

THE WIENHAUSEN GRABESCHRISTUS: EXPLORING 15<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY  
CLOISTER WORSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

Katherine Hunt Guinness: The Wienhausen Grabeschristus: Exploring 15<sup>th</sup>  
Century Cloister Worship  
(Under the direction of Dorothy Verkerk)

This thesis examines the Wienhausen Effigy of Christ-- a 15th century religious artwork from the Wienhausen Cloister in northern Germany. It will attempt to explain the Effigy's origins, usage, and overall history. By examining it I hope to break through the relative mystery surrounding this unique artwork, and show how its position in the Cloister as a liturgical object, reliquary, pilgrimage site, meditational tool, and subject of intense religious performance and mysticism, is both common for the time and highly unusual. In this way, it will be a valuable tool to understanding how 15th century women, particularly nuns, worshiped, thought, and lived. This thesis tracks the known history of the Effigy as well as the Wienhausen Cloister. Research has been collected from the Wienhausen Kloster's archives, primary texts, personal interviews, journal articles, and other publications. This thesis will also draw on more contemporary ideas of pre-Reformation art and performance.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	vi
Chapter	
I. Introduction: History and Patronage of the Grabeschristus .....	1
II. Traditional Use: Liturgical, Reliquary, and 15 <sup>th</sup> -Century Cloister Worship .	14
III. Worship and the Dornenkron: Imaginary Pilgrimage and Meditation .....	20
IV. Identification and Performance: The Wienhausen Cloister at Play .....	28
V. Conclusion: The Grabeschristus as Pre and Post Reformation Artifact .....	37
Figures .....	40
Bibliography .....	53

## LIST OF FIGURES

### Figure

1. Wienhausen Grabeschristus .....	40
2. Wienhausen Cloister Nuns' Choir.....	41
3. Wienhausen Grabeschristus, Guard details.....	42
4. Wienhausen Grabeschristus, Interior Painting details .....	43
5. Wienhausen Grabeschristus, Interior Painting details .....	43
6. Wienhausen Grabeschristus, Side Wound detail.....	44
7. Wienhausen Grabeschristus, Head detail.....	45
8. Wienhausen Grabeschristus, Feet detail .....	45
9. Wienhausen Arisen Christ.....	46
10. Wienhausen Grabeschristus, Hand detail .....	47
11. Wienhausen Grabeschristus, Feet detail .....	47

## **CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION: HISTORY AND PATRONAGE OF THE GRABESCHRISTUS AND WIENHAUSEN CLOISTER**

In northern Germany, near the city of Celle lies the Wienhausen Cloister. This Cistercian cloister was founded by the Duchess Agnes of Landsburg between 1221 and 1228. Landsburg, the widow of Count Heinrich Palatine of the Rhine, also founded the convent of Isenhagen. The founding of these convents was most likely an attempt to attain salvation for her and her husband's sins, and to create a place for her "pious retirement."<sup>1</sup> The Wienhausen Cloister was originally established in the town of Nienhagen, also near Celle, but was moved to Wienhausen in 1231 due to "mosquitoes, poisonous worms, and bad air."<sup>2</sup> The convent was later rebuilt in the North German red brickwork style in 1330 with funding from the widow resident Princess Mechtild.<sup>3</sup> Having changed little over time, this is how the convent appears today, although after its last Catholic abbess died in 1587 it became a protestant convent.<sup>4</sup> The Cloister was

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<sup>1</sup> Konrad Maier, *The Convent of Wienhausen, vol. 1, An Introduction into its History, Architecture, and Art*. Translated by Michael Wolfson, Dorothee Heienbrock, and Jochem Czech. (Celle: Teske, 2001), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> For years to come the women living in the Wienhausen Cloister would continue to hold secret Catholic services.

informally incorporated into the Cistercian order in 1244 by Duke Otto, but it is unknown whether the incorporation process was ever formally completed. Debate still lingers over exactly what teachings and disciplines the Cloister abided by. It is likely that the Cloister was never officially made a part of the Cistercian order, but loosely followed Cistercian customs, teachings, and modes of worship.<sup>5</sup>

The Wienhausen cloister has, from its early tentative religious reception, been a locus of cultural ambivalence, religious debate, strong personalities, and atypical situations. The Cistercian order focused heavily on vows of poverty and lack of material wealth, yet Wienhausen was one of the richest cloisters in northern Germany. It often underwent scrutiny because of this -- including instances of villagers scaling the walls of the building to spy on the wealthy nuns, and hard fought battles with various reformers including Johannes Busch. Johannes, or Jan, Busch (1399-1480) was a powerful reformer and provost of the Augustinian monastic order. He spent the last 40 years of his life visiting and inspecting monasteries and convents as well as producing many writings. Busch complained that the women at Wienhausen misunderstood the Order's rules regarding money and "the common life" because they kept all of their private money in a single community chest to which one nun had a key. In Busch's own words, whenever a nun needed money "she went to the keeper of the key and asked her to open the chest. And she always agreed, permitting her to take as much as she wanted

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<sup>5</sup> Much debate revolves around whether Wienhausen was actually incorporated into the order. The request survives but not the answer. The continuing active role of the bishops of Hildesheim indicates a lack of formal incorporation, although the chapter supposedly placed Wienhausen under the supervision of the male Cistercian house of Riddagshausen and gave the abbots of Locum and Michaelstein the task of visitation. In light of evidence on both sides, most scholars agree that Wienhausen followed Cistercian customs but was not formally incorporated into the order.

of her money, for it was her property.”<sup>6</sup> To Busch, this was a substantial issue, but the nuns themselves saw no problem with it.<sup>7</sup> One nun wrote, “before the reform each one provided her own [food] herself, whatever she was entitled to for her needs, so that the cloister's assets might be preserved in a good state and might multiply.”<sup>8</sup>

These arguments stemmed from the Cloister's atypical wealth, which in turn was a result of the highly unusual makeup of the Cloister's population. Not only was the Cloister supported by a vast array of neighboring noble families, the majority of the nuns who lived there were nobility themselves.<sup>9</sup> The abbesses of Wienhausen in particular almost always stemmed from nobility. Historian Anne Winston-Allen writes that it was truly “exceptional for a woman of the old free nobility” to join a Cistercian nunnery and yet Wienhausen exhibits exception after exception to this rule.<sup>10</sup> The convent also gathered wealth from land holdings, tithes, rents, patronage rights

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing About Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Leerhoff, 764, reports that the convent was in continuous conflict with its provosts concerning the management of convent property and wealth. In 1410 Provost Heinrich Hellewede von Verden resigned due to disagreements with the abbess. Provosts Johannes Holthusen and Dietrich Titze gave up their position for similar reasons.

<sup>8</sup> Winston-Allen, 62.

<sup>9</sup> Leerhoff, 779, reports that the community was closely tied to the Welf family. The dukes of Braunschweig-Lüneburg had close ties to Wienhausen; female members of their families were educated and raised here, entered as nuns, or returned as widows. The dukes also served as protectors (Schutzherren) for the convent. Wienhausen has even been called the female house of the Welfs. In 1252 King Wilhelm of Holland, the stepson of Otto "the child" took Wienhausen into his protection. In 1267 the son of Otto "the child" was named as guardian of the convent.”

<sup>10</sup> Winston-Allen, 62.

(Wienhausen possessed patronage rights in six different churches), and rights linked to the possession of the Luneburg salt works.<sup>11</sup>

The Wienhausen cloister was not, however, comprised exclusively of noblewomen, and the mix of wealthy and poor was often a source of tension. The issue of social rank was problematic and exacerbated an already competitive nature in many of the nuns. This is exemplified in an account of Princess Anna of Stargard, the niece of the Duke of Braunschweig and Luneburg, who joined the Cloister at a young age. *Get original source* writes

...she had spent three years in the cloister and, although still very young, she nevertheless outshone her companions in love, humility, and friendliness and exceeded them in obedience. This was a mighty thorn in the flesh of some resentful sisters and they worried that she would one day accede to the office of abbess. In order to forestall this, they falsely reported to her relatives (but under a pretense of kindness) that she was no behaving as was proper to her station. When her mother, Lady von Stargard heard this, she asked the abbess to bring her daughter along with several other young sisters to stay at Celle for a few days. Now when the abbess was returning to the cloister with the daughter, the young woman was taken from the wagon by force and held captive despite her tearful protests. She was forced to put on secular clothing against her will, but nevertheless continued to wear her habit underneath. Finally, she was sent to a cloister called Ribnitz, which housed only noble women, under the pretense that Wienhausen was not strict enough.<sup>12</sup>

Although the wealth of a number of the nuns, and of the Cloister overall, was a source of many problems for the convent (especially during the Reformation) it also

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<sup>11</sup> Leerhoff, 775, reports that in 1233 Bishop Conrad gave the Cloister 15 fields free of tithes in Wienhausen. They also owned tithes in several other towns including Bockelskamp, Flackenhorst, Bennebstel, Bostel, and Lachtehausen. Duchess Agnes gave the Cloister half of the patronage rights in the Church at Groß Hehlen, at least six farms, and a mill in Boye. Duke Otto gave Wienhausen Cloister several houses, authority in the village of Nienhagen, and the income of Ottenhause. Otto's widow, Duchess Mathilde, granted the convent toll and tax exemptions on all goods sold in Luneburg. By 1368 the entire villages of Nienhagen, Wiedenrode, and Sandlingen were incorporated into the convent's possessions.

<sup>12</sup> Winston-Allen, 48.



afforded the opportunity to obtain a great deal of artwork. The convent's possessions include one of the greatest collections of medieval furniture (many pieces of which are still in the same position as they were when used by the nuns in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries), a celebrated altarpiece, various reliquaries, and a famous collection of medieval tapestries.<sup>13</sup> It has been noted that at Wienhausen “when it comes to beauty and hand created Medieval Christian art, everything is almost beyond compare.”<sup>14</sup> Another example of the Cloister's artwork is its effigy of Christ, also known as the *Grabeschristus* meaning “grave Christ” (Figure 1). The work consists of a sculpture of Christ measuring 247 x 58 x 30 centimeters and an elaborately painted sarcophagus shaped like a Gothic cathedral measuring 252 x 80.5 x 172 centimeters; both are made of oak. The effigy is believed to have been made in 1290 and the sarcophagus was commissioned by Wienhausen's Abbess Katharina von Hoya in 1449.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the fact that art historian Jeffrey Hamburger has praised the Wienhausen Cloister's excellent preservation and records, claiming, “at Wienhausen, we come as close as we can to the art-historical equivalent of a time capsule”<sup>16</sup>, little is known about the Wienhausen effigy of Christ. In spite of its high cost and importance, the purpose of and usage for the piece is unknown. Even its name has been disputed. While for the

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<sup>13</sup> For more information of the artwork housed at Wienhausen see: Verlag, Pick & Schweiger, *Bomann-Archiv Chronik des Kloisters Wienhausen*. (Unpublished)

<sup>14</sup> H. Leerhoff, “Kloster Wienhausen“ in *Die Männer- und Frauenklöster der Zisterzienser in Niedersachsen, Schleswig-Holstein und Hamburg*. Ulrich Faust, ed. (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1994), 45.

<sup>15</sup> June L. Mecham, “Katharina von Hoya's Saint Anne Chapel: The Creation of Sacred Space and the Performance of Piety.” *Tagungsabstract für Frauen*. (2005), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent*. (Berkley: University of California Press, 1997), 177.

sake of clarity and simplicity I shall refer to both the sculpture of Christ and its sarcophagus as the Wienhausen *Grabeschristus*, it has many titles. The Cloister archives in Wienhausen refer to the piece as the *Grabeschristus*, early comments on the “Sepulcher of the Lord”<sup>17</sup> found in the nuns’ own writings are presumed to refer to it, many historians cite it simply as the Wienhausen effigy of Christ, and some know it as the Wienhausen Easter Sepulcher. The limited scholarship that has been done on this piece concludes it was used as a liturgical tool. Although it is possible and likely that the Wienhausen effigy of Christ was used as an instrument of mass and the liturgy, I argue that this was not its only employment. I will, in this thesis, elaborate on the largely unknown history of the *Grabeschristus*, place it within a larger context of cloister worship at both Wienhausen and other north-German cloisters, and attempt to reveal how the nuns at Wienhausen used it.

I believe that, as well as being a tool in the Easter liturgy, the *Grabeschristus* functioned as a reliquary, cult and devotional image, a focus of pilgrimage (both real and imaginary), and an object intricately involved in the mysticism, private contemplation, and perhaps even play of the nuns at Wienhausen. It is, in other words, a true *Andachtsbild*, which Wilhelm Pinder articulately defines as “large size sculptured figures occurring from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards, not belonging to the liturgical setting of the church, but primarily intended as an instrument of compassion and devotion for the individual though situated in the public sphere of the church.”<sup>18</sup> Through the

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<sup>17</sup> *Wienhausen Klosterarchiv, Handschrift*, trans. Katherine Guinness.

<sup>18</sup> Wilhelm Pinder, *Die deutsche Plastik vom ausgehenden Mittelalter bis zum Ende der Renaissance*. (Wildpark-Potsdam, Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, m.b.H. [c1924-29]), 92.

exploration of the Wienhausen *Grabeschristus*' purpose and utilization great insight into the worship practices and belief systems of females in the medieval ages can be gained. It is also an excellent example of religious communities' use of images in their devotion and how this usage could become highly controversial and troubling to both the 15<sup>th</sup>- and 16<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic Church, and scholars today.

It is most likely that Abbess Katharina von Hoya commissioned the sarcophagus from a workshop in the neighboring village of Luneburg. Katharina was the youngest daughter of Count Otto III and quickly climbed the administrative hierarchy within Wienhausen. In 1422, at just 23 years old, Katharina was elected to the position of abbess, although in 1437 she was forcibly made to relinquish this role because of her youth.<sup>19</sup> Three years later Katharina regained the position of abbess, although this time she was appointed by the previous abbess not voted in. The abbess who handed over power to Katharina claimed to do so because Katharina was “nobler in lineage.”<sup>20</sup> Von Hoya served as abbess of Wienhausen for a total of 44 years before Johannes Busch and the reformation ultimately removed her.<sup>21</sup> During her term Katharina was a well-loved abbess, and the story of her removal as told by a fellow nun exemplifies this. Busch had come to the Cloister and informed the sisters that anyone wishing to obey him and the reformation should stand to one side. The chronicler writes:

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<sup>19</sup> This information comes from the Cloister Chronicle and one should consider the bias and misinformation present in this document due to Cloister politics.

<sup>20</sup> Mecham, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Leerhoff 778 reports that after this encounter, Katharina was interrogated and forcibly deposed. The Bishop placed her into a wagon and sent her to Derneburg. Eventually all the Head officers of Wienhausen were sent to separate cloisters.

So that one could see which [sisters] wished to comply and which would show themselves to be disobedient, they ordered that these should stand on one side and those on the other side in two groups. Then they saw that all went to stand by the abbess, not out of rebellion, as one might think, but to show their obedience to their abbess from whom they did not want to be parted living or dead, except for one who went to the other side. But as soon as she saw that her sisters had joined the abbess, she went over to that side.<sup>22</sup>

Katharina von Hoya commissioned an artist from Luneburg to create the *Grabeschristus* after a near-death illness during which she had a vision where Saint Anne “appeared resplendently in a costly garment.”<sup>23</sup> Envisioning Saint Anne was particularly appropriate for von Hoya because by the 15<sup>th</sup> century the saint represented the cult of the family, (of particular interest to wealthy nobles concerned with their lineage) and was an important model of female piety frequently shown instructing the young Virgin Mary. Historian June L. Mecham writes, “Who better to educate the aristocratic abbess in the error of her ways and channel the symbols of Katharina's familial status, her private dwelling and personal wealth, into appropriate acts of devotion?”<sup>24</sup> In this vision the Saint chastised Katharina for her worldliness and extravagant living quarters within the Cloister. After recovering, Katharina converted these living quarters into a chapel dedicated to Saint Anne and spent a great deal of money on artistic decorations and liturgical objects for it. According to Mecham, the sarcophagus for the sculpture of Christ (making up the *Grabeschristus*) was part of this pious shopping spree and meant to be placed in the Saint Anne chapel. It was purchased for 100 marks; the equivalent to what a master builder might earn in a year,

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<sup>22</sup> Winston-Allen, 178.

<sup>23</sup> Mecham.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

and close to four years of Katharina's own annuity.<sup>25</sup> It is assumed that Katharina bought the sarcophagus with the intention of placing the wooden sculpture of Christ inside it.<sup>26</sup>

On top of being a well-respected abbess, visionary, and noblewoman, Katharina was an important patron of the arts and commissioned many artworks for the Cloister community. As mentioned above, the largest of these artistic endeavors was the creation of the Saint Anne chapel, which she saw as an opportunity to express her gratitude to Saint Anne for her newfound health and to repent for her sins. According to the Wienhausen Chronicler, (including the chapel itself, and the *Grabeschristus*) Katharina purchased “several robes for the Mass in a variety of colors, five yellow choir robes and three white choir robes, a pyx, three Missals, and three chalices” (one of which depicted the abbess herself in prayer).<sup>27</sup> The chronicle from Wienhausen also recorded that Katharina, in her piety, contributed a great deal of objects “known to God alone.”<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting that all of these objects were paid for from Katharina's personal finances, and without outside help. It is debated whether these funds were gained from donations of relatives or her own handiwork, but the chronicle merely describes her funding as “ohne einige fremde Hülffe.”<sup>29</sup> Her total expenditures amounted to roughly 414 marks.<sup>30</sup> The fact that the *Grabeschristus* cost an entire

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> According to Mecham, in comparison, a prioress at another convent (Preetz in

quarter of these expenses must be noted, and alludes to the great importance of the piece. Although the *Grabeschristus* did cost a significant amount of money, it is not entirely surprising that such a great deal was spent on a sculpture of Christ. Mecham writes that “most of the sisters had images of Christ and the saints, both sculpted and painted, which they used for their own devotions. Indeed, Katharina's spectacular expenditures followed a long tradition in which women, both religious and secular, functioned as artistic patrons of monastic houses in general and chapels in particular.”<sup>31</sup> Of course, Katharina's status of abbess must have made these vast financial transactions easier.

The 414 marks Katharina spent also went to rebuilding her personal living quarters in the Saint Anne chapel. The chapel was meant to be used by both nuns and their parish communities. In fact, the nuns often, if not usually, worked with the population of Wienhausen on the purchasing and usage of chapel artwork.<sup>32</sup> This is exemplified with Katharina's local artist commission for the *Grabeschristus*. The Saint Anne chapel itself held an interesting spatial and symbolic position; a position which is important to consider in regards to cloister life and the *Grabeschristus*'s usage. As a noblewoman and abbess Katharina did not live among the other nuns, but in her own private living quarters. Mecham writes that the location of this structure reflected the dual nature of the *corrodian* [another term used to describe the current abbess or person in charge of the Cloister on a day to day basis] as both community member and outsider.

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Schleswig-Holstein) built an entirely new infirmary for about 586 marks at the same time.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

The Chapel sat outside the Cloister's main area, but near the sexton's house next to the church and parish courtyard.<sup>33</sup> This situated von Hoya (physically and metaphorically) as both a sister at Wienhausen, a leader, but also an outsider. Finally, in order to gain a wider appreciation of the general cost of the *Grabeschristus*, it should be noted that von Hoya originally purchased this dwelling for a mere five marks. Mecham believes that the chapel was dedicated and consecrated in 1433, but out of usage by 1533 due to the reformation. Jo Ann McNamara, on the other hand, believes the chapel was not completed or consecrated until 1442.

The *Grabeschristus* was eventually moved to the Cloister nun's choir (Figure 2) after a fire destroyed the Saint Anne chapel. Although a study of how the *Grabeschristus* operated and was used specifically in the liminal space of the Saint Anne chapel would be useful and interesting, I plan to focus mainly on how the *Grabeschristus* was used after being moved to the very public worship center of the Nun's Choir.

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<sup>33</sup> Mecham, 6.

## CHAPTER II. TRADITIONAL USE: LITURGICAL, RELIQUARY, AND 15<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY CLOISTER WORSHIP

The most common theory for the *Grabeschristus*'s function is that it played a role in the Cloister's liturgical ceremonies, primarily as a visual prop. These ceremonies included the Easter liturgy and performances of the Deposition, Elevation, and the Visitation of the Three Marys to Christ's Grave. Imagery and works of art like the *Grabeschristus* have played a vital role in the Christian Church since well before the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and the liturgy was often supplemented through performances of songs, readings, and plays as well as sculptures and paintings. As the philosopher Poryphyrus stated, "the otherwise intrinsically invisible can be made perceptible through art."<sup>34</sup> Callistratus echoed those sentiments writing: "works of art too are divinely inspired revelations. They reveal the divine as well as other invisible phenomenon by embodying them in form. Art makes its subject matters real by creating the very structure of reality."<sup>35</sup> The nuns at Wienhausen also believed in the power of artwork to enhance their worshipping experiences, and incorporated many of the Cloister's art pieces into their daily routine.

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<sup>34</sup> Rudolf Berliner, *The Freedom of Medieval Art und andere Studien zum Christlichen Bild Herausgegeben von Robert Suckale*. (Berlin: Lukas, 2003), 61.

<sup>35</sup> Berliner, 61.



One such ceremony in which the nuns included performance and images was the “*Quem queritis*”, part of the Visitation of the Three Marys that is, according to Grinder-Hansen, “the oldest liturgical drama of the church.”<sup>36</sup> The *Quem queritis* was part of the elaborate Easter Liturgy performed by religious communities throughout northern Germany. The performance of this liturgy usually began with the announcement “Wy willen ju eyn bilde gheven” (we are going to show you an image).<sup>37</sup> This line further illustrates the importance of imagery and artwork in religious ceremony. It is safe to assume that the nuns at Wienhausen did act out an Easter play; historian Paulus Gijssbertus Johannes cites a textual fragment discovered at Wienhausen as proof of these performances. The fragment is from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and contains sections with Mary Magdalene meeting the risen Christ as well as a Doubting Thomas scene. It also includes musical notations for songs that were to accompany the dialogue. Johannes writes,

The sequence probably formed the end of the Easter play, as the text ends half way down a side that has remained empty. Art historian Horst Appuhn deduced for Wienhausen a possible dramatized version of the events of passion and Easter, of which the surviving fragment constituted part.<sup>38</sup>

The *Quem queritis* itself involved a brief dialog between the three Marys and an

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<sup>36</sup> Poul Grinder Hansen and S. Kaspersen, editors, *Images of Cult and Devotion: Function and Reception of Christian Images in Medieval and Post-Medieval Europe*. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2004), 234.

<sup>37</sup> Niklaus Largier, *Scripture, Vision, and Performance: Visionary Texts and Medieval Religious Drama*. Kathryn Starkey and Horst Wenzel, eds., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 208.

<sup>38</sup> P. Post[et al.], editors. *Christian Feast and Festival: The Dynamics of Western Liturgy and Culture*. (Sterling, VA: Peeters, 2001).

angel as they approached Christ's tomb. The performers of the drama would read:

Angel: "Whom do you seek in the sepulcher, O followers of Christ?"

Marys: "Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, O Heaven-dwellers."

Angel: "He is not here, he has risen, as he himself said; go, announce that he has risen",<sup>39</sup>

This dialogue was read aloud by the nuns in the chapel, and I believe that they would have readily used the *Grabeschristus* in this performance. The large and expensive sculpture shows Christ in a tomb, and would have served as the perfect visual focus of the play. It is important to consider the doctrine behind these Easter reenactments; Christ had risen from the dead and was thus not in his tomb. An empty tomb would have served as an appropriate visual prop for this scene, and so there is the possibility that the nuns at Wienhausen would remove the effigy of Christ from its sarcophagus. The doors located at the effigy's head and feet are too small to allow its removal, but when the sarcophagus is fully opened the slab on which the effigy lays could be easily removed.

The *Grabeschristus* was not only key in the performance and visual focus of the Easter Liturgy, but might have been used as a burial place for the host on Good Friday. It was Church practice at the time and to this day that on Good Friday the host would be placed inside a symbolic grave and hidden there until Easter Sunday. In most cases this grave, most commonly referred to as a "Holy Grave," was improvised or provisional and, as Grinder-Hansen writes, "typically no more than 60-70 centimeters high, so there would be no use for a man sized construction"<sup>40</sup> (unlike the life-sized *Grabeschristus*). In most cases a cupboard, niche, or some type of wooden structure covered with a cloth

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<sup>39</sup> Grinder Hansen, 234.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

was used as a host holder. Even baptismal fonts could be used. According to Grinder-Hansen there are a few cases in Germany at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century where these types of host holders evolved from small containers or paintings into Holy Graves containing life-sized figures of the dead Christ -- much like Wienhausen's *Grabeschristus*. He writes, "These decorations developed from paintings and reliefs to large-scale sculptures in stone or wood. At the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century we meet Holy Graves, mostly in Germany, with a life-sized figure of the dead Christ, resting in a coffin."<sup>41</sup>

The Wienhausen *Grabeschristus* is an excellent illustration of the evolution of the Holy Grave. After they grew out of provisional wooden boxes, but before they were placed in large, elaborate sarcophagi, Holy Graves were often simply effigies of Christ. These effigies would be laid out on a stone or other flat surface. Since the sculpture of Christ in the *Grabeschristus* predates the sarcophagus that now houses it by 159 years, it is safe to assume that it was used on its own. The effigy was most likely used to hold the host before Easter, since it is believed that the host was "buried" in the side wound of the Wienhausen Effigy of Christ. There are two examples of effigies used in just this way that have been found in Gissselfeld church in Denmark.

These sculptures, coupled with the Wienhausen *Grabeschristus*' eventual addition of a sarcophagus raise many questions. Why were these sarcophagi created? Why were they made so elaborately and in the style of Gothic cathedrals? Eric Thuno explains that the shape of these sarcophagi could be connected with the body of the Virgin Mary stating, "Shown as the mother of the historical and sacramental body of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Christ, there can be little doubt that the Virgin could be understood as a model of the church.”<sup>42</sup> St. Augustine also makes this connection, writing, “For the Church is both a mother and a Virgin.”<sup>43</sup> In this way, the sarcophagus surrounding Christ’s body in the Holy Grave symbolizes both the church and the protective body of his mother Mary. The connection between architectural sarcophagus and the Virgin Mary is explicitly shown in the *Grabeschristus*. On the opening door closest to the effigy of Christ’s head is a painting of the Holy Mother holding an infant Christ. Grinder-Hansen explains the church structure of these sarcophagi stating, “Architectural imitations of the Church of the Holy Grave were recognizable as different shapes of centralized churches without being exact copies in a modern sense.”<sup>44</sup>

Grinder-Hansen mentions two other examples of these Holy Graves: a sculpture from Bridgetine Abbey Church in Mariager, Jutland circa 1500, and one from Kerteminde Church in Funen, circa 1520. Each of these sculptures consists of a life-sized effigy of Christ housed in a sarcophagus resembling a cathedral, just like the Wienhausen *Grabeschristus*, although neither is as large or elaborate as the sculpture at Wienhausen, which predates them by over fifty years. Grinder-Hansen concludes that these sculptures were used primarily for the Easter ceremony and only in liturgical ceremonies of that nature. The Wienhausen *Grabeschristus* differs from these examples in two important ways. Each of these demonstrates why it, unlike the other Holy Graves, was probably used for more than just a liturgical prop. The first difference,

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<sup>42</sup> Eric Thuno, *Image and Relic: Mediating the Sacred in Early Medieval Roman Art*. (Roma: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2002), 73.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Grinder Hansen, 235.

mentioned above, is that while the Holy Graves from Jutland and Funen were built along with the effigy of Christ and the sarcophagus housing it at the same time; the Wienhausen *Grabeschistus* was not.

The other difference lies in the decoration of these three art works. Holy Graves can usually be identified as such by the paintings adorning them, which include guards, angels, and the women coming to Christ's tomb carrying ointments. This limited assortment of imagery leads Grinder-Hansen to categorize Holy Graves as "temporal (zeitlich) devotional pictures ....a concentration of a single historic scene of the Passion [or resurrection] of Christ"<sup>45</sup>. The Wienhausen *Grabeschristus* is covered with paintings of eight guards on its exterior surface (which can be seen when the sarcophagus is fully closed) (Figure 3).<sup>46</sup> This attests to the fact that it was indeed used as a Holy Grave, but unlike its sparsely painted companions, could not have been used only for meditation on specific topics. The *Grabeschristus* is covered with paintings on almost every available surface; these paintings include the outside guards, accompanied by various saints and patrons, and the entire life of Christ, starting with an Annunciation scene, including his Baptism, Last Supper, Passion and ending with his Resurrection and Ascension (Figures 4,5). The vast range of subject matter supports my suggestion that this piece was used in a variety of ways, not just in the Easter liturgy.<sup>47</sup>

Another probable use for the Wienhausen *Grabeschristus* was as a reliquary. As

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 234.

<sup>46</sup> It is my belief that these guards are both representative of the guards at Christ's tomb which Grinder-Hansen references, but are also individual portraits.

<sup>47</sup> The paintings decorating the *Grabeschristus* deserve to be elaborated on in further study. For this thesis, further discussion is not necessary.

noted above, the effigy of Christ may have been used to hold the host, and it is possible that relics were also housed there. It has been recorded that the side wound of the effigy was cut and enlarged over time by the nuns at Wienhausen, perhaps for the purpose of hiding or housing relics (Figure 6).<sup>48</sup> It is commonly believed that the effigy of Christ held relics, although crude holes and cuts made in the sculpture's head, side, and feet suggest that it was not originally meant for this purpose. The *Grabeschristus*' sarcophagus, however, was built with the intent of holding and displaying relics. There are two doors on the top of the sarcophagus that can be opened to reveal the sculpted head and feet of Christ, and each door is decorated on the interior, implying that they were sometimes displayed in an open position (Figures 7,8). These paintings, unlike the rest of the well-preserved images on the *Grabeschristus*, are worn away and almost unrecognizable. I believe that this proves the doors, as well as the effigy of Christ, were accessed by many churchgoers, both public and private, and heavily handled through touch, rubbing, and even kissing. These doors would be opened to reveal and allow access to the relics housed in the effigy's head and feet. The sarcophagus, unlike other examples of Holy Grave sarcophagi mentioned above, contains a bottom half resembling a cupboard. This section was meant to store objects, but what objects it stored are unknown. Contrasting with the top half's ornately painted swinging doors, the interior of this section is unpainted, consisting only of unadorned oak wood.

Although most scholarship concludes that the Wienhausen *Grabeschristus* did indeed hold relics, which relics in particular it housed are unknown. The Wienhausen Cloister was home to many relics, and its central relic was a droplet of the Holy Blood,

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<sup>48</sup> Leerhoff, 770.

brought back by Duchess Agnes after a trip to Rome.<sup>49</sup> There is scholarly debate as to where this relic was housed, but I agree that it was placed inside the Wienhausen Arisen Christ (Figure 9).<sup>50</sup> This sculpture, from 1280-1290, is made of oak and is considered to be one of Wienhausen's most important devotional figures.<sup>51</sup> It also was credited with performing miracles. One instance involved a woman who had been granted refuge inside the convent. She became ill after insulting the sculpture and was only healed through the nun's prayers. This sculpture depicts the resurrection of Jesus. Like the *Grabeschristus* it shows a decorated tomb, but here Christ is stepping out of it. The tomb is decorated with carved guards, suggesting that, also like the *Grabeschristus*, it was used in the Easter liturgy. Also debated is where this sculpture was housed; although today it resides in its own side-room, it was most likely originally placed in the nun's choir. Due to its smaller size, it may also have been used in processions.<sup>52</sup> If the sculpture of the Risen Christ was indeed used to house the Cloister's main relic and was located in the same room as the *Grabeschristus*, the *Grabeschristus* would have housed lesser relics. This suggests, once again, that it did not fit into only one usage.

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<sup>49</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> Leerhoff, 770.

<sup>51</sup> When visiting the Wienhausen Cloister, I found that the abbess was confused by my request to see the *Grabeschristus* as she was sure I meant the sculpture of the Arisen Christ. She took me to the sculpture of the Arisen Christ first and was clearly disappointed when I wanted to move on to other objects. She claimed it was indeed their "prized possession."

<sup>52</sup> This is also debated, see the Figurae website: <http://monasticmatrix.usc.edu/figurae/?function=detail&id=340&PHPSESSID=747ab7f0c3f00a2eab214ef5f0aa8a9d> for discussions by Horst Appun and Babette Hartweg for more on this topic.

### CHAPTER III. WORSHIP AND THE *DORNENKRON*: IMAGINARY PILGRIMAGE AND MEDITATION

Where there are relics, there is the potential for pilgrimage, and it is highly probable that the Wienhausen Cloister attracted pilgrims. The Cloister's possession of a droplet of the holy blood, categorized as a blood relic, adds to this likelihood since blood relics were a sought-after item for pilgrims. Pilgrimage to reliquaries of the holy blood were popular in Germany from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century through the beginnings of the Reformation, and are credited with energizing various pilgrimage sites and journeys. Many churches prospered with the accumulation of a blood relic, and new churches were built just to house them. It is likely that devout travelers would want to visit Wienhausen's relic.

The popularity of Wienhausen's blood relic in Germany cannot be denied,<sup>53</sup> but would pilgrims have also visited the *Grabeschristus* and the relics it contained? A number of bishop-sanctioned indulgences to the Cloister, and to the *Grabeschristus* in particular prove that this was, in fact, the case. In 1448 Bishop Albert of Minden granted a forty-day indulgence to anyone who visited the Saint Anne chapel, or the *Grabeschristus* housed there. Also in 1448, the Bishop of Misinum announced he would give a forty-day indulgence to "any truly penitent person" who recited prayers in

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<sup>53</sup> Walker Bynum, 67.



front of the Grabeschristus, lit candles on it, or provided for its decoration.<sup>54</sup> These indulgences were not specifically linked to Easter, and were to be granted to anyone visiting the sculpture at any time. Thus, it is not likely that the *Grabeschristus* was displayed exclusively at Easter and used only as part of the Easter liturgy but was instead on display year-round.

Besides being a source of indulgences, the *Grabeschristus* was believed to have healing powers. One nun at Wienhausen wrote that praying in front of the sculpture had given “many people... relief and improvement from the misery of the head” and would lessen the pain of death.<sup>55</sup> The writing on the effigy of Christ’s arm, thought to be graffiti left by pilgrims, also alludes to the Wienhausen Cloister’s status as a pilgrimage site, as does a sheet of Veronica illustrations on paper from the collection of the Wienhausen cloister archives. Veronicas are images, usually used as pilgrimage souvenirs, which reference the veil of Veronica, on which Jesus wiped and left an imprint of his face as he marched through Jerusalem to his crucifixion. The prints at Wienhausen were found together, on an uncut sheet containing eight identical icons. Jeffrey Hamburger suggests that they were cut and distributed to visitors as pilgrimage tokens or spiritual souvenirs.<sup>56</sup>

Leather pilgrimage badges bearing the Veronica image have also been found at Wienhausen. It is debated whether these badges were left behind by pilgrims, or used by

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<sup>54</sup> Mecham, 12.

<sup>55</sup> *Wienhausen Klosterarchiv, Handschrift*, trans. Katherine Guinness

<sup>56</sup> Hamburger, 194

the nuns themselves.<sup>57</sup> The badges were essential for any pilgrim, as they helped identify them on their journey, allowed them to find food and shelter more easily, served as an object of devotion and meditation, and acted as proof or souvenirs of their journey. The badges were also thought to have healing powers, and were often buried with the pilgrim after death. The importance of such badges makes it unlikely that they would have just been “left behind” at Wienhausen; therefore I believe they were instead used by the nuns.

J. Hoffman argues that the Veronica pilgrimage badges found at Wienhausen were indeed used by the nuns. She writes, “These vernicles appear to have been used daily by the nuns, and theories abound as to their use: paxes, substitutes for the Host, devotional images, gifts, or badges from a simulated pilgrimage within the convent walls.”<sup>58</sup> The concept of simulated, visionary, or imaginary pilgrimage (the act of performing or going on pilgrimages in one’s mind, without ever leaving “home”) was prevalent at Wienhausen, and the *Grabeschristus* may have played a key role in it. Evidence suggests that not only was the *Grabeschristus* an object used in the pilgrimage of those outside the Cloister, it also served as an object used in the Wienhausen nuns’ imaginary pilgrimage. During renovations to the Nun's choir in 1953, over 100 items were discovered under floorboards. They included several small devotional items, such as pilgrim badges, amulets, and medallions. Also found were thirty devotional books dated from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The books contained prayers and scripture.

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<sup>57</sup> Starr J. Hoffmann, “Passionate Transformation in Vernicle Images” (MA Thesis, University of North Texas, 2004).

<sup>58</sup> Hoffmann, 56.

Their cheap material and variations suggest that the nuns created them within the Cloister for their own personalized daily use.<sup>59</sup> Within these vernacular prayer books, or *Handschriften*, as they are called in Germany, were directions and prayers used in the nun's reenactment of the Stations of the Cross. One *Handschrift* begins this devotion stating, “o special soul, when you shall determine to walk in the footsteps of Christ...take care to follow in his footsteps in spirit and body to visit devotedly the *actual locations* where the spiritual suffering occurred.”<sup>60</sup> The book goes on to mention “our cemetery”, “our staircase” and “our sepulcher” when giving directions on how to carry out the stations.<sup>61</sup> This usage of possessive language leads one to believe that the Stations of the Cross were played out using props housed within the convent. Coupled with the earlier quotation which mentions visiting the “actual locations” it is likely that the nuns carried out the stations within their own convent, yet imagined they were visiting the actual locations of Christ's passion. The sepulcher referred to earlier in the *Handschriften* is, according to June L. Mecham, the *Grabeschristus*. It is referred to again in the fifth Station of the Cross, stating that the nun, when performing this station, should “approach the sepulcher of the Lord.”<sup>62</sup> Through their meditation and use of devotional imagery, the nuns of Wienhausen could partake in an imaginary pilgrimage

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<sup>59</sup> June L. Mecham, “Reading Between the Lines: Compilation, Variation, and the Recovery of an Authentic Female Voice in the Dornenkron Prayer Books from Wienhausen.”( *Journal of Medieval History*. 29,2) 7.

<sup>60</sup> Sarah Hamilton and Andrew Spicer, *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. (Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 139.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

to the place of Christ's passion. In this way, the *Grabeschristus* itself became a place of pilgrimage. The nuns, when meditating on it, could symbolically travel to Jerusalem, to the “locus sanctum”<sup>63</sup> of Jesus' burial.

As well as helping with the nun's imaginary pilgrimage, the Wienhausen Effigy of Christ also helped them to identify more with Christ's suffering-- an important devotional activity of the time. The *Handschrift* used in the Stations of the Cross, mentioned above, states that as the nuns approached the *Grabeschristus* they should focus on the pain of Christ “as he was thrown repeatedly to the ground beneath his cross.”<sup>64</sup> This is certainly not the only example of the nuns' focus on Christ's pain. The text on Christ's Passion that was found in the vernacular prayer books is a particularly gruesome one, known as the *Dornenkron*, or “Secret Passion.” Most of the prayer books found under the Nun's choir floor contained some form the *Dornenkro*. These writings, which are attributed to a Franciscan Brother named Theodore, gained popularity during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries throughout the Netherlands and Germany, mainly in female religious communities. It contained detailed and sensational descriptions of Christ's suffering during the passion from non-Gospel accounts. These included brutal reports of how Christ's hair and beard were pulled out, how spit was poured into his mouth, and how his accusers beat, kicked, and burned him, etc. Christ's crown of thorns is the main focal point throughout the *Dornenkron* and imagery of it piercing Christ's head, face and even teeth is prevalent. One account of the *Dornenkron* found in a *Handschrift* at Wienhausen describes the crown stating, “...it was baked in with the skin and flesh and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

hair.”<sup>65</sup> The *Dornenkron*’s sheer intensity encouraged and enabled the nuns to identify with Christ’s suffering in a starkly realistic and detailed manner.

The Wienhausen *Grabeschristus* certainly reflects the torment inflicted on Christ’s body in the events retold in the *Dornenkron*. The Christ sculpture’s face and neck are full of scratches and cuts, and his arms are decorated with the typical gory blood-flow found in medieval German artwork. His feet and hands contain the wounds of the cross (Figures 10,11). Most noticeable of all these wounds is the large and gaping hole in Christ’s side. The side wound is of particular note; because the nuns at Wienhausen were known to have cut it open several times, perhaps regularly or ritualistically.<sup>66</sup> While this cutting could have served to store relics or the host in the sculpture of Christ, it may also have been done in order to reenact Christ’s suffering.

The nuns’ preoccupation with Christ’s side wound is not limited to the effigy of Christ. An image from a stained glass window in Wienhausen shows a nun actually cutting into Christ’s side. The side wound could also be found as a prominent illustration in illuminated manuscripts such as one from a 15<sup>th</sup>-century Cistercian book, which shows the wound disembodied from Christ, alone. The vaginal imagery this image portrays cannot be ignored, and Gabriele Finaldi Writes:

To the modern viewer the similarity of the cartouche images to male and female genitalia suggests disturbing pornographic comparisons but the 17<sup>th</sup> century viewer may not have found these similarities so unsettling. The highly sensual, at times almost obsessively erotic, concern with the wounds of Christ demonstrated in the poetry, devotions, and visual imagery of the Middle Ages indicates that the sensual mode was felt to be a legitimate and effective means of entering into a relationship with the Christ of the Passion with narratives. Even

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<sup>65</sup> Mecham, *Dornenkron*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Mecham, *Dornenkron*, 6.

the libido could be redirected from its base concerns towards a proper and virtuous devotion to holy things.<sup>67</sup>

Another example of the importance placed on Christ's side wound comes from a Middle High German song cum poem to the cross. This poem has been found in manuscripts from Wienhausen and draws on a combination of secular and sacred sources. It pays particular attention to Christ's side, stating: "In my beloved's side, stands a golden shrine ...Oh! If only I were enclosed in it, as I desire. I ask, sweet Jesus, that through the power of your love, you place my wild heart, upon the branch of the tree. So that my heart may rest, entirely in your wounds..."<sup>68</sup> The nuns saw the wound in Christ's side as both a source of redemption and the dwelling place of the soul.

It is easy to see how the nuns at Wienhausen could have used their effigy of Christ to identify with Christ's suffering, but did they? Were images and artistic objects central to their meditations? If one looks at the devotional practices of nuns in Germany and the Netherlands at the time, the answer could certainly be yes. The writings of Suso, specifically his "Exemplar", were popular with religious communities during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. They focused on image related devotions and even mentioned specific artworks. Other written instructions used at the time and area includes the "Revelationes Coelestes" or "Celestial Revelations" of Birgitta of Vadstena, otherwise known as Saint Bridget of Sweden. In chapter 27 of her Revelations she explains how to regulate a convent, saying "A grave shall be found at a certain spot in the monastery; it must always be open and the sisters shall weekdays and holidays go to it after the

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<sup>67</sup> Gabriele Finaldi, *The Image of Christ*. (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 166.

<sup>68</sup> Hamburger, 122.

terts. While the abbess with two fingers throw a little earth in the grave...”<sup>69</sup> It is almost certain that the nuns at Wienhausen were influenced by Saint Birgitta's writings, and they did throw dirt on their *Grabeschristus*. If they were to follow these instructions, as assumed, the *Grabeschristus* would have needed to be displayed at all times, once again negating its use only during the Easter season as a Holy Grave.

An early 13<sup>th</sup>-century Rhenish Psalter also provides instructions for meditating with images and artwork, commanding its female readers to “stand in front of the cross and gaze at it, and say this prayer with all your heart...now look at the visage of our Lord...Now speak with all your heart to his breast...Now to his right hand...Now to his left hand...Now look at him sweetly...”<sup>70</sup> The prayer manuals at Wienhausen also included instructions for meditation in front of imagery. One *Handschrift* describes when and how the *Dornenkron* should be read. It says “the reader should recite the *Dornenkron* every Sunday evening while either standing or kneeling in a penitential pose, but not sitting, for then it would be “falsely spoken,” and it says it should be read in front of an image of Christ.<sup>71</sup> One can easily imagine the nuns at Wienhausen kneeling before their *Grabeschristus* to meditate and recite their daily devotions.

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<sup>69</sup> Grinder Hansen, 237.

<sup>70</sup> Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*. (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 83.

<sup>71</sup> Mecham, *Dornenkron*, 29.

#### CHAPTER IV. IDENTIFICATION AND PERFORMANCE: THE WIENHAUSEN CLOISTER AT PLAY

Not only did the Wienhausen Effigy of Christ help the nuns to identify with Christ's pain, but also with the suffering and position of his mother Mary. One

*Handschrift* contains the following excerpt from the *Dornenkron*:

Seeing and hearing all this your most just mother cried out and herself fell to the ground when she had seen you weakened through your most bitter Passion. And with compassion (for your) mother herself, weakened by all the blows to (your) body, (you fell) to the ground, still burdened and wearied with the cross.<sup>72</sup>

Mary was obviously a popular subject for the nuns to identify with, and this association was common all over Germany. In Southern Germany (but indicative of overall practices throughout the country) several *Nonnenbücher* (literally “Nuns’ Books”) from the 14<sup>th</sup> century containing evidence of this “*nachfolger Mariae*” were found.<sup>73</sup> These books include seven chronicles written by various sisters, three “spiritual autobiographies”, and hundreds of narratives that were designed around “evidencing

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<sup>72</sup> Hamilton, 149.

<sup>73</sup> The term “*nachfolger Mariae*” is a play on the Middle High German term “*nachfolger Christi*” (imitators of Christ). This term referenced devotional and meditative activities that attempted to be imitative of the Holy Mother. For more information on this topic, see: *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler, editors (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).



mimetic behavior modeled on various aspects of Mary's motherhood."<sup>74</sup> These texts relay a large number of visionary experiences in which the nuns gave birth to Christ, fed him, nursed him, and even bathed him. This is echoed in a passage of the books where a nun named Margaret von Zurich was given the opportunity, as a reward, to prepare a bath for the Christ-child effigy. It reads: "To comfort her because she wept so deeply she was permitted one advent to prepare the bath of our Lord (as we usually made a spiritual house with all things on earth of use to him), and one time because of her heartfelt tears our Lord appeared to her so lovingly as if he were a little baby and sat in the bath before her..."<sup>75</sup>

This particular way of identifying with Mary, and in turn the relationship with and devotion to Christ as an infant, deemed by Rosemary Drage Hale as "mother mysticism", is further exemplified in the widespread use of *Christkindls* by nuns in Medieval Germany.<sup>76</sup> A *Christkindl*, sometimes known as "liege," is a small statue of the Christ Child usually given to nuns (primarily those coming from wealthy families) by their families upon their entrance into a convent. These statues were often used in conjunction with small altars, garments, and cradles. While the Christ Child "dolls" were common devotional tools found throughout Europe, the addition of the cradle was particular to the Netherlands and northern Germany.<sup>77</sup> These cradles were often used as small, personal reliquaries and were elaborately designed to fit this purpose, ranging from functional yet simple cribs to intricate, jeweled sarcophagi.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 215.

<sup>75</sup> Suydam, 215.

<sup>76</sup> Suydam, 217.

<sup>77</sup> Finaldi, 24.

Nuns would interact with the *Christkindls* by dressing them, singing to them, placing them in and taking them out of their cradles, etc. One account by a Cistercian nun describes how she received a Christ Child statue in a cradle, which she later suckled in a vision.<sup>78</sup> In 1344 near Nuremberg, a nun named Margaretha Ebner was given a cradle that, by her own accounts, inspired “mystic dreams.”<sup>79</sup> These types of dreams, inspired by *Christkindls* and their care, stem from a tradition in the South Netherlands where, as mentioned above, nuns would imagine caring for Christ. The *Christkindls* allowed these dreams to become more real through physical interaction and performance; the nuns could act out their meditations using these dolls. With these statues, they did not merely describe or take part in devotion to Mary and Christ, but carried out a “performance of union with the divine child.”<sup>80</sup> It is easy to see how the nuns at Wienhausen, who acted out various biblical events (such as the Easter plays mentioned in chapter two), would be drawn to the performativity the *Christkindls* allowed them to participate in. Finaldi writes about the importance of this “hands-on” approach to religion and refers back to Margaretha, writing:

What knits the aggregate together in relationship is the arc of movement in touching, the haptic sense – that is, the tactile action of handling and caressing and rocking. Margaretha does not simply gaze upon the Christ-child effigy. She apprehends it, that is, she takes and holds the effigy and places it in the cradle and rocks it, she takes it to her breast and nurses it.<sup>81</sup>

The popularity and use of *Christkindls* also stemmed from devotions of Saint

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<sup>78</sup> Hamburger, Visual, 8.

<sup>79</sup> Finaldi, 217.

<sup>80</sup> Finaldi, 215.

<sup>81</sup> Finaldi, 218.

Francis to the Christ Child. These devotions included preparing for “the birth of Christ in one’s soul” and state “One now gathers up the sweet little child Jesus and lifts Him from His crib. As He Himself said one must lift up the son of man so that all those who believe in Him do not perish but may have eternal life.”<sup>82</sup> Another retelling of these devotions, from a 13<sup>th</sup>-century Franciscan monk commanded the reader to: “kiss the beautiful little feet of the infant Jesus who lies in the manger and beg His mother to offer to let you hold Him a while. Pick Him up and hold Him in your arms. Gaze on His face with devotion and reverently kiss Him and delight in Him.”<sup>83</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that the nuns at Wienhausen, inspired by teachings such as this, would go to their *Christkindls* and act out St. Francis’s writings, carefully lifting their own Christ Child out of its cradle to kiss and embrace it.

This personal and intense interaction by the nuns with *Christkindls* was belittled and thought of as mere play by some outsiders. An anonymous contributor to the “Freymuthige” (freethinker), a German publication of the time wrote, in response to these *Christkindl* “dolls”: “The female sex has a natural, irresistible inclination to be with children. If there are no living children at hand, then they make them out of wood or rags. Even at the age of fifty the nun remains herself a child who plays with a holy doll just like a three year old girl with a secular effigy.”<sup>84</sup> Even some modern scholars feel this type of play reflects psychological incongruities more than useful devotional activities. Christine Klapisch-Zuber writes that it is merely a “ritualization of their

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<sup>82</sup> Finaldi, 24.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Hamburger, Visual, 22.

desire for a child.”<sup>85</sup>

While some might have thought of this interaction, this “play” as unimportant, it should be noted that play is a rich and complex term, especially when considered in relation to religious devotions and ritual. Sociologist Don Handelman writes:

Ritual and play are shadow images of one another in the kinds of messages they transmit to the social order. They are analogous states of cognition and perception, whose messages are complementary for the resolution of the ongoing, immoral, deviant domain of ordinary reality.<sup>86</sup>

Jeffrey Hamburger echoes these sentiments in his book *Nuns as Artists*, and writes; “one cannot overlook the ways in which the conventions of female spirituality encouraged cloistered women to transfer their affections by ways of sublimation to Christ as a child or bridegroom.”<sup>87</sup>

While the *Christkindl* sculptures allowed the nuns to act out their affections and relationship to Christ as a child, it is my belief that the nuns at Wienhausen interacted with their *Grabeschristus* in such a way as to act out their affections to Christ as a bridegroom. These interactions, as Christine Klapisch-Zuber says: “transmute their frustrations and tensions....shows that the husband so desperately absent as hidden in the baby of their dreams....child-husband allowed these women an experience that their secluded life condemned them never to know.”<sup>88</sup> The theme of “Christ as bridegroom”

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<sup>85</sup> Kathryn Starkey and Horst Wenzel, editors. *Visual Culture and the German Middle Ages*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 8.

<sup>86</sup> Don Handelman, "Play and Ritual: Complementary Frames of Meta-Communication." *It's a Funny Thing, Humor*. Ed. Anthony J Chapman and Hugh Foot. (Oxford: Pergamon, 1976).

<sup>87</sup> Hamburger, *Visual*, 22.

<sup>88</sup> Starkey, 60.

is hardly uncommon. It is certainly a topic the nuns at Wienhausen believed in, as a detail from paintings in the Nun's Choir illustrates. This detail, entitled "Christ as the Heavenly Bridegroom" shows Christ surrounded by nuns who have received the "crown of life." This painting stems from the practice of "bridal mysticism" and the idea of nuns being brides of Christ, which extended throughout many cloisters.

The similarities between *Christkindls*, especially the sarcophagi *Christkindls*, and the Wienhausen *Grabeschristus* are striking. Each object was designed to house relics, to aid in devotional activities, and to help the nuns identify with Christ. The aesthetic similarities are also too great to be ignored. Both the dead Christ of the *Grabeschristus* and the infant Christ Child of the *Christkindl* are housed in ornate sarcophagi. Each sarcophagus is shaped like a gothic cathedral, decorated with precious metals, and are covered detailed paintings. Although the placement of the infant Christ in a sarcophagus in this way may seem odd, Eric Thulo explains the design, writing "...the unusual depiction of the crib as a sarcophagus, which provides a more explicit association of the crib...can be seen as an attempt to relate the Child in the crib to the Eucharist on the altar..."<sup>89</sup> The linking of Christ's death and birth is not, nor was it in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a new concept. An example of this link lies in the *Namur Musee des Arts Anciens' Liege* from the fifteenth century. This crib is decorated with a carving of Mary grieving for her dead son. This carving foreshadows the sculpted infant's future death. The *Grabeschristus*, as mentioned above, also intertwines Christ's birth and death by implying his sarcophagus is symbolic of his mother, Mary's, body. In this instance Christ's tomb is seen also as his mother's womb. Both the *Christkindl* and the

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<sup>89</sup> Thulo, 54.

*Grabeschristus* operated in much the same way; the nuns laid Christ, as a child, in his cradle and the dead Christ placed in his grave. The effigy of Christ in the *Grabeschristus* could be interpreted as a grown-up *Christkindl*. Because of these similarities, it is possible that the nuns interacted with this sculpture in much the same hands-on manner as they played with the *Christkindls*.

It has been proven, through textual and physical evidence that many nuns interacted with their *Christkindls* in the playful and intense manner mentioned above. Would they, however, be able to, or feel the need for, interacting with an effigy of the dead Christ in a similar way? There are numerous accounts in convent chronicles of “nuns standing before works of art, exchanging love vows with Christ, sharing embraces, kissing his wounds.”<sup>90</sup> A particular illustration from one 15<sup>th</sup> century German cloister shows a nun doing just that (literally kissing and embracing the wounds of Christ). Despite its gruesome nature, the nuns were not unaccustomed to this embracing of the crucified and dead Christ. Another print shows Saint Bernard, the founder of the Cistercian order, embracing an extremely bloodied Christ. Since Saint Bernard was the founder of the Cistercian order, to which Wienhausen belonged, it is within reason to assume that they were familiar with, and took part in these very physical performances with images of Christ’s body.

The possibility of the nuns at Wienhausen having direct contact and interaction with their Effigy of Christ is reinforced by traces of brown oil found on the sculpture of Christ. This perhaps used for preservative purposes, but likely used in ceremonies in which the nuns would rub various liquids into the wood of Christ’s sculpted body. These

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<sup>90</sup> Hamburger, Visual, 22.

ceremonies could range from the nuns reenacting stories of Christ's feet being washed, to the preparation of his dead body for burial.<sup>91</sup> The cutting of Christ's side wound, mentioned in chapter three, is another example of their direct touching of the sculpture. The Wienhausen *Grabeschristus*, in this way, illustrates a fascinating use of devotional hands-on interaction or play, which female religious communities in Germany used at that time.

This play was not limited to *Christkindls* and, as I argue, works like the Wienhausen *Grabeschristus*, but instead has many examples and objects associated with it. For example, many cloisters owned *Palmesels* – small figures of Christ on a donkey that were placed on wheels. These sculptures, whose similarity to children's pull-toys cannot be denied, were used to lead processions on Palm Sunday. This play that many cloistered nuns in the 15<sup>th</sup> century participated in has been greatly debated by various scholars. Some see play as central to any ritual or performance. Richard Schechner states in his book *An Introduction to Performance Studies* that, "Playing, like ritual, is at the heart of performance. In fact, performance may be defined as ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play."<sup>92</sup> Others feel it is a poor interpretation and offshoot of "regular" Christian devotional activities. Klapisch-Zuber, for instance, states that these toy-like sculptures or "ambiguous objects, both those representing the divine and those for play activities, reveal a confusion of attitudes toward the sacred and toward play on

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<sup>91</sup> Mecham, *Dornenkron*, 4 and personal observation of the *Grabeschristus*.

<sup>92</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. (London; New York: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2002), 89.

the part of those who were to manipulate them.”<sup>93</sup> On the other hand, scholars such as Niklaus Largier feel that this play is a perfectly natural and acceptable way to handle religious devotional. He writes, “both religious play and visions represent in similar ways a desire for the enactment of the hidden spiritual meaning of the scriptures. (This play) can be used to insist on the theological fact that the hidden meaning of the scriptures can never be represented but that they have to be understood in terms of performance of spiritual excitement...”<sup>94</sup> This statement reflects the general attitude that sculptures such as the *Christkindl* (and as I argue, the *Grabeschristus*) should be thought of as mediators; they helped the nuns focus their meditations on the spiritual more concretely. Finally, this type of interaction is thought of negatively by many due to its resemblance to so called “pagan beliefs.” This theory was especially popular towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, when some thought it implied a nearly idolatrous use of images thought to be dangerous to Christian beliefs.

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<sup>93</sup> Starkey, 60.

<sup>94</sup> Starkey, 8.



## CHAPTER V. THE GRABESCHRISTUS AS PRE AND POST REFORMATION ARTIFACT

In his book “Body, Brain, and Culture” Victor Turner writes that play “is a volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive essence, which cultural institutions seek to bottle or contain...”<sup>95</sup> The type play occurring at Wienhausen has been interpreted in a variety of ways, but I feel that Turner’s interpretation of play as a whole is one that can also (although it previously has not been) be applied to the nuns’ actions. The Reformation, Catholic Reformation, and Counter Reformation began for a large number of complicated reasons, but one reason was a growing attitude against such intimate and direct interactions with artwork, especially sculpture. While it would be unreasonable to say that the *Grabeschristus* at Wienhausen, and how the nuns there used it, was a direct cause of the Reformation, it is certainly an example of worship activities that angered or worried the powers behind these movements.

The Wienhausen *Grabeschristus* was created less than 100 years before the Reformation began. It reflected many aspects of older Catholic practices that upset the new movement: devotion to Mary, a great accumulation of wealth and power, iconic scenes of Christ, sculpture as religious mediator, the selling of indulgences, etc. In this way, the *Grabeschristus* is a fascinating pre-Reformation relic, outlasting the wave of iconoclasm carrying the Protestant Reformation where many objects of its kind were

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<sup>95</sup> Schechner, 90.

destroyed. The sculpture's survival was not entirely accidental or miraculous, however. The nuns at Wienhausen were firm followers of older Catholic practices, and did not want to change how they operated, even after numerous visits from the Catholic Reformation.<sup>96</sup> They even hid hundreds of artworks considered "idolatrous" by the Reformation under the floorboards of the nuns' choir so that the reformers could not destroy them. Their devotion to familiar ways of worship, and to their artworks, is reflected in Katharina Von Hoya's moving entry into the Wienhausen Chronicle. She describes her frustration and pain over being told how to live her pious life writing, "This was the way of life I found kept in this monastery [when I entered it] forty years ago; for as many years as I myself have kept it and will continue to serve in this way and no other."<sup>97</sup>

Because of its interesting historical position and the vast insight it provides into how 15<sup>th</sup>-century German nuns lived, worshipped, and used artworks, the Wienhausen *Grabeschristus* is a compelling piece that does not deserve to be ignored. Although previous scholarship on it has been well done, and I do not wish to argue against what has been written, it is extremely limited in its size and scope. This thesis is not only important for expanding what is known about the Wienhausen *Grabeschristus* and how it was used, but for illustrating the surprising ways in which the worship, personal activities, and mysticism of the nuns at Wienhausen operated, changed, and flowed.

The nuns at Wienhausen were not extraordinary; they were not sainted, they

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<sup>96</sup> The nuns at Wienhausen strongly opposed the Reformation and attacked bishops who visited the Cloister to carry out its new order. There are, from the Cloister Chronicles and scholars, accounts of the nuns attacking the reformers from the Cloister's roof and even biting off bishops' fingers.

<sup>97</sup> Winston-Allen, 22.

were not martyred, they did not write literature or music that is still used today, but they did live, and used artwork intimately in their existence. As June Mecham writes:

In medieval studies, the personal ownership and use of spiritual works by cloistered women as well as their participation in book production remain largely terra ignota. Apart from the lives and works of a few outstanding individuals who achieved recognition as saints and/or mystics, scholars know little about the devotional concerns and spiritual practices of ordinary medieval nuns. The current image of female spirituality thus relies primarily on the experiences of extraordinary women, while questions about what nuns read and how they prayed still remain.<sup>98</sup>

I wholeheartedly agree with Mecham, and feel that a larger understanding of how nuns overall lived and worshipped is essential to the study of medieval artwork.

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<sup>98</sup> Mecham, Dornenkron, 1.



Figure 1: Wienhausen Grabschistus, Wienhausen Cloister, 1290/1449



Figure 2: Nuns' Choir, Wienhausen Cloister





Figure 3: Wienhausen Grabeschristus, closed with detail of guards, Wienhausen Cloister, 1290/1449



Figure 4: Wienhausen Grabeschristus, detail of interior painting (Life of Christ),  
Wienhausen Cloister, 1290/1449



Figure 5: Wienhausen Grabeschristus, detail of interior painting (Life of Christ),  
Wienhausen Cloister, 1290/1449





Figure 6: Wienhausen Gräbeschistus, detail of side wound, Wienhausen Cloister,  
1290/1449





Figure 7: Wienhausen Grabeschristus, detail of head and door, Wienhausen Cloister, 1290/1149



Figure 8: Wienhausen Grabeschristus, detail of feet and door, Wienhausen Cloister, 1290/1449



Figure 9: Sculpture of the Arisen Christ, Wienhausen Cloister, 13<sup>th</sup> century





Figure 10: Wienhausen Gräbeschistus, detail of feet, Wienhausen Cloister, 1290/1449



Figure 11: Wienhausen Gräbeschistus, detail of hands, Wienhausen Cloister, 1290/1149

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