Medical Talisman for Childbirth
In Latin and French, illuminated manuscript on parchment and paper
[France, c. 1475-1500]

1 bi-folio of parchment + one single leaf of parchment copied in the same hand, written in brown ink in a fine bâtarde script, text on 24 long lines (justification: 115 x 60 mm), ruled in light red ink, 7 small 1-line high initials in red or blue marking the openings of the prayers, 8 2-line high initials in red or blue, parchment bi-folio and single folio probably originally bound in a gathering or quire (traces of sewing, but no signatures or catchwords), single folio used to wrap and protect bi-folio with illustrations, plus seventeenth-century copy on paper of the original fifteenth-century talisman also with copies of the illustrations, TWO STRIKING MARGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS IN THE MARGIN, traced in red ink and painted in red (red wash in the paper copy). Loose and unbound. Dimensions: 170 x 120 mm.

Exceedingly rare example of a birthing talisman--the content of the text and images otherwise known in prayer rolls, birth girdles, manuscripts, and single-sheet prints--intended both to ensure fertility and “birth without complications,” as our text states. The separation of this example from its parent manuscript in a folded-up form to facilitate the functions and protections described in it is apparently unique, as are certain details of its text.

PROVENANCE

1. Made in France, possibly Paris, in the last quarter of the fifteenth century based on the nature of the script and character of the illustration.
2. Relic of Mademoiselle Lacroix de Nogapo (“Relique de Mademoiselle Lacroix de Nogaro à l’usage de ses amis”), according to a description in an old sales catalogue (unidentified) accompanying the talisman; the catalogue description also refers to a printed ribbon (perhaps tied around the talisman) and an embroidered silk purse.

TEXT

[full text and translations of the French are provided below]

f. 1-2v, Prayers on the Measure and Length of Christ and on the Side Wound, as follow:

f. 1, Cy est la mesure et longueur / de Nostre Seigneur Jesu Crist / prinse et mesurée
d’une / croix en Constantinople laquelle / a esté mesurée au precieux corps de / Jhesu
Crist. Et saiachiez que quinze foiz autant que ceste croix cy dessus / est que nostre
seigneur fut grant et / long. Et en ce jour que par bonne / entencion et devociion tu
verras ceste / mesure ayant memoire de la passion nostre seigneur tu ne pourras mourir
de mort soudaine et ne pourras estre offensé de tes ennemis ne frappé d’au/cun
ferrement qui te nuyse et s’il / estoit une femme qui ne peut enfan- / -ter, mettez lui
ladicte croix ou orayson/ sur elle aveçques une chandelle be/noiste et par devotion
dictes une foiz / Pater noster […] et subitement / elle enfantera sans aucun peril en /
souvenance du precieux corps de / Dieu. S’ensuist l’oraison: Ave sacrata hostia caro
Christi qui ["This is the measure and length of our Lord Jesus Christ, taken and
measured from a Cross in Constantinople, measured on the precious body of Jesus
Christ. You must know that the above-mentionned cross, once multiplied by fifteen,
gives the length and height of Our Lord. In this day, if well-intentioned and devoted,
when you see this measure and remember the Passion of Our Lord, you will not die of
sudden death and will not be offended by your enemies nor struck by any sword ; and if
there should be a woman that cannot bear children, place this cross or prayer on her
with a holy/precious candle and piously repeat once “Pater Noster...”. Immediately she
will carry a child without risk/peril, remembering the precious body of God. Here
follows a prayer"] / /

f. 1v, pro peccatoribus mori voluisti cum / sanctis tuis apostolis pacem no- / -bis tui
clemencia dedisti atque / per tuam miseriam omnibus nobis / indulgenciam contribuisti. / 
Ave sanguis Christi vivus atque / condempnatus qui inter latrones / pro nostra
redemptione pependi/ voluisti tuis miseratianoe ac clemen/cia miserere nobis
peccatoribus amen./ Hec sunt verba Christi in cruce pendentis / Pater ignosce illis quia
ne/ sciunt quid faciunt. Amen. / Dico tibi, hodie mecum eris in para/diso. Mulier ecce
filius tuus dein/de dixit Discipulo ecce mater tua / Hely hely Lamazabathani hoc/ est
Deus meus ut quid dereliquisti / me. Sic In manus tuas / commendo spiritum meum / Si
ergo me queritis sine / hos abire. Spiritus vincit / Christus regnat, Christus imperat,
Christus / nos a Domini malo et periculo pro- //
f. 2, -tegat et ad vitam eternam perducat / qui in trinitate perfecta vivit et regnat / Deus per omnia secula seculorum Amen./ Cy apres est la mesure de / la benoiste playe du cousté / Nostre Seigneur laquelle fut apport- / -tee de Constantinople a l’emperereur/ d’Alemaigne en une chasse d’or come / ung reliquaire affin que aucun / ne lui peust nuyre en bataille. / Et dit que celui ou celle qui a ladite / mesure le jour verra ou sur soy / la portera ne mourra de mort sou- / -claine, ne en feu, ne en eau, ne tem- / -peste, ne trait, ne lance, ne couste - / -au, ne espee, ne aucuns ennemis / ne lui pourront nuyre. Et si fem- / -me la porte sur elle quant enfante- / -ra legierement se delivra. Et / tout cecy est [approuvé] car tout/ homme qui [bien] fait d’armes s’il / dit l’orayson qui s’ensuist ou / la porte sur soy sans jurer par ladite / playe ses ennemis ne le pourront //

f. 2v, grever et de male mort ne moura / S’ensuist l’orayson. ["This is the measure of the holy side wound of Our Lord that was brought to the emperor of Germany from Constantinople in a golden shrine or reliquary so that he might never be harmed in battle. It is said that he or she that is born under the protection of this measure or that wears it on his or her body, that person will not die of sudden death, nor be harmed by fire, water, storm, arrow, spear, knife, sword nor by any enemy. If a woman wears this measure during labour, she will give birth without complications (literally: “legierement” / “lightly”, “smoothly”). This is all approved. Also every man in battle, if he says the following prayer or carries the measure on him and does not swear, the side wound will protect him from his enemies et he shall not die from a bad death. Here follows the prayer ..."]. Benedictio Dei patris omni- / -potentis cum angelis / suis super me Amen. Benedi- / -ctio Jhesu Christi cum omnibus apostolis / suis sit super me Amen. Benedi- / -ctio beate Marie cum filio suo sit / super me Amen. Benedictio ecclsi- / -sie sue sancte catholice et beate Ka- / -therine sit super me Amen./ Homme ou femme qui aura en ce / fiance die le vers qui s’ensuist. ["Man or woman who believes in the above-mentioned facts should say the following verse"] /Nam et si ambulavero in / medio umbre mortis non / timebo mala quoniam tu mecum es. / Saincte Barbe c’est chose vraye / que de Dieu avez grant merite / et povoir contre le tonnerre / fouldre du ciel et mort subite/ apres Marie la fleur eslite / fay pour moy intercession / a Jhesus que mes pechez quicte/ et m’octroye confession. ["Saint Barbara, it is true that God has granted you power against the thunder, lightening and sudden death. After Mary, flower of exception [?], intercede in my favor with Jesus so that he rids me of my sins and grants me confession"];

f.3, De traict, de canon, de bombarde / Vierge saincte Barbe nous garde / Amen. Ce brevet trouva Joseph d’Arimathie sur la playe de Nostre Seigneur Jhesu Christ sur le cousté dextre escrite en lettres d’or. ["From arrow, from canon, from bombardment, the virgin saint Barbara protects us. Amen. This prayer [?] (literally “brevet”) was found by Joseph of Arimathea on the right hand wound of Our Lord Jesus Christ, written in golden letters.”]. Ave domina sancta Maria, / mater Dei, regina celi, por- / -ta pardisi, domina mundi, singu- / -laris et pura. Tu es virgo que / concepisti Jhesum sine peccato,
Debe- / -sti creatorem redemptorem et sal- / -vatorem mundi in quo non du/bito libera
me ab omnibus malis / et ora pro peccatis meis Amen.

Seventeenth-century copy

f. 1, Cy est la mesure et longueur de Nostre Seigneur Iesus Crist, prinse et mesuree
d’une croix en Constantinoble, laquelle a esté mesureee au presius corps de Iesu Crist et
sachés que quinze fois autant que ceste croix ci-dessus est que Nostre Seigneur fut
grand et long et en ce jour que par bonne intantion et devotion tu verras ceste mesure
ayant memoire de la passion Nostre Seigneur tu ne pourras morir de mort sodaine et ne
pourras estre offancé de tes enemis ni frappé d’aucun ferrement qui te nuise et s’il estoit
une femme qui nepeust enfanter metés luy ladicte croix sur elle [...] [lacking end of
folio];

f. 1v, Hec sunt verba Cristi in Cruce / Pater ignosce illis quia nesciunt quid [faciunt] /Amen dico tibi hodie mecum eris in paradiso / Mulier ecce filius tuus deinde dixit
discipulo / Ecce mater tua Hely Hely Lamazabatani hoc est / Deus meus ut quid
dereliquisti me Sicio in manus / tuas comendo spiritum meum. Si ergo me queritis sinite
hos abire Christus / vinct Christus regnat Christus imperat / Christus nos ab omni malo
et periculo protegat / et ad vitam eternam perducat qui in Trinitate / perfecta vivit et
regnat Deus per omnia secula seculum Amen / Ci apres est la mesure de la benoiste
playe du [...] [lacking end of folio];

f. 2, S’ensuit l’oraision / [Benedic]tio Dei patris omnipotentis cum angelis / [...] super
me Amen. Benedictio Iesu Cristi / cum omnibus apostolis suis sit super me Amen /
Benedictio beate Marie cum filio suo sit super me / Amen. Benedictio ecclesie sue sancte
catholice et / beate Caterine sit super me Amen. Homme ou femme qui aura en ce
fiance, die les vers qui s’ensuivent / Nam et si ambulavero in medio umbre mortis non /
timebo mala quoniam tu me cumes / sainct Barbe c’est chose vraye / que de Dieu avés
grand merite / et pouvoir contre le tonnerre / fouldre du ciel et mort subite / aprés Marie
la fl[e]ur eslite [...] [lacking end of folio];

f. 2v, Oratio / Salve latus gloriosum Domini Nostri / Jesu Christi pro nobis lancea militis
/ perforatum Amen / Unus militum lancea latus eius apervit / et continuo exivit sanguis
et aqua. Joan. 18. / Salve mitis apertura / De qua manat vena pura / parta patens et
profunda [...] [lacking end of folio].

The text occurs, also in Latin and French and with variations, in many other surviving
examples from the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries in Books of Hours,
prayer rolls, and single-sheet prints produced in England, The Netherlands, France, and
Germany. It was published by Simpson (1874) and then by Gougaud (1924). For
example, a prayer roll that doubled as a birth girdle dates from the end of the fifteenth
century (London, Wellcome Historical Medical Library, MS 632; see Moorat, pp. 491-
For sixteenth-century versions of the text, similar but not identical to the present one, see Simpson, p. 358, a printed Book of Hours, use of Rouen; Gougaud, 1924, p. 225; and Barbier de Montault, pp. 313ff.

Evidently, no recorded example of the text includes the textual detail of the woman placing the image on her with a holy candle (f. 1), nor is any other recorded example loose from a codex as is the present talisman (according to Areford, correspondence 9/02).

ILLUSTRATION

f. 1, Wooden ruler or cross, whose length multiplied by 15 gives the length of the body of Christ (length: 105 mm).

f. 2, Side wound of Christ (length: 75 mm)

The ruler or cross is close to other measures of the length of Christ represented only by a line or a bar, which seems to be a module of measure to be multiplied. The text states that this measure was taken from a “cross in Constantinople,” which is the famous reliquary of the arma Christi kept in the treasury of Hagia Sophia. Its measurements were thought to duplicate measurements taken of Christ’s body in Jerusalem. Multiplying by 15 gives the length of the body of Christ as 5 feet 3 inches or 1 meter 57 cm. It was frequently included in texts related to childbirth (e.g., British Library, MS Harley Roll 43 A 14, and New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS Glazier 39; see Lewis, 1989, p. 75).

The horizontal almond-shaped side wound is also life-size, and it became a metaphor for marriage or union, an entrance pierced by the spear to uncover the bedchamber of the heart, a breast at which to suckle, a place of rest and safety (see Lewis, 1997, p. 213-17). It was directly associated with childbirth, as was the measure of Christ’s body, because the Church was thought to have been born from the side wound of Christ at the time of his death as Eve was born from the side of Adam. Its striking visual similarity to female genitalia undoubtedly encouraged its frequent inclusion as an illustration accompanying texts used during childbirth. One of the earliest images of the measure of the side wound, c. 1320, states that the wound will help a woman in childbirth.

LITERATURE


Online Resources

Medieval Childbirth
http://historymedren.about.com/library/weekly/aa101900b.htm

Some [Medieval] Obstetrical History by Dr. Ian Carr
http://www.umanitoba.ca/outreach/manitoba_womens_health/hist1.htm