

'I am the True Vine.' Allegorical Motif on a Fifteenth-Century Ceramic Mould from the Pirita Convent

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Summary

Abstract: This article examines fragments of two miniature relief moulds found in the Pirita convent near Tallinn. They were made in the central Rhineland and are the only surviving examples of late medieval ceramic matrices in Estonia. One of them bears the motif of Christ the True Vine (John 15). The iconography and meaning of the motif are analysed in the context of the Brigittine spirituality of the convent and the devotional life of the time. The topic on the other mould is also revealed. The choice of imagery on the ceramic moulds and their possible function are discussed.

Keywords: Applied arts, Iconography, Christianity, Middle Ages

At the archaeological excavations in the ruins of the Pirita convent in 1975–1976, fragments of two ceramic moulds were found, and they are currently housed in the Tallinn City Museum. They are, so far, the only examples found in Estonia of small-scale relief moulds, which were widespread in medieval Europe, and were used to reproduce both religious and secular images in various materials. Previous researchers have established the central Rhineland as the area of origin of these fragments and have dated them, by means of style-critical analysis, to the early fifteenth century. The aim of the present article is to examine the moulds in the context of the devotional life of the Pirita convent and the spirituality of the Brigittines,

as well as to make some corrections to the interpretation of their iconography and discuss their possible usage.

The first mould is made of dense, fine clay and was fired into terra cotta. With exceptional skill, a relief image in the negative has been carved into it. Three quarters of the original mould was restored from the fragments. The diameter of the matrix is 14.7–14.8 cm (relief 13 cm) and the thickness 1.8 cm. The motif depicted on it can be found on several moulds and imprints and also on church bells in Germany.

In the centre of the circular composition is the crucified Christ, with a male and a female figure standing below. The cross is formed as a T or Y-shaped trunk of a branchy vine, and its twisting shoots and clusters form medallions enclosing the busts of the twelve apostles. Above the head of Christ, the Holy Spirit is depicted as a dove spreading its wings, and the texts on the accompanying scrolls say: 'ego sum vit[is] vera vos [palmites]' (I am the vine; you are the branches) and 'CPS STS illustrat' (Holy Christ illuminates). The male figure is hoeing the soil around the vine and the text says: '[pater] vmificat' (the Father gives life). The female figure pours water from a jug on the roots of the vine, the text explaining: 'maria fecu[n]-dat' (Mary makes fruitful). The ground is covered with a grassy turf with flowers, and between the text scrolls there are roses and in the sky, stars. The composition is surrounded by a profiled frieze.

The mould shows the crucifixion not as a historical event, but as an allegorical scene. The key to understanding it is given in the sentence in the upper part of the picture, referring to the beginning of the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John. Estonian researchers have regarded the male figure as John the Evangelist or St. Joseph, but the author of

the current article identifies him as God the Father. The male figure is placed on the right hand of Christ and he has eye contact with the crucified. Also, his nimbus contains a cross, that of Christ, and the dove of the Holy Spirit. His appearance is another indicator. Last but not least, the sentence from the Gospel continues: 'and my Father is the gardener', using the image of Jehovah as the keeper of the vineyard, an image known from the psalms.

The model of the scene depicted on the Pirita mould was probably a woodcut or a copper engraving. Therefore, the iconography can be regarded in the context of the devotional image (*Andachtsbild*) popular in fourteenth and fifteenth century German art. The matrix belongs to the group of moulds visualising the ideas of the passion mystics of the time. The iconographic type in question allegorically expresses the redemption of mankind and the establishing of the Church, and has been called the 'Vine of Salvation'.

In this composition, the crucifixion has been connected with other motifs of Christian iconography, such as the tree of life and the vine. These Old Testament and apocalyptic images allude to the coming of the Messiah and Paradise regained, as well as to the sacrificial death of Christ and the sacrament of the Eucharist. The image of tending and watering the vine occurs in the psalms, as well as in the letters of Paul. The favouring of Jews, the chosen people, by Jehovah later came to stand for the building up of the Christian Church by its members.

The spirituality of the Brigittines who lived in the Pirita convent was based on the revelations of the founder of the order, Saint Birgitta of Sweden (1302–1373). The beginning and the end of the order's rule, revealed to the saint, make use of the biblical symbolism of the vineyard. With the Brigittine

order, Christ has established a 'new vineyard' for himself and tells Birgitta to cultivate, keep and protect it. The vine also occurs in the saint's iconography. In some woodcuts and sculptures depicting her as the founder of the Brigittine order, the saint has the vine as her attribute.

In Birgitta's revelations, she complements the biblical allusions of the vineyard with references to Virgin Mary and the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus. In the text about renovating the Christian Church, which has decayed, the Mother of God compares it to the vineyard that Christ has watered with his blood, and promises to help those who are prepared to uproot the dried vines, to burn them and plant fertile vines instead. The Brigittine order is to be 'a vineyard in honour of Our Lady, where the friends of God, men and women, will work together'. Birgitta describes the Virgin Mary as a gardener elsewhere as well, and identifies with her. In the life of Brigittine convents, the garden had an important symbolic and ritual role. The saint is considered to be the author of a series of fifteen prayers, the last of which starts with the words 'O Jesus! True and Fruitful Vine...' This prayer was just as popular among late medieval people as it is today.

Only one fragment, 7.8 x 4.0 cm, has survived of the other mould found in Pirita. It probably originates from the same workshop and time as the first mould. Researchers have put forward various hypotheses of the theme of this mould, interpreting the details visible on the fragment in various ways. The present author has found an exact match with the second mould from Pirita in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nürnberg. The German mould has come down to us intact, and was made in the central Rhineland ca 1440. It depicts a scene from the life of St. Hubertus, who on a hunting trip encountered a stag

who had the image of the crucified Christ shining between his antlers. In late-medieval German culture, Hubertus became known as the patron saint of hunters. From the Estonian territory, however, there is not a single mention of the cult of Hubertus, and thus finding his image is quite remarkable. The author makes some attempts to associate the miracle and patronages of St. Hubertus with the life of St. Birgitta, as well as with the supporters and visitors of the Pirita convent.

There has been a lot of discussion about the possible function of these miniature ceramic moulds in the late Middle Ages. Researchers have been of the opinion that the Pirita moulds were used exclusively for making honey cakes, which were sold as pilgrim souvenirs. This assumption seems to be based on the fact that the moulds were found in the eastern wing of the convent, where the kitchen was located. Also, no customary pilgrim badges of metal have survived from Pirita, even though it is known that pilgrimages were made to the convent. At the same time, we have evidence that such moulds were used to produce reproductions of vastly different materials. In the opinion of the present author, we might consider the possibility that, by means of the moulds from Pirita, papier-mâché reliefs were made and used as devotional images. This practice was widespread in late medieval nunneries. Such coloured and gilded images could be used by the nuns themselves or they could be given as gifts to the patrons or sold to pilgrims. In any case, the motifs on the moulds – Christ the Vine and the Vision of St. Hubertus – must have been in accordance with the spirituality of the Brigittines and the Church festivals celebrated in the convent.

By their type, technical realisation and iconography, the two fifteenth century ceramic moulds found in Pirita are unique in

Estonian art heritage. Even though they are imported, and the motifs depicted are internationally well known, examining them in the context of St. Birgitta's revelations enables us to guess the reasons why these particular moulds were chosen for use in the Pirita convent. The allegory of Christ as the True Vine depicted on one of the moulds connects to the imagery in the Brigittine Rule and the founder's visions, and offers plenty of material for religious contemplation. It is more difficult to associate the miracle of the stag of St. Hubertus on the fragment of the other mould with Birgitta and Pirita, but as this is the first indication that the saint was ever known in Estonia, it certainly encourages us to think about the yet undiscovered aspects of the local religious life. In the current state of research, it is not possible to determine the exact manner in which the ceramic matrices were used in the convent. However, the imprints produced with them were the images that the late medieval citizens of Tallinn had in front of their eyes as they prayed for the salvation of their souls.

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