

Christian Wessely, Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati u.a. (Hg.)

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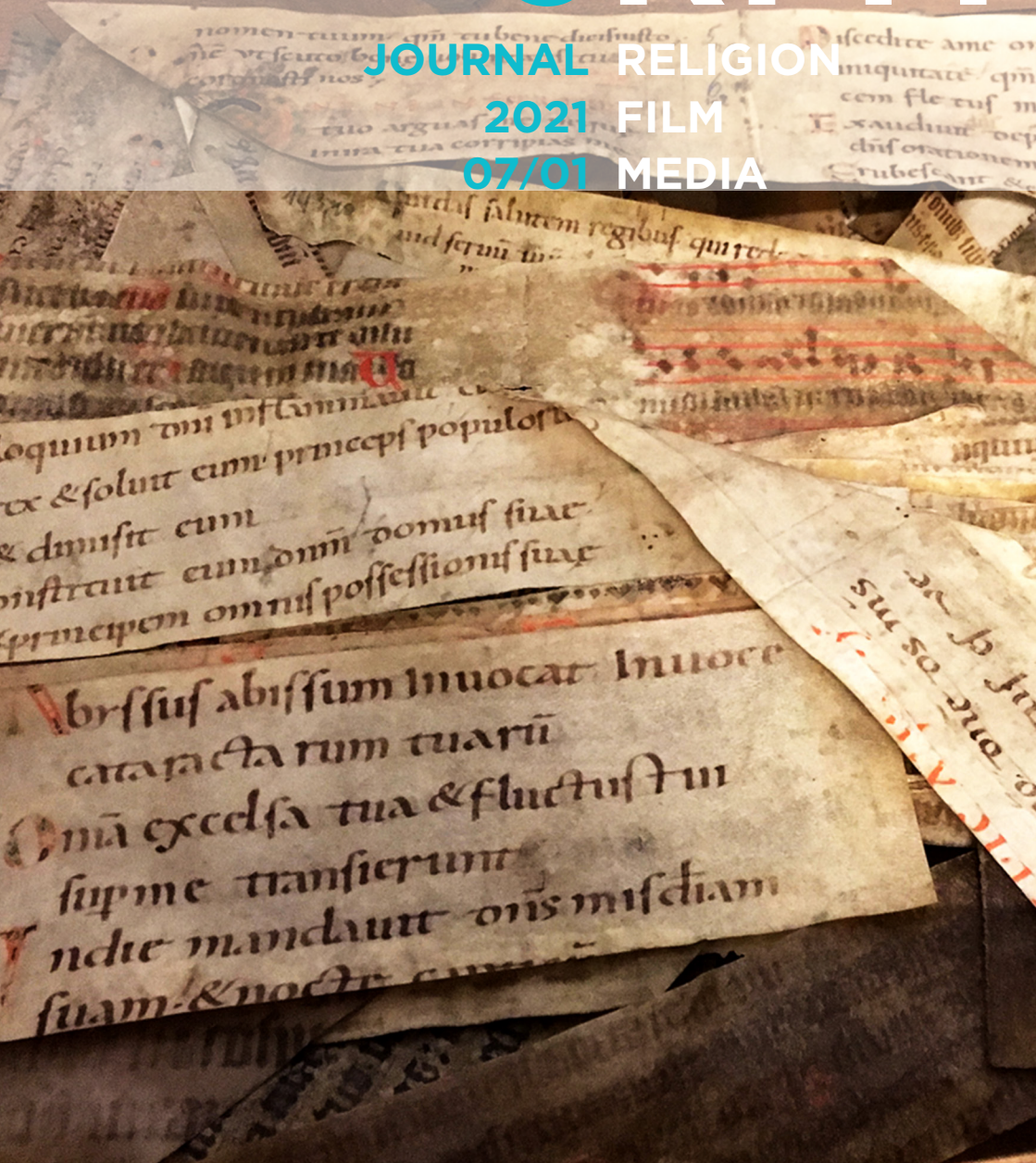
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**JRFM**

JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

2021  
07/01

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati and Christian Wessely (eds.)

# **Materiality of Writing**

## **Reconsidering Religious Texts**

**SCHÜREN**

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# Materiality of Writing

## Reconsidering Religious Texts

### Editorial

Before we can understand norms or read texts, as human beings we are in touch with things – we are born into a world full of objects.<sup>1</sup> In the last few decades, the relationship between humans and things has attracted the attention of many disciplines and approaches to culture in the humanities. The material turn has also influenced anthropological reflection within fields that specialise in religion, such as theology and the comparative study of religion.<sup>2</sup>

Looking for things, their agencies, and material practices arising from the interaction between humans and objects allows more comprehensive insight into religious symbols systems, religious communities, and religious traditions.<sup>3</sup> The substance, form, and colour of an artefact, the techniques for producing it, the possibilities for using, touching, wearing, or looking at it, the practices involving it, the ways of preserving, restoring, and destroying it or of passing it from one generation to another are fundamental aspects for us to consider when analysing and interpreting religions. Furthermore, a thing is not necessarily manufactured: materiality includes nature, organic and inorganic matter, vegetal and animal (including human) bodies. Analysing material culture as a crucial aspect of religious communities, symbols, rituals, traditions, and diffusion processes means considering more than just the discursive power of words. Religion is not primarily a system of reflection and philosophical pondering by means of texts; it is an existential experience. Religious beliefs and practices provide orientation around emotional, sensorial, corporeal, and aesthetic experiences. Yet, sacred texts and the commentaries they have inspired (and the related canonisation processes) have been

1 Samida/Eggert/Hahn 2014, 1.

2 See e.g. King 2010; Morgan 2010; Promey 2014; Chidester 2018.

3 On the terminological debate in conceptualising material things see e.g. Barad 2003; Lynch 2010.

considered the core of a religious tradition. Sometimes this approach to holy scriptures has even been completely – and uncritically – identified with the religious system as a whole. Research on theological and comparative approaches to religions has long been biased towards the concept of the text, including text production and text reception, yet this perspective has proved insufficient, not only in light of the findings of historical-critical exegesis but also as a result of the constraints of our respective languages, which have demonstrated considerable limitations in expressing the individual religious experience.

Under the influence of cultural studies approaches, the field of religious studies has broadened its epistemological horizon and reconsidered previously neglected dimensions of religious communities and traditions. Moreover, it has encouraged the reshaping of concepts like “sources” and “languages” – in the plural – “symbol” and “communication”, “space” and “time”, “body”, “memory”, and “tradition”, which have proved key points in the debate.<sup>4</sup>

This issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* stands at the crossroads of approaches to religion and offers a speculative exploration of texts that considers both procedures and results in researching material religion.<sup>5</sup> Two questions inspire this collection of articles: How does the materiality of a text influence meaning-making processes? How does its materiality impact the multi-layered communication processes in which a text is involved during its long-term transmission? In addressing these issues, we benefit from the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary character of religious studies that characterises this journal. Fundamental and systematic theology, biblical studies, and the study of religion have developed common methodological procedures to address the materiality of texts, and although they each have particular foci and explore particular facets, they are part of a mutual exchange. This introductory note highlights a number of essential topics that arise from a cross-reading of this collection of essays. According to Jan Assmann, a text can be described as the practice of recording a message. A text is storage for a communication that is wrested from its particular context in time and space and thus made available for potentially infinite re-enactments in new contexts. Addressing the material side of a text, understood in light of its storing and re-enacting of messages, we look at the particular codes used to secure

4 e.g. Plate 2015.

5 Hilgert 2016; Pöttler 2015; Ortlieb 2018; Ritter-Schmalz/Schwitter 2019.

that text: manuscripts, printed books, graphics, embroideries, tattoos, sheet music, and electronic codes are all forms of writing, of fixing a text into a material medium.<sup>6</sup>

The materiality of writing is always linked to the immateriality of communication, and thus the material medium retains the double quality of being a *thing* and a *stored communication*. Within religious traditions, this double quality of writing is evidently a crucial aspect when we recognise that sacred books are media by means of which divine revelation is made available in our world. Materiality alone can link the very idea of the communication of transcendence to the human life and world. This idea is represented in different forms in different religions, yet functions as a common motif – for example the Tora and the prophets of Israel, the Qur'an, and the incarnated Logos in Jesus of Nazareth all enfold the concept that materialization of divine revelation is a prerequisite for being perceived by mankind. Focusing on particular media and their quality as storage for a text raises the question of how a particular form of materiality influences the communication process that is activated by encoding the fixed code. This issue is discussed in the contribution by Erich Renhart, "Materiality of Religious Books. A Brief Sketch of Sometimes Disregarded Aspects of Book Culture". Renhart notes with reference to the Second Vatican Council<sup>7</sup> that multiple aspects precondition the fabrication of religious books and manuscripts, in particular their perception as works of art in their material quality, in calligraphy and illustration. This quality has to refer to the content of the respective holy or venerable book.

Mark K. George's approach to the topic of this issue concentrates on the cultural, political, and religious effects of materiality. In "Writing, Affordances, and Governable Subjects", George discusses the role of the technology of writing in the book of Deuteronomy, looking at the impact of writing in constructing and normalising a concept of Israel, of people, and of governability.

The materiality of writing shapes and is shaped by spatial practices. Two contributions explore the entanglement of the materiality of texts and place. In "Born under a Lucky Star. Interpretations of Woodcuts of Pseudo-astrological Birth Amulets from German-Jewish Printing Houses in the 18th Century", Alisha Meininghaus presents and discusses astrological illustrated printings that on the one hand allude to the relationship between the cosmos and life on earth and on the other hand serve to protect the places occupied by the

6 Assmann 2007, 130.

7 *Constitution* 1963, 122.

new-born child. Christos Kakalis' article "In the Orality/Aurality of the Book. Inclusivity and Liturgical Language" explores the effect of decoding writings in a contemporary Christian-Orthodox liturgy in Scotland. The transformation of texts and symbols stored in books into sounds and songs creates a transitory liturgical space where different Orthodox traditions amalgamate.

The contribution by Christian Wessely "Material Traces of a Religious Trial. The Case of Ludwig Teschler", reconstructs a case of witchcraft accusation in 17th century Styria. While it re-collects various facets of this complex story, the article focusses on the role of materiality in transmission processes. The manuscripts it analyses, discovered by chance, are the only trace of this occurrence. Moreover, the material aspect and the kind of writing affect the contemporary researcher in various ways: not only does the message need meticulous decoding, but also it conveys an emotional status and – in its very materiality – the traces of the centuries. Time has rendered parts of the documents unreadable and therefore in need of reconstruction, which will be a product of the researcher's context. The second, "Reading *The Book of Joseph*. A Communication-Oriented Analysis of *Far Cry 5*", considers the various meanings of the representation and materiality of a book that was originally created in a computer game. The *Book of Joseph* travels between digital and analogue spheres, adapting its effects and meaning-making processes to the media in which it is materialised. These varied studies are united by a common interest in the effect of the materiality of writings in diffusion processes through time and social spheres.

A further topic emerging from cross-reading this issue concerns the relationship between the materiality of writing and identity practices. "As i cannot write I put this down simply and freely'. Samplers as a Religious Material Practice" by Daria Pezzoli-Olgati deals with the autobiography of a lower-class woman, composed in silky red cross-stiches in 19th century England. The author reviews her life and organises her feelings and memories as she evokes moral texts and songs and prayers, as well as biblical quotations. These reflections are articulated by means of the slow, precise writing technique that today affects readers through its literal threads. The textile work discloses a struggle for identity mediated through female skills that were taught to unmarried women, necessary at that time for making a living. Ulrike Luise Glum in "The Tattoos of Armenian Genocide Survivors. Inscribing the Female Body as a Practice of Regulation" explores the relationship between writing and identity by considering tattoos as a practice of humiliation and assimilation as well as exclusion. The use of tattoos in the context of the Armenian Geno-

cide exemplifies the persistence of writing involving ink and the human body. Indelible, the tattoos transformed the faces and hands of female genocide survivors in a permanent, publicly readable medium documenting dramatic, extreme processes in which religious identity played a crucial role.

While we were editing these articles, the inauguration of the 46th President of the United States took place. The swearing-in of Joe Biden was the heart of this ceremony and involved a Bible held by the First Lady. In 2013 Barack Obama took his oath by placing his hand on two Bibles, which belonged to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. Donald Trump also chose Abraham Lincoln's Bible, along with his own, while Joe Biden preferred a large, 128-year-old family Bible. In this political ritual, the Bible is used as a thing, as a kind of materialisation of divine legitimation. Depending on the features, size, history, and owner of the book, the narratives evoked by this object are different: continuity in tradition, authenticity of faith, dignity of the office, political programme, and visions of the world are condensed in an oath practice that is transmitted and received worldwide. In such a ritual, material and immaterial dimensions – the characteristics of the book as a stored text with a particular material appearance and the book's relationship to spatial practices and transmission processes as well as its links to identities – converge. Here was a striking illustration of the relevance of the questions we explore in this issue and motivation to research religious texts beyond the words they contain – as performing things.

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# Materiality of Religious Books

## A Brief Sketch of Sometimes Disregarded Aspects of Book Culture

### Abstract

Engagement with Christian manuscripts – Eastern and Western – and with ancient and rare printed books makes evident a growing interest in material and codicological aspects of our book heritage. In other words, it evinces an emerging curiosity about the non-textual realities of books – at least of ancient books. This shift is particularly true for manuscript studies. The question of materiality remains unavoidable, however, even today, when we decide to edit a book in hard copy along with electronic or digital versions. As has always been the case, there is a direct correlation between the quality of materials used, the production/confection techniques and the external appearance of a book. Normally, one would not expect to find the finest inks, paper or parchment in the hands of less-skilled scribes or illuminators. This article sets alongside immediate material aspects corresponding, and usually expensive, issues like sewing and binding techniques, layout (*mise-en-page*) and decoration. They too condition our assessment – even unconsciously – when we meet religious books.

### Keywords

Materiality, Palimpsest, Parchment, Book Destruction

### Biography

Erich Renhart is professor of liturgics at the University of Graz. In 2005, he founded VESTIGIA – The Manuscript Research Centre of Graz University (<https://vestigia.uni-graz.at>), which is dedicated to research into and the restoration of hidden, lost and re-used manuscripts. As director of this institution and director of the Special Collections Department at the University Library Graz, Renhart conducts research within Manuscript Studies, on text editions (Latin, Greek, Armenian, Syriac) and for Digital Humanities.

# Introduction

It is a wonderful task to deal with the materiality of religious books. Yet which books are to be considered “religious”? The range of book forms and genres can seem overwhelming. For the purposes of this article, I propose that biblical books, liturgical books, prayer books and other devotional books fall into the category in question.

When we look at Christian manuscripts – Eastern and Western – and at ancient and rare printed books, we observe a growing interest in the material and codicological aspects of our book heritage.<sup>1</sup> In other words, a new emphasis on the non-textual realities of books is emerging – at least for ancient books. This shift is particularly true for Manuscript Studies.<sup>2</sup> However even nowadays, when we decide to edit a book, often in hard copy along with electronic or digital versions, issues of materiality cannot be avoided.

As has always been the case, a direct correlation exists between the quality of the used materials, the production techniques, and the external appearance of a book. Normally, we would not expect to find the finest inks, paper or parchment at the same time as less-skilled scribes or illuminators. Here, together with the immediate material aspects we should consider corresponding and often costly issues such as sewing and binding techniques, layout (*mise-en-page*) and decoration. They too will condition our assessment – even unconsciously – as we encounter religious books.

Based on my experience with and knowledge of historical books, this article explores various aspects that cast light on the weight of the material character of religious books and their interpretation. The article will make evident that materially speaking, there is no single way of understanding our religious books, for multiple aspects precondition the fabrication of books in general and of religious books in particular. That is to say, materiality is inherently complex.

This article examines the hypothesis that adequate expression of the most venerable content (e.g. God and God’s Word) requires the most precious ma-

1 Maniaci 2015, 69–88.

2 Zammit Lupi [forthcoming]: “This chapter is about ritual, reading and the senses. It discusses elements of the book that go beyond the reading of the text and its visual beauty. The velvety touch of parchment, the smell of leather bindings, the crisp sound of paper, the coldness and click of a metal clasp and the bulk and weight of heavy tomes are what make viewing a manuscript more than just any reading experience.” Only now is research perceiving historical books as a multisensory experience.





Fig. 1: A feature of book luxury: the head band of a book of high artistic quality.  
(Photo: E. Renhart)

terials (fig. 1). In the document *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, article 122, which also speaks of sacred art more generally, the Second Vatican Council stated:

Very rightly the fine arts are considered to rank among the noblest activities of man's genius, and this applies especially to religious art and to its highest achievement, which is sacred art. These arts, by their very nature, are oriented toward the infinite beauty of God which they attempt in some way to portray by the work of human hands; they achieve their purpose of redounding to God's praise and glory in proportion as they are directed the more exclusively to the single aim of turning men's minds devoutly toward God.<sup>3</sup>

Is this theorem applicable also to religious books – no ifs or buts?

3 [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html) [accessed 3 December 2020].



Fig. 2: Detail of a cloth book cover. An otherwise poorly furnished book is wrapped in fabric, which might be a sign of “emotional appropriation”. (Photo: E. Renhart)

## Categories of Religious Books

Three categories of religious book, roughly distinguished, are considered in this article and can be characterised here in a few words.

It is beyond question that the Bible – be it the complete Bible, Old Testament, New Testament, or individual biblical books (e.g. the book of Psalms, the Gospels) – is of utmost significance within the Christian book tradition. The biblical books are the primordial basis from which all other types of religious book examined here are derived or by which they are inspired. Biblical books are authoritative. Sometimes large volumes, they are intended to be consulted not just once, but instead regularly and over long periods of time. As a consequence, they must be robust. Do we find these realities mirrored in the material quality of such book production past and present?

Liturgical books<sup>4</sup> – lectionaries, missals, choir books<sup>5</sup> etc. – these too are deemed to have authoritative power, evident in their very prescriptive rubrics. Li-

4 Palazzo 1998.

5 For an in-depth study of a choir book's codicology: Zammit Lupi 2011.

turgical books intertwine biblical texts with hymns and chants and with prayers which appear to be regulated down to the last syllable. Usually, liturgical books provide texts (and musical notation) that are to be performed aloud. In addition to their authoritative character, they are performative and interactive. Are these requirements manifest in these books' materiality and presentation?

When it comes to the category "devotional books", we are confronted with an immeasurable variety of book types, from prayer books to pilgrim books and miracle books. For our purposes, we will consider only prayer books, and among them specifically Books of Hours. In some aspects like biblical texts, devotional books are focused on the formation of the reader's private spirituality and need therefore to be attractive to the individual and easy to handle. How do these requirements affect the material appearance of such books?

This brief characterisation of book genres already suggests different requirements with regard to their manufacture. Additional fundamental aspects can also be decisive for a book's material presentation (fig. 2).

## Crucial factors

Book makers have always been confronted a quartet of concerns that determine the framework for their activity: availability of materials, affordability, technique and number of copies.

### Availability of Materials (and Technical Skills)

From the very beginnings of book production and right up to the present day, the material quality of books has always been largely dependent on the availability of the most elementary "ingredients", i. e. writing surface (stone, clay, parchment, leather, paper, etc.) and inks and dyes (fig. 3). Some materials are highly durable, while others are more ephemeral (e.g. papyrus) and survive only under very favourable climatic conditions. Yet producers did not always have a choice of materials, often having instead to make do with the material available. In times of war and economic scarcity, for example, older books were often recycled by effacing a previous text and filling the folios with new content. Throughout the history of book confection – and the greater part of this history was dominated by the production of religious books, as our old and rare book collections attest – book makers were at times forced to use



Fig. 3: Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate ms. syr. 39: Gold-lettered header, placed in the upper margins of the page. (Photo: E. Renhart)

cheap materials, even for the most noble content. If the only available paper was of low quality, they would have to use it for the Bible and other prominent books; if they had no gold-pigmented colour, they would instead use a yellowish dye of vegetable or mineral origin.

The technical skills of the people involved in book manufacture contribute to the quality of their production. A high-quality book requires not only professional scribes and illuminators but also well-trained experts for its sewing and binding (fig. 4). They could help ensure the stability and durability of the book block and protect it with a cover, which might bear highly attractive leather ornamentation. Thus, they too contribute to the physical appearance of the book and to its robustness.

## Affordability

Today we continue to assess how much money we are prepared to spend on a book, and various factors determine the decision we make: whether the book has a hard cover and perhaps a jacket; whether it has thread stitching or an adhesive binding; whether the paper is certified in some way (woodfree coated or uncoated) or is perhaps cheap groundwood paper which will soon degrade and turn yellowish; whether the print is four coloured throughout or only black and white. Such factors are influenced not just by the commissioner's taste but also by their economic situation.



Fig. 4: The spine of a book with high-quality sewing of the quires (Yerevan, Matenadaran MM ms. syr. 203). (Photo: E. Renhart)

Economic potential is always a factor in book production. We cannot conclude that the esteem in which a book is held (e.g. a Bible or a Gospel book) will necessarily be reflected in its materiality.<sup>6</sup> The Holy Scriptures may appear in disguise, poorly clad in the hands of the rural poor or at times of scarcity, catastrophe or war. Book ownership could be a mark of achievement and engender satisfaction irrespective of the material quality of the book itself.

We do encounter, however, some marvellously manufactured and decorated books for public and private use. The numerous outstanding Books of Hours are a case in point. Intended for private use, they were often commissioned by the wealthy, mostly members of noble families. These books – highlights of contemporary book culture – were the fruit of the combination of precious materials and the highest craftsmanship, and as such they functioned as expressions of social distinction and aristocratic prestige.

Affordability was, however, a concern for consumers. Opulent books contrasted with the daily life of toil experienced by the majority, far from any kind of luxury. Medieval critics stigmatised such vain book production with a range of arguments, e.g.:

Following about haughtiness with books. From this haughtiness are suffering those who want to have gilded books.

Fourth then, that it is childish to love and become enthralled by gold and silver letters.

Eighth, that this beauty is of minor value since it does not satiate humans.<sup>7</sup>

6 An edition of the Bible was produced in 1982 for schools in Austria. The two volumes were of low quality, with cheap paper and a poor cover (in an unattractive red). Here was the paragon of a book whose materiality was out of step with the value of its contents.

7 Steinmann 2013, 476: Bibliothèque nationale, ms. lat. 12401, fol. 171r-v (13th century): *Sequitur de superbia librorum, qua specie superbie laborant qui volunt habere libros*

## Techniques of (Re)Production

The history of book fabrication involved a series of modifications, alterations and reinventions. Such shifts can readily be seen by looking at materials (e.g. papyrus or parchment, parchment or paper) or at book forms (scroll versus codex), and are all the more evident with regard to techniques for the reproduction of texts, musical notation, images, graphics, maps and the like, both handwritten or printed. What techniques are preferable and what are the consequences of realising those preferences? To answer this question, I turn now to two paradigmatic situations: (a) the shift from handwritten books to printed books, which marked the beginning of a new era, and (b) the transition from printed books to their virtualisation, so to their dematerialisation in our own time.

### From Manuscript to Print

Gutenberg's mid-15th century invention resulted in vivid discussions, sometimes indeed in disputes between the traditionally minded and the more forward-looking. This struggle is mirrored in many colophons, scribal notes and pamphlets. In 1494, Johannes Trithemius recorded in his treatise *De laude scriptorum* (*In Praise of Scribes*):

Who ignores the difference between manuscript and print? The manuscript if written on parchment might outlive a thousand years; though the print, being a matter of paper – how long would it subsist? If the script can survive 200 years in a book made of paper, this will be an ambitious estimate.<sup>8</sup>

During the first decades of book printing, the natural inclination was to imitate what was found in the medieval manuscripts. Accordingly, printers designed the letters after the handwriting they were used to seeing in manuscripts.<sup>9</sup>

deauratos [...] Quarto vero hoc quod puerilitas est litteras aureas et argenteas amare et in hiis delectari. [...] Octavo hoc quod parum valet ista pulcritudo scripture. Non enim hominem sariat.

8 Steinmann 2013, 902.2: Trithemius, *De laude scriptorum* (7, anno 1492): Quis nescit quanta sit inter scripturam et impressuram distantia? Scriptura enim, si membranis imponitur, ad mille annos poterit perdurare; impressura autem, cum res papirea sit, quamdiu subsistet? Si in volumine papireo ad ducentos annos perdurare potuerit, magnum est.

9 Many fonts and other expressions of modern typography bear the names of early printers: e.g. Garamond, Bembo, Aldus, Didot.





Fig. 5: Birds in the marginal arabesques of a luxuriously decorated manuscript (University Library Graz, ms. 48). Such opulence could not be produced by book printing for centuries, meaning that ancient books written and illuminated by hand remained exclusive and even exotic. (Photo: E. Renhart)

The new technique was able to provide “stable” texts,<sup>10</sup> which, taken from manuscripts with corrupted texts, were not always the best choice possible, initially. And the printers could produce far more copies. But they were not yet able to reproduce the illuminations and decorative elements that appeared in manuscripts (fig. 5); such elements were added by hand following the printing process. The result was a long-term and dramatic reduction of book illumination.

The new technology also had considerable impact on the non-textual multiverse of religious books. The quality of the materials used by the printers tended to decrease, since printing houses had to survive economically. Initially parchment was used as a carrier for the printing ink – a sumptuous practice which soon was reserved for extraordinary, expensive and high-status commissions.<sup>11</sup> In this context, the material was again suited to signalling societal distinction, but this durable writing surface, so appreciated for many hundreds of years, fell out of use for the vast majority of printed books. As the new technique of printing replaced hand-writing, short-lived paper also replaced parchment.

10 This development also marks the beginnings of religious, political and ideological censorship on a large scale.

11 E.g. the first edition of the *Theuerdank*, Emperor Maximilian I's autobiography of 1517, see Renhart 2020, 63–70.

## From Printed Books to Virtual Books

Towards the end of the second millennium, we witnessed another change of paradigm: the shift from materiality to virtuality. The conventional form of the book in its entire materiality was challenged by the electronic book, which can exist in dematerialised form, as an agglomeration of dots, the sophisticated outcome of the mathematical units “+” and “-”. It was now possible for a book to exist without ever having a physical reality.

Even deprived of its material being, this kind of book reclaimed the richly illuminated and illustrated book – a development that had started some 150 years earlier with photography and would reach a new peak in our time. The new technologies allow for all opulence imaginable in terms of colour, size and format, writing font, layout, script, etc. Despite all these options, the book as a material emanation still exists. The pluriformity of books produced a pluriformity of setting, giving the reader a new choice – *where* to access the book. The religious book is one of the cases where we tend to turn to the conventional form of the codex – possibly due to emotional aspects.

## The Number of Copies

The number of copies of a book that are produced is often directly tied to its material quality. In the age in which books were the product of a scribe's hand, any kind of luxury was imaginable for every volume (fig. 6). With book printing came industrial reproduction and an almost immediate loss of individuality. Nevertheless, prominent singular occasions still called for individually tailored books. Veneration of the book is one such occasion, as I now explore.

## The Book as Object of Veneration

Throughout the history of Christian literature, we encounter books as objects of veneration. Here I highlight three situations: the enthroned book (*hetoimasia tou thronou*); the kissing of books in the liturgical context; and the private veneration of a book expressing pious devotion. Such distinct situations demand extraordinary books of a quality that is in some sense remarkable.



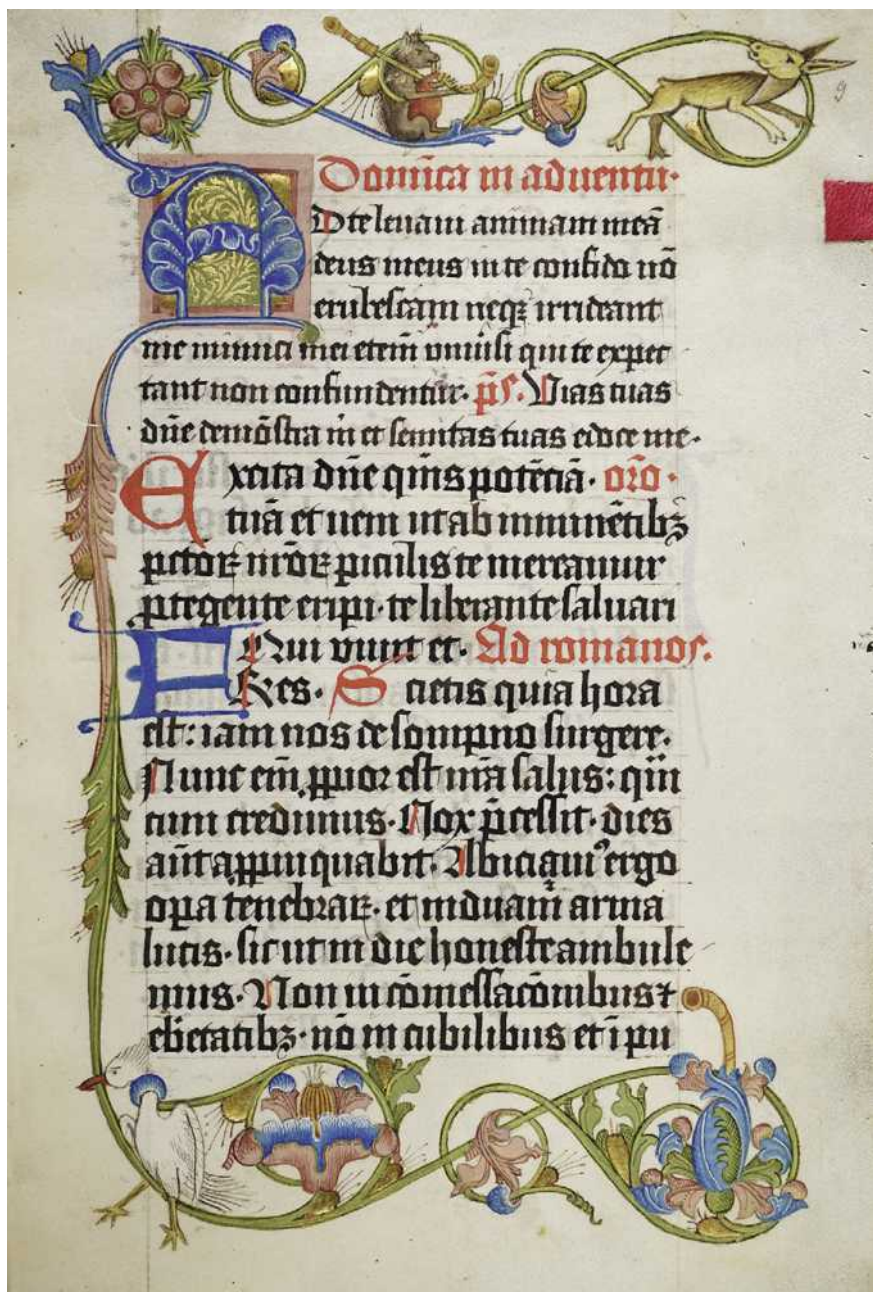


Fig. 6: University Library Graz, ms. 299, fol. 93. A marvellously decorated 15th century missal. (Photo: E. Renhart)

## The Book's Enthronement

In the ecclesial tradition we find the remarkable phenomenon of a book displayed on a decorated seat, representing a throne scene.<sup>12</sup> Christian iconography contains plenty of frescoes depicting the enthroned book, for example on wall paintings in many Orthodox churches, with the book usually resting on the pillow of a throne-stool. Sometimes we encounter this motif miniaturised in a manuscript or realised architecturally, for example as a *bema* throne cut in stone in North Syrian churches of the first millennium.

The opened book stands for the *praesentia Domini* – the Lord's presence. This iconographic representation was chosen for a limited number of situations, such as the opening of a synod or ecclesiastical council<sup>13</sup> (the message: your discussions and decisions here are performed before God's eyes and with the help of the Holy Spirit; the open book displayed the pericope of Pentecost, or the Last Judgement, with its unwavering final decision).

Such extraordinary cases give the book (the Bible or Gospel book) a central place in expressing a theologically most important idea. We cannot imagine a similar significance if a paperback book was enthroned. These are cases where we intuitively expect a book in its best material form. We should feel a dignity emanating from the book itself, even before or without reading from it. I propose an equation here: the most important ideas (contents), demand the most noteworthy materiality (form).

## Liturgical Veneration

In various liturgical celebrations we find acts of book veneration. The most frequent and most readily perceived involves kissing the Gospel book.<sup>14</sup> I cannot recall any case in which a liturgical book itself (missal, sacramentary, choir book, breviary, etc.) has been the immediate object of veneration. Rather, reverence is expressed towards God, God's Word (Holy Scriptures) and especially God's life (Gospels). It is no wonder that these books are given most attention among all our religious books and most sumptuous material expres-

12 Renhart 1995, Von Bogyay 1960, 1971, 1973 and Durand 1867.

13 See the famous depiction in Cod. graec. 510 of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris: Walter 1970 and Brubaker 1985.

14 Other such acts include processions and the act of transferring books. On kissing (of the altar, Gospel book and Cross) as part of the liturgy see Vereecke 1990, esp. 511, and Jungmann 1951, 210–211.

sion in terms of script, decoration and confection. Although sometimes also finely executed,<sup>15</sup> other categories of liturgical book were broadly speaking considered more auxiliary. However, the Gospel book has always retained its distinguished ranking among religious books. Many parishes of various confessional denominations have their standard lectionary for everyday use and a considerably more lavish Gospel book for special solemnities during the liturgical year or for use on other specific occasions.

## Object of Pious Devotion

The Book of Hours, largely associated with the Middle Ages, is possibly the category of ancient book best known today, as a good number have been produced in facsimile. They lend themselves well to engagement with today's audiences on account of their marvellous physical appearance – the presentation of the text, the opulent illumination and decoration<sup>16</sup> and the exclusive binding – as a product of pure luxury.

The Book of Hours was designed and designated for private use, a kind of breviary for noble lay persons. Christopher De Hamel's description is helpful:

By the late thirteenth century the fashion among the secular nobility was for a new type of portable devotional compendium in which selected psalms and prayers were already prearranged into an appropriate order for recitation by the laity at times of the day corresponding to each of the old monastic hours from Matins to Compline. These short cycles were dedicated to specific religious themes or saints, principally the Virgin Mary, whose cult was becoming increasingly prominent in the later Middle Ages.<sup>17</sup>

The Book of Hours provided two points of access for its user: texts for private recitation in line with the official prayers of the church (spiritual nourishment) and many distractions in the form of places on the page where the eye might linger, remaining with a gilded initial letter here, with the drolleries, flowers, animals or arabesques and tendrils there, or with manifold other features in the margins. It is evident that such a book would foster its user's emotional appropriation. At the same time, this book tells of social status and distinction.

<sup>15</sup> Renhart 2010, 39–51.

<sup>16</sup> On account of their opulent illuminations, a number of such books came to be designated “très riches heures”, as in the case of the Book of Hours of the Duc du Berry.

<sup>17</sup> De Hamel 2016, 387.

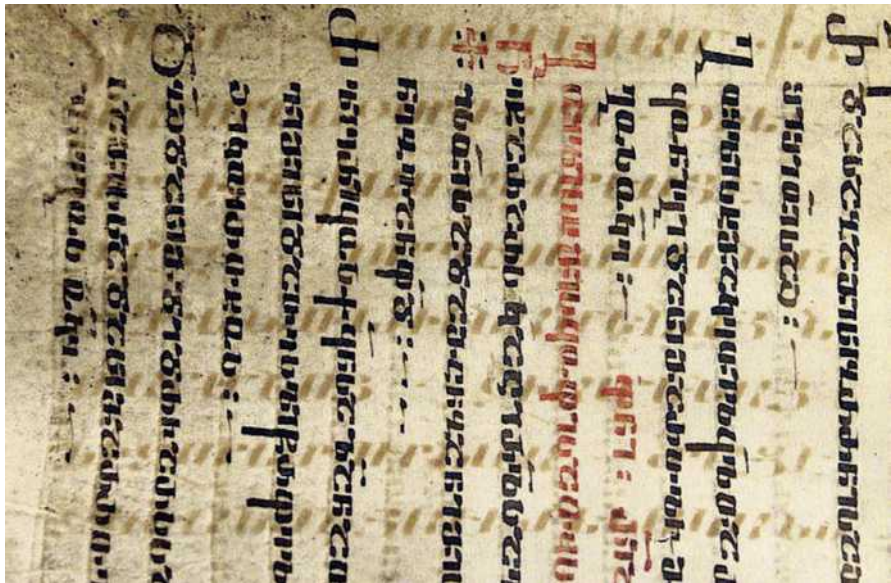


Fig. 7: Detail of a palimpsested folium. The previous writing layer – remnants of the first book – is easily discerned (University Library Graz, ms. 2058/2). (Photo: E. Renhart)

A considerable democratisation of the private prayer book would set in only centuries later, in the baroque period, reaching its peak in the 18th and 19th centuries. The material character of those subsequent books for private spirituality was neither exclusive nor exquisite.

## Destruction of Books

Brief mention can be made here of the destruction and degradation of religious books, highlighting three particular circumstances.

### The Palimpsestation of Books

The disassembling of a book made of parchment and construction of a new one from the debris was a common practice (fig. 7). For this purpose, book makers effaced the text and prepared the leaves for re-writing (*palimpsest*).<sup>18</sup>

18 Renhart 2015, esp. 46–47, and Renhart 2020, 17–27.





Fig. 8: A box of maculated folios: the debris of at least two liturgical books (containing the Psalms and biblical cantica). The parchment strips served to repair the holes of a wooden organ's pipes (courtesy Diocesan Archive Graz). (Photo: E. Renhart)

Any text which was no longer useful could fall victim to this procedure, for a variety of reasons. Even biblical and liturgical texts might meet this fate. This metamorphosis of a book discarded its original contents, with the original book surviving only in its materiality.

### The Maculation of Books

The decades and centuries following the invention of book printing saw the maculation<sup>19</sup> of medieval manuscripts (mostly made of parchment) in grand style. Thousands of ancient books for which new printings were now available were dismantled into pieces. The resulting materials were used for a myriad of purposes, for example for repairing and enveloping other books or for stuffing the holes of organ pipes (fig. 8). Even biblical and liturgical books with illuminations were not exempt from maculation. These actions suggest a disregard for book heritage and have left us today with many thousands of fragments – the rudimentary remnants of a vast hidden but, alas, irregular library.<sup>20</sup>

19 Neuheuser-Christ/Schmitz 2016.

20 Renhart 2013 and 2016.



Fig. 9: A partly burnt codex (Yerevan, Matenadaran, MM. ms. syr. 8). (Photo: E. Renhart)

## Burning Books

While libraries have gone up in flames accidentally,<sup>21</sup> there is also a rich record of deliberate burnings of books, even up to today. The act of burning a book can express many things. Historically, it has often been an act of censorship or aggression or a response to offence-taking born out of political or religious ideology (fig. 9). In this sense, the annihilation of the book not only exterminates the object but also challenges the identity, even the soul, of a person or social group. In some cases, we can speak of “cultural genocide”, when we see a deep disdain of books or even fear-created by their mere existence.

A very different custom in connection with book burning can be observed in some Eastern churches: religious books which have fallen out of use, which are too tattered to be repaired, for example, are prescribed to be destroyed by fire. This practice constitutes a ritual burning of religious books when they have come to the end of their life (fig. 10).

21 See e. g. Báez 2008.

Fig. 10: The act of throwing books into the fire – the catastrophe of book annihilation depicted in its most lovely form – executed with very fine line and gilded (University Library Graz, ms. 32, fol. 5r). (Photo: E. Renhart)



## Neglect and Disregard

This response appears to be the most common reason for the destruction or at least severe degradation of religious books. People forget books that they do not actively engage in their lives. As a result, these books are not kept in the preservative context they require. This neglect suggests an overabundance of books.

## Conclusion(s)

The more we are aware of the history of book confection (recent or ancient), the more able we will be to apply traditional materiality to religious books today. This statement holds in terms of the selection of materials, layout options and the use of decorative elements. Such factors dictate and constitute the dialogue between user and book – be that book of religious character or not.



Fig. 11: SOP 192: A ribbon for marking one's place in a book flows from the head band. Such attractive details might contribute to the owner's/reader's emotional appropriation. (Photo: E. Renhart)

We cannot claim that a religious book always requires the best quality materials. Equilibrium or tension has always characterised the relationship between a book's contents and their presentation. Books preserve their written content, and the material artefact that is the book has a contribution to enact. That involvement is shaped by the authority and weight of the content, economic and societal realities, piety and veneration, and emotional, spiritual and intellectual appropriation.

Such factors are still valid today and will presumably remain so for a long time to come. Appreciation of the religious book's materiality is tied to its use and to the emotional impact of turning to it (fig. 11). My own emotional response starts with the book's appearance and the feel of its surface; it continues with the layout of the page and the lettering (writing fonts) used, and climaxes with the bounty of the margins and, last but not least, with the quality of the paper and bindings – all together they compose an elegance of style and expression.

And finally we return to the hypothesis stated at the beginning of this article. The material quality of a book does not in fact necessarily correspond to



Fig. 12: University Library Graz,  
ms. 763, fol. 152r. A delicately  
repaired tear in the parchment,  
executed with care and  
remarkable skill.  
(Photo: E. Renhart)



the value of its contents and possibly never has other than in those few cases of economic independence and for a handful of people (fig. 12). However, the emotional appropriation of books can give even meagre material quality meaning, transgressing the limits of materiality.

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# Writing, Affordances, and Governable Subjects

## Abstract

The book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible makes a number of references to writing and to the importance of Israel carefully observing the commands, statutes, and ordinances written in the book. Readers can then conform themselves and their behaviors according to the subjectivity of Israel the book sets forth. The process of conforming oneself to what is written in a book makes use of particular affordances of writing, a technology that was becoming more widespread at the time Deuteronomy was being written. The materiality of the book and the social uses to which writing and books could be put are being realized in Deuteronomy in order to create people as particular subjects called “Israel.”

## Keywords

Writing, Affordances, Subjectivity, Deuteronomy, Technology

## Biography

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In the Hebrew Bible book of Deuteronomy, writing and the creation of texts is a widely shared activity. The deity writes, Moses writes, the people write, the (future) king is to have writing done for him. The material form this writing takes varies. The deity writes on stone tablets (9:10; 10:2), while Moses writes on a scroll (31:19, 24), the king has a copy of “this Torah” written for him so he can read it all his days (17:18–19), men write bills of divorce (24:1, 3), and the people write on doorposts, gates, plastered stones, and their “hearts” (6:9; 11:20; 27:3, 8). Writing gives material form to the commands, statutes, and ordinances of the deity and Moses, and it creates a path, *derek*, the people are to follow. This command path, as it were, is special, and readers are warned not to deviate from it (5:32; 17:11, 20; 28:14).

The metaphor of a path being fashioned from the commands, statutes, and ordinances expresses one of the important features of writing and books in religious traditions, or at least within this religious tradition. Writing creates governable subjects, in the sense of being subjects whose behavior is shaped by it. In the case of Deuteronomy, these subjects, called “Israel”, are loyal and docile subjects, obedient to what is written in the book. Their subjectivity is created in relationship to the book itself, as the path that sets out the practices and experiences individuals must enact in order to become the “Israel” of the book. This is achieved in part by affordances, or possibilities, writing offered to the writers of Deuteronomy that they then employed for Israel’s subjectivity. For many today, these affordances might seem obvious, but writing was a relatively new technology at the time Deuteronomy was being written. The possibilities of this technology took time to be realized and used. Deuteronomy provides evidence of that process.

My argument begins with a brief discussion of affordances and the history of writing in ancient Israel. From this discussion I consider three of writing’s affordances of particular import in creating Israel’s subjectivity: fixing and stabilizing the commands, standardizing and normalizing them for Israel and its conduct, and using them in assessment mechanisms. Writing and texts seek to create certain types of subjects in religious traditions, even before they shape other religious practices and performances.

## **Affordances and the Invention of Hebrew**

What is an affordance? James Gibson used the term to speak of those things in a physical environment that are offered (or, afforded) to an animal within it. Affordance refers to the relationship that exists between an animal and its environment, the complementarity of animal and environment.<sup>1</sup> That environment offers to the animal a set of possibilities for action that may be used and modified in certain ways. Affordances are not determinative of an animal’s actions, but rather are possibilities to be realized.

Gibson’s idea quickly was adapted to different contexts and uses, across a range of fields. I draw upon it with respect to writing and books to recognize that these technologies are part of social life, what I consider the environment of human life, both in the present day and in antiquity. Writing offers

1 Gibson 2015, 119.

humans a set of possible uses.<sup>2</sup> For instance, a printed book offers me the opportunity of reading the ideas and arguments of a scholar to whom I have no other access, but it also might serve as a useful paperweight or doorstop. The first use might appear to be the “natural” use of a book, but it is an affordance of writing, because the fixed and standardized form of those ideas becomes available to me in a different time and space. The second is a use of the book in a particular circumstance, one most writers do not intend.

It is the governmental possibilities of writing and books for Israel’s subjectivity in Deuteronomy that are my concern in this article. Writing and the texts produced by it offered the writers a set of possibilities that were relatively new in history, a result of what Seth L. Sanders calls “the invention of Hebrew”.<sup>3</sup> Sanders argues that written Hebrew, a vernacular language, developed in the 8th–6th centuries BCE and was put to a variety of uses beyond those of a royal administration or temple complex and its concerns (annals, records, and the like).<sup>4</sup> These included the processes that led to the writing of the books of the Hebrew Bible, which not only recorded oral narratives but also provided a mechanism by which communities could be formed.

The historical context Sanders describes for how Hebrew came into use in ancient Israel is the one within which the book of Deuteronomy was formed. Most scholars place the core of the book, chapters 12–26, in the late 7th century BCE and associate it with the “book of the law” that inspired the reforms of King Josiah (2 Kings 22:3–23:25).<sup>5</sup> The rest of the book came together in the 6th century BCE.<sup>6</sup> Writing as a technology was becoming part of the writers’ environment as Deuteronomy developed. The affordances of this new technology therefore were on offer to them as they worked. Another resource of the environment that they appropriated and used was the so-called suzerainty treaty, a diplomatic form from ancient Near Eastern international relations, where a dominant power (the suzerain) entered into a formal agreement with

2 Heidi Overhill provides a succinct summary of the adaptation of Gibson’s term across different disciplines and the categories of affordance theory that developed. My use here corresponds with social affordance, of a cascading variety. Overhill 2012, 1–4.

3 Sanders 2009.

4 Sanders 2009, 125–30.

5 This view goes back to the work of W. M. L. de Wette in 1805. More recent proposals date the core of the book to the first half of the 7th century (e.g. Otto 2012, 2016; Steymans 1995). For overviews of the history of scholarship on Deuteronomy, see e.g. Christensen 2001, lxviii–lxx; Tigay 1996, xix–xiv; Edenburg and Müller 2019.

6 I use the term “book” for convenience. Deuteronomy refers to itself as a scroll, *spr*, one of the technologies of that time. The codex, or book, is a later technology.

a foreign subordinate power (the vassal).<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy's literary form has this same literary form, so scholars understand Israel's deity, YHWH, to be the dominant party and Israel to be the subservient one.

## Fixing and Stabilizing

Sanders understands Deuteronomy to be an example of the mechanism by which communities are formed. It represents a community "called into existence through the circulation of texts", a result of texts' ability to create political communities or political belonging.<sup>8</sup> Sanders explains the community-forming abilities of Deuteronomy in terms of its rhetorical effects. The Shema, "Hear, O Israel, ..." (6:4), is a command directed to readers and listeners. He argues that this effect remains persuasive, as people still hear themselves being addressed by it.<sup>9</sup> They understand themselves to be this Israel. I agree, because the rhetoric of the book *is* effective. But I think the technology of writing and its affordances are just as important, if not more so, in the process of creating a community called "Israel".<sup>10</sup>

The circulation of written texts, mentioned by Sanders, is one such affordance. But in order for a text to be circulated, it must be written down. That process is what realizes another affordance, of fixing and stabilizing ideas and narratives.<sup>11</sup> When knowledge and ideas are written, they are given a physical manifestation with a particular form, order, and vocabulary. When they write, writers make decisions about what they are writing and how to write it. They determine the way(s) they want ideas and knowledge to be expressed, in what order, with which words. Self-consciously or not, they make a commitment on these aspects, shaping knowledge and ideas in a particular way. This process differs from oral communication, in which ex-

7 For more on this form and its use in Deuteronomy, see Weinfeld 1992; Steymans 1995; Otto 2012, 2016; Lauinger 2013.

8 Sanders 2009, 10.

9 Sanders 2009, 1.

10 The Hebrew Bible offers different, competing notions of Israel as a community. Sanders' claim speaks to only one such configuration or notion, as does my argument in this article.

11 I credit David Carr with the terminology of fixing and stabilizing, due to a personal communication with him in Denver, Colorado in May 2018. See his more considered thoughts on this aspect of writing in Carr 2011, especially chapter 5. Carr uses the terminology of standardization, not stabilization.

pression, word choice, or order are more fluid, varying in each performative event.

By fixing and stabilizing ideas and knowledge, writing also preserves them in a certain form. Once given that form, words and ideas can endure, transcending time and place.<sup>12</sup> Thousands of clay tablets from ancient Mesopotamia have been discovered in recent decades. The ideas and knowledge they contain is now available to others in very different times and places. The knowledge they contain, in its original form, remains available to others. This is not to say, however, that what was written is something that was standardized and normalized. These processes are part of another affordance of writing.

## Standardizing and Normalizing

Something can be written down and then revised, erased, destroyed, or otherwise discarded. It can be lost. What is required for writing to become standardized and normalized is social use. It must become part of social practice. Circulating texts between and among persons and communities is one practice whereby a text becomes standardized. The same text is shared, read, or performed, and thereby conveys the same words, in the same form and vocabulary, beyond the context in which it was written. Copying a text, whether once or repeatedly, creates the original text as a standard. Storing a text and later retrieving it in order to read it is another practice by which that text becomes a standard. The type and variety of social practices by which a text is created as a standard are large, but reuse must occur. Writing something does not automatically mean what is written becomes standardized. Reuse is not a foregone conclusion for a text. It requires conscious action. Thus, standardization is an affordance of writing, something offered by writing and texts but not required. It must be realized through practice.

Normalization is closely related to standardization, but different. Perhaps it is best to think of these as two points on a spectrum of behavior. Standardization involves the use of a text *as text*. It is text-focused, as written artifact. Normalization involves how the behavior of individuals and groups is shaped by written texts. Its focus is conduct as shaped by a (standardized) text. The Decalogue (or Ten Commandments; Exod. 20; Deut. 5) is normative because it

12 So Sonnet 1997, 109, 146. See also Olson 1994, 135.

was used to shape communal and individual behavior.<sup>13</sup> Normalization happens within a larger apparatus of government, that is, a system of mechanisms and techniques that seeks to shape people's behavior toward certain ends. Writing offers the possibility of being used normatively, but it is an affordance that must be realized.

## Assessment and Truth

Written words do not require assessment, neither of the words themselves nor of those who make use of them. But once texts become standardized and normalized, assessment becomes possible through some sort of mechanism of evaluation. Assessment can be performed on the behaviors of those individuals governed by texts or on a text itself. Texts, for example, can be compared with one another, revised, edited, re-organized, and altered in any number of ways.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, behaviors of individuals may be assessed through mechanisms of comparison and evaluation. Conduct may be examined, compared with what is written in (normative) texts about such behavior, evaluated, judged, then rewarded or penalized, praised or condemned, encouraged or modified. Mechanisms of assessment reinforce the affordance of standardization and normalization because they make use of standardized texts, which record and preserve certain ideas that function socially to govern how individuals are to conduct themselves. These mechanisms become governmental operations, influencing and guiding behaviors while also offering a means whereby individuals and groups can learn the truth about themselves. A simple yes-or-no truth game makes this possible: Did I act correctly? Did we behave as we are supposed to in this circumstance? These are instances of governmentality, intersections of technologies of the self (do individuals conform their conduct, singly and collectively, to what is written in certain texts?) and technologies of power (shaping behavior according to particular texts) that create and govern subjects.

13 Modern debates and disputes about Ten Commandment monuments in the United States offer present-day examples of a type of normativity associated with writing and texts. Among the more notable such debates is the placement of a Ten Commandments monument in the Montgomery, Alabama courthouse lobby by Judge Roy Moore. Kraft 2008.

14 Carr's arguments about the processes that led to the formation of the Bible could be characterized as describing ancient mechanisms of assessment; Carr 2011.



## Deuteronomy's Subjects

In Deuteronomy, the writers appropriate these three affordances to shape conduct and create Israel as a particular type of subject. Remember that writing was a relatively new technology at the time, one they and others presumably were learning about, including its affordances. During a period of empires and imperial governance, these writers made Israel the subject of their writing, rather than imperial matters and concerns.

Narratively, Deuteronomy is presented as a series of four speeches delivered by Moses to the assembled people of Israel on the eastern shores of the Jordan river (1:1). This feature of the text helps create in readers the sense they also are present as Moses speaks his words, that, as Sanders notes, they continue to understand themselves as the ones being addressed by Moses.<sup>15</sup> As readers encounter these speeches, they learn what it means to be “Israel” from the book: how to act, live, sacrifice, build, punish, behave in times of war, and treat war captives, what to do when entering Canaan, how to be blessed or cursed for (non-)observance of the words of Deuteronomy. They do so through the medium of writing. Moses is not delivering his speeches to the reader directly; his speeches are preserved in writing.<sup>16</sup> This is a realization of the affordance of writing. The affordance of fixing and stabilizing words a certain way enables individuals in other times and places to read them. The written speeches may be copied, circulated, used, and reused. These actions are made possible by this affordance, which contributes, in turn, to the social understanding that the texts record and preserve the words of a specific person, who spoke them in a particular time and place.<sup>17</sup> This understanding is encouraged by the narratives themselves, in several ways.

The deity models the fixing and stabilizing of words in writing. Twice the deity is presented as writing down words to preserve them for Israel, since Moses breaks the first set of stone tablets (4:13; 5:22; 10:2, 4).<sup>18</sup> Moses also models this affordance. He speaks to the people the words the deity gave him

15 The impression that Deuteronomy records actual historical events also is created, but such historicity is greatly debated.

16 Sonnet's arguments (Sonnet 1997) about the book within the book and the two levels of the book, that of the plot and that of the narrator, provide one of the more widely accepted explanations of the relationship between speech and writing in Deuteronomy.

17 This is another effect of fixing and stabilizing: what is written can be understood as a record of an event, even if fictive.

18 Divine writing is not as fixed or stable as one might assume.

on the mountain, then writes them down as the words of Torah (31:9). When YHWH gives him words of a song to teach to the people (31:19), Moses writes them down, then teaches them to Israel (31:22). The writers of Deuteronomy make use of the affordance of fixing and stabilizing words to create a certain relationship between the written text and readers. They present the content of the book as a record of what Moses said to Israel at a certain point in time. The book is both speech and writing. All the “spoken” words would be lost to time if not written down, but writing allows them to transcend time, place, speaker, audience, and context.<sup>19</sup> The affordance of fixing and stabilizing words and ideas in writing becomes the reliable means of transmitting Moses’ words into the future.

Sanders’ arguments about Hebrew being used in non-royal contexts are helpful here for thinking about writing as a technology. Assuming that by the 5th century BCE Deuteronomy was coming into a shape much like what we have today, this scroll would have appeared at a time when, Sanders argues, Hebrew was being used in contexts other than those of state bureaucracies and thus was not reserved for what might be classified as royal use.<sup>20</sup> As people in Israel learned to write and explored what might be done with this technology, they realized it offered the opportunity to fix and stabilize words and ideas and to share them.<sup>21</sup> This is a period in which orality remained important, even as writing emerged and was more widely used. By presenting Moses as speaking to the people and then writing down his words himself (31:9), the writers of Deuteronomy connected speech to writing and implied what is written is the same as what is spoken. The affordance of fixing and stabilizing words allows that speech to transcend time and place.

The affordance of standardization and normalization is realized in Deuteronomy in several ways. One of the clearest examples is when the deity is portrayed as re-writing the words recorded on stone tablets. Readers are assured in the text that YHWH writes “the same words as before” (10:4; NRSV). Writing offers the possibility of standardization: the same words, in the same order, are reproduced from one instance to the next. It comes as no surprise, then, that the future sovereign is to have a copy of “this Torah” written for

19 So also Sonnet 1997, 109. See also 146. Cf. Olson 1994, 135.

20 I consider the Masoretic text form to represent that shape, as do others, e.g. Tigay 1996, xxv; Nelson 2002, 8–9. As Karel van der Toorn argues, this shape likely was set by the end of the 5th century BCE (Toorn 2007, 144–45, 151).

21 Lachish Letter 3 provides evidence of this happening in this time period (early 6th century, c.597 BCE), as Sanders argues (Sanders 2009, 144).

his use, so he may have it to read from for all his days (17:19). “This Torah” is a standardized text to be copied. That understanding is created and enhanced by Moses’ repeated references to “this Torah,” *hatorah hazeh*.<sup>22</sup> They create the idea that what is written is consistent with what he spoke to Israel in the past, since the narrative presents him as writing it down. Because standardized as “this Torah”, they are what the people have read to them every seventh year during the festival of Booths (31:10–11). They are what the people write on a plastered monument on Mount Ebal (27:1–4, 8). The writers take advantage of the affordance of standardization in a variety of ways, thereby shaping Israel’s self-understanding and its actions.

It is in the ways writing shapes behavior that its normative possibilities are realized. Because the texts offer themselves to be used as norms of behavior, they influence Israel’s conduct, governing it. Moses makes clear “this Torah” also is normative for Israel’s life. The stone tablets are preserved within the ark (10:5). The king reads his copy of “this Torah” in order to learn the fear of YHWH and monitor (*shmr*) himself and his behavior so he is in compliance with it (17:19–20). The people are to internalize the words of Torah by writing them on their doorposts and gates (6:9; 11:20; writing governs individuals’ behaviors where they live). They are to learn these words and monitor (*shmr*) their behaviors to ensure compliance with them (e.g. 4:5–6; 5:1; 31:12). The people are to enact, do, and thus put into practice the commands of Moses and YHWH (e.g. 12:1, 32; 15:5; 26:16) in their own lives and conduct and those of their household and in relationship with others. These words are the path Israel is to follow carefully, without leaving it (4:2; 5:32; 12:32; 17:11, 20; 28:14). The written words are normative for Israel, governing its conduct and shaping individuals as subjects to what is written.

Finally, by cautioning readers and listeners against deviating from the book’s path, the affordance of assessment is realized. How many pilgrimage festivals are there for Israel? Check Deuteronomy (16). What food should Israelites eat? Check Deuteronomy (14). As a path, Deuteronomy can be used by individuals to determine if they have veered off it. They can check the book, compare it with their conduct, and assess whether the book and their conduct align. An evaluation mechanism is created by using the book for assessment purposes. The book defines what it means to be “Israel”, at least for the writers of Deuteronomy. Individuals can evaluate their conduct through comparison with it. This, in turn, makes possible another potentiality of writing: determining the

22 Deut 1:5; 4:8; 17:18–19; 27:3, 8, 26; 28:58, 61; 29:20, 28 [ET 21, 29]; 30:10; 31:9, 11–12, 24, 26; 32:46.

truth about oneself and Israel. A game of truth is created, with a binary (yes/no) structure. Each individual's behavior can be compared with the book, to assess it and judge whether it is in agreement with what is written. The book is, in the language of the book itself, a witness against Israel (31:19, 21, 26, 28; 32:46), able to determine the "truth" about Israel and each individual who understands themselves to be such a subject.

## Conclusion

Since at least the time of Josephus, interpreters have argued Deuteronomy is Israel's "constitution" (*politeia*) or, more recently, "polity".<sup>23</sup> Such arguments have focused on the institutions and practices by which Israel is organized. But the governmental functions of the book do more than this. They shape and guide (i.e. govern) how individuals come to be Israel as a subject and subject position. The affordances of writing are one means by which this occurs. Because the commands are fixed in writing, the same understanding of Israel becomes available to each and every individual who considers themselves part of Israel and addressed by the commands. The same practices and behaviors are incumbent upon all of Israel because Deuteronomy is a standard and norm of what it means to be Israel, an affordance provided by writing and the book. When individuals shape their thinking and selves according to the commands, statutes, and ordinances written in the book, they enact Israel's subjectivity and become subjects to the book. The government of the book, in other words, is concerned not only with institutions and the organization of Israel's society, but also with the creation of Israel as a people and with how individuals recognize themselves as part of this subjectivity. The affordance of assessment provides a means for evaluating oneself and others and the extent to which the examined behaviors correspond with those recorded in the book. Determining the truth about Israel becomes possible. In all these ways, writing and the book are not simply a constitution of (or for) Israel, in a nominal understanding of this term, but also constitute Israel, a verbal understanding.

I argued at the beginning of this article that the Israel created by Deuteronomy is a loyal and docile subject. The writers' appropriation of the suzerainty

23 Josephus 1930, Book IV, §198, 96; Christensen 2001, lvii; McBride 1987, 229–44. Bernard M. Levinson argues *politeia* should be translated as "form of government", not "constitution", although most other scholars do not adopt this translation alternative. Levinson 2008, 56–57.

treaty form as the model (standard) for Deuteronomy suggests that Israel's subjectivity is as the subordinate power. To be Israel is to be a loyal, docile subject.<sup>24</sup> In examining the affordances of writing that are taken advantage of in Deuteronomy, some of the practical ways in which this subjectivity is created become evident. These affordances are something of a commonplace now, aspects of writing and books so widely accepted they are deemed "normal" or "natural" and therefore not worth examining. Yet for the writers of Deuteronomy, the technology of writing was relatively new, something to be accepted and used, adapted and explored in order to learn what might be possible with it.

I end by noting that what is past is present. What I mean by this is that a digital revolution is underway, one that presents affordances to users and that shapes subjectivity in new ways. Considering a familiar technology with a long social history offers a perspective from which to analyze the digital revolution. The government of people is facilitated by the affordances of technology, digital and otherwise. This is not because technologies are deterministic or because a particular use of them is inherent and inevitable; it is, rather, because users realize those affordances and possibilities, take advantage of them, and use them for certain goals or purposes. As Bernard Stiegler has argued, such is as it ever has been for humans with technology: we find ways to use it and to put it to new, different uses.<sup>25</sup> This was the case for writing and books, as Deuteronomy demonstrates. It is the case for digital technologies too.

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24 There are many ways by which this goal or end is pursued in the book, which I explore in my forthcoming book, *Deuteronomy's Subject*.

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# Born under a Lucky Star

## Interpretations of Woodcuts of Pseudo-astrological Birth Amulets from German-Jewish Printing Houses in the 18th Century

### Abstract

This article examines illustrations of the zodiac signs on birth amulets from German-Jewish printing houses from the 18th century. These woodcuts are part of a long tradition of astrological references in Jewish art and literature. However, the amulet texts themselves do not contain any astrological topics. What, then, is the relationship of the woodcuts to the text and to the function of the amulets? By contextualizing the images with other contemporary traditions of illustration, this article provides three interpretation models which can explain the choice of the zodiac signs on the amulets.

### Keywords

Woodcuts, Amulets, Zodiac Signs, Astrology, Judaism, Magic

### Biography

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## Astrology and Amulets

Astrological ideas are certainly not the first association that comes to mind when thinking about traditional Judaism.<sup>1</sup> However, when one looks at objects that originate from the early modern tradition of the German Jews, nu-

- 1 My sincere thanks go to all the individuals and institutions mentioned in the captions for kindly providing the photographs.



merous illustrations of zodiac signs catch the eye. These illustrations belong to an old tradition that is not limited to groups marginalized as heretics. The long list of astrological references in Jewish art and literature includes, for example, illustrations of the zodiac signs on mosaic floors of synagogues in ancient Israel, astrological texts in the literature of Qumran as well as in the *Babylonian Talmud*, and philosophical discussions about astrology among Spanish scholars from the 12th century onwards.<sup>2</sup>

This article interprets the depictions of zodiac signs on birth amulets from Jewish printing houses of the 18th century in German-speaking countries.<sup>3</sup> So far, studies of Jewish amulets have been mostly philological, and a comprehensive analysis of woodcut prints – embracing the visual dimension and the material history of the prints – remains a desideratum of research.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, this article is located within a framework of “material religion” and “visual religion”<sup>5</sup>, and will supplement previous approaches.

The term “amulet” is a translation of the Hebrew word *kame’a* (קמיע) and denotes objects which are supposed to have a protective function. The term can be misleading, because in everyday language it implies objects which are worn directly on the body, which was not the case with amulet prints. Furthermore, the term “amulet” can evoke the assignment of these objects to the category “magic”. However, the concept of magic in the study of religions is highly problematic, and it is deliberately not applied in this article.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the term “amulet” allows a connection to previous academic discourses and is therefore used in this text.

Early modern Jewish amulets from German-speaking regions can be divided into prints, manuscripts, textiles, and metal amulets. The prints this article focuses on have been attributed an apotropaic function, primarily the protection of women in childbed and their new-born children against the demoness Lilith. There are five types of prints: (1) prints with illustrations of the 12 zo-

2 See Leicht 2006 and Fishof 2001.

3 The considerations presented here are the first results of research for my dissertation on German-Jewish amulets in the 18th and 19th centuries. They represent a work in progress that can be confirmed, supplemented, or corrected by future research.

4 See, for example, the excellent philological analysis by Folmer 2007. For studies on the visual elements, the work of Shalom Sabar is groundbreaking, see for example Sabar 2015.

5 See, for example, Beinhauer-Köhler/Pezzoli-Olgiaiti/Valentin 2010. Kiyarad/Theis/Willer 2018 can be cited as an example of interdisciplinary examination of images of “magical” objects, while Feuchtwanger-Sarig/Irving/Schrijver 2014 shows Jewish Studies’ growing interest in visuality and materiality.

6 See Otto 2011 and Meininghaus 2021.

diac signs, (2) lithographs in which a menorah is formed from micrography, (3) prints with a wide, striking ornamental frame, (4) prints with a single illustration in the upper part, and (5) prints without illustrations at all. Most of the objects known to me belong to the latter three types and show the same Hebrew-Yiddish text,<sup>7</sup> which consists of seven to nine elements:

1. The heading, which identifies the print as either “for a girl” or “for a boy”.
2. A Yiddish text, which is only found on some prints and which explains the protective function of the amulet against demons, ghosts, and sorcerers.
3. An invocation of Adam, Eve, and five angels, which is connected to the exclamation “Lilith out!”.
4. A summary of the following story in Yiddish.
5. A story in which the prophet Elijah meets the child-killing demoness Lilith and, by threatening her, makes her reveal her secret names. By the power of these names, which can also be read on the amulet, the mother and the child are to be protected.<sup>8</sup>
6. A name of God, which can also be translated as “Tear Satan!”, as well as several variations of Exodus 22:17 (“You shall not permit a sorceress to live!”),<sup>9</sup> created by word rearrangement and a repetition of the formula “*amen, sela*”.
7. A second invocation of Adam, Eve, and five angels with the exclamation “Lilith out!”.
8. Psalm 121, in which God is praised as the never-sleeping guardian of Israel.
9. At the end some prints mention the three women-specific commandments (hebr. *nidda, ḥalla, hadlaqa*), in the version for a girl, or make reference to the covenant of circumcision, in the version for a boy.

In all prints of this text, a distinction is made between a version for a girl and a version for a boy, versions that are often found on the front and back of the same sheet. Except for the heading and grammatical details,<sup>10</sup> the text of the two versions does not differ, but the illustrations do.

7 See Folmer 2007, 47–56.

8 The basic structure of this narrative has roots in antiquity. It was published in this form by David Lida (Amsterdam, c.1700) and by Haim Yosef David Azulai (Hebron, 1724–1806), see Folmer 2007, 48–50.

9 For the function of this verse, which is usually understood as a ban on “magic”, see Meininghaus 2020.

10 However, the text is often set incorrectly, with the grammatical forms not consistently adapted to the child’s gender.

Only very few amulets contain an explicit indication of when and where they were printed. However, assumptions can be made about origin based on woodcut prints used in other works. Accordingly, we can establish that most of the amulets come from the Jewish printing houses of Fürth and Sulzbach, while some can also be traced to Frankfurt am Main, Frankfurt an der Oder, and Karlsruhe. Most of them can be dated to the 18th century and some to the 19th century. The amulets were used in the context of different customs around the birth and the puerperium and were, for example, hung on the walls of the delivery room. This context makes our focus on the images particularly relevant. Given the small size of the amulets, the text cannot be easily read, even close-up. Only the often optically dominant pictures are visible then. If the amulet was not hung very close to the woman in childbed, looking at the picture might have played a greater role than reading or reciting the text, should she even have been capable of reading Hebrew.<sup>11</sup>

## The Woodcuts

With one exception all types of amulets have at least one illustration. In most cases, these are woodcuts, very rarely also copperplate engravings. While in studies with a philological focus the authors of the text are in the foreground, in this approach the artists who produced the printing blocks and the designers of the other visual elements of the amulets appear as creative religious actors. There is hardly any indication of who made the woodcuts, whether these persons were Jewish, what their relationship to the printing houses was, or to what extent the details of the depiction were determined by the printers or by the artists. In many cases, the woodcuts seem rather coarse and artistically not very demanding. The concrete visual design of the amulets was most likely decided by the respective typesetter.<sup>12</sup> Although he had no influence on the *content* of the text, which was predetermined by tradition, he was able to influence the *interpretation* of the text to an extent that should not be underestimated. This involvement could be achieved, for example, by setting some text elements in a larger font, by separating them from other text parts using decorative elements, or even by providing the Hebrew consonant text

11 See Wagner 2018, 66.

12 In many cases, the prints show indications of careless work, such as setting errors in the text or wrongly placed woodcuts.

with vowel signs, as it was usually set without vocals. It can be assumed that he also decided on the selection and placement of the woodcuts.

After these general explanations, the focus will now be on the type of amulets with a single image. So far, I am aware of a total of 12 different subtypes, each with a different illustration for the versions for a girl and for a boy. The motives vary, but in most cases a female figure is shown in the version for a girl, while a male figure is shown in the version for a boy. Accordingly, the illustrations probably served to facilitate the purchase of a suitable amulet for a male or a female infant by visualizing the gender of the child. This role was especially important for women, who sometimes had only limited knowledge of Hebrew. It is likely that they also served as “eye-catchers”, to increase the attractiveness of the products.

This corresponds to the function of the text elements in the upper third of the prints, which primarily served as information for the user and were probably particularly important in the purchasing situation. As far as I am aware, this “part of information” is typical of amulet prints, whereas neither pictures nor Yiddish explanations can be found on handwritten amulets. One can assume that these additions on the prints served as a substitute for the direct or indirect relationship between the writer of the handwritten amulets (who was often a rabbi and/or a kabbalist) and the amulet users. This relationship possibly had a positive influence on the user’s subjective feeling of protection. In the case of the amulet prints, which were produced by an anonymous typesetter and a printer, this form of relationship did not exist.

In addition to the picture and the headline indicating whether the print is intended for a boy or a girl, there is also at least one Yiddish text summarizing the content of the Hebrew story about Elijah and Lilith that follows.<sup>13</sup> Yiddish was the everyday language, while Hebrew was used for ritual purposes, and the Yiddish summary therefore enabled the user to get a rough overview of the content of the Hebrew text, which might otherwise be incomprehensible. In some prints, this summary is preceded by another Yiddish text, which praises the protective effect of the amulet against demons, ghosts, and sorcerers. It is noteworthy that the Yiddish texts are printed in a different font than the Hebrew ones. This semi-italic font is called *vaybertaytsh* (yidd.: “women’s German”), because it was used especially in Yiddish literature for women and less

13 A closer examination of this Yiddish text shows, however, that not only is the following text paraphrased, but other text elements, especially the versions of Exod. 22:17, are also interpreted and thereby connected with the other texts of the amulet.

educated people.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the visually different font was used as marking for the addressees of the text. In contrast to the informative function of the upper third of the prints, the Hebrew texts below were understood as protection against dangers and were addressed not to the user, but to Lilith and other threatening beings.

But what do the illustrations on the amulets of this type represent in detail? To date I have found no interpretations of the woodcuts by the printers or individual users, and therefore I construct possible attributions of meaning on the basis of similar traditions of illustration.

Three of the 12 woodcuts I have worked with, mentioned here only in passing, depict an angel (for a boy) or two angels under a palm tree (for a boy) and a mermaid (for a girl) as well as a man with a long walking staff (for a boy). Five other woodcut pairs all show the same motive, namely a woman in a richly decorated dress with a wreath in her hand (for a girl) and a man dressed in the current fashion<sup>15</sup> holding a book (for a boy) (fig. 1a and b).

The five pairs of woodcuts are remarkably similar even in their fine detail and as a result they form a coherent group. It seems likely that the figures depict a bride with a wreath and a man reading a religious book.<sup>16</sup> These depictions correspond to the typical ideals of marriage for women and of lifelong religious study for men.<sup>17</sup> Besides the transmission of these normative conceptions, the woodcuts also visualize the hoped-for effect of the amulets – the growth of the child into a socially conforming adult. This message may have had a positive psychological effect by contributing to the subjective perception of the protective effect of the amulet. It is also conceivable that the illustration, like the lower texts on the print, was attributed with agency and not only *represented* the growing-up of the children but also was understood to *cause* it.

Another positive psychological effect may have been evoked by the man's modern clothing. That depiction implicitly refers to the successive dissolution of dress restrictions for European Jews at the end of the 17th century and during the 18th century in the context of increasing political equality. This step

14 See Tamari 2001.

15 The man wears a hat (perhaps a tricorne), a frock coat, under it a waistcoat, a kind of bands and breeches. This corresponds to Central European dress fashion in the 18th century, which Jews were permitted to wear, see Rubens 1967, 178.

16 Wiesemann 2012, 60 also proposes this interpretation. In contrast, Carlebach 2011, 67 sees in the male figure a man reading a pocket calendar.

17 See Sabar 2002, 681.

דִּיא (קאייט) אַיז אַיז גרויס (סגולה) זון  
היטן דא (וואַרד) זיט אַיז קינד  
פֿר אַיז ביי (רוחה) אַיז (שידוך) אַיז אַיז  
אַיז (אכטפֿין) דא אַיז אַיז (כח) האבן  
זון אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז  
אַיז קינד (אכטפֿין) זיט זון אַיז אַיז  
פֿון אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז



אדם וחוה חוץ לילית חוה  
ראשונה סיני וסנסני וסנסני  
שניאל חסדיאל

דא אַיז דא (השפֿעה פֿון אַיז) אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז  
(אכטפֿין) ביי אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז  
אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז אַיז

בשם יהוה אלהי ישראל יושב הכרובים שמו נרדל ונרדל : אלהי הנביא  
זכור לטוב היה הולך בדרך ופגע בלילית וככל כת דילה ואמר  
לה ללילית הרשעה אן אתה טמאה ורוד טמאה וכל כת דילך כולם טמאים  
הולכים ותען ותאמר לו אדוני אליה אנכי הולכת לבית היולדות (פכ"פ) להת  
לה שינת המות ולקחת את בתה היולד לה ולשתות את דמה ולטעות את מות  
עצמותיה ולהכנס את בשרה והשיב לה אלהי הנביא זכור לטוב ואמר לה כהנים  
עצורה תהיה מאת השם יתברך וכאכן דומם תהיה וענתה ואמרה לו למען השם  
תתירני ואנכי אברה ואשבע לך בשם יי אלהי מערכות ישראל לעזוב את דרכים  
הללו מהיולדות הזאת ומכתה הנולד לה וכל זמן שאני שופע את שמותי אני  
אברה ועתה אדירע לך שמותי וכל זמן שמכירין אותם לא יהיה לי ולכל בתי  
דילי כח להרע וליכנס בבית היולדות ומכל שכן להזיק :

אלוהן שמותי לילית אביטי אביטי אביטי אביטי אביטי אביטי אביטי  
מטורטה אביטי אביטי אביטי אביטי אביטי אביטי אביטי

קרע שטן מכשפה לא תחיה : מכשפה תחיה לא : לא תחיה מכשפה :  
לא מכשפה תחיה : תחיה מכשפה לא : תחיה לא מכשפה :  
א"ס א"ס א"ס א"ס א"ס א"ס א"ס

אדם וחיה חוץ לילית חוה ראשונה סיני וסנסני וסנסני שניאל חסדיאל  
שור למעלות אשא עיני אל ההרים מאן ובא עזרי : עזר מעם יי עושה שמות  
וארץ : א ומן למוטרגליך א ינום עומדיך והיה לא ינום ולא יזין שומר  
ישאל : יי שומדיך יי צלך עלי יי מינה : יומם השמש לא יבהר וירח בלילה :  
יי שומדיך מכל רע שומר את נפשה : יי שומר צאתה ובואה שעתה ועד עולם :

Fig. 1a: Printer: Moses ben Uri Schraga Bloch (?), H61 WAGENSEIL.VK 209 b recto, print with woodcut, size unknown, 1690 (?), Sulzbach (?) Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen-Nürnberg, Bibliothek Wagenseil. (© Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen-Nürnberg)







had been preceded by a long tradition of specifically Jewish clothing, partly imposed by political authorities, partly upheld for reasons of inner-Jewish religiously motivated distinction. For these reasons the negotiation processes around Jewish clothing can be understood as a reflection of the tension between particularism and acculturation in Central Europe in modern times.<sup>18</sup> The woodcuts depicting a man dressed in modern clothes can thus be understood as an expression of social integration and of hopes for greater social participation and involvement.<sup>19</sup>

Four other woodcut pairs show a woman, who is usually naked but in one case is dressed, holding a plant in her hand (usually for a girl) and a naked or dressed man with a bow and arrow (for a boy) (fig. 2a and b).<sup>20</sup>

These figures can be interpreted with some certainty as representations of the zodiac signs Virgo and Sagittarius, given their correspondence to typical iconographic traditions of these signs.<sup>21</sup> For one subtype, this interpretation can even be proven, since the identical images can also be found in calendars, where they are printed together with the other zodiac signs and with the corresponding Hebrew designations. To my knowledge, one print of the version for a girl<sup>22</sup> and three prints of the version for a boy<sup>23</sup> of this subtype have been preserved. The same woodcut prints are also found on calendars and a book from the Jewish printing houses in Fürth, so the amulets can also be located there. The calendars are assigned to three printers: Ḥajim ben Zbi Hirsch (practised 1737–1772), Izig ben Löb Buchbinder (practised 1761–1792) and Itzig ben David Zirndorfer (practised 1775–1826).<sup>24</sup> This repetition indicates that the

18 See Silverman 2013, xvii–xxii and 68–73.

19 We can note, therefore, that persons open to modernity were a target group for the amulet. At the same time, however, the illustration emphasizes adherence to religious identity with the representation of the book.

20 However, only one subtype shows the image of the naked woman on the front and that of the man with a bow on the back. Another subtype shows the man with a bow on the front and the man with the book on the back (probably a mistake by the typesetter). Another subtype shows in some prints a naked woman (for a girl) and a naked man without a bow (for a boy) and in other prints the same naked woman (for a girl) and a man pouring wine (for a boy). From another subtype, I know of only one print that shows a naked woman (for a boy – so perhaps a setting mistake).

21 See Hübner 2013, 253, and Fishof 2001, 116–119 and 128–131.

22 Gross Family Collection 027.011.891.

23 F\_Kindbettzettel\_1 and F\_Kindbettzettel\_2 (found in the Geniza Freudental, today: Pädagogisch-Kulturelles Centrum Ehemalige Synagoge Freudental) and M 1252 (found in the Geniza Memmelsdorf, today: Jüdisches Kulturmuseum Veitshöchheim).

24 See Löwenstein 1913.





Fig. 2b: Unknown Jewish printer, F\_Kindbettzettel\_1, print with woodcut, 18.5 x 20 cm, Between 1764 and 1785 (?), Pädagogisch-Kulturelles Centrum Ehemalige Synagoge Freudental. (© Photo: Prof. Andreas Lehnardt)

## Interpretations of the Astrological Illustrations

The zodiac signs on these last amulets are confusing in that their text bears no reference to astrology.<sup>25</sup> For all other woodcut prints discussed here, a more or less direct relationship between illustration and text can be reconstructed: the depictions of angels refer back to the angels invoked in the text, while the man with the staff, the bride, and the man with the book visualize the gender and future development of the child mentioned in the title. Still, engagement with astrology in the text of the amulet would have been possible, since a reasonably intensive literary occupation with astrology existed in Jewish sources from antiquity to modern times.<sup>26</sup> A comparison with other Jewish objects of the same period in German-speaking countries depicting the zodiac signs illustrates the conspicuousness of this incongruity between text and image: zodiac signs were used to illustrate numerous printings, manuscripts, and textiles, for example, calendars,<sup>27</sup> books with prayers for celebrations throughout the year (*Maḥsor* books),<sup>28</sup> embroidered or painted Torah binders made from the cloth in which boys were swaddled at their circumcision (*Mappot*),<sup>29</sup> wedding certificates (*Ketubbot*),<sup>30</sup> as well as the printing signs of individual Jewish printers.<sup>31</sup> Although the zodiac signs were sometimes used for purely decorative purposes,<sup>32</sup> in most cases there are explicit or implicit references to astrological topics in the text. In calendars, they were arranged to correspond to the respective Jewish months. *Maḥsor* books contain two prayers with astrological references, while in the case of the Torah binders, the month of birth of the boy can be represented by zodiac signs. In the case of wedding certificates, the zodiac signs illustrate the congratulation “*mazel ʔow*” (literally: “a lucky star!”), while on a printer’s sign they often symbolize the birth month of the printer. There are also amulets from Frankfurt an der Oder which contain all 12 zodiac signs and refer explicitly to them in the text.

25 For this reason, the amulets can be called pseudo-astrological. The illustration of the mermaid noted above, however, needs explanation along the same lines as the zodiac signs treated here.

26 See Leicht 2006.

27 See Rosenfeld 1989, 29 and Rosenfeld 1990, 28, and also Carlebach 2011, 80–81.

28 See Fagin Davis 1991 and Narkiss 2007, 364.

29 See Weber 1997.

30 See Sonne 1953b.

31 See Sonne 1953a, 4.

32 See Sonne 1953a, 3 and Wiesemann 2002, 12.



These examples cause us to wonder whether the illustrations of the zodiac signs on the amulets had purely decorative purpose, but if not, then how the illustrations of Virgo and Sagittarius relate to the other illustrations on the amulets and the text. We might at first assume that amulets were provided with zodiac signs chosen in light of the birth month of the child. In this case, the picture would provide the text with additional information, enabling amulets to be used more effectively from an emic point of view. However, I know only of prints with the images of Virgo and Sagittarius, and yet it seems an unlikely coincidence for only amulets with these images to have survived. Three alternative explanatory models for the use of the illustrations are possible, I propose, and can coexist.

### Imitation of the Original Illustration Tradition: From Bride to Virgo

The most obvious thesis is that the use of the zodiac signs can be explained by the material conditions in the Jewish printing houses. Printing blocks with zodiac signs were standard equipment of Jewish printing houses because they were used in popular printings like calendars and *Maḥsor* books. In addition to woodcuts of the zodiac signs, a limited number of typical illustrations can be found in the Jewish literature of that time. These include portals on the front pages of books and illustrations of Yiddish books of fables. In addition, woodcuts illustrate people performing rituals, especially in books that depict regional customs (*Minhag* books), where the same woodcut is often used several times to depict different customs. Besides, woodcuts often depict biblical scenes in Yiddish bible paraphrases (*Tse'edah u-r'edah*), history books (e.g. *Sefer Josippon*), as well as in instructions for Pessah (*Pessah-Haggadot*) and Esther scrolls (*Megillat Esther*).<sup>33</sup> Thus, a suitable printing block was not acquired for each text, and instead existing woodcuts were reused in different contexts. This procedure was a common practice, not unique to Jewish printing houses, and, as Alexandra Franklin notes, should not be confused with arbitrariness or thoughtlessness:

When a woodblock appears with an entirely different text, we can assume that the printer found it expedient to use his or her existing stock, but this does not mean that the use was careless, or that the image was meaningless. What does an image illustrate – or how does it illustrate – if it is used

33 See Wiesemann 2002, 9–34.

in different contexts? Composition, as well as content, could suggest meaning.<sup>34</sup>

The woodcuts of the zodiac signs which were available anyway were then also used for amulets, for the realm of birth already had an astrological connotation marked by illustrations of the zodiac signs on Torah binders.

It seems likely that only Virgo and Sagittarius were used because they show anthropomorphic figures that could pick up on the tradition of depicting the bride and the man with a book, perhaps the primary tradition of illustrating these amulets. Since the amulets with the bride and the man with a book contain neither a year of production nor a reference to the printing house, the order in which they were printed and by whom cannot be established. Nevertheless, at least one amulet of this type can be dated relatively reliably to 1690 and located to Sulzbach (see figs. 1a and b).<sup>35</sup> This version would then be very old compared to the presumed dating of the other amulets. The whole tradition of illustration of the bride and the man with the book may then be quite old and perhaps even the original form of illustration for amulets. Accordingly, the zodiac signs can be understood as imitations of this tradition. The fact that the Gemini and the Aquarius were not used although they too are anthropomorphic can be explained by the similarity of the Virgo with the plant to the bride with the wreath. Besides, the Sagittarius with his bow would possibly fit better to the apotropaic function of the amulet than would the Aquarius.

### **Astro-Medical References: From the Virgo to the “Zodiac Man”**

Another possible and not necessarily competing explanation for the choice of Virgo and Sagittarius draws on an astrological-medical attribution for the illustrations. The context here is the tradition of images of a naked man whose

34 Franklin 2019, 216.

35 This is H61 WAGENSEIL.VK 209 b, Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen-Nürnberg, Wagenseil Library. The Wagenseil Library consists of prints collected by Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633–1705). After his death, the collection was sold by his heirs to the University of Altorf in 1708 and then given to the University Library of Erlangen. Although it is no longer possible to reconstruct how Wagenseil got hold of the amulet, the localization to Sulzbach and the dating to 1690 seem realistic. In any case, the print was produced before 1708, when the collection was sold, as no works were added to the collection.



Fig. 3: Printer: Itzig ben Löb Buchbinder, A 133, print with woodcut, size unknown, 1784/5, Landesarchiv Speyer. (© Photo: Prof. Andreas Lehnardt)

body parts are assigned the 12 zodiac signs.<sup>36</sup> This tradition is known from Christian and Jewish sources from the 13th century onwards and is called “Zodiac Man” (fig. 3).

The image had a medical function, related to determining the correct time for bloodletting at the respective parts of the body. For this purpose, the zodiac signs were often assigned to designated parts of the body as follows: Aries to the head, Taurus to the neck, Gemini to the shoulders or arms, Cancer to the chest, Leo to the heart, Virgo to the stomach or generally the abdomen, Libra to the kidneys or the pelvis, Scorpio to the genitals, Sagittarius to the thighs, Capricorn to the knees, Aquarius to the calves, and Pisces to the feet.

<sup>36</sup> See Hübner 2013.



The illustration of the Virgo was possibly chosen for the amulets because of its location on the Zodiac Man, where it is traditionally assigned to the area in which the uterus is located. Similarly, the illustration of the Sagittarius is partly assigned to the pubic area. The Scorpio, which is more often assigned to the genitals on the Zodiac Man, may not have been used because of the need to use a male figure to visualize the sex of the child. In this case, one can speak of a transformation of the original medical function of the illustrations to an apotropaic function. This interpretation is supported by the fact that illustrations of the Zodiac Man can also be found in Jewish calendars from Fürth.<sup>37</sup> We can therefore assume that the association of Virgo with the abdomen and of Sagittarius with the pubic area was known to the typesetters and readers. However, there are very few depictions of female bodies in the pictorial tradition of the Zodiac Man and therefore the zodiac signs were rarely explicitly related to female breasts, the womb, and the vulva. So far, a Zodiac Woman in Jewish sources is unknown to me.<sup>38</sup>

### **Ambivalent Forms of Representation: Adam and Eve**

Finally, a third possible interpretation can be noted, which refers to those amulets that depict the Virgo and the Sagittarius naked (fig. 4a).

These instances can function as reference to Adam and Eve, who are called on twice in the amulet text, while in the same sentence Lilith is ordered out of the house. Their relevance in the context of the birth amulet stems from their fundamental opposition to Lilith. The earliest source with a detailed legend about Lilith is the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. This Hebrew work is dated between the 7th and 10th centuries CE. In this narrative, God creates the first woman, Lilith, from the same dust as Adam, and only later the second woman, Eve, from Adam's rib. Since Adam and Lilith are simultaneously created from the same material, Lilith refuses to lie under Adam during intercourse. In the ensuing argument, Lilith pronounces the name of God and flees. Upon Adam's complaint, God sends three angels to bring her back. The angels find her at the Red Sea and threaten her, but Lilith refuses to return and swears to kill female children up until the 20th day after their birth and male children until the 8th day if she has the chance. However, if she sees an amulet with the names of the three angels, she will not do any harm.

37 See Rosenfeld 1989, 30–33 and fig. 3.

38 On the connection between the signs of the zodiac and the female body see Hübner 2013, 305–306.



Fig. 4a: Printer: Michael Ben-Zalman Hanau (?), 027.011.057A, print with woodcut, 20.5 x 16.6 cm, 1720s (?), Gross Family Collection. (© William Gross)

Corresponding with this tradition, the amulets discussed here contain the names not only of the three angels but also of Adam and Eve. They symbolize the perceived normative marriage and parent-child relationships, set in contrast to Lilith, who defiantly eluded her partner and has since killed the children of Adam and Eve. The great significance of Adam and Eve is also evi-



Fig. 4b: Printer: Michael Ben-Zalman Hanau (?), 027.011.0043, print with woodcut, 17.5 x 17 cm, 1720s (?), Gross Family Collection. (© William Gross)

dent in their depiction on another amulet type from Sulzbach or Fürth, which shows them as one of the central pictorial elements (fig. 5).

On this type, the depicted figures can be clearly identified as Adam and Eve through the use of captions with their names. So, it is possible that in the case of the amulets with the naked Virgo and Sagittarius, the woodcuts provide a second association, with Adam and Eve. This thesis is supported by the observation that there is also an amulet that, matching the naked Virgo with a plant in her hand, shows a naked man with a flower (fig. 4b). While the woman with the plant can be unambiguously recognized as a common





Fig. 5: Unknown Jewish printer, OBJECT.JMP.COLL/178801, print with woodcut, 16,2 x 21,6 cm, 18th century, Jewish Museum Prague. (© Jewish Museum Prague)

representation of the Virgo, the male figure cannot be interpreted as a zodiac sign, which makes the association of this figure with Adam likely. Moreover, the plants in the hands of the figures may evoke associations with the fruit of the tree of knowledge. This ambivalence of the illustrations is encouraged by the absence of explanatory captions on the amulets, unlike for many woodcuts in books. The printers may have deliberately played with the ambiguity of the illustrations.

## Conclusion and Outlook

The considerations presented here show that the material conditions in Jewish printing houses, especially the existence of certain printing blocks, influenced the design of the amulets. Thus astrological-medical interpretations not laid out in the text could also be accessed by users. In these cases, the images seem to be relatively independent of the text. Here, then, is an expres-

sion of the creativity which the typesetters deployed, unlike for the traditionally fixed text. At the same time, however, numerous associative references can be established between the illustrations and the text – for example, the depiction of angels matching the angel invocations, the bride and the man with the book matching the heading with the sex of the child, or the naked figures matching the invocation of Adam and Eve. With captions missing, the illustrations are open to various interpretations and associations. The illustrations could provide practical help in choosing the appropriate print, increase the attractiveness of the product, and possibly enhance the apotropaic effect of the text from an emic perspective.

The observations made provide impulses for further research. As valuable as studies on single amulets are, a broad comparison of all preserved prints will surely uncover connections and differences between amulet types. Furthermore, comparison of the amulets with other contemporary printed works with which they share visual and other elements is also indispensable. In a further step, the results should be contextualized within Jewish discourses of the 18th and 19th centuries, and an attempt should be made to reconstruct the practices associated with the amulets.

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# Material Traces of a Religious Trial

## The Case of Ludwig Teschler

### Abstract

In 1991, when a private house in Graz was to be sold, the owner asked her son and his wife to lend a hand in clearing the attic of the small house, a typical construction of the 1930s which had been built by her grandfather. Amongst the broken furniture, obsolete tableware, old books and rubble, all covered in layers of dust, the couple found a plastic bag containing about 70 sheets of paper, most of them damaged, most of them in an unreadable handwriting. The dates written on some of sheets aroused their interest: the years mentioned belonged largely to the 17th century.

The material aspect of this collection is of particular interest. On the one hand, the analogue medium of pen and paper has been subject to various destructive factors, and information originally contained in the documents is irrecoverable; the find is also incomplete. On the other hand, the medium provides access to dimensions of the individuals who produced these records in ways that a digital entity could never provide, contributing to stories that unwind across the 136 pages, narratives that are not only interesting but also deeply touching. One of these stories is a fine example for this engagement: the case of Ludwig Teschler, an artisan accused of using witchcraft. Teschler was tried and sentenced. This article explores how the material quality of the documents helps us interpret the case.

### Keywords

Teschler, Paris Lodron, Widman, Amulet, Talisman, Haus im Ennstal, Witchcraft, Superstition

### Biography

Christian Wessely is appointed as Professor for Fundamental Theology at the University of Graz. From 2014 until its dissolution in 2019, he was chair of the respective Institute.

## Introduction

Speaking of the “materiality of scripture” raises the question whether scripture can ever be “immaterial”. In fact, it is a misconception to classify even digital entities, be they texts, pictures, videos, or sound, as immaterial. Even though intangible in the strict sense, these backbones of our media society

are unthinkable without a material framework, and on the level of bits and bytes, they are material entities too.

Yet scripture has a different quality connected to bodily experience when it is engraved, written, or embossed on something palpable and with sensory elements. The haptic of old paper, the smell of the dust, the sound of the rustling, and the picture of the seals and the watermarks on the material become part of the perception process. Even for the best possible digital representation such dimensions are largely missing, in part as a result of a lack of technical possibilities and in part as a result of the usual focus on the text itself. In this article I seek to show that the opportunity to handle original material influences how we interpret and classify texts and thus provides us with new insights.

The original documents that are the subject of this article were found in 1991 in an attic in Graz, Austria. The lot includes letters of individuals involved in a witchcraft process, different versions of the corresponding interrogation record, and files and orders of the court involved. They bear signs of an enervating and painful process. As effigies of their writers, they have a place in this issue in showing relations between official proceedings and the unofficial course of action, associations that are often overlooked in cases like this.

It remains unclear why and how these documents were moved to the house where they were found. The plastic bag containing the rolled-up material bore the imprint of the Graz record shop Mecki Schallplatten; this company was founded in 1976 so evidently the documents were handled after this year, although we cannot know the nature of that handling – were they simply tidied up or perhaps they were acquired around this time, for example at a flea market. The last owner of the house, Gerlinde Leski, asserted that neither she nor to the best of her knowledge her parents (resident 1960–1990) knew about the treasure hidden above their heads.

In 1642 an accusation of witchcraft and/or performing magic was life-threatening. The last witch trial in the duchy of Styria was conducted in the city of Radkersburg in 1746,<sup>1</sup> and many of the accused were sentenced to death based on confessions they had been forced to make by being racked. The *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina* ordered, “If someone [...] carries around suspicious things or acts and speaks like performing magic [...] it is sufficient reason to question him [her] under torture.”<sup>2</sup>

1 Cf. Valentinitzsch 1987.

2 “Item so jemandt sich erbeut andere menschen zauberei zuo lernen / oder jemandt zuo bezaubern bedrahet vnd dem bedraheten dergleichen beschicht / auch sonderlich

Church authorities did not usually try the defendants – they had neither the authority to do so nor an official interest in this aspect of dealing with witchcraft. In the overwhelming majority of known cases, the sentence in witchcraft trials was passed by a municipal judge and executed by the hangman. In the particular case of Ludwig Teschler, the subject of the case these papers address, the two authorities coincided, for the Archbishop of Salzburg was also secular ruler of the considerably smaller duchy of Salzburg. We should note that although the result of the case described in this article resonated with the humanist ideals of Archbishop Paris Lodron, just 35 years later his successor had 150 persons tried and executed for similar accusations.<sup>3</sup>

## Materiality: A Description

The complete corpus of scans and transcriptions is published in Wessely/Knappitsch 2015. The publication is available as an open access PDF and contains all the documents mentioned here and more, in high resolution. The document numbers in this article (#xx) reflect the order in which the documents were found; in the online version of this journal, they are linked to the scans in the open access repository.<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

The **corpus of finds** contains 52 documents, each consisting of one or more pages for a total of 136 pages including the seals or the placement of lost seals. The material is paper; the paper watermarks have not yet been documented and classified. Of the documents, 51 are handwritten in ink; one is printed with handwritten amendments to the greeting (#115). The language is German except for #8 and #100, which are in Latin. The handwriting includes the *cancelleresca* script used in Austria and Salzburg in the 17th century, but some documents are written in an individual style. It has been possible to identify 9 hands that composed more than one document and 16 hands for

gemeynschafft mit zaubern oder zauberin hat / oder mit solchen verdecktlichen dingen / geberden / Worten vnd weisen / vmbgeht / die zauberey auf sich tragen / vnd die selbig person des selben sonst auch berüchtigt / das gibt eyn redlich anzeygung der zauberey / vnd gnuosam vrsach zuo peinlicher frage.” Kohler/Scheel 1968, XLIV. The *Peinliche Gerichtsordnung* was issued in 1532 and contained strict regulations limiting the previously uncontrolled practice of torture (“peinlich” refers to “pain”).

3 Fürweger 2015.

4 <http://irenaeus.uni-graz.at/index.php?category/202> [accessed 16 September 2020].

single documents. Considerably later, probably around 1900, someone tried to organize the documents by writing the date (if applicable) and keywords on the “outside” of the documents, i. e. on the external sheet visible after the document had been folded. This person was probably not a professional and made several grave mistakes, with the documents for this case incorrectly dated. The majority of the documents would have born seals, many of them embossed, some with sealing wax; but they have often been lost as the result of unskilled handling over the course of the last 350 years.

Forty-three of the documents are letters, 3 are contracts (#57, #91, #102,) 6 are announcements and rulings concerning affairs of public interest (#8, #41, #79 (probably in connection with #8), #83, #95, #109). The documents #1/2, 7/8, 25/26, 55/56, and 119/120 are not dated. The earliest dated document was written on 24 April 1618, the latest on 1 June 1715. Only eight of the documents are dated after 1700.

The state of the documents varies. Few are fully intact; most bear water spots. Damage done by mice and by fungi is severe in places, and the readability of several documents is thus limited.

The sequence of the documents as found was chaotic, with no recognizable system. The documents were scanned and numbered in that original sequence, to keep track of the changes to be applied by re-sorting on issue and date. The digitalization process was as careful as possible given the status of the documents; the Vestigia Centre of the University of Graz provided know-how and equipment for this tricky part of the process.<sup>5</sup> After digitalization, the originals were professionally stored in the air-conditioned climate of the departments archive room.

The issues addressed by the documents vary. Some refer to contemporary events, like the threat of invasion of the Holy Roman Empire (#53, 1661, #83, 1704) or political influence on the region (#47, 1689). Some broach pastoral issues like penalties for penitents (#1, 1627, #5, 1687, or #89, 1703). Others refer to legal transactions (#13, 1708, #41, 1698, or #57, 1640). All are interesting sources for historians, but the 22 pages concerning the case of Ludwig Teschler are the focus of this article.

The transcription of several documents which were particularly hard to read was undertaken by Veronika Drescher, a palaeographer.<sup>6</sup>

5 The author is grateful to Univ.-Prof. Dr. Erich Renhart, Vestigia Manuscript Center, University of Graz, for his assistance with the digitalization.

6 In several challenging cases, Prof. Dr. Johannes Giessauf, Institute of History, University of Graz, did not hesitate to lend a hand. We are very grateful for his assistance.

## The Case

In the 17th century the parish of [Haus im Ennstal](#) was in a tricky position. Politically it was an eastern outpost of the duchy of Styria, but ecclesiastically it was bound to the archdiocese of Salzburg, which was a political heavyweight too. In 1646, the parish was incorporated into the Benedictine monastery at Admont.<sup>7</sup> In the course of the Reformation in the previous century, almost all of the duchy of Styria, and especially the region Ennstal, had become Protestant, and it had taken repeated efforts by the reigning Habsburgs between 1570 and 1600 to re-establish Catholicism. Many Protestants had been forced to leave Styria, and Salzburg, but many remained, formally reverting to Catholicism yet remaining crypto-Protestants. This secret Protestantism made the mountain region of northern Styria difficult ground for every Catholic cleric, and parishes were often staffed by priests who having fallen out of favour with the authorities, being disciplined with this usually temporary assignment.<sup>8</sup> Many of them were naturally eager to regain the Archbishop's favour and actively sought to restore Catholic orthodoxy.

In the first half of the 17th century, the region was also affected by the rerouting of international trade roads as a result of the events of the Thirty Years' War. The lion's share of international commerce between the cities in the kingdoms and duchies of southern Germany on the one hand and Styria, Hungary and Croatia on the other hand was relocated to other routes, leaving the hitherto booming villages and markets with only a small part of their former income.<sup>9</sup> The impact of famines and marauding mercenaries did not hit the region as hard as elsewhere, but there was a constant threat, exaggerated by rumours, of being raided and plundered, which created a climate of anxiety.

7 Knappitsch 2015, 37–38.

8 Even until the 1990s, the ruins of a sacral building several hundred metres west of Trautenfels Castle were called the “Heidentempel” (heathen temple) in the vernacular. They were the remains of the [Protestant Church Neuhaus](#), which was destroyed in 1599 by the Archduke of Styria during the Catholic restoration. Cf. Leeb/Scheutz/Weigl 2009.

9 See Schmidt 2018.

## The Course of Events<sup>10</sup>

On 10 August 1642 after a service, the sacristan of the parish church in Haus comes across a red-leather pouch under the altar cloth. This pouch is subsequently opened and found to contain various substances that were commonly used as ingredients for a magic charm, such as human amnion, linen stained with the menstrual blood of a virgin, a rope used on gallows, and specific herbs.<sup>11</sup> A young acolyte admits to having put the pouch on the altar on behalf of the lorimer Ludwig Teschler, born in 1616. The parish priest, Albert Widman, sends the pouch to the Consistory of the Archbishop of Salzburg on 17 August along with a report about a similar pouch found earlier. We know these details only from the rescript, as the letter sent by Widman is lost.

In its session of 30 August, the Consistory discusses the case. The pouch is opened and found to contain several items used for magical purposes, as described. Widman is advised to send in the second pouch and keep the matter concealed from the public until the Archbishop has been informed. On 2 September, Widman is informed that the pouch has been presented to Archbishop Paris Lodron, who has authorized the initiation of judicial proceedings. Widman is instructed to discuss the case with the municipal judge at Radstadt, to clarify Teschler's malfeasance and from whom Teschler's knowledge about these procedures was received. On 9 September, the case is delegated to the Court Council. The judge in Radstadt is officially assigned to the interrogation of the accused and ordered to cooperate with Widman.

The contemporary Radstadt court records are lost, but the documents include two versions of the interrogation protocol – one version consists of the almost complete draft notes (#9–12), the other is a clean but incomplete copy of the version submitted to the court (#34–35). Both versions are dated 25 September 1642. The record shows that Teschler, scared by events during what would prove to be the final phase of the devastating war begun in 1618, has listened to the advice of a certain “doctor from Linz”(#12), who

10 See Knappitsch 2015. The Consistory was the relevant body for all religious concerns, but the Court Council was the responsible authority for all “worldly” cases, and prosecution always fell to the Court Council. Some individuals served on both. In both instances the Archbishop had the final word.

11 Cf. Knappitsch 2015, 47–48. Byloff 1902 describes a similar pouch that was found in Aussee in 1611. Knappitsch notes that pouches like these were relatively popular in this region in the 17th century.



has claimed to be skilled in magical practices. This man has told him that a charm worn around his neck which consists of certain ingredients and over which five Catholic masses have been celebrated will protect him from shots, stabbing and sword cuts.

The accounting Widman submits to the Consistory suggests that further versions of the protocol existed (#21). The final version is discussed in the Consistory on 10 October. Teschler and Barbara Schlemmerin, a midwife who provided Teschler with a dried piece of an amnion, are sent to the Court Council for punishment, with Teschler to be used to set an example. On 22 October the Consistory and on 30 October the Court Council vote for the examination and punishment of the midwife; the Court Council orders her to be interrogated under threat of torture.

On 20 November, a report by Widman is discussed in the Consistory. Widman writes that the accused midwife remains obstinate but has confessed to having said blessings and prayers over sick humans and animals. According to the theology of the 17th century, no layperson and, *a fortiori*, no woman was allowed to bless or say prayers over anybody beyond their own household, and the misconception around healing prayer taken as proof of magical practice was aggravating. Widman asks the Consistory to prohibit Schlemmerin from performing such rituals and to ban her from practising as a midwife. The Consistory decides to punish Teschler with a prison sentence of eight days and to require him to undertake a pilgrimage to the Capuchine monks of Radstadt (a journey of some 25 kilometres).

On 24 November the Court Council discusses the case of Barbara Schlemmerin. The council decides that she is to be released, but on 2 January 1643 the council again discusses the case and agrees to forbid her from secretly performing such blessings. Somewhere around January or February 1643, the Consistory demands to know from Widman whether Teschler has already served his sentence. He answers in the negative and adds that he has heard rumours that the local administrator at first refused to arrest Barbara Schlemmerin and only took her into custody after receiving strict orders from the judge. Widman also reports that Schlemmerin – again? – has practised magic (#110 und 111). Meanwhile, on 7 January 1643 the Consistory discusses the report of the Court Council and joins it in the interdiction against Schlemmerin; it increases Teschler's sentence from eight to ten days.

By the beginning of March 1643, a petition for mercy from Teschler arrives at the Consistory, in which Teschler notes that the parish priest (Widman) is harassing him and demanding he pay the expenses of the trial, which were

considerable (#21).<sup>12</sup> Teschler notes that he has already spent 17 days in prison and beseeches the Consistory to order Widman to leave him in peace. It is unclear whether Teschler is telling the truth; a comment on the petition (#23 and 24, possibly a copy written by Widman) describes his supplication as “fraudulent”.<sup>13</sup> In its session of 4 March the Consistory grants Teschler’s petition and orders Widman to answer the allegations. In #36, dated 20 March, the Consistory asks Widman for a more detailed list of his expenses. The last evidence of these proceedings is an entry in the Consistory protocol dated 18 May – Widman has again asked that an example be made in punishing Teschler and again asks that Teschler be ordered to cover the expenses. The Consistory decided to refer the cost issue to the higher authority and to order Widman to refrain from further punishment other than the required pilgrimage to Radstadt.

No further documents concerning this legal process could be found. Their loss may be attributed to a devastating fire which almost completely destroyed Haus im Ennstal in 1750; only the parish register survived.

## Dramatis Personae

The parish register, now accessible digitally,<sup>14</sup> is an important source for reconstructing at least some important parts of the lives of the individuals involved.

## Ludwig Teschler

Ludwig Teschler, his name spelled Taschler or Däschl in other sources,<sup>15</sup> was baptized in Haus on 26 October 1616. He was the third child of his married

12 Widman tried to charge Teschler for a total of 11 gulden and 2 shillings (1 gulden = 8 shillings = 60 kreuzer = 240 pfennige). In 1640, a skilled worker in this region might have earned a maximum of 16 kreuzer a day, so Widman was demanding more than a month’s income. Cf. Mensi 1929; Mensi 1935, Rimpl 1962.

13 “Verlogne supplication des überwisen werb[e]n Ludbig[en] Teschlers zu Haus” It remains unclear whether Widman himself wrote this copy. As the parish priest in Haus, he would have had no need to note the location specifically (“zu Haus”).

14 Cf. <https://data.matricula-online.eu/de/oesterreich/graz-seckau/haus-im-ennstale/>. I am most grateful to Gudrun Rausch, who assisted us so greatly in combing through entries in the parish records, which were sometimes almost unreadable.

15 As was customary in the 17th century, the surnames were written phonetically and thus spelled inconsistently.

parents, Jakob and Anna Teschler. Jakob was the local shoemaker and had contact with other leather workshops in the region: Ludwig's godfather was Adam Zeisser [Geisser], shoemaker in Schladming. Two of the three witnesses to Jakob and Anna's marriage are also identified in the records as shoemakers. Ludwig's elder brother Rupertus, born 1614, is identified as shoemaker too; Ludwig himself is called a "Riemer", a person who manufactures leather items for everyday use in rural communities, such as belts, straps, laces, harnesses, and horse-gear. The family is not poor; in a sidenote and in the later version of the main text of the interrogation protocol (#10), Widman mentions that Teschler's mother possesses 1,500 gulden. On 19 August 1643 Teschler married Elisabeth Pernung [?], the daughter of a servant of the archduke. Michael Schwaiger, the municipal judge at Haus, is recorded as a witness to the marriage. Teschler's surely sensational trial had taken place only a few months earlier, but it does not seem to have compromised his standing in the community. According to baptismal records for Haus, the couple had at least six children, with three sons and three daughters born between 1644 and 1660. After 3 June 1660, the date of the baptism of his youngest daughter, Barbara, there is no further trace of Ludwig Teschler, neither in parish records nor in other sources. He has no entry in the local listing of deaths, although his brother, his wife (1684), and at least two of his children were buried in Haus.

The entries in the parish records differ in form and style. Whereas entries made before Albert Widman was parish priest are clear and well structured, his entries between 1633 and 1648 are hard to read and in part lack clear structure, a problem also found in all his notes in the finding volume other than those directed to his superior authority.

## Barbara Schlemmerin

Information about Barbara Schlemmerin (who is once called Barbara Kramerin, #110, a name possibly related to a farm where she used to live<sup>16</sup>) is sketchy. The only entry that concerns her dates from 8 March 1602<sup>17</sup> and lists her as a legitimate daughter of Anna and Andreas Schlemmer. For her godmother, Anna, the record notes, "She does not know neither her nor her husband's

16 A property known colloquially as Kramer is still found in Oberhaus. It was purchased by the current owners in the 1970s and they know nothing of the property's earlier history or of the case discussed here (information by phone, 22 September 2020).

17 Archive of the Archdiocese Salzburg: Matriken der Pfarre Haus im Ennstal, Taufbuch I (1586–1629), 40.

surname, lives in Haus.”<sup>18</sup> The Schlemmer family was obviously not as financially well-off as the Teschler family, and also lacked their social standing. After the end of the legal proceedings in 1643, her trail runs cold. We do not know whether Widman’s second accusation had any consequences for her. We also do not know when or where she died – she does not appear in the record of parish deaths.

## Albert Widman

Widman was parish priest in Haus from 1635 until 1648; he succeeded Johann Riept and was succeeded by Christoph Assinger. We do not yet have details of his origins and career, since his personnel file has not been found. We do know, however, that he had studied law and was appointed as episcopal visitor in the parishes of Winklern, Matrei and Heiligenblut. Widman had been accused of repeated physical abuse. The records of the diocese of Graz-Seckau show that he threatened the municipal judge of Haus physically and on another occasion used a picket during an argument.<sup>19</sup> During the visitation, he was accused of having attacked two priests physically. Widman denied the accusation and pointed out that the priests had committed serious crimes, e.g. peculation, failure to remain chaste and even attempted murder (#17 and #19). His attitude was uncompromising: he insisted on using Latin in addressing the community even though virtually no one was able to understand it, and he did not cease until he received a strict order from the Consistory to desist.<sup>20</sup>

In spite of these reports, Widman was evidently trusted by his superiors, for in 1647 he was appointed as a visitor for the monastery of Rottenmann (#97, #100).

## The Authorities

Today the Archbishop of Salzburg is still termed *primas germaniae*, an honorary title indicative of Salzburg’s leading role in European church history.<sup>21</sup> At the time of these events, Paris Count Lodron (1586–1653) was Archbishop of Salzburg. He was descended from old and influential Italian nobility, highly

18 “Diese weiss weder ihren noch ihres Manns Zunamen nicht, ist wohnhaft zu Haus”. Ibid.

19 Archive of the Diocese of Graz-Seckau, records of the parish priests of Haus im Ennstal.

20 Fürsterzbischöfliches Konsistorium Salzburg 1642, 10 November.

21 See Zaisberger/Rainer 1998.

educated and upheld humanist ideals. After studying theology, he was appointed as cathedral provost and director of the Court Chamber. In 1619, he was elected Archbishop of Salzburg and in 1622 founded the university at Salzburg, with faculties of theology, medicine, jurisprudence and philosophy. A skilled politician, he managed to keep the region out of the turmoil of the Thirty Years War, but the border lands within his territory suffered in particular as a result of events in surrounding regions.<sup>22</sup> Although the duchy of Styria was part of the diocese of Seckau, religious life was dominated by Salzburg because the Archbishop was authorized to install (and recall) the bishop of Seckau, and large regions in Styria also belonged to the archdiocese. The situation for the adjacent dioceses was similar, for example for Chiemsee, where Christoph von Liechtenstein was bishop from 1624 to 1643. In presiding at the Consistory and the Court Council of Salzburg, von Liechtenstein was involved in the case of Ludwig Teschler (#31). Christoph Schrepf (also spelled Schropfh and Schroff), a doctor of theology, was a member of the collegiate monastery Beatae Virginis Ad Nives (Salzburg) and councillor of the Consistory. As such he signed documents #27, #36, #112 and #130.

## Materiality: Examples

The case of Ludwig Teschler is fascinating and layered. This analysis and even the literal transcriptions cannot alone reveal all that the documents contain. The digital versions, with high-resolution scans, enable the researcher to derive from the material emotional states and even sometimes psychological aspects. The handwriting often shows personal involvement, but writer and “speaker” are usually not the same person. We can safely assume that Ludwig Teschler and Barbara Schlemmerin were unable to write, especially longer texts. When they are available, changes between draft and fair copy are also revealing.

The material state of the papers is also intriguing: parts of the text are lost forever; parts are unreadable for the time being – the information loss is random, but it also provides new impulses for research.

This case also has an emotional quality that cannot always be accessed via digital artefacts. The scans have quantitative limitations and even as the quality of each new digitalization improves, it will still come up against the

22 See Heinisch 1991.

limitations of the storage space/picture resolution balance. More importantly, especially in this case which is deeply rooted in religious conceptions, in touching, smelling and viewing the papers one becomes deeply involved in a story that links these individuals and institutions in a struggle for safety, hope, truth and benevolence. The digital pictures in the repository and the examples that accompany this article can be only an inferior impression of the large originals. Links are given to the transcripts of the documents, with an English paraphrase of the content also provided.

**Left:**

To the reverend Consistory in Salzburg etc.

The mother of Teschler has assets of around 1500 fl. *[unreadable]*

**Right:**

Gracious and highborn Lords,

in execution of your order we have interrogated the undersigned Ludwig Taschler, citizen and lorimer here in Haus. Enclosed you find the protocol containing his statement and confession.

May your reverend highness register it graciously.



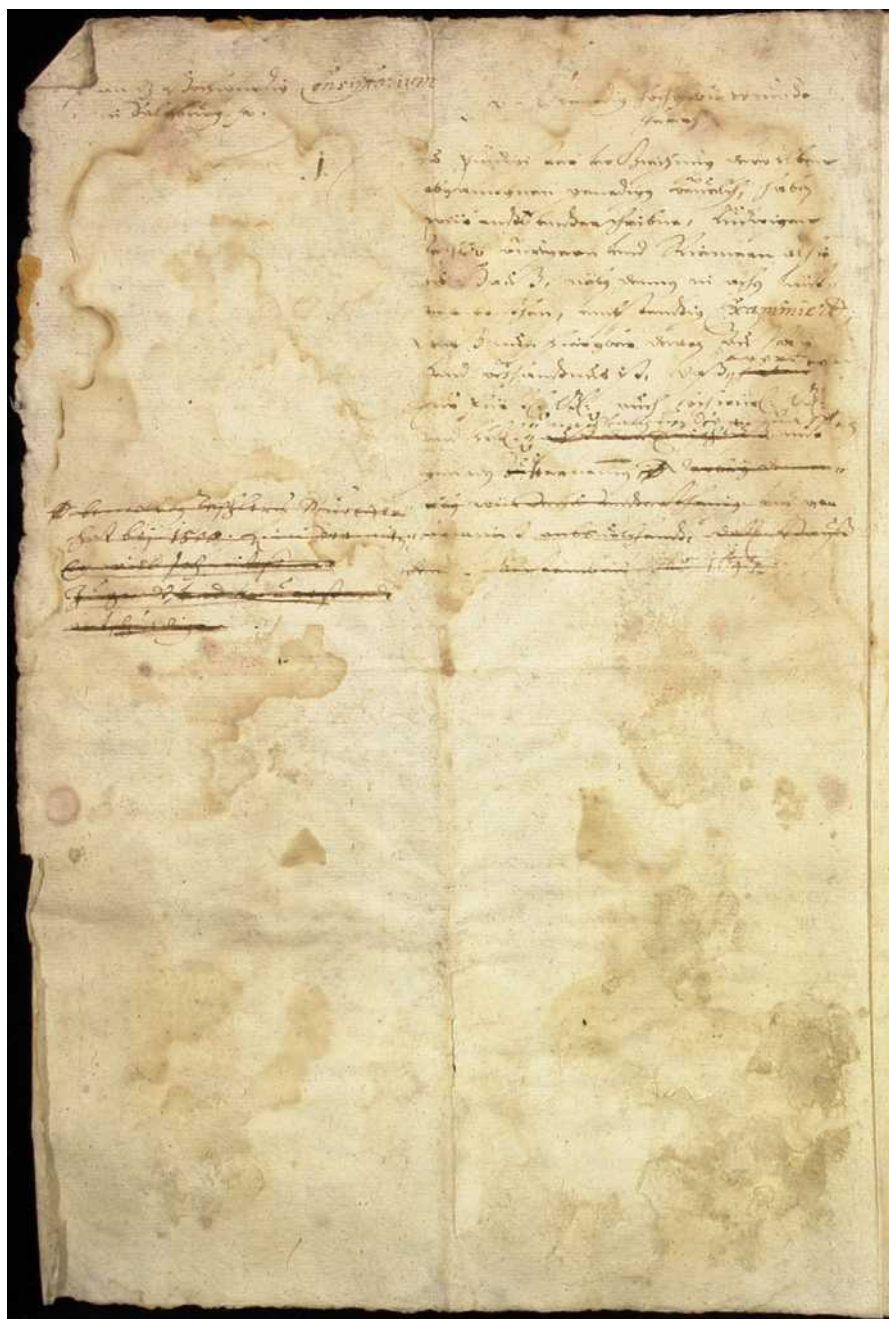


Fig. 1: The report of Albert Widman, cover letter, Hand 3, #10.

**Left:**

*7 lines and one amendment left stroke through*

**Right:**

2. Christian, the legitimate son of Martin Wolf, citizen and blacksmith, 15 years old, has confessed that Teschler asked him three times to put a pouch of red leather under the altar cloth whilst serving as acolyte, so that the mass is celebrated over it. He claims to have refused twice but agreed the third time.

He committed this on 10 August, the feast of St. Laurentius. After the service the sacristan noticed the pouch while extinguishing the candles and handed it to the priest Martin.

When Teschler wanted his pouch back, he [Christian Wolf] told him to ask the priest Martin for it, and [Teschler] did so.

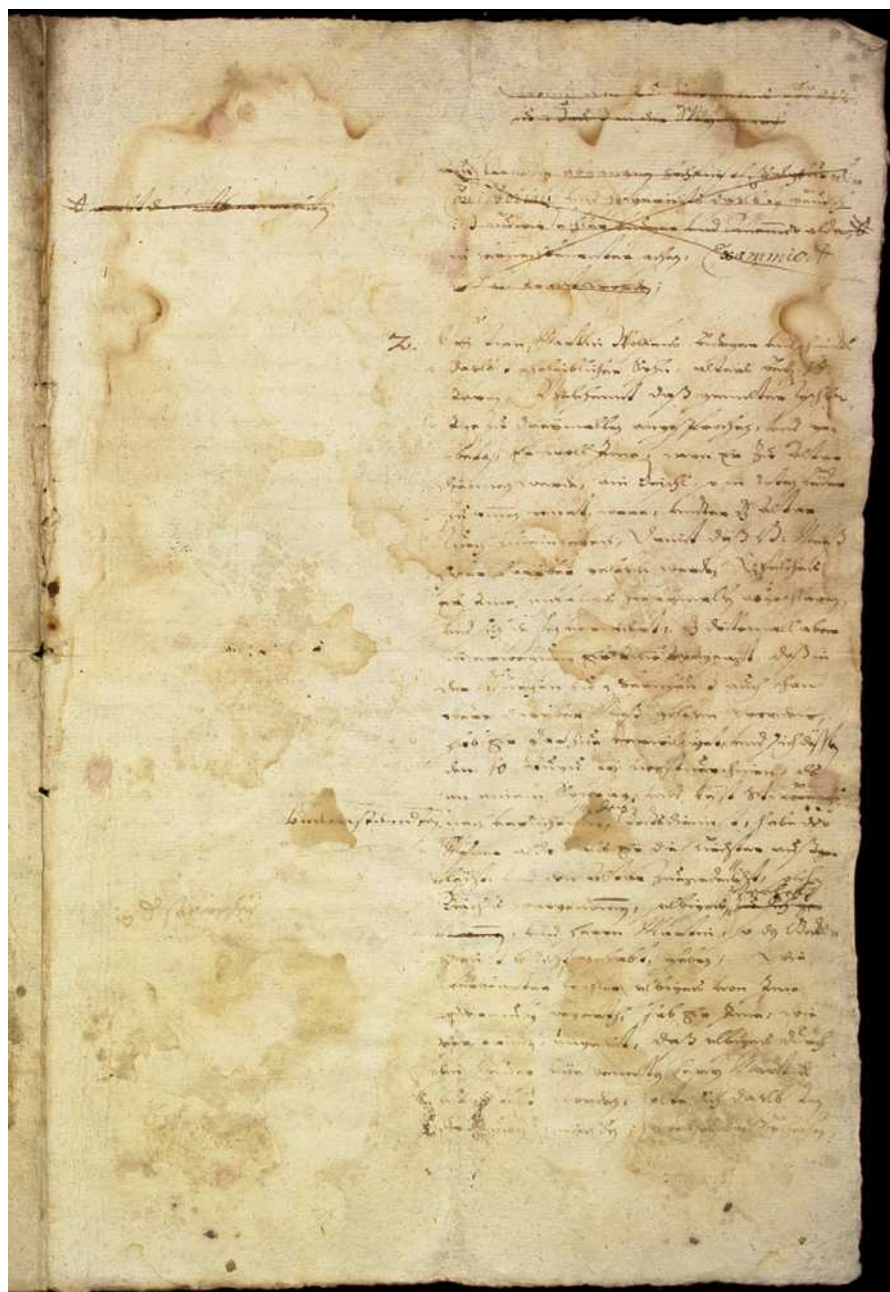


Fig. 2: The report of Albert Widman, part of the interrogation protocol, Hand 3, #11.

Reverend Duke, merciful Lord!

Your noble Highness I approach once more, me, a poor citizen of Haus, unmarried, due to grave distress.

A short time ago the reverend priest here at Haus, Albert Widman, wrongly put me on trial and in custody, but I, a simple mind, was merely misled by others [...] I have never before in my life been involved in magic, yet [...] I served the sentence of the consistory and court.

Now master Widman stalks me, wanting reimbursement for the costs of the trial, expropriating me.

I, just a poor wretch, have already been imprisoned for 17 days *[the original verdict of 8 days was revised to 10 days after Widman's appeal]* in iron chains.

I hope that your Grace will treat me poor subject mildly and grant me protection so that I may live in peace and not be harassed by the aforementioned priest.

He even approached my mother, an old woman who is completely uninvolved in the matter and yet has suffered enough due to the misdoing of her son. And he punished her for an insinuated violation of the tithe.

The committee that visited Haus had advised him to [...] yet he without any reason has defamed me in the house of the municipal judge as a scoundrel and accused me of



Handwritten text in a cursive script, likely a petition or legal document. The text is written on aged, stained paper. The script is dense and fills most of the page. There are some large, dark ink blotches or stains in the upper middle section. The text is written in a cursive script, likely a petition or legal document. The text is written on aged, stained paper. The script is dense and fills most of the page. There are some large, dark ink blotches or stains in the upper middle section. The text is written in a cursive script, likely a petition or legal document. The text is written on aged, stained paper. The script is dense and fills most of the page. There are some large, dark ink blotches or stains in the upper middle section.

Fig. 3: The petition of Ludwig Teschler, Hand 6, #23.

burglary in a cabin. If such were true, I would by my honour (although it is small) and my fortune (which is small too and I do not have a single penny left) be [...] and rightfully punished.

I am a poor tributary of your Grace who is a mild ruler and will advise the reverend priest that I have suffered enough and that I have nothing but my craft and that the priest [...] his intention.

I am your Grace's most humble and unworthy Ludwig Tesler, citizen of Haus.

**Bottom right:**

Untruthful supplication of the guilty Ludbig Teschler at Haus.



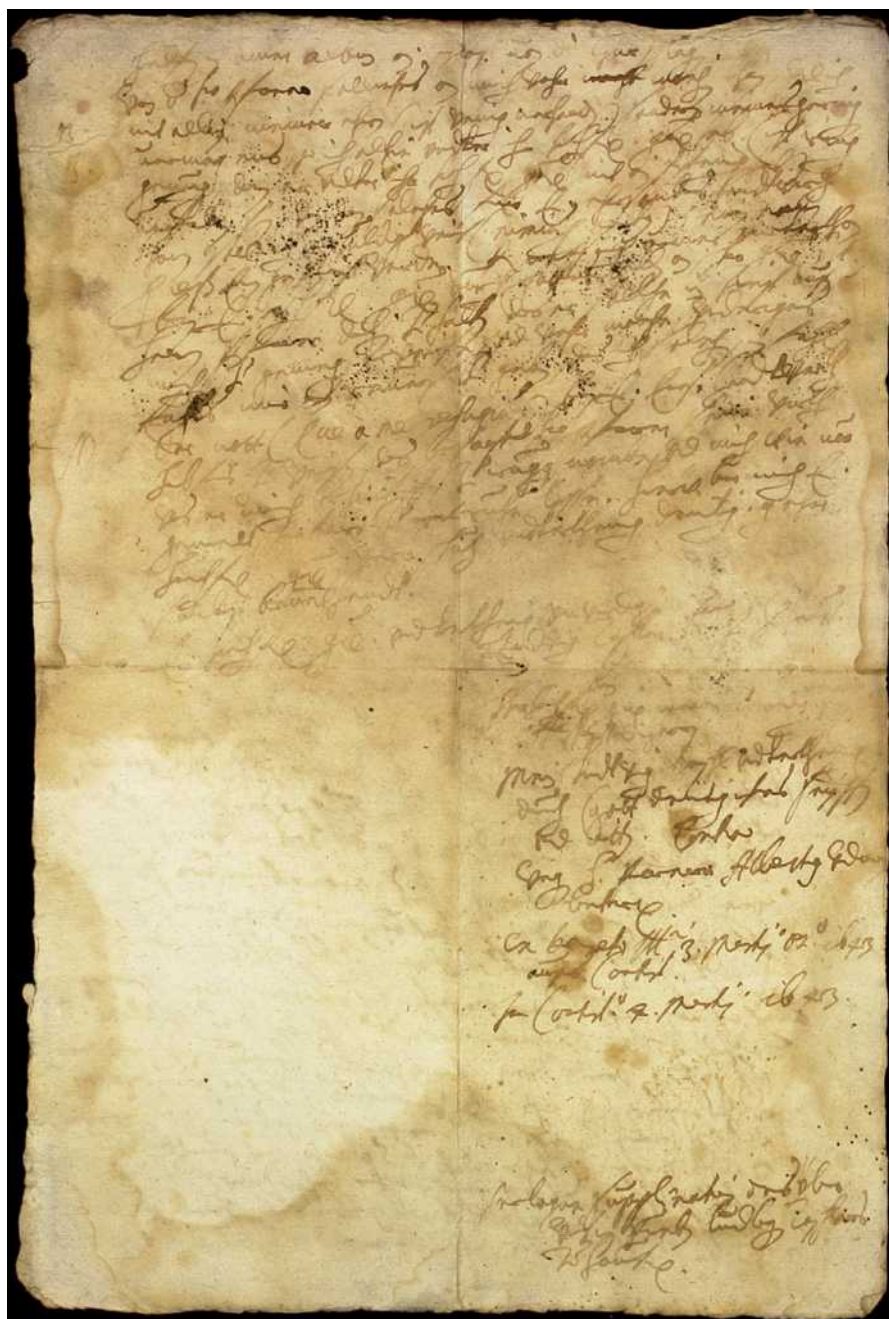


Fig. 4: The petition of Ludwig Teschler, Hand 6, #24.

Concerning the vicar Johann Guster, I do not know more than the protocol says, and I hope that I and the late master Tez will be found more trustworthy than such a person.

And it is not true that I beat two priests while visiting their parishes, for all my life I have never beaten a cleric with a single stroke, God is my witness.

It is true that I found two spoiled priests, namely in Heiligenblut and in St. Leonhard zu Windisch Matrei.

The one in Heiligenblut has had his concubine for 36 years, and he was even incarcerated for copulation. And when he was removed from Heiligenblut, he took with him the best and most valuable things and garments and locked them away in his chest.

The provost pointed me to that chest, which I hardly was able to open, and Tez retrieved from it the aforementioned things.

But the priest raised his stick, which was heavy as a hammer and he attempted to hit him on the head. I shouted out "Tez, watch out!" and caught his arm, else he would have killed him [Tez] and myself. Then I asked him whether he was a murderer.



The vicar, I think, may have been a cleric but is in fact now a living devil, having a concubine and 4 or 5 children. The mayor of Windisch Matrei has asked me to disestablish her but warned me to be careful so that I do not suffer any harm.

I tried that in a peaceful way and gave good words. But listen up: [...] tried to beat me several times. And when thereafter we came to Winklern, he stole several pages from the writing [*a reference to Widman's report of the visitation*]. Such a person is he, and the reverend Consistory will know what punishment all this deserves.

[...]

To the hands of the high and noble born count Guidobald von Thun, and to the noble and deeply learned Consistory at Salzburg, the president and director and councilmen, my gracious and powerful lords.





The president and the counsellors of the Court Consistory in Salzburg etc.

First our greetings, very reverend and deeply learned friend.

We have read what you reported about Barbara Schlemerin alias Kra-haimerin in Haus and ask you to proceed in adequate manner together with the respective authority.

Concerning Ludwig Teschler we order that in addition to the eight days he served according to the worldly authority, he is to go on a pilgrimage to the Capuchine monks in Radstadt and to prove this with a confession and a communion slip.

Report to us when this is done.

Yours sincerely and good willing.

Salzburg, 20 November 1642

Christopher Schrepf



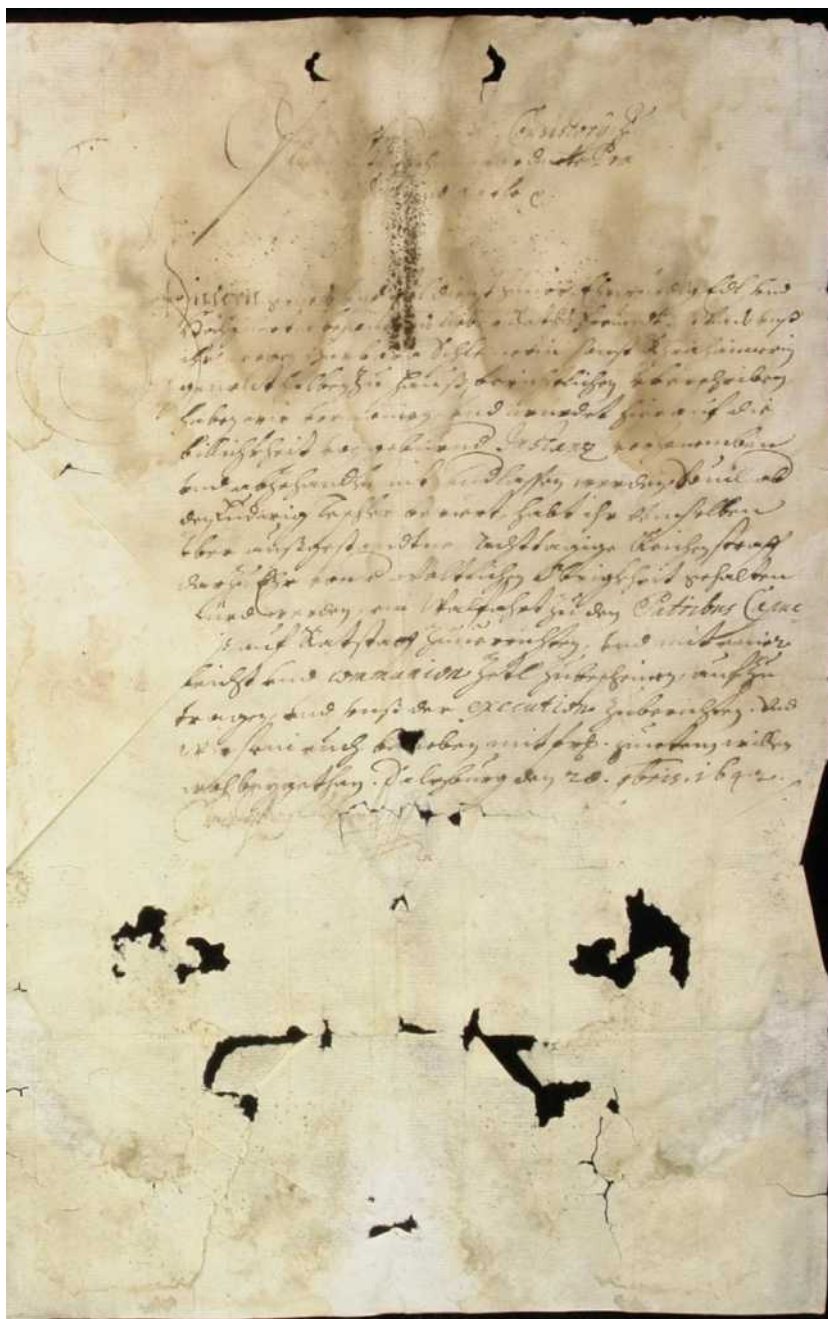


Fig. 7: The verdict against Ludwig Teschler, Hand 4, #112.

## Questions remaining

Exploration awaits for the documents amongst the material uncovered that do not concern Ludwig Teschler, Barbara Schlemmerin and Albert Widman. Transcripts are still incomplete, and much archive work will need to be carried out to explore, for example, why the chaplain Sebastian Walther defected from the parish in 1629 (#134), what punishment awaited Maria Schupferin, who in her sleep had smothered her toddler (#89, 1703), or whether the fugitive clerics who appear on wanted posters (#7 and #8) were caught.

For a theologian with great interest in religious theory and practice in the time of the Catholic reform of the early 17th century, the lot of the persons encountered in this article is a particular concern. What happened to Barbara Schlemmerin, who never appeared again in any records? She evidently was never tried, but she is also absent from the register of deaths – did she move away? Did she marry (improbable for woman who was elderly by contemporary standards and had a bad reputation, but still an option)? Why is there no record of the death of Ludwig Teschler even though he lived on for almost two more decades in Haus, apparently as a respected craftsman and father? What happened to Albert Widman after he was recalled from Haus in 1648? Our picture of each of them is nebulous, and they deserve more than the limited impression we can glean from the reports in hand. Speaking of hands, why is Teschler's petition by the same hand as the notes and Widman's apology? And lastly, how did this peculiar selection of papers find its way from the Ennstal to Graz, a distance of about 160 kilometres?

There is a lot of work to be done – archives to be rummaged through, activities to be studied, curiosity to be satisfied and knowledge about past Roman Catholic customs to be acquired.

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# “As i cannot write I put this down simply and freely”

## Samplers as a Religious Material Practice

### Abstract

Samplers are important sources for exploring the interaction between religion, text, and materiality. For centuries, needlework has been a textile-based skill taught to girls as a possible way to earn an income. By means of stitches and threads, young women learned basic knowledge, patience, and moral judgement. This article explores a unique sampler from southern England in the middle of the 19th century. The author, a young girl called Elizabeth Parker, transformed the practice of embroidering a sampler by stitching a text that challenged social and religious conventions. The document offers deep insight into the life, knowledge and religious belief of a working-class girl who could not ‘write’ but could articulate herself through an ancient textile technique.

### Keywords

Sampler, Religion and Textile, Materiality, Education, Gender, Materiality of Text, Study of Religion

### Biography

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## Introduction

This exploration of the materiality of texts and the performance of writing within religious traditions focuses on a striking connection between text and textile. Artefacts made with letters and with threads are defined with terms that derive from the same Latin verb, *textus*, a past participle of *texo*,

to weave, to braid.<sup>1</sup> The object which is at the core of this article joins letters and threads in a unique way: it is a sampler from southern England, embroidered by Elisabeth Parker in the middle of the first half of the 19th century. It belongs to the textile collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (fig. 1). In the last decades, this unique object has attracted scholarly attention. Among others, the British art historian Nigel Llewellyn and the North American cultural studies scholar Maureen Daly Goggin have reconstructed in detail the historical context in which the embroidered sampler was made.<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by their scholarly work, this article focuses on the relationship between text, materiality, and religion. More specifically, I am interested in the way the materiality of writing influences both meaning-making processes within a particular cultural setting and the reconstruction of religious practices within the study of religion, the discipline I work in.

In the last decades, materiality has become a key concept of cultural and religious studies, found at the core of theoretical and methodological debates as well as in historical and contemporary case studies.<sup>3</sup> While it is not possible to offer an overview of this debate here, as we tackle a material analysis of Parker's sampler, I would like to highlight that materiality has to be considered more as a process than as an element of a mere material object or thing. Anne V. Golden summarises the significance of the analysis of materiality in reconstructing religious practices as follows: "In the intersection of religion, media, and communication, the term *material culture* implies a strong relationship between religious artefacts and human behaviour in a spiritual, communicative, and cultural context. The term causes researchers to analyse the multiple interactions that take place between religious object, the creator and/or consumer of the religious items, and the culture."<sup>4</sup>

Following this approach to material culture, a material thing is always related to an object but also to the practices of production and reception that are linked to it.<sup>5</sup> In the case of our sampler, the object is a piece of embroidered linen fabric and at the same time a text. According to Jan Assmann, a

1 For the transformation of *textus* from a metaphor to a common word to indicate written texts see Assmann 2007.

2 Goggin 2002 and 2009; Llewellyn 1999.

3 See e.g. King 2010; Morgan 2010; Berger 2010; Promey 2014; Plate 2015; Kalthoff/Cress/Röhl 2016; Chidester 2018.

4 Golden 2010, 234.

5 For the different connotation of terms such as "thing", "object", and "matter" see e.g. Morgan 2011; Hahn/Eggert/Samida 2014 and Barad 2003.



text is a speech act in the context of a widely extended situation.<sup>6</sup> As a storage medium, a text can involve a speaker and a listener who do not share a time and space. Storage is a necessary condition if a text is to cross temporal and spatial distances; nevertheless, materiality is only one aspect of the dislocated communication allowed by the text. For Assmann a text is a message that can be resumed despite a space-time distance.<sup>7</sup>

When these general considerations about the text are linked with the idea of an object as a focal point of cultural practices, the significance of embroidering a text assumes particular significance. What is the impact of a material practice on the meaning-making processes linked to Elizabeth Parker's text? What is the relationship between the textile medium and the stored message in the specific case of embroidering a sampler? The analysis of the sampler highlights the impact of the materiality of this particular writing technique and the significance of religious practice for both the materiality of the sampler and the text as a "resumed message". Furthermore, this study highlights how studying objects and practice can help in the reconstruction of religious piety and ideas beyond religious elites and institutions. The writing, made of silky cross-stitches, gives insight into a compilation of prayers, hymns, and biblical texts that built the intimate religious worldview of working-class women in the 19th century. Following the materiality of this text, we discover a religious space in which dominant values and behaviours are reflected and challenged. A sampler, with its particular combination of materiality and text, is a crucial source, for it gives a voice to religious thinking and practices that have often been overlooked in academic histories of religions.<sup>8</sup>

The sampler is analysed according to the following steps. First, a close reading of the text is provided, with particular attention to the structure of the arguments. Second, the analysis is complemented with intertextual references to religious writings and hymns. Third, the link between text and socio-historical context is presented in light of the autobiographical character of Parker's narrative. Fourth, the materiality of this writing is addressed by discussing embroidery as a practice. In conclusion, the various aspects of the analysis are discussed in light of their religious significance.

6 "Texte sind Sprechakte im Kontext zerdehnter Situationen", Assmann 2007, 126–127.

7 Assmann 2007, 130: "Text, so hatten wir definiert, ist die wiederaufgenommene Mitteilung, der Rückgriff auf eine sprachliche Äußerung über den Hiat einer räumlichen und/oder zeitlichen Distanz hinweg." See also Eggert 2014.

8 Matthew-Jones/Jones 2015.

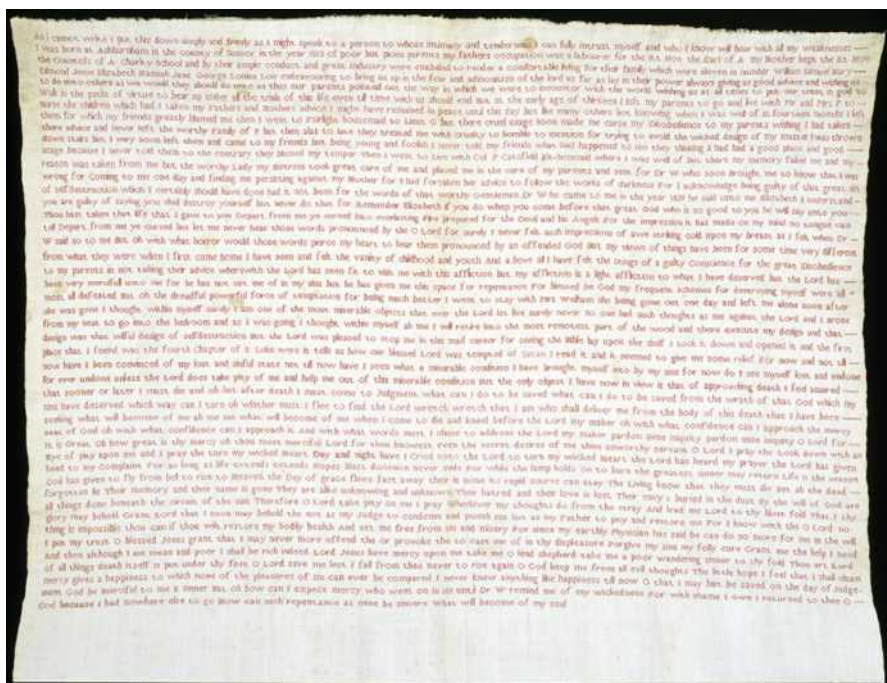


Fig. 1: Elizabeth Parker's sampler, ca. 1830 (?), England, embroidered linen with red silk in cross-stitch, height: 85.8 cm, width 74.4 cm, V&A T.6-1956.<sup>8</sup>  
(© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

## A Collapsing Self-reflexion: A Close Reading of the Sampler

In this sampler, a young woman named Elizabeth Parker materialises her autobiography in a textile design produced after 1829 (this date appears in the text, line 14). The narration is not always straight or linear and as the report progresses, the sentences become urgent and muddled. Towards the end, the style becomes more and more idiosyncratic. Suddenly, the narrative stops.

The composition, consisting of 46 lines, contains almost no punctuation. The capitalisation is not consistent.<sup>10</sup> As I discuss later, at certain points a

9 <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70506/sampler-parker-elizabeth/> [accessed 20 April 2019]; Browne/Wearden 1999, 108.

10 The transcription reproduces the graphic of the artefact, including some letters s that are mirror-inversed. The complete text is reproduced below as an appendix.

capital letter introduces a quotation. In the first line, the narrator introduces herself in the first person:

As i cannot write I put this down simply and freely as I might speak to a person to whose intimacy and tenderness I can fully intrust myself and who I know will bear with all my weaknesses

The use of “writing” in the first line can be interpreted as a reflection by the author of her social position: as Chloe Flower notes, “Parker’s use of the word ‘writing’ could imply polished exposition or literary style; as a working-class girl, she would have been hesitant to claim the skills of writing.”<sup>11</sup>

The lines that follow are presented as a dialogue with a reliable partner with whom the narrator wishes to develop an intimate conversation. It is not clear who the anonymous interlocutor of the “I”-narrator is. It may be the author herself, indicating that the text can be interpreted as a self-reflexion. Flower interprets the “I” in the background of literary genres as linked to autobiography:

Unlike the double “I” structure of forms such as the Bildungsroman, the autobiography, or the confession – where the past, narrated, self converges at the end with the present, narrating, subject – the sampler sewing “I”’s procession into futurity is decidedly less straightforward. Sampler sewing models a circular shape of development in which the young girl painfully revises or “mends” earlier experience; the subject is conceived of as perpetually reworking herself.<sup>12</sup>

In the second part of the text, God and Jesus are addressed in prayers.

In lines 2–6 Elizabeth describes her origins and her family. Born in 1813, she grew up in Ashburnham, a small village in East Sussex, in a “poor but pious” family. Her father “was a labourer” for the local landowning nobleman, and her mother was a teacher in the charity school financially sustained by that nobleman’s family. Elizabeth was the sixth child of eleven. Though they led a modest life, her industrious parents provided Elizabeth and her siblings with a stable living situation, moral guidance and a religious education:

11 Flower 2016, 312, with references to Kortsch 2009. Goggin 2002, 40 suggests, among other possible readings of this phrase, a self-imposed silence.

12 Flower 2016, 302; Goggin 2009, 33.

always giving us good advice and wishing us [5] to do unto others as we would they should do unto us thus our parents pointed out the way in which we were to encounter with this world wishing us at all times to put our trust in god to [6] Walk in the paths of virtue

In lines 6–12 the narrator describes her life in service, which she began when she was 13 years old. First, she was employed by Mr and Mrs P. as a children's nurse. Then she went to the village of Fairlight, on the English Channel, to work in the household of Lieutenant G. After a devastating experience, which I detail below, Elizabeth abandoned this workplace. First supported by her friends, she then found a hospitable place at the home of Colonel P. Here Elizabeth's health issues emerged, causing her to return to her parents in Ashburnham. The narrator interprets her deteriorating health as a consequence of the "cruel usage" she experienced at Lieutenant G.'s house. She describes her experience as follows (line 9):

they treated me with cruelty to horrible to mention for trying to avoid the wicked design of my master I was thrown down stairs

The first sign of her ailment was memory loss. Then, she writes, "my reason was taken from me" (line 12). In lines 12–16 Elizabeth tells about the intervention of Dr W., her "earthly Physician" (line 40), who convinced her not to commit suicide. He said to her:

Elizabeth I understand [15] you are guilty of saying you shall destroy yourself but never do that for Remember Elizabeth if you do when you come before that great God who is so good to you he will say unto you [16] Thou hast taken that life that I gave to you Depart from me ye cursed into everlasting Fire prepared for the Devil and his Angels

From line 17 onward the text becomes an inner dialogue between the desperate girl and God. Reflection on her miserable condition and an intense desire to put an end to her life, fears, and prayers are mixed up in an impressive textual composition. Different interpretations of her deep malaise are intertwined. On the one hand there is a strong, recurring desire to end her meaningless, desperate life:

I arose [24] from my seat to go into the bedroom and as I was going I thought within myself ah me I will retire into the most remotest part of the wood

and there execute my design and that [25] design was that wilful design of selfdestruction

On the other hand, she knows well that suicide is considered a capital sin, and thus a great offense to God her creator:

not till now have I seen what a miserable condition I have brought myself into by my sins for now do I see myself lost and undone [28] for ever undone unless the Lord does take pity of me and help me out of this miserable condition But the only object I have now in view is that of approaching death I feel assured [29] that sooner or later I must die and oh but after death I must come to Judgment what can I do to be saved what can I do to be saved from the wrath of that God which my [30] sins have deserved which way can I turn oh whither must I flee to find the Lord wretch wretch that I am who shall deliver me from the body of this death that I have been [31] seeking what will become of me ah me me what will become of me when I come to die and kneel before the Lord my maker oh with what confidence can I approach the mercy [32] seat of God oh with what confidence can I approach it And with what words must I chuse to address the Lord my maker pardon mine iniquity pardon mine iniquity O Lord for [33] It is Great Oh how great is thy mercy oh thou most merciful Lord for thou knowest even the secret desires of me thine unworthy servant

In her clouded inner dialogue, Elizabeth interprets her failure as a consequence of disobeying her parents. This motif appears from the beginning (line 7):

had I taken my Fathers and Mothers advice I might have remained in peace until this day

In line 25 Elizabeth describes a turning point in the swirl of negative thoughts that haunt her:

But the Lord was pleased to stop me in this mad career for seeing the Bible lay upon the shelf I took it down and opened it and the first [26] place that I found was the fourth Chapter of S. Luke were it tells us how our blessed Lord was tempted of Satan I read it and it seemed to give me some relief

Reading the Bible, in this case Luke 4:1–11, allows her a direct relationship with God. Elizabeth receives a divine message that enlightens her. Comparing

herself with the tempted Jesus, she understands her desire for suicide as an ordeal she must endure. In this text, the narrator describes a multifaceted image of God, as both strong judge and merciful father:

I pray whenever my thoughts do from the stray And lead me Lord to thy blest  
fold That I thy [39] glory may behold Grant Lord that I soon may behold the  
not as my Judge to condemn and punish me but as my Father to pity and  
restore me For I know with the O Lord no- [40] thing is impossible thou can  
if thou wilt restore my bodily health And set me free from sin and misery

In line 41, Elizabeth addresses Jesus for the first time:

I put my trust O blessed Jesus grant that I may never more offend the or  
provoke the to cast me of in thy displeasure

All these thoughts are interlaced and not always easy to follow. The text breaks off in the middle of line 46 with a desperate sentence:

For with shame I own I returned to thee O God because I had nowhere else  
to go How can such repentance as mine be sincere What will become of my  
soul

## Intertextual References

Alongside the composition are several references to devotion characteristic of the Victorian revival within British Protestantism. The embroidery contains a compilation of quotations from biblical books and hymns and possibly from educational books as well. For example, the golden rule is echoed across lines 4–5:

wishing us to do unto others as we would they should do unto us

Furthermore, line 16 contains a quote from Matthew 25:41, inserted into the direct speech of Dr W.

Depart from me ye cursed into everlasting Fire prepared for the Devil and  
his Angels



In lines 16–17 “no tongue can tell” may be a reference to the hymn *The worth of thruth no tongue can tell*;<sup>13</sup> while the phrase “the Lord has been very merciful unto me” (lines 20–21) recalls a recurrent verse in the book of Psalms (e.g. 57:1; 86:3). Line 30 contains a quotation from Romans 7:24: “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this dead?”, while in line 33, “thou knowest even the secrets desires” may allude to *Thou knowest Lord*, a funeral anthem from the *Book of Common Prayer*.<sup>14</sup>

Lines 35–38 contain part of a quote from the hymn *As long as life its term extends*, verses 1–4, which evokes Ecclesiastes 9:4–6, 10.<sup>15</sup> While Elizabeth’s writing does not follow the hymn exactly, sometimes breaking the rhythm and the rhyme, the capitals often correspond to the beginning of the line in Isaac Watts’ very popular text. For these reasons, it is possible that Elizabeth quoted the text from memory.<sup>16</sup> On the left, Elizabeth Parker’s stitched text is rewritten according to the lines of the hymn in the version of 1800, given on the right. The variations in the textile work are printed in *italics*.

as long as life extends <i>extends</i>	As long as life its term extends
<i>Hopes</i> blest dominion never ends	Hope’s blest dominion never ends
For while the lamp holds on to burn	For while the lamp holds on to burn
the greatest sinner may return	The greatest sinner may return
Life is the season [36] God has given	Life is the season God both giv’n
to fly from hell to rise to Heaven	To fly from hell to rise to Heaven
the Day of grace flees fast away	That Day of grace flees fast away
their is none its rapid course can stay	And none its rapid course can stay

13 [https://hymnary.org/text/the\\_worth\\_of\\_truth\\_no\\_tongue\\_can\\_tell](https://hymnary.org/text/the_worth_of_truth_no_tongue_can_tell) [accessed 15 May 2020].

14 The *Book of Common Prayer* is a liturgical text introduced in the Church of England in 1549. After various revisions, since 1662 it has been the standard liturgy book for most Anglican churches in the British Commonwealth. Worldwide, variations of the English *Book of Common Prayer* are used throughout the Anglican Communion, and it has influenced liturgical language in many English-speaking Protestant churches. See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Book-of-Common-Prayer> [accessed 15 May 2020].

15 This hymn belongs to the influential production of Isaac Watts (1674–1748). The hymn appears in several variants in different collections. As far I could reconstruct, this version best matches Elisabeth Parker’s text. For more details see [https://hymnary.org/text/how\\_long\\_eternal\\_god\\_how\\_long](https://hymnary.org/text/how_long_eternal_god_how_long) [accessed 27 April 2020].

16 On the widespread influence of Isaac Watts on embroidery motifs during centuries see Parker 2019, 132–134.

The Living know that they must die But <i>ah</i> the dead [37] forgotten lie Their <i>memory</i> and their name is gone <i>They are</i> alike unknowing and un- known	The Living know that they must die But all the dead forgotten lie Their mem'ry and their name is gone Alike unknowing and unknown
---	--

Their hatred and their love is lost Their <i>envy's</i> buried in the dust <i>By the will of God are</i> [38] <i>all things done</i> beneath the cir- cuit of the sun.	Their hatred and their love is lost Their envie buried in the dust They have no share in all that's done Beneath the circuit of the sun.
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Some phrases (e.g. line 19) evoke titles of volumes such as Daniel Williams' *The vanity of childhood & youth wherein the depraved nature of young people is represented and means for their reformation proposed*, which is a book of 136 unnumbered pages containing sermons for young men.<sup>17</sup> By meditating on her relationship with God and praying, Elizabeth describes her condition as one that results from the traumatic experience with Lieutenant G., which she interprets as a consequence of disobeying her parents.

[19] from what they were when I first came home I have seen and felt the vanity of childhood and youth And above all I have felt the stings of a guilty Conscience for the great Disobedience [20] to my parents in not taking their advice

The topics of conscience and disobedience/obedience of parents are crucial in Daniel Williams' book. Here are some excerpts from the book's introductory sermon:

Let me then acquaint thee, oh young Man! that  
God addresseth himself to thee, as by Name. Thou  
by nature art brutish and devilish, and as long as  
thou followest the imaginations of thy vain mind, thy  
case becomes more desperate, thy Lusts by indulgence  
grow more violent, and Conscience still less concern | ed  
to vindicate the Affronts thou offerest to Gods Do | minion,  
or to represent the injury thou dost to thy own Soul;

17 Williams 1691.

yet be assured, whether thou mindest it or not,  
there is a God, whose right it is to govern thee, and will  
be sure to judge thee: Thou art born his Subject,  
thô unwilling to obey, and forward to rebell against  
him; thou hast an immortal Soul, how little soever  
thou providest for its future [...]  
It's true, there is a way of Salvation  
for lost man published in the Gospel; but that can be | nefit  
one who continues to reject Christ, and refuse  
the terms of Peace. Thou art the dedicated Child  
of believing Parents, but their Faith cannot save  
thee now that thou art capable of consenting to the  
Covenant, and refusest it;<sup>18</sup>

I am not arguing that the sources I have referenced here were the sources Elizabeth Parker used, since biblical verses and citations recur in many hymns and prayers. Common phrases cannot be traced to a specific book. The parallels to the Bible and other foundational texts I have listed here are only indicative, based on textual comparison.<sup>19</sup> Still, these resonances provide insight into the general religious context within which the narrator, in search of guidance in a deep life crisis, is embedded. She seems to be familiar with a set of hymns, prayers and edifying literature.

## Materialised Biography: From Text to Context

This biographic needlework text(ile) describes Elizabeth's life as a tragic anticlimax. Once she lived peacefully as a child, but she shifts to a stage marked by confusion and desire for death. Her belief functions as a frame that allows her to interpret her fears, guilty feelings, and wishes. On the one hand, she understands her destiny as the result of her sins, while on the other hand, she asks God as creator and Jesus as saviour for both mercy and redemption. The text gives insight into the intimate religious thoughts of a narrator who is very articulate, despite her statement that she "cannot write".

<sup>18</sup> Williams 1691.

<sup>19</sup> I wish to thank Prof. Christopher Rowland, University of Oxford, who helped me to find quotations and references for biblical and other sources.

Indeed, Elizabeth Parker did not *write* this text. She embroidered the 6,530 letters in cross-stitch with red silk on piece of linen fabric measuring 85.8 cm by 74.4 cm. As noted above, the needlework is incomplete and the writing covers only about 60 percent of the cloth. The project may be incomplete, but the embroidery skills are outstanding: the stitches are regular and the letters well-designed. This sampler expresses Elizabeth's fears and hopes in a tragic phase of her life but is also more generally an exceptional biographical document that provides evidence of the religious knowledge and devotion of a young working-class woman in a village in 19th-century England.<sup>20</sup>

Elizabeth Parker's birth year (1813) stitched in the sampler is historically correct, as are the names of her 10 siblings, and the information pertaining to her family, and the places she was employed as a servant. She did not in fact commit suicide while a young woman, but instead spent the remainder of her life in the village where she was born, dying on 10 April 1889, aged 76. Her father, William Parker (1780–1852), served as an agricultural labourer for different generations of a noble family in the village of Ashburnham. The earl mentioned in the sampler was George Ashburnham (1797–1878). In this small village in East Sussex, there were two day schools: a public school that charged fees and a charity school sustained financially by the earl's family. Elizabeth's mother, Jane (née Winchester, 1784–1856), worked as a teacher in the latter school, where needlework was taught alongside subjects such as reading, writing, geography,<sup>21</sup> mathematics, history, and music. Goggin notes: "According to a school report written by Jane Parker, students of all ages, from infancy up through their teens, were taught a variety of subjects including geography, math, history, reading, writing, music, and needlework. Jane separated out for special notice music and needlework, saying that these 'are [especially] well taught'".<sup>22</sup>

Needlework was crucial for girls, who were expected to use their skills for marking clothing and sheets for the households in which they worked. Elizabeth, like her mother, became a teacher, and lived as a single woman in a

20 Browne/Wearden, 1999, 11; Goggin 2002, 39.

21 See Tyner 2018, 18. "Map samplers became popular at about the same time as dissected maps; they were not designed for amusement, but for instruction in both needlework and geography. However, map samplers undoubtedly arose for some of the same reasons as puzzles and games, especially as a way of combining geography instruction with other activities." The increasing interest in geography that also led to the practice of embroidering map samplers mirrored the increasing interest in travel and discovery in modern Europe.

22 Goggin 2002, 43; she refers to the archive document East Sussex Records Office, Lewes, East Sussex ASH 1809.

house next to the charity school. Later, she raised her niece, Elizabeth French, the daughter of her deceased sister Louisa.<sup>23</sup>

Most of the people mentioned in the embroidery have been identified. The traumatic experience Elizabeth refers to happened in the house of Lieutenant G., who was employed in the newly established coastguard. In her intimate text, Elizabeth did not record what happened to her, nor had she dared explain her situation to her friends who supported her after she left Fairlight:

but I very soon left them and came to my friends but being young and foolish I never told my friends what had happened to me they thinking I had had a good place and good [11] usage because I never told them to the contrary they blamed my temper

Besides being thrown down the stairs, we do not know what other abuse Elizabeth endured. It is difficult not to assume that she was sexually abused.<sup>24</sup> In any case, she describes the destructive and long-lasting impact of this experience in her vivid autobiographical textile, which is currently the only known document to have been produced by her.

Why did Elizabeth embroider her autobiographical narrative? Why did she choose such a demanding and steady textile technique? Was it a form of “self-imposed penance”?<sup>25</sup>

## Embroidering as an Educational and Religious Practice

“As i cannot write I put I down simply and freely [...]” suggests a spontaneous form of expression, which seems to contradict such neat and time-consuming needlework. Samplers are specimens of embroidery techniques stitched into a piece of fabric. They were used to practice stitches and motifs and collections of patterns, and were employed to reproduce, design, and inspire ornaments and letters in clothing and home linen. Samplers are examples – from the Latin *exemplum* or old French *essamplaire*<sup>26</sup> – which are widespread throughout different cultures and times.<sup>27</sup>

23 See Goggin 2002, 47.

24 See Goggin 2002, 40 alludes to sexual violation and physical abuse.

25 Goggin 2002, 39 quotes a note by Lili Griffith, who sold the sampler to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1956.

26 See Browne/Wearden 1999, 7: “any kind of work to be copied or imitated.”.

27 An interesting collection of samplers can be found in a virtual exhibition on the website

Elizabeth Parker's sampler also belongs to an old European textile tradition. Samplers are important documents for exploring the techniques and styles of a domestic practice and the transmission of knowledge within this particular craft. Over the centuries, the techniques of embroidering as well as stitching and pattern-making changed. With the dissemination of printing in the early 16th century, books slowly took over the traditional function of samplers as a model for copying or inspiring patterns for embroidery.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, samplers did not disappear. Rather, their function and significance were transformed. "By the nineteenth century," Llewellyn writes, "samplers have become universally identified with social acceptability, domestic values, female discipline and modest piety."<sup>29</sup>

Samplers were used to prove working-class girls' skills to potential employers and thus this textile technique ultimately helped them secure jobs and earn an income. Furthermore, needlework was understood as a means of teaching girls patience, endurance, and obedience. For these reasons, in the 19th century needlework was taught to girls at school along with other basic subjects.

In the *Manual of the system of the British and Foreign School Society of London for teaching reading, writing, arithmetic, and needle-work in the elementary schools*, a teaching book widespread in non-conformist religious institutions, needlework is presented as the discipline that marks gender difference:<sup>30</sup>

Schools for girls are fitted up on the same plan as those for boys [...] The system by which reading, writing, and arithmetic are taught in the boy's school is applicable in all its parts to girls as well as to boys. – The method by which needlework is taught, is all that will therefore be necessary to detail respecting the system of education for girls.<sup>31</sup>

The girls were allowed to bring "work" – which means needlework – from home. Additionally, in some cases the schools allowed for the sale of the girls' work:

of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge: <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/samplers/what/index.html> [accessed 20 April 2020]. For the collection of the V&A museum see Browne/Wearden 1999.

28 According to Browne/Wearden 1999, 7 the first such book was printed by Johann Schönsperger in Augsburg, Germany in 1524.

29 Llewellyn 1999, 64. Samplers continued to be an integral part of the education of girls in many European countries until the early 21st century.

30 I am quoting from an edition printed in London in 1816.

31 Manual 1816, 34.



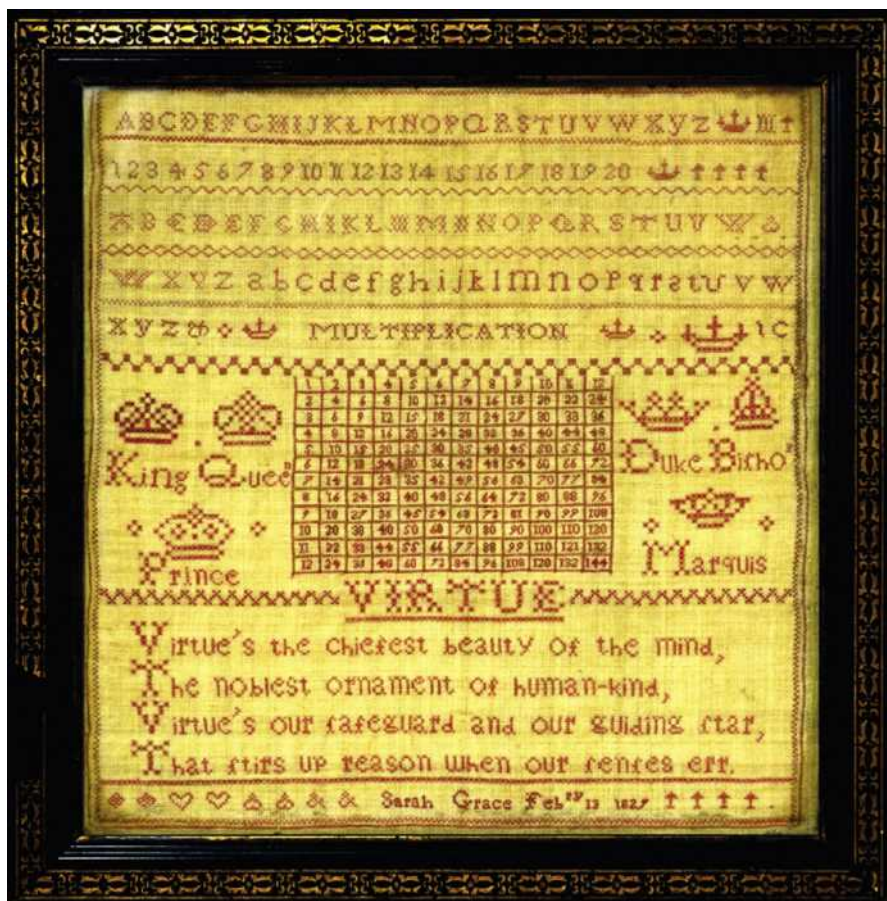


Fig. 2: Sampler, Sarah Grace, 13.02.1827, England, embroidered wool with silk, height 31.7 cm, width 30.5 cm, V&A T.133-1961.<sup>32</sup> The sampler contains different sets of alphabets, figures, a table for multiplication, various ranks with the appropriate attributes, and the following text: “VIRTUE / Virtue’s the chiefest beauty of the mind, / The noblest ornament of human-kind, / Virtue’s our safeguard and our guiding star, / That stirs up reason when our senses err.” (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

If work could be procured from persons in the middling and lower class in life without any other pay than is sufficient to defray the expense of needles and thread: or if a little fund could be raised to purchase goods at a wholesale price, and after making clothes of them, sell them without

32 <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70504/sampler-grace-sarah/> [20.04.2020] and Browne/Wearden 1999, 107.



Fig. 3: Elizabeth Smith's sampler, 1803, England, embroidered linen with silk in cross stitch, V&A 942-1897.<sup>33</sup> This sampler is composed of various ornaments and texts. The words "When greedy worms / My Body eat, / Here you may read / my Name complete" allude to the sampler as a material memory surviving Elizabeth, who completed this work when she was 11 years old. "Religion, and good learning, / They I hope will save / The Soul from pain & sorrow / When beyond the grave" sums up in a few lines the ideals of female education in the 19th century. (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

charging much for the work, it might afford employment for the children and benefit the poor.<sup>34</sup>

33 <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70491/sampler-smith-elizabeth/> [20.04.2020]; Browne/Wearden 1999, 102.

34 Manual 1816, 41.





Fig. 4: Ann Seaton's sampler, 1790, England, embroidered wool with polychrome wool in cross, double back and satin stitch, height 52 cm, width 47.75 cm, Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge T.166-1928.<sup>35</sup> This sampler belongs to the production made at Quaker schools in England and America in the 18th and 19th centuries. (© Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)

Though the embroidering of samplers was widespread in all classes, it was considered a privileged “language” for teaching girls lessons such as basic arithmetic, reading, and writing (fig. 2). For this purpose, Bible quotations and moral or pious texts were often stitched (fig. 3).

35 <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/sampled/lives/quakergirls/quakersamplers> [accessed 3 May 2020].

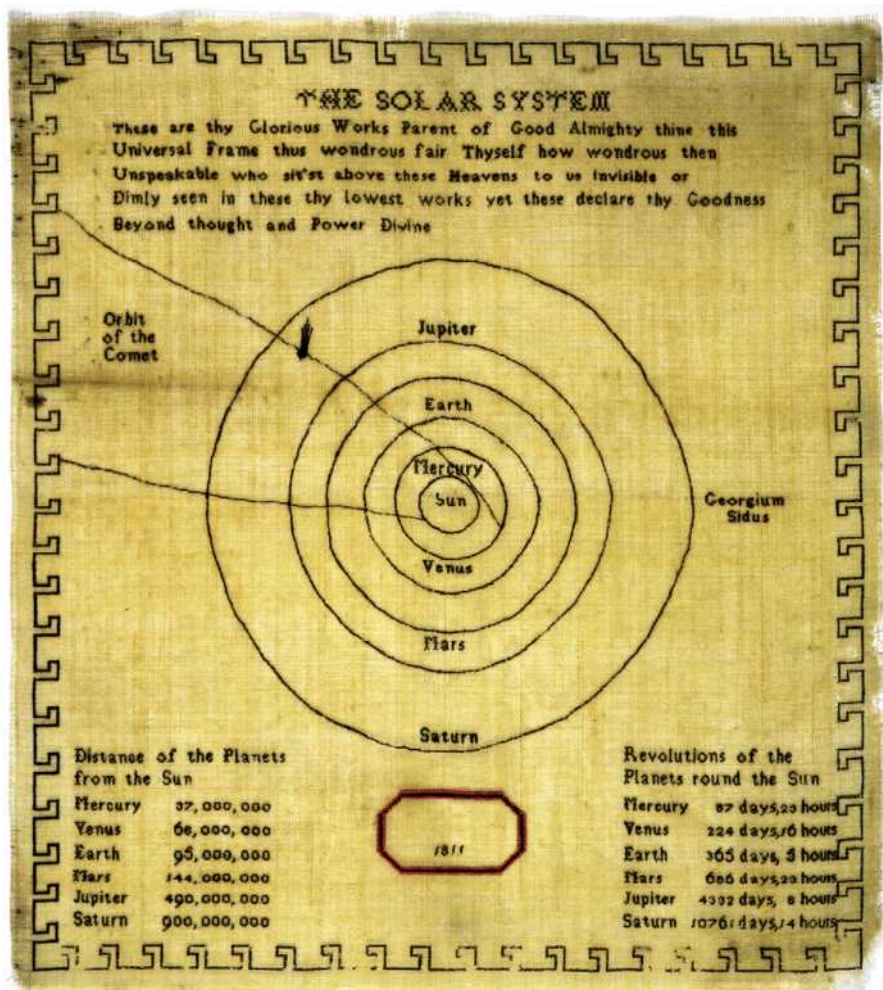


Fig. 5: Sampler, 1811, England, embroidered wool with silk in running-stitch and cross-stitch, V&A T.92-1939.<sup>36</sup> The solar system is introduced by this text: "These are thy Glorious Works Parent of Good Almighty thine this / Universal Frame thus wondrous fair Thyself how wondrous then / Unspeakable who sit'st above these Heavens to us invisible or / Dimly seen in these thy lowest works yet these declare thy Goodness / Beyond though and Power Divine." (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

36 <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70501/the-solar-system-sampler-unknown/> [accessed 20 April 2020] and Browne/Wearden 1999, 10.

Flower records: “Across classes the sampler would be a testament to religious learning, discipline, and moral character, as well as a display of basic literacy and fluency with the needle. It was also closely tied up with a girl’s economic future, whether that future rested on her capacity to maintain employment, or the securing of domestic stability through marriage.”<sup>37</sup> From the 18th century onwards students also used samplers to learn geography, by reproducing maps or depictions of the solar system through their stitch work (fig. 4 and 5).

Nineteenth-century samplers often combined ornamental patterns, decorative motifs, and figures and letters. For women who were in service, letters on their samplers could demonstrate their ability to mark lingerie or linens with the initials of members of the family who employed them.<sup>38</sup>

The genre of the sampler and its embroidery skills, so crucial in the education of girls of many classes in 19th-century Britain and also in other countries, was also associated with femininity, humility, and an attitude of submission.<sup>39</sup> Embroidering was understood as an indispensable skill and a milestone in female education, as a practice that helped temper the character and inculcate the attitude young women from all social classes were expected to assume.<sup>40</sup>

To stitch two letters would take about 45 minutes.<sup>41</sup> If a character was deemed not satisfactory, the girl would have to undo it and repeat it, doing so as many times as was necessary to achieve a neat result.<sup>42</sup> According to this formula, it would have taken Parker eight hours a day for 306 days to stitch her sampler, although as a skilled embroiderer, she may have been faster. She would not have been able to dedicate the necessary hours in one block to the sampler and we can assume that she spent some years writing her autobiographical notes with the red silk thread. When the sampler was made is therefore difficult to establish. While the Victoria and Albert Museum indi-

37 Flower 2016, 304.

38 Goggin 2002, 39.

39 See Flower 2016. The author highlights the tendency in the first half of the 19th century to focus on cross-stitches and repetitive patterns rather than on a capacity to invent new visual motifs (307). See also Browne/Wearden 1999, 11: embroidering samplers “was becoming increasingly a standardised form of unambitious exercise in the early nineteenth century”.

40 Newell 2009, 56.

41 Flower 2016, 308.

42 Flower 2016, 308–309.

cates a probable date around 1830, Goggin proposes that it was made around 1839.<sup>43</sup>

This description of the main aspects of the embroidering of samplers as a cultural material practice has sought to emphasise the significance of needlework in the education of girls and the role of religious references in this practice. In the nineteenth century, embroidering became a means of inculcating ideals of femininity and of what it meant to be a woman. As Rozsika Parker demonstrated in her study *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), the teaching of needlework in schools and families naturalised values linked to women. She explains:

In this book I examine the historical processes by which embroidery became identified with a particular set of characteristics, and consigned to women's hand. By mapping the relationship between the history of embroidery and changing notions of what constituted feminine behaviour from the Middle Age to the twentieth century, we can see how the art became implicated in the creation of femininity across classes, and that the development of ideals and feminine behaviour determined the style and iconography of needlework. To know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women.<sup>44</sup>

Another sampler from the V&A collection expresses very well the ideals linked to women and embroidery at the time Elizabeth Parker stitched her autobiography (fig. 6). The sampler text reads:

Seek to be good but aim not to be great,  
A womans noblest station is retreat,  
Her fairest virtues fly from public sight,  
Domestic worth still shuns too strong a light.<sup>45</sup>

The text praising modesty and reservation as female virtues is associated with the Tree of Life, Adam, Eve, and the tempting snake, who offered Eve the famous fruit.

Elizabeth Parker's sampler reproduces the virtues of modesty and reservation, while it simultaneously subverts them by clearly expressing her fights

43 See <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70506/sampler-parker-elizabeth/> [accessed 20 April 2020] and Browne/Wearden 1999, 108; Goggin 2002.

44 Parker 2019, ix.

45 <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O355537/sampler-bailey-jane/> [accessed 20 April 2020]; Parker 2019, 165.





Fig. 6: Jane Bailey's sampler, 1830, England, embroidered wollen canvas with coloured silks, backed with crêpe, height 37.15 cm, width 31.70 cm, V&A T.321-1960. (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

against temptation and her desire for death and self-destruction. In other words, her sampler does not evince a time-consuming exercise meant to engender female virtues. Instead, it reflects her poor condition and mirrors her inner suffering. Elizabeth did not deny the attractions of temptation. Rather, she used needlework as a strategy to gain ground in her life. Her narration seems distinct from 19th-century embroidery ornamentation, texts, and be-

haviours in that it consists of a plain cross-stitch without any decoration. Her text, as she states at the beginning, is free and intimate. What does this text mean in terms of its materiality? What might be the meaning of such a textile performance? Nigel Llewellyn interprets this needlework as penitential and as “a tool of therapy, a thing made of words shaped by cloth and thread to keep Elizabeth memories alive for her, to encourage reflection on her past folly and be a weapon against her fits of shame and depression to help her gain salvation and lead a virtuous life.”<sup>46</sup> According to him, the sampler was made not to demonstrate needlework skills, but rather to elaborate Elizabeth’s condition. It was not intended to be presented to others, for it was an intimate embroidery.<sup>47</sup> Llewellyn assumes that it was not designed by Elizabeth herself, but made under the supervision of a person caring for her, maybe the wife of Dr W. This suggestion is a hypothesis worth considering, even though the stitched text, particularly in the second part, appears as a very personal compilation composed from memory rather than as a text suggested by somebody else. In any case, the conventions linked to the sampler as a textile genre are broken by the intimate character of this material source: modesty and religious devotion clash with the description of inner conflicts and a desire to die.

## Concluding Remarks

The textile nature of this autobiographical narration is crucial for interpreting it both as a storage medium and as a practice of writing.<sup>48</sup> As a material thing it has specific characteristics – a cloth of linen with silk cross-stitches – and has been preserved through generations. The sampler, as an object, stores not only a succession of letters conveying a meaning, but also the practices of producing this very text, through accurate and neat needlework. It is a very slow process of writing, reflecting, and praying. By engaging with the object, the reader gains insight into the life, fears, religious worldview, devotion, and living context of a young working-class woman from Ashburnham, East Sussex. This case study demonstrates the crucial significance of material culture for studying everyday practices not accessible through intellectually and theologically sophisticated literary production. In the case of Elizabeth Parker’s

46 Llewellyn 1999, 66.

47 See e.g. Newell 2009, 55.

48 Goggin 2009, 33.

sampler there are at least two levels of material meaning-making to address. The first level to consider includes the production of the sampler after 1829. This level highlights the meaning the text conveys and the implication of needlework and embroidery as a privileged practice used for educating girls and shaping the skills, behaviours, and thoughts of women in the early 19th-century English historical context.

The second level of material meaning-making includes considerations of the sampler as a piece exhibited in the textile collection of the V&A museum. This piece of needlework attracted my attention during a visit to the collection in 2009. On this second level, meaning-making arises out of the encounter between the material object and a scholarly interpretation that aims to fill a gap within the European history of religion and, more generally, the study of religion.

The analysis of the sampler opens a window on the religious practices and worldviews of women who did not have access to more formal forms of storing their ideas, thoughts, sufferings, and hopes, such as printed books or personal, well-written journals. Embedded in a Victorian ideal of girls' education, the sampler highlights the adaption to mainstream values and behaviours as well as the opening of a space in which to express "simply and freely" an intimate desire to resist self-destruction through the expression of forbidden plans. The ambiguity of this female space is mirrored in the function of the Bible: on the one hand the sacred text legitimises gender differences that relegate women to a domestic role, while on the other hand it functions as a source of hope and resilience for a young woman facing violence, depression, and the temptation of suicide. This *exemplum* highlights the effects that neglected sources may have on what we define as the history of religion, which, in fact, should always be pluralised. There are many histories about people, communities, belief systems, and traditional processes that have yet to be told in a way which takes seriously material objects and the practices related to them.

## Appendix

- 1 As i cannot write I put this down simply and freely as I might speak to a person to whose intimacy and tenderness I can fully intrust myself and who I know will bear with all my weaknesses
- 2 I was born at Ashburnham in the county of Sussex in the year 1813 of poor but pious parents my fathers occupation was a labourer for the Rt Hon. the Earl of A. my Mother kept the Rt. Hon.

3 the countess of A. charity School and by their ample conduct and great Industry were enabeled to render a comfortable living for their family which were eleven in number William Samuel Mary

4 Edmond Jesse Elizabeth Hannah Jane George Louisa Lois endeavouring to bring us up in the fear and admonition of the lord as far as lay in their power always giving us good advice and wishing us

5 to do unto others as we would they should do unto us thus our parents pointed out the way in which we were to incounter with this world wishing us at all times to put our trust in god to

6 Walk in the paths of virtue to bear up under all the trials of this life even till time with us should end But at the early age of thirteen I left my parents to go and live with Mr and Mrs P. to

7 nurse the children which had I taken my Fathers and Mothers advice I might have remained in peace until this day but like many others not knowing when I was well of in fourteen months I left

8 them for which my friends greatly blamed me then I went to Fairlight housemaid to Lieut G but there cruel usage soon made me curse my Disobedience to my parents wishing I had taken

9 there advice and never left the worthy Family of P but then alas to late they treated me with cruelty to horrible to mention for trying to avoid the wicked design of my master I was thrown

10 down stairs but I very soon left them and came to my friends but being young and foolish I never told my friends what had happened to me they thinking I had had a good place and good

11 usage because I never told them to the contrary they blamed my temper Then I went to Live with Col. P Catsfield Kitchenmaid where I was well of but there my memory failed me and my

12 reason was taken from me but the worthy Lady my Mistress took great care of me and placed me in the care of my parents and sent for Dr W. who soon brought me to know that I was

13 wrong for coming to me one day and finding me persisting against my Mother for I had forsaken her advice to follow the works of darkness For I acknowledge being guilty of that great sin

14 of selfdestruction which I certainly should have done had it not been for the words of that worthy Gentleman Dr W. he came to me in the year 1829 he said unto me Elizabeth I understand

15 you are guilty of saying you shall destroy yourself but never do that for Remember Elizabeth if you do when you come before that great God who is so good to you he will say unto you

16 Thou hast taken that life that I gave to you Depart from me ye cursed into  
 everlasting Fire prepared for the Devil and his Angels For the impression it  
 has made on my mind no tongue can  
 17 tell Depart from me ye cursed but let me never hear those words pro-  
 nounced by the O Lord for surely I never felt such impressions of awe strik-  
 ing cold upon my breast as I felt when Dr  
 18 W said so to me But oh with what horror would those words pierce my  
 heart to hear them pronounced by an offended God But my views of things  
 have been for some time very different  
 19 from what they were when I first came home I have seen and felt the van-  
 ity of childhood and youth And above all I have felt the stings of a guilty  
 Conscience for the great Disobedience  
 20 to my parents in not taking their advice wherewith the Lord has seen fit to  
 visit me with this affliction but my affliction is a light affliction to what I  
 have deserved but the Lord has  
 21 been very mercifull unto me for he has not cut me of in my sins but he  
 has given me this space for repentance For blessed be God my frequent  
 schemes for destroying myself were all  
 22 most all defeated But oh the dreadful powerful force of temptation for  
 being much better I went to stay with Mrs Welham she being gone out one  
 day and left me alone soon after  
 23 she was gone I thought within myself surely I am one of the most misera-  
 ble objects that ever the Lord let live surely never no one had such thoughts  
 as me against the Lord and I arose  
 24 from my seat to go into the bedroom and as I was going I thought within  
 myself ah me I will retire into the most remotest part of the wood and  
 there execute my design and that  
 25 design was that wilful design of selfdestruction But the Lord was pleased  
 to stop me in this mad career for seeing the Bible lay upon the shelf I took  
 it down and opened it and the first  
 26 place that I found was the fourth Chapter of S. Luke were it tells us how  
 our blessed Lord was tempted of Satan I read it and it seemed to give me  
 some relief For now and not till  
 27 now have I been convinced of my lost and sinful state not till now have I  
 seen what a miserable condition I have brought myself into by my sins for  
 now do I see myself lost and undone  
 28 for ever undone unless the Lord does take pity of me and help me out of  
 this miserable condition But the only object I have now in view is that of  
 approaching death I feel assured

- 29 that sooner or later I must die and oh but after death I must come to Judgment what can I do to be saved what can I do to be saved from the wrath of that God which my
- 30 sins have deserved which way can I turn oh whither must I flee to find the Lord wretch wretch that I am who shall deliver me from the body of this death that I have been
- 31 seeking what will become of me ah me me what will become of me when I come to die and kneel before the Lord my maker oh with what confidence can I approach the mercy
- 32 seat of God oh with what confidence can I approach it And with what words must I chuse to address the Lord my maker pardon mine iniquity pardon mine iniquity O Lord for
- 33 It is Great Oh how great is thy mercy oh thou most merciful Lord for thou knowest even the secret desires of me thine unworthy servant O Lord I pray the Look down with an
- 34 Eye of pity upon me and I pray the turn my wicked Heart Day and night have I Cried unto the Lord to turn my wicked Heart the Lord has heard my prayer the Lord has given
- 35 heed to my Complaint For as long as life extends extends Hopes blest dominion never ends For while the lamp holds on to burn the greatest sinner may return Life is the season
- 36 God has given to fly from hell to rise to Heaven the Day of grace flees fast away there is none its rapid course can stay The Living know that they must die But ah the dead
- 37 forgotten lie Their memory and their name is gone They are alike unknowing and unknown Their hatred and their love is lost Their envy's buried in the dust By the will of God are
- 38 all things done beneath the circuit of the sun Therefore O Lord take pity on me I pray whenever my thoughts do from the stray And lead me Lord to thy blest fold That I thy
- 39 glory may behold Grant Lord that I soon may behold the not as my Judge to condemn and punish me but as my Father to pity and restore me For I know with the O Lord no-
- 40 thing is impossible thou can if thou wilt restore my bodily health And set me free from sin and misery For since my earthly Physician has said he can do no more for me in the will
- 41 I put my trust O blessed Jesus grant that I may never more offend the or provoke the to cast me of in thy displeasure Forgive my sins my folly cure Grant me the help I need



- 42 And then although I am mean and poor I shall be rich indeed Lord Jesus  
have mercy upon me take me O kind shepherd take me a poor wandering  
sinner to thy fold Thou art Lord
- 43 of all things death itself is put under thy feet O Lord save me lest I fall from  
thee never to rise again O God keep me from all evil thoughts The little  
hope I feel that I shall obtain
- 44 mercy gives a happiness to which none of the pleasures of sin can ever be  
compared I never knew anything like happiness till now O that I may but  
be saved on the day of Judge-
- 45 ment God be merciful to me a sinner But oh how can I expect mercy who  
went on in sin until Dr W. remind me of my wickedness For with shame I  
own I returned to thee O
- 46 God because I had nowhere else to go How can such repentance as mine  
be sincere What will become of my soul

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# The Tattoos of Armenian Genocide Survivors

## Inscribing the Female Body as a Practice of Regulation

### Abstract

In the course of the Armenian Genocide (1915–1917), an unknown number of female victims were forcibly tattooed, often on the face. Inscribing them with an alien identity, their captors permanently regulated the women's bodies in order to assimilate them into their communities. Some women eventually escaped and found shelter in orphanages or women's houses, but the tattoos remained on their skin, constituting a barrier to their reintegration. These women were stigmatized and shunned, their tattoos seen as a sign of sexual impurity and "transculturation". The tattoos needed to be removed – and the women's bodies regulated once again. Approaching tattoos as a means of regulation, this article explores how inscription materializes power dynamics in the context of the female body.

### Keywords

Tattoos, Armenian Genocide, Regulation, Sexuality, Conversion

### Biography

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Black dots and lines are scattered over L. Bilandjian's face, marking the tip of her nose, her forehead and cheeks, running down her chin and throat. They appear to be tattoos, but an examination of their origin and significance leads us far away from the contemporary understanding of tattooing, from the "tattoo renaissance"<sup>1</sup> that has emerged over the past decades as tattoos have become a common, fashionable practice and a part of popular culture. Bilandjian's tattoos (see fig. 1) are a record of the horrors she was forced to

1 Caplan 2000, xi. See Velliquette/Murray 1998.



Fig. 1: L. Bilandjian, 17 years old, from Aintab. (© Nubarian Library collection, [http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online\\_exhibition\\_2.php](http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online_exhibition_2.php) [accessed 9 January 2021])

endure as a consequence of the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1917. Like many other female refugees, Bilandjian was forced to live in a non-Armenian community, presumably among those who identified as Turks, Kurds, or Arabs.<sup>2</sup> Although some women were eventually able to return home, the marks remained inscribed on their bodies as permanent reminders of their past, of stories that involved suffering, sexual violence, and the deprivation of freedom. In this article, I will analyze how this form of tattooing is connected to the regulation of survivors' bodies during the time of their capture as well as after their return. While in an academic context, tattoos are often viewed either as a means of individual self-expression<sup>3</sup> or as a form of corporal punishment,<sup>4</sup> in the context of the

Armenian Genocide, they take on a rather different significance, as a form of regulation expressed in terms of assimilation and exclusion. If we focus more narrowly on the female experience of the Armenian Genocide, this process of regulation is connected to sexuality, religion and ethnicity.

Photographs of the tattooed women constitute the main source used for this article. They can be accessed via the online exhibition hosted by the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute and derive from accounts of relief efforts undertaken by volunteers and missionaries in support of Armenian women and children. Many of the photographs were taken by Karen Jeppe, a Danish

2 Researchers have given the creators of the tattoos various labels. This issue will be discussed later in the article. I am aware that ethnicity is an ambiguous concept and correspondingly read ethnicity not as a natural phenomenon, but as an analytical notion. For our present purposes, it is necessary to distinguish ethnicities such as “Armenian” and “Turkish”. For further reading on this topic, see Eriksen 2019.

3 See Martin 2019; Thompson 2015.

4 See Anderson 2000; Gustafson 1997.

missionary who ran a shelter in Aleppo where nearly 1,700 women and girls lived.<sup>5</sup> Written records of eyewitness accounts will be used to round out the visual documentation.<sup>6</sup> When it comes to the survivors' return to Armenian communities and the work of the volunteers who were in charge of the rescued women, I rely on research by Rebecca Jinks.<sup>7</sup>

In the next section, the concepts of "tattoo" and "regulation" will be defined using an approach grounded in religious studies. Subsequently, I will illustrate the role of gender during the Armenian Genocide, present the historical context in which the tattoos originated and describe their design in detail. In the main section, I will discuss how the tattoos functioned as a means of regulating Armenian women's bodies. More specifically, I will focus on their role in expressing processes of assimilation and exclusion that occurred both within the non-Armenian communities in which the women were forced to live and in relation to the Armenian communities to which they subsequently returned.

## Approaching Tattoos as a Means of Regulation

Tattoos<sup>8</sup> are bodily practices that have recently attracted considerable attention in scholarly research, particularly in religious studies. Regula Zwicky conceives of tattoos as visually coded media that enable a revealing approach to the analysis of sources in the study of religion. She argues that two pivotal aspects characterize the tattoo: (1) it originates from an intentional action; (2) it is a permanent mark on the skin. Although nowadays methods for removing tattoos exist, they cannot be simply taken off or washed away; they are meant to last a lifetime. Following Fritz Stolz, Zwicky understands religion

5 Jinks 2018, 87, 115–116.

6 Svazlian 2011 collected more than 300 testimonies. The eyewitness accounts were sometimes recorded many years after the events in question and should be seen as memories. Still, they are a vital source, providing access to the stories of the tattooed women.

7 Jinks 2018 examined the treatment of tattooed Armenian women by relief workers in particular.

8 The term "tattoo" derives from the English term "tatow", which was, in turn, borrowed from the Tahitian word *ta-tatau*, which can be translated as "hitting a wound". While the technique developed independently in different regions of the world, drawings found on the body of the natural mummy "Ötzi", which dates back to approximately 5,300 BCE, are presumed to be the oldest known examples of tattoos. See Hainzl/Pinkl 2003, 8–9 and 18–19.

to constitute a communication system, within which tattoos are carriers of a polysemic meaning, which is transcribed through the interaction between the tattoo and its recipient. It is therefore essential to consider the context of the tattoo, as well as the relationship between the tattoo, the tattooed person, and the tattooer. These relationships are of crucial importance for this article, since here they are governed by violence and coercion.<sup>9</sup> In the present context, regulation will be understood as a process of assimilation and exclusion. The use of the term “assimilation”, instead of “inclusion”,<sup>10</sup> is intentional here and its meaning is interpreted, following Jutta Aumüller’s reading of Mary Douglas, as being connected to purity (*Reinheit*) and obliteration (*Auslöschung*). Aumüller refers to “purity and danger”, whereas Douglas identifies the separating out of the impure, the dirty, as an identity-forming factor. Assimilation is related to the inability to endure difference. It can be understood as a combination of appropriation (*Vereinnahmung*) and cleansing (*Säuberung*). Coerced tattoos were an appropriation of the enemy’s body. They are an interference in a person’s physicality that is not eliminated, but reshaped at the will of another.<sup>11</sup>

This process of regulation erases and establishes difference, which is made visible. Hence, tattoos are relevant for symbolic and social boundary formation. By marking social differences connected to unequal access to resources and opportunities, tattoos represent and document an individual’s position within society and may radically transform it.<sup>12</sup> As we shift our focus to the tattooed women of the Armenian Genocide, the dialectical process of boundary formation is crucial, since assimilation is always simultaneously accompanied by social exclusion. Through the irreversibility of the tattoo, the deprivation of freedom assumes an all-encompassing character. The tattoos embody a continuous actualization of their origin – an act of violence – and preserve the tattooed person’s experiences.<sup>13</sup>

9 Zwicky 2013, 81–83, 90; Zwicky 2014, 260.

10 Following Akçam, Bjørnlund, and Derderian.

11 Aumüller 2009, 41. See Douglas 1966.

12 Grigo 2015, 80; Dahinden/Duemmler/Moret 2011, 227; Häusle-Paulmichl 2018, 20, 37–38; Caplan 2000, xiv.

13 Zwicky 2013, 81–83. Boundary formation is especially relevant in the context of tattoos, since they are inscribed into the self’s most fundamental, physical point of demarcation, namely the skin. In other words, tattoos mark and modify the boundary between self and world. See Häusle-Paulmichl 2018.



## Gender and the Armenian Genocide

An estimated 1.5 million Armenians were killed during the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1917 in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>14</sup> The genocide was planned and executed under the leadership of the Committee for Union and Progress, also known as the “Young Turks”. Gender played a crucial role in the organization of the genocide.<sup>15</sup> Katherine Derderian asserts the existence of a “definite link between genocidal and gender ideologies”,<sup>16</sup> which included the assimilation of women and children and the prevention of childbirth. The genders were separated; the male population was then massacred, while many members of the female population were raped, abused, and taken as slaves or brides, in addition to being forced to convert from Christianity to Islam. This separation of the genders was grounded in the assumption that only adult males acted as carriers of “ethnicity”, while women (and children) could be assimilated into non-Armenian society, their cultural values erased and reprogrammed. Assimilation and conversion were thus important structural components of the genocide and aimed at erasing Armenian identity.<sup>17</sup> As a result of this worldview, many Armenian women and children experienced different horrors than the men. Instead of being immediately put to death, they often faced months-long death marches, marked by recurring sexual violence. Rape, prostitution, and murder were widespread, and camps and deportation convoys evolved into slave markets. Karen Jeppe stated in 1926 that amongst the thousands of Armenian women and girls she had encountered, all but one had been sexually abused.<sup>18</sup> A huge number of Armenian women and children had ended up kidnapped, sold, or “voluntarily” living among their captors to escape deportation. It is estimated that around 5–10 percent of the Armenian survivors resided in non-Armenian communities. In the course of their assimilation, many Armenian women were tattooed in the same way as the members of their new communities. At the time of the genocide, tattooing was a widespread practice in eastern Anatolia and the northern Levant. Kurds, Turks, Arabs, Yazidis, and many other ethnic groups decorated their bodies with tattoos. However, the use of tattoos was not a common custom among Armenians.<sup>19</sup>

14 The number of victims varies depending on factors such as the period considered.

15 Bjørnlund 2009, 17.

16 Derderian 2005, 13.

17 Derderian 2005, 2, 10, 13–15; Bjørnlund 2009, 17, 34; Üngör 2012, 182.

18 Bjørnlund 2009, 24–25; Akçam 2012, 312, 315.

19 Akçam 2012, 314; Okkenhaug 2015, 440; Jinks 2018, 86; Smeaton 1937, 53; Field 1958.

As a result of a large-scale assistance mission after the First World War, many female victims were “reclaimed” by the Armenian community. Many found shelter in rescue homes, which were often established by North American and European missionaries and volunteers. However, not all Armenian women were treated in the same way. The tattoos which some women carried on their faces constituted not only the violent inscription of an alien identity, but also a barrier to readmission into their home communities.<sup>20</sup>

## The Origin and Design of the Tattoos

It is difficult to identify which ethnic groups were responsible for the tattoos documented on the photographs of the Armenian women. In the scholarship, their new communities and thus the presumed originators of these tattoos are labelled as Turks, Kurds, Arabs, or Bedouins.<sup>21</sup> In general, scholars seem to concur that all of these new communities followed Islam.<sup>22</sup> The oldest evidence of tattooing in the region dates back to the Mesopotamian city-state of Ur in 4,000 BCE. Figurines found there have black markings on their shoulders, which are interpreted as depicting early tattoos. Although tattooing was and still is controversial in Islam, it was a common practice among rural communities. Yet, as Winifred Smeaton noted in 1937, over the course of the 20th century, it was gradually becoming unpopular. In the area corresponding to present-day Turkey, tattooing was mostly practiced in eastern and southern Anatolia and was usually called *daqq* or *dövün*.<sup>23</sup>

The practice appears to have been very similar in Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab communities. The pigment used for tattooing was made out of diverse ingredients, although the fundamental component was lampblack. The design was painted on the surface of the skin before being poked into the hypoderm using a needle. The tattooists were mainly women, whether professionals, women who tattooed themselves, or mothers who tattooed their children. Although it was more common for women to receive tattoos, men were also

20 Jinks 2018, 87–91.

21 See Okkenhaug 2015, 441; Jinks 2018, 87; Akçam 2012, 315. The term “Bedouin” describes not an ethnicity but a way of life among the Arabs. See Chatty/Young 2014.

22 See Okkenhaug 2015, 440–441; Jinks 2018, 90; Üngör 2012, 181; Derderian 2005, 9.

23 Field 1958, 8, 12; Smeaton 1937, 53; Birkalan-Gedik 2006, 46.

tattooed, mainly on their hands or wrists. Among women, the chin, neck, chest, ankles, and hands were common places for tattoos.<sup>24</sup>

The tattoos documented in the photographs are located on the faces, necks, and hands of the Armenian women and are dark in color.<sup>25</sup> The tattoos vary in form: in some photographs, they consist of fine dots and delicate lines, while in others they are thick and irregular. The marks are usually arranged symmetrically and are quite small, up to a few centimeters in size.

The most important location for tattoos seems to have been the face. All of the women display marks on their chins, which sometimes continue down their throats in a line usually consisting of intermeshing crescents.<sup>26</sup> Located towards the lower edge of the chin, the designs are often of crosses and circles. Several of the women also have designs right below their mouths that resemble an upside-down Y or have their chins divided by a straight line. Another important place is the middle of the forehead. Often, the design here is comparatively large and grabs the viewer's attention right away. Two women display designs reminiscent of an eye: they consist of a central dot surrounded by a semicircle with three/five short lines branching off. In other cases, the forehead is marked by simple geometrical designs like dots, circles, or crosses. The cheek is another location where several of the women were tattooed. Here, the design often consists of three closely arranged dots.<sup>27</sup>

The second important location visible on the photographs is the hands. In only two of the photographs are the hands visible, and in both cases they are tattooed. This may be an indicator that the hands were only included in the photograph if they were tattooed, which would, in turn, indicate that only a few of the women had tattooed hands. The hand tattoos seem more extensive than the face tattoos – they are bigger and closer together. One woman's hand displays an assortment of designs that do not seem to be arranged in any particular order, while the second woman's hands are marked with symmetrically arranged designs. The backs of her hands are divided by

24 For more details on the recurring motifs see Smeaton 1937, 54–60; Çağlayandereli/Göker 2016, 2557; Birkalan-Gedik 2006, 46; Field 1958, 15–18, 24. Field's and Smeaton's records attest to an orientalist perspective. But since they studied tattoos in the region relatively shortly after the Genocide, their sketches and descriptions are the best available source for analyzing and comparing the tattoos.

25 Eyewitnesses mostly speak of blue tattoos, e. g., Gayané Adourian. See Svazlian 2011, 446.

26 See figs. 1, 2. This kind of tattooing is called *şadr*, see Field 1958, 15.

27 See figs. 1, 3, 4.



Fig. 2: Astghik, 16 years old, from Urfa. © Nubarian Library collection, [http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online\\_exhibition\\_2.php](http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online_exhibition_2.php) [accessed 9 January 2021])

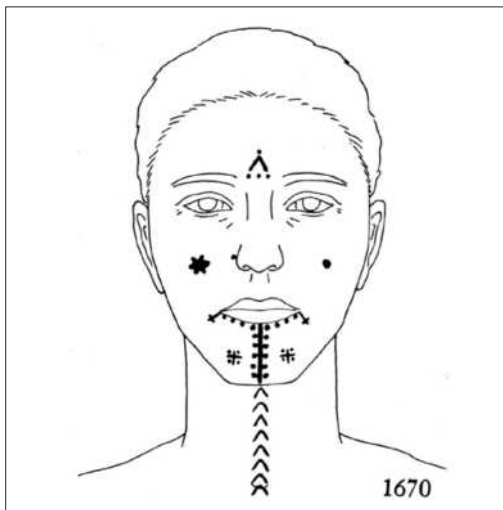


Fig. 3: Depiction of the tattoos of a Solubba woman. (© Henry Field (1958), figure 5)



Fig. 4: Mariam Chaparlian, 27 years old, from Marash. © Nubarian Library collection, [http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online\\_exhibition\\_2.php](http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online_exhibition_2.php) [accessed 9 January 2021])

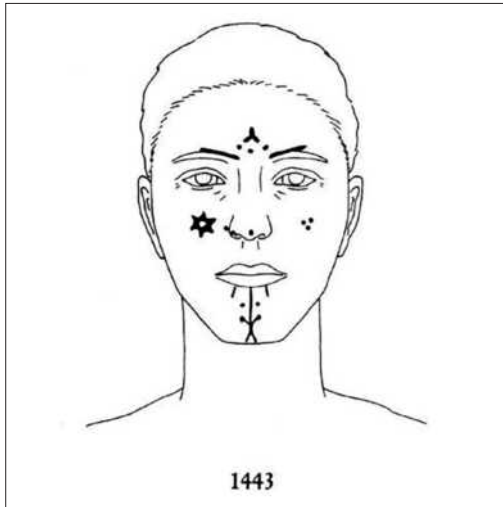


Fig. 5: Depiction of the tattoos of a Schammar woman. (© Henry Field (1958), figure 5)

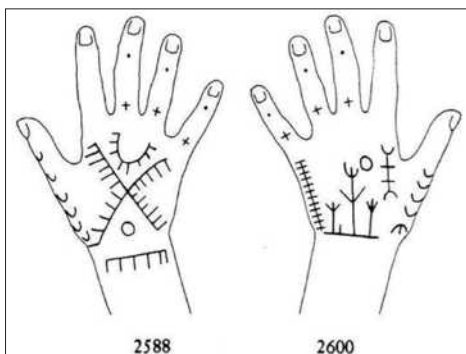


Fig. 7: Depiction of the tattoos of Yazidi women (© Henry Field (1958), figure 4)

Fig. 6: Jeghsa Hairabedian, from Adiaman. (© Nubarian Library collection, [http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online\\_exhibition\\_2.php](http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online_exhibition_2.php) [accessed 9 January 2021])

large crosses and her wrists are bordered by an edging consisting of small designs.<sup>28</sup>

The Armenian woman in figure 2 and the Solubba<sup>29</sup> woman in figure 3 display very similar tattoos. Both women are tattooed with a line along the chin and neck, which is called *şadr* and consists of dots and crescents.

The woman in figure 4 has a design on her forehead that matches exactly the one seen on the Solubba woman in figure 3. As in figure 3, in figure 4 too the design consists of three dots, a reverse V, and another dot on top. Additionally, a comparison with figure 5 shows strong similarities. The latter image is of a woman belonging to the Schammar.<sup>30</sup> Both women have three dots tattooed on their cheeks, though on the opposite sides of their faces. The designs on their chins are also very similar: in the center, starting beneath the mouth, is a line with two dots to the left and to the right, terminating in a reverse V. In figure 6, the tattooed hand of Jeghsa Hairabedian, an Armenian woman, is visible. We know that her tattooists were Kurds.<sup>31</sup> Her marks resemble the hands depicted in figure 7: on her wrist, we see an extensive

28 See fig. 6.

29 The Solubba were nomads living mainly on the Arabian Peninsula. See Betts 1989.

30 According to Field, the Schammar are Bedouins, that is, Arabs. See Field 1958, 13.

31 Jinks 2018, 121.

comb, while on the back of her hand, there are arrangements of circles and dots resembling suns. However, the hands depicted in figure 7 belonged to a Yazidi woman, which shows once more the similarities of the markings across ethnic groups.

## Inscribed and Erased: Regulating the Body through Tattoos

According to the findings of Henry Field and Winifred Smeaton, the practice of tattooing in Asia Minor was rarely connected to coercion. Mostly, women served as tattooists, which highlights the link between this practice and gender. However, it was neither an inherited profession nor was it reserved for a certain ethnic or social group.<sup>32</sup>

While in non-Armenian communities, women were the agents and the tattoos were seen as voluntary, for the Armenian women who were assimilated into these communities, the tattoo took on the opposite connotations. Alongside other bodily regulations, like rape and captivity, tattoos were a form of deprivation of physical integrity. Tattooing was a means of assimilation along with forced marriages, the imposition of non-Armenian names, and the compulsory learning of a new language.<sup>33</sup> Haykoush Miridjan Ohanian describes how the process of being tattooed was connected to violence: “The Arabs held me, put me down on the ground and put a mill-stone on my breast. I was kicking my feet saying: ‘I don’t want’, and they wanted to tattoo my face, to make me look like an Arab girl.”<sup>34</sup> Not only were the Armenian women brought into alignment with the women in their new communities, but their old identities were supposed to be overwritten. It was the visual level that made the assimilation evident and irreversible: Through the tattoos, a line was to be drawn between the Armenian women and the Armenian community, between the Armenian women and their “Armenian-ness”.

For those Armenian women who escaped their captors, their tattooed bodies were once again a matter of regulation, both within the women’s refuges (often led by Christian missionaries) and within groups composed of other Armenians. A tattoo symbolized a disgraceful memory and was therefore to be ignored, suppressed, and, in the best case, removed from the skin. Gayané Adou-

32 Smeaton 1937, 54–60.

33 Derderian 2005, 10–12.

34 Svazlian 2011, 338.



rian recounts how her mother tried to remove her tattoos, which led to further injury: “But they used to laugh at me. I did not know Armenian. There were blue tattoos on my face. My poor mother tried to remove them with nitric acid, but it burnt my skin. It corroded my skin and left scars up to this day.”<sup>35</sup>

But often it was North Americans and Europeans who prevented the reintegration of the tattooed women into Armenian communities: Jinks states that only Karen Jeppe accepted all Armenian women into her women’s house without discrimination. The tattooed women rarely appear in the records and fundraising materials, an indicator of the discomfort surrounding tattoos among relief workers. Moreover, there was an “obsession”, as Jinks calls it, with removing the tattoos surgically. Doctors working for relief missions asked for advice on how to remove the tattoos, while publications printed photographs of successful operations.<sup>36</sup>

The women were thus assimilated into a foreign tattooed community, while being excluded from their own non-tattooed community, into which they could be reassimilated through the removal of the tattoos. Three aspects of these processes of regulation were especially relevant: sexuality, religion, and ethnicity.

## Regulating Sexuality

Many of Smeaton’s findings suggest that tattooing among the communities she observed was sexually meaningful. She writes about women who tattooed themselves in order to keep – or lose – their husband’s love. In other cases, tattooing was supposed to induce pregnancy: interestingly, the tattoos were to be applied on the second or third day of menstruation. Smeaton speculates that tattooing might have constituted a puberty rite for girls, who were mostly tattooed around the time they reached puberty, or at least before they got married. One could also argue that these sexual connotations were reflected in the places on the body where these tattoos were applied, for example on the abdomen, in a line going down from the navel (fig. 8).<sup>37</sup>

These areas are not visible on the photographs of the Armenian women. However, one eyewitness report also suggests a sexual motivation behind the tattoos: Tagouhi Antonian states that through the tattoos, the Bedouins protected them from the Turkish “harem”: “There we spoke Armenian with each

35 Svazlian 2011, 446.

36 Jinks 2018, 78, 90–91, 100, 107.

37 Smeaton 1937, 54–57.

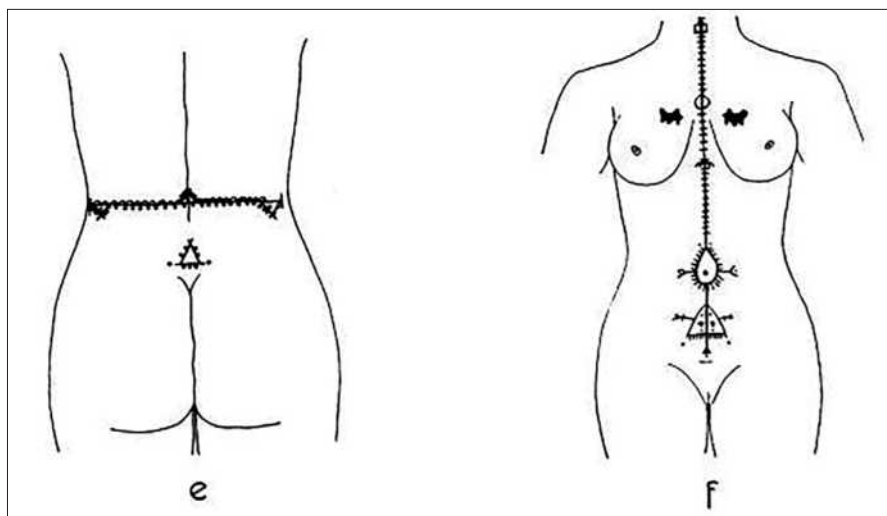


Fig. 8: Depiction of the tattoos of a “Non-tribal woman of Baghdad” and a “Gipsy woman (Kaulia)”. (© Winifred Smeaton (1937))

other. To save us from the Turks, the Bedouins had tattooed our faces with green ink. We were altogether 12 Armenian girls. There was a pasha nearby. Every day he took one Armenian girl with him. He had made something like a harem.”<sup>38</sup> Because the faces of the Armenian girls were marked with green ink, the “Turks” would not want to kidnap them for their harem. Although it sounds like Antonian perceived the tattoos as a necessary precaution, one could argue that at the same time, by tattooing the girls and women, the “Bedouins” marked them as part of their community, as bodies that they controlled. Antonian’s statement implies that this involved claiming sexual ownership over the women’s bodies, since she later had to marry one of the Bedouins.

For the Armenian women who found their way to rescue homes, the tattoos were again given sexual connotations by their European and North American helpers. Jinks explains the strong rejection tattoos triggered in terms of the “contemporary cultural unease in Western society regarding tattoos”.<sup>39</sup> Europeans had tattooed convicts in their colonies, often on the face, and tattoos were seen as a sign of a “primitive” civilization. Europeans who were tat-

38 Svazlian 2011, 110.

39 Jinks 2018, 101.

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tooded were often those perceived as living at the margins of society: seafarers, soldiers, and, in the case of women, sex workers.<sup>40</sup>

The contemporary press echoes this sexualization of the tattoos. Figure 9 shows a page from the *Standard-Examiner* of 1920. In the upper right corner, an imagined scene involving the application of tattoos is drawn. A woman, nearly naked, is being pushed to the ground by three men. The choice of words in the headline is also striking: not only has a tattoo been removed, but the woman has been “cleansed” of the “cruel Turk’s brand of shame”.<sup>41</sup> In an article from 1919 that appeared in the *Prescott Journal Miner*, Dr Post of Princeton University is recorded as claiming that the tattoos indicate that a woman had been “an inmate of a harem”.<sup>42</sup>

This context makes clearer why many missionaries and volunteer workers were reluctant to acknowledge the initial purpose of the tattoos as decorative. Instead, many described them as a type of disfigurement, a stigma,<sup>43</sup> as marks of shame and slavery – what “delineated the rescued women as an outcast group”.<sup>44</sup> This exclusion was closely connected to moral and sexual concerns, since the tattoos were permanent reminders of the women’s relationships with Muslim men: “the image of sexual subjection evoked by the tattoos was intolerable, and also a symbol that the women’s innocence and purity had been corrupted.”<sup>45</sup> Jinks describes how, for this very reason, rescued women were regarded with suspicion and separated from the younger girls. Volunteers felt particular unease in the case of mothers whose children were seen as a product of “sexual impurity” or even “miscegenation”. Many women, aware of this stigma, did not dare to return to the Armenian community. Because of their stigmatization and rejection, some were left with prostitution as the only means of survival – aggravating the condemnation from their environment.<sup>46</sup>

The sexual stigmatization entailed by the tattoos also affected how the women were seen by other Armenians, as the eyewitness accounts illustrate.

40 Jinks 2018, 101–102; Oettermann 2000, 193, 205–209.

41 [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/dlc\\_frenchbulldog\\_ver04/data/sn84026749/00280764711/1920090501/0636.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/dlc_frenchbulldog_ver04/data/sn84026749/00280764711/1920090501/0636.pdf) [accessed 28 December 2020].

42 <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=906&dat=19191209&id=hncNAAAAIBA&sjid=D-FIDAAAAIBA&pg=3752,3372070> [accessed 28 December 2020].

43 Interestingly, classical Greek and Latin authors commonly used words derived from the noun *stigma* to refer to the practice of tattooing. See MacQuarrie 2000.

44 Jinks 2018, 106.

45 Jinks 2018, 105.

46 Jinks 2018, 105–106, 112–113.

In some cases, the tattoos regulated a central aspect of the women's sexuality, namely marriage. Sirena Aram Alajajian states that because of her tattoos she was unable to find a husband: "During my youth, a very polite Armenian youth met me. He admired my looks and knowledge of languages, but he said that without the blue tattoos on my pretty face, we might have gotten married. So, what the Arabs did with my face was the reason for me to remain all alone in my old age."<sup>47</sup> However, other accounts suggest that many Armenian women were married to Armenian men in spite of their tattoos. Karapet Tozlian recounts: "We came to Aleppo, but there was no place to live, they gathered the orphans from the Arabs and placed them in orphanages. The children used to speak Arabic. The Arabs had tattooed the Armenian girls' and women's faces with blue ink, but our Armenian youth said: Never mind, we'll marry our unfortunate girls. What then, if the Arabs have made them work."<sup>48</sup> Nouritsa Kyurkdjian recounts something similar: "Then, the English Protestants opened orphanages. The Armenian girls, who had been kidnapped, were brought back, as well as the children, and put to schools. The adult girls were married to Armenian boys, though many of them had been tattooed on their faces with blue ink."<sup>49</sup> These two statements show that the tattoos did not seem to be an insurmountable obstacle to finding a husband. However, they do indicate that the tattoos were seen as problematic, even if not always problematic enough to prevent the women from being considered "marriageable".

## Regulating Religion

The connection between tattooing and religion is evident in Smeaton's remarks, as she states that "probably most tattooing has an ultimate magico-religious purpose."<sup>50</sup> For example, tattoos were considered a remedy for healing injuries and curing diseases. The tattoo was applied directly to the body part in need of healing: for example to the forehead or the temple in the case of headaches. Smeaton also observed cases of tattooing aimed at bringing about a desired result. This practice included the sexually connoted tattoos described above, as well as tattoos applied to protect children from death or to ward off other magic. Tattooing could also be connected to reading the

47 Svazlian 2011, 412.

48 Svazlian 2011, 441.

49 Svazlian 2011, 453.

50 Smeaton 1937, 54.

Qur'an: Women tattooed dots on their hands to ensure (or repel) their husband's love; one of Smeaton's informants stated that the best results were achieved when the tattoo was applied on a Friday at noon, while a female mullah was reading the Qur'an.<sup>51</sup>

Though it is likely that some of the designs found on the Armenian women had an apotropaic purpose, the eyewitness accounts do not draw a direct connection between the tattoos and religion. Many speak of forced conversions to Islam,<sup>52</sup> but they do not document the victims as perceiving the tattoos to be a sign of such a conversion. Hakob Hovhannes Moutafian is the only witness who mentions religion and tattoos in the same context:

During the massacres many Armenian girls and boys were able to escape, in various ways, from the Turkish murderers and find refuge, naked and hungry, at the Arab desert Bedouins. The latter had tattooed with blue ink the faces of many Armenian girls according to their custom, had made them Moslems and had kept them for years. Most of those Armenians had grown up, had forgotten their mother tongue, had become Arabs, but there are those among them who still remember that their ancestors were Armenians.<sup>53</sup>

Even if the tattoos were not perceived as a physical manifestation of an alien religion, they were evidently perceived as a means of inscribing a new cultural identity onto the women's bodies. And this cultural identity included an alien religion.

For the American press of the time, by contrast, the connection between tattooing and religious conversion was evident. "The victims of the branding and tattooing, in every case, were Christians and their captors thus marked them as Mohammedans",<sup>54</sup> declares the *Prescott Journal Miner* article cited above. Similarly, an article in the *New York Times* from 1919 claims, "In the tents of the Arabs in the Syrian desert, many were bound and forcibly tattooed on the forehead, lips and chin, to mark them as Moslem women."<sup>55</sup> Finally, in the article from the *Standard-Examiner* cited above (fig. 9), the tattoos

51 Smeaton 1937, 54–55.

52 See Svazlian 2011, 200, 204, 222, 272, 287.

53 Svazlian 2011, 546.

54 <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=906&dat=19191209&id=hncNAAAAIBAJ&sjid=D-FIDAAAAIBAJ&pg=3752,3372070> [accessed 28 December 2020].

55 <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1919/06/01/97089721.pdf> [accessed 28 December 2020]



are called “Holy Arrows”, “a Living Symbol of Ownership and Religion”, and are described in the following terms:

Between the girl’s eyebrows the needle made a crude arrow of little dots. The arrow pointed upward – “to guide the girl’s future thoughts to Mohammed.” Below her lower lip a similar arrow, also pointed upward, was formed, that “her spoken words might be wafted above with reverence to the Prophet.” Around the edge of her lip five purple blotches were placed to represent the five daily prayers of Islam.<sup>56</sup>

The article describes the story of Nargig Abakiam, whose tattoos were removed by experts in New York. Their removal was supposed to restore her “beauty”, but because the tattoos were perceived as a physical manifestation of an alien religion, removing them also meant restoring her Christianity.

Religion was also an important topic among the missionaries and volunteer workers helping the Armenian women who had escaped. For them too, they were not just women who had lived among men, but Christian women who had lived among Muslim men. Especially among the missionaries, it was widely believed that the Armenian population had been “Islamized”. As their goal was to reconstruct the Armenian nation not only as a political group, but also as a religious group, the recoverability of the women, especially of the tattooed women (who wore permanent, visible reminders of their “defilement” by non-Christians on their skin), was questionable. Missionaries often preferred to concentrate on orphans, who were considered more malleable and easier to reintegrate.<sup>57</sup>

## Regulating Ethnicity

Neither Field nor Smeaton mention tattooing in general or specific designs as belonging to a particular group or ethnicity.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, some ethnic groups did tattoo, while others did not: the Armenians were among those

56 [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/dlc\\_frenchbulldog\\_ver04/data/sn84026749/00280764711/1920090501/0636.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/dlc_frenchbulldog_ver04/data/sn84026749/00280764711/1920090501/0636.pdf) [accessed 28 December 2020]. Interestingly, this direct connection between Islam and the symbolism of the tattoos cannot be found in Smeaton’s or Field’s research. The article in the *Standard-Examiner* does not reveal the source of these interpretations of the tattoos.

57 Jinks 2018, 91, 97, 112.

58 Çağlayandereli/Göker 2016, 2557.

who did not, as is evident from the eyewitness accounts. Most eyewitnesses connected the tattoos directly to ethnicity, for instance Gayané Adourian: “The Chechen took me to Telhafar – a town in Iraq – and sold me to my new Turkmen father. I remained with him for five years. [...] They tattooed my face with blue ink to give me the appearance of an Arab, and they gave me the name Nouriya.”<sup>59</sup> Sirena Aram Alajajian states that as a result of the tattoos, she not only looked like an “Arab”, but she also became an “Arab”: “But afraid of losing me, one day they seized me by my hands and feet and began to prick my face with blue ink down to my breast. I shouted from the pain but there was no one to hear me. In fact, this was their custom; they had made me into an Arab.”<sup>60</sup> And elsewhere she asks, “Do you see my face? The Arabs have tattooed my face, pricking with pins and pouring blue ink in order to make me a fellah Arab.”<sup>61</sup> Here she implies that for her kidnappers, the motivation for tattooing her face was to regulate her ethnicity. This regulatory function is even more obvious in Barouhi Chorekian’s statement: “Swimming across the Khabur River (river flowing near Der-Zor), we reached near the Arab Bedouins. They sheared off our lice-infested hair; they tattooed our face with ink in order to hide our Armenian origin.”<sup>62</sup> Barouhi Silian similarly recounts that the tattoos were a means to overwrite her Armenianness: “I fled with four other girls to the forest and then swam across a river. An Arab took me to his home and told me, ‘My daughter, I know you do not have the same custom, but let me tattoo your face with blue ink so that they will not take you for an Armenian.’ I cried. I had neither bed nor clothes. They tattooed my face; they sheared my thick braids.”<sup>63</sup>

The visual demarcation between the Armenian women and their Armenian community was not easy to overcome once the women had escaped their captors. For many missionaries, aides, and Armenians, the tattoos marked a border between themselves and the women. These processes of delineation were reinforced by the specific historical and political situation that the Armenian people was confronted with at the end of the First World War. Civil and religious aides, along with the Armenian elite, were driven by the idea of rebuilding the Armenian nation. For the Armenian elite in the Middle East,

59 Svazlian 2011, 445–446.

60 Svazlian 2011, 411.

61 Svazlian 2011, 410.

62 Svazlian 2011, 413.

63 Svazlian 2011, 414.

this idea implied a “pure” community, cleansed of “Turkification” – an ideal that the tattooed women carrying visible reminders of it on their faces hardly fit. Among the aides, Jinks states, a “national reconstructionist humanitarianism” prevailed that urged for a recreation of the Armenians as a people: “Women, as child-bearers and custodians of domesticity, had to epitomize Armenianness.”<sup>64</sup> In the context of this national reconstruction, not all women were perceived as equally recuperable. With the formation of a stable Armenian identity as a key goal in the process of nation-building, the tattooed women turned into a threat. Since their tattoos were perceived as “an extreme social transgression. [...] most rescuers shrank from the women – suspicious also that the tattoos indicated an individual’s transculturation, and thus divided national loyalties.”<sup>65</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

The regulation of the Armenian women’s bodies by means of tattoos was not a random occurrence. The tattoos were not simply the result of living together, that is, of adapting to a custom. Those who regulated the women’s bodies had an aim. But beneath all of the sexual, religious, and ethnic ideals, we find one main concern: making women’s bodies the same – the same as the tattooed bodies and the same as the non-tattooed bodies. For their captors, this involved *appropriating* the body, by reshaping it according to their own will. For their fellow Armenians and foreign volunteers, it involved *cleansing* the body of sexual evidence, of an alien religion and ethnicity. However, while the application of the tattoos was certainly coercive, it remains unclear how much agency the women had in the process of their removal.

Having been assimilated into a community they did not want to be a part of and excluded from the community to which they felt they belonged; the tattooed women did not fully belong to any group.<sup>66</sup> After their escape, delin-eating themselves from the perpetrators of the genocide would have been a logical step toward reinstating their belonging to the Armenian community. Because of their tattooed bodies, the women did not have the chance to re-

64 Jinks 2018, 94.

65 Jinks 2018, 91–94, 102, 105, 110.

66 Jinks similarly notes: “as “captives” held in “slavery” by these marks, they were not fully part of Bedouin society, but neither could they fully rejoin the Armenian community.” See Jinks 2018, 106.

alize this demarcation fully. To some degree they were seen as belonging to the group of the perpetrators. The tattoos not only preserved the violence of their origin, they also documented and perpetuated the women's expulsion.

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# Reading *The Book of Joseph*

## A Communication-Oriented Analysis of *Far Cry 5*

### Abstract

In the game *Far Cry 5*, a book called *The Book of Joseph* plays an important role. It is the confession, autobiography and sermon compilation of Joseph Seed, the leader of the fundamentalist, Christian-inspired violent Doomsday cult called “Project at Eden’s Gate”. In the game, the player is tasked to defeat Seed’s grip on – fictional – Hope County, Montana (USA). *The Book of Joseph* is not only found in the game, where its content is kept hidden from the player, but is also featured in a live-action trailer, called THE BAPTISM. Most importantly, Joseph Seed’s book has also been published as a physical object and was distributed to the first 2,000 buyers of the Mondo edition of the game. In this article, the authors argue that the communicative function of *The Book of Joseph* differs significantly from one medial object to the next (game, trailer, book), influenced by the intertextual and intermedial relationships between those medial objects and by their exclusive characteristics. Using a communication-oriented method of text analysis, the authors investigate the various communicative processes within the different “texts”, in order to establish the narrative loci of the book’s materiality.

### Keywords

*Far Cry 5*, *The Book of Joseph*, Communication-Oriented Method, Intertextuality, Cult, Intermediality, Materiality

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Frank G. Bosman is a theologian of culture and a senior researcher at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Tilburg University, the Netherlands. Bosman is the author of many articles and books on the relation between culture, theology and faith, and focuses on the role of religion and religious themes in video games. In 2019, he published a synthesis of his previous research on religion and digital games in *Gaming and the Divine. A New Systematic Theology of Video Games* (London: Routledge).

Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen, is a full professor of Old Testament exegesis at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Tilburg University, the Netherlands. He has introduced modern linguistics into Bible exegesis, resulting in his communication-oriented method. He has published extensively on notably Isaiah and Amos, e.g. “Writing and (not) Reading the Torah (and Contrasting Texts) in the Book of Isaiah”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44, 1 (2019).

In the game *Far Cry 5* (CA 2018), developed and published by Ubisoft, the player's avatar is tasked, as part of a side mission, to destroy a giant concrete statue of Joseph Seed, the violent leader of a cult called "Project at Eden's Gate". Joseph and his cult have taken over fictional Hope County, Montana (USA), in preparation for the dawning End of Days. On top of the statue, the player's avatar, a nameless junior deputy sheriff, finds a half-destroyed shrine with on it a copy of *The Book of Joseph*, the official "Holy Scripture" of the Project at Eden's Gate. This specific copy belongs to Faith, one of the high-ranking members of the cult and responsible for the production of The Bliss, a drug used to brainwash the cultists. The deputy follows the suggestion of his fellow resistance members to burn this symbolically very important copy of *The Book*, tossing it aflame from the top of the statue, never again to be seen in the game.

In the game, the content of *The Book of Joseph* remains a mystery for the deputy and for the player. In two instances, discussed below, the player can interact with the book, but only in the context of scripted events. The same uncertainty applies to the second of two narratively interlinked live-action trailers, *THE SERMON* (CA 2018) and *THE BAPTISM* (CA 2018): the book appears in the latter, but its contents again remain hidden for the viewer. However, the content of *The Book of Joseph* can indeed be accessed, although by other means. In 2018, Ubisoft published a physical (and very limited) edition of *The Book of Joseph*, serving as promotional material for the first 2,000 buyers of the Mondo edition of the game.<sup>1</sup> Rhetorically, this version of *The Book of Joseph* combines multiple genres such as autobiography, sermon and prophecy, while aesthetically it maintains a middle ground between a traditional Christian Bible (exterior) and an Evangelical study book (interior), combining texts with pencil drawings of apocalyptic scenes.

Across all three objects – the game, the trailer and the physical book, in both their texts and their images – the materiality of *The Book of Joseph* differs significantly, influenced by the intertextual and intermedial relationships between them. To analyse the differences and similarities between these texts, we will utilize a communication-oriented method. Intertextuality is a form of synchronic literary analysis focussing on the relationships between texts, enlarging the traditional concept of "text" from exclusively

1 While it is beyond doubt that *The Book of Joseph* is published by Ubisoft, Montréal (Canada), the book itself bears no bibliographical information other than the name of the fictional author. We will explain this particularity in more detail later in this article.

written forms to all possible cultural expressions, such as films and digital games.<sup>2</sup> The related term “intermediality” denotes the narrative complex between different media, in the case of *Far Cry 5* between film, book and video game.<sup>3</sup>

The communication-oriented method focuses on the various levels of communication between senders and receivers (figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Three levels have to be distinguished:

- the level of the historical, i.e. real, author *outside* the text (RA), the one(s) who produced the physical text, and the historical, i.e. real, reader *outside* the text (RR), the one(s) who read the physical text either in the past or in the present day.
- the level of the text-immanent author (TIA), the director *in* the text, and the text-immanent reader (TIR), the ideal reader *in* the text.
- the level of the characters (C), the stage on which they, as actors, perform.

The following scheme outlines these three communication layers.

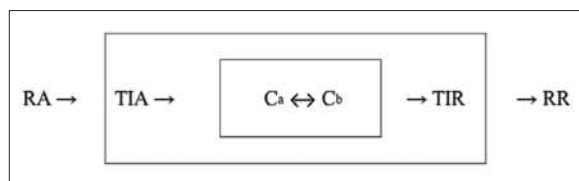


Fig. 1: Table providing an overview of the various communicative levels in texts.

The Real Author (RA) and the Read Reader (RR) are situated outside the text. By using the text, they communicate, but the text does not provide access to them. In the text we find the stage on which the characters perform ( $C_a$ ,  $C_b$ , etc.). Characters communicate with each other, both verbally, by means of direct speech, and non-verbally. Characters, however, do not perform on their own initiative. A position in the text determines when a character is allowed to perform on the scene. This position is called the Text-Immanent Author (TIA). The text-immanent author communicates with the Text-Imma-

<sup>2</sup> Kristeva 1980.

<sup>3</sup> Elleström 2010.

<sup>4</sup> See especially van Wieringen 2020.

ment Reader (TIR). The text-immanent author is able to act as a character in the text, e.g. in an “I”-narration. The text-immanent author is also able to address the text-immanent reader directly.

Regardless of whether a text is written or spoken, these various communication levels are present in it. In fact, all cultural products of expression can be considered a text in which these three different communication levels can be distinguished. Let us take the example of a painting. Every painting has a historical painter, the “real author”. The one who saw or sees the painting is the “real reader”. The figures in the painting are the “characters”, communicating with each other. In the painting a painting-immanent director, the “text-immanent author”, enables the painted figures, the characters, to take their position in the painting. The painting-immanent viewer, the “text-immanent reader”, is the receiver of the communication from the painting-immanent director, the text-immanent author.

In addition, we define video games as digital, interactive, playable, narrative texts.<sup>5</sup> As a text, a video game is an object of interpretation; as a narrative, it communicates meaning; as a game, it is playable; and as a digital medium, it is interactive in nature. The close reading of *Far Cry 5* is done by playing the game itself (multiple times), including all possible (side) missions, in what is known as the game-immanent approach.<sup>6</sup> We have chosen to address the different medial objects in their reversed internal chronological order, that is, to discuss the game first, and the trailer and the physical book second, even though the book describes Joseph’s origin story, the trailer the growth of the sect, and the game the downfall of both. The argument for this particular order is that the trailer and the book are published as promotional material for the game, positioning the game as the core text of the three.

## ***The Book of Joseph in Far Cry 5***

The *Far Cry* series (CA 2004–2019) is a loosely connected series of games defined by exotic locations, likeable villains, and a massive amount of creative violence. *Far Cry 5* took the series to a fictional county in the American state of Montana, introducing a doomsday cult that bears a striking resemblance

5 Bosman 2019, 38–43.

6 Bosman 2019, 43–51.

to a group of right-wing, Christian-inspired violent extremists.<sup>7</sup> These creative decisions have caused huge controversy among critics, players, and the general public, especially – or almost even exclusively – in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

At the head of the cult, self-identified as “Project at Eden’s Gate”, stands Joseph Seed aka The Father. Together with his brothers John and Jacob and their adopted sister Faith, Joseph tyrannizes the valley, killing all who dare resist and mind-controlling all those who are too afraid to resist. Local law enforcers eventually take interest. The story follows a nameless deputy sheriff who fails to arrest Joseph in the middle of a religious meeting at his compound. The arrest party is captured, and only the deputy succeeds in escaping. The rest of the game consists of establishing a resistance movement made up of the terrorized citizens of Hope County and killing all four Seed siblings, with Joseph the last to die.

Project at Eden’s Gate is a classic religio-fanatic Doomsday cult.<sup>9</sup> The game features a charismatic, but ultimately deluded leader-figure demanding absolute obedience of his followers. This leader creates a strong dichotomy between the outside world, which is considered corrupted and hostile towards the cult, and the religious community itself, as the paramount of holiness. Joseph claims divine inspiration and proclaims the urgent coming of the apocalypse that will destroy all outsiders but will enable the cultists to be the progenitors of a new, purified human race. Project at Eden’s Gate uses traditional Christian religious language like “redemption”, “bliss”, “confession”, “sin”, “reckoning”, and “baptism”, but in a clearly violent and distorted fashion. Game critics have, not surprisingly, commented on this one-dimensional portrayal of Christian fundamentalism.<sup>10</sup>

At the start of the game, when the deputy tries to escape, *The Book of Joseph* is found littered all over the game map (see fig. 2). The player can find copies on the shores of the Henbane River, used in baptism rituals (see fig. 3), in houses and mansions (see fig. 4), on numerous altars and shrines (see fig. 5), and so forth. That *The Book of Joseph* is found in various locations is indicative of the book’s ubiquity and Bible-like status in the religious community: devotees take it with them on their business, use it for religious ceremonies,

7 Bosman 2019, 223–229.

8 Machkovech 2017, Plante 2017, Rivera 2017, and Robinson 2017.

9 Snow 2003.

10 Green 2018 and Roberts 2018.

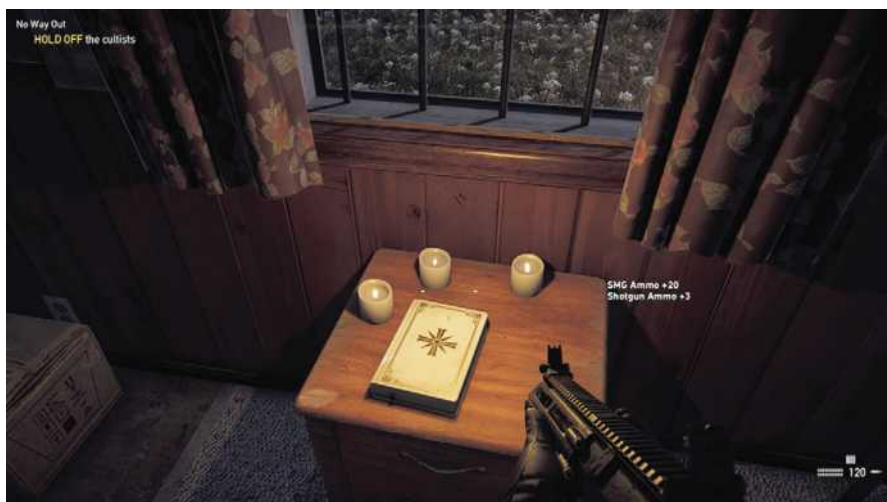


Fig. 2: In the first building the player finds, after escaping Joseph's men, a copy of *The Book of Joseph*, surrounded by three burning candles.



Fig. 3: *The Book of Joseph* found on the sandbanks of the Henbane River.

put it in places of reverence in both their private houses and the more public buildings used by the whole community.

In the game, the majority of the copies of *The Book of Joseph* are “white versions” of the book, a version apparently distributed in large quantities to regular members of the cult. It is an average-sized book, covered in what appears to be





Fig. 4: *The Book of Joseph* in John's mansion.



Fig. 5: *The Book of Joseph* as the centrepiece of a devotee's shrine.

white leather, featuring golden decorative patterns on the outside of the cover and with a golden double cross, the cult's logo, in the middle. A small red reading ribbon peaks out of the bottom of the book. The contents remain hidden for the deputy (and therefore also for the player): the book cannot be opened, cannot be found opened, and is not discussed explicitly by a single non-playable character.



Fig. 6: Pastor Jerome is forced to use *The Book of Joseph*.

## The Mission “The Atonement”

The player cannot interact with the book in-game other than in two scripted events, which are part of two main missions: “The Atonement” and “False Prophet”.<sup>11</sup> The first one takes place in the Lamb of God Church in the west of Hope County. The deputy is lured to the church by John Seed to save Pastor Jerome Jeffries from harm. On entering the church, the deputy is knocked down by a cultist. When awoken, the deputy is confronted with John and a couple of cultists holding Mary May, Nick Rye, Jerome Jeffries, and the deputy himself at gunpoint. John forces Jerome to oversee a religious ceremony swearing Mary, Nick, and the deputy into the cult, including an oath taken on *The Book of Joseph* and the violent mutilation of the new recruits’ bodies.

John Seed slams the Bible Jerome is holding out of his hands and replaces it with a (grey) copy of *The Book of Joseph*. John forces Jerome to oversee Nick Rye taking the oath on *The Book of Joseph*. When Jerome hesitates, he is knocked down by one of the Peggies (the cult members of Project at Eden’s Gate) standing next to John. In the turmoil, Jerome manages to switch *The Book of Joseph* for the Bible he was holding earlier, which contains a secret

11 See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=svpbsQT9BK4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svpbsQT9BK4) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmeAgoJhBwg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmeAgoJhBwg) respectively.

compartment with a handgun in it (fig. 6). After Nick is sworn into the cult, John forces Jerome to do the same with the player's avatar.

John says (with Jerome reluctantly echoing him): "Will you, deputy, place your hand upon The Word of Joseph [capitalization by in-game subtitles]. And renounce your sins and admit your transgression." Jerome urges the deputy to "say yes", suggesting he utilize the hidden gun in the Bible that Jerome is presenting to him but with John still under the impression that the book is his copy of *The Book of Joseph*. The deputy opens the Bible Jerome is holding and takes the gun out to shoot the Peggies attending the ceremony. In the subsequent turmoil, Nick, Jerome, and the deputy manage to escape unharmed, while John, heavily wounded, is assisted by a cultist outside the church.

John's copy of *The Book of Joseph* is visually different from the white version found elsewhere in the game. This "grey version" features a grey, not a white, apparently leather cover. While the same golden logo is used, the decorative lines are also slightly different. It seems this grey version is reserved for the upper echelons of the cult, leaving the white ones for the lower members. The grey version also cannot be read in-game, and while Jerome's copy of the Bible is opened, primarily to show the hidden compartment with the gun, the grey *Book of Joseph* remains closed throughout the whole scene.

## The Mission "False Prophet"

The second time the player comes across this special version of *The Book of Joseph* is in the mission "False Prophet". When the player has liberated Hope County jail from the cultists, Tracey Lader tells the deputy to go and destroy the giant statue of Joseph Seed standing on the slopes of some hill not far from the jail. Tracey explains her wish as follows: "We gotta tear down that statue, let all those Peggies know their Father ain't fuckin' God. He's just a man. What do you say, Rook? Drive a big fuck-you sized hole in that thing?"

When the deputy approaches the statue and encounters some resistance from cultists, Tracey radios him with a second task: "If you're lookin' to cause more trouble, I got an idea. Faith keeps her personal copy of Joseph's ramblings inside that thing. Climb in that statue and burn those papers. Show what happens when you fuck with the wrong people." At the top of the – now destroyed – statue of Joseph (the deputy can still navigate through the inner structures of the hollow object), the player discovers a copy of *The Book of Joseph* in a semi-ruined shrine. When they approach the book, the player can



Fig. 7: The player burns *The Book of Joseph* after destroying Joseph Seed's statue.

interact with it, but only by setting the copy alight and throwing it, still burning, from the statue; the book is not seen again in the game (fig. 7).

This copy of *The Book of Joseph* is visually identical to the one in John's possession during The Atonement mission earlier in the game. Now, two reading options appear to the game's text-immanent reader: either it is the same (unique) book, or John and Faith have identical copies of the "grey" version apparently reserved for high-ranking members of the cult. Both options can be argued for, so it is up to the game's text-immanent reader to decide which option they want to read into the game. However, again, the content of *The Book of Joseph* remains hidden from both the deputy and the game's text-immanent reader. The choice the game's text-immanent reader has to make puts emphasis on the special grey edition of the book. In the case of the first reading option, the emphasis is even increased, as a result of the implicit uniqueness of the grey version of the book.

When the mission is concluded, with the destruction of the book, both Faith and Tracey react to the deputy's actions. Faith is disturbed and frightened: "What have you done? His words. Don't you understand what He'll [capitalization by in-game subtitles] do to me?" Tracey, by contrast and quite understandably, reacts with joy: "That was fuckin' beautiful. Joseph Seed's gonna be shittin' bricks, and Faith is gonna feel the heat now. She'll need to answer for that burning book, and that mangled effigy. Hell of a job." This statement concludes the mission scene.



Fig. 8: Joseph writing in some sort of diary that bears no visual resemblance to *The Book of Joseph*. Scene from *INSIDE EDEN'S GATE* (00:14:03).

## ***The Book of Joseph* in THE BAPTISM**

As indicated earlier, Ubisoft has launched two narratively interconnected live-action trailers, called *THE SERMON* and *THE BAPTISM*, and one short movie called *INSIDE EDEN'S GATE* (Barry Battles, CA 2018), all for the promotion of the launch of the game.<sup>12</sup> We exclude *THE SERMON* and *INSIDE EDEN'S GATE* here because *The Book of Joseph* does not play any role in either of them. Even though the short film does feature a scene in which Joseph writes something on a page in some sort of notebook, this notebook does not resemble *The Book of Joseph* as seen in the game, in either its white or its grey version (fig. 8). The writing itself cannot – unfortunately – be read by the film's text-immanent reader and the characters in the film do not refer to it either directly or indirectly.

The second trailer, *THE BAPTISM*, does feature *The Book of Joseph*, and it does so twice. In *THE BAPTISM*, Joseph is performing a baptism on the shores of the Henbane River on a Black girl, who is later revealed to be the teenage daughter of Jerome Jeffries, the pastor of the Lamb of God Church, also featured in "The Atonement" mission in the game. During the ceremony, while Joseph holds the girl under water, he gets flashbacks of his earlier encounters with Jerome. We see Joseph meeting Jerome and his daughter in the trailer (fig. 9), where he has a notebook bearing the symbol later associated with his cult.

12 See: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5uHQYz-hNw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5uHQYz-hNw), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VokeHE550\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VokeHE550_w), and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eL4hY12SGF8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eL4hY12SGF8) respectively.





Fig. 9: Joseph holding a notebook with the symbol of Project at Eden's Gate on it. Scene from *THE BAPTISM* (00:01:00).



Fig. 10: Joseph working on what appears to be *The Book of Joseph*. Scene from *THE BAPTISM* (00:01:24).

We see Joseph attending Jerome's sermons in his church, but also working feverishly in his room on a manuscript that is probably an earlier version of *The Book of Joseph* (fig. 10).

Next, we see images of Joseph desperately browsing through the pages of a Bible, followed by him marching through the woods of Hope County in the company of a group of his followers. The next scene depicts Jerome's daughter holding her hand on the cover of *The Book of Joseph* while she tries to copy the logo with her other hand (fig. 11).

The trailer ends with Joseph coming to his senses only to see he has held the girl under water too long, causing her to drown: the baptism has gone terribly wrong.

Two visually very distinct versions of *The Book of Joseph* are featured in the trailer. The second one, seen in the hands of Jerome's daughter, appears to be the white version found scattered throughout the game world. The first one





Fig. 11: Jerome's daughter copying the symbol on the cover of *The Book of Joseph*.

is unique to the trailer: it is a grey notebook with a black rubber band holding the pages together, with on the cover the symbol of the double cross, later in the game identified as the cult's logo.

Although the trailer does not state so explicitly, it is suggested that this grey notebook with the rubber band is a proto version of the later *Book of Joseph*, probably consisting of Joseph's handwritten notes, which he is seen working on later in the same trailer. Eventually, these notes are transformed into the typeset printed white book seen later in the trailer and throughout the game. Just like in the game, the content of *The Book of Joseph* is hidden from everyone, including the film's text-immanent reader.

The fact that in both the game and the film trailer the *Book of Joseph* is inaccessible to both the characters (except Joseph Seed himself, although this is not made explicit) and to the text-immanent reader emphasizes the secret character of the cult of Joseph Seed. One cannot freely enter and leave the book. This restriction makes the cult a dangerous sect, where brainwashing, instead of the reading and discussion of the book on which it claims to be based, stands central. For the game's text-immanent reader, this insight even underlines the importance of their task to stop Joseph Seed by playing the game.

## ***The Book of Joseph: The Physical Book***

As stated earlier in this article, the physical *Book of Joseph* was part of the *Far Cry 5*'s Mondo edition, the most extensive edition Ubisoft made available for sale. This edition included – besides the game itself – a steel book-holder, a vinyl record with the original soundtrack, a code for the digital version of the

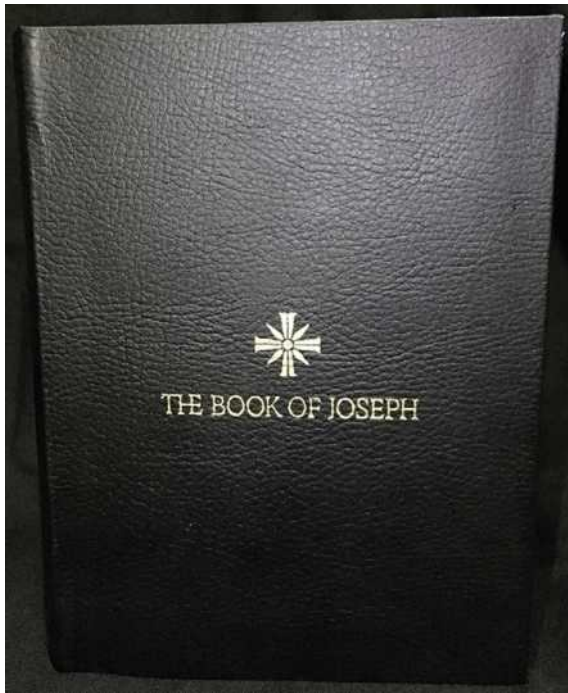


Fig. 12: The cover of *The Book of Joseph*. Courtesy of Bryanna Gillen.<sup>13</sup>

soundtrack, and a convenient box, all designed by the artist Jay Shaw in the style of *Far Cry 5*.<sup>14</sup> The Mondo edition was in itself a limited edition – only 4,000 units were made available for purchase – but the inclusion of the physical *Book of Joseph* was even more limited. Only the first 2,000 buyers of the Mondo edition received one.<sup>15</sup>

The average-sized book has 128 pages, the majority of which are used for printed text. Also, 14 black pencil drawings are incorporated, all but one covering a whole page. The book consists of 13 chapters, each given a Roman numeral. All chapters are preceded by short extracts from multiple “sermons from the Project at Eden’s Gate”, all printed in italics. The cover is made of black leather, the front featuring – in golden capitals – “The Book of Joseph” and the logo of the Project at Eden’s Gate (fig. 12).

The book provides little to no bibliographical information: ISBN, publisher, place of publication, real author, and date are omitted. Even the name of the

13 [www.wattpad.com/story/179523951-the-book-of-joseph-far-cry-5](http://www.wattpad.com/story/179523951-the-book-of-joseph-far-cry-5).

14 LeFebvre 2018.

15 Gillen 2019.

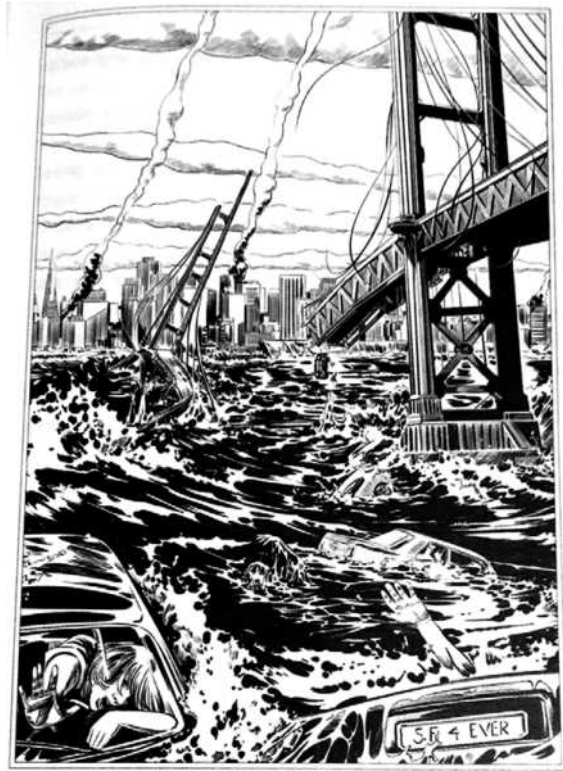


Fig. 13: A drawing from *The Book of Joseph* depicting the destruction of San Francisco. Courtesy of Bryanna Gillen.<sup>16</sup>

text-immanent author has to be deduced from the caption below a picture of Joseph Seed on page three – “Joseph Seed, Project at Eden’s Gate Guide / Hope County, Montana USA” – and the name below the prologue of the book on page five. There is no doubt, however, that this limited book was created, published, and distributed by Ubisoft in the context of the promotion of *Far Cry 5*. Because of the rarity of this collector’s item, physical copies of the book are very hard to come by. Fortunately, some of the lucky owners have provided photos of the book through the Internet.<sup>16</sup> In terms of genre, the book is a mixture of at least four:

- it contains fourteen “sermons” in which Joseph tells his followers how to obey him, thirteen given a Roman numeral, and one the word ‘epilogue’.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, [www.wattpad.com/story/179523951-the-book-of-joseph-far-cry-5](http://www.wattpad.com/story/179523951-the-book-of-joseph-far-cry-5) and <https://octo-chan.tumblr.com/post/172753930318/this-is-the-first-chapter-in-the-book-of-joseph-a>.

<sup>17</sup> [www.wattpad.com/story/179523951-the-book-of-joseph-far-cry-5](http://www.wattpad.com/story/179523951-the-book-of-joseph-far-cry-5).

- it is a guide book providing new arrivals with the right state of mind needed to join the sect.
- it is an autobiography by Joseph himself, retelling his life's story from his troublesome youth until the founding of his cult.
- it is a collection of prophecies and apocalyptic visions Joseph has about the approaching destruction of the old world.

The fourteen drawings contained in the book are thematically and aesthetically connected to the American Evangelical interpretation of the Christian apocalypse.<sup>18</sup> It is not known who the real artists of the drawings are, and also no text-immanent artist is suggested. All but two of the pictures feature apocalyptic scenes, the majority of them located in the United States, for example in San Francisco (fig. 13), Miami Beach, or Hope County. The images' message is clear: the world is burning, people are being killed, the Evil One is roaming the earth; the Apocalypse is nigh.

## From Rome to Hope County

Content-wise, *The Book of Joseph* describes Joseph's life story, from his troubled youth in Rome, Georgia (USA) until the founding of his cult decades later (unfortunately, the book does not provide the text-immanent reader with any dates or other chronological indications). Joseph and his two brothers, Jacob and John, were raised by an alcoholic and aggressive but at the same time very Christian fundamentalist father and a psychologically and emotionally absent mother. Eventually, the three are taken away from their parents by child protection and placed – first together, but later, after Jacob set fire to the farm of their abusive adoptive family, separately – in foster homes.

The brothers lose track of each other until Jacob has grown up and decides to find his lost siblings. After a number of misadventures, Jacob manages to track down his brothers: John has become a rich and influential lawyer under the influence of his new religious-fanatic family, while Jacob has lost his psychological health as a US marine in Iraq and Afghanistan. Once united, the three start their Project at Eden's Gate, first in Rome, but later, after an incident involving the violent death of a former cult member, in Hope County, Montana, the scene of the game. Joseph is the leader of the three and builds his cult from the "losers" of society: the addicts, the lonely, and the desperate, for whom he claims to offer a new family.

18 Hummel 2020.

Eventually they are joined by Faith, a young and attractive woman with a drug addiction, from which she is freed by the three Seeds, only to then lead the cult's drug production: "The Bliss" helps the Seeds to pacify any potential resistance within the cult. Finally, Joseph describes their community in Hope County as secluded and self-sufficient, ready to survive the impending apocalypse, from the ashes of which Joseph and his cultists will rise to be the guardians of a new, improved and purified humankind.

Joseph's religious inspiration comes from an entity he calls "The Voice of the Creator", or simply "The Voice". This entity speaks to Joseph on two occasions of extreme pain and humiliation: the first time when young Joseph was beaten by his father for the forbidden possession of a *Spiderman* comic; the second time when the adult Joseph is ambushed and kicked by a group of three nameless and faceless thugs outside the psychiatric hospital he is working for. Joseph renders the words of The Voice either as a textual unidentified quote or as a paraphrase:

But let me tell you what The Voice told me: The Creator has never turned a blind eye to the distress of the righteous. He has been watching mankind and has seen those who desecrate His word, who desecrate themselves in a race toward material wealth and vainglory. Such sinners have angered Him and it won't be long until He unleashes His righteous punishment. (*The Book of Joseph*, physical version, p. 21)

This situation communicatively means that The Voice is only accessible to Joseph. All other characters and the text-immanent reader can only know The Voice through Joseph. This exclusivity underlines the unique function of Joseph in the sect. Discussion about The Voice is out of the question because only Joseph has access to it.

## The Seeds as Monks

The drawings in *The Book of Joseph* are principally apocalyptic, but there are two exceptions: one drawing is of the face of Joseph himself, printed before the prologue (p. 3), and the other is of the Seed family, printed before the epilogue (p. 124, fig. 14). From a communicative point of view, this second picture is very important.

In the drawing we see the four Seeds, from left to right John, Joseph, Faith, and Jacob. All male characters are dressed in (probably) white clothes with

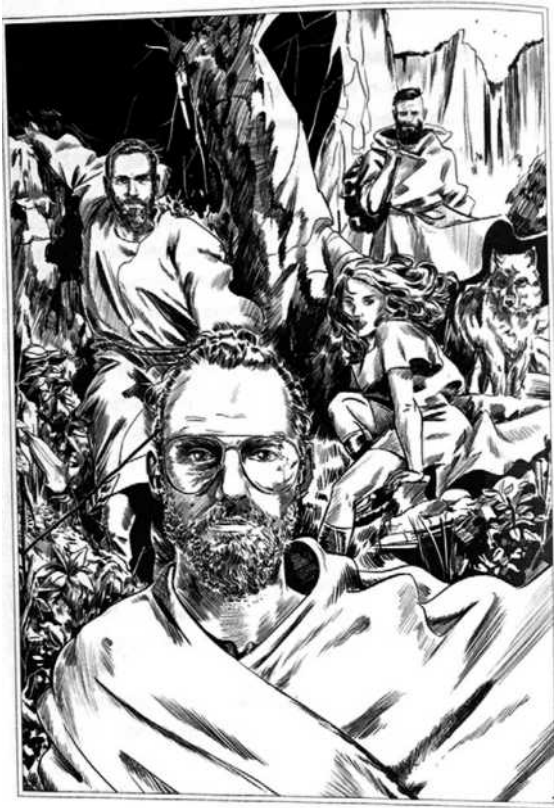


Fig. 14: A drawing from *The Book of Joseph* depicting the Seed family as peaceful monks amidst blossoming flowers. Courtesy of Bryanna Gillen.

ropes for belts. Jacob wears a backpack on his right shoulder and what appears to be a hood folded back on his back. Faith, the only female character in the drawing, is dressed in a short skirt and narrow-fitting boots, accentuating her feminine features. All four human characters, especially Joseph, who is in the forefront of the drawing, look directly at the drawing's text-immanent reader. Joseph's large spectacles, his visual trademark in game and trailer, intensify this even more.

The position in the drawing of the character Joseph Seed in particular creates direct communication with the drawing's text-immanent reader, inviting them to become a member of the cult by reading the book. This summons implies that the text-immanent reader of the drawing takes up a position that is different to that of the text-immanent reader of the game. The game's text-immanent reader is never invited to join the cult; conversely, indeed, they are called to stop the cult. The physical book, and especially its drawings, creates



a huge tension between its own text-immanent reader and the text-immanent reader of the game world (the video game itself and the related trailers).

A detail in the drawing supports this difference. On the far right we see a wolf, apparently gentle and kind. All characters are positioned in a field of blooming flowers, adding to the serenity and peacefulness of the scenery. Both flowers and wolves, however, are featured in the game, but in a very different capacity. The flowers are used to make the drug The Bliss, which the Seeds use to maintain a constant mental influence over the more independent members of their cult. The Bliss is also used for experimentation on animals, among whom are wolves, in order to create more reliable and even more fearsome biological weapons. The Bliss-infused wolves, called “Judges” in the game, are indeed ferocious enemies of the deputy and the members of the resistance.

## The Materiality of *The Book of Joseph*

After introducing and describing the cultural objects featuring *The Book of Joseph* – the trailer and the digital game – and the physical book itself, we can look into the materiality of the different versions of the book found throughout the discussed medial objects of game, trailer, and physical book (fig. 1).

There appear to be at least four versions of *The Book of Joseph*, each in its own context and with its own visual identity markers. First, there is the “white” version. This version is seen in the trailer and abundantly in *Far Cry 5*. The covering is of white leather, with golden decorative lines on the front side along with the cult’s logo, a double cross. This version is apparently for the lower members of the cult. Its contents remain a mystery and cannot be interacted with in-game.

The second version can only be seen in the game, and more precisely in the two aforementioned missions, “The Atonement” and “False Prophet”. Whether or not the two books are actually one and the same, this version of *The Book of Joseph* clearly differs visually from the white one, not only in colour (grey instead of white) but also in the pattern of the decorative lines, which has been slightly altered. The logo is also present. This version is apparently for higher ranking members of the cult: Tracey speaks about Faith’s “personal copy of Joseph’s ramblings”.

The status of the grey version is seemingly higher than that of the white one: whereas the white ones are interchangeable with one another, the grey

Version	Visuals	Appearances	Interaction?
White	Logo + decoration 1	Game + trailer	No
Grey (John + Faith)	Logo + decoration 2	Game	Yes (scripted)
Grey (Joseph)	Logo + rubber band	Trailer	No
Black	Logo + title	Physical book	Yes

Fig. 15: Table providing an overview of the different versions of *The Book of Joseph* in the various medial objects.

one, or ones, is (are) unique and attached to a specific Seed. That is probably why Faith reacts with shock when she discovers that the deputy has destroyed her copy. Yet, the grey version is equally unwilling to share its content with the deputy or the player, but it can at least be interacted with, although only in a strict and scripted way.

The third version of *The Book of Joseph* is exclusively found in THE BAPTISM trailer. It is also grey, like the special version in the game, but here it appears to be a notebook, including a rubber band, containing what would probably later become *The Book of Joseph* seen in the other medial objects under inquiry in this article. This proto version of Joseph’s book has no decorative lines, only the logo. No interaction is possible because of the nature of the medial object (film instead of digital game).

The fourth version of *The Book of Joseph* is the physical limited edition delivered as a part of the Mondo edition of the game. It has a black cover with no decorative lines, but with logo and title in golden letters. The black colour of the cover and the occurrence of the title are unique to this version. Interaction with this version is very much possible.

The book’s materiality is summarized in figure 15.

	FAR CRY 5	THE BAPTISM	Physical book	
			text	drawing
<b>Real Author</b>	(Ubisoft)	(Ubisoft)	(Ubisoft)	
<b>Text-Immanent Author</b>	“director”	“director”	Joseph Seed	“artist”
<b>Characters</b>	Various characters, including the player’s avatar	Various characters, <u>not</u> including player’s avatar	Various characters, including Joseph: 3 <sup>rd</sup> /1 <sup>st</sup> ps. singular + 1 <sup>st</sup> ps. plural	The characters Joseph, Jacob, John and Faith
<b>Text-Immanent Reader</b>	“player”	“viewer”	2 <sup>nd</sup> ps. singular/plural + 1 <sup>st</sup> ps. plural	2 <sup>nd</sup> person perspective
<b>Real Reader</b>	player	viewer	reader/viewer	

Fig. 16: Table providing an overview of the different types of communication in game, trailer, and physical book.

## The Text-Immanent Communication

After discussing the materiality of the different versions of *The Book of Joseph*, we can concentrate on the textual communication evoked by the book in the various discussed medial objects. The table above (fig. 16) shows the different communications for each of the four medial objects:

### *Far Cry 5* and THE BAPTISM: The Avatar Character

To start with *Far Cry 5*, let us first establish the text’s real author, i.e. the game’s development team, consisting of directors (Dan Hay and Patrik Methe), producers (Darryl Long), programmers (Cedric Decelle), artists (Jean-Alexis Doyon), writers (Drew Holmes, Dan Hay and Jean-Sebastien Decant), and the teams of co-workers they led and oversaw. The text-immanent author is not visible in-game, but functions nevertheless as a kind of invisible director, leading the sequence of scenes as the player ventures through the game.

The characters on the stage, the ones featured in the game, can be divided into two categories: the NPCs (“non playable characters”) and the player’s avatar. Not only are Joseph, Faith, Jerome, and Tracey, for example, characters in the game’s story, directed by the text-immanent author, but the player too is a character, or more precisely, the player’s avatar (in first-person perspec-

tive). Even though the player experiences a considerable degree of freedom, especially in an extended open world game like *Far Cry 5*, the number of possibilities of ways to act is ultimately limited to those allowed technically by the real author, but communicatively by the game's text-immanent author. The player's avatar is a character in the story of the game.

This means that the game's text-immanent reader is, like the game's text-immanent author, not visible in the game. Only their in-game representation, their avatar, being in fact a character, is. It is through the avatar that the game's text-immanent reader influences the course of events in the game, within the technical and communicative boundaries. Through the player's avatar, the text-immanent reader's position in a game can be much more complex than in a written text: there is the possibility that the player's avatar, as a character, will interlock with the game's text-immanent reader, but only when the gamer, i.e. the game's real reader, is interacting with the game's world without an avatar. And finally, we can identify the game's real reader, a real person playing the game on their console or PC.

When we concentrate on THE BAPTISM trailer, we see a familiar pattern. The real author of the trailer is an unknown production team, consisting of directors, script writers, technicians, and so forth, employed by Ubisoft to create promotional material for the upcoming game release. Just as in the case of the game, we can identify a text-immanent author, a "director", leading the sequence of scenes as the viewer, i.e. the trailer's text-immanent reader, watches the story unfolding.

The characters in the trailer are more or less the same as in the game, with a focus on Joseph, Jerome, and Jerome's daughter, but with one very important communicative difference: the trailer does *not* feature a player's/viewer's avatar as the game does. Technically, this variation is caused by the non-interactive quality of the film medium versus the necessary interactive quality of the game medium. From a communicative point of view, this quality makes clear that the freedom of the text-immanent reader is greater in a game than in a text or film. And the trailer also has a real reader, the historical viewer, a real person watching the trailer.

### ***The Book of Joseph: The Text-Immanent Reader***

The communicative analysis of the physical version of *The Book of Joseph* has two sections, one concentrated on the analysis of the text of the book, and one on analysis of the images in the book, especially the one featuring the four Seeds as monks.

The real author of *The Book of Joseph* is an anonymous and (as of yet) unknown writer, employed by Ubisoft to write the book as part of the promotional material included in the Mondo edition of the game. Here, the text-immanent author is clearly distinguishable (unlike in the cases of the game and the trailer). Even though Joseph is nowhere in the text identified explicitly as the author of the text, we have an abundance of rhetorical clues to argue in favour of this reading option, among which the strongest is the appearance of the name of Joseph below a picture of himself (p. 3) and beneath the prologue (p. 5).

Interestingly enough, Joseph also appears, besides many others, such as Jacob, John, and Faith, as a character in the text of the book itself. The text-immanent author writes about himself as a character in his own story in three different grammatical and communicative forms. In the majority of these cases, Joseph writes about himself in the first-person singular: for example: “I am the messenger” (p. 5), “I wouldn’t give up” (p. 85), and “I tell them what The Voice told me, again and again” (p. 115).

However, in some other cases, although not very often, Joseph appears as part of a collective “we” (first-person plural). To give some examples: when Joseph describes how the Seed family survived under the rule of their abusive, alcoholic father – “We lived off a patchwork of welfare, food stamps, charity, and soup kitchens” (p. 24); or when Joseph has finally found his brother John and they become – quite literally – a collective again – “When we were reunited, John even hated himself” (p. 77).

In one instance, in the first chapter (and only there), the text-immanent author writes about himself in the third-person singular. The second section of the chapter tells about “a child of about ten” (p. 9), delaying the explicit identification of the text-immanent author with the character of the same name somewhat more. Only in the third section is this tension lifted: “The father thrashed his arms furiously while the boy, young Joseph Seed, stood with his head bowed, contrite and seemingly fixated on the floorboards” (p. 9).

This movement from a third-person representation to a first-person representation results in the merging/coinciding of the text-immanent author’s and character’s positions. Owing to this movement, the position of Joseph Seed is strengthened. Joseph Seed occupies all possible positions, removing the difference between the positions of author and character. He becomes the centre of the textual world as he is the centre of the sect.

A similar thing happens with the text-immanent reader, who is addressed by the text-immanent author in two grammatical and communicative manners, which are more or less equal in number: a second-person singular/plural

and a first-person plural. Both have complications. In the English language it is often difficult to distinguish between the second-person singular and plural, both for “you” and “your”. However, even more, the form “we” is used by the text-immanent author to address both the characters in the text (including himself as such) and to address the text-immanent reader (who is *not* a character in the text). This use of the first-person plural is known as an inclusive “we”, distinguishable from an exclusive “we” that only indicates the one speaking.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, this inclusive “we”, incorporating the text-immanent reader as well, could be called a “text-immanent we”.

To give some examples: right at the beginning of the text, in the prologue, the text-immanent author addresses the text-immanent reader – “You will hear ...”, “People will tell you ...”, “If you want to live, you need ...” (all on p. 5), and “You belong in the next world, the new world” (p. 122). The text-immanent “we” (as different from the character “we”) is found throughout the text whenever the text-immanent author starts to preach to the text-immanent reader(s): “We who were once so pure....”, “We have been created in in His image....”, “We have enraged God and will pay the price sooner than we think” (all on p. 17), or “Concealed in shelter that we have dug ourselves, we may experience deprivation and scarcity” (p. 122). This “inclusive we” bonds the text-immanent author and text-immanent reader. This direct influence of the text-immanent author, Joseph Seed, on the text-immanent reader accords with the drawing’s direct communication between the character Joseph Seed and the drawing’s text-immanent reader described above.

Also, *The Book of Joseph* has a real reader, but now in two forms. In the first form, the most obvious form, the term denotes a physical reader who reads the physical book page after page. The second form is purely theoretical. We could imagine there are real people who are so attracted to *The Book of Joseph* that they consider themselves part of the (originally fictional) Project at Eden’s Gate. No reports have surfaced suggesting that “Seedism” is considered to actually exist. However, such a scenario is not impossible, since examples have emerged in recent years of the existence of belief systems with a fictional source.<sup>20</sup>

Let us now focus on the images used in *The Book of Joseph*, and especially the last one, depicting the Seeds as friendly monks in harmony with human-kind, flora, and fauna. Again, the real author, the artist, is an anonymous artist, employed by Ubisoft to contribute to a piece of promotional material

19 Lewandowski 1994, Vol. 2, 790.

20 Davidsen 2013.



for *Far Cry 5*. The artist, the drawing's text-immanent author, is not visible on the drawing and exists only theoretically. The image-characters are, as said before, the four Seeds and a "Judge" wolf. However, a text-immanent viewer can be identified by following Joseph's stare, as we have already indicated above. The cult's leader is looking, as are the other three humans, directly at the viewer, by which the viewer becomes a part of the text of the image, in what could be described as a "second-person perspective" or a "visual you". Finally, there is also a real viewer, but, as was the case in the text of the book, either as a real-world communicative instance or as a theoretical devotee of the (still to be) de-fictionalized cult of Seedism.

## Concluding Remarks

First of all, we would like to draw the obvious conclusion that communication takes place via and within all medial objects, drawings, films, games, and texts alike. A communication-oriented method provides the tools not only to make this communication visible, but also to make clear the differences in communication in the various medial objects.

When comparing the different communications in the texts of game, book, drawing, and trailer, we can identify three shifts. The first is the shift in text-immanent author: in the game, the trailer, and the image, this communicative instance is only theoretically present, while in (the text of) *The Book of Joseph* it can be easily identified. The same applies to the shift in text-immanent reader: in game and trailer the game's and film's text-immanent readers are invisible and only theoretically present, while in the book (text and image) the text-immanent reader is spoken to in multiple ways (first-, second-, and third-person singular, and first- and second-person plural).

This communication-oriented analysis of the intertextual and intermedial complex of various medial objects connected to *The Book of Joseph*, as a part of the fictional universe of *Far Cry 5*, illustrates clearly that the materiality of Joseph's book differs according to the communicative process in each individual medial object, as the table below shows.

In the cases of the game and the trailer, the materiality is found on the level of the characters witnessing and interacting with the book without being able to discover its content, while in the physical book, the materiality is found on the levels of the real author and real reader, who can actually and physically take the book in hand in order to read it. (This includes those real readers who read the book through digital reproductions, as we have.)

Medial object	Communicative level
Game	Level of the characters
Trailer	Level of the characters
Physical book	Level of the real author and real reader
Physical book's drawing	Absent

Fig. 17: Table providing an overview of the materiality of *The Book of Joseph* in the various medial objects.

The transition to the physical world does not just change the materiality of the book, for it also changes the communication based on the book. In the case of *Far Cry 5*, it is far from an innocent transition. Whereas in the imaginative world of the game and trailer, the text-immanent reader is positioned in contrast to Joseph Seed, the dangerous leader of a violent cult, and encouraged to stop the fictional Seedism, in the physical world the text-immanent reader is invited to join Joseph Seed, as if it were a positive thing to become a member of (still to be) Seedism. Communication is exciting. Transitions in medial objects make communication even more exciting.

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# In the Orality/Aurality of the Book

## Inclusivity and Liturgical Language

### Abstract

This article examines the role of language in the constitution of a common identity through its liturgical use at the Eastern Orthodox church of St Andrew's in Edinburgh, Scotland. Open to individuals who have relocated, the parish has a rather multinational character. It is a place of worship for populations that consider Christian Orthodox culture part of their long-established collective identity and for recent converts. Based on ethnographic research, archival work and theoretical contextualisation, the article examines the atmospheric materiality of the written text as performed by the readers, the choir and the clergy. This soundscape is an amalgam of different kinds of reading: prose, chanted prose, chanting and antiphonic, depending the part of the Liturgy being read. The language of the book is performative: the choreography and its symbolisms perform the words of the texts and vice versa. Additionally, the use of at least four languages in every service and two Eastern Orthodox chanting styles in combination with European influences expresses in the most tangible way the religious inclusivity that has been carefully cultivated in this parish. Through closer examination of literary transformation processes, I demonstrate the role of liturgical language in the creation of communal space-times that negotiate ideas of home and belonging in a new land.

### Keywords

Role of Language, Christian Orthodox Culture, Religious Books, Transnational Religious Community, Religious Soundscapes, Atmospheric Materiality, Performance, Belonging

### Biography

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# Introduction

In 2011, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain, under Archbishop Gregorios, published the *Divine Liturgy* as translated from ancient Greek to English by the priest Ephrem Lash.<sup>1</sup> The book, in a dark red cover, is small (slightly smaller than A5) and made to be held by parishioners during the service. Each spread of the book has the ancient Greek text on the left page and its English translation on the right page, as well as instructions for the choreography of the rituals and clearly marked gaps for the parts of the liturgy that change depending on the date. Underlining the significance of English as a common language in Orthodox Christian parishes of the United Kingdom, this small red book is acquired by most of the parishioners of St Andrew's Orthodox Church in Edinburgh, Scotland, from the very beginning of their participation in the services. The congregation does not need the book, however, to contribute actively to the chanting, a tradition that has long since faded out, giving to the choir and deacon the role of living bridge between congregation and clergy. The parishioners of St Andrew's use this small red book to ease their unfamiliarity with the worshipping environment by following the texts on the right page; the text on the left pages may not relate to their background, which for some worshippers is Russian, British or Rumanian or even French or Chinese and therefore associated with languages that are not traditionally connected to Orthodox culture.

Books have played an important role in Orthodox Christian rituals since Byzantine times.<sup>2</sup> Handwritten manuscripts preceded the invention of typography, which enabled the texts' production and wider dissemination, while their liturgical use has developed and become an important way of communicating knowledge. Religious books can be divided into two main categories: books of personal/private/individual prayer and books used during services of collective prayer – the Divine Liturgy, Matins, Vespers and so forth. In both cases, there is a performative element in the way the book as an object is carried and used, contributing to the materiality of private prayer spaces and the church. In the case of collective services, the rituals and the texts constantly interact.

In this article, I examine the role of language in the creation of inclusive religious auralities at the multinational Orthodox Community of St Andrew in Edinburgh. With the term “aurality”, I describe the materiality of a place's

1 [https://orthodoxwiki.org/EPHREM\\_\(LASH\)](https://orthodoxwiki.org/EPHREM_(LASH)) [accessed 20 July 2020].

2 Aston 2004, Földvály 2008.



intangible qualities such as sound, odours and light, which while not perceived visually, still contribute to the phenomenal spatiality of the examined places, filling the spaces between tangible components.<sup>3</sup> In unpacking the transformation of text into sound, I argue about a repositioning of personal and collective identity, from a more ethnic understanding to a more inclusive one, emerging during the religious activities.

This is not the first time that social fields such as transnational religious places have been approached from the perspective of the constitution of identity.<sup>4</sup> People choose to participate in the activities of a religious institution in the hope of a more settled sense of belonging, which is connected to deep existential quests and their inherited backgrounds. Since late 1990s, sociological scholarship has emphasised the need for the “transtemporal” and “translocative” in the creation of new geographies through religion by migrants.<sup>5</sup> In these geographies, the locals and non-locals are interconnected in practices that re-enact identity, an identity that goes beyond the limits of the country in which they co-exist to reach the home countries of the migrants as well.<sup>6</sup> Ethnographic research via interviews and observation and the study of archival material and secondary sources are combined here to further unfold these processes.

The St Andrew’s community in Edinburgh was established in 1948 by the Polish priest John Sotnikov for a very small congregation, composed mainly of Polish soldiers from Stalin’s forces who had been demobilised in Britain at the end of the Second World War. Russians, Greeks and very few British were the yeast of today’s 200-strong congregation, who come from around thirty countries. Because of the differences in national and cultural backgrounds, language has become one of the key components for the establishment and development of the community. A series of literary transformative processes has created a field of worshipping interactions between members of the parish in various spaces, many of which were not constructed for religious purposes. Translations, transliterations and musical transcriptions have been combined to produce the soundscape needed for a transnational community that while not unique, is also not what might be considered a “mainstream” Orthodox Christian congregation. In the St Andrew’s community, the minority

3 On aurality, atmosphere, ambience, attunement see Griffero 2014, Böhme 2018 and Pérez-Gómez 2016.

4 Levitt/Glick 2004.

5 Tweed 2009.

6 Levitt/Glick 2004, 1027.

citizens are the majority and locals (from the United Kingdom) are only one group within it.

Focusing on the role of books in Orthodox Christian praxis, I argue that the amalgamation of two ways of ordering the services, a more normative one (based on formal documents) and a more organic one (based on the parish's needs) has allowed the community to produce its own soundscape. In its aural experience (heard or performed), "identity" as traditionally understood, mainly related to the nation state and ethnic background, is repositioned as a multi-vocal condition. This repositioning is the result of controlled and flexible transformations that respect the background of individuals and groups that are part of the community.

## Placing Books in Order

In Orthodox Christian tradition, a rotating four-sided lectern has been gradually developed as a furniture piece that holds the books at an angle in order that the members of the choir can more easily read the parts of the liturgies.<sup>7</sup> Placed on the angled surfaces of the lectern, variously sized books can be read undisturbed by a group of people standing in front of them or around them. The rotating lectern focuses the gaze of the cantors and facilitates the transformation of the texts into sound in the form of prose reading, melismatic reading and chanting. Due to the antiphonic character of the Byzantine Liturgy, traditionally we find two lecterns in the zone in front of the sanctuary, providing the conditions for discursive chanting and reading. In the St Andrew's parish, there is only one lectern, usually placed where there is sufficient space for the cantors to stand.

The number of books and use of rotating lecterns follow the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition that organises its calendar according to a "feast cycle" based on the events of the life of Christ, the Mother of God and the Saints. The main theme is the Resurrection of Christ, celebrated at Easter, the first Sunday after the full moon of the vernal equinox. Thus, a "moving" festival cycle related to the fifty days of the preparation for Easter (Great Lent) and the fifty days

7 The introduction of this piece to Orthodox Christian worship cannot be precisely dated. It is not included in the sketches and descriptions made by 18th-century Russian pilgrim to Mount Athos Vasil Grigorovich Barsky in his depictions of liturgical practice at the Great Lavra Monastery. Earlier depictions and written descriptions contain *diskeli* ("of two legs"), which is closer to a typical music lectern.

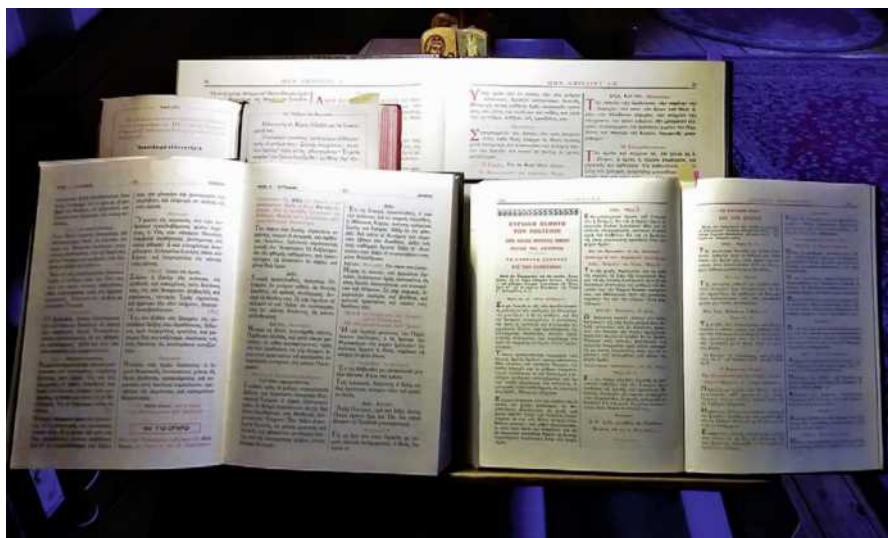


Fig. 1: Books arranged for Matins on a Lenten Sunday, at the chapel of St Andrew's in April 2020. (Photo by the author)

after it (Pentecost) is combined with a fixed cycle. The main “canonical” (and fixed) calendar is organised around the “Twelve Feasts” (*Dodekaorton*), twelve to sixteen key events of the Orthodox faith celebrated on fixed days. Furthermore, each day of the week (recollecting the seven days of the creation) is dedicated to an important religious event. This normative order of time and services is based on formal documents, named *Typikon*, that are the products of synodical meetings and established traditions.<sup>8</sup>

Space and time are incorporated in the liturgical use of the book. In figure 1 we see the book arrangement for Matins on a Lenten Sunday in April 2020 at the chapel of St Andrew's. The books are placed in the order to be used, merging the moving and fixed calendars. Hence, books such as the *Triodion* (The Three Odes) and *Pentikostarion* (The Book of the Fifty Days) refer to the texts to be read during the Great Lent and the Fifty Days that follow it, until the celebration of Pentecost. In parallel, we have books of the fixed liturgical calendar, such as the *Menaion* (The Book for the Month) or the *Festal Menaion* (important feasts of the fixed calendar). *Typikon* suggests a complex system of liturgical worship in which these books are combined in different ways to facilitate the readings of the services. Very few prayers are read “silently” by

<sup>8</sup> Getcha 2009.

the priest during the services, leaving the emphasis on the sonorous expression of the books and including these moments of silence in the animation of the ritual soundscape.

In figure 2 an A4 sheet of paper of Choir instructions for Palm Sunday in April 1988 is depicted. It is signed by the priest-in-charge then, Archimandrite John Maitland Moir. It is a collage of hymns (*antiphons*) in English, Greek and Russian and instructions about Matins and the Liturgy. A closer look reveals again a merging of moving and fixed calendars: the choir is to read from the *Lenten Triodion* and from books usually used for the Divine Liturgy (fixed calendar). Different languages and different calendars are all depicted on this compressed transcription of the Liturgy.

In the case of St Andrew's, we find an amalgamation of two kinds of normative liturgical orders: the *Typikon* of Constantinople, practised in Greece and the churches under the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and the *Typikon* of Jerusalem, practised in Russia and Balkan countries such as Serbia. This amalgamation is based on a careful organisation of the components of the services to meet the worshipping needs of the community, greatly informed by its demographic dynamics. Three languages are used: Greek (mainly related to the *Typikon* of Constantinople), Old Slavonic (connected to the *Typikon* of Jerusalem) and English, as the common language of the different national groups. In parallel, two musical notations are deployed, the European (used for the polyphonic Slavonic chanting) and the Byzantine (used for the Byzantine chanting).

The parallel use of the two *typika* introduces a temporal dimension. The *Typikon* of Jerusalem still follows the Julian calendar, which was replaced by the Gregorian calendar (which we still use) during the sixteenth century. The former is currently thirteen days behind the latter. The periods of daylight and darkness are divided into twelve equal parts of one hour.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the division of Orthodox Christian music into eight modes (tones) influences the liturgical soundscape, as the chanting of each week of the year follows the sequence of the eight modes. At every ninth week, the musical tone goes back to the first, continuing a repetitive pattern that is interrupted by the moving elements of the festive calendar.

A closer look at the construction of this page of instructions introduces us to the way in which the community was established and developed. It is one of

9 For example, Christmas and the feast of the Holy Protection of the Theotokos (Pokrov in Slavonic) were worshipped in both the Old Calendar and the New Calendar. The feasts of St Nicholas and St Seraphim of Sarov were celebrated only in the Old Calendar.



four A4 sheets (as shown on the stapling at the upper left). Handwritten notes by the Archimandrite John Maitland Moir open the instructions, followed by pieces of copied liturgical books in different languages (Greek, Slavonic and English). The pieces have been hand cut and glued on the paper without attention to their visual/aesthetic impression, but in accurate liturgical order. The gaps between the glued cut-out pieces, given in black when photocopied, testify to the physical effort that was invested in making the document. The clarity in the instructions (expressed in the handwritten bridges between the pieces) and ritual order testify to the mental effort invested in collating the parts into a whole. The materiality of this physical-mental care, condensed in four A4 pages, makes us ask about the reasons for such a complex liturgical performance and about its organic development, and also how it was related to the specific liturgical space-time and linked to the normative attunement of the *typikon*.

Three priests-in-charge have had opportunity to develop the parish, making decisions about the spaces to be used as well as the order and character of the services.<sup>10</sup> While this article is not a chronological narrative of the parish, some indicative information is necessary at this point. Its founder, the priest John Sotnikov, was born in Russia<sup>11</sup> in 1905 and arrived in Great Britain as a soldier with Polish forces, which were disbanded in October 1946. In 1984 the Archimandrite John Maitland Moir, who was born in Scotland in 1924 and was received into the Orthodox Church in 1981, became the priest-in-charge. After his death in 2013, Archimandrite Father Raphael Pavouris, who had joined the community as a priest in 2004, became the priest-in-charge. In 2007 Archimandrite Avraamy Neyman (British of Polish origin and Orthodox of Russian tradition) came to the parish and a British convert, Father Luke Jeffery, was ordained a deacon in 2008 and then a priest in 2015. Father Antonios, a Greek immigrant, was ordained a deacon in July 2018, having been a parishioner for nine years, and then a priest in 2020. The multinational background of the clergy reflects the demographics of the congregation.

The Edinburgh congregation was very small at the beginning. For several years, the services were held in Dean Parish Church. In the 1970s Father John Sotnikov started using a side chapel of the Scottish Episcopal Church of St Michael and All Saints at Tollcross. Two Liturgies were held each month in the city and additional Liturgies were held further afield. Father Sotnikov had

10 The priest John Raffan was priest-in-charge for a short period in 2013 but did not have opportunity to contribute to the development of the parish.

11 Born in Vilnius, now in Lithuania, which was then in Russia and was later occupied by Poland.



previously travelled and served in Galashiels, in the Cala Sona refugee camp in Ayrshire, and in camps in Perthshire and East Lothian. At the time Stalin was in complete control of the USSR, the Baltic States, Poland and most of Eastern Europe. The men and women in the camps could not return to their homes as, in the words of parishioner Stephen Gellaitry, “there was no home to return to”.<sup>12</sup> Those who returned to the USSR were either executed or sent to the gulag. In this geopolitical environment of exile and re-settling in a new land, the newly established small parish was composed mainly of Polish from the Polish army forces under General Anders, Ukrainians and some Serbs who lived in Scotland in the post-war years. Russian and Greek spouses of Scots were also included in its members, such as Evgenia Fraser (author of *The House by the Dvina*), Sophia Lavranou (a Greek immigrant from Corfu, Greece)<sup>13</sup> and Marili MacVicar (from Corfu, the Greek wife of a Scottish sheriff).<sup>14</sup> The Greek families were fully welcomed into the community, which followed the Russian, Old Slavonic, style, as John Sotnikov never learned English well.<sup>15</sup> He introduced the recitation of the Creed and Lord’s Prayer in Greek, English and Slavonic and insisted that some part of the Liturgy be said in the various languages of members of the congregation. Hence, even from its establishment, the parish showed inclusivity and acceptance of difference in nationality and cultural background, which gradually would develop into defining qualities of the parish.

In the 1980s an influx of young professionals and students from Greece brought new active members to the community. Many of them settled in Edinburgh, where they made their homes and raised their families. Gradually the number of parishioners was increasing. The community started to need a “church of its own”,<sup>16</sup> a permanent location for services and relevant activities (instruction, Bible study, communal meals). From a more fluid fabric of religious practices, the community now developed stability. The transformation of a house at 23a George Square into a church and a hall in 1986 was followed in 2004 by the transformation of a former parish school into community premises that continue to serve the church today.

This stability was the result of innovations that were introduced by Father John Maitland Moir and consistently maintained to open a field of devotion

12 Interview with Mr Stephen Gellaitry, April and May 2020.

13 Edensor/Kelly 1990, 96–102.

14 McVicar 1991.

15 Interviews with Mr Thomas Francis Nicholas Donald, Mrs Marina Donald and Mr Stephen Gellaitry, April and May 2020.

16 Interview with Mr Stephen Gellaitry, April and May 2020.

that was essentially based on the worshipping interaction between the members of an Orthodox community. The defining element for membership was faithful understanding of the world, with nationality or social hierarchies less significant. Full participation in the sacraments was given to Orthodox Christians, but nothing prevented the non-Orthodox from being involved in the life of the parish. As the priest John Maitland Moir used to say, “All Orthodox Christians and those interested in Orthodoxy are welcomed.”<sup>17</sup> Matins and Vespers were added to the services, which were increased in frequency, taking place weekly with the exception of the first Sunday of every month, when Father John visited Orthodox Christians in other parts of Scotland, beyond Edinburgh and Glasgow. One of the most important changes that Father John instigated was a rotation of the languages to be used during the three Liturgies held in Edinburgh. It was the first time that almost the whole Liturgy was provided in English once a month.

The alternation in liturgical styles and languages has been kept since then, disclosing the significance of the text in the consecration of a space. The text of the Liturgy, including parts of the Gospel and the Acts or the Epistles of the Apostles, is performed through the rituals. The Slavonic style in English, the Byzantine style in Greek and English, the recitation of the Creed and Lord’s Prayer in Russian, Greek, Romanian and English (in every Liturgy) fill the spaces in-between objects and people. The mixing of languages, with English playing a prominent role, has added to the detaching of Christian faith from any sense of nationality. The missionary character of the parish adds another angle: for some people, mainly converts, this is the only Orthodox atmosphere that they have known and the one in which they converted.<sup>18</sup>

## Mobility

In order for inclusivity to be enacted, new “books” had to be made. These were folders in which the services were transformed from ethnic into trans-border through the careful collaging process that we encountered earlier. These folders are big enough to be placed on the lectern for the Choir to see, while also

17 From recollections of the priest Raphael Pavouris during an interview with him in July 2020.

18 The foundation and development of the Greek School is a characteristic case of negotiating the connection of the parish to a specific nationality or Orthodox culture through language. We should note that in this instance Father John Maitland Moir encouraged other nationality groups to have schools on the church’s premises.

First-called a - mong the A - po - stles and bro - ther of their lea -  
der, en - treat the Ma - ster of all to grant peace to the  
world, O An - drew, and to our souls great mer - cy.

Russian-style Tone 4:

First-called among the apostles /  
and brother of their leader, /  
entreat the Master of all /  
to grant peace to the world, O Andrew, //  
and to our souls great mercy.

First called a mong the a po stles  
and bro ther of their lea der  
en treat the ma ster of All to gra ant  
peace to the world O An drew and to  
our souls great me e e e ray

Fig. 3-4: A characteristic spread, from the folder of *The Divine Liturgy*.  
(Photos by the author)

considered essential objects for the worship of a service, as the most precise collection of the parish's textual material.

Figures 3–4 depict a characteristic spread of these books, from the folder of *The Divine Liturgy*. In it we find the *Apolytikion* of St Andrew (the festal hymn of the Saint) scored in three different ways: in European notation and Latin alphabet, in European notation and Greek alphabet, and in Byzantine notation and Latin alphabet. The *Apolytikion* of St Andrew is chanted during the first third of the Divine Liturgy and it is a fixed part of its order. The page is made to be read by people with different musical and linguistic knowledge. The spread was transcribed in both notations and languages by Dr George Nabil Habib and further edited by the Reader Gregory Gascoigne in the early and mid 1990s. Not necessarily professional musicians, they transcribed specific types of notation into other types of notation while in parallel translating from (ancient) Greek into English in a prosodic way. The lack of extensive musical education and the complexity of the project have led to an empirical blended methodology that remains “imperfect” in terms of scholarly or more clinical approaches, but is sufficiently flexible to adjust to diverse demographic dynamics as well as to the different spaces in which the community had to worship.

In parallel, figure 5 shows a page with the Beatitudes in Old Slavonic alphabet and music using European notation by Thomas Donald. All the transliteration from Slavonic to Latin was undertaken by Donald, and it was based on an abbreviated version of the Liturgy that Father John Sotnikov had previously created in order to accommodate the limited time for which the side chapel of St Michael and All Saints could be used. This abbreviated version is still used for the Slavonic parts of the Liturgy. In the transcription to European notation, one can also find connections to Episcopalian chanting, perhaps related to Donald's Episcopalian background as well as his contribution to the Edinburgh Royal Choral Union.

This blended methodology of adjusting to the changing needs of the community is also evident in alterations to the lectern. A characteristic Episcopalian church furnishing, the lectern we see in figure 6 was initially used as a typical musical unidirectional angled lectern. The photograph was taken on 19 October 1992, at the house on George Square whose basement was used at that time as a chapel. It is difficult to say when exactly the lectern was transformed into an Orthodox-like four-sided one, but it is very likely this transformation would have taken place at the time the chapel was moved to the ground floor of the house, as depicted in figure 7 (taken in 1995 or 1996). Ob-



### Antiphon 3 *Beatitudes*

Vo tsarstvi/Tvoyem pomyani nás Gospodi,/yegda pri-ideshi vo tsarstvi Tvoyem.

Blazheni/nischi douhom,/yako tyech yest' tsarstvo nebyes-noye.

Blazheni/plachouschi,/yako ti outye-shatsya.

Blazheni/krot-tsi,/yako ti naslyedyat zymlyou.

Blazheni/alchou-schi i zhazh-douschi pravdi,/yako ti nasit-yatsya.

Blazheni/milostivi,/yako ti pomilovani boudout.

Blazheni/chisti syerd-tsem,/yako ti Boga ouzryat.

Blazheni/mirotvortsui,/yako ti suinovye Bozhe narye-koutsya.

Blazheni/izgnani pravdui radi,/yako tyech yest' tsarstvo nebyes-noye.

Blazheni/yesty, yegda ponosyat vam,/i iz-zhenout, i rekout vsyak zol glagol na vui lzhauschye Myenye radi.

Radou-tisya/i vesyelitisa,/yako mzda vasha mnoga na nyebyesye.

### Sunday Introit

Pri-iditye, poklonimsya i pripadyem ko Christou.

Spasi nui, Suinye Bozhi, voskresui iz myert-vuich, poyou-schiya Ti, allilouia

### St Andrew

Yako apostolov pyervo-zvannui  
i verhovnago sou-schi brat.

Vladui-tse vsyech, Andrye-ye, molisya

mir vsyel-yennyel darovati,

i dousham nashuim veli-you milost'.

*First called among the Apo:les.*

Fig. 5: A page with the Beatitudes in Old Slavonic and European notation done by Thomas Francis Nicholas Donald. (Photo of the author)

jects such as the books and the lectern symbolise the significance of language in the constitution of religious place, as material expressions of its aurality.

In exploring how religious buildings contribute to soundscapes, architectural scholarship has largely focused on the acoustic qualities of the building itself, which may have religious symbolism. Thus, in *Sound and Space in Renaissance Venice*, Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti's examination of the



Fig. 6: A view from the chapel of St Andrew's, taken in 1992 in the basement of 23a George Square. On the left we see the Episcopalian lectern. (courtesy of St Andrew's Community)



Fig. 7: A photograph of the chapel on a Holy Friday service, taken during 1995 or 1996, when the chapel of St Andrew's had moved from the basement to the ground floor of 23a George Square. The same lectern is now transformed into a four-sided rotating one. (courtesy of St Andrew's Community)



relationship between architectural design and sacred music in Renaissance Venice is combined with scientific explorations and choral experiments in the spaces themselves. In addition, the work of art historian Bissera Pentcheva and the musicologist Alexander Lingas explores the way Byzantine chanting would have been heard through computationally simulated spatio-temporal environments.<sup>19</sup> Coming from a purely scientific or mathematical understanding of music, these studies are limited to the qualities of architecture that are shared with this approach to music, a more algorithmic and technical approach to acoustics, that while valuable does not fully describe the materiality of the atmosphere and its bodily poetics.

Here, a bottom-up methodology is adopted<sup>20</sup> to capture glimpses of the soundscape related to the book's use as a performative object. Starting from the people and the processes followed to fulfil the intentions of the clergy-in-charge, the spaces are read through the creation, maintenance and evolution of the soundscape itself, a soundscape that reflects the identity of a transnational community whose members have settled in a new land.<sup>21</sup> It is really difficult to describe in text something intended to be lived (either heard or performed), something so integral to the choreography of the services. But isn't that always the case when scholarship seeks to translate ambient atmosphere into hermeneutic narratives? Even online streaming provides a different soundscape from the actual one, translated from the phenomenal to the virtual.<sup>22</sup> Writing about the soundscape of this community allows us to adopt a distance from it and to think about the effort that is invested to transform the text – the language that is performed in a typical service – into an ambient mosaic through translation, transliteration and transcription. The book itself is a space of interaction. Inked symbols, gaps and lines are all interrelated on the white pages. As an instrument of attunement, the book, or the folder in our case, enables the performance and perception of an inclusive soundscape.

Human praxis is at the core of phenomenal study of sacred space filled with voices through time. Place-making is an “embodied practice” and “the out-

19 Pentcheva 2017a, 2017b.

20 For additional use of bottom-up methodology for religious musical environments see Lind 2012.

21 This methodology contrasts with the top-down application of a pre-formed theoretical framework or methodological model to a specific case study.

22 A characteristic Divine Liturgy according to the order of the folders can be accessed in the services live-streamed during the COVID-19 lockdown: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H\\_1GIDh0dgo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_1GIDh0dgo) [accessed 1 August 2020].

come of human engagement”.<sup>23</sup> The emergence of a sacred place is, as Claudia Moser and Cecelia Feldman argue, “the outcome of actions, intentions and recollections – it is the result of past and present interactions among humans, material implements, architecture and landscape”.<sup>24</sup> Through the reciprocal relationship between the ritual and the text, the physical context is transformed into a religious place. The environment for these actions plays an important role, re-defined through their performance, and hence re-designed in accordance with the choreographies taking place in it. The choreographies are phrases performed through voice and body movement. For Tonino Griffero, atmospheric situations, such as the one described here, involve a vagueness that is difficult to fully grasp and order.

One might wonder [...] what the criteria of identity and identifiability of atmospheres are, [...] whether they constitute a semantic or *de dicto* vagueness (the atmospheric description designates a given situation in a given way) or instead, as we like to think, a metaphysical or *de re* vagueness (the atmospheric description designates a vague entity in a precise way), analogous to that attributable to many other quasi-things, such as colours, shadows etc.<sup>25</sup>

This inherent vagueness of ambience is what has allowed the transforming of texts into sound to play a significant role in the resulting inclusive soundscape. Using mainly English, the services followed the normative choreographies and texts, but the soundscape cannot be fully connected to one of the two *typika* used or to a specific national or cultural tradition. People feel connected with parts of these acts through their own language, the type of liturgical music used back home, or the movements of the clergy that are common to all Orthodox religious traditions. The whole of the service cannot be attributed to one of the established types of Orthodox Christian Liturgy. The liturgical atmosphere always feels slightly incomplete, allowing for new voices to enter into it. Interestingly, the use of folders instead of books embodies this incompleteness and openness to new additions that are related to the needs of the parish. The clips are always waiting to be opened, allowing pages to be added or removed.

The social aspect of the religious place is important to its constitution and the development of its meaning and character, as this case reveals. Kim Knott

23 Moser/Feldman 2014.

24 Moser/Feldman 2014, 1.

25 Griffero 2014, 12.

has argued that “the spatial underpinning of religion is witnessed at all levels, from the expression of hierarchical relations (divine, clerical, lay) in the physical enactment of the Eucharist in Christianity, to the local, national and global extension of religious structures and institutions by their repeated reproduction.”<sup>26</sup>

Migration, diaspora and transnationalism<sup>27</sup> are combined in the inclusivity of the soundscape examined in this article. It is very difficult to live this soundscape without thinking of these three concepts as integral. It is impossible to get into its spatial reality without grasping its openness and mobility. This controlled and careful openness and inclusivity allow for the vagueness of its aurality to be a welcome part of the services. They allow for “mistakes”, incompatibilities, dissonances, slight diversions from a nominalist following of the order to be considered not wrong but rather a creative practice with its own coherence and methodological value.

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26 Knott 2005, 21.

27 Vertovec 2004.

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## **Media Reviews**





## Book Review

# Christopher Partridge / Marcus Moberg (eds.), The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music

London / New York: Bloomsbury, 2018, xiv + 425 pages,  
ISBN: 978-1-350-08262-5

Elvis Presley, with nimbus and royal crown, a winged and flamed heart on his chest, his hand raised in a gesture of blessing and his initials to the left and right of his head – this depiction by illustrator Jim Starr appears on the cover of the *Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*, edited by Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg. The aim of the handbook is to provide a broad overview of the research field of religion and popular music. The task is not easy. The field of popular music and religion is multi-layered and touches not only on definitions of popular music but also on demarcations between religious and secular – or on the blurring of this boundary. A secular song can arouse religious feelings, just as a song created in a religious context can become a viral hit; a star can become a kind of saint, as Jim Starr demonstrated with his Elvis image.

The book opens with an introduction by the editors, who first emphasise that the field of religion and popular music has gained less attention than the empirically observable (or listen-able) interrelations of religion and popular culture more broadly. How true! All the more important, then, is a publication such as the *Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*. As always for such broad topics, the editors were faced with identifying a useful approach to a complex field. They decided to divide the book into an introduction and three parts.

In the introduction, the editors situate the contributions to the handbook, especially those in Parts II and III, according to a typology proposed by B. D.

Forbes.<sup>1</sup> Forbes distinguished four possible perspectives on relationships between popular culture and religion: religion in popular culture, popular culture in religion, popular culture as religion, religion and popular culture in dialogue. In addition, the editors rightly emphasise the contextuality of methodologies, concepts and categories as well as the cross-disciplinary questions that the handbook poses. For example, they raise the important issue of an appropriate definition of “religion” for this field of research and ask to what extent the term “sacred” is more open than “religious”: “the sacred [...] concerns those ideas which exert a profound moral claim over people’s lives” (7).

Part I, “The Study of Religion and Popular Music: Theoretical Perspectives, Methodologies and Issues”, brings together five contributions that address central theoretical, methodological or conceptual issues in religion and popular music: ethnography (Andy Bennett), emotion and meaning (Christopher Partridge), protest (Ian Peddie), censorship (Michael Drewett) and feminism and gender (Alison Stone). This part of the book develops central processes in the interrelation between religion and popular music across genres and religious traditions. These articles emphasise the diverse social meaning-making processes of popular music and reflect an academic view. It is particularly positive that the contributions in this part highlight the transgressiveness of popular music and religion: both popular music and religion are subject to processes of negotiation, for example regarding censorship (chapter 4). Popular music (as well as religion) can reflect and legitimise dominant ideas – as discussed by Stone (chapter 5) – but also challenge them. And sometimes both processes happen at the same time. The contributions in Part I help frame the following articles and provide reference points across the other parts of the book.

Part II, “Religious Perspectives”, focuses on the interrelation between popular music and religious traditions, specifically Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Japanese religion, Chinese religion, Paganism, Occultism and Caribbean religions (in this order). The individual contributions and their insights are fascinating. A close look at individual religious traditions shows concisely how popular music can emerge in religious traditions, how it can be used by religions to convey worldviews and to evoke emotions, how it is shaped by religious ideas and how certain religious symbols, motifs and narratives are popularised through music and, in part, received again and again.

A point to ponder in relation to this part of the book, however: what we usually subsume under “popular music” originated in the “Western” cultural

1 Forbes 2000.

context, and it is noticeable in this part that Christianity is treated particularly prominently. Not only does Part II begin with Christianity, but four articles are dedicated to this particular tradition (while one of them discusses biblical references in popular music, the New Testament receives more attention than the Hebrew Bible), while the other religious traditions – certainly no less complex – are discussed in one contribution each. One might experiment by reading the contributions in Part II from back to front in order to gain a more unusual view of the interplay between popular music and religious traditions.

Part III, “Genres”, is dedicated to different genres and their interrelations with religion: Heavy Metal, Pop and Rock, Punk and Hardcore, Reggae, Folk Music, Country Music, Electronic Dance Music, Blues and Jazz, Psychedelic Music, Rap and Hip Hop, Goth Music, Ambient Music and Film Music (in this order). These very enjoyable articles convey focused and telling information and great examples that allow the reader to connect the thoughts raised in Part I with different genres and to discover similarities as well as differences in the relationships between religion and specific genres.

The book ends with notes to every chapter, a collective bibliography (which makes it more challenging to select only one contribution to read with students), a discography, a filmography and a very helpful index.

The *Handbook of Religion and Popular Music* is a rich resource that explains the complex subject area in a multifaceted way and with the help of gripping examples. As one reads the book from beginning to end, the topic’s complexity becomes very clear, but individual articles can also be picked out easily because they are self-contained. Despite their brevity, the individual contributions provide an excellent first insight into a specific field of research and offer good starting points for further research. For me, however, the stimulating Part I could have been expanded a little more. The body does appear in some contributions within the first part (especially the one on gender), but a separate chapter on the body as the basis of religion and music would have been exciting. I would also have liked to delve more deeply into a transdisciplinary view of (religious?) values and norms conveyed through music, a topic on which chapter 4 touches, but with a focus on censorship. I recognize, however, that this handbook does not aim to cover every possible topic or angle, but instead provides initial impulses for further research. And it succeeds very well in doing so.

The *Handbook of Religion and Popular Music* is useful reading material for all those interested in music and religion, for example scholars in Religious Studies and Cultural Studies, musicologists, journalists, artists and students

across a range of fields. It can surely be called a standard work for introduction to this subject area. It is very suitable for teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The only (small) disadvantage is that as a handbook in the classic style, it approaches its subject by means of texts and some pictures. Music examples are not integrated. I recommend readers ensure they have internet access within reach as they digest this book, in order that they can listen to the songs mentioned.

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## Book Review

# Christopher Ocker / Susanne Elm (eds.), Material Christianity Western Religion and the Agency of Things

Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of  
Traditions and Cultures 32, Cham: Springer Nature  
Switzerland, 2020, 249 pages, ISBN 978-3-030-32017-1

*Material Christianity: Western Religion and the Agency of Things* is a collection of essays that focuses on the role of things in shaping religious practices, identities and thinking. The chapters analyse different dimensions of materiality from various disciplinary perspectives – e.g. history, history of art, theology and religious studies, South Asian studies – bringing together approaches and methodologies from a broad range of epochs and cultures. In this sense, the title is misleading, since the spectrum of case studies is broader than Christianity or Western religion, which remains a diffuse category. Highlighting the crucial role and effect of things on practices and beliefs, the book shows in an exemplary way how detailed analysis of individual or shared religious ritual and thinking in past and present resists academic generalisations and conceptualisations.

The volume is organised into two distinct parts. The essays in the first part are categorised under the title “Bodies”. In her contribution on “Cimabue’s True Crosses in Arezzo & Florence”, Henrike Lange analyses crucifixes at the heart of various material practices. Lange considers selected works, following their long histories through phases of material degeneration and restoration. The case of the crucifix is particularly significant since this object performs visually and materially the incarnation of Christ, the material practice at the core of Christianity. Christopher Ocker, who is also a co-editor of the volume, analyses in “Resacralising the Media of Grace” the role of materiality within

various streams of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Focussing on the tension between objects and symbols, between imagination and the physical world, between memory and real presence, he highlights the role of bread and wine in articulating new and controversial approaches to the body of Christ. Within the structure of the book, these first two contributions are complementary, since they deal with different material agencies that shape the relationship between believers and Christ as well as the practices of forming, regulating and controlling the effects of things in the relationship between communities and the divine. Mark A. Peterson's contribution, "Puritanism and Refinement in Early New England: Reflections on Communion and Silver", analyses silver objects used in a religious tradition that is not usually associated with refinement and splendour. In comparing the recurrence and function of precious objects in both religious rituals and domestic practices, he questions scholarly assumptions about the radical condemnation of luxury. The article shows how a culture of refinement was compatible with Puritanism because the objects could express a communitarian and personal link to revelation. Samuel F. Robinson's "The Problem of the Flesh: Vegetarianism and Edible Matters" focusses on controversial interpretations of food practices in the 17th and 18th centuries. Discussing vegetarian diets promoted by Roger Crab and later by Thomas Tryon, the chapter shows how readings of the agency of food relate to various theologies of the body in the early modern era.

The second part of the volume is dedicated to "Spaces". In "San Diego the Pamatácuaro: A Mountain Shrine in Colonial Mexico", Martin Austin Nesvig discusses the role of materiality in a devotional practice in a remote location. By erecting a shrine, a late 16th-century community unfamiliar with the political, religious and linguistic culture of the colonial power shaped the cult of the Catholic saint associated with their town. The result is a peculiar form of devotion based on the needs of and beliefs rooted in this place; material agency led in this case to the autonomous agency of the inhabitants. The following chapter takes the readers to a different place and time: leaving early modern Mexico they arrive in contemporary California. In "Labyrinths as an Embodied Pilgrimage Experience: An Ignatian Case Study", Kathryn Barush reflects on the relationship between the spatial materiality of a labyrinth – an obligatory, delimited path with strong metaphorical significance that has been used in Christianity since the 4th century – and the bodily experience of walking as a form of religious reflection. The last two chapters are dedicated to the intriguing question of pantheism from the perspective of philosophy of religion. Raphael Lataster and Purushottana Bilimoria, in "Pantheism and



Its Place in the History of Religion”, and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, in “Pantheism Monstrosities: On Race, Gender, Divinity and Dirt”, explore concepts of pantheism and ask whether resisting the clear separation between an external divine entity and the world could change how we look at materiality. Following such pantheistic worldviews, material agency and its efficacy cannot be considered mere products of humans but stand rather as independent entities in religious meaning-making processes.

These short summaries of the essays collected in this volume emphasise the challenges linked to fundamental questions about how we describe, reconstruct and conceptualise religion. First, the volume shows the crucial significance of historical and contemporary case studies for understanding the agencies of things, individuals, collectives and religious experts in constituting religious practices and beliefs. In doing so, it highlights the challenge of defining appropriate categories for comparing particular and unique constellations in order to achieve a general reflection on material agency. If material agency is to be taken as independent of human activity, concepts like “religion” or “tradition” will need to be discussed anew. Along this line, the volume notes the problematic role of anthropocentric scholarly approaches throughout the history of research into religion and religious history. Thus the editors argue: “The issue moves from a question of how religion reflects social order, human imagination, and culture, to a question of how religious things and performances belong to an ecology that produces human nature, society, and culture. For culture is no longer the mere product of human action and phantasy. Like self and society, it is generated simultaneously by willful people acting in space and time *and* by physical things” (9).

The case studies gathered in this volume are not linked by a common theoretical approach or methodology and from this point of view, the book is no more than a collection. Nevertheless, it offers an intriguing contribution to a new approach to the study of religion where concepts that are often taken for granted, such as “agency”, “subject” and “object”, are opened up for new consideration. “Religion” becomes a less and less clear concept to delimit anthropocentric constructions of transcendence and the divine. Rather, it is transformed into a conceptual map with which one can order and connect questions about practices that characterise cultures and societies. The book as a whole can be used as an introduction to the field of material studies in religion; the individual contributions may also be of interest to scholars familiar with the specific contexts.

## Book Review

# Frank G. Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine* A New Systematic Theology of Video Games

London: Routledge, 2019, 265 pages,  
ISBN: 978-1-138-57956-9

With the series “New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies” Routledge is publishing new approaches in well-established academic disciplines. Amongst the volumes published in this series so far is Frank Bosman’s *Gaming and the Divine*, and not only does it fit perfectly with the purpose of the series, it is in itself (spoiler alert!) absolutely worth reading.

In his introduction, Bosman establishes the connection between computer games and theology using an episode of *Assassins Creed Rouge*, which thematizes the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. He then notes popular misconceptions about the personality of gamers (3) and alerts readers to a blind spot about (serious) theological topics in computer games. Bosman’s discussion of the state of research shows not only great competence but also a high level of experience with the products he is analysing. Yet for me, as a fundamental theologian, his next step is even more important. He discusses the value of computer games as a *locus theologicus*, referring to Cano’s definition from 1563 and arguing for its applicability to the topic of this book (6). In the following chapter, he even describes video gaming as a religious act: “The act of playing particular games can, in some specific cases, be interpreted as a religious act in itself” (8).

Chapters 1 and 2 contain what Bosman calls “Fundamentals”. He presents a “Theology of Culture” and a “Study of Games”, both urgently needed because of the diverging terminology in scholarly discussion. Here Bosman’s systematic focus becomes obvious. In his discussion of contemporary cul-

tural theology, he shows profound knowledge of historical proposals (e.g. *logoi spermatikoi* or *praeparatio evangelica*, 20–25) and of the contemporary approaches of Moltmann and Tillich. After a reference to Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, which pledges the Catholic Church to read the signs of the times, the author describes the two main positions of “God” in the modern world: Nietzsche's “dead God” and the “hidden God” that Bosman prefers, noting “the Western world is the exception to the world's rule” that being religious is self-evident (31). This enables Bosman to state that the “veiled God” is still “Creator, Savior and Whole-Maker [and] still revealing himself to his creatures” (32), yet in new and sometimes surprising forms that are, he concedes, to be critically discussed.

In the section that follows, Bosman defines what he understands as video games. He points out the importance of textuality (40–41): in light of their communication potential, video games qualify as texts. These digital, interactive, playable and narrative texts (43) communicate meaning and are objects of interpretation.

The following paragraphs describe the methodology Bosman proposes: a four-step process of “internal reading” (playing the game), “internal research” (collecting all available in-game information), “external reading” (cross-linking intermedial relationships) and “external research” (gathering additional information about the game and its background). This method enables the identification and examination of five forms of religion in any given video game: material religion (the explicit occurrence of religion), referential religion (allusions to religious traditions in the real world), reflexive religion (“the reflection on existential notions that are traditionally associated with religion within the game itself”, 49), ritual religion (the involvement of the player's avatar in what is usually associated with religious practice) and gaming as religion (the experience of gaming provides the player with feelings usually associated with religious practices).

Chapters 3 to 8 discuss the classical treatises of dogmatic theology through the lens of video games, illustrating the main theses with references to representative games. In chapter 3, on creational theology, Bosman discusses “the three divine attributes”, omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence (60) and points out that these are also the attributes of the “god-gamer”, but only in an imperfect manner, such that the latter is more similar to the gnostic demiurge than to the Christian God, a diagnosis applicable for both the player and the developer of the game. The author then unfolds the Genesis creation myth and points out that while the Genesis narrative holds that the human

being is made in the likeness of God, even most scholars in theology do not share this view anymore. What if one applies this changed perspective to the interpretation of games? Here a core question pops up almost casually: “Does the player and/or the developer share with his or her digital followers the ability to establish and maintain relationships with one another [...] and do the digital followers have this ability among themselves?” (67). The ontological status of the game as an existing relation between the programmer, the player and the “product” is worth considering and has indeed extensive consequences for both theology and philosophy. The humans involved could possibly be considered “created co-creators” (68).

Chapter 4, on Christology, draws on the expected “messianic aspects of the heroes of many video games” (77), but Bosman adds another perspective by pointing to the legend of St. Christopher. This type of reference avoids the problem that arises from Christ-like messianic interpretations of the protagonist of a game (almost all of these figures have substantial attributes and/or tasks that could be interpreted as supporting such a view) by shifting the key role to the player. He or she is enabled to “become Christophoric” (91). Yet how is the necessary prerequisite of something Christomorphic to be integrated into the (at least in most cases) very violent protagonists; although Bosman dedicates the next paragraphs to “The Christophoric Player: Descending” (92), the reviewer is not (yet) completely convinced.

Chapters 5 through 7 are dedicated to theological anthropology, theodicy – the problem of evil – and ethics respectively.

Chapter 8 focuses on what in classical dogmatics is the treatise of eschatology. Unlike in real life, in gaming death is an experience the player usually undergoes repeatedly. It is a feedback mechanism of almost any game (172). Death is the consequence of failure; those who succeed can win the game or at least solve the next puzzle. This progression is in sharp contrast to the concept of death as an absolute end in (real) secular life. Even though there is a slight similarity – in both cases the situation is out of the player’s control – the identification of player and avatar ends but can easily be restored either by restarting the level or by loading a saved game status. Bosman supplies a table that shows the variability in integrating the idea of death in a game (174), unfolding the concepts on the next pages (175–192). Then, interestingly, he brings up the topic of death as a result of sin and refers explicitly to Romans 5:12 – a theological reflection of high quality connected to the body-soul problem (197).

Chapter 9 is somewhat different. Not only is it the longest chapter in the book, but whereas the preceding chapters mirror the core treatises of dog-

matics, this one is – at least in the European tradition – genuine fundamental theology. Here, Bosman engages with the critique of religion found especially in the aggressive (and often not well-founded) diction of the “new atheists” (205) and identifies five categories, again based on extensive references to games, of religion as fraud, as blind obedience, as the source of violence, as madness and as an instrument of oppression (206–240). He concludes the chapter with thoughts on how to deal with this challenge and pleads for a digital iconoclasm as a befitting strategy. His interpretation of iconoclasm offers new elements and refers to the shattering of religious idols (including false images of God). Bosman suggests that players integrate the inherent critique of religion in the games and use them to “critically examine their own collective and individual behaviour and history” (243).

In his conclusion, Bosman comes back to his two hypotheses from the introduction (video games as genuine *loci theologici* and video gaming as a potentially religious act). He finds them validated and adds that the player does not have to be aware of the implications he has carved out in this book. He draws parallels between the Donatist dispute and the orthodox characteristics of a sacrament (in both Catholic and Protestant traditions), finally stating that video games have sacramental potential (256): “They are new vehicles of God’s self-revelation and grace [...] God did not die; He has been hiding himself, waiting to be found by the gamer.”

I am impressed by this book. Bosman demonstrates not only praiseworthy scholarship and a talent for systematic thinking, but also an instinct for burning questions. Above all, he draws on plentiful resources from his own experience, being a gamer himself.

Yet there are some issues that dampen my enthusiasm somewhat, most of them minor, such as the dating of the rise of liberation theology (15) or a less than convincing definition of the terms “ethics” and “moral” (esp. 155–158). In terms of ethics, an additional challenge would be to explore the behaviour of players not only in-game, but also in their game-related practices in real life. Do they use a legal copy of the game, a walkthrough or a savegame editor? Even though these aspects are not strictly in-game, it would be very interesting to have at least some paragraphs on them in the next edition of this book. And how about illustrations? The print version of the book does not include a single screenshot. This absence is a pity, because video games offer plenty of opportunities to illustrate the theses Bosman develops.

My major concern is Bosman’s conclusion about the potential sacramentality of games (255–256). I am not convinced by his arguments. Even if one

were to concede that playing a game might have sacramental quality, a major problem remains: at least according to Catholic theology, the sacraments and sacramentals require a conscious decision from the persons involved, i. e. of the priest and the receiver (or their godparent). To administer a sacrament without this conscious engagement is not only forbidden but also threatens its validity; consequently, unknowing participation in a sacrament or even a sacramental by playing a video game seems impossible to the reviewer. Furthermore, both sacraments and sacramentals usually have to be celebrated in highly ritualized forms. Even though the author offers a suggestive argument, I cannot follow him in this last step, and at present I do not see any way of overcoming that hesitation.

Frank Bosman's *Gaming and the Divine* is a book worth reading and what is more, a book worth buying. I have learned much from it and will definitely include it in the recommended reading for my course on media and religion.

# Dance Video Review

## Works & Process Artists (WPA)

### Virtual Commissions

### The Guggenheim, 2020

Accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/user/worksandprocess>

All we hear are bagpipes as a blurry image gradually comes into focus. We begin to make out the dark torso of a man who appears to be suspended upside down. His arms are folded beneath his head. A faint drumbeat starts to play and his right arm begins to trace the ground several inches below. For the next four and a half minutes, Jamar Roberts will wriggle and pulse through a rectangular performance space not that much bigger than his body. The camera angle will change, as will the volume of the music accompanying him and the speed at which he moves through his confinement. Watching the piece is an exercise in disorientation. Which way is up? Is Roberts lying down or dangling by his feet? We struggle to find our bearings as we watch him navigate his own. The odd pairing of bagpipes and drums adds to our slight discomfort, to say nothing of the fact that the image calls to mind the haunting lyrics of “Strange Fruit”. The last few moments see the dancer, now drenched in a blinding white light, softly snap his chin to the right before going limp.

According to the Artist Note by Roberts, the performance piece, called “Cooped” (2020), “was inspired by the release of recent statistics showing the disproportionate amount of black and brown bodies being affected by the Covid-19 crisis.”<sup>1</sup> Imagining a “fever dream”, Roberts set out to explore “the anxiety of quarantine” among minority populations already politically

1 Jamar Roberts, “Cooped”, 24 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3GgOpXxufI> [accessed 5 January 2021].



ghettoized. Roberts was one of dozens of artists benefiting from the Guggenheim's performing arts series *Works & Process Virtual Commissions*, which was launched in April to help artists create shorts works while abiding by social distancing guidelines. More than \$150,000 was allocated by the commissioning organization, which is now in its 35th year.<sup>2</sup> A few performers were selected to participate in special Bubble Residencies, held through summer and fall 2020 across the Hudson Valley. Some of these culminated in live shows at the Kaatsbaan Festival in Tivoli, NY, and some were filmed at Lincoln Center in New York City. All 37 performances can be watched on the *Works & Process* YouTube channel.<sup>3</sup>

The performers and their pieces feature a wide range of diversity, spanning different genres, subject matter, age, body type, and professional notoriety. Some names, such as the prestigious Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Tony-nominated Joshua Bergasse, are well known to audiences. Others, less familiar. The pieces too display a diversity of aims, and along with those, of achievement. Some artists, like Roberts, use their bodies and various media to explore the psychological and emotional angst of inhabiting a world battered by COVID. Others, like "100 Days" (2020), featuring the quirky yet lyrical movement of Ballet X dancer Chloe Perkes, are much more lighthearted.<sup>4</sup> The lighthearted pieces seem to be a better fit for their digital medium, as their creators appear aware of the constraints of the project and work within and around those limits.

That's not to say that all such pieces will be everyone's cup of tea. "O Circle" (2020), a six-minute piece showing dancer Burr Johnson merely spinning around in a circle as classic nursery rhymes are read in the background, seems overly simple.<sup>5</sup> "Is this... *all?*", I asked myself every few seconds, not sure why such a capable dancer would be content to sign his name to this. But that's the risk with art: it can and does disappoint some of its audience, at least some of the time. Another risk – or, perhaps better said, an avenue of promise – is that even when it disappoints, art invites its audiences to engage with it, with themselves, with the world. There have been many times since the start of the pandemic that I've found myself, like Johnson, spinning idly through

2 The Guggenheim 2020.

3 <https://www.youtube.com/user/worksandprocess> [accessed 5 January 2021].

4 Caili Quan, "100 Days", 14 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxQvb6BJLS0> [accessed 5 January 2021].

5 Burr Johnson, "O Circle", 16 November 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJtOmZbjrRQ> [accessed 5 January 2021].

my surroundings, staring blankly at the wide horizon of nothing-in-particular-ness around me, and reading children's books. Perhaps, then, Johnson's performance is a visual representation of many of our journeys through 2020.

In fact, we share a lot in common with the *Works & Process* performers. Like them, we are trying to navigate the challenge of finding new ways of being-and-moving-in-the-world. Our normal work- and life-spaces have been overturned, locked down, closed. We are trying to find our footing on new ground, aware at all times that one wrong step could end up costing us dearly. We are all, like Roberts, disoriented. And yet we forge ahead. The curtain is already up; it always is. We are on stage. We are who we perform ourselves to be: what new characterizations have we discovered within ourselves as we've moved through our own quarantines? Limitation is the very condition of possibility.

Our quarantine spaces are stages of sorts. Those spaces don't exist somewhere out there, but are constituted by our very movements within them. If we adhere to the strict recommendations laid down by the Centers for Disease Control, then our performance space spans the roughly six-foot distance between us. Dancer Gabriel Lamb explored this theme explicitly in her piece "5x8", named after the dimensions of the Persian rug on which she danced around her Hamilton Heights neighborhood.<sup>6</sup> During her five-and-a-half-minute performance, the camera captured Lamb dancing fluidly in several different locations, never straying, however, beyond the boundaries of the rug beneath her feet. "Home and the outdoors have been our refuges during this time of uncertainty", she wrote in the accompanying Artist Note, "so there was a peculiar logic in the combination." Home, in other words, is often thought of in opposition to that which is outside of it. Yet what happens when we relocate the most intimate spaces of our home outdoors? Is home something we carry with us, like a rectangular piece of fabric? Or maybe home is the musical setting that continues to play within us as we move between both spaces.

Lamb's project is different from many of the others because its compilation was public, a fact of which she gradually became more aware during the filming process. "During my shoot with cinematographer Melissa Wu, I noticed that outdoor rug dancing provokes a lot of curiosity in passers-by", she writes in her Artist Note. While New York City has been off and on under

6 Gabrielle Lamb, "5x8", 3 August 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbtf-2\\_kl\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbtf-2_kl_k) [accessed 5 January 2021].

strict quarantine orders since the beginnings of the pandemic, many residents continued to spend time out of doors, exercising, going to grocery stores, walking pets. Imagine the surprise of New Yorkers, whose theater lights have been dimmed since March 2020, finding a sole dancer performing her craft out in the world. What a delight that must have been – for those, that is, who stopped to take in the experience. Not all of them did.

Not all of us do, either, which was one sad takeaway from violinist Joshua Bell's 2007 incognito subway performance. We are surrounded by a world of animated beauty, but we don't always make time for it. "It" being our noticing of what is always happening, because, to be sure, the beautiful is always already around us in dazzling abundance. We are, understandably, more primed to experience it in the world's great performance halls. But where will we find it when they are closed? Because, as COVID-19 has taught us, even the most prestigious ones can be closed. When that happens, what will happen to art? To a world improved by art? To artists?

The Brookings Institute estimates that the fine and performing arts industries in the US suffered a loss of 1.4 million jobs and \$42.5 billion in sales.<sup>7</sup> And anyone who has purchased a ticket to a live performance in the past few years can certainly understand how quickly those numbers can be arrived at. We live in an age when four-digit Broadway ticket prices are quite common, when succeeding as a dancer requires a childhood of expensive training. The performing arts, for all the good that they offer the world, remain off-limits for many people who can't afford to participate in them. Which is why funding projects like *Works & Process* is so crucial to arts development, particularly at a time when a global pandemic has brought down the curtain. Artists need to continue to eat. Beyond that, however, they need to continue to create.

Some of the most interesting virtual commissions showed performing artists navigating their private lives. Married dancers Ashley Laracey and Troy Schumacher offered a glimpse into the daily routine of their lives as parents.<sup>8</sup> The film "7:30/7:30" opens with the New York City Ballet dancers waking up and immediately beginning to care for their young twins. As Schumacher's piano music plays in the background, the couple play with their children, feed them, bathe them, bounce them in front of a mirror. Throughout the piece, Laracey and Schumacher are seen stretching and putting their bodies through

7 Florida/Seman 2020.

8 Ashley Laracey and Troy Schumacher, "7:30/7:30", 2 August 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6qe\\_YFyekI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6qe_YFyekI) [accessed 5 January 2021].

various ballet technique drills. At the end of the video, the couple embrace, no doubt exhausted from having performed these rewarding yet demanding parenting roles. The couple dedicate their performance to “everyone raising children during these unprecedented times”. Their Artist Note is worth quoting in full:

It's special and beautiful to be together as a family, exhausting without a minute to spare, and a struggle to find enough time to maintain our identities as artists. Capturing every moment during a single day gave us the opportunity to zoom out and see what we are really working on right now: the art of raising two humans into this world.

What Laracey and Schumacher have performed is that which enables every performance to be what it is: the behind-the-scenes goings-on that allow the performer to study, to rehearse, to grow, to improve, to take center stage. The performed world that supports the performance – that supports the performance that acknowledges its performed-ness – is absolutely vital for the latter. Without a world to support it, the art cannot be created. Without a world to support *her*, the artist cannot create. Some of this support will come in terms of funding and budgets, and some will come from reliable childcare and the not-having-to-worry that next month's rent will be paid. All of these things belong to the scaffolding that holds up the stages on which artists perform their crafts. Audiences typically do not see them, however. Laracey and Schumacher's piece brings this scaffolding to the fore, and reminds audiences that erecting and maintaining these structures is as much a part of an artist's work as any other performed aspect of it.

Another real-life married couple whose work offers a glimpse into their home life is tap dancers and body percussionists Nicholas Van Young and Carson Murphy.<sup>9</sup> In “Hook, The Moon”, Young and Murphy create intricate rhythms to a simple track composed by Young, which are then layered over other rhythms, visually and audibly. The couple have an impressive command of their bodies. Even as they create drum beats with their hands and feet, their bodies move with precision, fluidity, and grace. Several times during the piece, their child Immy appears in the frame and dances around with the joyful abandon of a toddler. Young and Carson receive credits for choreography

9 Carson Murphy and Nicholas Van Young, “Hook, The Moon”, 6 September 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Yrs1WqELB0> [accessed 5 January 2021].

and improvisation, which is a welcome reminder that the best performances often feature a combination of both. Performing artists create within the confines of their or their director's vision – but they *create*, which is to say, they bring forth something new. Always. Every time an artist performs a piece, she offers the world something that wasn't already there. The meter for Young and Murphy's piece was set, as were many of their choreographed time steps. Within those parameters, however, they were able to bring forth something new. There's a lesson here, perhaps, for those of us struggling to find our creativity in quarantine: the rhythm of our routine may be set in a predictable meter, but we are nevertheless capable of playing within those boundaries.

As a dancer, it's encouraging to see my colleagues experiment with new ways of being and making in a COVID world. As a human, it's a welcome reminder that I, too, am being called upon to cultivate a life of beauty and goodness within the confines of the spaces I inhabit. *Works & Process* is a clear testimony to the virtually unlimited creative potential of the human soul, which often discovers itself within the movement of the sole.

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## Exhibition Review

### *Home Alone Together*, curated by Aaron Rosen and S. Billie Mandle

Accessible at <https://imagejournal.org/exhibitions-home-alone-together/>

In book twelve of his *Confessions*, Augustine tells God that there is no better name for God's "heaven of heaven" than God's "house" (*domum tuam*). It is in the home, in the *domus*, that the "pure heart enjoys absolute concord and unity in the unshakable peace of holy spirits". Augustine goes so far as to say that his soul begs to be inside the home. It is the only thing for which his soul yearns. Riffing on a passage of the Psalms, he writes that his soul's "single request" is that it may "dwell in God's house all the days of its life". In his *Confessions*, Augustine not only compares God's home to heaven, he also claims that the home *is* heaven; home is where "absolute concord and unity" can be enjoyed.<sup>1</sup>

Augustine's enthusiasm for the home, his declaration that it is "heaven of heaven" seems uncanny in a time of quarantine. For those of us lucky enough to have permanent shelter, the four walls and roof over our heads can feel more akin to a personal hell than to a place of eternal domestic bliss. A kitchen that has been adapted to fit the experiments of your child's science class, a bathroom that now doubles as a greenhouse to fit your growing collection of plants, and a bedroom that also functions as office space: our houses are stretching to incorporate our confined lives. Thus, the buildings meant to be most intimate to us, the ones that makes us feel as though we can turn inside from out, as though we can delineate between "private" and "public" spheres, have necessarily needed to hold *more*. Our homes now function as more than space that provides reprieve from the workday, more than space within which to cook and clean and sleep. Our homes are now functioning in ways that exceed what we

1 Augustine 1991, 252.

thought they once were. We can no longer believe the home to be an interior space constituted by four walls meant to keep the communal out.

In May 2020, professor of religion and visual culture Dr. Aaron Rosen, and Massachusetts-based artist Billie Mandle, whose work focuses on the politics, histories, and paradoxes of place, came together to launch an exhibition titled *Home Alone Together*. The exhibition, supported and featured by *Image*, a journal representing art and literature, ran for twelve consecutive weeks during the summer of 2020, hosted by the journal's webpage. Collating the work of 25 artists from across the globe, Rosen and Mandle probe the theme of domesticity. Submitting an image each week, either of their living rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, gardens, kitchens or of a mixture of the people and things found within these, the contributing artists allow us into spaces that are intimately their own. Through the content of their homes, they provide us with images of the objects and people that constitute themselves.

As visitors move through the virtual exhibition space, we can choose to view the photographs in categories sorted by either room, week, or artist. Each image is captioned first with the space in which it was taken (bathroom, kitchen, living room, etc.), and then with a title, the artist's name, and date. One never gets a sense that one is touring through the artist's home. Instead, carefully framed images of bodies, books, and blankets flood the frame such that the image seems as though it could have been taken from anywhere, from inside anyone's home. In week one, photographer and book-maker Claudia Hermano, interested in themes of home and belonging, contributes a photo, "Bedroom" (12 April 2020), in which we see a cascade of blue. The fitted bedsheet just slept in, unmade from the night before, evokes familiarity as it ripples, wave-like, across the mattress. In week three, Amsterdam-based artist Yvonne Lacet, whose work centers cityscapes, landscapes, and nature play, includes an image, "Kitchen" (26 April 2020), in which plant life develops; a thin and fragile root, much like the one that currently shoots out from the clippings of my own quarantine-era philodendron, spirals out atop vibrant green. And in week five, London-based artist Aude Hérail Jäger, who is inspired by dualities and finding meaning in the immediate environment, provides a silhouetted shadow of a body bathing in sunlight: "Bedroom" (8 May 2020). Through these images, which stage the particularities of everyday life, the air of the online exhibition is filled with a sense of the personal that somehow, miraculously, one may even say "heavenly", speaks to us universally.

Stirring feelings of what is familiar, the artists' close-up frames provide obscured views of laundry lines, shadow puppets, and bodies splayed across



living-room floors. These views, not quite unique to one home, but not quite not, render the photographs universalizable. During a time when we feel alone, forced to reconcile with new realities, and trapped inside them, the exhibit connects us via the spaces that protect but also trap us. Comprising the mundane objects which constitute a bathroom, a bedroom, a kitchen, the images echo the objects that, if we are lucky enough, also texture our everyday. An orange towel splashed across a blue tiled floor (“Bathroom”, Sam Winston, 27 June 2020), a boy shrouded in a sheet as he plays piano (“Living Room, Buffalo New York”, Yola Monakhov Stockton, 15 June 2020); through that which is immanent the photographs allow us to transcend the monotony that is our own. Through what is commonplace, they invite us to miraculously be any place. Through a play with what is familiar, they make us feel connected through the things which surround us in our homes.

Roles of toilet paper centered by Justin Kimball and Sam Winston, vibrant collections of fruits and vegetables soaking in soapy water as framed by Guler Ates, spaces of sex and sleep transformed by Alyssa Coffin, Michael Takeo Magruder, Claudia Hermano, Gol Kamra, and Yola Monakhov Stockton; all of these are crafted into photographs that ocularly arouse.<sup>2</sup> Thus, these spaces of washing and bathing and cooking and fucking meant to be inhabited only by those most intimately connected are exposed. The photographs appeal because they render the intimate public. Thus, the artist’s space becomes a snapshot upon which the world is meant to gaze. In this way, the images, as well as the artists who have photographed them and the curators who have staged them, open a space for connection by means of the home meant otherwise, and especially right now, to keep us apart.

The artists in this exhibition push against what it means, or what we think it means, to be “domestic”. The previously private domestic life (considered historically to be the realm of the womb and women) has been positioned in opposition to the public, the world of labor, economy, politics, and man. This exhibition invites the public eye into what we have deemed as the private, advancing our notions of what it means to be domestic, to be at home. Forging connections through the spaces that we consider as our most intimate, the artists transform the binary of private and public life.

- 2 “Bathroom”, Justin Kimball, April 18, 2020; “Bathroom”, Sam Winston, April 18, 2020; “Kitchen, Fruit Bath”, Guler Ates, May 15, 2020; “Bedroom”, Alyssa Coffin, April 18, 2020; “Bedroom, Spare Room, Physical Record”, Michael Takeo Magruder, May 22, 2020; “Bedroom”, Claudia Hermano, May 22, 2020; “Bedroom”, Gol Kamara, June 12, 2020; “Bedroom”, Yola Monakhov Stockton, April 12, 2020.

While the exhibit predominantly centers the spaces of the home, other images captioned “Outside” are featured as well. Some “Outside” photographs center the OPEN signs hung on boarded-up corner stores (“Outside”, Barbara Takenaga, 22 May 2020) while others are of flyers that announce blood drives (“Outside”, Jordan Eagles, 17 June 2020). Many photos that fall into the “Outside” category feature community protests in response to Black lives lost due to police violence over the summer. One image of her sons by Janna Ireland, contributed on 24 May, is particularly poignant because of the history of blackness in America to which it speaks. As a caption to her photograph of her sons Ireland writes,

Posting early because this day is so heavy, and this is a picture about love and closeness. The feeling of watching Minneapolis burn last night was indescribable. My heart was full and empty and broken all at once, and today I am so tired. I have been trying and failing to organize my thoughts about this week, and George Floyd, and the wounds his death has prodded. The thought that keeps circling is that all of the pictures I share of my children are a form of propaganda, and that the idea they are trying to sell is that my people are people, and that we have a right to our lives. This world is absurd, but there is nowhere else to go. It is an awful kind of relief to have my longstanding fears – those of a mother of black children living in the United States – to distract me from my new fears about parenting during a pandemic. I know these old fears intimately, at least.

The exhibition highlights the contours and contrasts of identity. Ireland’s photograph speaks to these contours, and the impossibility of ever *really* getting beyond them, despite the feelings of connection that images can evoke. In other words, our identities, while they enable connection, also segregate us into racialized, stigmatized, and ostracized groups. The things which make us individually ourselves and thus able to connect with others implicate our social privilege or marginalization. The exhibition calls attention to these disparities of identities as much as to familiarities that can be drawn between them. Ireland’s photo traces life’s limits and edges. It alludes to the idea that there are certain experiences of race, of class, of sexuality that are more familiar to some than to others. In this way it forces us to attend to all the spaces in our lives that lack connection. It makes us realize that even through art connection is not always possible. Ireland’s photo and the accompanying caption evoke absurdity, fear, feelings of disconnection. Ireland’s photo is one

within the exhibition that brings disconnection to the fore so as to make viewers grapple with it.

In a recent interview with *Poet's Country*, philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler commented that it is “hard to stay sensate during these times, to see and feel and hear what is happening”.<sup>3</sup> The exhibition *Home Alone Together* invites us to stay sensate. It invites us to attend to what is happening around us.

After all, *Home Alone Together* is a project of collaboration. The artists and curators summon us to come together as they have. They encourage us to notice our everyday, to look around and see so as to feel the ripples of blue in our slept-in bedsheets, the green roots growing, despite all odds, out from the leaves we clipped months ago, the way the light catches our bodies and casts us, silhouetted, onto our four walls. Perceiving others' lives as they continue inside the walls that separate them from us, we are invited to notice and thus feel connected through what is otherwise socially distant. The exhibition instantiates a feeling of connection through the places where we dwell. In so doing, it contributes to the very revolution of relating that is taking place in our midst. *Home Alone Together* is art that invites us to attend to our own surroundings through its attention to the surroundings of the artists. In this way the exhibition, to borrow language from Augustine, transforms the home through image into a place where “absolute concord and unity” can be enjoyed. This unity does not depend upon the home being “heavenly”, though. Rather, it depends upon sharing intimacies. The exhibition is a sight of transcendence. It encourages us to get beyond ourselves through the places we call “home”.

A selection of works from *Home Alone Together* will be shown alongside an exhibition by Julia Alcamo titled *All We Have Stories* at the Dadian Gallery in the Henry Luce III Center for the Arts & Religion in Washington, DC in the spring of 2021. Until it can be experienced in person, the exhibition will be shared through virtual tours and videos. It will be kept open until it can be shared in person, probably not before the summer.

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## Paradise Lost

### Presentations of Nostalgic Longing in Digital Games

“Ah, why should all mankind  
For one man’s fault, be condemned,  
If guiltless?”

*John Milton: Paradise Lost*

*Paradise Lost* is not only the title of John Milton’s famous epic poem (1667), but also a philosophical-theological notion linked to and emerging from the ‘Fall from Eden’ in Genesis. It expresses – or imagines – the human experience of a definite rupture in history, the inextinguishable urge to return to the period before the rupture and – unable to do so – thus constructs an idealized version of this past to long for. Throughout history, this longing has been expressed in artwork, architecture, literary works and is, perhaps, best observed in the Romantic era with its preference for the past, the future, and the contemporary exotic. Today, the notion of ‘Paradise Lost’ has far from disappeared but finds postmodern manifestations in the revival of (secular) nationalism and (religious) fundamentalism. In addition to literature and art, the 20th and 21st centuries have seen a new arena for narratives and iconographies of ‘Paradise Lost’ emerge: digital games.

When applied to the field of digital game studies, the notion of ‘Paradise Lost’ can be traced in three different ways:

- *Present.* In the past decade, the game industry has been witnessing a surge in retro-gaming as a kind of narratological, ludological, visual, and technological longing for the early age of gaming. For example, some modern games have (re-)introduced the concept of perma-death (*Wasteland 2*, *Hades*, *Xcom*, *Diablo* series) and retro-graphics has become a deliberate design approach in contemporary games (*Cuphead*, *Celeste*, *Undertale*). The

industry – and consumer – has also witnessed the emergence of various re-makes of old-school classics (1942, *Baldur's Gate*, *Oddworld: Abe's Exoddus* as *Oddworld: Soulstorm*). In other words: the *present* longing for the past, or the early (or golden) age of gaming, manifests itself in and through the game. Papers could explore this longing for a(n idealized) past in all its diversity, including the social, philosophical, theological, and psychological mechanisms associated with this, either because they occur in the game or because the game itself is part of such a romanticization of the past.

- *Past*. Some games explicitly and deliberately employ and reflect on the idea of a rupture in human history; that is, the loss of an earlier (potentially utopian) state one strongly longs for but is beyond reach (for example *Horizon Zero Dawn*). This lost period could be medieval times, paradise, 9/11, the pre-Corona time in light of prolonged lockdowns, and so forth. It also includes the romanticization of earlier periods and pre- and non-Christian traditions, societies, and a pre-Christian age. Papers could explore the presentation and interpretation of such a perceived rupture in human history, including its ramifications for contemporary philosophical and/or theological debates on ethically-sensitive issues, like race, gender, or religion.
- *Future*. Other games speculate about what will happen if we die; that is, they speculate if we can regain – and at the same time could be seen as the expression of hope to regain – the paradise once lost to us. Examples are the in-game portrayal of afterlife, either heaven, hell or something in between in games such as *Limbo*, *Dante's Inferno*, or the *Doom* series. But such speculations do not remain confined to in-game narratives. Instead, they spill over into lived religious practices and can become part of how religious practitioners imagine the afterlife. Papers could explore topics such as religious life/practice as playful life/practice, the afterlife as game, gaming in the afterlife, the practice of gaming as symbol for innocence that was lost.

We invite contributions that explore the theme of 'Paradise Lost' in the context of digital games from various cultural and religious backgrounds that take the debate beyond a western and Christian context.

We invite contributions from scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including – but not limited to – religious studies, theology, game studies and media studies, sociology, digital anthropology and cultural studies.

We also welcome contributions that employ a range of approaches to the study of digital games including both game-immanent (text-immanent author/reader) and actor-centered (real reader/author) approaches.

We also encourage the exploration of games from all platforms, including mobile ones.

The issue also includes an open section for articles on other topics linked to the profile of JRFM. The deadline for all submissions is 15 August 2022. Contributions of 6,000–8,000 words (including notes) should be submitted for double-blind peer review through the journal homepage [www.jrfm.eu](http://www.jrfm.eu). We kindly ask authors to register and consider the instructions for submitting contributions, especially the stylesheet. Publication is scheduled for May 2023. For any questions about the issue or possible contributions, please contact the issue editors: Dr. Frank Bosman ([F.G.Bosman@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:F.G.Bosman@tilburguniversity.edu)) and Dr. Alexander Darius Ornella ([alexander@ornella.info](mailto:alexander@ornella.info)).

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