Bodleian Library, MS. Germ. e. 22. The Christ Child in the Host

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This paper presents a miniature from a sixteenth-century prayer book originating from the Strasbourg Dominican nunnery St Nikolaus in Undis in its historical and devotional context. The study particularly emphasises the interplay of liturgy and private devotion, as well as the iconographic programme seen through the lens of the prayer book’s contents.


KEYWORDS: Strasbourg, St Nikolaus in Undis, Eucharist, Christ Child, Devotio moderna, Corpus Christi, Bodleian Library

In the guise of a fifteenth-century prayer book, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Germ. e. 22, which was copied towards the end of the sixteenth century,¹ harks back to a time when St Nikolaus in Undis was an important centre for literary book production in Strasbourg.² The strategy of adopting an older style is particularly evident at the opening of the codex: a full-page miniature on parchment highlights the book’s central theme, that of the Eucharist. The following short study focuses on this, the only image in the manuscript.

The motif contained in this drawing is sometimes found in breviaries and Books of Hours.³ Two kneeling angels hold a monstrance in which the Christ Child is displayed

³ Examples in: Roger S. Wieck, Illuminating Faith: The Eucharist in Medieval Life and Art (New York: Morgan Library & Museum, 2014), pp. 51–53, 62, 74, 75; in liturgical books, pp. 66, 73. The motif is also depicted on single-leaf woodcuts, for example: Washington, DC,
with a cross halo, and gripping the scourge and the whip of the Passion. Two smaller angels are positioned in the upper register, holding banderoles inscribed with the opening words of two hymns. These hymns underline the double layered meaning of the entire composition: in the opening miniature, we see a visual conflation of the consecration of the host and the incarnation of the Christ Child (Figure 1).

The liturgical dimension visually evoked through the monstrance associates the image with the familiar theme of the Child appearing on the altar, since the monstrance becomes visible at the high point of the mass when the sacrament is prepared. Christ Child miracles most commonly correlate, however, with the elevation, that is when the host would have been held in the priest’s hands. In the Breviary of Aldersbach (c.1260), for example, an image shows a priest releasing the small figure of the Christ Child from his hands in the moment of the elevation.4 We may look at the Child in the Host-miracle from three angles: practically speaking, “if Christ is to be elevated at the consecration he must be in a small enough form to be held aloft”;5 theologically, the sacramental presence of Christ is the liturgical celebration of the incarnation;6 from a historian’s perspective, devotional practices such as meditation in front of a sculpture may have reinforced the wish for the material manifestation of Christ’s presence. For this meditative purpose, from the fourteenth century onwards, Christ Child figures in their cradles would be placed on the altar during the period of Christmas.7 An early fifteenth-century miscellany with sermons, theological treatises, and other texts, formerly kept at St Nikolaus in Undis contains an anonymous vernacular sermon (Geistliches Würfelspiel), in which nuns were held to play spiritually with the Christ Child.8

By the fifteenth century, “the veneration of the host was a cult of fanatical proportions.”9 In late medieval German sister books, Christ Child apparitions are sometimes seen at the elevation, but they can also occur individually during private devotional acts.10

The National Gallery of Art, S. 1940; see Fifteenth Century Woodcuts and Metalcuts: From the National Gallery of Art, Catalogue prepared by Richard S. Field (Washington: Publication Department of the National Gallery of Art, 1965), no. 275.

4 Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 2640, fol. 15v. The idea of the incarnation in the Eucharist could be figured differently, too. In a Gnadenstuhl-drawing, that Jeffrey Hamburger, Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), p. 13, has discussed, the ‘architectural framework serves as a monstrance for the “corpus Christi”, which “demonstrates” the Incarnation’. — The literary motif of the Christ Child on the altar appears in: Caesarius of Heisterbach, Dialogus miraculorum, dist. 9, chs. 2–3, ed. by Joseph Strange (Ridgewood, NJ: Gregg, 1966), vol. 2, pp. 167–69.


8 Berlin, Staatsbibliothek-Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. germ. quart. 149, fol. 36v–49v. A full manuscript description is available online at: Predigt im Kontext <http://pik.ku-eichstaett.de/9718/> [accessed 16 December 2016]. — Depictions of spiritual intimacy, however, are very rare.


10 See Kieckhefer, The Christ Child, p. 177, for a discussion on the choir stalls as ‘semi-private spaces’ where effects of the elevated host were experienced.
This latter, more private Christ Child apparition has precursors in various mystical accounts such as those of Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude of Helfta. Thomas Lentes has argued that private meditation on the infancy of Jesus in the context of the *Devotio moderna*, with its practical use of images intended to stimulate processes of imagination, is different from that which sought to
achieve mystical union. While such a distinction needs reconsideration, especially when taking into account Seuse’s use of images in processes of imagination, the St Nikolaus in Undis prayer book is an example for how the liturgical context and the aspect of private devotion are interlinked.

The hymns evoked on the angels’ banners refer to certain feast days. *Ave rex noster fili David (redemptor)* is sung on Palm Sunday, drawing our attention to the notion of the sacrificial Christ. Indeed, the notion of the sacrificial Christ is coded in the image through the torture instruments held by the Christ Child. *Ecce panis Angelorum (factus cibus)* sometimes appears as an independent hymn though it is taken from the *Lauda Sion Salvatorem*, the sequence for Corpus Christi traditionally attributed to Aquinas. The manuscript’s textual composition reflects the interest in the feast of Corpus Christi, which celebrates the eucharistic sacrament: among the many eucharistic prayers and treatises transmitted in our manuscript is a set of prayers for the octave after Corpus Christi (fol. 243v–247v). The manuscript’s drawing is a visual rendering of a Christ Child apparition as part of the communal ritual. By framing it liturgically, the private miracle moves within observant constraints.

St Nikolaus in Undis had been reformed in 1431. In the sixteenth century, the sisters were prolific producers of gift cards. In November 1576, they shipped forty-eight of those to the convent in Lichtenthal. None of these cards have survived but the gift ledger records, among others, five cards depicting the Christ Child. This circumstance, and the fact that the drawing is executed on parchment in a paper manuscript — its insertion during the binding process is visible in the parchment stub between fol. 8 and 9 — suggest that the image may be based on a motif that the nuns perhaps used for their famous gift cards. Its inclusion in a eucharistic prayer book that speaks to private devotion within the frame of collective worship highlights the interplay of communal liturgy and individual prayer practice.

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13 On the uncertainty of the attribution to Aquinas, see Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991), pp. 185–96.
14 For a visual connection of the Christ Child to the Corpus Christi feast in a late fifteenth-century Southern German drawing, very likely originating from Eichstätt, see The British Museum, collection no. 1972, U.677, online: <http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=142443001&objectId=720887&partId=1> [accessed 27 October 2016]. I thank Jeffrey F. Hamburger for the suggestion of an Eichstätt workshop as place of origin of this drawing.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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