he has given her the wedding ring, Christ tells Catherine, "So now, daughter, do manfully. From now on you must never falter about accepting any task my providence may lay upon your shoulders."
[26] All eleven letters are found in Catherine of Siena, *Letters, vol. 1*: Letter T61/G183/DT2 (before May 1374), 3-5; Letter T41/G105/DT3 (possibly 1368, but certainly before May 1374), 7-10; Letter T99/G272/DT7 (Lent 1372), 13-16; Letter T105/G113/DT8 (late March 1372), 18-19; Letter T200/G112/DT9 (late March 1372), 21-22; Letter T107/G238/DT11 (April 1372), 24-25; Letter T14/G252/DT13 (1370 to September 1373), 29-30; Letter T18/G250/DT14 (late 1373 to early 1374), 32-33; Letter T202/G226 (early 1374), 35-36; Letter T127/G117/DT20 (near 26 March 1374), 38-41; and Letter T70/G114/DT21 (April to May 1374), 42-45. Noffke cannot confidently date a twelfth letter, Letter T31/G333/DT12, 27-28, placing it in either March 1373 or summer 1374. Therefore, I

of the letters is overtly political in nature, certainly in comparison to Catherine's later epistles. For example, two are addressed to her brothers, urging them to care for their newly widowed mother.[27] Thus, it appears that by the time Raymond became her confessor, Catherine had gained enough renown to be noticed by the Dominican community outside of Siena, but she had not yet embarked upon her public career.

Indeed, it seems that although she was not yet heavily involved in papal and Italian politics, Catherine had been noticed by the pope himself. In one of her early letters, from March 1374, she tells two of her followers that "the pope sent his representative here, the one who was spiritual father to that countess who died in Rome [presumably, Birgitta of Sweden]… Be glad and rejoice, for the holy father has begun to turn his attention to God's honor and that of holy Church." Catherine continues, detailing the rather non-political contents of the first (now lost) letter that she wrote to Pope Gregory XI: "I have written a letter to the holy father asking him, for love of that most sweet blood, to give us permission to offer *our* bodies for every sort of torment."[28] Noffke suggests that by this request, Catherine was asking the pope's permission to visit the Holy Land with her followers and companions.[29]

The content of Catherine's letters after she received Raymond as her personal confessor in early 1374, however, begins to shift dramatically. With two exceptions, her other letters in 1374 and early 1375 are addressed to her followers and to local religious men and women. The two exceptions, however, are important. The first, a letter written in the first half of 1375 to Frate Lazzarino da Pisa, is directed toward a man who had initially doubted Catherine. Frate Lazzarino

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have not included it in the list of letters Catherine wrote before Raymond became her confessor. For a full description of Noffke's methods for dating the letters, see Noffke, *Letters, vol. 1*, xli-xlvii.

[27] The two are Catherine of Siena, Letter T14/G252/DT13, *Letters*, *vol. 1,* 29-30; and Catherine of Siena, Letter T18/G250/DT14, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 32-33.

[28] Catherine of Siena, Letter T127/G117/DT20, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 40.

[29] Noffke, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 140, note 15.

was a Franciscan friar who had initially met Catherine at an earlier point in order to test her and garner information to further denounce her publicly. After meeting her, however, he begged to be received as her disciple.[30] By 1375, when she wrote to him, he had become one of her followers. The letter is significant because it implies that although Lazzarino had become part of Catherine's *famiglia*, her term for the men and women who looked to her for spiritual guidance, he had not renounced the Franciscans and become a Dominican. Catherine advises him: "if it should happen that these three enemies of ours show up along the way—I mean the world, the flesh, and the devil—let us take up the weapon of hatred, as did your father Saint Francis… If the demon of the flesh wants to rebel against this spirit, let contempt come on the scene to punish and mortify our body as did this same father of yours [Francis] who always ran along this holy way conscientiously, with no carelessness."[31] Thus, although Catherine continues to acknowledge St. Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Franciscan order, as Lazzarino's spiritual leader, she does not seem to feel compunction about providing him with advice.[32] The letter further demonstrates that Catherine's fame had spread beyond the circle of her own town and religious order. The second exception is Catherine's first letter to Raymond, written in June 1375, to be discussed in more detail below.[33]

By June 27 1375, however, she was writing a highly political letter to Sir John Hawkwood, an English mercenary soldier then fighting in the service of Pope Gregory XI, to ask his participation in the same Crusade for which she would later request Queen Joanna of

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[30] Noffke, *Letters, vol. 1*, 91.
[31] Catherine of Siena, Letter T225/G121, *Letters, vol. 1*, 93.
[32] Noffke, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 94, notes that the manuscript Paris Ital. 1002 contains "our" instead of the two instances of "your" in this letter's reference to St. Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Franciscans. She additionally points out, however, that the manuscript is a reproduction, with many errors, of MS Florence Palatino 56, itself a fifteenth-century copy of Vienna MS Palatino 3514. See Noffke, *Letters, vol. 1*, 338-339. Regardless, the use of a first-person plural or a second-person singular pronoun does not significantly affect the content of the letter itself or Catherine's claim to provide advice to a member of a different religious order.
[33] Catherine of Siena, Letter T273/G97/DT31, *Letters, vol. 1*, 85-89.

Naples's support.[34] During the course of the brief letter, delivered to Hawkwood by Raymond at Catherine's behest, she tells the soldier:

> Would it be such a great thing for you to withdraw a little into yourself and consider how much pain and anguish you have endured in the devil's service and pay? Now my soul wants you to change your course and enlist instead in the service and cross of Christ crucified, you and all your followers and companies. Then you would be one of Christ's companies, going to fight the unbelieving dogs who have possession of our holy place, where gentle First Truth lived and endured his sufferings for us. You find so much satisfaction in fighting and waging war, so now I am begging you tenderly in Christ Jesus not to wage war any longer against Christians (for that offends God), but to go instead to fight the unbelievers, as God and our holy father have decreed… I find it very strange that you should be wanting to make war here after pledging (as I've heard) your willingness to go and die for Christ in this holy crusade. This is hardly the holy preparation God is asking of you for going to so holy and venerable a place! It seems to me you should be readying yourself now by virtue until the time comes, for you and the rest who are so disposed, to give your lives for Christ.[35]

Noffke notes that Gregory did not promulgate his bull calling for the Crusade until July 1, indicating that Catherine was considered important enough (either by Gregory directly, or by Raymond indirectly) to be told about it in advance.[36] This crusade, which never fully materialized, would be an important and recurring topic for Catherine. In the months following the promulgation of the bull, Catherine wrote two additional letters to Joanna;[37] one to Elizabeth, the Queen Mother of Hungary;[38] one to Pietro del Monte Santa Maria, a Sienese senator;[39] and several to local religious figures, all advocating support for the planned crusade.

As the 1370s progressed, Catherine's political activities continued, most notably her support for the papacy during the War of the Eight Saints (1375-1378), against a coalition of

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[34] Catherine of Siena, Letter T143/G313/DT39, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 147.
[35] Catherine of Siena, Letter T140/G220/DT30, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 80-81.
[36] Noffke, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 80n6.
[37] Catherine of Sienna, Letter T138/G314/DT41, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 99-102; and Letter T133/G312/DT32, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 122-126.
[38] Catherine of Siena, Letter T145/G311/DT40, *Letters, vol. 1*, 166-171.
[39] Catherine of Siena, Letter T148/G210/DT36, *Letters, vol. 1*, 150-153.

Italian city-states led by Florence.[40] Connected to this support were her ardent exhortations to Gregory to return the papacy to Rome from Avignon. We have already seen that Gregory had sent Birgitta of Sweden's former confessor to Catherine in early 1374, and that by 1375, the pope presumably held her in high enough esteem to inform her of his proposed crusade (either directly or indirectly) before he disseminated the bull announcing it publicly.

Catherine would develop an advisory relationship with both Gregory and his successor Urban VI, alternating between supporting their efforts and sharply chastising them when they did not meet with Catherine's expectations of papal behavior and authority. Her earliest extant letter to Gregory, from January 1376, already demonstrates the approaches that she would take with both popes. In it, she has progressed some distance from simply asking the pope's permission to travel to the Holy Land. Throughout the letter, Catherine is primarily concerned with encouraging the pope and providing him with spiritual support during unspecified trials that he is facing: "Don't be afraid, father, no matter what may happen, of these blustery winds that have descended upon you—I mean those rotten members who have rebelled against you. Don't be afraid, for divine help is near. Just attend to spiritual affairs, to appointing good pastors and administrators in your cities, for you have experienced rebellion because of bad pastors and administrators."[41] Immediately, however, her tone becomes harsher: "Do something about it! And take heart in Christ Jesus and don't be afraid. Pursue and finish with true holy zeal what you have begun by holy intent—I mean your return [to Rome] and the sweet holy crusade. Delay no longer, for your delaying has already been the cause of a lot of trouble… Up, father! No more irresponsibility!"[42]

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[40] Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, provides an analysis of Catherine's role in this war.
[41] Catherine of Siena, Letter T185/G1/DT54, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 248.
[42] Catherine of Siena, Letter T185/G1/DT54, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 248-249.

Perhaps realizing that she has gone too far, Catherine offers an apology for her severe words, saying "Forgive me, father, for talking to you like this. Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks, you know."[43] By the letter's close, however, Catherine has once again re-asserted herself by giving Gregory what appears to be a direct order: "I've heard you are going to promote the master of our order to another office. If this is so, I beg you for love of Christ crucified to see that you give us a good and virtuous vicar… You can discuss this with Messer Nicola da Osimo and the archbishop of Otranto. I will write to them about it."[44]

This first extant letter to Gregory is representative of Catherine's subsequent communications with the pope. In those letters, her language continues to slide easily between guidance and rebuke, and the pope's return from Avignon to Rome is a recurrent theme. In May 1376, Catherine herself traveled to Avignon, to plead directly with Gregory. There, she found that her goals coincided with his: in September, Gregory set out for Rome, putting an end to the Avignon papacy. Although artists would later enjoy depicting Catherine physically leading the pope back to Rome, she actually remained in France until November, attempting to allay the French king's displeasure at Gregory's departure from Avignon and requesting his support for the crusade project.[45]

Gregory died in 1378. Enmity between his successor, Urban VI, and the curia led to the election of a second, French, pope, Clement VII, and the beginning of the Western Schism (1378-1417). Catherine characteristically supported the Roman papacy during the final two years of her life, writing letters to prominent Clementine supporters including Joanna of Naples, the king of France, and Cardinal Pietro di Luna. Her letters to Urban

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[43] Catherine of Siena, Letter T185/G1/DT54, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 249.
[44] Catherine of Siena, Letter T185/G1/DT54, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 250.
[45] Catherine of Siena, Letter T235/G186/DT78, *Letters, vol. 2*, 219-222. See also Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 171-177, for a discussion of Catherine's journey to Avignon.

have the same tenor as those written to his predecessor. For example, in January 1380, a few months before she died, Catherine begs Urban's patience and then immediately asserts an aspect of authority over him: "Be patient with me, for I will never, as long as I live, cease prodding you in prayer and in person and in writing—until I see what I desire in you and in holy Church."[46]

There are fewer surviving letters from Catherine to Urban than from the future saint to Gregory; in November 1378, she traveled to Rome, where she had readier access to the pope's person.[47] Raymond reports that once there, Catherine gave an impassioned speech to the curia, advising courage in the face of the schism. Afterward, Urban remonstrated the cardinals in a harsh speech:

> See how blameworthy we are before God for being frightened. This weak woman puts us all to shame. I call her a weak woman, not to make little of her; but I want to emphasize that she *is* a woman, and belongs to what is by nature the weaker sex, and from that I want to draw a lesson for ourselves. By nature, it is she who should show fear, even in a situation where we would feel no danger. But on the contrary, it is we who play the coward, while she stands undaunted, and by her rousing words imparts to us her own courageous spirit.[48]

Catherine remained in Rome from November 1378 onward, enjoying frequent audiences with the pope and helping him plan to end the schism. Raymond, however, was sent by Urban on a preaching tour to promote the same crusade that Gregory had wished to launch.[49] In January 1380, Catherine stopped drinking water, adding to the strictly ascetic eating practices that she had employed for years. The resulting dehydration was too much for her already emaciated body

[46] Catherine of Siena, Letter T364/G21, *Letters, vol. 4*, 353.
[47] Raymond, *Life*, 310.
[48] Raymond, *Life*, 311.
[49] Raymond, *Life*, 314.

to endure, and although she began eating and drinking normally in February, she died two months later, on April 29, 1380.[50]

Domination and Resistance

In the above sketch of Catherine's life, particularly the public components of it, I have relied heavily upon her letters as source material for a straightforward reason: our other main source about Catherine's life, the *vita* written by her confessor Raymond, largely eschews any discussion of her political career, attempting instead to convey her story in more conventional saintly terms. Finished approximately fifteen years after Catherine's death, Raymond's *vita* of his spiritual charge was clearly composed with the aim of seeing her canonized.[51] At the points when he is forced to explain her unusual activities (becoming a tertiary instead of a cloistered nun, for example), Raymond invariably depicts her decisions as being personally guided by either Christ or the pope himself. By doing so, Raymond simultaneously provides an explanation for Catherine's sometimes abnormal behavior and also attributes more glory to her by making her a frequent, direct recipient of Jesus and the pontiff's advice and favor. In Luongo's words, "Raymond's Catherine was a would-be contemplative forced into the world in obedience to divine commands."[52] As we have already seen, Raymond reports that Catherine began her public life only when directed to do so by Christ at their wedding. Significantly, for Raymond, this "public" life consisted of charity work with few political implications.

Catherine's own letters tell a different story. They also provide us with insight into the negotiated relationship between Catherine and Raymond. He was ostensibly her spiritual director, and yet, much as she did with Gregory and Urban, it is often Catherine who seems to be

[50] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 169.
[51] Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 8; Karen Scott, "St. Catherine of Siena, 'Apostola,'" *Church History* 61.1 (1992): 34-46.
[52] Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 8.

giving Raymond spiritual advice. Her letters to Raymond are rarely quite as harsh as are the ones written to the popes, but Catherine apologizes to Raymond in only one of her letters. On the other hand, Raymond wrote Catherine's *vita* after her death, without direct influence or guidance from her. As such, he was able to shape her public perception starting from the time of her death.

To help understand the relationship between Catherine and her confessor, it is useful to employ James Scott's theories of domination and resistance. An anthropologist with a focus on the Malay peninsula, Scott posits the creation of two transcripts, the public and the hidden; he focuses on societies in which one group has sharp economic or political dominance over another group. His examples include slave societies, serfdoms, and areas where the Hindu caste system is strictly enforced. Although Scott does not address medieval Europe in his text, his ideas still seem to be applicable to the relationship between Catherine and Raymond. As a (male) priest, Raymond enjoyed the full backing of the Dominican Order and the institutional Church, giving him at least nominal dominance over Catherine, who was both female and—as a tertiary—technically a member of the laity. Certainly, Catherine experienced a certain level of privilege as a woman people regarded as holy during her lifetime, but it is important to remember that even holy women were not immune to a sudden change for the worse in their status.[53]

According to Scott, public transcripts constitute an "open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate."[54] That is, the public transcript is the version of events, actions, and discourses that plays out among subordinates when the dominant elites are present. Scott notes that with greater disparity in power comes a falser public transcript.[55] In contrast is what Scott calls the "hidden transcript," that is the actions and discourses that take place "off-

[53] Marguerite Porete (died 1310), Joan of Arc (c. 1412-1431), and the women of the beguine movement provide the most prominent examples.
[54] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 2.
[55] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 3.

stage," away from the dominant elites. In the societies on which Scott focuses, the hidden transcript may take many forms beyond obvious complaints among fellow subordinates: these include theft, mockery, unproductive labor, tax evasion, and attempts to undermine the elites via (anonymous) destruction of property.[56] For Scott, the discrepancy between hidden and public transcripts is a "zone of constant struggle," in which everyday, ordinary conflicts arise.[57] Although he devotes most of his study to the transcripts of subordinates, Scott also incisively argues that elites utilize public and hidden transcripts as well. He argues that "if the weak have obvious and compelling reasons to seek refuge behind a mask when in the presence of power, the powerful have their own compelling reasons for adopting a mask in the presence of subordinates."[58]

Ordinarily, and theoretically, the confessor (Raymond) would serve as the spiritual director to his charge (Catherine). John Coakley reminds us, however, that in the medieval understanding, holy women—by virtue of their status as supposedly contemplative women—had access to a type of intimate relationship with Jesus that was ordinarily not available to men.[59] Nancy Caciola also points out that the nature of women's bodies, understood to be exceptionally porous in medieval medical theory, left them open to the possibility of divine (or demonic) possession.[60] As a case study, Aviad Kleinberg has performed a close analysis of the relationship between Christina of Stommeln (1242-1312) and her confessor and biographer, Peter of Dacia,

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[56] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 5.
[57] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 14.
[58] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 10. As an example, Scott cites George Orwell's essay "Shooting an Elephant," in which Orwell is reluctant to kill an elephant that had previously ravaged the surrounding area, but feels that he must do so in order to maintain his position and respect among the native, colonized onlookers.
[59] Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*, 2-3. Coakley provides analyses of the relationship between Catherine, Elisabeth of Schönau, Hildegard of Bingen, Mary of Oignies, Christina of Stommeln, Angela of Foligno, Giunta Bevegnati, Margaret Ebner, and Dorothy of Montau and their respective confessors/biographers.
[60] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*.

highlighting the ways in which Peter was convinced of, and in some ways influenced by, Christina's holiness.[61]

The relationship between Catherine and Raymond certainly resembles that of other late medieval holy women and their confessors, and yet, in some ways, it is markedly different. With the exception of Hildegard of Bingen, for example, none of the other women in Coakley's study were exceptionally political. Also, again with the exception of Hildegard, none left behind such voluminous documentation of their own writing as did Catherine. Moreover, although there are similarities between Hildegard and Catherine, it is important to note that while Hildegard was a Benedictine abbess of noble birth, Catherine was a Dominican tertiary of middling means. Thus, while Hildegard came from a background of influence and was (at least nominally) enclosed, Catherine was free to travel about Italy, with at least some institutional support.

There is also the remarkable language that Catherine uses in her letters to address Raymond. Using Scott's terms, these letters would, of course, be considered public transcripts as they are evidence of direct communication between Catherine and Raymond. When looking at them closely, however, it is additionally possible to discern elements of hidden transcripts—unspoken, but implied, meanings that hint toward the ways that Catherine attempted to shape the relationship with her confessor. As Heather Webb writes, although Raymond "may have had plans to shape Catherine's life story into a model of Dominican sainthood, Catherine herself had plans to sculpt her confessor's life."[62]

There are seventeen extant letters from Catherine to Raymond, more than to any other single recipient. The majority do not offer much by way of understanding their relationship, but a few do provide us with insights. Perhaps the most crucial is the first letter (briefly discussed

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[61] Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country*, 71-98.
[62] Heather Webb, "Catherine of Siena's Heart," *Speculum* 80.3 (2005): 811.

above) that Catherine wrote to Raymond, approximately one year after he became her confessor. Elsewhere, I have analyzed the letter in terms of Catherine's attempts to masculinize herself and feminize Raymond in order to create her own authority, but here, I wish to focus on two passages from the letter.[63]

To set the context, Catherine and Raymond had been in Pisa, but she came home to Siena to intervene in the execution of a political criminal, Niccolò di Toldo. At the time, Siena was partial to the anti-papal league; Niccolò, from the papal state of Perugia, was suspected of causing trouble in the city and had been sentenced to beheading by the Sienese government.[64] Although Catherine was unable to prevent his execution by beheading, she did attend it. Her letter to Raymond details her mystical experiences there.

In her salutation, after telling Raymond that she longs to see him drowning in Christ's blood, she informs him: "I see no other way of our attaining the most basic virtues we need. No, dearest father, your soul could not attain them—this soul of yours that has become my food. Not a moment passes that I am not eating this food at the table of the gentle Lamb who was slain in such blazing love."[65]

The unusual imagery of eating souls occurs frequently in Catherine's writings, as a metaphor for both bringing others to salvation and for achieving it oneself. She perennially encouraged her recipients to partake of souls. During Lent 1372, for example, in one of her earliest letters, she advises Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi, a young man who had asked to join her circle of followers, that "you will have to eat and savor souls, the food of God's servants, and

[63] White, "Hungering."
[64] Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 94-96.
[65] Catherine of Siena, Letter T273/G97/DT31, *Letters, vol. 1*, 85.

there I advise and beg you to find your delight always."[66] That same year, in a letter to a monk in Asciano, she elaborates on the image: "This is how we come to take delight in the food in which God delights. This is how we learn to enjoy eating souls. Souls are a food so sweet and mild that they make us fat, till we can enjoy no other food. I tell you, here your weak teeth will be so strengthened that you will be able to eat big mouthfuls as well as small."[67] Here, Catherine considers the concept of eating souls central enough to her understanding of Christianity that she devotes almost the entire letter to its elaboration.

By 1375, the year of the execution letter, Catherine still considered the metaphor relevant, as she tells Raymond that not only is his soul unable to achieve salvation without Christ's aid—a common, rather unremarkable idea—but that his soul is also food for her. Moreover, "not a moment" passes that she is not eating his soul. Nowhere in her writings does Catherine suggest that her soul is food for anyone but Christ. Although she informs other recipients that she longs to eat their soul, it is *Raymond* whose soul constantly provides food for her. In her classic study *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that the religious significance of food had a gendered component in the late Middle Ages.[68] While Bynum's theory is persuasive, I do not find it relevant here. In her letters, Catherine encourages both men and women to eat souls, and she longs to consume the souls of both genders. Thus, when it comes to *souls* as food, gender does not seem to be important for Catherine. Rather, I hold that in the execution letter, Catherine is producing an implicit assertion of her authority. Although no humans can eat her soul, she is constantly consuming Raymond's.

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[66] Catherine of Siena, Letter T99/G282/DT7, *Letters, vol. 1*, 15. Noffke, *Letters, vol. 1*, 15 note 17, traces Catherine's image of eating souls to John 4:33: "So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?'"

[67] Catherine of Siena, Letter T200/G112/DT9, *Letters, vol. 1*, 21. The imagery of eating souls is present throughout Catherine's writings; I have selected these two early examples as some of the clearest articulations of the metaphor.

[68] Bynum, *Holy Feast*. Although Bynum refers to Catherine throughout her monograph, see 165-180 for an extended discussion of the Sienese tertiary.

As the letter continues, Catherine tells Raymond that shortly before the execution was to take place, she briefly placed her own head on the execution block. Disappointedly finding her hopes of martyrdom dashed, Catherine awaited the condemned man at the base of the execution stand. She tells Raymond that upon Niccolò's appearance, he "wanted me to make the sign of the cross on him. When he had received the sign, I said, 'Down for the wedding, my dear brother!'"[69] Here, Catherine performs the (male) priestly action of blessing the condemned man. Although she states that "a great crowd of people was there," she makes no mention of a priest, friar, or any other religious figure except herself.[70] We have no way of knowing whether Niccolò had previously received absolution from a priest. Importantly, however, Catherine sees no need to mention this action to Raymond if it did occur. She is careful to point out, though, that *she* blessed Niccolò.

The events narrated in this letter have both a public and a hidden transcript. In the public transcript, which we can take to be the surface reading of Catherine's words, she has merely elaborated upon a metaphor—eating souls—that she frequently employed. As we have seen, she had been discussing the consumption of souls for at least three years before the execution took place; although we have no firm evidence, we can presume that Raymond was familiar with her use of the image. Additionally, her action of blessing Niccolò could be interpreted as simply responding to the request of a dying man to be blessed by a holy woman; we have seen that Catherine had already garnered enough attention as a religious figure in northern Italy to be discussed at the General Chapter of the Dominican Friars in 1374.

The hidden transcript, however, is far more interesting. Again, Catherine writes in the letter that it is only Raymond's soul that she is eating, constantly. In none of her other letters

[69] Catherine of Sienna, Letter T273/G97/DT31, *Letters, vol. 1*, 88.
[70] Catherine of Sienna, Letter T273/G97/DT31, *Letters, vol. 1*, 88.

does she specifically name the recipients' souls as her food; rather, she either says that she merely *longs* to eat their souls or she speaks of the action in more general terms. I contend that her emphasis on the specific consumption of Raymond's soul is a subtle technique used by Catherine to assert her own religious authority at an early point in her relationship with Raymond. This reading is bolstered by the detailed narration of the actions at the execution block, in which Catherine highlights her own activities but omits mention of any other religious figures who might have been present and performed the same activities for the condemned man.

As we examine more of her letters to Raymond, we find that Catherine continued to assert her own authority over and above his. Writing to him in 1376, shortly after he left for Avignon to plead with Gregory to lift an interdict that had been imposed upon Florence,[71] Catherine tells Raymond of the following vision: "I wanted to make my confession to you; but divine Goodness gave me more than I was asking for, since when I asked for you he gave me himself, and gave me absolution and remission of both my sins and yours."[72] The quote comes from the middle of a letter in which Catherine is encouraging Raymond and urging him not to fail in his mission. Although she begins the passage innocently enough, by informing Raymond that she wished to relate her sins to him, as her confessor, it quickly changes to demonstrate that Catherine does not need Raymond to intercede with Christ on her behalf. Rather, Christ will absolve her sins directly. Moreover, based on Catherine's request, Jesus will also forgive Raymond's sins.

I would argue that although Catherine is quite subtle in this passage, her hidden transcript nevertheless clearly invokes her own authority. She does not tell Raymond that she has directly

[71] This long interdict, known as the "War of the Eight Saints," along with Catherine's involvement in it, has been analyzed in depth by Luongo, *Saintly Politics*.
[72] Catherine of Siena, Letter T226/G89, *Letters, vol. 2*, 10.

asked Christ for forgiveness, as that might have been going too far or might have breached the public transcript. Rather, she laments Raymond's absence to Christ, who then proactively grants her absolution. By attributing the agency to Jesus, she is able to maintain that she is, at least nomially, the penitent. Despite the mask that she places over the action, however, she is doing more than simply asserting her own independence. As when she blesses Niccolò during the events recounted in the execution letter, she is taking on the role of priest. At a time when absolution for all sins could be attained only through the intercession of a priest, Catherine took on the role of that male authority figure.[73]

Coakley acknowledges that "nowhere does [Catherine] ask [Raymond's] advice or refer to his instruction or aid," but he also states that "it is not that she challenges his authority."[74] While I agree with Coakley's first argument—it is true that Catherine's letters to Raymond contain no requests for spiritual aid—I find his second claim problematic. Catherine's ability not only to receive absolution directly from Christ, but to receive it for Raymond as well, indicates that she interpreted herself as being able to intercede with Christ on Raymond's behalf—a complete reversal of the expected confessor/penitent relationship. It seems clear that although she does not do it overtly, she does subtly and implicitly challenge his authority over her.

By late 1377, Catherine had worked with Gregory to return the papacy to Rome. The long Florentine interdict was still in place, however, and Catherine dispatched Raymond to Rome to continue pleading with the pope, with the intention of soon joining him there herself. While the two were separated, they continued to communicate. The following passage, worth

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[73] Raymond recounts numerous stories in which Catherine does not need priests; most often, she receives the Eucharist directly from Christ or by means of it miraculously levitating to her. See Raymond, 288-304. Bynum, *Holy Feast*, argues that Catherine, along with the numerous other women in her study, continued to show great reverence for priests. I do not dispute this theory; rather, I hold that there were specific instances in which Catherine saw it necessary to articulate her own authority. Her appropriation of a priestly function in this instance serves as an example of that need to articulate her own power and influence.

[74] Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*, 181.

quoting at length, is from yet another encouraging epistle that Catherine sent to Raymond, presumably in response to a despondent letter she had received from him:

> Remember, dearest father and remiss son, Mary's teaching and that of gentle First Truth. Realize your need to dwell in knowledge of yourself, and to offer continual humble prayer. You have to treasure your cell and come to know the truth, and avoid all company except what is necessary for the salvation of souls, to rescue them from the hands of the devil in holy confession. Where that is concerned, find your pleasure with publicans and sinners. As for other people, love many of them but associate with few. Don't forget the divine office in the proper time and place. Don't be slow or careless when you have things to do for God and in service to your neighbors, either. But though you do have business to attend to, find refuge in your cell and don't be gadding about under the pretext of virtue.[75]

To begin, Catherine's means of addressing Raymond as "dearest father and remiss son" is interesting, but not particularly unusual for her. She twice calls Raymond "son" in the execution letter, and she refers to him as such when naming him as the messenger of the communication that she sent to the mercenary soldier John Hawkwood.[76] This appears to be a rhetorical choice that she employs when giving spiritual advice to Raymond.

More interesting is her counsel to avoid people and to seek refuge in a solitary cell. Throughout his *vita* of Catherine, Raymond attempts to portray her in the conventional terms of a contemplative female saint who was forced into the world against her will. We have already seen that in the *vita,* her most public action is her visit to the papal curia in 1378. In his narration of the event, Raymond transforms Catherine's active intention to visit Rome into reluctant acquiescence to Pope Urban's request, relating a lengthy anecdote in which Catherine initially refuses to leave Siena for Rome, fearful of the condemnation she will face for "gadding about" Italy. It is only when Urban sends a written request to her that she complies.[77] Interestingly,

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[75] Catherine of Siena, Letter T104/G92, *Letters, vol. 2*, 656.
[76] The references to Raymond as "son" in the execution letter can be found at Catherine of Siena, Letter T273/G97/DT31, *Letters, vol. 1*, 85, 87. The references in the letter to John Hawkwood are at Catherine of Siena, Letter T140/G220/DT30, *Letters, vol. 1*, 81.
[77] Raymond, *Life*, 310.

Raymond attributes a fear of "gadding about" to Catherine, the same action against which she cautioned him.

Reading Catherine's letters, however, provides a different picture of her. Rather than a contemplative recluse who had to be compelled to travel to Rome, we instead find a woman who traveled throughout Italy and frequently became embroiled in public, political conflicts. Thus, her advice to Raymond that he "find refuge in [his] cell and [not gad] about under the pretext of virtue" becomes all the more interesting. She is, in effect, telling him to adopt the type of feminine, reclusive life that he would later use to characterize her. At the same time, she eschews her own advice and goes "gadding about" Italy in the name of restoring the Church. Certainly, Catherine probably did not interpret her own activities as being performed under the *pretext* of virtue, but rather for virtue itself.[78] Importantly, however, she has once again reversed the roles of the male confessor and the female penitent. She has instructed Raymond to seclude himself in contemplation while she will implicitly continue with her public activities.

From late 1378 until her death in April 1380, Catherine and Raymond were usually separated: she remained in Rome while he went on the preaching tour for the crusade planned by Gregory and then Urban. The two, however, seem to have exchanged frequent letters, and Catherine's half of the correspondence is filled, as expected, with both encouragements of Raymond rebukes of him. In December 1378, Raymond was on his way to France to guarantee the French king's support for the Roman, as opposed to the Avignon, papacy during the early days of the Western Schism. Catherine's letter of encouragement to Raymond begins with an extended discussion of the "light of fine discernment." She then tells Raymond that because she

[78] Raymond frequently addresses Catherine's detractors, many of whom criticized her public activities as unbecoming for a woman. See, for example, 165-172. Catherine herself addresses one of her detractors directly in a terse letter, although the focus of her critic's complaints seems to have been her eating practices rather than her political activities. See Catherine of Siena, Letter T92/G305/DT19, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 160-161.

knows how "essential" the light is, she longs to see him enlightened with it, specifying that she desires it as much as "I myself long to rise up from darkness and unite and conform myself with the light."[79] Her public transcript would here seem to place Catherine and Raymond on nearly the same footing: although she is aware of the light and wants him to receive it, she herself does not yet have it either.

The hidden transcript is quite subtle in this communication to Raymond. One would perhaps expect Catherine to ultimately claim that she *does* indeed have the light that she longs for Raymond to receive, but she in fact never makes that explicit assertion. She does, however, provide Raymond with an exhortation: "I beg you, for love of Christ crucified and of the dear mother Mary, to try as hard as you can to fulfill God's will and my soul's desire for you, for then my soul will be happy."[80] As we have seen elsewhere, Catherine does not publicly or overtly express her religious superiority; instead, she couches it in terms of her desire, by equating God's will with her own. Nevertheless, she does seem to attribute more weight to her own knowledge and guidance than she does to his. As with her other letters to Raymond, this epistle is devoid of any request on Catherine's part for spiritual advice, and she makes no mention of what Raymond wants her to achieve. Instead, she places her own desires at the center.

By early January 1379, the mission to France had been abandoned, and now, in her letter to Raymond discussing what she perceived to be his failure, Catherine has harsh words for her confessor. After a discourse on the benefits of "bread-eating," a hallmark of spiritual maturity that Catherine contrasts to "liking milk," she tells Raymond:

> God has also wanted you to come to know your own imperfection, showing you that you are still a child rather than a man who feeds on bread. For if God had seen that you had the teeth for it, he would have given you bread, as he has to others of your companions. You weren't worthy to stand even for a little while on

[79] Catherine of Siena, Letter T330/G99, *Letters*, *vol. 4*, 42.
[80] Catherine of Siena, Letter T330/G99, *Letters*, *vol. 4*, 42.

> the [spiritual] battlefield. No, like a child you were driven off—and you willingly fled, very happy that God has made concessions to your weakness! My wicked little father! How blessed would be your soul and mine if you had for love of [Christ's] blood cemented a stone into holy Church with your blood![81]

Here, Catherine's hidden transcript has ruptured the subtle language that she usually employed to give herself authority; it has instead become the public transcript. In the space of a few lines, she has directly—not implicitly—told Raymond that he is spiritually immature and that he is more content to accept God's concessions toward his failures than to strive harder for success. The last sentence of her rebuke is particularly noteworthy. As we have seen, Catherine's letters show no evidence that she looked toward Raymond for spiritual advice; indeed, they often do not even indicate that he *was* her confessor. Here, however, she implies that because of the failure of her spiritual director, her own soul has been harmed, in addition to Raymond's. I do not wish to go so far as to read Catherine's statement as an effort to make Raymond feel guilty, but it remains intriguing that this reproach is one of the very few times that she links his spiritual fate to her own.

Although the January 1379 letter is full of rebuke for Raymond, the clearest instance in which Catherine reverses the confessor/penitent relationship comes from August of that same year. Once again, Raymond had attempted his mission to the king of France and had failed. The content of Catherine's letter makes it clear that she has received a communication from him in which he worries that her love for him will diminish as a result of the aborted mission. Catherine assures Raymond of her love for him, but she also uses the opportunity to take control of their relationship. After telling Raymond that she is at peace about his failure because she "did what [she] could to have someone sent to the king of France,"[82] she informs Raymond: "I make use of

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[81] Catherine of Siena, Letter T333/G100, *Letters*, *vol. 4*, 90.
[82] Catherine of Siena, Letter T344/G101, *Letters*, *vol. 4*, 231-2.

reprimands to bring you constantly back to your senses… And when your own shortcomings are pointed out to you, be happy and thank divine Goodness for appointing someone to work on you and keep an eye on you in God's presence [godete, e ringraziate la divina bontà, che v'ha posto chi lavori sopra di voi, e veglia nel suo cospetto per voi]."[83] She continues to warn him that if he does not attempt again to follow through with the French mission, she will "complain to Christ crucified and to Mary about" him.[84] This is a clear breach of the roles that Raymond and Catherine should nominally have: she claims the power to report Raymond to Christ, and she reminds him of the reasons why *she* attempts to strengthen and direct *his* spiritually. Moreover, Catherine frames herself as the person appointed to monitor—and, presumably, strengthen—Raymond's Christian beliefs.

By the letter's close, Catherine retreats from giving Raymond the type of direct counsel and spiritual warnings that we would normally expect him to give her and instead takes the rare step of asking his forgiveness "for whatever has not been for God's honor and the respect I owe you. Let love be my excuse."[85] This is reminiscent of her letter to Pope Gregory XI, discussed above, in which she begged his forgiveness for perhaps going too far in expressing both her displeasure and her authority. It also constitutes a rare moment in which she seems to be—or at least presents herself as—dependent on Raymond's blessing.

The remaining few letters that Catherine wrote to Raymond before her death in 1380 are either straightforward notes of encouragement or recountings of mystical visions that do not appear to have public or hidden claims to authority. Nevertheless, they point toward an important conclusion: the very fact that Catherine did write frequent letters to Raymond demonstrates that

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[83] Catherine of Siena, Letter T344/G101, *Letters*, *vol. 4*, 233. For the Italian, see Caterina da Siena, *Le Lettere di Caterina da Siena, vol. 5,* 193-194.
[84] Catherine of Siena, Letter T344/G101, *Letters*, *vol. 4*, 234.
[85] Catherine of Siena, Letter T344/G101, *Letters*, *vol. 4*, 235.

the two had a close, if unequal, relationship. Catherine's frequent exclamations of authority, done both overtly and subtly, indicate that she wrote the letters of her own volition; she did not write reports to Raymond simply because she was told to do so. Raymond does, though, seem to have been someone in whom Catherine could confide. The execution letter and the last two letters Catherine wrote, both addressed to Raymond, tell of deeply personal mystical experiences and encounters with God.[86] In the letters written to her other recipients, including religious men and women, Catherine certainly uses mystical language frequently and draws on images that reflect her spiritual intimacy with Christ, but it is only with Raymond that she seems to have felt comfortable sharing the details of her own experiences. Thus, while the hidden transcripts and her attempts to assert her own authority undoubtedly inform our understanding of the relationship between Catherine and her confessor, it is important that we realize that the very existence of a public transcript between them provides significant evidence about how Catherine and Raymond saw each other, and potentially about how they presented themselves to each other and to the public. Raymond may not have truly functioned as Catherine's confessor, but she does seem to have recognized a confidante in him.

Conclusion: A Look Forward

We have seen that Catherine had a very different conception of herself than the one that Raymond chose to utilize in his *Life* of her. He frequently omits her political activities, and when he is forced to mention them (her address to the curia, for example, an event that might not have been quickly forgotten), he attributes their agency to Christ or the pope, leaving Catherine as the sometimes-reluctant effector of others' plans. Catherine, on the other hand, clearly saw herself as a public figure and used her epistolary career to make her political goals a reality, including

[86] The final two letters can be found at Catherine of Siena, Letter T371/G103, *Letters*, *vol. 4*, 359-363; and Catherine of Siena, Letter T373/G102, *Letters*, *vol. 4*, 364-370.

providing Raymond with frequent acclamations of her own independence and authority alongside—and sometimes above—his.

Raymond had different goals for Catherine's life than she had for herself, and he chose to portray a version of her that he felt would be more amenable to sanctity, downplaying—or excising—the parts of her life that he deemed too controversial. Those goals, however, often seem to oppose Catherine's aspirations for her own life. It is clear that both wanted her to reach sainthood, but they approach that through different lenses. In the next chapter, as I place Agnes, Birgitta, and Catherine in conversation with each other and with the theologians previously examined, I will argue that their conflicting claims regarding Catherine's foreskin ring(s)—and indeed, their entire understanding of the Holy Foreskin—stem from these different ways that Raymond and Catherine interpreted her approach to sainthood.

CHAPTER 6: THE BODY, THE BLOOD, THE CHILD: UNDERSTANDING THE HOLY FORESKIN

In the past few chapters, I have focused on contextualizing three women who had visions of the Holy Foreskin. In doing so, I have used those encounters to construct arguments about how they practiced their religion: Agnes's mysticism that is an imperfect fit for a Franciscan beguine, Birgitta's relationship with the Virgin Mary and prominence during her own lifetime, and Catherine's inverted relationship with her confessor. Here, I wish to bring the focus fully onto their interactions with the Holy Foreskin, using those previous arguments to help explain their experiences. I will also place these women in dialogue with the theological concerns examined earlier by exploring five themes: the location of Jesus's foreskin, its relationship to the Eucharist and to the Resurrection, why medieval veneration of Jesus's foreskin was not sexual, what the foreskin meant to the three women, and how each woman mediated (successfully or not) the potential transgressions associated with venerating a theologically problematic relic.

Location of the Holy Foreskin

As we have seen, these three women do not agree on the location of Jesus's foreskin. Birgitta is the only one of them who unequivocally states that it is on earth. In the brief vision in Rome during the 1350s in which Mary tells Birgitta about the foreskin, Birgitta presents the medieval history that Mary saved Jesus's prepuce and passed it and some blood from his wounds during the Passion on to John the Evangelist, who buried them. Birgitta, however, leaves the usual Charlemagne component out of the history for reasons that are unclear. Instead, in Mary's speech to Birgitta, she says that an angel showed the location of the foreskin and blood to "friends of God."[1] Birgitta also does not provide a chain of transmission to explain how these

[1] Birgitta of Sweden, *Sancta Birgitta: Revelaciones, Book VI,* ed. Birger Bergh (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1991), 273.

relics of Christ ended up in Rome; Mary, via Birgitta, states only that the Romans do not honor the "treasure that is most dear to [Mary]."[2]

In this brief vision, Birgitta has made two statements about the location of the Holy Foreskin. First, it is located in a specific city, Rome, and therefore presumably in the Basilica of St. John Lateran; as we have seen, the Lateran did claim to possess one of the foreskin relics.[3] This refutes the claims of any other foreskin relic. Secondly, and more importantly from a theological standpoint, Mary, through Birgitta, claims that Jesus's foreskin has *always* been on earth. Mary/Birgitta provides no location for where it was buried, nor does she state how long it remained underground. The key point, however, is that it never left the earth and was thus not reunited with the rest of Jesus's body during the Resurrection. For Birgitta, the Holy Foreskin was and had always been an earthly relic of Christ's human body.

Neither Agnes nor Catherine is as clear about the earthly location(s) of Jesus's prepuce as is Birgitta. Instead, both indicate that Jesus's foreskin is with him in heaven, and that he miraculously, periodically sends it to earth.[4] As such, although they do not directly comment on any of the various foreskin relics or their veracity, both women imply that the earthly relics—including Birgitta's preferred one in Rome—were not real: if Jesus can provide his foreskin, whether as a ring or in the mouth to women on earth, he must have it with him in heaven.[5]

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[2] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelaciones, Book VI*, 273.
[3] Birgitta Morris and Denis Searby, trans., *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden, vol. 3* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 175, note 1, speculate that Birgitta was in the Lateran when she had this vision in Rome in the 1350s. However, they incorrectly imply that this was the only relic of Jesus's foreskin in which people believed during the Middle Ages.
[4] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 182, suggests that Agnes hesitated to tell her confessor about her encounters with the Holy Foreskin because the idea that Jesus's foreskin was resurrected with him "was in conflict with the numerous relics of the foreskin honored throughout Europe." This, of course, ignores the theological arguments *against* those very foreskin relics.
[5] Of course, Agnes, who died in 1315, could not have commented directly on Birgitta's 1350s vision.

Agnes's ideas about the Holy Foreskin's location provide an additional argument that her mysticism was not fully in line with the Franciscan order. Franciscans generally accepted blood relics of Christ and were usually more open to Eucharistic miracles than were their Dominican counterparts. Mark Daniel Holtz, for example, has explored the late medieval blood particle at La Rochelle that Franciscans had long displayed.[6] Caroline Walker Bynum has also noted that because Franciscans stressed the Passion and Crucifixion, they could use relics of Christ on earth to arouse and maintain the average Christian's devotion. For Franciscan teachers, "visible manifestations were important because they pointed beyond." Blood relics could be "a sign of the death that saves."[7]

Agnes rejected this Franciscan acceptance of earthly relics of Jesus by claiming that his foreskin was in heaven. This is emphasized through the structure of the *vita*. Her confessor-biographer writes that "she began to think about the foreskin of the lord and where it might be."[8] Immediately afterward, Agnes began to feel on her tongue the skin that would later be revealed to her as Jesus's foreskin. Agnes's query about where the foreskin might be had initially left open the possibility that it could exist on earth; the implied question was whether it was on earth or in heaven. If it was on earth, the logical second question would be, which of the locations that claimed it possessed the true relic? This question, however, was ultimately precluded by the appearance of Jesus's foreskin on Agnes's tongue and the voice that told her that Jesus's foreskin was resurrected with him. None of the earthly relics was real.

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[6] Mark Daniel Holtz, "Cults of the Precious Blood in the Medieval Latin West," (Ph.D. diss, University of Notre Dame, 1997), 290-295.
[7] Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 129.
[8] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 37, p. 118: "Sic quoque compatiens et flens coepit cogitare de praeputio domini, ubinam esset."

To foreshadow the meaning of the Holy Foreskin, the Circumcision certainly happened at the beginning of Jesus's life while the Passion and Crucifixion, which provided the blood for Franciscan-endorsed blood relics, occurred at the end of Jesus's life. As we have seen, however, medieval Christians often figured the Circumcision—and the blood shed during it—as foreshadowing the Passion and its accompanying blood, drawing a clear link between the two. Jacobus de Voragine saw the blood shed during the Circumcision as the beginning of salvation.[9] In prayer, Catherine of Siena spoke to Jesus of the circumcision blood as "a down payment;" she draws a direct connection to the Passion by ending her prayer with "and in the end, when your body was slashed open, you paid in full."[10] Elsewhere, in an early January 1376 letter to a Dominican friar, she advises him: "Know that on the day that God espoused the human race with his flesh we were washed again in his blood and espoused with his flesh."[11] Although Catherine is not explicit here, the early January date of the letter, combined with the bridal language she usually used to discuss the foreskin, indicates that she understood the Circumcision as another opportunity to be washed in Jesus's blood.

Agnes herself draws a similar connection. Her *vita* states that "almost since from her youth, this person was in the habit on the Day of the Circumcision of crying anxiously from great compassion of the heart over the shed blood of Jesus Christ, which he deigned to shed unhesitatingly [tempestive] at the beginning of his infancy."[12] By strongly emphasizing shed

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[9] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, BnF Nal 1747, 35r.
[10] Catherine of Siena, Letter T221/G152, *Letters, vol.* 2, 184.
[11] Catherine of Siena, Letter T129/G116/DT29, *Letters, vol. 1*, 238. Noffke, 238 note 27, notes that Dupré Thesider reads this passage as Catherine receiving the Eucharist after a long abstention. Noffke rejects this interpretation and instead suggests that Catherine is referring to the Circumcision. I think there is no doubt that Catherine is discussing the Circumcision here.
[12] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, ch. 37, p. 116: "Ista persona solita erat quasi a juventute semper in die circumcisionis anxie deflere ex magna cordia compassione effusionem sanguinis Jesu Christi, quem sic tempestive initio suae infantiae effundere dignatus est." Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin,* 35, provides a more explicit translation: "this person always used to cry over the blood Christ deigned to shed so early at the beginning of His childhood."

blood, Agnes (or her confessor-biographer) makes a implied connection between the blood shed during the Circumcision and the blood shed during the Passion, but it remains only that: an implied connection. As important as Jesus's shed blood was to Agnes, relics of that blood (which never actually appear in Agnes's *vita*) did not necessitate relics of the foreskin.

Both Agnes and Catherine understood the Circumcision to be the first shedding of Christ's blood, but a key difference between them is in the number of times Jesus sent his circumcised, blood-producing foreskin to earth and the number of people to whom he sent it. For Agnes, there was only one recipient of Jesus's foreskin: herself. Nowhere in her *vita* is there an indication that anyone else received any sort of encounter with Jesus's foreskin, let alone one as intense as the one Agnes had. Even during her prolonged internal debate about whether to tell her confessor about the Holy Foreskin's miraculous, repeated appearances on her tongue, she prayed that if Jesus wanted her to confess this experience, he should send *her* his foreskin again.[13] She did not request that her confessor have the same experience, to provide proof to him that gustatory revelations of Jesus's foreskin were real. Importantly, the fact that Agnes swallowed the foreskin each time that it appeared in her mouth ensured that she alone would experience it: there remained no physical evidence that could be collected and displayed as a relic with which other people could interact.[14] Indeed, that possibility is entirely forestalled: when Agnes "[was] tempted to touch it with her finger," perhaps to retrieve and view (or display?) it, the foreskin went down her throat "on its own."[15] Through Jesus's intervention, it was always and only Agnes who encountered the foreskin sent from heaven.

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[13] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 38, p. 120.
[14] For a discussion of the medieval mechanics of digesting Jesus's body, specifically in the form of the Eucharist, see Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist*. See also Piero Camporesi, "The Consecrated Host: A Wondrous Excess," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part 1*, ed. Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone Books, 1989), especially 224-234.
[15] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 37, p. 118.

Catherine, on the other hand, endorsed a vastly multiplied foreskin, even as she seems to have rejected the multiple earthly relics of the Holy Foreskin. The foreskin wedding rings that Catherine believed Jesus to give his many spouses again indicate that Jesus's foreskin was in heaven. As with Agnes, the logical implication is that in order for Jesus to give his foreskin to anyone (whether as a wedding ring or in someone's mouth), it must be with him. As noted, though, Catherine did not reserve these fleshy wedding rings for herself. Indeed, in her letters, she usually states that *everyone* (or at least every woman) possesses one of the rings.

We see Catherine repeatedly telling other women that *they* possessed Jesus's prepuce in the form of a ring. To a nun in Pisa, for example, she writes in 1376 that Jesus has espoused "you—you and everyone else—and not with a ring of silver but with a ring of his own flesh. Look at that tender little child who on the eighth day, when he was circumcised, gave up just so much flesh as to make a tiny circlet of a ring."[16] In late 1377, she reminds one of her earliest followers, Caterina di Ghetto, that "you are a bride. You know very well that God's Son espoused us all at the time of his circumcision, when his flesh was cut to give us just the tiniest bit of a ring as a sign that he wanted to espouse the human race."[17] Catherine similarly ascribes spousal agency to Jesus's circumcision in a 1378 letter to Tora, a recent widow, although here she does not use the second person, instead describing a generic pious Christian woman whom Jesus wed with his foreskin. She does, however, close the letter with a direct address to the widow, instructing her to "wed yourself to Christ crucified with the ring of most holy faith."[18] Although Catherine does not explicitly name Jesus's prepuce in this command, it follows

[16] Catherine of Siena, Letter T221/G152, *Letters, vol. 2*, 184.
[17] Catherine of Siena, Letter T50/G185, *Letters, vol. 2*, 595.
[18] Catherine of Siena, Letter T262/G322, *Letters, vol. 3*, 325.

immediately upon her bridal-influenced discussion of the foreskin, leaving the reader to draw the conclusion that Catherine was again offering Jesus' foreskin as the wedding sign.

Notably, Catherine did not restrict these foreskin rings to holy women (although they are the group to which Catherine mentions them most frequently). In an early 1375 letter to Queen Joanna of Naples, whom Catherine frequently depicted as imperfectly religious, she tells the queen that she desires "to see you a true daughter and spouse consecrated to our dear God;" Catherine then uses a prayer to Jesus to remind Joanna that he has already wed humanity by offering up his flesh on the day of the circumcision. Again, she emphasizes that Jesus's flesh is worth more than any precious metal before transitioning into a discussion of that flesh as food.[19] In this letter, Catherine uses the idea of Jesus's foreskin as a type of incentive to induce Joanna to be a better Christian (in this case, by lending support to the projected Crusade that Catherine wished to launch).

Catherine addressed these discussions of Jesus's foreskin to several women, but to only two men: her confessor Raymond and the priest Bartolomeo Dominici, who had been introduced to her by her previous confessor Tommaso dalla Fonte and who occasionally served as her confessor.[20] In the December 1378 exhortatory letter to Raymond, she closes by telling him that "we must rouse ourselves from the slumber of apathy and rise above the blindness of ignorance, and really espouse Truth with the ring of most holy faith."[21] As Noffke notes, the language here is identical to that used in the letter to the recently widowed Tora: "the ring of most holy faith."[22] In the letter to Tora, Catherine does specifically mention the Holy Foreskin. In this letter to Raymond, however, Catherine stops at an allusion to the foreskin ring and does not name it

[19] Catherine of Siena, Letter T143/G313/DT39, *Letters, vol. 1*, 147-148.
[20] Noffke, *Letters, vol. 4*, 536.
[21] Catherine of Siena, Letter T300/G99, *Letters, vol. 4*, 42-43.
[22] Noffke, *Letters, vol. 4*, 43, note 11.

directly. Given the proximity of the letter's date to the Feast of the Circumcision on January 1, it would seem unusual for Catherine not to name the foreskin if that indeed was her meaning. By contrast, her early January 1376 letter to Bartolomeo—also near the Feast of the Circumcision—does contain a specific reference to Christ's flesh: "Know that on the day God espoused the human race with his flesh we were washed again in his blood and espoused with his flesh."[23] Thus, we might infer that Catherine is discussing Jesus's foreskin with Raymond, but we cannot be certain.

Catherine's almost total silence regarding the Holy Foreskin in her letters to men is a bit mysterious. We possess 383 surviving letters written by Catherine. Of them, 261 (68.15%) are addressed exclusively to men (including 17 to Raymond, her most frequent correspondent), 106 (27.67%) have only women as their recipients, and 16 (4.18%) include both men and women as addressees, usually either a married couple or a mixed group of Catherine's followers. If Catherine had written only a handful of the 383 extant letters to men, one could argue that their sample size was simply quite small, and that Catherine would naturally not discuss every possible topic in so few letters. Instead, however, a gender imbalance among recipients cannot explain why Catherine did not extol Jesus's foreskin to men in her letters. Indeed, if there is a gender imbalance, it is in favor of men: Catherine wrote more than twice as many letters to individual men than she did to individual women.

In her writings, Catherine did not *explicitly* restrict recipients of the foreskin ring to women. For example, she tells the Pisan nun that Jesus has married "you and everyone else [te e ogni creatura]" with the foreskin.[24] She reminds Caterina di Ghetto that "God's Son espoused us

[23] Catherine of Siena, Letter T129/G116/DT29, *Letters, vol. 1*, 238.
[24] Caterina da Siena, *Le Lettere di S. Caterina da Siena, Ridotte a Miglior Lezione, E in Ordine Nuovo Disposte Con Note di Niccolò Tommaseo, a Cura di Piero Misciattelli, vol. 3* (Siena: Giuntini Bentivoglio & C.O., 1913), 338.

all [Figliuolo di Dio tutti ci sposò] at the time of his circumcision."[25] Similarly, in prayer, she notes that Jesus has "espouse[d] our souls to you with the ring of your flesh, the ring of your charity, to be espoused to you by law if we but recognize these blessings of yours—by that law, I mean, through which you make us sharers of eternity."[26] Her silence regarding the subject with men, however, apart from the two brief references to Raymond and Bartolomeo, would seem to indicate that Catherine generally understood the foreskin ring to be a gift for women. Even in her most famous letter, reporting to Raymond on the 1375 execution of the political criminal Niccolò di Toldo, in which she repeatedly shifts the genders of Niccolò, Raymond, and Jesus, culminating in marriage between Niccolò and Jesus, Niccolò does not receive a foreskin ring.[27]

The answer comes from an analysis of Catherine's language when she discusses bridal imagery. Women are frequently addressed as direct brides of Christ. However, when Catherine is writing to a man, particularly a member of the clergy, she usually addresses him as the vicar of the bride of Christ—that is, the institutional Church. In an early letter to Pope Gregory XI, she tells him that if he will support her proposed Crusade, Jesus will favor his bride, the Church.[28] When writing to Pietro di Missere Iacomo Attaghufi dei Tolomei, a Florentine prefect fighting against Gregory's return from Avignon, she suggests to Pietro that he is a false Christian fighting against the renewal of Christ's bride.[29] Similarly, in a late 1377 letter to Raymond, she pleads with Jesus to remove "the brambles of all the sins that are choking" his bride, again referring to the Church.[30]

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[25] Catherine of Siena, Letter T50/G185, *Letters, vol. 2*, 595. For the Italian, see Caterina da Siena*, Le Lettere di S. Caterina da Siena, vol. 1*, 236.
[26] Catherine of Siena, *Prayers*, Prayer 25, 215.
[27] Catherine of Siena, Letter T273/G97/DT31, *Letters, vol. 1*, 85-89. For further analysis of gender bending in this letter, see my "Hungering for Maleness; and Luongo, "Catherine of Siena: Rewriting the Female Holy Authority.
[28] Catherine of Siena, Letter T238/G9/DT80, *Letters, vol. 2*, 233.
[29] Catherine of Siena, Letter T254/G84, *Letters, vol. 2*, 293-297.
[30] Catherine of Siena, Letter T267/G91, *Letters, vol. 2*, 475. For additional examples in which Catherine refers to the institutional Church as Christ's bride when writing to men, see Catherine of Siena, Letter T210/G138, *Letters, vol. 2*,

Her prayers follow the same pattern. In the earliest of her recorded prayers, dated to August 1376, she asks Jesus that her "bones and marrow be ground up for your vicar on earth, your bride's only spouse," referring to Gregory.[31] Similarly, a 1378 prayer sees her advocating with Jesus on behalf of Urban VI as "this new spouse of the Church."[32] In fact, given her usual wide-ranging metaphors and imagery, Catherine's prayers are remarkably consistent in referring to the Church as Jesus's bride and the pope as its vicar or earthly spouse.[33] She does this even during a January 1, 1380 prayer, when she again expresses her understanding of the Circumcision as a down payment for the Passion and of Jesus's foreskin as a wedding ring. Toward the end of this prayer, she implores Jesus to "purge your bride and sweep her clean of old vices just as you have purged and swept her clean of old barren plants."[34] Her language throughout the prayer makes clear that she is referring to the Church, rather than herself, as the bride that needs to be purged of vices; only once in her recorded prayers does she refer to herself as Jesus's bride.[35]

From this, it seems that Catherine did not generally understand men as brides of Christ. Instead, they were vicarial supervisors of Jesus's institutional bride, the Church.[36] They, as men, did not marry Jesus directly. In her most famous letter to Raymond, she even feminizes Niccolò

236-238; Letter T239/G10/DT81, *Letters, vol. 2,* 243-247; Letter T272/G90, *Letters, vol. 2*, 495-506; Letter T227/G126, *Letters, vol. 3*, 120-123; and Letter T373/G102, *Letters, vol. 4*, 364-370. I have found only one example in which Catherine refers to Christ's bride exclusively as the Church when writing to a woman: Letter T214/G174, *Letters, vol. 2*, 658-661.

[31] Catherine of Siena, *Prayers*, Prayer 1, p. 20. Catherine is taking a stance in the impending Great Schism here, stating that Gregory is the sole head of the Church.

[32] Catherine of Siena, *Prayers*, Prayer 7, p. 59.

[33] See, for example, Catherine of Siena, *Prayers*, Prayer 3, p. 36; Prayer 8, p. 64, in which she draws a sharp distinction between herself and the Church as the bride; Prayer 10, p. 80; Prayer 12, p. 103; Prayer 14, p. 118; Prayer 15, p. 132; Prayer 18, p. 163; Prayer 26, p. 225-226.

[34] Catherine of Siena, *Prayers*, Prayer 25, p. 218. Noffke, 220 note 21, notes that the "old barren plants" are a reference to corrupt cardinals.

[35] Catherine of Siena, *Prayers*, Prayer 14, p. 124. In an additional prayer, she presents a heretofore unencountered spousal pair: God's divinity as bridegroom and our humanity as bride. See Prayer 19, p. 171.

[36] Notably, Catherine did not seem to understand men as vicarial supervisors of individual brides of Christ—including herself. See my previous chapter on Catherine.

in advance of his marriage to Jesus.[37] Thus, even though she believed that "God espoused us all," it was only women who were *direct* brides of Christ. As such, men were forestalled from receiving celestial wedding rings, be they made of gold or flesh.

The key point in this discussion of the Holy Foreskin's location is that for Catherine, it had a type of mystical bilocation. It was in heaven—for Jesus to send it to his earthly brides—and simultaneously scattered throughout Christendom, (presumably) on the ring finger of every devout Christian woman and, less probably, man. Catherine, however, never mentions one of the Holy Foreskin relics: although Jesus's foreskin(s) could be vastly multiplied, it/they always existed in her view on the bodies of individuals, never in reliquaries or treasure chests in churches. Thus, if Agnes reserved Jesus's foreskin for herself alone and Birgitta identified a single relic as valid, Catherine did the opposite, multiplying and spreading Jesus's prepuce—but always for individual people, never in a church storehouse.

The Holy Foreskin and the Eucharist

The locations that Birgitta, Agnes, and Catherine provide for Jesus's foreskin play into how their visions relate to theological concerns surrounding the Eucharist. As we have noted, Guibert of Nogent's primary concern about the Holy Foreskin was the threat that he understood it to pose to the Eucharist.[38] By the time that these three women lived, however, the doctrine of

[37] Catherine shared her contemporaries' views on same-sex relationships. For Catherine's condemnation of the "sin against nature," a common medieval term for male-male sexual relations, see Catherine of Siena, Letter T21/G306, *Letters, vol. 2*, 145-150; quote is at 147. The frequent gender shifts in her letter about Niccolò, however, do seem to diminish her concerns about two men marrying. For the late medieval understanding of sodomy, see Michael Goodich, *The Unmentionable Vice: Homosexuality in the Later Medieval Period* (Dorset: Dorset Press, 1979); and more recently, Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2005). John Boswell, *Christianity, Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), provide more positive analyses of the medieval understanding of male-male sexual relationships. Matthew Kuefler, ed., *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on* Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), provides multiple responses to Boswell's arguments.
[38] Guibert of Nogent, CCCM 127, 80-175.

transubstantiation had been confirmed, and as we have seen, Jacobus de Voragine—also writing after Lateran IV—understood bodily resurrection, rather than the Eucharist, to be most endangered by earthly relics of the Holy Foreskin. Nevertheless, it remains crucial to investigate how these women, especially Agnes, understood Jesus's foreskin to relate to his body and blood.

Birgitta's vision of Jesus's foreskin functions primarily to confirm its earthly existence and to pinpoint its location, to identify the true foreskin relic among all the various imposters scattered throughout western Europe. Certainly, if we follow Guibert's reasoning, the fact that she *does* identify an earthly relic posed a threat to the Eucharist, but her designation of only one relic as true would seem to diminish that danger. For Birgitta, a medieval Christian had to be in Rome in order to encounter that very special Holy Foreskin: it was not a piece of Jesus's body that could be experienced locally along the Rhine, in the Low Countries, or in France. In those places, Christians would have had to encounter Jesus's body through the institutionally sanctioned method: a priest consecrating bread. Moreover, the existence of a single relic forestalled its use as an alternative to the institutionally sanctioned Eucharist. A Christian could not have consumed the Holy Foreskin in Rome as the one true relic of Jesus's body, or it would simply have been gone.

However, the key to Birgitta's separation of the Holy Foreskin from the Eucharist comes from her understanding of the latter. Like many medieval Christians after Lateran IV, Birgitta believed that the Eucharist was the true body of Christ. During an undated revelation, Jesus appears to Birgitta and instructs her to "receive my body frequently. It is both medicine and food by which the soul is comforted."[39] He continues, drawing a distinction between regular food and the Eucharist: "Bodily food has three characteristics. First, when it is chewed, it melts, then it

[39] Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden, vol. 3*, 59.

disappears, and third, it nourishes for a time. My food, however, is chewed but remains unchewed, and it does not disappear but remains the same, nor does it nourish only for a time but eternally… It is the flesh that I promised in the gospel which gives everlasting nourishment."[40] Here, Birgitta presents the common medieval idea that grace flowed into the communicant via the true flesh of Christ contained in the Eucharist.

A revelation from the 1340s, approximately a decade before Birgitta's vision about the Holy Foreskin, provides more detail about the nature of that true flesh. In the revelation, a demon appears to Birgitta and suggests that the Eucharistic host was simply bread because a god would not allow its body to be broken into pieces or chewed in someone's mouth. Jesus immediately appears and (somewhat indirectly) refutes the demon's points by asking it, "Was my body that Thomas touched after my resurrection a spiritual or corporeal body [utrum erat corpus… spirituale an corporale]? If it was corporeal, how did it pass through the locked doors? But, if it was spiritual, how was it visible to corporeal eyes?" The demon reluctantly concedes that Jesus was "both corporeal and spiritual after rising from the dead. It is because of the eternal power of your divinity and because of a special privilege of your glorified flesh that you can enter anywhere and be present everywhere."[41]

After the demon has affirmed that Jesus's post-Resurrection body is simultaneously corporeal and spiritual, Jesus also pre-emptively addresses a possible fear that Birgitta shared with her late medieval contemporaries. He assures her that even if the priest consecrating the Eucharist doubts Christ's true presence in the bread, Jesus's body is present for Birgitta and any

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[40] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelations of St. Birgitta, vol. 3*, 60. For a discussion of medieval theologians' views on what happened to Jesus's body during mastication, see Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist*, *passim*. For an examination of Guibert and Jacobus's specific views, see Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 316-317.
[41] Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden, vol. 2,* trans., Birgitta Morris and Denis Searby (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 117-118. For the Latin, see Birgitta of Sweden, *Sancta Birgitta: Revelaciones, Book IV,* ed. Hans Aili (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1992), 197.

other believers who might be there. He additionally tells her that "everyone who receives me receives both my divine and human natures as well as the form of bread."[42]

In the revelation, Jesus seems to draw a distinction between all these terms. "Divine" and "human" are not the same as "spiritual" and "corporeal," respectively. "Spiritual" and "corporeal" refer solely to the post-Resurrection body, whereas "divine and "human" do not seem so restricted. The only examples provided to explain Jesus's body in the Eucharist come from after his Resurrection, implying that it is that body present in the consecrated host. In John, Thomas touches a body that is both spiritual and corporeal. It is a spiritual body that passes through the locked door, but a corporeal one that the disciples see. There is, of course, no shortage of examples of Jesus's corporeal body in the Gospels—the Circumcision itself would be but one—but it is telling that in this revelation, Jesus does not use, for example, his ability to walk on water as an example of his spiritual body. Rather, he uses the post-Resurrection ability to walk through doors. It appears as though the living body that could walk on water was divine, whereas the resurrected body that could walk through doors was spiritual. In a separate 1340s revelation about growing evils within the institutional Church, Jesus promises Birgitta that he "will show [her] a likeness of [his] body as it was during and before [his] passion, and such as it was after the resurrection, as Magdalene and Peter and others saw it," further implying a difference between Jesus's living and resurrected, spiritual body.[43]

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[42] Morris and Searby, *Revelations of St. Birgitta, vol. 2*, 118. The concern that unholy or unbelieving priests would be unable to consecrate the Eucharist was a point of theological discussion and communicant fear. Gary Macy emphasizes this in regard to the Waldensian heresy in "Theology of the Eucharist in the High Middle Ages," in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, ed. Christopher Levy, Gary Macy, and Kristen Van Ausdall (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 365-398. Agnes Blannbekin provides an example of a Christian who seems to have had this fear. Her confessor-biographer assures us that even though Agues once received communion from a priest who had raped a young virgin the night before, she still tasted the usual sweetness that she felt when taking the Eucharist. See Dinzelbacher and Vogler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 126-128.

[43] Birgitta Morris and Denis Searby, trans., *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden, vol. 1* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 200.

Thus, by not seeing a dangerous overlap between the Holy Foreskin and the Eucharist, Birgitta was following Jesus's own teaching to her. The Holy Foreskin did not imperil the Eucharist because even though both were Jesus's body, they were not the same body. The revelation makes clear that the body present in the Eucharist is Jesus's post-Resurrection body, one that is both spiritual and corporeal. Jesus's foreskin, however, which had remained always on earth in Birgitta's conception, was solely corporeal. It would have contained both the divine and human natures that were also present in the post-Resurrection/Eucharistic body, but it was not spiritual and could not affect salvation in the same way that the Eucharist could. Simply put, the Holy Foreskin might float on water, but it could not pass through a locked door.

In contrast to Birgitta's single foreskin relic, Catherine's foreskin rings would seem to present a different problem: their multiple number could have made them ripe for consumption. Importantly, however, it appears that each (presumably) woman to whom Jesus gave his foreskin as a ring received only one. Thus, the foreskin rings were simultaneously innumerable and singular. For Catherine, these were also gifts directly from Jesus, making it unlikely that the women would have consumed them, unless directed to do so. Additionally, there is no doubt that Catherine believed in the transubstantiated Eucharist. Raymond reports that she "often saw a baby hidden in the hands of the priest."[44] In her own writings, Catherine is quite clear that she understood Jesus's body as food. In a metaphor that seems to be unique to her, she frequently advised her recipients to take part in a celestial feast, at which God the Father served as the table, Jesus the Son was the food, and the Holy Spirit was the waiter.[45] At times, the Cross itself was

[44] Raymond of Capua*, Life*, 166. As with so much of Raymond's *Life* of Catherine, this statement is designed to bring to mind an existing legend—in this instance, the baby that appeared when Gregory the Great celebrated the Eucharist.

[45] For representative examples, see Catherine of Siena, Letter Gardner I/DT52, *Letters, vol. 1*, 189; Letter T52/G132, *Letters, vol. 2*, 120; and Letter Fawtier 15, *Letters, vol. 2*, 663.

the table, but the food remained Jesus.[46] In prayer, she states that Jesus "has left you himself, wholly God and wholly human, hidden under the whiteness of this bread," clearly identifying the Eucharistic host as Jesus's body.[47] Elsewhere, she praises Jesus, telling him that "you left us yourself as food."[48]

Catherine's relationship to food was, of course, complicated. Raymond frequently highlights her fasting, noting that eventually she ate nothing but the Eucharist.[49] The anonymous Florentine author of the *Miracoli*, a short *vita* written during Catherine's lifetime, concurs, noting that she never swallowed earthly food, but instead chewed it and spat it out.[50] Catherine herself is usually reticent about her food practices, but she did rebuke at least one critic of her fasts.[51] At the same time, she advised other women to eat normally if they needed to, telling one to "eat meat—and if once a day isn't enough, have it four times."[52] Regardless of how much Catherine actually ate or whether she did subsist exclusively on the Eucharist, the key point is that she understood the Eucharist, as consecrated by priests, as the proper means of consuming Jesus's body. Nowhere does she nor do her biographers indicate that the foreskin wedding rings were an acceptable substitute Eucharist. Catherine's metaphors included part of the Trinity as table and as waiter, but they did not extend to the Holy Foreskin as food.

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[46] See, for example, Catherine of Siena, Letter T38/G184, *Letters, vol. 2*, 544; Letter T124/G142, *Letters, vol. 2*, 695; and Letter T329/G262, *Letters, vol. 4*, 100.
[47] Catherine of Siena, *Prayers*, Prayer 10, p. 78.
[48] Catherine of Siena, *Prayers*, Prayer 12, p. 101.
[49] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 151-153, 155-157, mentions that Catherine became sick when she ate anything other than the Eucharist. Rebecca Lester, "Embodied Voices: Women's Food Asceticism and the Negotiation of Identity," *Ethos* 23 no. 2 (1995): 187-222, points out that during the Middle Ages, eating was seen as incorporating; by eating only the Eucharist, Catherine developed a stronger relationship to Christ and diminished the earthly part of herself.
[50] Mariju Lehmijoki-Gardner, ed, *Dominican Penitent Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 162, 194.
[51] For a notable example, in which she responds to a critic of her fasting, see Catherine of Siena, Letter T92/G305/DT19, *Letters, vol. 1*, 160-161.
[52] Catherine of Siena, Letter T213/G163, *Letters, vol. 3*, 299-300.

Unlike either Birgitta or Catherine, Agnes fully realized Guibert's fears: for her, Jesus's foreskin became an actual substitute Eucharist. Although Agnes is told that Jesus's foreskin was resurrected with the rest of his body, it appeared, repeatedly, directly in her mouth. By swallowing the "little piece of skin"—the very action that forestalled using it as a relic—she instead gave it another, and more dangerous, meaning.[53] This vision contains no priest to administer the holy flesh to Agnes; instead, it comes directly from Jesus himself.

In her study on medieval holy women's relationship to food, Bynum has collected a number of stories of religious women who received a version of the Eucharist in a non-standard manner. Lutgard of Aywières (1182-1246) nursed from Christ's side wound. Lidwina (1380-1433) received a miraculous Eucharist delivered by angels, in defiance of a corrupt priest who had brought an unconsecrated host to test her. The mouth of Jane Mary of Maillé (d. 1414) filled with blood when she prayed for a drink of the consecrated wine, and Flora of Beaulieu (d. 1347) received a piece of the host that had miraculously disappeared from the paten.[54] Agnes miraculously felt the Eucharist in her mouth after an sinful priest misplaced his own piece of consecrated bread.[55] Raymond reports that Catherine drank Jesus's blood directly from his side wound and also miraculously received the Eucharist:[56] Jesus delivered a lost piece of the broken host directly to Catherine, and more than once, the consecrated host flew directly from the priest's hands into Catherine's mouth.[57] Importantly, however, none of these women received a concretely identifiable piece of Jesus's body, apart from the concept of blood itself. Lutgard, Jane Mary, and Catherine drank that blood while Lidwina, Flora, and again Catherine consumed

[53] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 37, p. 118.
[54] Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 117-119, 127-132.
[55] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 41, p. 128.
[56] The most famous instance in which Catherine drinks Jesus's blood can be found at Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 147-148; two additional examples occur at Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 170-171.
[57] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 288-291.

miraculously delivered Eucharistic hosts. The priest may not have placed the Eucharist in the holy women's mouths, but the concept remained that Jesus's body was contained within consecrated bread. Agnes, however, did consume a precise piece of Christ's flesh, with no priest and no bread in sight.

There is no doubt that Agnes fully believed in the corporeal presence of Christ in the Eucharist. She seems, rather, to have taken it to a logical conclusion: if eating consecrated bread was proper precisely because it contained Jesus's flesh, then directly consuming a piece of Jesus's body would be equally appropriate. We have already seen that during her vision of a naked Christ, a fellow Christian nudged Agnes so that she could witness the Elevation, causing her to temporarily lose the vision. Agnes reports to her confessor-biographer, however, that even during visions, God allows her "always to come back to herself such that she might see the body of the Lord."[58] What was displayed during the Elevations that Agnes's visions still allowed her to see was disguised flesh and not simply bread. While Agnes is contemplating Jesus's return during the Octave of the Ascension, a voice tells her that "to return" refers to "the daily arrival, when he comes in the mystery of the altar, and as many angels assist him there, wherever that mystery is performed by whatever priest, as accompanied him during his Ascension."[59] The exact number of angels involved is not relevant for this argument; what is important, however, is Agnes's insistence that Jesus returns, bodily, every day when consecration occurs during mass.

The language used by Agnes—or at least, by her confessor-biographer—to describe her experience with the Holy Foreskin reinforces the eucharistic meaning that consuming Jesus's

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[58] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 140, p. 312: "Dixit autem haec puella mihi, quod non esset necesse eam instigari ibi, cum esset in aliqua visione infra missam, quia dominus dabat ei semper redire ad se, in tantum ut videret corpus domini." The emphasis here is on Jesus's body as contained in the Eucharist, rather than on the sexuality of a naked Christ.

[59] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 101, p. 234: "Illud autem venire refertur ad quotidianum adventum, quo venit in mysterio altaris, et tot angeli assistunt ei ibi, ubicunque peragitur hoc mysterium a quocunque sacerdote, quot ei astiterunt in ascensione sua."

prepuce had for Agnes. According to her *vita*, "the sweetness of tasting that skin [Jesus's foreskin] was so great that she felt a sweet transformation in all her limbs and parts of her limbs."[60] As we have seen, Agnes frequently emphasized the sweetness of the Eucharist—and, therefore, of the body of Christ—likening it to honey.[61] Although this sweetness is a recurring theme in the *vita*, it makes its first appearance in the Holy Foreskin vision.[62] Later in the *vita*, Agnes tasted the sweetness, even when an unworthy priest had consecrated the bread.[63] In a separate instance, even a broken piece of the host produced the customary sweet flavor.[64] In one of her many visions in which she delineates the gifts of God for his followers, Agnes states that this sweetness is one of the gifts that God gives to his brides, among whom she apparently numbered herself.[65] When explaining how the five physical senses related to five spiritual senses, Agnes states that the soul's sense of taste exists "to taste God's sweetness and to perceive his sweetness," presumably via the Eucharist.[66] Furthermore, according to Agnes, the sense of taste—and receiving the Eucharist—strengthened the soul more than the other four senses (vision as contemplation, hearing as intelligence, touch as renewal of the soul, and smell as desire for God).[67]

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[60] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 37, p. 118: "Tanta fuit dulcedo in degustatione hujus pelliculae, quod in omnibus membris et membrorum articulus sensit dulcem imuutationem."
[61] As noted previously, God sometimes withheld the sweetness for Agnes lest she become complacent with it. See Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 39, p. 122; and ch. 104, p. 240.
[62] The only previous instance of "sweetness" in reference to Jesus occurs during the lengthy trip to heaven that opens the *vita*, in which Agnes states that saints drink from the sweet stream of blood that flows from the side wound.
[63] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 41, p. 128.
[64] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 59, p. 156.
[65] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 68, p. 170.
[66] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 187, p. 390: 'Os animae sive gustus est gustare suavitatem dei et ejus dulcedinem percipere, et his sensus maxime confert vires animae."
[67] See Gordon Rudy, *Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), for a discussion of language of touch and taste in mysticism. Rudy focuses on Bernard of Clairvaux, Hadewijch, and Bonaventure.

The structure of the *vita* is also important here. Chapter 34 contains a lengthy dialogue between Agnes and God on the day of the Feast of the Circumcision, which establishes that the divine voice she heard really was that of the Lord: "It is I who speaks, who once spoke through the mouth of prophets. Just as I spoke with Moses in the thorn bush—and this was not because of any virtue of the thorn bush—so what I speak to you and within you is my present, not because of your virtue or merit."[68] The subsequent two brief chapters discuss the importance of communicating and emphasize the holiness of the communicant. Agnes's encounter with the Holy Foreskin follows. Together, the placement of these chapters assures both Agnes's belief in the Eucharist and her close communication with God. It was his voice that explained to Agnes that she had been swallowing Jesus's foreskin.

Immediately after recording Agnes's foreskin vision and her decision to tell him about it, her confessor-biographer shifts his focus to Agnes's longtime devotion to Christ, emphasizing especially her childhood fasting.[69] He tells us that when she was eleven years old, she felt an extreme longing for the "body of the lord" and "when she received Him, she physically felt in her mouth an indescribable sweetness, and as she reported, all earthly sweetness was in comparison to this sweetness just as vinegar is in comparison to honey. Then she believed that all communicants would feel this sweetness."[70] Placing this early and intense interaction with the Eucharist directly after Agnes's equally intense experience with the Holy Foreskin both reinforces the foreskin-Eucharist connection and troubles it. I will address the problematizing

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[68] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 34, p. 114: "Ego ipse sum, qui loquor, qui olim locutus sum per os prophetarum. Quemadmodum Moysi locutus sum in rubo—et hoc non erat ex virtute aliqua rubi—sic, quod tibi loquor et in te, meum donum est, non tua virtus vel meritum."
[69] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 39, p. 122.
[70] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 39, p. 122: "Cum enim esset annorum undecim, devotione magna flagrabat ad corpus domini. Quod cum accepisset, sensit corporaliter in ore dulcidinem inenarrabilem, et sicut reruilit, quod omnis dulcedo create in compartione illius dulcedinis esset sicut acetum in comparatione mellis."

aspect later in this chapter when I discuss transgression and mediation, but here I wish to focus on the ways in which this passage highlights Agnes's use of the Holy Foreskin as Eucharist.

The location of this passage within the *vita* ensures that the reader would now be thinking about the Eucharist and might make parallels between it and the previously reported encounter with Jesus's foreskin. Both were the flesh of Christ, both could be consumed, and both appeared through a type of miracle. Additionally, we again find the language of sweetness—this time heightened with a vinegar/honey metaphor that does not appear elsewhere in the text. The extra detail here mirrors the intensity of Agnes's interaction with Jesus's prepuce: consuming it caused her to feel "a sweet transformation in all her limbs and parts of her limbs."[71] The Eucharist itself routinely caused a sweetness in Agnes's soul that others did not experience, but nowhere else in the *vita* does Agnes's confessor-biographer provide such detail about the bodily effects of consuming Christ's flesh.

This extra detail seems to reflect exceptionally important encounters with Jesus's flesh. We cannot be certain whether Agnes took communion for the first time when she was eleven years old, but the text, particularly her idea that all communicants would feel the sweetness that she did, indicates that this was either her first Eucharist or the first time that she felt its divine sweetness. The same detailed language appears during her miraculous encounter with Christ's foreskin—but only when she was consuming the foreskin itself. As we have seen, Agnes asked God for the Eucharist as a sign that she should tell her confessor about the initial experience with Jesus's foreskin. God provided it via a chaplain who was celebrating the Eucharist unusually late, allowing Agnes to consume the consecrated bread. This time, however, there is no mention of its sweetness. Instead, her confessor-biographer emphasizes the favor that Agnes held with

[71] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 37, pg. 118.

God through the celebration of this quasi-miraculous (because late) Eucharist. Importantly, this particular Eucharist exists only to demonstrate the validity and rectitude of the foreskin encounter. The absence of language surrounding sweetness for this Eucharist highlights the other, very special consumptions of Jesus's body.

As noted previously, Agnes's encounter with the Holy Foreskin and the connection that she drew between it and the Eucharist does demonstrate that she adhered to the doctrine of transubstantiation settled upon earlier in the thirteenth century. Rudy reminds us that authors of mystical texts "wrote in order to teach and influence other people who were interested in these subjects."[72] Such texts were not simply reports of visions. Agnes's experience with Jesus's foreskin served a similar didactic function. Indeed, she is even compelled to teach about it: when she decided not to tell her confessor about her encounter, she began to get sick because God wanted her to tell what had happened, and her confessor-biographer notes that he greatly desired to hear about it.[73] During the communion that Agnes received from the tardy priest, God gave her three additional personal messages to pass on to her confessor-biographer.[74] Further, in their dialogue before the actual foreskin encounter, God tells Agnes that he is speaking to (through) her, just as he did with Moses and the prophets. The concept of teaching is thus built into the core of this experience. Not only did Agnes believe in transubstantiation, but it seems possible that the consumption of Jesus's foreskin (i.e., Jesus's flesh as flesh) was designed from the beginning to be disseminated: a mechanism to teach people about the veracity of the Eucharist (i.e., Jesus's flesh as bread).

The Holy Foreskin and Resurrection

[72] Rudy, *Mystical Language*, 13.
[73] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 118.
[74] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 120.

As much as Agnes's experience with Jesus's foreskin encapsulated Guibert's Eucharistic fears, it avoided—although, perhaps, obliquely addressed—the concerns that Jacobus de Voragine, especially, had regarding the Resurrection and the Holy Foreskin. Not only did Jesus's foreskin appear in Agnes's mouth only when she began to wonder where it was located after the Resurrection, but God told Agnes that his prepuce was resurrected with the rest of his body.[75] This indicates that, unlike her certainty regarding Jesus's true presence in the Eucharist, Agnes harbored doubts about how complete his bodily Resurrection was. In the *vita,* she never questions whether the consecrated bread actually is Jesus's flesh, but she is not sure about the totality of his resurrection. If this is the case, she would not have been alone. As Bynum has argued, efforts to explain and justify bodily resurrection were a hallmark of late medieval theology.[76] If we read the condemnation of Holy Foreskin relics by male theologians (particularly Jacobus) as insights into their own uncertainties about Christian doctrine, Agnes's vision confirming that Jesus's foreskin was with him in heaven would have provided a type of relief regarding the Resurrection, even as it potentially troubled the Eucharist. If so, her experience made a firm theological point, one that weighed into these extensive theological discussions: yes, Jesus was resurrected with full bodily perfection, leaving alive the possibility that humans could be as well.

Catherine's conception of the Holy Foreskin also undergirds bodily resurrection, but she does not express the same doubts that Agnes implicitly does. Catherine never questions where Jesus's foreskin is located; instead, she consistently states that it exists on earth only on the fingers of his brides. Again, the conclusion is that if Jesus is able to give them foreskin rings, he must already have his resurrected prepuce with him in heaven. Although Catherine does not refer

[75] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 118.
[76] Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*.

to Thomas of Chobham, she uses a type of logic similar to that of the English theologian: if Jesus's body can miraculously appear in multiple places via the Eucharist, his foreskin can also exist simultaneously on the fingers of multiple brides.[77]

In her letters, Catherine does give agency to the infant Jesus to indicate that even at the time of the Circumcision, the eight-day-old baby wanted to use his excised foreskin as a wedding ring for his future brides, usually stating either that Jesus gave up just enough flesh to make a ring or that just enough flesh was taken from him (with his consent) to make one.[78] She never, however, implies that the infant Jesus (or Mary) left his foreskin on earth, that as a child he married his brides, or that his foreskin was not a part of the Resurrection.[79] Instead, Catherine employed foreshadowing to understand that Jesus would *eventually* use his foreskin to wed his brides. Similarly, she figures the blood shed during the Circumcision as a "down payment" for blood that would be shed later during the Passion.

Catherine's depiction of the wedding at Niccolò's execution indicates that she understood marriage to Christ to occur later in his life. As part of the wedding, Jesus "received [Niccolò's] soul as well as placed it all-mercifully into the open storeroom of his side,"[80] a place that Catherine had already identified as his side wound.[81] Importantly, Catherine assigns the wounds of the Passion only to an adult Jesus, never to an infant one. As we have seen, Catherine frequently wrote about the blood shed during the Circumcision as *prefiguring* the blood that

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[77] Thomas of Chobham, *Summa de Arte Praedicandi*, CCCM 82, 110.
[78] For examples of Catherine assigning matrimonial agency to the infant Jesus, see Catherine of Siena, Letter T221/G152, *Letters, vol. 2*, 180; Letter T262/G322, *Letters, vol. 3*, 324; Letter T143/G313/DT39, *Letters, vol. 1*, 147; Letter T50/G185, *Letters, vol. 2*, 595.
[79] Although Catherine never discusses someone marrying the circumcised infant Christ, later paintings sometimes have a different depiction, showing her wedding a clearly infant Jesus. See, for example, Ambrogio Bergognone, *The Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Catherine of Siena*, oil on canvas, c. 1470s-1523/1524 (National Gallery, London). In his depiction of the marriage, Raymond, *Life of Catherine of Siena*, 106-109, also presents Catherine as marrying an adult Christ.
[80] Catherine of Siena, Letter T273/G97/DT31, *Letters, vol. 1*, 88.
[81] Catherine of Siena, Letter T273/G97/DT31, *Letters, vol. 1*, 85.

Jesus would shed during the Passion, implying that the infant Christ did not yet have those wounds. For Catherine, marriage to Christ entailed marriage to an adult, already foreskin-less Christ—one who had his foreskin restored to him during resurrection. It was not marriage to an infant one who had (or had just) lost his foreskin and never recovered it. In her letters, a pre-circumcision infant Jesus who sheds redemptive blood and matrimonial flesh anticipates his future suffering, resurrection, and marriages; he is not already a part of them. Thus, although Catherine ascribes early intent to Jesus, she does not understand that his resurrection was anything less than bodily perfect. The foreskin rings were sent back to earth; they had not remained there.

Birgitta's revelation from Mary, on the other hand, presents precisely the opposite approach to the Resurrection. In it, Jesus was never reunited with his foreskin, either while he was on earth or afterward. Instead, Mary kept it until her own ascension, at which time she passed it on St. John. An anonymous string of people continued the transmission until the Holy Foreskin ended up in Rome, where Mary, via Birgitta, claims that it was still located and was insufficiently venerated.[82] Birgitta thereby directly challenges the concept of bodily resurrection and validates Jacobus's fears. According to her, Jesus had not been resurrected with bodily perfection.

Birgitta and Jacobus do seem to agree that the object claiming to be Jesus's foreskin was located in the Sancta Sanctorum in St. John Lateran. From here, though, the similarities between them are few. According to Jacobus, people claimed that the Sancta Sanctorum also contained a section of Jesus's umbilical cord and his sandals.[83] In Birgitta's version, Jesus's foreskin was paired instead with blood from the wounds inflicted during the Passion, bringing together the

[82] Bergh, *Sancta Birgitta*, 273.
[83] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, BnF Nal 1747, 36v.

wounds at the beginning and end of his life. Her vision contains no mention of the umbilical cord or Jesus's sandals. Pairing Jesus's foreskin with blood from the Passion wounds, however, does perhaps reflect that Birgitta shared in Jacobus's use of the circumcision blood as precursor to blood shed during the Passion.[84]

The discrepancy in exactly what was located in the Lateran probably stems from the texts available to Birgitta. As we have seen, Jacobus's *Legenda aurea* was widely copied and translated. Searby and Morris point out that according to Birgitta's canonization records, she owned a Swedish copy of saints' lives. They speculate that it was probably a version of the *Legenda aurea*, which was adapted into Swedish in the late 1200s as what is today known as *Fornsvenska legendariet* (*Old Swedish Legendary*).[85] It is unclear whether Birgitta possessed a copy of the *Legenda aurea* itself. Although the Swedish legendary draws on Jacobus's text, it is not a direct translation. It instead additionally includes German and continental sources and some Scandinavian saints whom Jacobus does not discuss.[86] Moreover, unlike the *Legenda aurea*, the text is arranged chronologically, beginning with stories about the Virgin Mary and then Jesus, before transitioning to legends about Jesus's disciples, followed by saints' *vitae*. It does not include Jacobus's sometimes lengthy thoughts about individual entries/saints or their theological and didactic importance. Rather, its entries are quite short, presenting its stories without further meditation on them.[87] Most importantly, the legendary does not discuss Jesus's circumcision or his foreskin—either positively or with skepticism. Thus, Birgitta may not have been aware of

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[84] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea,* BnF Nal 1747, 35r. As we have seen, Catherine of Siena later, and frequently, used this same reasoning to connect the Circumcision and the Passion.
[85] Morris and Searby, *Revelations of St. Birgitta, vol. 2*, 7.
[86] Morris and Searby, *Revelations of St. Birgitta*, vol. 2, 7.
[87] The legendary can be found at George Stephens, ed., *Ett Forn-svenskt legendarium, 2 vols.* (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söner, 1847). See Morris and Searby, *Revelations of St. Birgitta*, vol. 3, 255n3 for an example of a specific point in Birgitta's revelations that can be traced to a discrepancy between the *Legenda aurea* and *Fornsvenska legendariet*, regarding the number of days between Mary's death and her resurrection. My thanks to Dr. John Eason, University of Alberta, for assistance with translating the relevant sections of the Old Swedish text.

Jacobus's (or other theologians') objections to the Holy Foreskin or about differences between her and Jacobus's accounts regarding the Sancta Sanctorum's holdings.[88]

Most importantly, Birgitta seems to have had no concern about the Holy Foreskin invalidating bodily resurrection for humanity. This can partially be traced to her understanding, discussed above, that Jesus's resurrected body differed from his living body. It is possible that the difference led Birgitta to believe that Jesus's post-Resurrection body was perfect, with his foreskin restored, even while the non-spiritual, pre-Resurrection Holy Foreskin remained on earth as a site of veneration.

It also seems, however, that the late medieval (and long-running) debates about the mechanics and specifics of bodily resurrection were unimportant to Birgitta. For her, theologians may have been arguing over minutiae. A 1350s revelation in Italy explaining the meaning of Lazarus's resurrection attaches contemporary symbolism to the biblical story. In the vision, Birgitta and her daughter Catherine represent the sisters Mary and Martha while Lazarus is the soul and, typical for late medieval anti-Judaism, Jews in the biblical story become contemporary "envious persons." In the revelation, Jesus rebukes Birgitta somewhat, telling her that "you love the world more than they [Mary and Martha] did. Therefore, my mercy toward you is greater than my mercy toward those sisters. It is clearly all the greater inasmuch as spiritual death is more dangerous than bodily death, and the resurrection of the soul is more glorious than bodily resurrection."[89] Here, in Jesus's words to Birgitta, it is the soul that matters, not the body. It was irrelevant whether Jesus's foreskin was restored to his body during the Resurrection. The

[88] If Morris and Searby are correct that Birgitta was in the Lateran when she had her vision, her account of its holdings may be the more reliable of the two. It is unclear where Jacobus was when he wrote his entry in the *Legenda aurea* on Jesus's circumcision.

[89] Morris and Searby, *Revelations of St. Birgitta, vol. 2*, 131-132. In a 1350s letter to a priest in Rome, Birgitta sees Lazarus as having faced two types of enemies, both physical and spiritual, implying a further distinction between bodily resurrection and spiritual resurrection. See Morris and Searby, *Revelations of St. Birgitta, vol., 2*, 153.

important fact was that his soul—and subsequently, the souls of Christians—was resurrected. For Birgitta, Jacobus's concerns about whether the Holy Foreskin endangered resurrection would have been irrelevant and even missing the key point.

Desexualizing Jesus's Foreskin

It is tempting for us, in our modern world, to view the veneration of Jesus's foreskin as sexual. Agnes Blannbekin repeatedly swallowed it, conjuring images of oral sex. Catherine of Siena wore it as a wedding ring, implying marriage and possible sexual acts. The association of Jesus and sex, however, is not limited to these two women's interactions with his foreskin. For example, Bynum highlights the story of the recluse Dorothy of Montau (1347-1394), whose body swelled with a type of mystical pregnancy in anticipation of the Eucharist, implying at least one sexual act.[90] Agnes herself once experienced this type of swelling [tumor] nightly from Christmas until the Octave of the Epiphany.[91] Perhaps most famously, Leo Steinberg has argued that Renaissance artists drew attention to the Christ Child's penis and to the adult Jesus's genitalia in order to highlight the very fact that he did have a human nature, which presumably experienced the temptations of a man; without those temptations, Jesus's usually accepted virginity would have been meritless.[92] Additionally, as Bynum states in her summary of Steinberg's monograph, Jesus's male sexuality "represents the salvation of the totality of what we as human beings are. Christ redeems not only our physiological differences as men and women; he redeems our sexual nature (if not our sexual acts) as well."[93]

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[90] Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 136, 257. Bynum, 268-269, also includes a story from Caesarius of Heisterbach about a priest who experienced a similar type of mystical pregnancy.
[91] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 406-410.
[92] Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*.
[93] Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," 84.

Other scholars have shifted the focus away from Jesus but have retained a sexual reading of religious devotion. As previously discussed, Dyan Elliott has argued that the cult of the Virgin Mary rose to prominence during the central and late Middle Ages because she was a safe source of psychosexual fascination for celibate monks.[94] Lyndal Roper has suggested that some witchcraft confessions resulted from frustrated sexual inactivity.[95]

I follow Bynum, however, in arguing that these sexualized readings—even of a foreskin—are the application of modern ideas onto medieval concepts. Medieval people were certainly not unaware of sexuality or sex; the French *fabliaux*, with their inclusion of "noble steeds" and "agreeable pits", as euphemisms for male and female genitalia, speak to that in sometimes graphic detail.[96] Manuals for priests also indicate that Christians engaged in a variety of sexual acts during the Middle Ages, for which they would have to do varying levels of penance.[97] However, concepts that we might think of as sexual today had additional or alternative meanings during the Middle Ages. Bynum is worth quoting at length here:

> When, for example, the medieval nun Lukardis of Oberweimar and Margaret of Faenza breathed deeply into their sister's mouths and felt sweet delight flooding their members, they did not blush to describe this as receiving God's grace or even as receiving the eucharist. Twentieth-century readers think immediately of lesbianism. When Hadewijch, the Flemish poet, described herself as embracing Christ, feeling him penetrate deep within her and losing herself in an ecstasy from which she slowly and reluctantly returned, she thought of—she *experienced*—the love of God. We modern readers think of sexual arousal or orgasm, as we do when we read the account of a twelfth-century monk, Rupert of Deutz, who climbed on the altar, embraced the crucifix, and felt Christ's tongue in his mouth… There is reason to think that medieval viewers saw bared breasts (at least in painting and sculpture) not primarily as sexual but as the food with which they were iconographically associated… There is reason to think that medieval people saw Christ's penis not primarily as a sexual organ but as the object of

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[94] Elliott, *Fallen Bodies*.
[95] Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Religion, and Sexuality in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
[96] Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature*.
[97] James A. Brundage, *Lax Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987); Pierre J. Payer, "Sex and Confession in the Thirteenth Century," in *Sex in the Middle Ages,* ed. Joyce E. Salisbury (New York: Garland Publishers, 1991), 126-142.

> circumcision and therefore as the wounded, bleeding flesh with which it is associated in painting and in text… I am not here denying that religious people saw a penis when they saw Christ's penis. Moreover… they sometimes saw a breast (or a womb) when they saw Christ's side. But they probably did not associate either penis or breast primarily with sexual activity. Rather, both their writing and their art suggest that they associated penis and side with pain and blood, and therefore, astonishing as it may be to us, with salvation.[98]

Bynum's analysis is not perfect: she does, in my view, incorrectly associate Catherine of Siena's foreskin rings with the Eucharist, which I will discuss shortly, but her overall point holds.[99] Concepts that we might hold to be sexual today were not always (at least in the same way) thought to be so in the past.

In this section, I largely omit Birgitta of Sweden. Birgitta's vision contains no potentially sexual components, apart from the modern sexual understanding of the foreskin itself. Moreover, Birgitta became fully active as a holy woman after her husband's death. During her marriage, she had eight children; she fully experienced a married sexual life before turning to a religious, chaste one. Regarding Agnes and Catherine, I argue that contrary to a modern sexualized understanding of Jesus's foreskin, they did not attach a sexual meaning to either Jesus's penis to the skin that was excised from it.

Agnes provides a highly pertinent example of this desexualisation of Jesus's penis—of both medieval people's awareness of sexuality and of the very lack of that sexuality in relation to Jesus's foreskin.[100] She had frequent visions involving either a nude Christ or other male religious figures. In one trio of visions, a "most beautiful" young man appears to her, "completely naked in an immense light." Despite his nudity, however, she "fe[els] neither horror nor displeasure" at seeing his naked limbs; instead, she "[is] filled with a great consolation of the

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[98] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 186-187.
[99] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 186.
[100] Stoklaska, "Die Revelationes," 28, points out that bridal imagery is severely limited in Agnes's *vita*. She terms those passages "unerotic" and "dispassionate [leidenschaftslos]."

spirit, as in other visions."[101] The figure is not initially identified, but we can assume it to be Jesus because under his right arm, there is a large, open wound in which "blood [is] boiling like a hot pot before a fire, yet without bubbling over."[102] Again, the wound does not instill fear in Agnes, but rather it, too, brings her joy. In the middle of the vision, after the finally named Jesus says that he is willing to offer himself to all who approach him with humility, someone nudged Agnes so that she could see the Elevation, and the vision ended.

The next day, however, it repeated. During a sermon, Agnes was concentrating on the face of the preacher in order to better understand his message when the naked Jesus appeared to her again, still with blood boiling in his side wound. This time, Jesus enigmatically looked back and forth between Agnes and the preacher, but he did not say anything.[103]

Jesus's mysterious behavior is explained by the third vision. On the feast day of St. George, Agnes was in the same church to attend another sermon when Jesus appeared to her yet again, still naked and with a side wound full of boiling blood. As the sermon progressed, Jesus "himself spoke every word of the preacher." After a while, the vision ended long enough for Agnes to hear the friar discussing Songs of Songs 1:4, "the King has led me into his chamber." The vision resumed and Jesus tells Agnes that whenever a devout friar preaches, "God is in his mouth and speaks through his mouth."[104] We can assume that in the middle vision, Jesus's silence indicates that the friar was not devout.

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[101] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 140, p. 310: "Feria quinta post 'qusi modo geniti,' cum interesset divinis, apparuit sibi in visione unus pulcherrimus homo, juvenis bene adultus, totus nudus in immense lumine. Nec tamen quidquam horroris habuit nec displicentiae videndo omnium membrorum illius dispositionem et nuditatem, sed magis consolation spiritus repleta est, sicut in aliis apparitionibus."

[102] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 140, p. 310: "Et sub brachio dextro apparuit nulnus magnum et latum et apertum, in quo sanguis recents bulliebat, quemadmodum olla fervens, cum ad ignem bullit nec tamen superebullit."

[103] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 141, p. 312.

[104] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 141, p. 312: "Et apparuit ei Christus totus nudus et cancellatis minibus super pectus, et vulnus sub brachio dextro apertum et latum bulliens sanguine sicut in prioribus visionibus; et omnia verba praedicatoris dominus ipse loquebatur. Et modicum perduravit haec visio, et reversa est ad se adhuc

The meaning behind Jesus's nudity in these three visions seems to center around the Song of Songs passage. The lack of a tunic not only allows him to be identified by his blood-filled side wound, but it is also possible to interpret that side wound as the chamber into which the Song of Songs bride has been led. As we have seen, Catherine of Siena would explicitly refer to the side wound as a chamber approximately 75 years later. The blood brimming in it represented the salvation that Jesus could offer to all who approach him with humility. Though boiling, it never spilled over and was lost, just as the whole body of Jesus was contained in every piece of the Eucharist. Throughout the three visions, his nudity is a positive phenomenon, in terms of both interpretation and in the reaction—great consolation of spirit—that Agnes feels at its sight. Importantly, that consolation was spiritual, not physical. Agnes took no sexual pleasure at seeing a nude Jesus. Instead, she received a message about the proper devotion of preachers and about salvation. For good measure, the confessor-biographer notes that this spiritual consolation was similar to what she experienced in her other visions—ones in which a naked, potentially sexual, Jesus usually did not appear.

The message about priestly devotion seems to be linked repeatedly to Jesus's nudity. On the Friday after the Day of Ascension, Agnes was in the prayer cell in her house when a lamb appeared to her, "big like a one-year-old calf, clothed in human flesh, nude, with a human face, and walking on four feet like a lamb, its face turned toward the earth, and a diadem around its head."[105] Agnes is confused by the vision, which disappeared and reappeared multiple times. The

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fratre loquente et praedicante. Cumque frater illud verbum canticorum 'introduxit mox fuit in spiritu, et apparuit dominus ei sicut prius nudus et vulneratus. Et ait dominus ad eam: 'Quando praedicator verbum dei ex devotione annunciat et ad laudem dei, tunc deus est in ore suo et loquitur per os ejus, quoniam taliter praedicans assumituer in deum.' Inde fuit, quod dominus loquebatur verba praedicatoris."

[105] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 154, p. 330: "Cum autem esset sero illa in oratorio suo domi post completorium suum, facta est in spiritu, et ecce, apparuit ei agnus magnus ad modum vituli anni unius carne humana vestitus, nudus, habens faciam humanam, et incedens quatuor pedibus, ut agnus, facie versa ad terram, et diadema circa caput ejus."

following day, when she went to church to hear Mass, the lamb again appeared, although larger this time. Its actions were also more extensive. In the vision, it walks around all the altars where Mass was being celebrated and kisses the chasubles of all the priests. Suddenly, it appears next to Anges and kisses her cheeks, an action by which she was "sweetly inflamed, even physically [fuit suaviter inflammata etiam corporaliter]."[106] This vision is briefly interrupted by the Elevation of the Eucharist, after which the lamb reappears and says to Agnes that it has smelled the sweetness of the priests' devotion. It explains that other devout people, such as Agnes herself, also attract it to them. The lamb/Jesus proceeds, using a convoluted metaphor to compare its slaughter and varying size to that of a calf. It ends, however, by reiterating that is it the smell of devotion that has brought it to this Mass. The lamb demonstrates this to Agnes: two hours later, another Mass was being celebrated, and the lamb appears again, this time quite small and standing on the paten before the officiant. In this setting, "all good people and she herself [Agnes] also received that little lamb" in the form of the Eucharist.[107]

The nudity/devotion link is confirmed in the subsequent chapter. Agnes proceeded to another church; her confessor-biographer tells us that it was her habit to visit as many churches as possible to attend Mass.[108] In this church, the priest was apparently not devout enough: the lamb again appeared on the paten, but "it was not given to the priest there to receive the lamb, but other good people and those worthily disposed to the meal of the lamb, who were truly without mortal sins, received this lamb."[109] To explain this, Agnes gave to her confessor-

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[106] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 154, p. 332.
[107] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 155, p. 334: "Et hunc agniculum omnes boni perceperunt et etiam ipsa. Mirabatur autem ipsa multum, quod sacerdotes, qui per se celebrando hunc agnum percipient, iterum non eo minus cum aliis perciperent ipsum."
[108] Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 55, relates stories of people dashing from one church to the next to see as many consecrations as possible.
[109] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 156, p. 334-336: Sed illi sacerdoti non est datum ibi agnum percipere, sed alii boni et digne dispositi ad esum agni, qui scilicet fuerunt sine mortali, ipsum agniculum perceperunt."

biographer the parable in which a man prepared a large meal, but many invitees failed to appear; instead, Jesus ordered other people to be invited to the meal. For Agnes, if those who are invited (the priest) do not appear or are unworthy, it is appropriate to instead invite others who are worthy.[110]

In this passage, the confessor-biographer again downplays the sexual suggestions. There is a nude lamb-man, which kisses Agnes's cheek, in a way that gives her physical pleasure. That same lamb-man, however, also kisses the priests' robes, which seems to negate the sexual connotations. Rather than the kiss with Agnes being sexually charged, it instead seems to be a kiss that the lamb-man/Jesus gives to his most devout followers. The physical pleasure that Agnes felt because of the kiss can be related to the sweet sensation she repeatedly felt when taking the Eucharist. This connection is heightened as the series of visions proceeds and the lamb clearly becomes a metaphor for the Eucharist.

Turning away from visions of a nude Jesus, the *vita* additionally relates the story of a friar named Erlolf who had been particularly devoted to Agnes. After his death, Agnes had a vision in which he and a large group of virgins are holding hands while performing a ring dance. In the vision, Erlolf and the virgins wear golden crowns, but are otherwise naked. The *vita* notes that their nudity was "not only not unchaste or thought to be disgusting in the eyes of the beholders, but filled the heart of the virgin [Agnes] herself with great happiness, propriety, and joy."[111] Wiethaus notes that this vision may have been one reason why the *vita* was censored

[110] See Luke 14:16-24. This passage also comments on the recurring refrain in Agnes's *vita* of the efficacy of unworthy priests. Although they are insufficiently devout, they are able to perform the consecration, even if they themselves do not benefit from it.
[111] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 227-28, pp. 466-472.

during its publication in the eighteenth century, as it contains a naked man cavorting with girls in heaven.[112]

A further vision involves nude, religious men, understood to be Franciscans, who have influenced those around them negatively through their immoral actions involving jokes and foolishness. Here, the nudity is seen as entirely negative. These are monks who will be "not fit [inhabilies]" for grace, a condition highlighted by their nudity in the vision.[113] As Wiethaus points out, nudity for Agnes could have both positive and negative connotations.[114] Although the visions of a nude Christ were positive, though not sexual, the vision of the naked monks was unquestionably negative. The fact that the confessor-scribe indicates at the beginning of the next chapter that this vision took place at home, rather than at church, indicates its transgressive nature.[115] He was aware that ascribing sexual meaning to religious figures, particularly also in a religious setting, could be dangerous and took steps to provide some mediation. Thus, although there is nothing erotic about the monks' nudity, there remains an element of censure.

The confessor-biographer also relates that during one Christmas season, Agnes's entire body swelled up nightly from Christmas Day itself through the Octave of the Epiphany. During that time, she "felt in her soul such a sweetness of spirit and in all of her flesh, not a sexual but a chaste pleasure, that she knew that truly no other pleasure on earth could be compared to those two pleasures, namely those of the soul and the body."[116] Both Agnes and the confessor-biographer interpreted these nightly visions as a type of pregnancy; Bynum notes that Dorothy of

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[112] Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 11.
[113] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 132, p. 298.
[114] Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin,* 69, note 96. Wiethaus also notes here that the Franciscan epitome for positively understood male nudity is Francis of Assisi taking off his clothes to follow a nude Christ.
[115] Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 69, note 96.
[116] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 195, p. 406: "Tantamque in anima sensit spiritus dulcedinem et nihilominus in carne sua tota non libidinosam, sed castam ducorationem, utilli utrique delecationi scilicet animae et corporis nullam sciret prorus deletationem super terram posse comparai, nihilque esse sub soelo, quod sibi placer posset in comparatione illius gaudii, quo replebatur in illa utraque suavitate animae et carnis."

Montau and Ida of Louvain experienced similar mystical pregnancies, although she interprets this as losing "normal" bodily concepts and perceptions.[117] Importantly for Agnes, however, is the confessor-biographer's clarification that the pleasure from the pregnancy—which would of course be ordinarily the result of vaginal intercourse—was chaste, rather than sexual in nature.

In each of these visions, it is clear that Agnes and/or the confessor-biographer was aware of the sexual connotations associated with nudity. She/he/they knew that the visions contained sexual elements, indicating that the concept of sex was not unknown, and steps were taken to address those associations. In the first vision of a full-bodied, naked Christ, Agnes's reaction of pleasure was solely spiritual and was explicitly related to her response to other, non-sexual visions. The nude man-lamb kissed not only Agnes, but also priests' ceremonial clothing, indicating that its affection was for anything holy and was not reserved for sexual situations. The confessor-biographer specifically states that Erlol's nudity is "not unchaste;" the vision may have spurred Enlightenment-era censorship, but the confessor-biographer did what he could to rhetorically shape it as involving nudity, but not sex. It is only in the vision of the immoral—presumably more dangerous than insufficiently devout—monks that we find nudity explicitly encoded as negative. Even here, though, the nudity is framed as indicative of damnation, rather than being simply sexual. The pregnancy from Agnes's mystical recurring pregnancy is specifically described as "chaste."

The key point here is that Agnes and her confessor-biographer recognized sexual interpretations where they existed and worked to mitigate them. In the vision of Jesus's foreskin, however, there is no such mitigation. There is no such non-sexual framing. There is no such hedging or explanation: no sensation emphasized as purely spiritual, no lamb that also kissed just

[117] Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 203-204.

cloth, no need to highlight that something is "not unchaste." In place of this, we instead have something that could indeed be seen as quite physical, quite sexual, and unique to Agnes alone: a detailed description of the very texture of Jesus's foreskin.

And yet, both Agnes and her confessor-biographer are silent about any sexual connotations. Given their awareness of and efforts to address potentially sexual readings of other visions, it seems unlikely that they would have left unaddressed a sexual interpretation of the Holy Foreskin vision—provided that they would have recognized it at all. The lack of any sexual mitigation here indicates instead that Agnes and her confessor-biographer simply did not read the consumption of Jesus's foreskin as sexual. Rather, it had other meanings for them. A nude Jesus had a sexuality that had to be addressed, but primarily, it was a message about priestly devotion. A nude lamb-man could also be problematic, but it could also be a metaphor for that same devotion. However, as unexpected as it may seem to modern readers, a vision about Jesus's foreskin could be entirely non-sexual and could instead, as I will argue later in this chapter, be primarily about one thing: the Eucharist itself.

Turning to Catherine of Siena, as explained in the quote from Bynum above, Catherine was one of the medieval people who associated Jesus's penis with "wounded, bleeding flesh" rather than with sexuality. We have seen repeatedly that Catherine (along with Jacobus, although in more graphic detail) understood the Circumcision to be a precursor to the Passion, the first wound at the beginning of Jesus's life that prefigured the wounds he would also receive at the end of his life. For Catherine, his foreskin conjured images of suffering and the Passion, not of sex. Its associated fluid was salvific blood, not semen.

Although Raymond's depiction of Catherine's marriage to Jesus presents her as the consummate bride of Christ, her own descriptions of celestial marriages are more egalitarian.

Catherine addresses woman after woman as either already a bride of Christ or a potential one. In an early letter to the otherwise unknown widow Monna Colomba, Catherine's soul longs for her to be "a bride consecrated to Christ, a productive field not sterile but filled with the sweet fruits of solid virtue."[118] A 1376 Lenten letter to several women in Lucca expresses the same desire.[119] A contemporary letter written separately to one of the Luccan women seems to simply assume that women are brides of Christ.[120] Although her prayers most frequently refer to the Church as the bride of Christ, they also contain references to individual women as Jesus's brides.[121]

Understanding so many women to be already—or at least potentially—married to Christ has the effect of de-emphasizing, and thereby de-sexualizing, those marriages.[122] Certainly, Catherine believed that being Christ's bride was an honor, but we cannot understand it as a singular one. Further, even if, as Catherine seems to have believed, every bride of Christ received a piece of his penis as a wedding ring, their omnipresence—much like the multiple marriages themselves—makes them less sexual. Ironically, Raymond's presentation of Catherine as a singular bride, even one without a fleshy foreskin wedding ring, is more sexualized than Catherine's own understanding of the widespread event.

Given Catherine's own negative views of sex, it is even more difficult to interpret that she had a sexualized understanding of the foreskin wedding ring (either her own or another woman's). In a 1376 letter written to a married woman, Catherine encourages her to abstain from

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[118] Catherine of Siena, Letter T166/G349, *Letters, vol. 1,* 179.
[119] Catherine of Siena, Letter T162/G350, *Letters, vol. 1*, 44.
[120] Catherine of Siena, Letter T163/G347, *Letters, vol. 2*, 48. For additional letters to women on this theme, see Letter T221/G152, *Letters, vol. 2,* 180; Letter T54/G160, *Letters, vol. 2*, 74-75; Letter T112/G329, *Letters, vol. 2*, 335-337; Letter T75/G146/DT62, *Letters, vol. 2*, 515-519; Letter T79/G149, *Letters, vol. 2*, 551-556; Letter T217/G156, *Letters, vol. 2*, 561-566; Letter T215/G145, *Letters, vol. 3*, 9; Letter T81/G171, *Letters, vol. 3*, 38-40; Letter T262/G322, *Letters, vol. 3*, 323-327.
[121] See, for example, Catherine of Siena*, Prayers*, Prayer 14, p. 124.
[122] It also has the effect of negating the importance of the Holy Foreskin relics, which—again—Catherine never specifically discusses. If so many women wear Jesus's foreskin on their fingers, the relics themselves have little purpose.

sex within her marriage, arguing that Jesus "had a consummate love for continence and virginity as a way of life." She continues, now in prayer to Jesus: "How pleasing it is to you and how fragrant is the state of holy continence, especially in those you have chosen for marriage and who for love abstain and so move from the common state to the perfect because they feel they are so called by the Holy Spirit."[123]

This advice was not limited to women. A 1378 letter to Ristoro Canigiani, a Florentine lawyer to whom Catherine is also advising marital chastity, is worth quoting at length:

> If the blow of filthiness wants to strike us, we strike back with the fragrance of purity, and this purity and continence make us angelic. Purity is charity's intimate daughter, and its mother so loves it as to make us loathe not only the impurity that kills the soul (the impurity of those who wallow in the ire of sensuality like brute beasts), but even makes us avoid the impurity of those who are married, which is licitly permitted without the guilt of deadly sin—so much so that a person would willingly run away from it if possible, because it appears as what it is, and one cannot get out of that mud without having been muddied [lordarsi]. It's really impossible to use mud and not be smeared by it. This is why those who live in the most perfect charity have a taste for the fragrance of continence and so would like to run away from whatever is opposed to it. Oh, what a sweet sacrifice it would be and how acceptable to God if you, my dearest son and daughter, were to offer yourselves to God with this fragrance so sweet and lovely and, leaving leprosy to the lepers, would this very day pursue the angelic state![124]

In addition to making clear Catherine's abhorrence of even marital sex, these excerpts also demonstrate that although she was a religious virgin, Catherine certainly understood what sex was; like Agnes, her de-sexualized understanding of Jesus's foreskin did not come from naïveté.

I wish to pause here over the more psychoanalytical interpretation that some scholars might give these passages. This psychoanalytical reading would be bolstered by one passage in Raymond's *vita* of Catherine in which she asks Jesus to increase her suffering as a means of strengthening her faith. In response, Jesus allows demons to visit Catherine to try to convince her

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[123] Catherine of Siena, Letter DT1, *Letters, vol. 2,* 52.
[124] Catherine of Siena, Letter T279/G30, *Letters, vol. 3*, 211. For the Italian, see Caterina da Siena*, Le Lettere di S. Caterina da Siena, vol. 4*, 239.

to give up her virginity because she is so beautiful and ought to be married.[125] When that fails, the demons bring "vile pictures of men and women behaving loosely before her mind, and foul figures before her eyes, and obscene words to her ears, shameless crowds dancing around her, howling and sniggering and inviting her to join them."[126] Raymond notes that at the same time, Jesus did not visit Catherine as frequently as he usually did, but she never gave up "praying and mortifying her flesh."[127]

According to a psychoanalytical interpretation of this passage, in combination with Catherine's clearly stated abhorrence of sexual acts, she loathed sex and sexuality precisely because as a religious virgin, those activities were denied to her, resulting in a projected sexual frustration.[128] That resentment was so strong that not only did she vehemently counsel even married Christians to abstain from sexual relations, but her own desires—in the form of fantastical, demonically produced hallucinations—also tormented her repeatedly.

The problem with this interpretation, however, is the derivative nature of Raymond's *vita* of Catherine. As we have explored, it was clearly written with the aim of seeing her canonized: this type of demonic attack is a trope. The *vita* itself even reinforces this type of non-psychoanalytical reading. Immediately after recounting the attack, Raymond refers to the good Christian who perseveres in the face of tepidity of faith as "an athlete of Christ," noting that Jesus himself introduced Catherine to that concept.[129] This entire passage evokes the idea of the fourth-century Egyptian monk Anthony the Great, who was also famously beset by demons and

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[125] Catherine's beauty and marriage prospects are running themes throughout the first part of the *vita*. According to Raymond, *Life,* 37-40, God even has Catherine's older sister Bonaventura die in childbirth because she had been trying to lead Catherine into vanity.
[126] Raymond, *Life*, 91-92.
[127] Raymond, *Life*, 92.
[128] As noted above, Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies,* makes a similar argument about medieval monks.
[129] Raymond, *Life*, 92.

battled successfully against them.[130] Raymond has already stated in the *vita* that as a child, Catherine wished to imitate the Desert Fathers.[131] Thus, rather than indicating that Catherine viewed sex negatively because of her own subconscious desires, this passage is instead an example of Raymond including yet another established and venerated saint in whose footsteps Catherine's own sanctity followed.

In addition to sex, Catherine viewed nakedness negatively, further negating a sexualized reading of Jesus's foreskin—a piece of Jesus's penis that itself would usually only be visible if Christ himself were nude. Nowhere in Catherine's writings do we find the potentially evocatively naked Jesus of Agnes's visions. Instead, for Catherine, nakedness seems to have been a metaphor for spiritual immaturity. In a 1379 exhortatory letter to Raymond, she reminds him that through the grace of Jesus's blood, "we will find our nakedness covered."[132] At approximately the same time, she gives similar advice to Onorato Gaetani, the Count of Fondi.[133] An earlier letter to a Sienese nun expresses Catherine's usual desire for her female recipients: "I long to see you dressed in a royal garment, the garment of blazing charity. This is the garment that covers your nakedness, hides your shame, and warms and consumes your coldness." She shortly clarifies that this is "the wedding garment [in which] we'll clothe ourselves completely."[134] We find the same language in a 1377 letter to a group of nuns in Bologna.[135]

It is worth pausing to consider this divine wedding garment, as juxtaposed to Catherine's negative understanding of nakedness. Noffke points out that during Catherine's lifetime, a Sienese bride's wedding dress was scarlet, allowing Catherine to make a connection between her

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[130] See Benedicta Ward, trans. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo and Oxford: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 1-9.
[131] Raymond, *Life,* 27.
[132] Catherine of Siena, Letter T102/G93, *Letters, vol 4,* 346.
[133] Catherine of Siena, Letter T313/G192, *Letters, vol. 4*, 334.
[134] Catherine of Siena, Letter T220/G115, *Letters, vol. 2*, 446.
[135] Catherine of Siena, Letter T215/G145, *Letters, vol. 3*, 12.

idea of a wedding garment and the blood of Jesus on which she focused.[136] In a letter to a nun at Saint Agnes's convent in Montepulciano, Catherine reminds her that a bride wears scarlet to please her bridegroom and draws an allusion to the parable of the wedding banquet in Matthew 22:1-4.[137] Similarly, she tells nuns at a group of unnamed convents that "the bride has the wedding garment and so she is not banished from the wedding feast but is received with joy and gladness by her eternal Bridegroom."[138] Most explicitly, we find Catherine expounding on her idea of covering nakedness in the 1379 letter to Raymond. She tells him that "[we will] find ourselves clothed in the wedding garment of charity's fire, fire mixed and kneaded together with the blood that was shed for love and made one with the Godhead. In the blood we will be fed and nourished on mercy."[139] In this letter, we see her repeating the metaphor previously expressed to Raymond of Jesus's blood being kneaded with a substance (either charity's fire or the Godhead itself) to produce something that is more than the sum of its parts—here, a wedding dress that not only covers nakedness, but also allows the bride to be clothed in the very blood of Christ.

Catherine's metaphors regarding Jesus's sexuality extend beyond his blood and also address his body itself. Indeed, like many aspects of her spirituality, Catherine used metaphors and imagery to understand Jesus's body in a variety of ways—not just as a body. In one letter to an otherwise unknown Roman woman, Catherine sees Jesus's body as a book: it is written on the wood of the Cross, its ink is his blood, the illuminated initials are his wounds, and each chapter

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[136] Noffke, *Letters, vol. 2*, 274 note 3. Raymond, *Life,* 124-125, recounts a story in which Catherine gives her cloak to a beggar, who turns out to be Jesus. Although Jesus initially returns the cloak to her covered in jewels, he subsequently pulls from his side wound a garment the color of blood, invisible to all but Catherine (similar to Raymond's description of the wedding ring). For the rest of her life, the cloak keeps Catherine warm. As with the story about demons tempting Catherine sexually, this story is also derivative, imitating the legend of St. Martin of Tours.

[137] Catherine of Siena, Letter T54/G160, *Letters, vol. 2*, 74. Raymond had previously been confessor to Agnes of Montepulciano, creating a link between the two women. See Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 169-170, 241-243.

[138] Catherine of Siena, Letter T215/G145, *Letters, vol. 3*, 9.

[139] Catherine of Siena, Letter T102/G93, *Letters, vol. 4*, 346-347.

is a different part of his body.[140] A letter to Countess Bandeçça Salimbeni of Siena in 1377 mixes bridal imagery with Catherine's frequent food-based understanding of God the Father as table, Jesus the Son as food, and the Holy Spirit as waiter—this time at a bridal feast.[141] In three similar letters, she compares Jesus's body to a staircase. The first step is his feet. The second is his side wound where the soul finds "a storehouse filled with fragrant spices" and "the God-Man." The final step is his mouth where the soul "falls asleep in the peace of the Bridegroom" and finds "rest in quiet calm."[142] Most famously, of course, Catherine constructs an extended metaphor of Jesus as a bridge in her *Dialogue*, imagining him as the connection between the soul and God.[143]

For Catherine, Jesus's body could be many things, sometimes simultaneously: a book, food, a staircase, a bridge, and/or a wedding garment to cover shameful and immature nakedness. His circumcised foreskin could represent a wedding ring and salvific blood. None of these understandings, however, was sexual. Birgitta's encounter with the Holy Foreskin was not direct—at least as reported; as noted above, she may have visited it at the Sancta Sanctorum in Rome, but if so, we do not possess records of that visit. Her lack of reported direct contact with the relic negates a sexual reading of her understanding of Jesus's foreskin. Agnes had the most clearly modern sexual encounter with this piece of Jesus's flesh, but both she and her confessor recognized potentially sexual readings of her visions and worked to address them. Their mediating and negotiating silence surrounding the foreskin vision is telling.

If Agnes, Birgitta, and Catherine did not understand their interactions with the Holy Foreskin to be sexual, how, then, did these medieval women interpret this piece of Jesus's penis?

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[140] Catherine of Siena, Letter T309/G299, *Letters, vol. 2*, 538-542.
[141] Catherine of Siena, Letter T112/G329, *Letters, vol. 2*, 335.
[142] I have quoted from Catherine of Siena, Letter T75/G146/DT62, *Letters, vol. 2*, 517-518. The other two letters, which contain the same imagery are Letter T74/G119*, Letters, vol. 1,* 313-314; and Letter T120/G344, *Letters, vol. 2*, 438-440.
[143] Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*.

Understanding the Holy Foreskin

As discussed above, the Holy Foreskin for Agnes meant the Eucharist. Both were Jesus's flesh, and both could be consumed, at least by those favored by God. The very special sweetness that Agnes experienced when consuming Jesus's foreskin and (at times) his body as bread strengthens the connection. We have seen that throughout the *vita*, Agnes thought frequently about Jesus's body, both clothed and unclothed, both in the Eucharist and in its individual parts. Some of her visions on this topic seem unique to Agnes. During one Mass, for example, Jesus's skin on a Crucifix in the church appears blue. Although Agnes initially thinks it is a trick of the sunlight reflecting off the Crucifix, a voice tells her that Jesus's body on the Cross *was* blue.[144] Even an otherwise standard vision of Jesus in heaven surrounded by saints places extra emphasis on his body: although the unnamed religious people surrounding him are clothed in variously colored garments to represent their heavenly station, Jesus is naked. The emphasis in the vision is on the bright light emanating from his wounds.[145] Agnes even states that the mouth of the priest is the holiest object in the church, both because words coming from it consecrate the host and because it frequently consumes the body of Christ.[146]

Agnes's visions are full of symbolism, often related in relatively predictable ways to the Eucharist. What something *was* usually stood in for what it *meant*. For example, in one vision placed shortly after her encounter with Jesus's foreskin, Agnes saw the Virgin Mary and St. Simon each touching the host with one finger. A cross with one finger was also touching the host, and a donkey touched it with one hoof. The voice that usually accompanied her visions told her that each represented a type of human being who took Communion: the Virgin Mary was the

[144] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 120, p. 266-268.
[145] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 214, p. 442.
[146] Dinzeblacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 198, p. 412.

priest who effected the consecration because she had given birth to Jesus, St. Simon represented those who accepted Jesus on faith alone, the cross symbolized Christians who were devoted to the Passion, and the donkey stood in for sinners who did not understand the salvific grace of the Eucharist.[147]

This type of symbolism is key to understanding Agnes's interpretation of Jesus's foreskin and her fascination with Jesus's body. As we have seen, the doctrine of transubstantiation taught that every piece of the consecrated host contained the entirety of Jesus's body. For Agnes, his foreskin performed the same function. Through synecdoche, Jesus's foreskin became his entire body, just as one piece of bread was Jesus's full body. Even the description of the foreskin's texture—the membrane on the inside of a boiled egg—harkens back to the food-based accidents of the Eucharist, understood to be used by God to make flesh and blood palatable to human beings.[148] Although Wiethaus understands the egg comparison to be "perhaps the most outrageous provocation to the refined paradigm of courtly love," I argue instead that it is additional evidence of Agnes carrying her understanding of Jesus's foreskin to its utmost: Christ's body appeared to then-modern Christians in the form of food, as the wheaten host, and so every part of his body—even identifiable ones such as his foreskin—might logically have the trappings of food.[149]

Turning to Catherine of Siena, as much as she shared the interest of her late medieval contemporaries (such as Agnes) in Jesus's body, she was focused much more strongly on his blood.[150] Her letters almost always begin with a variant of the phrase "I am writing to you in

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[147] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 42, pp. 128-130.
[148] It is perhaps noteworthy that during one of her pregnancy visions, Agnes ate nothing that day except a raw egg, again drawing a connection between food and Jesus. See Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 193, p. 402.
[149] Wiethaus, "Spatiality and the Sacred in Agnes Blannbekin's *Life and Revelations*," *Agnes Blannbekin*, 173.
[150] Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 175-180. Mary Dzon, *The Quest for the Christ Child in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 221, claims that for Catherine, Jesus's foreskin "was a symbol of God's

Christ's precious blood." In a 1377 letter to Giovanna dei Pazzi, one of her early followers, she mentions Jesus's body as food and his blood as drink, but then states that "only the blood can satisfy our hunger, because the blood has been mixed and kneaded with the eternal Godhead."[151] She understood priests to be "ministers of the blood," not "ministers of the body," telling an ambassador from Florence, for example, that it is Jesus's blood, rather than his body, that is administered by priests.[152] In a contemporary letter to Gregory, she quotes Jesus as he refers to priests as "ministers of my blood."[153] In a 1379 prayer, she further refers to the Pope as the "minister of your [Jesus's] blood."[154]

In one of her more famous visions, recounted by Raymond, Jesus grants Catherine the opportunity to drink his blood directly from his side wound after she has proven her devotion to him by earlier drinking a bowl of pus to tame her—in her conception—sinning body.[155] This highlights that in Catherine's understanding, probably developed due to the late medieval withdrawal of the chalice from the laity, Jesus's blood was more important than his body.[156] The doctrine of concomitance held that the consecrated bread also contained Jesus's blood, but that may not have been enough for Catherine. Although Jesus's body had bled during the Passion, his foreskin was itself the *result* of a bloody procedure, and as we have seen, Catherine—even more strongly than Jacobus—understood the Circumcision as directly prefiguring the Passion.[157]

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union with humanity, presumably because it showed that the Son became man in all things but sin." In her view, the foreskin signified Jesus's maleness in a way that his baby teeth did not.

[151] Catherine of Siena, Letter T87/G342, *Letters, vol. 2*, 632.

[152] Catherine of Siena, Letter T234/G215/DT82, *Letters, vol. 2*, 239.

[153] Catherine of Siena, Letter T238/G9/DT80, *Letters, vol. 2*, 234.

[154] Catherine of Siena, *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. Suzanna Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), Prayer 12, p. 103. See also Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, ch. 14, 23, 131; and Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 177.

[155] Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, 147-148.

[156] Although she was a Dominican tertiary and enjoyed a close relationship with several members of the clergy, particularly Raymond, Catherine was technically a laywoman and would thus have had limited access to the consecrated wine.

[157] Catherine of Siena, Letter T123/G202, *Letters, vol. 2*, 372-377, includes a tale of St. Thomas in India, in which Thomas is slapped by a steward at a banquet. Jesus subsequently has a lion kill the steward, whose offending hand is brought to Thomas by a dog. Noffke, *Letters, vol. 2*, 374 note 17, points out that this story appears in the *Legenda*

In addition to Catherine's writings that I have cited previously, there are additional instances in which she links the Circumcision with the Passion. In prayer on the Feast of the Circumcision in 1380, Catherine praises Jesus by stating that he "ma[de] the down-payment and stir[red] us up in the love of your most holy Passion;" she continues, discussing espousal via the foreskin ring.[158] She tells Giovanna dei Pazzi, an early follower, in late 1377 that when Jesus was circumcised, "the tiny cask of his body was tapped. Yet it was so little that it couldn't satisfy us. But at the time of the Crucifixion the lance was thrust into his side… When this cask was emptied of physical life through the separation of soul from body, his blood was handed over." A rhetorical question follows. Where can one go to access this blood? – "to this very cask, Christ crucified, by following his way and teaching."[159]

The metaphor of the tapped cask that gave so little when Jesus was a circumcised baby and so much when he was a crucified adult provides perhaps the clearest evidence that Catherine understood the Holy Foreskin as the salvific blood that she craved so strongly. The intentionality that she so frequently ascribes to the infant Jesus during the circumcision suggests that, for Catherine, Jesus not only intended to wed humanity with his foreskin, but to do so precisely by means of his blood. To Joanna of Naples, she writes that "on the eighth day just enough flesh was taken from him to make a circlet of a ring. To give us sure hope of payment in full he began by paying the pledge. And we received the full payment on the wood of the most holy cross, when the Bridegroom, the spotless Lamb, poured out his blood freely from every member and with it washed away the filth and sin of humankind, his spouse."[160]

Aurea, but that Jacobus marks it as apocryphal because Augustine of Hippo condemned this type of vengeance in *Contra Faustum*. Catherine's inclusion of the story indicates that she had an imperfect familiarity with the *Legenda Aurea*, particularly because she does not seem to view the story as apocryphal.

[158] Catherine of Siena, *Prayers*, Prayer 25, 214-215.

[159] Catherine of Siena, Letter T87/G342, *Letters, vol. 2*, 632.

[160] Catherine of Siena, Letter T143/G313/DT39, *Letters*, *vol. 1*, 147-148.

Importantly, Catherine did not think about Jesus's foreskin solely on or around the Feast of the Circumcision. Although that date prompted Agnes to have her gustatory encounter with Jesus's prepuce, Catherine seems to have considered the meaning of the foreskin throughout the year. Certainly, several of her references to it do occur on or around January 1, as in the prayer referred to above, but she also speaks of it at other times of the year. The letter to Joanna of Naples was written on August 4, 1375. Catherine wrote her letter to Sister Bartolomea della Seta in late April or early May, 1376.[161] Noffke has dated the letter to Caterina di Ghetto, a Sienese tertiary, to October or November 1377.[162] The letter to Mona Tora also comes from October, in the following year.[163] Her final letter to Raymond, in which she states that "God has accomplished such wondrous mysteries from the feast of the Circumcision until now," is from mid-February 1380, approximately six weeks after the feast itself.[164]

Just as Catherine thought about Jesus's blood throughout the year, she did the same with his Circumcision and the wedding rings. For Catherine, wearing Jesus's excised foreskin meant that she was wearing a symbol of his shed blood. She and the other brides of Christ to whom she wrote could not easily have worn the Eucharist—the body of Christ—itself; wearing the liquid, consecrated wine, even if Catherine had had the access to it that she desired, would have proven even more logistically difficult. However, Jesus's foreskin, potentially already in the form of a ring, was already a conveniently portable piece of Christ's body. Moreover, it symbolized more than that body itself: it represented a down payment of shed blood, one that would come to fruition in the blood shed during the Passion that provided salvation to Christians.

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[161] Catherine of Siena, Letter T221/G152, *Letters, vol. 2,* 184.
[162] Catherine of Siena, Letter T50/G185, *Letters, vol. 2,* 595.
[163] Catherine of Siena, Letter T262/G322, *Letters, vol. 3,* 324.
[164] Catherine of Siena, Letter T373/G102, *Letters, vol. 4*, 365.

Birgitta shared an understanding of Jesus's body with Agnes and Catherine. As we have seen, she believed in his bodily presence in the Eucharist. As part of a vision from Mary, she also included the Circumcision in a list of significant moments in Jesus's life, along with the Passion.[165] In the vision of the Holy Foreskin itself, Mary also states that she saved Jesus's foreskin "along with that blessed blood that remained in his wounds when we took him down from the cross,"[166] drawing a further connection between the Circumcision and the Passion. Unlike Agnes and Catherine, however, Birgitta's interaction with Jesus's foreskin did not come from Christ himself and was not a physical one. Instead, it was part of a vision from Mary;[167] this is the key to understanding Birgitta's conception of the Holy Foreskin, a distinction that I purposefully make here. Agnes and Catherine had encounters with *Jesus's* foreskin whereas Birgitta had a vision of the *Holy* Foreskin, the relic—not a piece of Jesus's body that he himself delivered to her—either in her mouth or as a ring.

Mary Dzon has written extensively on Birgitta's close relationship with the Virgin Mary; the two enjoyed a "private, female discourse, in which Mary reveal[ed] intimate details about the Holy Family to another woman whom she trust[ed]."[168] As Dzon points out, Mary was speaking as one mother to another; unlike either Agnes or Catherine, Birgitta had children.[169] We have seen that Birgitta's most famous vision is an extended one in which she is present at the Nativity and Mary tells her exactly how she gave birth to Jesus, followed by reflections on her marriage to Joseph.[170] Given this close relationship, it is through Mary that Birgitta understood the Holy

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[165] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelations, vol. 3*, 31. The vision comes as advice from Mary on how Birgitta can work to save a friend of hers from eternal torment after his death.
[166] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelaciones, Book 6*, 273.
[167] Morris and Searby point out that nearly a third of Birgitta's revelations came from Mary. See Birgitta Morris and Denis Searby, *The Revelations of Birgitta of Sweden, vol. 4* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 158.
[168] Dzon, *Quest*, 187. Dzon's focus in this section of her book is on the descriptions of infant clothing that Mary provides to Birgitta.
[169] Dzon, *Quest*, 187.
[170] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelations, vol. 3*, 250-255.

Foreskin as a piece of Mary's son's body that was insufficiently venerated. In an undated vision, but one that probably occurred on the Feast of the Circumcision, Mary states that although she "cannot be angry," she is still upset that knowledge of her "little boy" is neglected; she states specifically that on the day the vision was delivered, "the most innocent little boy who never sinned was circumcised."[171] She also refers to the relic as "a treasure that is most dear to me."[172]

For Mary, and through Birgitta, Jesus's foreskin was a piece of her child's body, a child who had suffered and whom Mary had lost before her own death. Because medieval Christians did not practice circumcision, it is very unlikely that Birgitta would have had any of her sons circumcised. Thus, she would not have shared that experience with Mary. However, we know that Birgitta lost two of her own eight children in infancy and worried about one of her sons in adulthood, perhaps creating a connection of loss between these two mothers. For Mary/Birgitta, Jesus's foreskin was an earthly, incorruptible remain of the child's body that Mary had held and nursed and that Birgitta adored. This understanding of the Holy Foreskin as the relic of a beloved child also helps explain why Mary would have taken the trouble to safeguard Jesus's foreskin throughout his life and after his death, even as the young family moved about frequently or fled to Egypt.[173] Although Birgitta does not present Mary here as having divine foreknowledge of her son's death, there was a stream of thought in the Middle Ages that believed Mary knew what would happen to Jesus.[174] Preserving his simultaneously human and divine foreskin was a way for Mary—and future generations, such as Birgitta—to have continued access to her son's body.

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[171] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelations, vol. 1*, ed. Denis Searby and Birgitta Morris (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 308.
[172] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelaciones, Book 6*, 273.
[173] It does not explain why Mary specifically chose to keep Jesus's foreskin rather than any other part of his body (hair, baby teeth, clipped finger or toenails). Again, I would argue that it is because only the foreskin, rather than any of the other possible body parts, is mentioned in the Christian Scriptures.
[174] Although Mary's foreknowledge was debated during the Middle Ages, influential commentators such as Rupert of Deutz (c. 1080-1129) had clearly written that Mary knew all aspects of what would happen to Jesus. See Fulton Brown, *From Judgment to Passion*, 327-329.

Transgression and Mediation

The Holy Foreskin—and even the very concept of Jesus's excised foreskin—was dangerous. It raised problematic questions about key Christian doctrines, themselves sometimes doubted by late medieval Christians. It called into question the authority of priests and their unique, and absolute, control over dispensing Jesus's body to the laity. And yet these three women had very specific, and at times, intense encounters with this risky piece of Jesus's body. In the final section of this chapter, I wish to examine how Agnes, Birgitta, and Catherine worked sometimes alongside and sometimes in opposition to their confessors and biographers to mediate the risk posed to a publicly known holy woman by openly venerating the Holy Foreskin. I do not wish to suggest here that veneration of Jesus's foreskin was the deciding factor in determining a woman's holiness or sanctity, but rather that as a fraught relic, devotion to it did need to be addressed. We will see in this section that each woman and their confessors/biographers did so in different ways, and to varying degrees of success.

Beginning chronologically with Agnes, she and her confessor-biographer were the least successful among these three women at mediating her interaction with Jesus's foreskin, certainly from the perspective of post-mortem sanctity. Dinzelbacher attributes her obscurity to her interaction with Jesus's foreskin.[175] Wiethaus points out that when the first printed edition of Agnes's *Life and Revelations* appeared in 1731, it was almost immediately censored and withdrawn from the public. She notes that Agnes's encounter with Jesus's foreskin "challenged not only sexual prudishness but Church teaching that it had remained on earth."[176] As we have seen, of course, the institutional Church and its clerical representatives were not unanimous

[175] Dinzelbacher, "Die Wiener Minoriten," 183.
[176] Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin*, 11.

about the Holy Foreskin's terrestrial presence. Wiethaus does, however, point out additional elements of the *vita* that were transgressive, during both the 1730s and the Middle Ages.

We frequently find the laywoman Agnes at the altar, a masculine, clerical space during the late Middle Ages. She kisses it frequently, noting that she smells a "fragrant scent, similar to warm, sweetly smelling flour [similae], but incomparably sweeter," particularly when Mass has just been celebrated.[177] Moreover, she seems to have done this at multiple churches throughout the town. In one vision, Agnes envisions her own faith as a young woman dancing wildly around the altar.[178] Agnes's confessor-biographer apparently condoned these behaviors and visions since they were "divinely approved through supernaturally granted olfactory phenomena" and revelations.[179] However, it is unclear—and perhaps doubtful—whether other friars or clerics approved of Agnes's behaviors. Her practice of bowing at the basement window of the merchant's house that turned out to contain a stolen consecrated host certainly attracted ridicule from her fellow townsfolk, even if the *vita* does not mention what the clergy itself thought.[180]

As we have seen, Agnes was also frequently critical of priests. In her visions, we have seen Jesus look back and forth between worthy and unworthy recipients of the consecrated host—including priests.[181] Jesus in the form of a lamb refuses to kiss an unworthy priest even as he/it kisses the very clothing of devout priests.[182] Even specifically Franciscan priests—the order

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[177] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 40, p. 126: "Et tunc tantam sensit odoris fragrantiam, quasi ad modum similae caidae suaviter redolentis, sed incomparabiliter suavius.". Wiethaus, "Spatiality and the Sacred," 165, additionally characterizes the scent of flour or rolls as particularly transgressive. I would disagree here because of the frequent late medieval visions and artworks that depict a flourmill, into which went Jesus's body and out of which came the Eucharist. For an additional example of Agnes at the altar, smelling flour or bread, see Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 175-176, pp. 364-366.
[178] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 211, pp. 434-436.
[179] Wiethaus, "Spatiality and the Sacred," 163.
[180] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 44, pp. 132-134.
[181] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 140, p. 312.
[182] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 154, 156, pp. 330, 334-336.

with which Agnes was affiliated—are seen dancing naked, in a type of visionary foreshadowing of damnation for their sins.[183]

However, Agnes's anti-clerical tone goes beyond the obvious. She does not just point out the individual priests who are unworthy or sinful or insufficiently holy. By consuming Jesus's body in the form of his foreskin, she makes the argument, perhaps inadvertently, that priests are not even necessary for the sufficiently devout. I have argued above that we can dismiss a reading of eating Jesus's foreskin as sexual, certainly from a medieval perspective. However, we cannot set aside that Agnes consumed a piece of Jesus's body as precisely that: body—not bread.

The confessor-biographer's (or Agnes's) choice to place her encounter with the Holy Foreskin so closely to other important interactions with the Eucharist certainly does serve to heighten her belief in the Eucharist, in transubstantiation, and in her understanding of the full bodily presence of Jesus in the consecrated bread, but that very tight connection itself is problematic. By so closely relating the Eucharist with a specific piece of Jesus's body, Agnes and her confessor-biographer raise questions: Why is the Eucharist itself necessary? Why are priests necessary? If someone is sufficiently devout, why can't they receive Jesus's foreskin—his body—directly? Certainly, Agnes's *vita* presents her as extraordinarily holy, but as noted above, the lives of holy men and women were design to teach, to inform. And here, Agnes provides a particularly dangerous teaching for the late medieval Church. I do not wish to argue that she consciously anticipated Reformation-era ideas about direction interaction or communication with God, but she and/or her confessor-biographer nevertheless accomplished a similar outcome: a holy person's encounter with Jesus could extend beyond visions to direct interactions with identifiable, consumable parts of his body itself.

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[183] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, ch. 132, p. 298.

Birgitta's vision about the Holy Foreskin certainly did not impinge upon her sainthood; she was canonized just eighteen years after her death.[184] Indeed, I would argue that Birgitta's revelation about the location of Jesus's foreskin was probably not a factor in her canonization at all. It was simply overwhelmed by the amount of other Brigittine material, running to approximately 700 revelations distributed over eight volumes.[185] By contrast, Agnes's intense interaction with Jesus's foreskin is related in a comparatively short text filled with other unusual visions. The Catherinian material is also extensive, but Catherine wrote about Jesus's foreskin rings frequently. Further, it is important to remember that these women were not silent apart from relaying visions or dictating texts. They were not anchorites or recluses, despite Raymond's best efforts to portray Catherine as such; instead, they were part of their communities. As much as Catherine wrote about Jesus's foreskin, we must imagine that she talked about it to others even more.

By comparison, Birgitta provided a single vision about Jesus's foreskin; that vision itself contained no direct interaction with it.[186] Birgitta did not swallow Jesus's prepuce or wear it on her body in any way. The most dangerous part of her vision was that she affirmed the veracity of one of the earthly relics, thereby endangering the doctrine of bodily resurrection. As discussed above, however, this was probably not a concern for Birgitta. Further, her revelations, including those from Mary, do leave alive the concept of bodily resurrection. In a vision from the early

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[184] I am focusing here on official reception of these women's texts. Claire Sahlin, "Gender and prophetic authority in Birgitta of Sweden's *Revelations,*" in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), 82-85, provides an excellent discussion of ordinary people, particularly in Rome, who questioned whether Birgitta was a prophetess or a witch.

[185] Birgitta Morris, "Labyrinths of the Urtext," in *Heliga Birgitta—budskapet och förebilden: Föredrag vid jubileumssymposiet i Vadstena 3-7 oktober 1991*, eds. Alf Härdelin and Mereth Lindgren (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1993), 23.

[186] Kimberley M. Benedict, *Empowering Collaborations: Writing Partnerships between Religious Women and Scribes in the Middle Ages* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 49, notes that near that end of her life, Birgitta asked the former bishop Alphonsus to edit her Latin grammar and double-check the orthodoxy of what she had written. He presumably found no fault with the Holy Foreskin vision, at least as it is presented to us today.

1350s, Mary recounts the story of her own assumption, stating that "my body lay buried in the earth for fifteen days and then was carried into heaven by a multitude of angels. The specific time held a great mystery, for the resurrection of bodies will occur at the seventh hour and the beatitude of souls and bodies will be accomplished at the eighth."[187] Mary proceeds, following the common medieval practice of dividing the world into various ages, here using hours.[188] Although we see again that Birgitta/Mary makes a distinction between the importance and resurrection of the soul and the body, it is clear that the body will be resurrected.

As discussed above, Birgitta's vision primarily served to affirm the veracity of a single foreskin relic, the one located in Rome, presumably at the Sancta Sanctorum. It did not challenge priestly authority. It did not present an alternative Eucharist. If one of these relics *had* to be real—and, as we have seen, although theologians generally wrote against them, they were not univocal—at least Birgitta had specified which one it was, thereby removing questions about all the others. The fact that the affirmed relic was located in Rome, the historical seat of the papacy and the city to which Birgitta wished the Avignon papacy would return when she had her vision, certainly did not hurt.

Although Birgitta's vision was the least problematic, Catherine and Raymond are the duo among the individuals examined here who most successfully negotiated veneration of the Holy Foreskin. Even though Birgitta also achieved sainthood, and in a shorter time after her death than did Catherine, the Italian saint had more significant interactions with Jesus's foreskin; she also wrote about it more frequently. During the 20th century, Catherine also achieved greater acclaim than Birgitta, being named one of only three female Doctors of the Church, despite the early

[187] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelations, vol. 3*, 125.
[188] For example, the first hour is from creation until Moses; the second hour is from Moses until Jesus's birth. See Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelations, vol. 3*, 125.

twentieth-century ban on discussion of the Holy Foreskin. Here, I wish to examine how Catherine, and particularly Raymond, worked to negotiate and mitigate her veneration of Jesus's prepuce and her other activities.

In terms of Catherine's own writings, we have seen above that she did not endorse or even discuss any of the foreskin relics on earth. Instead, she believed that Jesus gave his numerous terrestrial brides foreskin rings. Through this understanding, Catherine did not imperil the Eucharist, as did Agnes; Catherine frequently discussed the consumption of souls in her letters, but she never instructed her recipients to eat their fleshy wedding rings. Moreover, Catherine's assertion that the post-Resurrection Jesus had foreskins to send to his brides set aside worries about bodily resurrection. It was Jesus's choice the send his foreskin back to earth; the key point was that in order for him to have his foreskin to send in the first place, he did indeed have that piece of his body, resurrected, with him in heaven.

These points are all interpretation, of course. As we have seen, Catherine makes few explicit theological points about Jesus's foreskin in her own writings. Instead, she is quite straightforward about it: Jesus marries his devoted brides, and they receive wedding rings made of flesh. To understand the full extent of the foreskin mediation, it is necessary to compare her writings to those of Raymond, as derivative as his biography of her was. Indeed, it is precisely in that *vita*'s nature that we find the answers to why Catherine wrote of celestial wedding rings as foreskins and Raymond described hers as an invisible one made of diamond and pearl-encrusted gold. Although she clearly and frequently understood herself as having greater spiritual understanding than he did, his *vita* presents her as a conventional, if extraordinary, female saint.

As discussed, Raymond's motive in his *vita* of Catherine was to present her as a would-be contemplative woman forced into the world precisely by Jesus's command. The entire *vita* is

carefully planned out to lead to this. At the beginning, when he discusses Catherine's childhood, he states that although she wanted to be a solitary in the model of the Desert Fathers, "it was not, in fact, the will of heaven that she should lock herself away in solitude."[189] Even from an early age, he presents her as consistently exhausted and emaciated, tying into her fasting, although we know from her letters that she traveled extensively throughout Italy.[190] Even her marriage to Jesus, complete with the traditional golden ring, has this presentation: "I believe the Lord willed this [her marriage to Jesus] because of her sex and the novelty of what she did and the slack condition of our times, all of which seemed likely to raise obstacles to the mission entrusted her by heaven, so that she needed special and continuous assistance."[191] Not only do Catherine's activities need explanation here, but her own motives and activities are diminished in favor of seeing her sanctified: in Raymond's presentation, she could not have *wanted* to enter the public sphere. Indeed, she needed constant assistance from Christ to do so.

According to Raymond, Jesus tells Catherine in a further vision that she will essentially be forced out into the world.[192] Jesus specifies:

> Your heart will burn so strongly for the salvation of your fellow men that you will forget your sex and change your present way of life; you will not avoid this company of men and woman as you do now, but for the salvation of their souls will take upon yourself every kind of labor. Many people will be scandalized by the things you do, and oppose you, so that the thoughts of their hears may be revealed. But you must not be anxious or afraid, for I shall always be with you, and I shall free your soul from the evil tongues and the lips that utter lies.[193]

Shortly afterward, Jesus gives a similar speech to Catherine:

> The salvation of many souls makes it necessary for you to go back [to earth; she had been in heaven in a vision]! You must change your present way of life; your cell must not be a home to you any longer; instead, for the good souls you will

[189] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 27.
[190] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 55-57.
[191] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 101.
[192] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 150-151.
[193] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 110.

> have to leave even your own city. I shall be with you always, in our goings out and your comings in, and you will carry my doctrine and the honor of my name to high and low, to lay folk, to clerics and religious. I shall put a kind of wisdom in your mouth that none shall be able to resist. I will leave you before Popes, before the Heads of the Christian Church and its people; and through the weak, as is my custom, I shall humble the pride of the powerful.[194]

Throughout these two sections, Raymond makes a post-mortem argument for why Catherine engaged in such wide-ranging and public activities. It was not through her own desire, but only because of the irrefutable will of Christ that she traveled throughout Italy and wrote her extensive letters.

Leaving nothing untouched, Raymond also provides a divine explanation for that writing itself, probably also addressing how an illiterate woman could have provided a lengthy theological treatise, Catherine's *Dialogue*, when she might otherwise be ignorant of formal Latin theology. He writes that shortly before Catherine had her spiritual marriage to Jesus, she learned to read—but not speak—Latin, through an otherwise unexplained process.[195] Although Raymond's description of Catherine's literacy is typically undated, she herself does unusually provide corroboration of what he reports. In a late 1377 letter, she tells him that after an ecstatic experience, God "provided for my refreshment by giving me the ability to write—a consolation I've never known because of my ignorance." She reports that John the Evangelist and Thomas Aquinas helped teach her in her sleep.[196]

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[194] Raymond of Capua, *Life,* 193.
[195] Raymond of Capua, *Life*, 96-97.
[196] Catherine of Siena, Letter T272/G0, *Letters, vol. 2*, 505. Catherine's writing abilities seem in question. She continued to use her literate followers as secretaries throughout her life to transcribe her letters as she dictated them. Noffke, *Letters, vol. 2*, 505 note 51, is persuaded that Catherine learned how to write in an elementary fashion, noting that she is also claimed to have written Letter T367 and Prayer 6, although she concedes that some scholars dispute this. Interestingly, Noffke, *Prayers*, Prayer 6, 53, notes that the language and themes in Prayer 6 differ from Catherine's usual repertoire; here, Noffke conclude that Catherine may have memorized and adapted this prayer, rather than composing it herself.

The acquisition of literacy provides a rare example in which Catherine and Raymond agree. The discussion of celestial wedding rings, however, is not one. For Catherine, these rings were the foreskin of Jesus, miraculously multiplied across all devout women. For Raymond, it was a bejeweled golden ring, specific to Catherine alone. Raymond's choice of a more mundane golden ring was not accidental. He was a high-ranking Dominican priest, confessor to specifically designated holy women: Agnes of Montepulciano and then Catherine. Although he was not confessor to Birgitta of Sweden, he succeeded Birgitta's confessor who had been previously and briefly assigned to Catherine. Shortly after Catherine died, he became head of the Dominican Order. There is little doubt that he was familiar with the theological treatises circulating in his day. Although he would not have known Guibert of Nogent's screed against the Holy Foreskin, he was probably familiar with Innocent III's ambivalence about the relic. As a Dominican priest trained in public preaching, he would almost certainly have read the *Legenda aurea*. Raymond knew that Jesus's foreskin was even more problematic than Catherine's public activities; if nothing else, the latter could be explained in his *vita* through Jesus's own instructions and interventions. Catherine's understanding of the foreskin, however, could be most cleanly erased by, in Bynum's words, creating a "bowdlerized" version of it.[197] Rather than a ring of celestial flesh, it could instead be a ring of jewels and gold, conveniently invisible to all but Catherine herself.

This naturally had the effect of denying Catherine her own agency, in service to creating her sanctity.[198] We also find here two different theological understandings of marrying Jesus. For

[197] Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 246.
[198] Gábor, "Legends as Life Strategies," 151-171, discusses women who consciously modelled their lives on previous saints. See also Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country* and André Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du moyen âge d'auprès les process de canonization et les documents hagiographiques* (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 1981).

Catherine, it was an unusually egalitarian and commonplace occurrence. Practically any devout woman—unmarried or practicing marital continence—could have the honor. Jesus's foreskin was the sign. Here, again, Catherine did not assign the foreskin a sexual relevance. There was no connection between foreskin ring, penis, and (celestial) marital sex; as we have seen, Catherine did not countenance sexual relations. Instead, it seems probable that Catherine was working from the dual ideas of an excised foreskin potentially being shaped as a ring (she almost certainly had no idea of what one actually looked like) and of the existence of Jesus's foreskin in multiple relics. Although she herself did not endorse those relics, she was undoubtedly aware of them—she lived in Rome for a time and grew up not far from the city—and they may have influenced her thoughts about Jesus's body, including the idea that his foreskin could exist in multiple places at once.

Raymond, on the other hand, saw marriage to Jesus as singular. It was only Catherine who married Jesus. Indeed, it *had to be* only Catherine who married Jesus in order to continue to ensure her sanctity. It was yet another mark on his celestial checklist for her. More significantly for this discussion, he also erased all popular veneration of the Holy Foreskin in service of sanctifying Catherine. For Raymond, Jesus's prepuce was not something that existed, let alone something that should be venerated. Instead, it was only with traditional—and traditionally accepted—gold that Jesus wed his one bride. Raymond has no other extant treatise about the Holy Foreskin, so it is unclear what his own views on it were. It is clear, however, that he understood the upper echelons of the institutional Church to have problems with it: in his *vita* of Catherine, he effaced it just as he erased her own public agency.

Conclusion

Each of these three women interpreted Jesus's foreskin differently, underscoring that even though the Holy Foreskin was widespread, their understanding of it—let alone their devotion to it—was not uniform. Agnes rejected earthly relics in favor of a very special, divinely given alternative Eucharist that proved itself to be problematic. For Birgitta, it was a fully physical earthly remnant of the baby Jesus, the child whom Mary had held and whom Mary and Birgitta continued to venerate. Catherine saw Jesus's foreskin as symbolic of the shed blood that saved Christians and that she craved. All of these understandings, however, were specifically Christian in nature; they denied the actual, Jewish purpose of Jesus's circumcision. In the next, final chapter, I wish to explore that denial more deeply and examine the ways in which medieval Christians appropriated a (for them) specifically Jewish ritual to give it a Christian meaning.

CHAPTER 7: LATE MEDIEVAL ANTI-JUDAISM: JUDAISM AND THE HOLY FORESKIN

Devotion to the Holy Foreskin was widespread during the late Middle Ages, despite its controversial nature. Theologians such as Guibert of Nogent or Jacobus de Voragine may have opposed it, but equally influential figures such as Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena endorsed it—even in a singular earthly form, in Birgitta's case. However, a key factor in all of this devotion and controversy is that none of the late medieval figures we have examined would themselves have endorsed the general practice of circumcision. Instead, following centuries of theological exposition on Paul's command to practice circumcision of the heart rather than of the physical body itself, late medieval Christians performed baptism as a sign of their covenant with God.[1] Further, Jews were denigrated precisely because they continued to practice circumcision; it was seen as a bodily sign of their continued stubbornness to accept Jesus.

And yet, there was widespread belief in and devotion to Jesus's earthly foreskin—the very result of a Jewish ritual that medieval Christians did not practice and that they viewed as not only useless, but also theologically inferior. As Andrew Jacobs writes, the Circumcision is "Christ's most Jewish moment."[2] At the same time that devotion to this relic was growing, however, anti-Judaism in Europe was on the rise. For example, late medieval Christians baselessly accused Jews of desecrating the Eucharist and of killing Christian children in order to obtain their blood to bake in Passover matzoh. The figures we have explored thus far also wrote their own anti-Jewish statements. Although opposition to Jews might be expected from

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[1] Romans 2:29. See Irven M. Resnick, *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 53-65, for an extensive discussion of medieval Christian views regarding Jewish circumcision and Christian baptism. See also Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 189-190.

[2] Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 14.

theologians such as Guibert of Nogent or Innocent III, who had misgivings about the Holy Foreskin, it is perhaps more surprising from the foreskin devotees we have examined: Agnes, Birgitta, and Catherine.

In this chapter, I will explore late medieval anti-Judaism with a focus on views surrounding circumcision. In doing so, I will attempt to reconcile how some late medieval Christians could worship the result of a Jewish ritual while simultaneously denigrating the very group that practiced that ritual. Drawing on arguments made in the previous chapter and the large historiography on medieval anti-Judaism, we will find that devotion to the Holy Foreskin involved appropriating the Jewish practice of circumcision, specifically Jesus's Circumcision, to give it new, Christian meanings that would have had no basis in medieval Judaism.

Late Medieval Anti-Judaism: An Overview

Growing anti-Judaism during the central and late Middle Ages is well documented in scholarship. Focusing on twelfth-century northwestern Europe R.I. Moore has postulated that violence targeted at Jews, heretics, and lepers coalesced to form what he has termed a persecuting society.[3] He argues that as twelfth-century monarchies began to become administrative in nature and to formalize their control, "persecution began as a weapon in the competition for political influence, and was turned by the victors into an instrument for consolidating their power over society at large."[4] He points out that although the growing anti-Judaism was driven by secular concerns, the Fourth Lateran Council also "laid down a machinery of persecution for Western Christendom."[5]

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[3] R.I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).
[4] Moore, *Formation*, 138. See also Moore, *Formation*, 162. For the rise of administrative kingship, particularly in England and France, see C.W. Hollister and John Baldwin, "The Rise of Administrative Kingship," *American Historical Review* 83 (1978): 867-905.
[5] Moore, *Formation*, 10.

Miri Rubin narrows in the discussion of anti-Judaism to focus on the host desecration and blood libel charges that were repeatedly leveled against Jews, particularly in German lands. Rubin does not greatly detail the persecution that Jews faced because of these myths, instead concentrating on their narrative qualities and the social classes that were most often implicated in them.[6] In the host desecration charge, a Jew would request a consecrated host either to destroy it or to perform black magic using it; a Christian—usually a poor woman—would provide the host. When the Jew attempted to damage the host, it would exhibit miraculous properties: becoming flesh, bleeding, or crying like a baby. In the blood libel accusation, a Jew would murder a Christian child in imitation of the Crucifixion to obtain its blood for use in creating matzoh for Passover.[7] She argues that the source for this particular persecuting discourse was the increased importance that we have seen placed upon the Eucharist after the Fourth Lateran Council. Those members of society, such as Jews, who could or would not partake of the Eucharist became more isolated and subject to persecution.[8] Jews became a tool for emphasizing the importance of the Eucharist: the fact that they did not believe in Christ, but still used the Eucharist—the body of Jesus himself—to perform magical rituals, confirmed the validity of the consecrated host for those Christians who may have doubted its veracity.

Anna Abulafia also focuses on the discourse against Jews—and what it actually says about the Christians who wrote their treatises. Abulafia argues that Christian doubts about the nature of the Eucharist and Christ's divinity in the twelfth century led to anti-Judaism, as Christians "turned against the Jews because they embodied the denial of those beliefs about

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[6] Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, 48-57, does provide details on two massacres at Rintfleisch (1298) and Armleder (1336-38). Bynum, *Wonderful Blood* offers occasional discussion of the host desecration narrative, but Bynum is more interested in the theological complexities of Christ's body and blood than their role in interfaith relations.
[7] Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, 7-40, provides a general analysis of the two tales. She discusses the gender and social rank of the tales' usual characters at 71-74.
[8] Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, 1.

which so many doubts existed." She points out that although some twelfth-century Christians experienced religious doubts, it was generally thought that anyone with reason could reach concurrence with Christian beliefs. Furthermore, it was held that all human beings possessed reason; thus, Jews began to appear in Christian discourse as sub-human.[9] She finds that this sub-human Jews appears in multiple medieval texts. For example, contemporary theologians Anselm of Canterbury (1033/4-1109) and Odo of Cambrai (1060-1113) both argued that reason should be sufficient to understand the validity of the Incarnation.[10] Regarding Guibert of Nogent, she writes that "much of what Guibert wrote [about the Jews] betrays his deep concern about his own body and about bodily impurities in general."[11] Indeed, by the twelfth century, it was believed that Christians were concerned about the mind whereas Jews cared more about the bestial, physical body.[12]

Joshua Trachtenberg's now-classic monograph uses this theme of disbelief to draw links between the medieval conception of the devil and Jews. As the discursive image of the mythical Jew was created, the figure developed links to the anti-Christ, the devil, and witchcraft.[13] Mark R. Cohen utilizes a comparative approach in his analysis of Jewish life under Christian and Muslim rule during the Middle Ages, asking why conditions for Jews were better in Islamic Spain than elsewhere in Europe. Although he does not concentrate on major periods of persecution and violence, such as the 1391 Spanish pogroms, these concerns do inform his

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[9] Anna Sapir Abulafia, "Twelfth-Century Renaissance Theology and the Jews," in *From Witness to Witchcraft: Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 129.
[10] Anna Sapir Abulafia, "Bodies in the Jewish-Christian Debate," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester and New York; Manchester University Press, 1994), 124.
[11] Abulafia, "Bodies in the Jewish-Christian Debate," 123-124.
[12] Abulafia, "Bodies in the Jewish-Christian Debate," 129.
[13] Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983).

work.[14] For Cohen, the presence of multiple religions within a society is key: he roots the better conditions that Jews experienced in Islamic Spain in the fact that Jews were not the only ethnic or religious minority in the Iberian Peninsula.[15] He notes that the absence in Islam of "irrational" thinking about Judaism, such as associating Jews with the devil or utilizing Jews in eschatological schemes, helped suppress Muslim persecutions of Jews.[16]

David Nirenberg also sees increasing violence against Jews during the late Middle Ages. Similar to Cohen, he examines the situation of Jews in Spain, but he focuses on the fourteenth century, a time when Christians had conquered most of the Iberian Peninsula.[17] Nirenberg severely critiques the position that discourse and dominant modes of thought controlled medieval peoples' actions. He argues that a persecuting discourse does not always lead to *acts* of persecution. While clearly acknowledging that negative discourses about Jews, Muslims, and other minorities existed in the Middle Ages, he suggests that "any inherited discourse about minorities acquired force only when people chose to find it meaningful and useful, and was itself reshaped by these choices."[18] He goes on to state that the persecuting discourse "was but one of those available, and its invocation in a given situation did not ensure its success or acceptance. The choice of language was an active one, made in order to achieve something."[19] Nirenberg's

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[14] Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 44.
[15] Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 115-120.
[16] Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 173. For a similar, more popular, analysis, see Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009). Menocal, Jerrilynn D. Dodds, and Abigail Krasner Balbale, *The Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Making of Castilian Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), provides a more scholarly presentation of Menocal's ideas, with a focus on art history.
[17] David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Although Nirenberg includes Muslims living under Christian rule in his study, his primary focus is on Jews.
[18] Nirenberg, *Communities*, 6.
[19] Nirenberg, *Communities*, 6. While Nirenberg does not deny the existence of actual violence against Jews, such as annual bouts of violence during Holy Week ceremonies, he posits that these attacks could be "stabilizing" and work toward the creation of a community, albeit a hierarchical one, suggesting that "violence and bind and sunder in the same motion. See Nirenberg, *Communities*, 229.

point about persecuting discourse is particularly salient here because we are analyzing what people *wrote* about Jews; we do not possess evidence that figures such as Innocent III or Catherine of Siena themselves perpetrated violence against Jews.

The medieval authors whom we have examined bear out the anti-Jewish beliefs that characterized the late Middle Ages. Because we are examining the juxtaposition between anti-Judaism and belief in the result of a Jewish ritual, I will focus here on writings by Agnes, Birgitta, and Catherine—our foreskin devotees. In a vision classifying human beings into twelve categories, seven of which will be damned and five of which will be saved, Agnes Blannbekin sorts Jews into one of the condemned categories. They appear as "black and blind and laid out as if dead" because they are "blind in faith and in the Scripture of sacred faith."[20] Other damned groups include heretics, apostates, and humans too focused on worldly pleasures. A separate vision relating Jesus's five wounds to forgiveness begins by noting that the vision was populated only by people "who were all in a state of salvation. No heretic, no Jew, nobody in mortal sin was shown to her."[21] A nativity vision specifies that Jews are unbelieving and do not acknowledge Jesus through the testimony of Scripture.[22] Although Agnes never directly advocates violence against Jews, her discourse of blindness and damnation positions her within the prevalent anti-Jewish rhetoric.

We see similar themes with Birgitta of Sweden. Visions from both Jesus and the Virgin Mary blame Jews for Jesus's Crucifixion. They also use Jews as a type of foil, positioning

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[20] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, Ch. 181, pg. 372: "In secunda parte homines errant habentes integram dispositionem humanam, sed nigri et caeci jacentes quasi mortui, et isti sunt Judaei caeci in fide et in scriptura sacrae fidei."

[21] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, Ch. 190, pg. 396: "Alio tempore in spiritu vidit multitudinem hominum qui errant omnes in statu salutis; nullus haereticus, nullus Judaeus, nullus in mortali existens est ei ostensus."

[22] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin*, Ch. 194, pg. 406: "Hoc de infidelibus Judaeis, qui eum ex scripturae testimonio agnoscere (noluerunt), intelligendum est."

doubtful or sinful Christians as even worse than the disbelieving Jew. For example, Jesus tells Birgitta in an early vision that Jews prepared three types of punishment for him: the wood on which he was hung, the iron used to nail him to the Cross, and the vinegar that he was given to drink.[23] In another vision, Mary sets up the Jew-as-foil motif, lamenting that modern, sinful Christians are worse because the Jews "acted out of envy and because they did not know [Jesus] to be God."[24] Speaking in another vision to Jews alternately as God the Father and God the Son, Jesus tells them both that he created them and led them to a promised land, but that they did not believe in him and will be punished when he returns.[25] Separately, Jesus tells Birgitta that his mercy is nearly boundless, but does not extend to pagans and Jews.[26]

A more metaphorical vision positions Birgitta and her daughter Katherina as the biblical figures Mary and Martha; their soul is the biblical figures' brother Lazarus.[27] Jesus assures Birgitta he will "raise your soul—your brother—for you and protect it from being killed by the Jews." He additionally notes that he will "guard and protect [her] from these Jews."[28] Here, Birgitta's vision has gone a step further. It is no longer Jesus who was endangered/killed by Jews; instead, it is Birgitta and her daughter themselves who are in danger from these nonbelieving people. This suggests that the supposed danger presented by Jews was not just an

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[23] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelations vol. 1,* 102. See also *Revelations vol. 1*, 157; *vol. 2*, 114; *vol. 2*, 239; *vol. 2*, 242; *vol. 2*, 312

[24] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelations vol. 1*, 114-115. See also *Revelations vol. 1*, 148; *vol. 1*, 183; for similar visions involving Mary. See also, however, *Revelations vol. 3*, 19, in which Mary says that Jews would often come to visit her young son because of his beauty.

[25] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelations vol. 1*, 122-124. At 120, Jesus makes an exemption for "all the Jews who are secretly Christian." We will discuss the concept of crypto-Jews and *conversos* later in this chapter.

[26] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelations vol. 1*, 309-310. See also *Revelations vol. 2*, 42; *vol. 2*, 203;

[27] Luke 10:38-42 presents the story of sisters Mary and Martha. During Jesus's visit, the latter focuses on preparing a meal while Mary sits at Jesus's feet and listens to his teachings. There is no mention of a brother. John 11:1-44 tells the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. John notes that Lazarus has two sisters, Mary and Martha, but it is unclear whether they are the same women in the Lucan story. See Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*, 18-46, for a discussion of what she calls a "surfeit of Marys" (29).

[28] Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelations vol. 2*, 132. *Revelations vol. 2,* 237, also relates the story of Lazarus

historical or abstract one; rather, it was believed to be one that existed during Birgitta's lifetime—although a spiritual danger, rather than a physical one.

Catherine of Siena also exhibits anti-Judaism in her writings, although perhaps to a lesser degree. In a 1376 letter to a priest in Florence, she engages in her typical act of encouraging him to greater piety, reminding him that "we are not Jews or Saracens, but Christians ransomed and bathed in Christ's blood."[29] Similarly to Birgitta, in a letter to the Duke of Anjou, who had recently held a lavish banquet, she likens Jews to worldly Christians who "on the outside… seem beautiful… but their heart and affection are filled with these deadly transitory things that give off the disgusting stench of bodily and spiritual corruption."[30] She frequently writes that Jews implored Jesus to come down from the Cross, claiming that they would believe his divinity if he did so; the implication is that their belief was misplaced in a physical manifestation of holiness rather than in Jesus's words about himself.[31]

We do possess a single letter that Catherine wrote to a Jewish man, in early 1376. Consiglio had moved to Siena after the city invited Jews to the city to practice moneylending at interest, a practice technically forbidden to Christians at the time.[32] In the letter, Catherine attempts to convince him to convert to Christianity, inviting him to "receive the grace of holy baptism, since without baptism you cannot have God's grace." She goes further to argue that the unbaptized "justly reap pain and darkness, having been unwilling to be washed in the water of holy baptism and having spurned the blood of God's Son."[33] Catherine also offers an idea of

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[29] Catherine of Siena, Letter T171/217/DT60, *Letters, vol. 2*, 26. See also Letter T207/G198/DT68, *Letters vol. 2*, 142.
[30] Catherine of Siena, Letter T237/G190/DT79, *Letters vol. 2*, 225.
[31] Catherine of Siena, Letter Letter T101/G27/DT23, *Letters vol. 2*, 67; Letter T159/G120, *Letters vol. 2*, 108; Letter T325/G186/DT78, *Letters vol. 2*, 221; Letter T11/G24/DT23, *Letters vol. 2*, 523; Letter T242/G37, *Letters, vol. 2*, 528; Letter T309/G299, *Letters, vol. 2*, 542; Letter T79/G149, *Letters vol. 2*, 554; and Letter T169b/G85, *Letters, vol 3*, 81
[32] Suzanne Noffke, *Letters vol. 2*, 280.
[33] Catherine of Siena, Letter T15/G310, *Letters vol. 1*, 281-282.

redemption: "It seems [Jesus] does not want to remember the offenses we commit against him; he does not want to condemn us for eternity but wants always to be merciful."[34]

This letter provides evidence that although Catherine shared in her late medieval contemporaries' view that Jews would not receive salvation, she also believed that they were not unequivocally barred from doing so. She engages in the belief that Jews stubbornly refused to recognize Jesus as divine, but she also does not understand them as irredeemable: instead of Christ-killers, she presents them as people who wanted Jesus to perform a physical manifestation of holiness by coming down from the Cross. This may be evidence of the medieval belief that Jews engaged more in physicality than in spirituality. She certainly sees Consiglio as needing redemption, as his own religion does not provide it to him, but she does also see him as someone incapable of receiving that redemption. This letter to a male—presumably circumcised—Jew is particularly interesting, given Catherine's intense focus on the body as a site of spirituality.

Medieval Anti-Judaism: Circumcision and Menstruation

Late medieval anti-Judaism extended not just to ideas about Jews' souls or their role in the Crucifixion or host desecration, but also to their very bodies. In particular, male circumcision was the most distinguishing, most physical feature that separated Jewish bodies from Christian bodies. As we have seen, medieval Christians did not normally practice male circumcision—indeed, condemning it as a sign that one was adhering to Mosaic (physical) law rather than to Christian (spiritual) law. However, Eilberg-Schwartz argues that circumcision of the man in Judaism was purposeful: "It is no accident that the symbol of the covenant is impressed on the penis. The penis is the male organ through which the genealogy of Israel is perpetuated. The removal of the foreskin has the effect of giving the penis the appearance it has when erect thus

[34] Catherine of Siena, Letter T15/G310, *Letters viol. 1*, 282.

symbolizing great things to come… They thus associate the circumcision of the male with pruning juvenile fruit trees; like the latter, circumcision symbolically readies the stem for producing fruit"[35]

In late medieval Christianity, however, Eilberg-Schwartz's connection between circumcision and masculine procreation was inverted. Already by the thirteenth century, Jewish men were thought to suffer from anal bleeding, believed to be a spiritual punishment because their ancestors had been involved in the Crucifixion.[36] Resnick notes that Alfred the Great claimed that Jewish men were more afflicted by bleeding hemorrhoids, although Alfred cited scientific reasons such as a defective diet and earthly/melancholic blood as the rationale. Medical scholars also believed that women—Jewish or not—did not suffer from hemorrhoids because their excess blood was removed via menstruation.[37] Here, however, there is a differentiation from Alfred's view: Jewish men were also said to have hemorrhoids because of their timidity and pallor—qualities more associated with women during the Middle Ages.[38] At the same time, Christian also commentators believed that Jewish men had an abnormally high sexual drive; circumcision had perhaps been an injunction from God to help curb this.[39] Abramson and Hanson point out that although "Jewish men were perceived as excessively libidinous and Christian women were dangerously susceptible to their sexual power… the mutilation of the [male] genitalia was also a feminizing wound, a form of emasculation."[40]

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[35] Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book," in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective,* ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 23.
[36] David Biale, *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol Between Jews and Christians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 105.
[37] Resnick, "Medieval Roots," 253-255.
[38] Resnick, "Medieval Roots," 256.
[39] Resnick, *Marks of Distinction*, 69-71.
[40] Henry Abramson and Carrie Hanson, "Depicting the Ambiguous Wound: Circumcision in Medieval Art," in *The Covenant of the Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Rite*, ed. Elizabeth Wyner Mark (Lebanon, NH: University of New England Press, 2003), 101. Daniel Boyarin provides an argument from the point of view of

The idea of bleeding Jewish men ultimately combined with the practice of circumcision—which feminized men and also lowered their sexual drive—to produce the concept that circumcised Jewish men menstruated, even monthly. The first to tie this process to the lunar cycle was the 13th-century chronicler and Bishop Jacques de Vitry in his *Historia orientalis*, a history of the Crusades. He writes that during the Crucifixion, Jews called the blood of Jesus upon themselves.[41] Because of this, Jewish men, "have become cowardly and feeble as women. Whence, as it is said, they suffer from hemorrhage of blood during each lunar cycle."[42] There was still some disagreement about timing, however. Jacque's contemporary, Caesarius of Heisterbach, a German Cistercian prior, claimed that Jewish men menstruated annually Good Friday, the anniversary of Jesus's death.[43] On the other hand, a 1370s astronomical text from Germany that taught Christians how to calculate the Jewish lunar calendar also states that Jewish men menstruate monthly.[44]

Regardless of the precise timing of this mythical phenomenon, two implications are clear. First, Jewish men exhibited this unusual bodily process precisely because of their relationship to Christianity. Although Alfred the Great had argued that Jewish men experienced hemorrhoidal bleeding because of diet and their humoral constitutions, by the later Middle Ages, the cause was a punishment wrought down by God because of Jews' participation in the Crucifixion. This became a medical malady with a specifically Christian cause. The religious connection goes

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rabbinic Jews, for whom the feminization enabled by circumcision was positively constructed. See Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 87-90. A shorter form of Boyarin's essay originally appeared as Daniel Boyarin, "Masasa or Yavneh? Gender and the Arts of Jewish Resistance," in *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies*, eds. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 306-329.

[41] Matt. 27:25.

[42] Jacques de Vitry, *Historia Orientalis*, ed. Jean Donnadieu (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 328: "Imbelles enim et imbecilles facti sunt quasi mulieres. Unde singulis lunationibus, ut dicitur, fluxum sanguinis patiuntur."

[43] Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum, vol. 1*, ed. Joseph Strange (Cologne: Heberle, 1851), 92.

[44] Nothaft, "The Meaning of *Judaeus*.".

further with the second implication. Because Jews continued to practice a physical relationship with God via circumcision—rather than a spiritual one via baptism—they suffered, resulting in a feminization (and therefore, denigration) of Jewish men within Christian society. We see here that Christianity has already appropriated the Jewish male body, and rituals performed on that body, to provide it with meanings that Judaism itself would not have attached to it. In the next section, I wish to present a case study of 14th-century anti-Jewish pogroms in Spain. Although the Holy Foreskin did not garner widespread devotion in the Iberian peninsula, a series of anti-Jewish actions toward the end of the *Reconquista* brings together the previous discussions of late medieval discourse against Jews with a focus on the Jewish body itself.

The Jewish Body in Spain: A Case Study

On June 4, 1391, Spanish Jewry underwent a drastic change. After living in Spain for over a millennium in relative peace and prosperity, and despite their sometimes-powerful positions in royal courts and in their communities, the Jews of Spain faced a series of pogroms, the likes of which they had never seen. As anti-Jewish riots began in Seville and blazed across the Iberian Peninsula, the centuries-old state of *convivencia*, in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together, began to crumble.[45]

Prior to the pogroms in 1391, Iberian Jews inhabited a society with relatively neutral feelings toward them, due in large part to the support of Christian kings and queens. During the *Reconquista*, the reconquest of Muslim Spain by Christians from 711 until 1492, "the Jews were seen as useful for purposes of settlement, colonization, tax collection, and centralization."[46] As Christian kings retook Spain from Muslims, Jews provided "a bridge between the East and the

[45] Menocal, *Ornament of the World*; and Menocal, Dodds, and Balbale, *Arts of Intimacy,* provide extended discussions of c*onvivencia.*
[46] Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardic Jewry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), xxvii.

West, not only from economic, political, and diplomatic viewpoints but in cultural and philosophical matters as well."[47] By serving such essential roles, Jews fulfilled their part of what Benbassa and Rodrigue call the "royal alliance," noting that "nowhere else in medieval Europe did so many Jews reach the uppermost echelons of royal administration, and nowhere else did they become as important, and as useful to kings."[48]

Mark Cohen, however, does importantly point out that "Jews, over time, came to belong (in the sense of nearly absolute control) to a secular ruler and thus to have special, but limiting, status under the law."[49] Cohen's view illustrates the role of Jews in Castilian society. Viewed not as individuals, but rather as a group that came to belong to a secular ruler, Jews donned the mantle of possession in which their bodies served the state, in the occupations allowed them by Christian society. When they fell out of favor with the monarch, the Jewish bodies that had been used for the state were transformed into sites used by the government to inflict punishment.

Don Samuel Halevi, a Jewish courtier under King Pedro the Cruel of Castile (r. 1350-69), highlights the differing environments in which Jews could find themselves. As the king's chief treasurer, Halevi amassed enough personal wealth to build the synagogue of Santa María la Blanca del Tránsito in Toledo.[50] In his position as treasurer, he "signed all royal instructions relating directly or indirectly to the public revenues… and review[ed] the obligation of the bishop of Cordova to pay taxes."[51] The royal instructions that survive from the period bear his signature along with a Hebrew inscription. The presence of an inscription in Hebrew, the

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[47] Jopseph Pérez, *History of a Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 24.
[48] Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardic Jewry*, xxvii.
[49] Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 43. Cohen takes the view that the special status of the Jews ultimately did them harm; as people subject more to the whims of a ruler than to a law code, Jews encountered danger when rulers decided to withdraw their support of the Jews.
[50] Pérez, *History,* 24.
[51] Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain, Vol. 1* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961), 363-364.

language of the Jews, next to the emblem of Christian Castile is particularly indicative of Halevi's stature at the court. During the mid-fourteenth century, at a time when England and France had already expelled Jews living within their borders,[52] the government of Castile was issuing royal documents bearing evidence of its treasurer's non-Christian religion. Halevi's body was in positive service to the state; he was rewarded by influence and wealth that could have been used to purchase luxuries to create a better environment in which that body could live.

However, as well as Halevi provides evidence of the heights that Jews could achieve in Castile in the mid-fourteenth century, he also demonstrates that Christian feelings toward Spanish Jews during the 1300s, even in Castile, were only relatively, and not completely, neutral. In the early 1360s, Halevi and his family were arrested for unknown reasons and taken from Toledo to Seville where he died under torture.[53] The fate of Halevi's body demonstrates the mercurial environment of the Jews. Following an unsuccessful attempt to take Halevi's money, the government tortured him, inflicting pain and, ultimately, death on the very body that it had once rewarded. Thus, embodied service can be seen as the source, and the site, of both reward and punishment.

Shortly after the death of Samuel Halevi, King Pedro, whom many saw as friendly to the Jews, found himself under attack. In 1366, Henry of Trastamara, Pedro's stepbrother, rebelled against him. During the civil war that followed, Jews supported the king, but when Henry won, he imposed enormous fines on the Jewish communities in his new kingdom.[54] Yet, after he had restored peace and levied the punitive tax on the Jews, Henry "adopted the well-tried traditional

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[52] Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 49. Jews were expelled from England in 1290 and from France, repeatedly, in 1306, 1322, and 1394. Though the final French banishment did not take place until after the 1391 Castilian pogroms against the Jews, the expulsion process was begun in France approximately fifty years before Halevi took office under King Pedro.
[53] Baer, *Vol 1*, 364.
[54] Scarlett Freund and Teofilo F. Ruiz, "Jews, *Conversos*, and the Inquisition in Spain," in *Jewish Christian Encounters over the Centuries*, ed. Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 174.

Jewish policy, taking the Jews under his protection and confirming their privileges."[55] Following in the financial footsteps of Samuel Halevi, "Yussaf Pichon practically ran the finances of Henry… between 1369 and 1375."[56]

Following the death of Henry's successor in 1390, Henry III, a minor, inherited the Castilian throne. When the archbishop of Seville also died in 1390, the vitriolic mendicant priest Ferrán Martínez took over the diocese. A vociferous opponent of Judaism, Martínez delivered "public harangues in Seville against the Jews" and "enjoined the rural population of Andalusia not to allow Jews to live in their midst."[57] Such pollution rhetoric, advancing the idea that the mere corporeal presence of Jews would somehow taint the Christian communities, "legitimizes hierarchy and authority, establishes rules for inclusion, and justifies exclusion."[58] The Jewish body needed to be separate from that of the Christian in order to maintain religious sanctity.

Importantly, the royal alliance produced unforeseen negative effects for the Jews. King Henry III, twelve years old at the time of the 1391 pogrom, was unable to prevent the riots.[59] On June 6, 1391, the pogroms began in Seville; rioters converted two synagogues into churches, and a series of murders and robberies followed.[60] Hasdai Crescas, an Aragonese rabbi writing in October to the Jews of Avignon about the disaster that had befallen Spanish Jewry, described the events in Castile by saying that in June, "the Lord bent His bow like an enemy against the

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[55] Baer, *Vol 1*, 367.
[56] Philipp Wolff, "The 1391 pogrom in Spain. Social crisis or not?" *Past and Present* 50.1 (1971): 6.
[57] Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain, Vol. 2* (Philadelphia: the Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961), 95.
[58] Mary Elizabeth Perry, *The Handless Maiden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 54.
[59] Benbassa and Rodrigue, xxxii.
[60] Wolff, 8.

community of Seville… they set fire to its gates and killed many of its people."[61] From Seville, the violence quickly spread throughout the peninsula.[62]

In the Crown of Aragon, Jews concentrated inside Jewish quarters and in fortresses to protect themselves against the Christians. The pogrom reached Valencia on July 9 when, after a few Christians had entered the Jewish quarter, Jews closed the gates to keep out further intruders.[63] Their efforts were in vain, however, as further Christians soon breached the gates and killed 250 Jews. On July 22, news of the destruction in Valencia reached Barcelona; by August 5, the local citizenry rose up against the Jews, one hundred of whom took refuge in the city fortress. Within a day, however, the Christian mob had breached the fortress.[64]

In Castile, the monarch tried to intervene in the crisis, but his attempts to mitigate the attacks met with limited success. The young king Henry III had left Madrid in May of 1391 and traveled to Segovia where "messengers came and informed him of the attack on the Jews in Seville, the robbery of the Jewish [community] there, and the conversion of 'most' of the Jews, and similarly in Cordoba, Toledo, and elsewhere."[65] The pogroms continued until October, and ultimately, "1391 marked an unprecedented psychological break from the cherished tradition of *convivencia,*[66] highlighted by the thousands of conversions from Judaism to Christianity.[67] It is

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[61] Hasdai Crescas, "Letter of October 19 to Jews of Avignon", in Baer, Yitzhak, *A History of the Jews of Christian Spain, Vol 2* (Philadelphia: the Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961), 96.
[62] Wolff, 8; A. Mackay, "Popular movements and pogroms in fifteenth-century Castile," *Past and Present*, no. 55, 35.
[63] Baer, *Vol. 2*, 100.
[64] Baer, *Vol. 2*, 104.
[65] Roth, 33.
[66] Freund, 176.
[67] There is much debate about the extent to which the conversions were forced or voluntary. Similarly, scholars disagree on exactly how many conversions, regardless of the reason for the individual conversions, took place around 1391. Netanyahu, *The Marranos of Spain* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1966), 235-45, believes that as many as 400,000 conversions happened between 1391 and 1415; by 1480, during the Inquisition, there were upwards of 480,000 *conversos* living in Spain. These numbers are generally considered to be inflated, however, and it is believed that by the time of the expulsion in 1492, approximately 225,000 *conversos* were living in Spain. See David Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Lives of Crypto-Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 74.

believed that after the months of riots, perhaps "100,000 Jews converted, another 100,000 had been murdered, and yet another 100,000 somehow survived by going into hiding or fleeing to Muslim lands."[68]

At the same time that the pogroms were happening, priests began making active efforts to convert Jews to Christianity, efforts that continued until the Jews were expelled a century later. One of the most famous converters of Jews, St. Vincent Ferrer, a Dominican from Valencia, "possessed the art of inflaming the crowds by his eloquence and the settings that he chose for his performances."[69] A man equally comfortable converting Jews and instructing Christians about the dangers of Judaism, Ferrer warned Christians to avoid the "corrupt teaching of certain persons, and the pernicious examples of those who have already yielded to such temptations," advising them instead to "shun all intercourse and familiarity with those who sow broadcast… the temptations of which I have spoken."[70] Though Ferrer did not specifically name Jews in his treatise, it seems likely that they were the propagators of the "corrupt teaching," in their supposed efforts to Judaize new *conversos*. With his rhetoric, Ferrer developed the idea of the Jew as a polluted "other," one who must be avoided and whose religion tainted the entire body. It was not enough to avoid Jewish teachings or writings; instead, Ferrer's flock had to eschew all contact with Jews, whose very beings were stained with their beliefs.

Conversos, despite having converted to Christianity, were not immune to the polluting stigma of their former religion. In the "Instrucción del relator," published in 1449, Fernán Díaz de Toledo, himself a New Christian, wrote that after *conversos* had mixed with Old Christian families, it was difficult to ascertain exactly who had Jewish lineage. The *converso* commented

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[68] Jane S. Gerber, *The Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 113.
[69] Joseph Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 11.
[70] Vincent Ferrer, *Treatise on the Spiritual Life* (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2006), 25, 27.

that "all the Jews of Spain… from which these descend, who knows who they are; in our time there are Reverend Padre Don Pablo, Duke of Burgos, a famous and great chancellor and advisor of the king, and his grandsons and great-grandsons, and granddaughters, and the others of his lineage are already today in the lineages of the Manriques, and Mendosas and Roxas, and Saravias and Pestines…"[71] A long list of families suspected of having Jewish blood follows. Regulations and conventions against the marriage of *conversos* with Old Christians implied that "'tainted' people would pollute 'pure' Christians through marriage, and their offspring would clearly be tainted."[72] Such laws made the Jewish body the focal point of restriction. For the religious stain to be passed from generation to generation, it must have been an inherent part of the corporeal Jew. The idea also assumes that Old Christian bodies were innately superior and capable of transmitting that superiority to offspring, provided that tainted Jewish blood was not present in the gene pool.

Importantly for our purposes, circumcision became a focal point for the discrimination against Jews. As we have seen, medieval Christians did not practice circumcision; thus, a penis without a foreskin became a mark on the male body."[73] Circumcision, or rather the lack of it, became a means of testing *conversos'* adherence to their new religion. A first-generation male *converso* could easily justify his circumcision by the obvious explanation that he had been born a Jew, but males "born of *converso* parents, unless born before [their parents] had converted, who nevertheless were circumcised had to come up with ingenious if fantastic explanations."[74] One

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[71] Fernán Díaz de Toledo, "Instrucción del relator," in Kaplan, Gregory B., *The Evolution of* Converso *Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 20.
[72] Perry, 55.
[73] John Beusterien, *The* Libro Verde*: Blood Fictions from Early Modern Spain*" (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1997), 192,
[74] Roth, 235.

Spanish monk, for example, claimed that his circumcision was the result of a childhood prank in which friends had tied him up and cut his foreskin.[75]

As we have seen in this case study, the practice of circumcision was an important site of differentiation and identity. Medieval Christian writers were aware—certainly in Spain—that Muslims also practiced circumcision, but there were some commonalities between the two religions, such as belief in the Virgin Birth, that allowed Christian commentators to see Islam as an aberrant version of Christianity in terms of this practice.[76] Medieval Jews, however, did not share those particular commonalities with Christianity. Instead, they were viewed as killers of Christ whose very bodies were marked—by choice—with a sign that visually and physically distinguished them from Christians, that forced them to undergo a special type of monthly, feminine bleeding, and that became a marker for discrimination and violence.

Reconciling Circumcisions

Late medieval Christians were agreed that the Jewish practice of circumcision was a negative one. It did represent a covenant with God. However, it was a *bodily* covenant, one that had been replaced by the spiritual covenant of baptism. It was a physical, indelible marker on the bodies of Jewish men that marked them as different, even if they had (under force) converted to Christianity.[77] Some authors believed that it also afflicted them with a monthly menstrual flow, feminizing them and repeatedly confirming that their ancestors had crucified Christ. There was still, however, the troubling figure of the purposefully male, divine Jesus—the heart of Christian

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[75] Roth, 235.
[76] Resnick, *Marks of Distinction*, 73-79.
[77] Nissan Rubin, "*Brit Milah*: A Study of Change in Custom," in *The Covenant of Circumcision*, ed. Elizabeth Wyner Mark (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 87-88, points out that during the Roman Empire, the practice of Jewish circumcision left enough foreskin to draw it over the glans of the penis and pass as Gentile if men wanted. Rubin argues that rabbis instituted the medieval (and modern) practice of *periah*—or removing as much of the foreskin as possible—after the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-136 CE) to prevent this from happening.

worship—who had also been circumcised. For the remainder of this chapter, I wish to focus on how the foreskin devotees we have analyzed, as well as the author of one very elaborated *vita* of Christ, negotiated this contradiction. To do so, I will concentrate on late medieval Christian appropriation of the Jewish circumcision ritual.

As we have seen, Agnes Blannbekin makes no association between the foreskin that repeatedly appears in her mouth and Jesus's penis on the Feast of the Circumcision. The text itself seems unaware of sexual connotations during this vision—when it actively works to counteract them elsewhere. Instead, Agnes takes the Jewish act of circumcision and gives it a Christian meaning. Rather than focusing on the circumcision ritual and its meaning for the Jewish covenant with God, she completely transforms the ritual and understands the vision as a version of the Eucharist, the eating of Jesus's flesh. The vision's date is also an appropriation of the Jewish circumcision of Christ. Although the Feast of the Circumcision occurred on the eighth day after the Nativity, and therefore the day on which Jesus would have been circumcised, Agnes initially approaches it as a way to understand where Chris's foreskin might be located. Thus, she does not think about the ritual itself, but rather about how it might contribute to her understanding of the Resurrection—that is, to the interplay between the divine and the human in Christianity.

Birgitta also approaches the Holy Foreskin from a Christian perspective. She does not focus on the meaning of the ritual for Jesus as a Jewish boy, but rather on the chain of transmission that occurred to preserve and then unearth the relic, culminating in the idea that the Roman people did not sufficiently venerate the relic that was housed within their city. The focus here is on how the relic came to light for the purpose of Christian worship. Birgitta also learns in the vision that the Virgin Mary saved *both* Jesus's foreskin *and* blood from his wounds during

the Passion. We have seen that the supposed role of Jews during the Crucifixion was one motivating factor behind late medieval anti-Judaism, the blood libel in particular. There is no indication in Birgitta's vision that she is making an explicitly anti-Jewish statement, but by linking Jesus's foreskin with blood from the Passion, she is clearly imbuing the former with a Christian meaning. There was no reason for Christians to be particularly interested in Jesus's foreskin except as it related to their own religious understanding of his corporeality. Here, Birgitta makes a direct pairing in this relic find of the body and blood of Christ, the two components of the Christian Eucharist.

Catherine follows Birgitta in linking the Jewish ritual of circumcision with the Christian belief in the Passion, although she does so both more metaphorically and more directly. As we have seen, Catherine does not discuss any one of the individual earthly relics of Jesus's foreskin; nor does mention any of the relics claiming to be vials of his blood. Her understanding of the Holy Foreskin is more figurative, in the form of the rings that Jesus gives to his spiritual brides. However, she does make a more direct link between the Circumcision and the Passion than we find in Birgitta's implied connection. We have seen that Catherine specifically sees the blood shed during the Circumcision as directly prefiguring the blood that would subsequently be shed during the Passion. There is no discussion of the circumcision blood within a Jewish context. Instead, it takes on meaning only because it can be related to the Christian belief in the Passion. Without the latter, the former has no significance.

Turning to a text that we have not yet explored, the 14th-century illustrated *Meditations on the Life of Christ* is a text once attributed to the Franciscan St. Bonaventura (1221-1274); it has subsequently been re-attributed to Pseudo-Bonaventura, with ultimately unknown

authorship.[78] The popular text (more than two hundred manuscripts survive) is a chronological combination of the four gospels, supplemented with additional detail that does not appear in the biblical text, often to emphasize the human side of Christ.[79] The text begins with a very brief summary of the time before Jesus was born and tells the biblical story through the Crucifixion. Here, however, I will focus on the lengthy description of Jesus's circumcision.

Rather than the laconic Lucan statement that Jesus was circumcised, *Meditations* provides a detailed description of the event and of both Jesus's and Mary's pain, typical of both the text and of Franciscan spirituality. The text notes that the Circumcision was the first time that Jesus shed blood for humanity before telling readers that they should "feel compassion him and weep with him, for perhaps he wept today. On this feast [the Feast of the Circumcision] we must be very joyful at our salvation, but have great pity and sorrow for his pains and sorrows."[80] The text then explicitly states that it was the Virgin Mary who circumcised Jesus:

> And hear that today his precious blood flowed. His flesh was cut with a stone knife by his mother. Must one not pity him? Surely, and his mother also. The child Jesus cries today because of the pain he felt in his soft and delicate flesh, like that of all other children, for he had real and susceptible flesh like all other humans. But when he cries, do you think the mother will not cry? She too wept, and as she wept the child in her lap placed his tiny hand on his mother's mouth and face as though to comfort her by his gestures, that she should not cry, because he loved her tenderly and wished her to cease crying.[81]

The author here makes direct points about the physicality of Jesus's body, comparing it directly to the pain felt by other children (although presumably not other circumcised children). This is again an attempt to foreshadow the pain that Jesus would feel during the Passion and

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[78] Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green, eds. *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), xxi, note 2.
[79] For example, we learn that Jesus preferred the Virgin Mary's cooking. See Ragusa and Green, *Meditations*, xxii-xxiii, xxvii.
[80] Ragusa and Green, *Meditations*, 43.
[81] Ragusa and Green, *Meditations*, 44. The translators also note on xxv that the text frequently shifts between verb tenses, presumably to make the events feel more present to the reader.

Crucifixion. Similarly, the author draws our attention to Mary's suffering, to the sorrow that a mother would feel upon seeing her child in pain. The infant Jesus's attempts to comfort Mary foreshadow Catherine of Siena's view that Jesus wanted to be circumcised, in order to shed blood and to provide the spiritual wedding rings.[82]

The most interesting point for our purposes, however, is that it is Mary who circumcises Jesus. Abramson and Hannon point out that, rather than the male rabbi who would usually perform a circumcision, medieval Christian polemicists sometimes portrayed women conducting the ritual, giving it an aura of emasculation. Often, these women were depicted as old crones.[83] We have seen a version of this in the Syriac Infancy Gospel in which an old Hebrew women takes and preserves Jesus's foreskin. Here, however, the ritual itself is performed by the young Virgin Mary, whom Christians would certainly not have understood as an emasculating crone. Here, the text also presents a refocusing of the Jewish ritual: Mary actually prepared to perform the circumcision herself. Prior to Jesus's birth, while she is still pregnant, Mary is present at the circumcision of John. Rather than attending openly, however, she "was standing behind a curtain that she might be invisible to the men attending the circumcision of John [and] listened intently to the hymn in which her son was mentioned and secured everything in her heart, most wisely."[84] In other words, according to *Meditations*, Mary did not perform Jesus's circumcision because there was no rabbi present; rather, she had planned to do it herself, converting the Jewish ritual at the time of a man circumcising an infant boy into the affective Christian connection between the Virgin Mary and God the Son.

Conclusion

[82] It is unclear whether Catherine was familiar with *Mediations*. However, given its popularity and Italian origin, it is not unreasonable to assume that she was acquainted with the text.
[83] Abramson and Hanson, "Depicting the Ambiguous Wound," 98.
[84] Ragusa and Green, *Meditations*, 25.

Late medieval Europe was rife with narrative anti-Judaism. Until this chapter, I have focused on an inward view of how Christians understood the Holy Foreskin—this bodily relic of their Savior. It is important to recognize, however, that medieval Christians—and their views—did not exist in isolation. They could be relatively innocuous syncretisms between Christianity and local pagan views, as in the case of St. Guinefort the Greyhound.[85] They could also lead to direct violence, such as the 1491 Niño de la Guardia blood libel case that contributed to the expulsion of Jews from Spain the following year.[86] As we have explored here, they could also exist in a narrative realm. As noted above, there is no evidence that writings by Agnes, Birgitta, Catherine, or the author of *Meditations* led to direct violence against Jews. However, all of the figures examined here did engage in anti-Judaism and saw Christianity as a religion superior to Judaism. None goes so far as to deny the importance of circumcision to Jews, but they do all re-appropriate the ritual for Christianity and assign it Christian purposes. For late medieval Christians, circumcision was a practice done by Jews. The straightforward fact of Jesus's circumcision, as presented in Luke, could not be denied, but it could be reconfigured to meet Christian beliefs.

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[85] Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children since the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[86] Stephen Haliczer, "The Jew as Witch: Displaced Aggression and the Myth of the Santo Niño de La Guardia," in *Cultural Encounters: the Impact of the Inquisition in Spain and the New World*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Perry and Anne J. Cruz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

CONCLUSION: THE CIRCUMCISED BODY

As widespread—and problematic—as the Holy Foreskin was during the late Middle Ages, it has largely disappeared from western culture in the early twenty-first century, existing mostly in period dramas such as *Borgia*, in which it serves as a potential cure.[1] Many of the relics themselves, located in France, disappeared or were destroyed during the anti-religious sentiment of the French Revolution.[2] As noted in the introduction, the bull by Pope Leo XIII in 1900 effectively ended veneration of the relic, upon threat of excommunication. A singular exception was made for a foreskin relic housed in Calcata, Italy, which had possibly been the relic located in the Sancta Sanctorum in Rome during the Middle Ages. Residents of Calcata were allowed to hold a procession with the relic once per year, on the Feast of the Circumcision on January 1; afterward, the relic was returned to its housing—a simple box under the priest's bed, rather than the ornate reliquaries of the Middle Ages—for the remainder of the year. In 1983, however, the last remaining relic of the Holy Foreskin disappeared. It is unclear whether the relic was bought, stolen, or lost.[3]

The Holy Foreskin itself may be relegated to fiction today, but the act of circumcision that initially engendered it lives on—and continues to be controversial. However, its practitioners have changed somewhat since the Middle Ages. Circumcision in the United States and Canada has become largely secularized, and the operation is routinely practiced for medical and even aesthetic reasons, including among Christians. As scholar and anti-circumcision advocate Leonard Glick notes, "[American] Jews almost never question how circumcision can define their ethnic individuality in a country where tens of millions of Gentile males have genitals

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[1] *Borgia*, Season 3, Episode 7, "1501," directed by Athina Rachel Tsangari, aired 2014.
[2] David Farley, "Fore Shame," *Slate*, December 19, 2006, https://slate.com/human-interest/2006/12/who-stole-jesus-foreskin.html.
[3] Farley, *An Irreverent Curiosity*, provides a history of the Calcata relic.

indistinguishable from the Jewish version—and where an unknown but possibly substantial number of Jewish boys and men have *not* been circumcised" [emphasis original].[4] This is in clear contrast to the Middle Ages, when the circumcised penis was the indelible marker of the male Jew (or Muslim). In Europe today, male circumcision remains almost exclusively confined to observant Jews and Muslims.

Circumcision rates of newborn males vary widely from country to country with a worldwide average of 10-20%. Rates are highest in Israel and in countries with a predominantly Muslim population. Worldwide, the incidence of circumcision for Jewish newborns is greater than 95%, and among Muslims, the rate rises to 95% by adulthood. In the United States, 65% of all newborn males are circumcised, while in Canada, approximately one in three male infants undergoes circumcision.[5] These two countries contain the highest number of men circumcised for nonreligious purposes, due to an advocacy for circumcision in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English-language medical literature, which argued that the operation could cure physical ailments, such as headaches and stress, as well as what were perceived as moral sicknesses, including masturbation.[6] More recently, in the United States, the American Academy of Pediatrics has been inconsistent in its stance on male circumcision, stating in 1999 that data for the benefits of circumcision were not sufficient to recommend it as a routine procedure.[7] In

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[4] Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8. Glick, a circumcised Jew, is vehemently opposed to male circumcision. See Michael Benatar and David Benatar, "Between Prophylaxis and Child Abuse: The Ethics of Neonatal Male Circumcision," *The American Journal of Bioethics* 3.2 (2003): 35-48; the response by Rio Cruz, Leonard B. Glick, and John W. Travis, "Circumcision as Human-Rights Violation: Assessing Benatar and Benatar," *The American Journal of Bioethics* 3.2 (2003): 19-20; and Benatar and Benatar's tart rejoinder "3:2 Target Article Authors respond to Commentators: How Not to Argue about Circumcision," *The American Journal of Bioethics* 3.2 (2003): 1-9.

[5] Mark C. Alanis and Richard S. Lucidi, "Neonatal Circumcision: A Review of the World's Oldest and Most Controversial Operation," *Obstetrical and Gynecological Survey* 59.5 (2004): 383. Alanis and Lucidi note that rates were similarly high in England before the introduction of national socialized medicine, when circumcision was labeled as an elective surgery.

[6] Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 149-214, provides an extended discussion of this literature, including the role of Jewish American physicians in twentieth-century circumcision advocacy.

[7] Alanis and Lucidi, "Neonatal Circumcision," 382.

its most recent statement, however, the Academy determined in 2012 that the benefits of circumcision include decreased urinary tract infections, the prevention of penile cancer, and a reduction in the transmission of sexually transmitted illnesses, including HIV. The Academy concluded that "although health benefits are not great enough to recommend routine circumcision for all male newborns, the benefits of circumcision are sufficient to justify access to this procedure for families choosing it and to warrant third-party payment for circumcision of male newborns."[8]

Circumcision rates are much lower in Europe, however, exemplified by a 2012 ruling by the regional court (*Landgericht*) in Cologne, Germany, which banned the circumcision of male children for religious reasons. In its ruling against the Muslim physician who had performed the circumcision in question, the court cited such secular concerns as bodily integrity (*körperliche Unversehrtheit*) and a narrow definition of the rights of parents to provide their children with a religious upbringing (*religiöse Kindererziehung*).[9] The German Bundestag later proclaimed a resolution that male circumcision was an integral component of religious freedom. Data from 1985 suggest that less than 1% of male newborns in Germany were circumcised.[10] Rates are similar in Scandinavia and Russia. England has a slightly higher incidence of 6%, probably due to lingering effects of the Victorian- and Edwardian-era circumcision advocacy discussed above.[11] In Germany, Muslims constitute approximately 3.7% of the population; Jews make up less than 0.5%.[12] Because Muslims do not always practice infant circumcision, the incidence of circumcision, combined with the percentage of the German population who identify as Jewish or

[8] American Academy of Pediatrics, "Circumcision Policy Statement," *Pediatrics* 130.3 (2012): 585.
[9] Landgericht Köln, Urteil 151 NS 169/11, IWW Institut, http:// http://www.iww.de/quellenmaterial/id/85915.
[10] Steven E. Lerman and Joseph C. Liao, "Neonatal Circumcision," *Pediatric Clinics of North America* 48.6 (2001): 1541.
[11] Alanis and Lucidi, "Neonatal Circumcision," 383.
[12] Gerhard Robbers, "The Legal Status of Islam in Germany," in *Islam and European Legal Systems*, eds. Silvio Ferrari and Anthony Bradney (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 147.

Muslim, indicates a reasonable conclusion that the circumcision of male newborns in Germany is almost entirely limited to practitioners of Judaism and Islam. These figures also indicate that the majority of circumcised men in Germany are Muslim.

The 2012 ban indicates that male circumcision remains a contested issue, long after any medieval devotion to the Holy Foreskin in German-speaking lands. On November 4, 2010, a Muslim physician in Cologne performed a circumcision on a four-year-old Muslim boy under local anesthesia. The court's judgment notes that the procedure was performed at the request of the parents and without "a medical indication."[13] The physician gave the child four stitches and visited him at home that evening. On November 6, 2010, the child's mother took him to the University Children's Hospital in Cologne to treat postoperative bleeding, which was staunched at the hospital. A state prosecutor brought charges against the physician in 2011; the case was acquitted by the Cologne district court (*Amtsgericht*) on September 21, 2011.[14] Krüper notes that in its judgment, the district court argued that the circumcision would preclude stigmatization in the boy's religio-cultural environment and that it could have hygienic motivations.[15] Unsatisfied, the state prosecutor renewed his case in 2012 in the regional court, which ruled that the physician would not face any legal charges because he was fully acting under the belief that "as a pious Muslim and qualified doctor [als frommem Muslim und fachkundigem Arzt]" he was allowed to perform circumcision for religious reasons. Nevertheless, although the ruling only officially applied to the Cologne region, it did state, in more general terms, that the desire of the parents to education their children and to bring them up in the Islamic faith did not overrule the child's right to bodily integrity. The court additionally noted that children could decide for themselves,

[13] Landgericht Köln.
[14] Landgericht Köln.
[15] Julian Krüper, "Entscheidungsanmerkung: Religionstradition und Rechtskonvention: Die Unzulässigkeit religiöser Knabebeschneidung," *Zeitschift für das Juristische Studium* 4 (2012): 548.

when they were older, whether they wished to have "a visible sign of belonging to Islam [ein sichtbares Zeichen der Zugehörigkeit zum Islam]."[16]

Although, as noted, the court did not expressly prohibit circumcision and its ruling only applied to the jurisdiction of the Cologne court, the decision was taken in the German and international press as prohibiting circumcision throughout Germany. *Der Spiegel* understood the ban to have implications for all of Germany and reported the criticism leveled against the ruling by the Central Council of Jews in Germany; at the time of press, the Central Council of Muslims had not provided a statement.[17] The BBC reported that after the ruling, the Jewish Hospital in Berlin, which had performed circumcisions for 250 years, halted its planned circumcision operations of both Jewish and Muslim boys. Mohammed Asif Sadiq, a Muslim leader in Berlin, told the BBC that he feared that circumcisions would continue, but in less hygienic conditions. Alternatively, he warned, devout Jews and Muslims would have circumcisions performed outside of Germany, perhaps in their homelands, in the case of Muslim immigrants.[18]

It does seem, however, that the media's nationwide interpretation of the ruling was not without justification. Two months after the ruling by the Cologne court, the *New York Daily News* reported that Rabbi David Goldberg, in the Bavarian city of Hof, faced legal charges for circumcising a male infant after an unidentified physician filed a criminal complaint, citing bodily injury to the child.[19] The resolution passed by the Bundestag in late 2012 to keep religious

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[16] Landgericht Köln.
[17] Barbara Hans, "Landgericht Köln: Beschneidung aus religiösen Gründe ist strafbar," *Spiegel Online*, accessed March 23, 2015, http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/religioes-motivierte-beschneidung-von-jungen-ist-laut-gericht-strafbar-a-841084.html.
[18] Stephen Evans, "German circumcision ban: Is it a parent's right to choose?", *BBC*, accessed March 22, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18793842.
[19] Christine Roberts, "The unkindest cut of all: German rabbi faces charges for performing newly outlawed circumcision procedure," *New York Daily News*, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/health/unkindest-cut-german-rabbi-faces-charges-performing-newly-outlawed-circumcision-procedure-article-1.1142324.

circumcision legal in Germany cleared Rabbi Goldberg of his charges. Writing after that resolution was passed, *Deutsche Welle* emphasized the national debate that had occurred after the Cologne ruling, noting that "the decision [in Cologne] prompted many Jews and Muslims to question their acceptance and sense of feeling spiritually at home in Germany."[20]

Although the debate was ultimately solved at the federal level, Cologne's ban on religious circumcision holds important questions about the place of religion and the body in western, secular societies. The ban itself seems to have stemmed from brewing Islamophobia in Germany, but it reminds us that the body and the religious practices associated with it remain fraught issues.[21] Although proponents of the circumcision ban cloak their arguments in concerns about the bodily integrity of children, they notably focused their attention circumcision practiced by Muslims, the fast-growing "other" group in Germany. Thus, reactions to this religious bodily practice tell us about general societal views.

As we have seen, the Holy Foreskin performs the same function when we examine the late Middle Ages. Certainly, for some (and perhaps many) Christians, the foreskin relics were straightforward devotional sites. They were akin to the relics of saints that medieval Christians were taught to venerate. The prepuce itself was a very special relic associated with Christ, but of course, there were other very special relics: Mary's chemise at Chartres or the crown of thorns at Notre Dame in Paris.

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[20] Scholz, Kay-Alexander, "Circumcision remains legal in Germany," *Deutsche Welle*, accessed March 23, 2015, http://dw.de/p/16oDQ.

[21] Post World War II-Germany has a history of banning Muslim practices, such as halal slaughter, while permitting the Jewish practice of kosher slaughter. See See Pableo Lerner and Alfredo Mordechai Rabello, "The Prohibition of Ritual Slaughter (Kosher Shechita and Halal) and Freedom of Religion of Minorities," *Journal of Law and Religion* 22.1 (2006/2007): 11; David Smith, "'Cruelty of the Worst Kind': Religious Slaughter, Xenophobia, and the German Greens," *Central European History* 40.1 (2007): 89, 112-113; and Tetty Havinga, "Regulating Halal and Kosher Foods: Different Arrangements Between State, Industry, and Religious Actors," *Erasmus Law Review* 3.4 (2010): 242-244.

For some Christians, however, the Holy Foreskin—this enduring piece of Christ's very flesh, whether mystical or terrestrial—became something more. It was a paradoxically physical object that separated Christianity from Judaism. It was a way to connect with the Christchild and divine motherhood. It represented the promise of salvation, either through the consumption of Jesus's flesh or as a prefiguration of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. At the same time, it could destroy both of those concepts, rendering the Eucharist and priestly consecration unnecessary and calling into doubt whether human beings could hope for a truly, fully resurrected body. Not dissimilar to the modern-day circumcision ban in Germany, the late medieval devotion to the Holy Foreskin tells us about more than the practice or the relic itself. Instead, it gives us an insight into how society projects its fears, its ongoing debates, and its religious beliefs onto the body itself.

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