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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 mesuree d'une / croix en Constantinople laquelle / a esté mesuree au precieux corps de / Jhesu Crist. Et sachiez 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 devocion 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 avecques 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-mentioned 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 miseracione 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 sinite / hos abire. Spiritus vincit / Christus regnat, Christus imperat, Christus / nos a Domini malo et periculo pro- //

f. 2, -tegat et ad vitam eternam perducatur / 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 appor- / -tee de Constantinople a l'empereur / 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- / -daine, ne en feu, ne en eaue, 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 delivrera. 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 eccle- / -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. / Sainte 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 sainte Barbe nous garde / Amen. Ce brevet trouva Joseph d'Arimathe sur la playe de Nostre Seigneur Jhesu Christ sur le cousté dextre escripte 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 paradisi, domina mundi, singu- / -laris et pura. Tu es virgo que / concepisti Jhesum sine peccato,

peperi- / -sti creatorem redemptorem et sal- / -vatores mundi in quo non dubito 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 mesurée d'une croix en Constantinoble, laquelle a esté mesurée 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 mourir de mort soudaine et ne pourras estre offencé 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 / vincit Christus regnat Christus imperat / Christus nos ab omni malo et periculo protegat / et ad vitam eternam perducatur qui in Trinitate / perfecta vivit et regnat Deus per omnia secula seculorum Amen / Ci apres est la mesure de la benoiste playe du [...] [lacking end of folio];

f. 2, S'ensuit l'oraison / [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 / saint Barbe c'est chose vraye / que de Dieu avés grand merite / et pouvoir contre le tonnerre / fouldre du ciel et mort subite / apres 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 aperuit / 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 Gougau (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-

93; and Lewis, pp. 83-84). 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 or 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

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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