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Shoe Fit for a Lady

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This shoe-shaped object is soft leather, caramel-brown in color with a dark buckle along the decorated sides. (fig. 1) Surrounding the surface are curious images, particularly the motif of a woman. Scholarship on this object is scant, most particularly an analysis of the unusual choice of material and the details of the iconography. Without these, our assumptions on the use and ownership—those issues that provide a context for the object—remain out of reach. Questions that remain unanswered are: Why leather, a material that seems of less grandeur than the traditional diamonds and metals used for reliquaries? Why is it this curious shape? And who is the woman pictured in the ornamentation?

Based on an analysis of the material and an iconographical reading of the embossed imagery, I will argue that this shoe-shaped object was simultaneously a portal, a closet, and a piece of luggage. By this, I mean that this object was a reliquary carrying case, rather than an actual reliquary. Combining this with an iconographical analysis, which identifies the imagery to be scenes from the vita, or hagiography of St. Margret, I suggest that this unusual object provides a particularly revealing reflection of the progressive feminist ideas unique to the late middle ages.¹ While there have been other realms of exploration in gender roles in the middle ages, it is my thesis that the reliquary case not only embodies medieval ideas of the female gender by featuring the imagery of St. Margaret, a saint who was a powerful female role model, but also that the owner of this reliquary case might well have been a convent of nuns working as a midwives. This reliquary case thus provides us with a glimpse into the didactic power of the female in the context of monastic women and one of their sanctioned vocational roles.²

¹ Anne E. Bailey, "Lamentation Motifs in Medieval Hagiography," *Gender & History* 25/3 (2013): 529-544; and Anna Taylor, "Hagiography and Early Medieval History." *Religion Compass* 7/1 (2013): 1-14. See also, Jacobus de Voragine and William Granger Ryan, *The Golden Legend*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

² Jennifer C. Edwards, "Man can be Subject to Woman?: Female Monastic Authority in Fifteenth- Century Poitiers." *Gender & History*, 25/1 (2013): 86-106.

Particularly interesting is the fact that this role was one that connected the cloistered female to her sisters in the real world, as well as to their patron saint.

The object's actual materials and shape are symbolic of the role of the woman outside of realm of traditional female ideas. Made out of leather with an iron buckle, this supposed reliquary features a material that is particularly non-traditional. While most reliquaries are fashioned out of metals such as gold and feature rich embellishments such as semiprecious stones, this is different in that it is made from natural substances, durable in various weather conditions and climates. Leather was traditionally used to make bags, belts, and gloves, as well as many items worn by the traveler or those meant to experience rougher weather conditions.³ The idea that the so-called "shoe reliquary" is fashioned out of this material, which is known for its durability, leads us to believe it was a piece that was designed to be taken on extensive journeys. Looking at other objects made of leather that open in the manner of this shoe-shaped object, like that of the chalice case from the Victoria and Albert museum (fig. 2) or the leather case with a red cord from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 3) used for carrying writing materials, actually suggests that rather than a reliquary, this was actually a case used to carry a more precious reliquary of a similar shape. Like a shoe fitting a foot, this case would most likely have housed a foot-shaped reliquary.

The actual process of preparing the leather to function as a carrying case is a reflection of medieval ideas on the power of women. The fact that this reliquary case is made out of leather tells us that it was constructed outside of the city, as we know that "the pungency of these processes (tanning the leather) and the toxicity of the solutions used, meant that most towns and

³ Paul B. Newman, *Daily Life in the Middle Ages*, (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2001).

cities tried to keep leather works far away from central, highly populated areas.”⁴ Moreover, we know that it was formed out of a procedure called *cuir bouilli*, literally meaning boiled leather.⁵ This method proposes a very fascinating connection to gender roles of the middle ages. *Cuir bouilli*, the process, was also used in the making of military armor. Those serving in the military would have generally been men-- this correlation illustrates an interesting juxtaposition of material and meaning. The ability to withstand harsh elements including both weather and attack directs us towards the conclusion this was a very protective method and material; in the same way, women had to be hardened to the elements and protective of the interior.⁶ To encase the relic in a reliquary and carry that reliquary in an armor-like case would have ensured the safety of the relic. The interesting connection that can be made between the materials used and the user of the reliquary case establishes the case as an object reflective of a unique role of women in the middle ages—that of a midwife. This is confirmed in the analysis of the iconography of the imagery embossed into the leather.

Creamy mocha brown in color and split apart near the heel in order to make room for a large iron buckle, the leather reliquary case is decorated in low-relief of floral-like patterns and curious characters. (fig. 1) Upon closer gaze, one can see a formation of a narrative using distinct and separate paneled frames featuring the same lead character, a female. Who is this mystery woman? There are no key phrases or signal words scrawled in Latin to guide us to her identity. Instead, one is given snapshots, which read like scenes from hagiographic texts. Piecing these

⁴ Barbara Hanawalt and Michal Kobińska, *Medieval Practices of Space*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁵ Jean Turner, “Cuir Bouilli Technique: A Historical Method of Hardening Leather” 2009, <http://www.jeanturner.co.uk/static-content/tutorials/CuirBouilliTechnique.pdf>.

⁶ Ann E. Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse: Woman-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2/2 (1986): 81-93.

together, we recognize the woman on the shoe to be St. Margaret of Antioch, a martyr and saint, whose tale is known to trace back to the eighth century BCE.⁷

Saint Margaret of Antioch was born to a nurse who took care of her in the fields. She was beautiful, pure, and domestic. One afternoon, as she was tending to her flock of sheep, Olybrius, a provost, took notice of her. Infatuated, he immediately decided to take her as his wife. However, he found it troublesome she was a Christian. When she refused to deny her faith, he cast her into prison. While in prison, she encountered a dragon. The dragon attempted to kill her by swallowing her into his stomach. Upon her arrival in his gut, she made the sign of the cross, which cut the dragon into halves, allowing her to escape and survive. After she emerged, Olybrius tied and tortured her through fire at the stake. After burning her, he threw her into a great vessel of water. St. Margaret then shot out of the water, alive. The Heavens crowned her with a golden crown, and Olybrius, finally out of ideas and options, beheaded her. She was buried a martyr and was sainted. Before her ultimate death, she announced that pregnant women ought to call to her for protection during childbirth.⁸ It is assumed her symbolic emergence from the stomach of the dragon was reflective of childbearing.

The iconography on the reliquary case provides direct reflections, or snapshots, of this story. With the toe facing to the right, the image of Margaret and her sheep is at the far left on the heel. (fig. 5) This picture of Margaret represents her as the docile, tender shepherd. As one moves across the case, the middle frame shows her blessing a pregnant woman, taking on the authoritarian power granted to her by her sainthood. On the toe of the case is an image of her

⁷ Elizabeth L'Estrange and Alison More, "Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe," in *Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011): 1-15.

⁸ This is a summary of the hagiographic account provided in Jacobus de Voragine and William Granger Ryan, *The Golden Legend*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

torture at the stake. On the left side of the shoe, there are images of Margaret slaying and then riding the dragon as well as floral and decorative motifs, illustrating her power and strength.

The story of Margaret is highly unique due to many elements of this story. Her role in the middle ages was to be a model to both men and women, demonstrating the qualities of purity, chastity, strength and relentless faith. From the image on the reliquary case, one can see she was tender to her sheep and a gentle protector of mothers and children.⁹ However, she also demonstrated to both men and women a very strong female character. The significance of this quality in her hagiographical account can be seen in the numerous encounters with the devil or demons, for while it was not uncommon to see the presence of evil in hagiographical accounts, the continued victory over the demons makes Margaret's story unusual.¹⁰ In one discussion of Margaret, Theotimus is to have said her primary trial was how she "fought the demon and overcame the world."¹¹ "Overcoming the world" is much heavier and bolder language than often used to describe hagiographical accounts, suggesting that her sheer power was used as a contrast to the docile image we see of her tending sheep or threading wool. The image was, however, consistent to her character. Her strength was not limited to her gender, but rather she was emboldened in her purity with physical strength. This picture of a brazen, but humble woman was demonstrated particularly in her defeat of the second devil. In the account of this victory, she is said to have placed her right foot on his neck, pinning him down as she declared, "Abandon now, evil one, and your attempts against my chastity!" This triumphant cry accompanied by the physical tackling of the demon was reminiscent of both Christ and the Roman warriors. Most

⁹ Gary Dickson, "Rite De Passage? The Children's Crusade and Medieval Childhood," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 2/3 (2009): 313-332; and Gail McMurray Gibson, "Scene and Obscene: Seeing and Performing Late Medieval Childbirth," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29/1 (1999): 7-24.

¹⁰ L'Estrange, "Representing Medieval Genders," 10.

¹¹ L'Estrange, "Representing Medieval Genders," 12.

telling of this aspect of her character is, however, the shape of the reliquary carrying case. The shoe shape was meant as an allusion to this particular episode in which Margaret's powerful foot was responsible for the trampling of the devil.

The second way that this reliquary was a portrait of feminism in the middle ages is through the occupation of the probable owner, which I argue was most likely a convent of nuns whose vocation was nursing, but more particularly performing the duties of the midwife. Given the imagery on the reliquary case, it is likely that the object would have triggered the familiar knowledge of Saint Margaret and her miraculous life story. The reliquary case would have evoked the memories of Margaret as the protector of childbirth. Given a midwife's function was to aid in the birthing of a child, this imagery would have made reference to Margaret in her earthly role as a midwife. It, therefore, seems logical that the images on the surface of the shoe reliquary case would allude to the profession of the persons by whom it would be carried.

The role of the midwife is very illuminating to the ways in which women held specialized roles Middle Ages. Medicine and the use of medicinal plants at the time this reliquary case was made, was a field dominated by men.¹² There was, however, one area/location into which even men could not venture and this was birthing and the birthing room in particular. It was here that the role of the midwife became extremely important, as they were trained professionals, oftentimes even requiring a special certification to aid in delivery. In order to become a midwife, one had to train for several years both in the field and through textbook-like guides.¹³ The role of the midwife was taken very seriously and could not be done by just anyone. It was a role particularly well suited to women within the convent.

¹² Riklef Kandeler and Wolfram R. Ullrich, "Symbolism of Plants: Examples from European- Mediterranean Culture Presented with Biology and History of Art," *Journal of Experimental Botany* 60/ 4 (2009): 1067-1068.

¹³ Maria Kontoyannis and Christos Katsetos, "Midwives in Early Modern Europe (1400-1800)," *Health Science Journal* 5/1(2001): 31-36.

The role of the midwife embodied the idea that women could hold healthcare professions and seek the education required to do so. It was one of the few areas where they were given the opportunity to excel in something both academic and spiritual. This dual-nature of the profession also hints at a more progressive view of the church not generally seen until several hundred years later.¹⁴ On one hand we know that with the inherent dangers of childbirth, a midwife was seen as a necessity. Childbirth carried with it a high mortality rate, both for the mother and the child and that conditions of delivery were not always pristine, as birthing was often carried out in places such as barns.

On the other hand, however, it is important to note that the role of the midwife within the Catholic Church became a natural occupation for cloistered women and was very encouraged.¹⁵ As convents were clusters of women devoted to the Church and its practices, it would have been likely that these nuns took over the roles of a midwife in order to fall in line with the church's beliefs. For instance, we know that it was the role of to bring babies to the church for their baptism.¹⁶ Most telling, in terms of the reliquary case, was the fact that these midwife/nuns were also responsible for traveling to the location of delivery.¹⁷ Carrying this case, with its precious reliquary inside would have been seen as a necessary accessory to the successful and blessed delivery of a new soul.

The reliquary case's function also sheds light into the spiritual role of women in the middle ages. The relic, belonging most likely to the martyr, Margaret, would have been believed

¹⁴ Norman P. Zacour, *An Introduction to Medieval Institutions*. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969).

¹⁵ Kontoyannis and Katsetos, "Midwives, 31.

¹⁶ Kontoyannis and Katsetos, "Midwives," 32.

¹⁷ Lisa M. Bitel, *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe*, (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Amanda Richardson, "Riding Like Alexander, Hunting Like Diana: Gendered Aspects of the Medieval Hunt and its Landscape Settings in England and France." *Gender & History* 24/2 (2012): 253-270.

to hold special healing powers.¹⁸ These were powers that the midwife could bring to the scene of the birth by carrying the relic with her. Relics like this were used as an intercessor between human and God, allowing a person to potentially witness and experience the miracles of God.¹⁹ Histories of these types of miracles surfaced everywhere in the middle ages, and in so doing the stories served to corroborate and enhance the power of these objects. So while the midwife was an experienced aid for delivering children, the relic would therefore have added an extra level of both spirituality and safety to the delivery. A woman preparing to give birth would have found great comfort in her midwife carrying a relic with healing powers. It is, however, particularly telling that a woman could be in possession of an object of such great spiritual significance for it signals the level of authority that women could potentially hold within the monastic realm.

Evidence supporting the idea that the ownership and use of the reliquary case would have been appropriate for a convent of nursing nuns who frequently were called on to leave the convent and perform the duties of the midwife, can be found in the practice of pilgrimage. Like midwives, medieval pilgrims traveled long and wearying distances where conditions were often unpredictable.²⁰ They too carried their precious objects in leather cases as is evidenced by the objects mentioned earlier found in the Victoria and Albert museum in London and elsewhere. Like these objects, the relic in the midwife's possession would have been of great value, and would have required that proper precautions be taken to insure the safety and integrity of the relic during the journey. Thus while many scholars have debated the authority of the female gender in the spiritual realm, this reliquary case, made of embossed leather and dedicated to St.

¹⁸ Cynthia Hahn, "What do Reliquaries do for Relics?" *Numen* 57/3-4 (2010): 284-316.

¹⁹ Cynthia Hahn, *Portrayed on the Heart: Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of Saints from the Tenth through the Thirteenth Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 31.

²⁰ Anne E. Bailey, "Flights of Distance, Time and Fancy: Women Pilgrims and their Journeys in English Medieval Miracle Narratives," *Gender & History* 24/ 2 (2012): 292-309.

Margret, sheds light on one of the more significant roles women could play in the middle ages—most particularly that of the cloistered nun who ventured out from her sequestered life to tend the needs of women in labor under the protection of their patron saint.²¹

²¹ Joan Evans, *Life in Medieval France*, (London: Phaidon Press, 1957).

Figures



Figure 1: Shoe Reliquary c. 1350-1400

Accession Number: (47.101.65)

French or Swiss

Leather and Iron; H. 5 1/4 in. (13.3 cm), W. 11 1/4 in. (28.6 cm), D. 4 5/8 in. (11.7 cm)

The Cloisters Collection, 1947

<https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/47.101.65>



Figure 2: The Luck of Edenhall (Beaker and Case) c. 1350

Museum Number: C. 1 to B-1959

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O3311/the-luck-of-edenhall-beaker-and-case-unknown/>.



Figure 3: Case (etui) with an amorous inscription c. 1450-1500.

Accession Number: 50.53.1.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/468350>.



Figure 5: Heel with Margaret and Sheep

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