Medieval Iconographic Rings: Constructing a Cultural Context

Anillos iconográficos medievales. La construcción de un contexto cultural

Sandra Hindman
Les Enluminures

Abstract
This essay examines an important but long-overlooked type of medieval object, known as "iconographic rings," and considers their contribution to devotional practices in late-medieval England. Building on Herbert Kessler's observations concerning the significance of portable objects in medieval art, it contextualizes iconographic rings within a broader circuit of religious imagery, underscoring their uniqueness as wearable prayers, more personal and intimate than other devotional objects like Books of Hours, the imagery from which they draw closely. Utilizing data from a newly completed census, this essay also counters recent scholarship that has characterized iconographic rings as commonplace or *populuxe* items, showing instead that they were luxury objects created for an emerging middle class. Personalized with inscriptions and name-saints for their owners, iconographic rings take us inside one of the most intimate forms of devotion and make us rethink the relationship between image and prayer in late-medieval England.

Keywords: English manuscript illumination; Private devotion; Medieval jewelry; Iconographic Ring; Black-letter inscription; Prayer; Book of Hours.

Resumen
Este ensayo examina un tipo de objeto medieval importante, pero que se ha pasado por alto durante mucho tiempo, conocido como "anillos iconográficos". Se considera en estas páginas su contribución a las prácticas devocionales en la Inglaterra bajomedieval. Partiendo de las observaciones de Herbert Kessler sobre la importancia de los objetos portátiles en el arte medieval, contextualiza los anillos iconográficos dentro de un circuito más amplio de imaginería

religiosa, subrayando su singularidad como oraciones llevables, más personales e íntimas que otros objetos devocionales como los Libros de Horas, cuya imaginería extraen estrechamente. Utilizando los datos de un censo recientemente completado, este ensayo también contrarresta los estudios recientes que han caracterizado los anillos iconográficos como objetos comunes o *populuxe*, mostrando en cambio que eran objetos de lujo creados para una clase media emergente. Personalizados con inscripciones y nombres de santos para sus propietarios, los anillos iconográficos nos llevan al interior de una de las formas más íntimas de devoción y nos hacen repensar la relación entre imagen y oración en la Inglaterra bajomedieval.

Palabras clave: manuscritos ingleses iluminados; devoción privada; joyería medieval; anillo iconográfico; inscripción de letra negra; oración; libro de horas

Introduction

When I studied and taught art history at university, the "minor" or "decorative" arts were not part of the curriculum. My undergraduate teacher, Herbert Leon Kessler, whose influence on my formation as an art historian I gratefully acknowledge, made a similar observation in the opening of *Experiencing Medieval Art* (Toronto, 2019), his wonderful book which began as a revision of *Seeing Medieval Art* (Ontario/New York, 2004), but ended up being a "completely new work" – and what a stimulating one at that.[1] In the first chapter of *Experiencing Medieval Art* called "Object," Kessler considers portable objects "a prime category of medieval art," including some objects of personal adornment, and he examines the multiple practical, talismanic, and devotional functions they could serve. In other chapters, especially "Matter" and "Performance", Kessler returns to what we might call, broadly speaking, the cultural context of objects, including small portable objects. In the last decade, the turn toward the bodily in material studies in art history, coupled with an interest in performance and ritual, acknowledged by Kessler, opens the field to long-overlooked media, like medieval rings.[2] Yet, there are no medieval finger rings in his book, or indeed, in any survey of medieval art history I have consulted to date.

Although there is a significant, and growing, scholarly literature on medieval rings, most of the publications consist of catalogues of museum and private collections. As a result, many of these objects –so rarely on view in museum displays– are now available for study, even if few publications offer much more than the most generic descriptions of rings. Worth noting among these publications are catalogues of rings from the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Ashmolean Museum, as well as several catalogues of private collections, large and small, such as the Hashimoto Collection, the Alice and Louis Koch Collection (now part of the Swiss National Museum in Zurich), and a few others. Studies on individual

* I am grateful to the following for their help: Peter Bovenmyer, Beatriz Chadour-Sampson, Richard Edgcumbe, Hazel Forsyth, Kristen Racaniello, Diana Scarisbrick, Naomi Speakman, and Matthew Winterbottom."

[1] H. L. Kessler, *Experiencing Medieval Art*, Toronto/Buffalo/London, 2019; Idem, *Seeing Medieval Art*, Toronto, 2014.

[2] A. Kumler, C. R. Lakey, "*Res* and *Significatio*: The Material Sense of Things in the Middle Ages", *Gesta*, 51 (2012), pp. 1-17.

types of rings from Western Europe in the Middle Ages –"architectural" rings, bishop's rings, magic rings, "iconographic" rings, gemstone rings, signet rings, love rings, merchant's rings, posy rings– are infrequent at best. There are still not comprehensive studies that build on the very modest contribution I made in 2007 *Toward an Art History of Medieval Rings*, which located the major types of rings within traditional movements or periods of art history and related them to other contemporaneous works of art.[3]

My contribution in this volume considers one specific ring type from the later Middle Ages, the so-called "iconographic" ring. It develops observations I made already in 2007 and on those more recently presented by Kathleen E. Kennedy, who discussed this group of rings under the rubric of "populuxe jewelry."[4] Unlike most types of medieval rings which are pan-European, iconographic rings were found exclusively in the British Isles, from their origin in the first half of the fourteenth century until c. 1520.[5] Let us start with their name, which is already problematic and was conceived by Victorian collectors in the nineteenth century. The earliest use I have found of it is in the *South Kensington Museum Catalogue of Special Exhibition* of 1862, in which the antiquarian Edmund Waterton (1830-1887) exhibited seven of his rings and wrote the catalogue entries under the rubric "Iconographic."[6] Waterton's rings are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Shortly thereafter, in 1877, the term was adopted by another fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, William Jones in his monograph *Finger-Ring Lore*.[7] For Waterton, Jones, and all subsequent cataloguers, "iconographic" refers to rings with the image of a saint or a religious subject somewhere on the ring, usually on the bezel (the front of the ring), sometimes on the shoulder (the band or hoop of the ring), and only infrequently on the inside of the band or hoop. Occasionally, rings that have no imagery on their bezels or hoops are included under the rubric "iconographic," but I will include here only those that are "with images" as the documents describe them. Many of these rings also have inscriptions on the inside of the hoop.

Regarding both terminology and ownership, an examination of English testaments and wills, as Kennedy has already embarked upon, is instructive.[8] The word "iconographic" is not used in medieval documents, although these rings do appear to be distinguished from other types as *cum ymagine* or "with images." In 1415, Isabellae de Wyleby, the widow of a knight,

[3] S. Hindman, I. Fatone, A. Laurent-Di Mantova, *Toward an Art History of Medieval Rings: A Private Collection*, London, 2007 (reprint 2014).

[4] K. Kennedy, "English Iconographic Rings and Medieval Populuxe Jewelry", in E. Foster, J. Perratore, S. Rozenski (eds.), *Devotional Interaction in Medieval England and Its Afterlives*, Leiden/Boston, 2018, pp. 80-99.

[5] These are the approximate dates given by Oman based on style and letter forms: C. Oman, *British Rings, 800-1914*, London, 1974, pp. 54-55.

[6] J. C. Robinson (ed.), *Catalogue of the Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Mediaeval, Renaissance, and More Recent Periods, on Loan at the South Kensington Museum, June 1862*, London, 1863, Section 32, p. 630.

[7] W. Jones, *Finger-Ring Lore: Historical, Legendary, Anecdotal*, London, 1877.

[8] See especially: L. Boatwright, M. Habberjam, P. Hammond (eds.,) *The Logge Rester of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills 1479-1486*, 2 vols., Knaphill, 2008; J. Raine (ed.), *Testamenta Eboracensia or Wills Registered at York Illustrative of the History, Manners, Language, Statistics, Etc., of the Province of York from the Year MCCC Downwards*, vols. I-V, London, 1835-1884; S. Tymms, *Wills and Inventories from the Registers of the Commissary of Bury St. Edmunds and the Archdeacon of Sudbury*, London, 1850; F. W. Weaver (ed.), *Somerset Medieval Wills Second Series (1501-1530) with Some Somerset Wills Preserved at Lambeth*, London, 1903.

left her *unum annulum aureum cum quatuor ymaginibus* to Willielmon Wawton.[9] In 1437, Elena Welles, the lady of a lord, whose son was a bishop, left her *annulum aureum cum ymagine Trinitatis et Beatae Mariae* to Roberto Grene.[10] In 1443, Henricus Markett, a merchant residing in York, left his *annulum aureum habentem ij ymagines … Beatae Mariae Virgines et Sancti Johannis* to another merchant, Willelmo Gaunte.[11] In one instance, the ring is described also as enameled: in 1453, Elena Fulford leaves *un annulum de auro cum j. ymagine Santae Elenae enameled* to the widow of David Paynton.[12] The subject of Elena's ring, Saint Helen, is uncommon on iconographic rings; surely it was her name saint. In English, the phrasing is similar: in 1490, the widow of a wealthy tradesman's family in Nottingham, Margaret Alestre, leaves to her son John Bell a "ryng of gold wt ymages yeron";[13] and in 1509, Alison Sothill of Dewsbury left "a ryng of gold having Sent John Baptist graven in hit" to her son-in-law William Amyas.[14]

Details of ownership reveal that both men and women possessed these rings "with images". Frequently the owners were merchants from the up-and-coming middle classes, but the wills show that the aristocracy (Sir William Plumpton knight in 1443), the landed gentry (Robert Lascelles Esq. in 1507-08), chantry priests (Dan John Fell of York Minster in 1506), and their wives, owned iconographic rings. They bequeathed them to family members but also to friends, both male and female, confirming that the type of ring was not restricted to, or even especially favored by, one or the other gender. Further research would prove fruitful, as the documents are rich sources of information. For example, both Sir William Plumpton and Dan John Fell owned other luxury goods, the former several manuscripts, one a Primer richly bound, and the latter books (he specifies that one is printed), goldsmith work, and alabaster sculptures.[15] Robert Lascelles did not own an iconographic ring to leave to his heirs, so instead he left a weighty gold coin (one "ryall" or "royal" worth 10 shillings, the highest valued coin before the sovereign was introduced) to his cousin's wife with instructions that she was to have a ring made from it: "one ryall of gold, to mak a ryng upon wt three hedles Sanct Anton crosses, yt she may remember me and pray for my soule."[16]

This pattern of ownership contradicts the *populuxe* categorization suggested by of Kennedy, who considers the rings as "commonplace as pilgrim badges," borrowing the term "populuxe" from postwar American mass consumer culture to refer to inexpensive versions of luxury products. Although there are extant iconographic rings composed of less expensive metal alloys, silver, lead, and copper,[17] most references specify the material as "gold," a

[9] *Testamenta Eboracensia*, I, 1836, p. 282.

[10] *Testatmenta Eboracensia*, II, 1855, p. 62.

[11] *Testatmenta Eboracensia*, II, 1855, p. 88.

[12] *Testatmenta Eboracensia*, II, 1855, p. 165.

[13] *Testamenta Eboracensia*, IV, 1869, p. 64.

[14] *Testatmenta Eboracensia*, V, 1884, p. 6.

[15] *Testamenta Eboracensia*, III, 1865, p. 67; and *Testamenta Eboracensia*, V, 1884, p. 244.

[16] *Testamenta Eboracensia*, IV, 1869, p. 272.

[17] For example, British Museum: AF.909, AF.922, AF.923, AF.924, AF.925, AF.926, AF.927, AF.930, AF.931, AF.932, AF.933; Museum of London A1610, A16840; Portable Antiquities Schema: HAMP-06D639, HESH-A784A7; Victoria and Albert Museum: 680-1871, 681-1871.

fact confirmed by my database, whereas the vast number of extant pilgrims' badges are of tin and baser metals. That some of the extant rings seem crudely carved and void of other enrichment also reinforces for Kennedy the idea that they are *pop-uluxe* but it should be remembered that, in many cases, the present condition of these rings does not reflect their original appearance. Enamel survives poorly when buried, and many extant rings come from the ground. A few surviving rings give us a better idea of just how showy they were when initially worn: in multiple instances, deep blue-black coloring (enamel or perhaps niello?) sets the engraved figures off from the background; in several others, the remains of green and white enamel shows that the hoop was also colored (Fig. 1). We need to imagine this class of rings as mostly made of gold, finely and deeply engraved with images, set off against a colored background and perhaps with the details of drapery highlighted in niello, and the hoop of multicolored enamel.

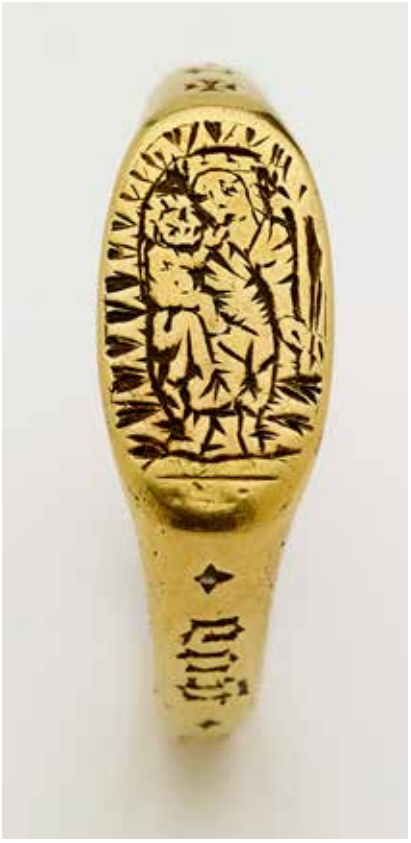

Fig. 1. Iconographic ring, British Museum, AF.901, Virgin and Child. (Photo: British Museum with permission)

Taking a different tack than Kennedy, I will explore how the rings adapt the imagery of illustrations in English Books of Hours, offering their wearers access to prayers worn on the body. Repeatedly touched and rubbed by their wearers, who further manipulated them by twisting them around on the finger and taking them on and off to view the inscriptions, these rings enrich our understanding of the culture of prayer and its rites and practices in the late Middle Ages. I will also show how the inscriptions on iconographic rings further complicate the work that the rings as objects accomplished. Sometimes fixing the moment of gift or exchange, or evoking a sentiment from giver to receiver, or offering a shorthand code to a larger textual context, the inscriptions on the rings operate in a discursive framework that underscores the slippage between sacred and secular in the art and language of the late Middle Ages. This study is thus focused on the cultural work performed by the rings as objects, which, as the reader will see, is quite distinct from that performed by pilgrims' badges.

The Database

My study utilizes a database I have compiled (to be published elsewhere), which to date includes approximately 248 extant iconographic rings, and is searchable by subject, inscription, and typology (form of the ring). A note of caution is warranted here: this database is an

ongoing project, since iconographic rings are occasionally found in the ground and recorded in the United Kingdom in the Portable Antiquities Scheme, and other examples, long in private collections, also turn up from time to time. The tabulation is important, however, because it helps us understand better the cultural context of iconographic rings.

A quantitative overview of the database produces the following statistics. The most frequent subject is the Virgin and Child (36), sometimes accompanied by other saints, followed by Saint Catherine (31), Saint Barbara (30), the Trinity (28), Saint John the Baptist (28), Saint Christopher (25), Saint George (19), the Annunciation (18), Saint Margaret (14), and Saint John the Evangelist (11). Less common saints that occur are Saints Anthony (5), Paul (4), Thomas Becket (3), and Peter (2). One ring depicts Saint Anne Teaching the Virgin to Read (1). At present this tabulation remains approximate, because there an additional 60 saints or subjects are still unidentified by their holding institutions. Approximately one-third of the rings bear inscriptions (87). There are many different ring types. The most common is the ridged bezel with two panels (75), followed by the oval bezel (45), the ridged bezel with three panels (35), the rectangular bezel (35), the oblong bezel (30), the octagonal bezel (5), and the circular bezel (2). Eight rings have no bezel or are simply hoops with panels. One ring opens, revealing a triptych. Several rings are mounted with stones. I will discuss a few of these examples as "outliers."

Iconographic Rings and the Culture of Prayer

Nearly every subject found in iconographic rings also occurs, and with remarkably similar representations, in early fifteenth-century Books of Hours, primarily but not exclusively in the Suffrages or prayers to the saints. Compare, for example, the image of the *Gnadenstuhl* Trinity ("Throne of Mercy") which appears so frequently on iconographic rings, and in this particular example on the central panel of a triple panel bezel (Fig. 2), with the same subject in a Book of Hours by the Ushaw Workshop (Paris, Bibl. de l'Arsenal, MS 565, f. 43; Fig. 3).[18] The fleshy, full face of God the Father with his bifurcated beard, posed above the image of the emaciated suspended Christ, offers a close-up version of that found in the miniature. Coming just before ithe special prayer of intervention to "sweet God" the Almighty, and sometimes prefacing a Suffrage to the Trinity, the image of the Trinity as it appears on the ring invites the viewer to recollect the words of the prayer. The suffrage typically opens *Adoro te Deum Patrem, et Filium, et Spiritum Sanctum* ("I worship thee God the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit").[19] The Trinity bifurcates a scene of the Annunciation, with the Angel Gabriel on the left and the Virgin Mary on the right panels of the ring. These figures, the angel swooping down from the left, the Virgin turning as she holds her hands up in astonishment at the unexpected visit, occur in similar poses, proportions, and definition in numerous Books of Hours, where the Annunciation opens the very core of the book at Matins of the Hours of the Virgin. The prayer at Matins begins with *Domine, labia mea aperies/ Deus in adiutorium meum intende* ("O Lord, open my lips/ O God, come to my assistance"). It is these words, surely

[18] M. Smeyers, *Vlaamse miniaturen voor van Eyck (ca. 1380-ca. 1420), Catalogus*, Louvain, 1993, no. 13, pp. 36-39. Hindman, Fatone, Laurent-Di Mantova, *Toward an Art History of Medieval Rings*, pp. 156-161, no. 26.

[19] For quotations from the Book of Hours, I have used the online Hypertext available at https://www.medievalist.net/

Fig. 2. Iconographic ring, Private Collection, Throne of Mercy *(Gnadenstuhl)* with annunciation panels (left: Virgin; right: Gabriel). (Photo: Les Enluminures, with permission)

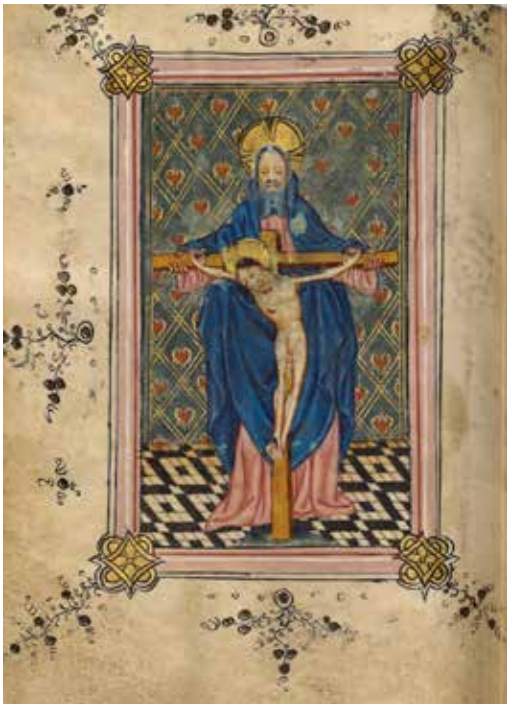

Fig. 3. Book of Hours, Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 565, fol. 43v, Throne of Mercy. (Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, with permission)

known by heart to every owner of a Book of Hours, that the engraved images of the Angel and the Virgin would have called to mind.

Other comparisons between images on iconographic rings and those in Books of Hours further confirm the use of a common visual vocabulary in the two media. An iconographic ring in the British Museum (inv. 1855,1201.215; Fig. 4)[20] and the Beaufort Hours (London, British Library, Royal MS 2 A XVIII, f. 00; Fig. 5),[21] the latter made in two campaigns between 1411 and 1415 and 1425 and 1443, both illustrate Saint George and the Dragon. The body of the saint curves forward, his spear raised as he prepares to pierce the dragon's body at his feet. The figures share other details as well, such as the shield, pointed helmet, and armor, even if the rearing horse, the maiden in distress, and the landscape are eliminated in the more shorthand

[20] Published, Dalton, *Franks Bequest*, no. 727; further photographs and exhibition history are found on the British Museum site: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1855-1201-215.

[21] See most recently, S. McKendrick, J. Lowden, K. Doyle, *Royal Manuscripts: The Genius of Illumination, London, 2011*, no. 25; the manuscript is fully digitized on the British Library site: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal_ms_2_a_xviii_f096r

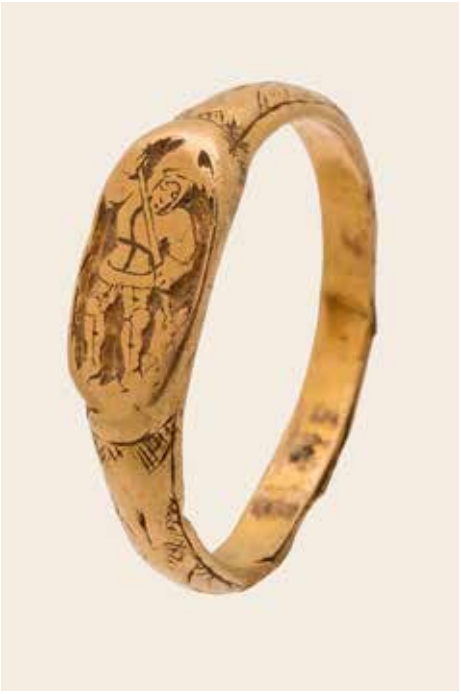

Fig. 4. Iconographic ring, Private Collection, Saint George. (photo: Les Enluminures, with permission).

version the ring necessarily adopts due to its small surface. We can account for George's prominence on rings (19 examples) and in Books of Hours as the patron saint of England, a role he enjoyed from the mid-fourteenth century, when King Edward III established the royal Order of the Garter under his protection. In rings and Books of Hours (see British Museum, AF.906[22] and the Bybbesworth Hours, 1405-1415, f. 12v, made in Bruges for export to England, now Private Collection),[23] the giant Christopher, his legs immersed in water halfway up his thighs, holds his staff in his right hand as he turns toward his left, the Christ Child seated atop his left shoulder. The murder of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, depicted most elaborately on the band of an "outlier" iconographic ring (British Museum, AF.899), includes the details found in most miniatures of the subject (compare British Library, Harley MS 2900 f. 56v, a Sarum Book of Hours made in Rouen for export).[24] Dressed in his bishop's robe, the saint holds his staff and stands before the altar on which appears a book, a chalice, a candle. The retable adorning the altar and the tiled floor of the Cathedral setting further associate the two images. Returning to the Bybbesworth Hours (f. 16v), it also combines images for the paired suffrages of Saints John the Evangelist and Saint John the Baptist, likewise posed in side-by-side panels on iconographic rings. Saint Catherine, Saint Anne and the Virgin, and Saint Margaret, to name only a few more, also, all have analogies in Books of Hours.

To understand fully how wearers experienced their iconographic rings, we need to imagine them rubbing, touching, and fondling the surface of the image as the image prompts them to murmur aloud, or perhaps repeat silently to themselves, their prayers, literally "opening their lips" as the opening prayer at Matins articulates. In this way, the iconographic ring acquires agency. It is a sort of stand-in for the religious figure who is addressed –God, the

[22] Published, Dalton, *Franks Bequest*, no. 732; J. Evans, *English Posies and Posy Rings*, London, 1931 (reprint 2012), p. 7; further photographs are found on the British Museum site. On the ten lozenges of the hoop, the ring reads '*de boen cuer*,' and it may also have functioned as a decade ring.

[23] S. Hindman, *Medieval Must-Haves: The Book of Hours*, [np], 2018, no. 12, pp. 64-67.

[24] Published, Dalton, *Franks Bequest*, no. 720; and A. Ward, J. Cherry, B. Cartiledge, *Rings through the Ages*, New York, 1981, pl. 185; and L. De Beer, N. Speakman, *Thomas Becket: Murder and Making of a Saint, London*, 2021. Further photographs are on the British Museum site: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_AF-899; this ring is an outlier in that its bezel is set with a pointed diamond (perhaps signaling Becket's importance?).

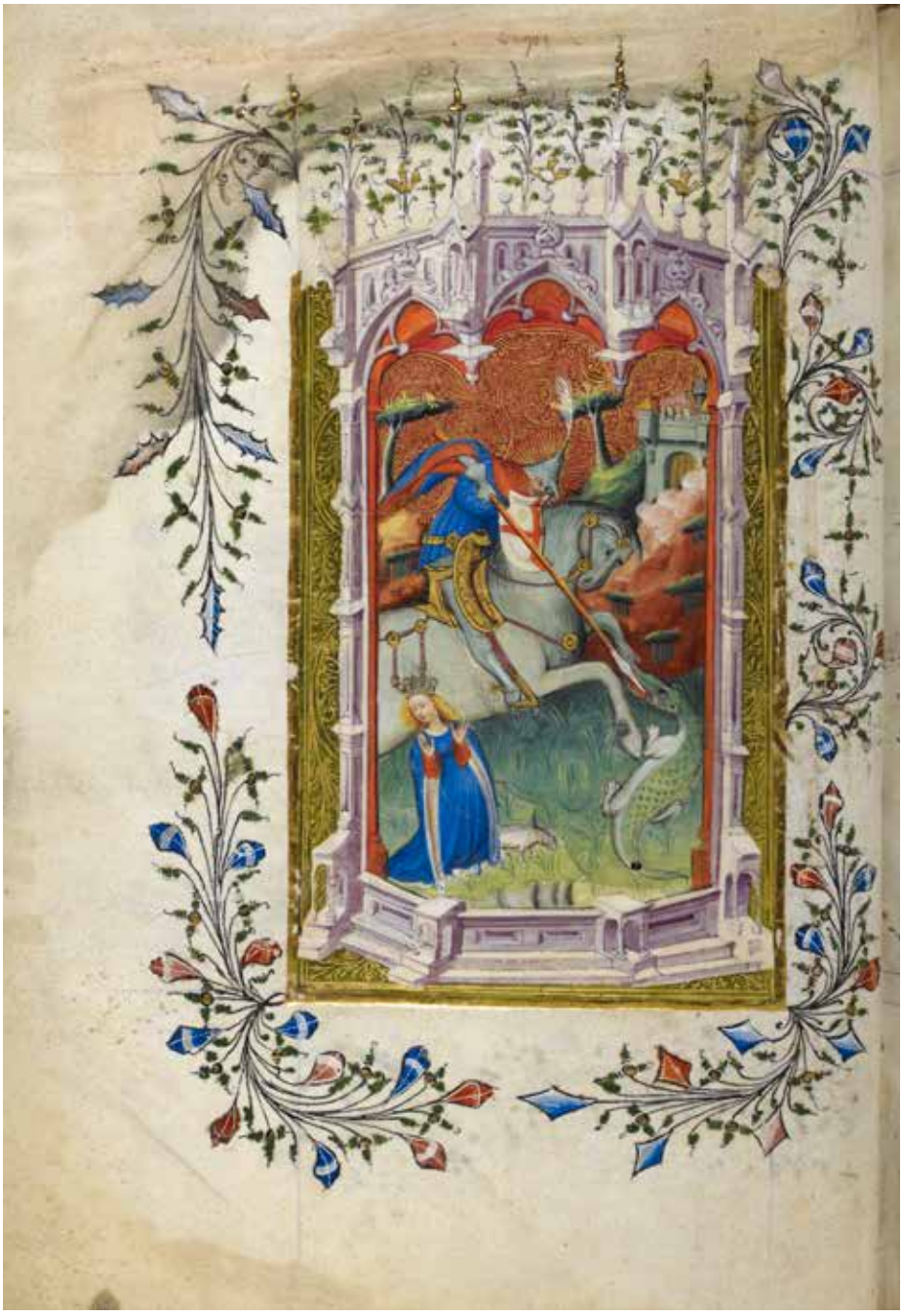

Fig. 5. The Beaufort Hours, London, British Library, Royal 2 A XVIII, fol. 5v, Saint George. (Photo: British Library, with permission)

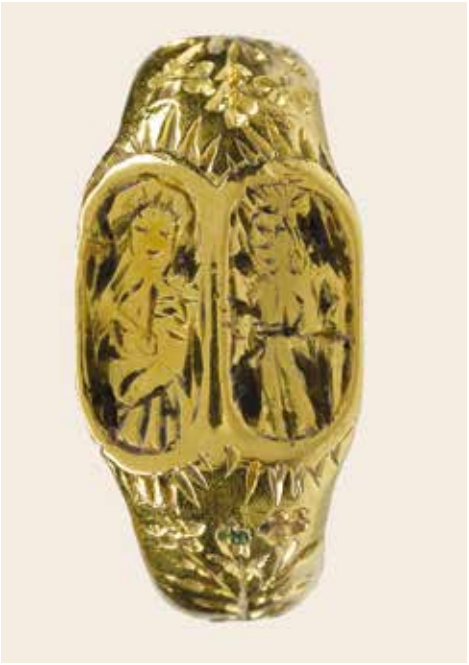

Fig. 6. Iconographic ring, Edinburgh, Museum of Scotland, H.NJ.7, Unidentified saints.
(Photo: Museum of Scotland, with permission)

Virgin, the Trinity, individual saints– and it thus facilitates the reciprocal nature of prayer as conversation, often begun with an invocation, then a request for assistance, and finally proceeding to a dialogue between the devout wearer and a holy being. That rings were extensively handled and over a long period of time is evident, because many survive in abnormally worn states that can only be the result of repeated use (Fig. 6).[25] In some cases, the surfaces of the engraving became so worn out that the images seem even to have been re-carved, reviving the power of the intercessor and affirming the efficacy of the image as its substitute.

There is one other crucial characteristic of many iconographic rings that affected how they were experienced –their inscriptions. To return to our Trinity-Annunciation ring (Fig. 1), on the interior of the hoop it is inscribed in an angular gothic script, called "gothica textura" and also referred to as "black letter script." This is a formal book hand, the script virtually exclusively employed in the later Middle Ages for Books of Hours, liturgical manuscripts, and many luxury manuscripts (as opposed, say, to *gothica cursiva*), and it therefore links iconographic rings even more closely to Books of Hours. It is an upright angular script, with separate strokes used to form the letters or parts of letters, resulting in a formal, regular, and neat appearance. The inscription on this ring reads *loial sui* (I am loyal). At first instance, it refers quite simply to the sentiment that might accompany the gift of a ring from lover to the object of his affection: "I am loyal [to you]." The phrase occurs, among other places, in a thirteenth-century medieval fabliau *Le chevalier qui fist sa femme confesse*[26] and is reminiscent also of the oath a lord swears to his lady or the fealty of a knight to his lord. But like many of the inscriptions in iconographic rings, this can be read in multiple senses. As Virginia Reinburg notes in her stimulating discussion on prayer in Books of Hours, prayer was also a contract like a seigneurial oath or bond.[27] When the patron kneels

[25] Further examples: WA1897.CDEF.F585; British Museum:1856,0701.2704, AF.925, AF.926, AF.930, AF.931, AF.932;_LE: 654, Portable Antiquities Scheme: YORYM-1ECA63, SUSS-603855, KENT-503C38, ESS-653F98, KENT-DDF152, BH-E08757, SUSS-028791, LANCUM-3590E1; Victoria and Albert Museum: 683-1871, OA 12188.

[26] W. Noomen, N. Van Den Boogaard (eds.), *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux*, Assen/Maastricht, 1988, pp. 227-243, 414-415.

[27] V. Reinburg, *French Books of Hours: Making an Archive of Prayer, c. 1400-1600*, Cambridge UK, 2012, esp. pp. 154-158.

in prayer before the Virgin and Child, he or she assumes the position of homage, pledging service, as the holy person promises protection. So, just as *loial sui* may serve as a reminder of the gift of the ring, so it too pledges faith and honor to God, Christ, and the Virgin, simultaneously fulfilling a secular and spiritual function as the ring and its wearer straddle the world of daily life and private devotion.

A unique, unusually intricate example, sheds further light on the complex work these rings performed in relationship to prayer (Fig. 7). When closed, the gold ring appears to be a straightforward example of the double-panel type of bezel with an image of Saint George and the Dragon on the left panel and Saint Catherine on the right panel.[28] I have already discussed Saint George, who as patron saint of England and a fearless soldier, figured prominently in Books of Hours and on rings. Saint Catherine exceeded the popularity of any other saint on iconographic rings (31 examples). Of noble blood, the princess Catherine was a fourth-century virgin martyr, who refused to marry the Roman emperor Maxentius and, subsequently, challenged to a debate with pagan philosophers, converted them to Christianity with her great wisdom. Eventually strung up to be martyred on a spiked wheel (her symbol), her body miraculously shattered the wheel, and she survived, only to be beheaded shortly thereafter. Favored among noble women, often the namesake of princesses, Catherine was considered the patron saint of female wisdom, called upon to ease childbirth and protect during travel. The image-pairing of these two saints on this double-panel ring would have prompted wearers to pray to the saints for protection, reciting prayers known to them from Books of Hours. Both George and Catherine were venerated at late medieval English pilgrimage sites.[29] The image-pairing of these two

Fig. 7. Triptych ring, Private Collection, Saint George (exterior, left), Saint Catherine (exterior, right), Trinity (interior, center), Annunciation (interior, left and right). (Photo: Les Enluminures, with permission)

[28] D. Scarisbrick, *Rings: Symbols of Wealth, Power and Affection*, London, 1993, pp. 36-37; Eadem, *Royal Rich and Renowned: Rings from Imperial Rome to Victorian England*, London, n.d. [2016], no. 35, pp. 84-85.

[29] K. Lewis, *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England*, Woodbridge, UK, 2000.

saints on this double-panel ring would have prompted wearers to pray to the saints for protection, reciting prayers known to them from Books of Hours. The images thus served as tactile amulets or talismans, their charm-like function underscored in the opening words of the most common suffrage to Saint Catherine referring to her as *Virgo sancta Caterina Graeciae* ***gemma*** (the Virgin Saint Catherine, **jewel** of Greece).

Yet, this ring demanded still more of its wearer. A tiny, almost invisible pin joins the double-panel bezel at its central ridge. Pulling up on the pin releases the bezel, which opens outward like the shutters of an altarpiece or reliquary shrine (compare for example the Guennol Triptych Reliquary of the True Cross, but there are many other examples of the structure). Inside appears a triptych, the central panel illustrating the *Gnadenstuhl* Trinity and the two side panels the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary of the Annunciation, in a representation that is a virtual twin to the triple-panel Trinity-Annunciation ring already discussed, and it serves as a similar pictorial prompt for prayer. Closing the triptych, replacing the pin, and removing the ring from the finger, the wearer could also read its inscription: *Joye sans fin* ("Joy without end").

Like the inscription *loial sui* discussed previously, *Joye sans fin* works on many levels. It was the motto of an important noble English family in the fifteenth century, the Widdringtons, and as such it could function superficially as a sign of ownership, a reference that was every bit as specific to a family as a coat of arms. Sir Ralph Widdrington (c. 1440-1503), lord of the castle Widdrington in Northumberland (about 50 miles north of Durham), married in 1480 the well-to-do heiress Felicia Claxton Widdrington.[30] Ralph and Felicia's dates fit the approximate period of execution of the ring, and their socio-economic status would have allowed them to commission such a luxurious, and undoubtedly costly, object. That their family motto was used on jewelry is suggested by another ring found near Widdrington, a ring that was presumed at the time to have been Felicia's ring and inscribed with the words *Joye sans fin* in black letter on the outside of the hoop.[31] But mottos were more than signs of ownership, for families chose them to express sincerely held beliefs or vows they hoped their kin as well as future generations would espouse. So, what could *Joye sans fin* have meant for the Widdrington family? The phrase occurs in medieval religious literature, specifically in the Fifteen Signs of the Last Judgment, in which the devout was meant to say a separate prayer for each of fifteen days. The conclusion of the prayer on the fifteenth and final day before the Last Judgment reads as follows:

> *Les bons auront pour leurs bienfaiz*
> ***Joye sans fin*** *ou ciel la sus/*
> *Les mauuais yront ou palus/*
> *D'enfer en torment pardurable./*
> *Or prions dont au bon Jhesus/*
> *que ce jour nous soit profitable.*

[30] On the Widdringtons see: A. Collins, *A Supplement to the Peerage of England, Containing Several Additions and Corrections, etc.*, London, 1716, pp. 180-184.

[31] W. H. D. Longstaffee, "Some Notes on Widdrington and the Widdringtons", *Archæologia Æliana, Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne*, 3 (1859), pp. 189-196, esp. pp. 190-191. A drawing of the ring is reproduced in this report along with a rendering of the Widdrington coat of arms with the motto *Joye sans fin*.

> (For their charitable deeds the good will have/ **Joy without end** in heaven above/ The bad will go to the abyss of hell in eternal torment/ Now let us thus pray to the good Lord Jesus/ That this day may be profitable for us)[32]

Extrapolated from a longer text or prayer, the motto *Joye sans fin* expressed for the Widdringtons their hopes for salvation at the end of time; for the wearer of the ring (whether or not he or she was a Widdrington) it supplied an epigraphic prompt for discourse with Jesus to accompany the multiple other prompts the ring bore – to the Virgin, the Trinity, Saint George, and Saint Catherine.

The richness of phrases like this as familiar codes that took on multiple meanings is borne out by another use of *Joye sans fin*, this time in a manuscript illumination. Book 2 of Jean Mansel's *Fleur des Histoires*, an encyclopedic world history, opens with a miniature of the Birth of the Virgin. In a cozy bedchamber with a fireplace in the background, Anne lies in a richly appointed canopied bed while one of the attendants stands beside her holding her child, the newborn Mary, in her arms, as another attendant hovers at the foot of the bed. On the mantle above the fireplace appears the inscription *Joye sans fin* written in flourished Gothic letters. Illuminated in Bruges before 1483 by the Master of the White Inscriptions, this manuscript (London, British Library, Royal MS 18 E. VI; Fig. 8a and 8b)[33] bears the royal coat of arms, the colors of King Edward IV, the motto and symbol of the Order of the Garter, and the Tudor Rose. Clearly it was not made for the Widdrington family, but the inscription *Joye sans fin* in this manuscript painting expresses similar sentiments to the Widdrington ring. On the most obvious level the motherly joy at the birth of a child, but it also foretells the role Mary would eventually play as mother in the incarnation, promising eventual salvation to mankind.

Versions of the same inscriptions occur again and again on iconographic rings, suggesting that buyers had access to a standard repository of phrases from which to choose. *Joye sans fin*, or sometimes just *sans fin*, was a popular inscription. So too were others, such as *sans departir* (meaning "without ever leaving," also having the sense of "everlasting love"), *de bon cuer* ("of good heart" or "with all my heart") and *nul autre* or *nul si bien* ("no one [but you]"). These are generally regarded as amatory expressions and, like *loial sui*, appropriate to love tokens. Like *joye sans fin*, they were all also popular mottos, *sans departir* used as such by King Richard II of England (r. 1377-1399) and by the poet Louis de Beauvau (d. 1469), the seneschal of René d'Anjou. *De bon cuer* refers not just to the "heart's desire" as the center of bodily emotion, but to the Christian heart and even the body politic, as recent work by Cynthia Hahn has shown.[34] As an indefinite pronoun, the fragment *Nul autre* in Acts of the Apostles (4:12, *et non est in* ***alio aliquo*** *salus*) makes explicit reference to Jesus Christ, thus eliciting memory of a longer biblical text. Each inscription summons up the equivalency between a lover and one's patron saint or the Virgin Mary or Christ, between faithful devotion on earth and in heaven.

---

[32] W. Heist, "Four Old French Versions of the Fifteen Signs before Judgment", *Medieval Studies*, 15 (1953), pp. 184-198, quoted on p. 189.

[33] Further literature, photographs, and description available on the British Library website: http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=5714&CollID=16&NStart=180506

[34] C. Hahn, *Heart's Desire: The Darnley Jewel and the Human Body, The Watson Gordon Lecture 2018*, Edinburgh, 2019.

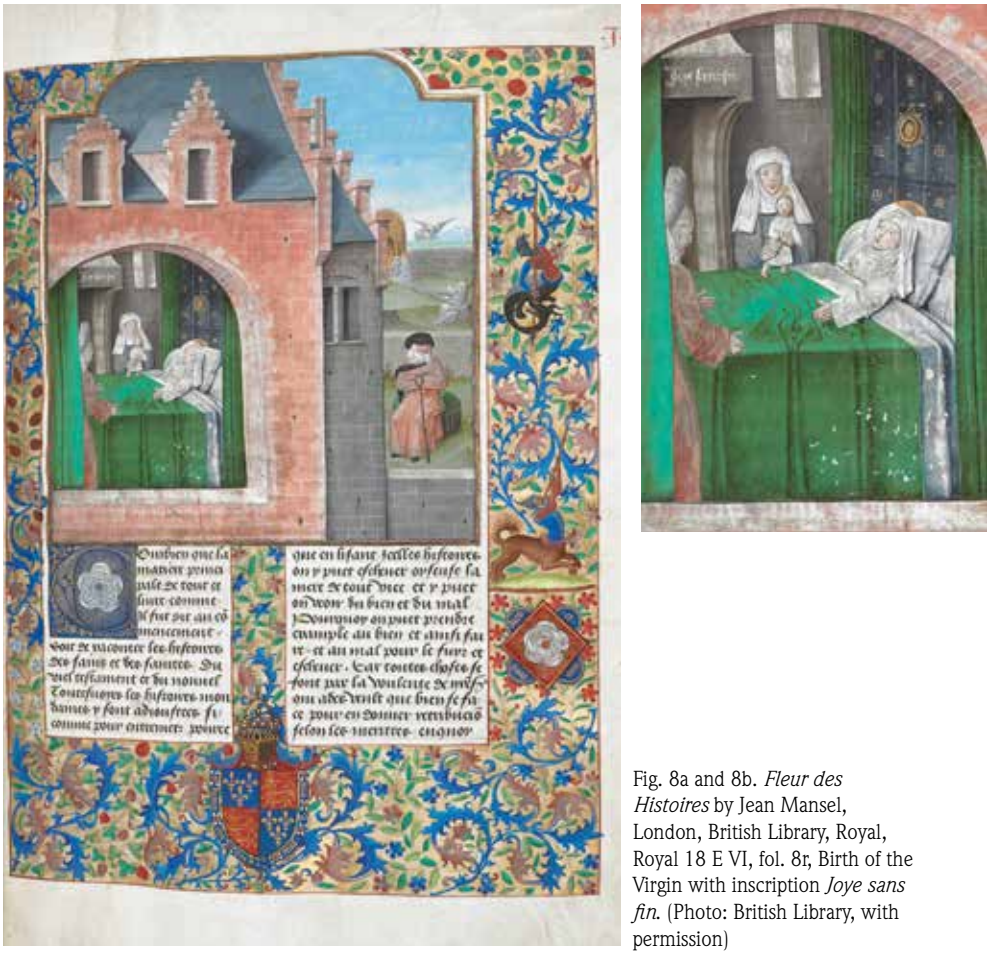

Fig. 8a and 8b. *Fleur des Histoires* by Jean Mansel, London, British Library, Royal, Royal 18 E VI, fol. 8r, Birth of the Virgin with inscription *Joye sans fin.* (Photo: British Library, with permission)

I want to return to what the physical form of iconographic rings tells us about how they were perceived and used. Kathryn Rudy's imaginative work on "touching the book,"[35] suggesting that medieval readers experienced a divine link on an intimate level through physical interaction with their manuscripts, pertains equally, if not more so, to the experiences enjoyed by wearers of iconographic rings. Sometimes iconographic rings are architectonic or reliquary-like, such as the example of the triptych ring which becomes, when open, a little shrine. There is considerable research on how the touching of the reliquary was thought to transfer the

[35] K. M. Rudy, "Dirty Books: Quantifying Patterns of Use in Medieval Manuscripts Using a Densitometer", *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, 2, nos. 1-2 (2010); and Eadem, "Touching the Book Again: The Passional of Abbess Kunigunde of Bohemia", in P. Carmassi, G. Toussant (eds.), *Codex und Material* (Wolfenbutteler Mittelalter-Studien), 34, Wiesbaden, 2018, pp. 247-57.

power of the saint to protect and to heal.[36] The triptych ring is also book-like as are the most common iconographic rings, those of the double-panel bezel type; the imagery is laid out as a double page in a book, the ridge between the panels recalling the gutter or the margin on the inside edge where the pages are bound together. I contend that this form of iconographic rings reinforced the connection wearers made with prayers found in books and readily elicited their memory. Nowhere is this connection with books made clearer than in an iconographic ring of Saint Anne Teaching the Virgin to Read (Private Collection; Fig. 9).[37] On the bezel, Anne and Mary stand on the left and right panels respectively, facing each other. Between them, occupying the ridge of the bezel is an open manuscript, the ridge itself defining the spine of the book. The inscription on the inside of the hoop reads *nul si bien* ("no one better" or "you're the best"). Through touching and feeling it on the finger, rubbing the bezel, taking it off and putting it on, this iconographic ring played an active role in the life of its wearer. On a worldly level, this ring was a reminder of the motherly love Anne had for her daughter. It may also have recalled for its owner her own experience teaching her daughter to read, often, as we know, from a Book of Hours. Through its inscription it may have recorded the gift from an earthly mother to her own daughter. On a spiritual level, it was a prompt for prayer to Anne as a patron saint (*Ora pro nobis, beata Anna*, "Prayer for us, blessed Anne"), a prompt for prayer to Mary (*Obsecro te domina sancta Maria, mater Dei*, "I beseech thee O Holy Lady, Mary, mother of God"), and an invitation to discourse with Mary's son Jesus (*nul si bien*).

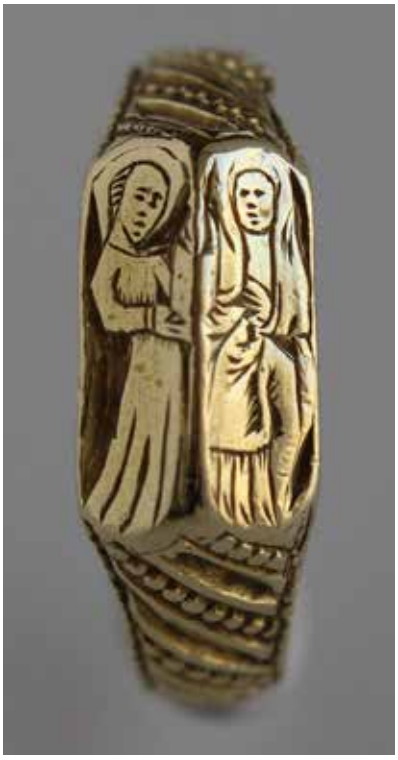

Fig. 9. Iconographic ring, Private Collection, Saint Anne Teaching Virgin to Read. (Photo: Les Enluminures, with permission)

Not every iconographic ring recalls the physical structure of a book, but all of them promote touching, even the flat bezel variety. A subgroup composed of flat bezels joined in a circular band demand frequent turning with simultaneous touching. One exceptional example,

[36] C. Hahn, "The Voices of the Saints: Speaking Reliquaries", *Gesta* 36 (1997), pp. 20-31; A.-M. Talbot, "Pilgrimage to Healing Shrines: The Evidence of Miracle Accounts", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 56 (2002), pp. 153-173, esp. 160; In a similar way, holy images, such as the Wounds of Christ found on some iconographic rings, were believed to transmit healing powers through physical contact; see: P. M. Jones, "Image, Word, and Medicine in the Middle Age", in J. A. Givens, K. M. Reeds, A. Touwaide (eds.) *Visualizing Medieval Medicine and Natural History, 1200-1550*, Aldershot/Burlington, 2006, pp. 1-24; and these examples in the British Museum: 1894,1014.1; AF.897; AF.1009.

[37] On this imagery, see P. Scheingorn, "'Wise Mother': The Image of St. Anne Teaching the Virgin Mary", *Gesta*, 32 (1993), pp. 69-80.

notable, as we have seen, for its extensive blue enamel, is a ring with five oval bezels going all around the hoop, creating a narrative (British Museum 2004,0202.1; Fig. 10a and 10b).[38] The unusually detailed scenes enable the wearer to access sections of prayer in the Book of Hours on his or her finger. From the Annunciation at Matins of the Hours of the Virgin (note details such as the lily and even the scroll of the Angel Gabriel which must have once read *Ave Maria, gratia plena* …), the ring rotates to the Nativity at Terce of the Hours of the Virgin. What follows is the Resurrection, either for the Hours of the Cross, or alternatively to the Passion Sequence. Next, the Pentecost with the apostles arranged on left and right and the dove descending from above could recall the Hours of the Holy Spirit. Finally, the Last Judgment (called the Ascension of Christ on the British Museum website) would lead the wearer either to the Seven Penitential Psalms or the Office of the Dead. Instead of turning the pages of a book, this wearer turned the hoop of the ring to engage in the rite of prayer [39]. Praying from a Book of Hours embraced

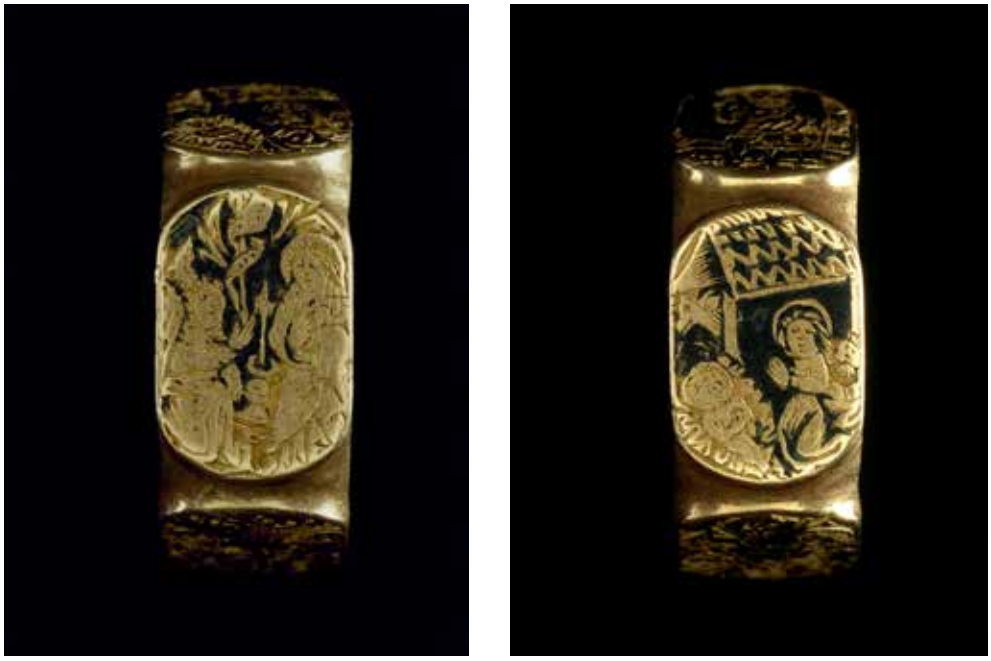

Fig. 10a-10b. Iconographic ring, London, British Museum, 2004,0202.1, Annunciation and Nativity. (Photo: British Museum, with permission)

[38] Published J. Robinson, *Masterpieces of Medieval Art*, London, 2008, p. 142; *Treasure Annual Report*, 2002, p. 93, no. 106; found in Sleaford, Lincolnshire. Further photographs are on the British Museum site: https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/642395. A similar ring, Victoria and Albert Museum, M.27-1952, contains the Five Joys of the Virgin in scenes around the hoop.

[39] A ring with the same subjects, identified as the Five Joys of the Virgin, is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, M27.1952.

vision, touch, gesture, and posture in the space created by the reader when he or she consulted the book, but the ring, ever-present on the finger, transformed prayer into an activity that punctuated every moment of daily life anywhere.

The language of wearing prayer appears frequently in medieval texts. In an early sixteenth-century Prayerbook the reader is instructed "Saint Augustine composed this prayer, and whoever **wears** it or says it …." (BnF, MS nouv. acq. lat. 703).[40] In *La devotissima contemplation del peccatore al Crocifisso* published in Venice in 1586, "whoever recites with humble heart this lament ... for the five wounds Our Lord received … or **wears** it … he shall be saved" (*quicumque hanc oracionem super se portaverit*).[41] Another often quoted reference occurs in a prayer *Oratio ante portam Ierusalem*, which recounts how Christ cured Saint Peter of a fever. In the final two lines, Peter states: "Lord I beseech you that whoever **wears** this prayer will not suffer fever."[42] Don Skemer,[43] Virginia Reinburg and others understand these references to refer to amulets, that is capsules of text worn on the body, or sometimes birthing rolls, manuscripts placed on the belly during the deliverance of a child. But could not these references apply equally to rings? Iconographic rings were indeed worn. Precious golden objects brightly enameled in colors, custom-made for their owners who chose personalized saints, episodes, and inscriptions, they functioned as a sort of wearable proxy for the illuminated Book of Hours. As art objects that enrich our understanding of private devotion in late medieval England, underlining the multi-dimensional nature of prayer, they deserve a place going forward in a new history of experiencing medieval art.

[40] Reinburg, *French Books of Hours*, p. 167, and n. 140; see also chapter 4, "Rhythmic Medicine: The Psalter as a Therapeutic Technology in Beguine Communities," in S. Ritchey, *Acts of Care: Recovering Women in Late Medieval Health*, Ithaca/London, 2021, esp. p. 222.

[41] G. Caravale, *Forbidden Prayer: Church Censorship and Devotional Literature in Renaissance Italy*, Aldershot, 2016, p. 193, n. 6.

[42] Reinburg, *French Books of Hours*, p. 144, and no. 26.

[43] D. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages*, University Park, PA, 2006.