

Illustrated Textual Amulet: Extracts from Four Gospels; Sixty-six Divine Names; Apocryphal Letter of Christ to Agbar (The Heavenly Letter)
In Latin, with some Occitan, illuminated parchment sheet
Southern France, c. 1375-1425

One parchment sheet, glued onto backing, written in a rounded southern Gothic bookhand in three columns of fifty-five lines, majuscules highlighted in pale yellow, numerous red and blue crosses, two- to three-line alternately red or blue initials, one four-line parted red and blue initial, large ILLUSTRATION OF THE ARMA CHRISTI in ink with color wash in the center, equivalent to c. 34 lines of text (described below), in very good condition apart from wear along some fold lines (with loss of occasional short phrases of text). Unbound, once folded five times horizontally and four (?) times vertically. Dimensions 175 x 176 mm.

Medieval men and women believed that written words and images had power. Carrying this sheet of parchment, neatly folded, with its holy texts and drawing of the *Arma Christi* (the objects associated with Christ's Passion), provided protection from evil and forgiveness of sin. People in special danger, including women during childbirth, depended on amulets to keep them safe or to secure their salvation if they died. Medieval textual amulets of any type are rare; this is a particularly fine example, quite exceptional in the level of professionalism exhibited in its script and decoration.

PROVENANCE

1. The evidence of the script and the iconography of the drawing of the *Arma Christi* support a date c. 1375-1425, certainly after the middle of the fourteenth century. The text in Occitan suggests an origin in Southern France. Many textual amulets on sheets of parchment were crudely written, and probably homemade. This example, in contrast, was certainly written and decorated by a professional scribe and artist. Medieval amulets on paper or parchment survive in limited numbers, since they lacked the protection of libraries that ensured the survival of codices (Skemer, 2006; no Latin examples are listed in the Schoenberg Database). They are especially interesting as proof of the popular belief in the efficacy of powerful words and symbols – in written form – to ward off the Devil and ensure God's favor (we thank Katherine Skeels for sharing her unpublished research on this sheet).

TEXT

[Top left], *Sanctum Johannem*, incipit, "In principio erat uerbum ... plenum gratie et veritatis [John 1:1-14]; *Sanctum Marcum*, incipit, "In illo tempore. Recumbentibus undecim discipulis .. sequentibus signis [Mark 16:14-20]; [top right] *Sanctum Lucham*, incipit, "In illo tempore. Missus est angelus ... deum omne uerbum [obscured in fold: dixit autem maria ... uerbum tuum [Luke 1:26-38]; *Sanctum [Mattheum]*, incipit, In illo tempore. Cum uenisset ihesus in domum Petri ... et egrotaciones nostras portauit [Matthew 9:14-17];

Selections from each of the four Gospels are copied in the upper right and upper left sides of the sheet, on either side of the central miniature. The choice of passages is significant. The beginning of the Gospel of John was believed to be protection from demons and evil throughout

the Middle Ages (Skemer, 2001, pp. 200, 212). The passage from Mark is an account of the Resurrection. The passage from Luke describes the Annunciation, when Mary is visited by the Angel and receives the news that she will bear a son, and the news that her cousin Elizabeth has also miraculously conceived. These two passages focusing on birth (one rebirth, as well as two actual holy births), were often included in amulets for childbearing. The last excerpt, from Matthew, describes healing miracles: Jesus healing Peter's mother of a fever, and then healing and casting out devils from many others. The passages from Mark, Luke and Matthew all begin "In illo tempore," the words spoken at the beginning of Gospel readings during Mass, and their text as well suggests the source was probably a Gospel Lectionary or a Missal, rather than a Bible.

[On the left, below the Gospel of Mark], *Dicens <abraded> [mo]rietur sine confessione, incipit, "Mater digna dei venie via porta diei/ Sis tutella rei dux comesque mei/ ... Domine Jesu christe fili Dei cum sancto spiritu miserere mei";*

Opening verses of a hymn in honor of the Virgin Mary; Chevalier, 1892-1921, no. 11335; the rubric, although now partially illegible, almost certainly promised that saying these verses was useful in case one died before properly confessing.

[In the Middle, above and below the drawing of the *Arma christi*] *Nomina domini nostri Jesu Christi. Quils portara ab devocio no morta Ni a mort soptata ni de metzines. E haura en la sua fi los sacramentus de sancta matre [e]glesia ... e finalment se delliverat de tots perils finalls. Totes a questes graties a conssequira qui portara ab si pintades les armes que serviren a la sagrada passio de nostre redemptor ibesu christ. E moltes dal tres graties li sera fetes ab la misericordi de nostre senror deum, incipit, "Alpha et omega, † primogenitus principium, † virtus, † vita ...";*

Sixty-six Divine Names. The tradition of reciting divine names as an act of devotion and to invoke protection from various evils is known in many cultures, including the Christian Middle Ages, and texts such as this one are frequently found in medieval amulets. The list here is a lengthy one, and includes sixty-six names of Christ, each separated by a cross (a later medieval tradition of seventy-two names is studied by Izmirlieva, 2008; see also Skemer, 2006). The image of the cross was in itself apotropaic, and the crosses would also ordinarily prompt the reader to make the sign of the cross as he or she recited the holy names. In this case, the list of names is prefaced by a rubric in Occitan (the language of Southern France) explaining the usefulness of the text and promising that carrying the text and the painted image of the *Arma Christi* will bring protection from sudden death and the perils of dying without the sacraments of the church. The wording seems important; carrying is specified, and there is no mention of the benefits of reading or reciting the text, or gazing on the image, underlining the amuletic function of the names and the image in this case.

[On the right, below the reading from the Gospel of Matthew]: *Si quis <se que?> littera domini nostri ibesu christi scripsse portauit <?> tenuerit ab omnibus malis et periculis evadet, incipit, "Beatus es Abagare quia credisti in me cum ipse non uideris me ... discipulis meis mittam ad te ut <?> te. † Domini est salus";*

The apocryphal letter of Christ to King Abgar V (4 B.C.-50 A.D.) of Edessa (Urfa), also known as the Heavenly Letter. King Abgar according to Syriac tradition was one of the first kings

converted to Christianity. He was suffering from an incurable illness (perhaps leprosy), and wrote to Jesus, stating that he believed in His divinity and wished to be healed. He also offered Jesus asylum. Jesus's reply is included here (he does not accept Abgarus's offer, but says he will send one of his disciples to heal him after His death). The letter, included in Eusebius of Caesarea's (d. c. 340), *Historia ecclesiastica*, was popular in both the Eastern and Western Church, and was often copied on separate parchment sheets to serve as amulets. The rubric here specifies that carrying this copy of the letter will provide protection from all evils and dangers (Skemer, 2006, pp. 96-103; Karaulashvili, 2002; Matthes, 1882; Online resources).

Protestacio utilis, incipit, "Firmiter <credens?> Ihesum christum nazarenum esse filium dei et omnes articulis simbolium apostolicis et fide catholice ... In cuius testimonium porto mecum presens scriptum."

A short informal creed or "*protestacio utilis*" (a useful solemn declaration), the text begins, "Believing firmly that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the son of God, and in all the articles of the Creed and the Catholic faith ...," and concludes "I wish to live in this faith and if I die afflicted by my sins, to confess them with the help of God. In witness of this I will carry this present document [*presens scriptum*] with me."

In the important study of the topic, Don Skemer, defines textual amulets as "generally brief apotropaic texts, handwritten or mechanically printed on separate sheets, rolls, and scraps of parchment or paper," that provided protection when worn or placed anywhere on the body, serving as "a renewable source of Christian empowerment" (Skemer, 2006, p. 1). There is no doubt that this sheet was copied to serve as an amulet. Three of the rubrics state that the texts will provide protection when they are carried. The Gospel extracts, the names of Christ (separated by crosses), and the "Heavenly Letter" are all found in other medieval amulets. The French or Burgundian early fifteenth-century amulet roll described by Skemer, for example, includes similar texts: John 1:1-14, Mark 16:17-18; Luke 11:27-8; and Mt 8:14-17, as well as a different list of Divine Names, separated by crosses; and the Letter to Agbar (Skemer, 2001, pp. 209-212, and 2006, appendix two; see also Aymalar, 1926, describing a collection of materials for childbirth, including an amulet and a series of roundels dedicated to St. Margaret). The layout of this sheet, with the image in the center, surrounded by texts of equal dimensions on both sides, show that this was always an independent sheet, that was folded into a small square (the fold marks are visible), and carried about or placed in a small pouch and worn.

Amulets straddle the line between faith and devotion, magic and superstition. How one chooses to see them will partially depend on your own set of beliefs, but they undoubtedly reveal a great deal about religious practice in the Middle Ages. Many of the texts in this amulet are found in amulets and rolls that were specifically used for childbirth, and it is possible that was the main function of this particular sheet. However, since there is no specific mention of the childbirth in the text or rubrics here, it may have been carried to provide general protection from evil, and to help ensure salvation.

ILLUSTRATION

This amulet provided protection, not only with the words, but also with a holy and powerful image of the *Arma Christi*, placed prominently in the center of the sheet. The image is mostly in shades of brown, with touches of color, pale green and yellow, with brighter red and blue,

surrounded by a frame inscribed with holy texts, separated by red and blue crosses. It depicts Christ as the Man of Sorrows, shown three-quarter length in the tomb, his eyes shut, with his arms crossed, still bleeding from the wounds on his hands and side, with the three soldiers at the tomb sprawled on the grass below, with their eyes open, surrounded by the instruments of the Passion, including the sudarium, with the image of Christ's face (prominently drawn in the center at the top), a hammer, a pincer with one nail, three dice, the bag of money, a ladder, the cross, clothes, the cock of denial on a column, a trumpet, the sun and moon, four hands (showing the exchange of money and the washing of hands), a knife with Malchus's ear, the reed and spittle, the pillar of flagellation, vinegar and gall, the shroud, lanterns and torches, the sword of Peter, and the heads of two blasphemers.

The *Arma Christi* (the arms or weapons of Christ), or the Instruments of the Passion, had a dual meaning to the medieval believer. Like the Cross itself, they were symbols of the Resurrection and Christ's victory over death, but they were equally objects that conveyed Christ's human suffering and sacrifice. Especially in the later Middle Ages, meditating on the objects associated with the Passion enabled believers to share in Christ's suffering. By the fourteenth century, indulgences were promised to the believer who gazed on the images of the *Arma Christi* daily. One of the earliest depictions of this sort are two leaves from the Cistercian monastery of Villers-en-Brabant dating from 1320 (now in Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale; Suckale, 1977, fig. 2). The contemporary full-page image of the *Arma Christi* in the *Passionale* of the Abbess Kunigunde, Prague, UB XIV A.17, datable between 1313 and 1321 (Suckale, fig. 3, Schiller, fig. 657; Online resources), like the image on our sheet, depicts the instruments of the Passion surrounding a central image of Christ, although in this case it is Christ on the Cross, rather than in the tomb as the Man of Sorrows.

Closer in composition to the image on our sheet is the painting of the Man of Sorrows with the *Arma Christi*, often dated c. 1354, by the Neapolitan painter, Roberto Oderisi (or d'Oderisio), active in the second half of the fourteenth century, c. 1330-1382, now in the Fogg Museum at Harvard. The arrangement of the motifs is strikingly similar, although Mary and John, flanking the tomb on either side in Roberto's panel, as in many other images of the Man of Sorrows, are absent in our sheet. The prominence of the three soldiers depicted in the grass at the bottom of our sheet is also a distinctive detail that sets it apart from other examples. Roberto's panel shows only the head of one soldier at the bottom (and he is shown sleeping with his eyes shut). The panel by Lorenzo Monaco, dated 1404, is not as close a parallel to our sheet overall, but it does include a landscape at the bottom, in this case including only additional symbols of the Passion and not the three soldiers.

It seems possible that the artist of our sheet, who was working in Southern France, was familiar with Italian depictions of the Man of Sorrows accompanied by the *Arma christi*. Although we are unable to provide a precise attribution, this artist was certainly a professional, as was the scribe. The formality of the text and image are exceptional, especially compared with other amulets in sheet format, which are often quite simple and were possibly made by the owners themselves.

LITERATURE

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<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/lbob/lbob09.htm>

Digital reproduction of Prague, UB XIV A.17

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