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**Title:** The 'lily among thorns': A Re-evaluation of the Lily Crucifixion Motif

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**Abstract**

The lily is ubiquitous in representations of the Annunciation scene between the fourteenth and sixteenth century where it is usually associated with the Virgin's purity. However, its precise meaning has confounded the modern scholar. This paper looks at the specific motif of the lily crucifixion that developed in Britain from the end of the fourteenth century. It is often closely linked with the theme of the Annunciation, however, the depicting of the cross as a living being is part of a wider tradition in Christian art, one which alludes to redemption as being the reason for the incarnation. This paper argues that the lily-cross motif points to the lily as representing a way of relating to God and a surrendering to divine providence.

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## **The 'lily among thorns': A Re-evaluation of the Lily Crucifixion motif<sup>1</sup>**

*Marie, for thine ioies .v.,  
Help me to leue in clene lyue,  
For pe teres pou lete under pe rode,  
Sende me grace of liues fode,*

From: 'A Prayer by the Five Joys' (late fourteenth century).<sup>2</sup>

### **Introduction**

The primary purpose of this paper is to re-evaluate the iconographic form of the lily crucifixion or lily-cross, a popular motif in late medieval Britain, paying particular regard to two examples which have only come to light in the last ten years. The image of the cross growing in the world was not new but the combining of the lily specifically with the cross was a motif that became largely associated with England. This reconsideration will include a fresh look at the meaning of the lily, a multivalent symbol most commonly found in the Annunciation image. Giving attention specifically to its popularisation in medieval Britain, the last part of the paper will then focus on the association between the lily-cross and Christ's sacrificial death, with the motif being seen to symbolise not just the redemption of humankind but Christ's willingness to suffer for its attainment. It will be argued that when the lily is understood in terms of a way of relating to God; as part of an Annunciation scene, the lily crucifixion can serve to stress the redemptive role of the Virgin Mary who was an exemplar of how we can all become a lily.

### **The Lily-Cross**

The lily-cross is known in Britain from a reasonable number of surviving works in a variety of media that date from the last quarter of the fourteenth century to the first half of

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<sup>1</sup> 'As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters' (Song 2:2). This translation of the Bible, as elsewhere in this paper unless otherwise stated, uses the Douay-Rheims translation (Challoner Revision).

<sup>2</sup> Carleton Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edn, 1952, 216-17 (n.122).

the sixteenth century. In 2012 Cristina Maria Cervone listed seventeen extant examples along with two cases where there is some evidence that a representation of the motif may possibly have existed but is now lost.<sup>3</sup> Since that time two further fifteenth century examples have come to light. One is embroidered on an altar frontal from Sawston Hall, Cambridgeshire, an ecclesiastical textile, associated with Archbishop John Morton (c. 1420-1500), that is made up of fragments of more than one vestment and was recently acquired by the Auckland Project, Bishop Auckland, County Durham, for their new Faith Museum. The other is embroidered onto the back of a chasuble at Campion Hall, Oxford.<sup>4</sup> The chasuble was the outer garment worn by the priest during the celebration of the Mass when he re-enacted Christ's death on the cross while facing the altar with his back towards the congregation.<sup>5</sup> These two new examples certainly support the observation made by Cervone that the motif was most often used in public presentation in the church to be seen by the congregation, rather than in private devotion.<sup>6</sup> In fact in these cases the placement of the motif on items associated with the performance of the liturgy might also suggest a specific connection with the Eucharist.

What this collection of examples has in common is that they all bring together the crucifix and the lily into a composite iconographic motif, usually known as the 'lily crucifixion' (figs.1 and 2). Aside from that unifying feature it is often suggested that in other respects this motif lacks iconographic cohesion, with it being said that 'no two are alike'.<sup>7</sup> The motif most commonly appears as part of a wider Annunciation scene with Christ usually 'nailed' to the

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<sup>3</sup> Cristina Maria Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation*, Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 279-80 (n.90). All the known extant examples are English except the one Welsh example of the Lily Crucifixion in the Llanbeblig Hours the origin of which is uncertain (see E. J. M. Duggan, 'Notes Concerning the "The 'Lily Crucifixion" in the Llanbeblig Hours', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 27, 1991-2, 39-48; 43-5). There is, however, another one noted by Cervone to have possibly existed outside England as part of a broken carved misericord at Gresford in Denbighshire, Wales, which relates to a broken corbel as the central element in what has been suggested to have been an Annunciation scene (G. L. Remnant, *A Catalogue of Misericords*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, 194).

<sup>4</sup> The Sawston altar frontal came to public attention in 2014, at sale by Mallams Ltd (Oxford). A recent scientific study has shown that at least two vestments are present in the frontal and that the vestment which contained the lily crucifix together with a *rose-en-soleil* motif, and possibly bore Morton's rebus, could well have been a chasuble (Mary Brooks, Sonia O'Connor, *et al*, 'Fragments of Faith: Unpicking Archbishop John Morton's Vestments', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 100 (2020), 274-303). For the Campion Hall chasuble, see: Altair, Brandon-Salmon, 'The History of the English Reformation in One Vestment', Campion Hall University of Oxford (News), 27.05.2017, <https://www.campion.ox.ac.uk/news/history-english-reformation-one-vestment>

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, 348-49 (and see illus. 170 where, in a painting by Hans Baldung Green, the priest at the altar wears a crucifix embroidered on the back of a chasuble).

<sup>6</sup> Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation*, 198 and 203.

<sup>7</sup> Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation*, 197.

## *The lily among thorns*

lily-plant, which sits in a pot or vase.<sup>8</sup> This has led scholars to assume that even though the Virgin Mary and the angel Gabriel are not always present in the form that the motif exists today, it is nonetheless specifically linked to the Annunciation.<sup>9</sup> This connection usually being seen as related to the fact that in many medieval calendars in England both the Annunciation and Christ's death were commemorated on the same day, the 25 March.<sup>10</sup> However, the recently discovered example on a vestment at Campion Hall was clearly never intended to have been seen within an Annunciation context as such, and instead depicts a more typical crucifixion scene of Christ on the cross with John and Mary on either side at the base, except for the addition of a small three-headed lily emerging from the head of the cross (see fig. 9). The other recent example, on the Sawston Hall altar frontal, also does not feature the Virgin Mary and the angel Gabriel, at least not in the form that the textile exists today, but here the Annunciation context might be implied by the two-handled pot (fig. 3).

In linking the motif specifically to the Annunciation, Cervone has argued that the lily crucifixion presents the 'simultaneous narration' of both the moment of the incarnation and

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<sup>8</sup> The nails are not always evident, and Christ may sometimes appear stretched against the plant. Occasionally Christ's hands may be nailed to a cross-bar entwined within the plant.

<sup>9</sup> Four representations were identified by G. W. Kemp as not featuring the Virgin Mary and the Archangel Gabriel. It was usually assumed, however, that these figures probably once existed but have subsequently been lost or destroyed, especially as most of these were in stained glass (G. W. Kemp, 'The Annunciation and the Lily Crucifixion', in *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club*, vol. 45 (1986), 426-441: 437; Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation*, 198). [The Godshill wall painting may have included Mary and Gabriel but overpainting to the sides currently prevents any identification. This example has also not been interpreted as having a lily pot \(Kemp, 'The Annunciation', 436\), although Cervone has suggested that there is one \(Cervone, \*Poetics of the Incarnation\*, 280 n.90\). The example at Long Melford church also has no lily-pot, but is much reconstructed \(W. L. Hildburgh, 'Some Further Notes on the Crucifix on the Lily', \*The Antiquaries Journal\* 12 no.1 \(1932\), 24-6: 24; Cervone, \*Poetics of the Incarnation\*, 202\).](#)

<sup>10</sup> Western tradition associated 25 March with the crucifixion of Jesus, even before his date of conception was established (Philipp E. Nothaft, 'Early Christian Chronology and the Origins of the Christmas Date', *Questions Liturgiques*, 94 (2013), 247-65: 262). In the medieval period it was a commonly held view that the conception of Christ occurred on the same day of the year as his crucifixion, including by the Influential English monk Bede (d. 735), as expressed in *De temporum ratione* (Paul Underwood, 'The Fountain of Life in Manuscripts of the Gospels', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 5 (1950), 41-138: 87 n.183). This has been seen as the possible explanation for one of the sculptured figures on Nicola Pisano's baptistry pulpit in Pisa (1259-61), where the seated angel Gabriel, who calls to mind the Annunciation, holds a tablet showing the crucifixion (Eloise M. Angiola, 'Nicola Pisano, Federigo Visconti, and the Classical Style in Pisa', *The Art Bulletin*, 59:1 (1977), 1-27: 15). It is also often given as a possible explanation for the lily crucifixion motif, given its association with the Annunciation (see Duncan Smith, 'The Many Mysteries of the Lily Cross', *Quarr Abbey Newsletter*, 25 (2019), 8; and W. L. Hildburgh, 'An Alabaster Table of the Annunciation with the Crucifix: A Study in English Iconography', *Archaeologia*, 74 (1925), 203-32: 205-6). It may even be noted by scholars that the collect for 25 March, Lady Day, still associates the two events of the Annunciation and the crucifixion: 'that as we have known the incarnation of thy Son, Jesus Christ by the message of an angel, so by His cross and passion we may be brought into the glory of His resurrection' (Kemp, 'The Annunciation', 437).

the moment of Christ's death.<sup>11</sup> In John's Gospel the cross is presented as 'the instrument and point of victory', when, by submitting to death on the cross, Christ vanquishes it.<sup>12</sup> The lily-cross motif might then have been intended to illustrate not so much Christ's death as the Christian paradox of new life coming out of death. In medieval art there is a long tradition of picturing Christ crucified upon a 'living cross', or 'tree-cross', where the cross as a living being symbolises the Tree of Life.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most important English example is the 'Tree of Life' in the Psalter of Robert De Lisle in the British Library, which dates to before 1339 and includes a green tree-cross with text-inscriptions composed by Johannes Metensis (*fl* 1273) that drew

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<sup>11</sup> See Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation*, 16-17; 'simultaneous narration' being seen as the depiction in the visual arts of multiple narrative moments in one narrative plane. In spite of this 'simultaneous narration', Cervone has argued that the focus is very much on life, "particularly beginnings" (Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation*, 198).

<sup>12</sup> John Marsh, *The Gospel of St John*, London: Penguin Books, 1968, 618. The Annunciation, as a symbol of the incarnation, may represent the transition from the Old to the New Testament, but the cross might act as the metaphorical 'key'. For Saint Augustine it was the *clavis crucis* (key of the cross) that opened the full meaning of the Old Testament through the New (cited by Catherine Brown Tkacz, *The Key to the Brescia Casket: Typology and the Early Christian Imagination*, Paris: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002, 95-96). Gertrud Schiller notes a prayer repeated before Mass from Palm Sunday to Maundy Thursday that uses the symbolism of the tree, from which life was to spring, and relates it to the cross, which is seen as being key to victory; 'he who conquered on the wood was also to be conquered on the wood' (Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, 2 vols. London: Lund Humphries, 1971-72, 2:133-34).

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer O'Reilly, 'The Trees of Eden in Medieval Iconography', in Paul Morris and Deborah Sawyer (eds.), *A Walk in the Garden: Biblical, Iconographical and Literary Images of Eden*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992, 167-204: 170-80; Gerhart Ladner, 'Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism: A Comparison', in Gerhart B. Ladner, *Images and Ideas in the Middle Ages: Selected Studies in History and Art*, Rome: University of California and the Kress Foundation, 1983, 239-82: 256-57. In Britain there are examples of the 'roughly-hewn' cross pictured as a living 'green' tree which go as far back as the Anglo-Saxon period (Nicole Fallon, *The Cross as Tree: Wood-of-the-Cross Legends in Middle English and Latin Texts in Medieval England*, University of Toronto: Unpublished Ph.D thesis, submitted 2009, 61-64), and include two thirteenth-century English illuminations, one of which is in the Amesbury Psalter (O'Reilly, 'The Trees of Eden', 184-6; Schiller, *Iconography*, 2:134 and Fig.410). From the fourteenth century, however, the tree-cross, which represents the cross as a tree with actual branches, and flowers or fruit, becomes more common in the West, under the influence of St. Bonaventura (Schiller, *Iconography*, 2:135). The most well-known examples are those from Florence, one by Pacino di Bonaguida, which dates to c.1310 (Ladner, 'Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism', 258; Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:45, 2:136) and one from the 1330s by Taddeo Gaddi (Franklin, 'Dream of the Virgin,' 222). It is important to distinguish here between the cross being depicted as a living tree or vegetation and the so-called 'Living Cross' that developed in northern and central Europe in the fifteenth century, which defines a cross where the four extremities terminate in moving hands that represent divine agency (Schiller, *Iconography*, 2:158-61; Achim Timmermann, 'The Avenging Crucifix: Some observations on the Iconography of the Living Cross', *Gesta*, 40:2 (2001), 141-60; Jill Franklin, 'Cat. no.33: Dream of the Virgin', in *Catalogue of Paintings in the Collection of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, eds. Jill Franklin, Bernard Nurse and Pamela Tudor-Craig, 2015, 217-28: 221). A century ago, Walter Hildburgh observed that the lily crucifixion might be a development of the tradition of associating Christ's cross with living vegetation and he cited numerous European examples from throughout the medieval period (Hildburgh, 'An Alabaster Table', 213-219; see also the discussion in his later paper: Walter Hildburgh, 'Iconographical Peculiarities in English Medieval Alabaster Carvings', *Folklore*, 44.1 (1933), 32-56).

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upon the mystical content of the treatise *Lignum vitae* by the Franciscan theologian St. Bonaventura (fig. 4).<sup>14</sup>

From the twelfth century devotion to the Virgin Mary became an important part of devotion to the crucified Christ along with a greater emphasis on Mary's role in the redemption of humanity.<sup>15</sup> The 'tree-cross' can sometimes be used to emphasise the role of the Virgin Mary in the process of redemption, such as in a fifteenth century stone sculpture from Münster bei Dieburg, in Germany, where Mary holds the child in one hand, and a tree, in which Christ hangs crucified, in the other.<sup>16</sup> The tree includes half-figures that symbolise those who have been redeemed by Christ's death, suggesting that Christ can be seen here hanging upon the 'tree-cross' as an allusion to the fruit of the tree that brought about the fall of humanity: 'Eve caused us to be damned with an apple from a tree, Mary absolves us through the offering from a tree, because Christ hangs from the wood like a fruit. Thus, as death comes from a tree, so does life.'<sup>17</sup>

Also of interest here is a painting from the second half of the fourteenth century, in the collection of the Society of Antiquaries in London, known as the *Dream of the Virgin*, which once formed part of an altarpiece attributed to the Bolognese artist Simone dei Crocifissi (fig. 5).<sup>18</sup> Here, in what would probably have been understood at the time as a deathbed scene, the sleeping Virgin contemplates the moment of Christ's own death, with the crucified Christ depicted suspended on a living vine growing out of the Virgin's

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<sup>14</sup> De Lisle Psalter, British Library, MS Arundel 83 II fol.125v: Lucy Freeman Sandler, *The Psalter of Robert De Lisle in the British Library*, London: Harvey Miller, 1983, 60 (plate 14).

<sup>15</sup> Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ & the Virgin Mary, 800-1200*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, 200-201.

<sup>16</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 2:135 and fig. 445. The Münster bei Dieburg example of this type dates to c.1420 (Fig. 445).

<sup>17</sup> Attributed to Saint Ambrose (d. 397), "Sermo XLV: De primo Adam et secundo", as quoted by Angiola, 'Nicola Pisano', 13. The idea of Mary as the 'second Eve', in a typological relationship of contrast, dates back to at least the second century where the fruits of paradise are symbolically restored through the fruit of Mary's womb (Leena Mari Peltomaa, *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn*, Leiden: Brill, 2001, 128-134; José María Salvador-González, 'The Eve/Mary parallelism/antithesis in the light of Christian theological tradition and its reflection in the iconography of the Annunciation (15th century)', *Volynskiy Blahovisnyk*, 9 (2021), 57-91). It may also be noted here that the Legend of the Wood of the Cross, which told the tale of how the tree of the cross was the material product of the tree of knowledge, was particularly popular in medieval England evidenced by the high number of known manuscripts found there (Fallon, *The Cross as Tree*, 92-8). On the linking of the two trees in the economy of salvation see Ladner, 'Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism', 255-57.

<sup>18</sup> Villers et al, 'Simone dei Crocifissi's "Dream of the Virgin" in the Society of Antiquaries, London', *Burlington Magazine*, 1169:142 (2000), 481-6: 481, and 484 on Mary's role in the process of redemption. The painting is currently on display in the National Gallery, London. Also see Franklin, 'Dream of the Virgin' 221-22. The painting is thought to have been adapted from a detached *cimasa* (the uppermost portion) of a dismantled altarpiece.

abdomen.<sup>19</sup> The connection being made between the Virgin's womb and Christ's tomb is an analogy that was long made implicit in textual sources.<sup>20</sup> Adam and Eve's emergence from a rock tomb below Mary's bed signposts the resurrection, reinforcing the central message of human salvation through Christ's incarnation.<sup>21</sup> With Mary in a recumbent position the growth of the tree from her abdomen is reminiscent of the iconography of the 'Tree of Jesse,' the genealogical tree that begins with Jesse, the father of King David, and culminates in the birth of Christ. The Tree of Jesse is based on Isaiah's Old Testament prophecy (Isa. 11:1), which expressed the idea of the Hebrew Messiah who was to come from the royal house of David, and which, early-on in Christianity, had been interpreted allegorically and applied to Christ.

The reference in the *Dream of the Virgin* to the iconography of the Tree of Jesse alludes to the redemptive role of the Virgin Mary, by 'showing her as the female Jesse, not the tree itself, but its sacred root,' as Jill Franklin has said.<sup>22</sup> From the twelfth century Mary had been referred to as the *radix sancta* ('sacred root'), in the Marian liturgical hymn *Ave regina caelorum* ('Hail, Queen of Heaven').<sup>23</sup> It was more common, though, for theologians to equate the virgin (*virgo*) with the rod or shoot (*virga*) mentioned in Isaiah's prophecy as emerging from the root of Jesse, from which arises the 'flower' (*flos*) that was usually associated with Christ.<sup>24</sup> This image occurs in an interpretation of the Tree of Jesse in the

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<sup>19</sup> Villers, 'Dream of the Virgin', 2000, p.484; Franklin, 'Dream of the Virgin', 222.

<sup>20</sup> See Franklin, 'Dream of the Virgin', for twelfth-century textual sources (p. 222), and Verdon for devotional and theatre texts of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century (Timothy Verdon, *Mary in Western Art*, New York: Hudson Hills, 2005, 217). The analogy is first made quite early in Christianity; see Hirn, *The Sacred Shrine*, 337-8.

<sup>21</sup> In explaining the mysteries of the incarnation, Christian legend placed more emphasis on the resurrection than on Christ's death on the cross. It recounts how, after the Crucifixion, Christ descended into the underworld of the dead and freed Adam and Eve, along with other Old Testament figures. Only with Adam redeemed by Christ had salvation been fulfilled. Franklin, 'Dream of the Virgin', 220-21.

<sup>22</sup> Franklin, 'Dream of the Virgin', 222.

<sup>23</sup> Franklin, 'Dream of the Virgin', 222. And see the comments that were made by Millard Meiss on a similar painting by Simone in Ferrara, the only other contemporary depiction of the theme that includes comparable iconography (Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951, 153; Franklin, 'Dream of the Virgin', 219).

<sup>24</sup> 'And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root' (Isa. 11:1). This is the Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate (Challoner Revision). It is only in Latin that what emerges from the root is clearly referred to as a flower, the *flos*. Translations of the original Hebrew to other languages, such as English, renders the vegetative growth as a branch, or fruit (Arthur Watson, *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse*, London: Oxford University Press, 1934, 3; Anna C. Hulbert, 'Conservation of the Fourteenth-Century ceiling at Saint Helen's Church, Abingdon', in Valerie Dorge and F. Carey Howlett (eds), *Painted Wood: History and Conservation*, Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Trust, 1998, 287-300: 288). The association of the *virga* (rod or shoot) with the virgin and *flos* with Christ became more frequent in the twelfth century but had already existed for some time, at least since Tertullian in the third century (on the history of

twelfth-century English Lambeth Bible, where the Virgin, who stands out by her position and size, is shown as the stem of the tree rising from the recumbent Jesse, with branches springing from the top of her head encircling a relatively small bust of Christ. Her arms are outstretched depicting her as the connecting link between Church and Synagogue.<sup>25</sup>

The thirteenth-century *Legenda Aurea* (Golden Legend) related Isaiah's prophecy to the flowering of Joseph's staff at the altar in the Temple, when it acts as a sign of divine will in relation to him being the one from the house of David to whom the Virgin Mary was to be espoused.<sup>26</sup> Some scholars have even suggested that the Old Testament prophecy may be the explanation for the flower in the Annunciation scene, when the angel's salutation heralds the incarnation of Christ.<sup>27</sup> That may well be the case when the flower is directly associated with a representation of the Tree of Jesse, such as in the Annunciation panel on an altarpiece from the Marienthal Monastery in Netzer, northern Germany, which dates to the very end of the fourteenth century, where, instead of a lily-pot between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, it includes the Tree of Jesse bearing white lilies (fig. 6).<sup>28</sup>

Broadly contemporary with this panel from Netzer is the late fourteenth-century Tree of Jesse on the ceiling of St. Helen's in Abingdon (Oxfordshire), where the culmination of the

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Tree of Jesse iconography see Susan L. Green, *Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern Europe in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, London: Routledge, 2019, 2-15). The verbal similarity between the two Latin words *virgo* (virgin) and *virga* is likely to have contributed to the association, which appears in art from the end of the eleventh century and is occasionally made explicit when the word *virga* can even appear next to the Virgin (Watson, *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse*, 3-5; 129-130). On the equating of the Virgin with rod, or shoot, in iconography, also see Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:15-6. For an analysis of doctrinal texts see José Maria Salvador-González, "'Flos de radice lesse': A hermeneutic approach to the theme of the lily in the Spanish Gothic painting of 'The Annunciation' from patristic and theological sources", *Eikón Imago*, 4 (2013), 183-222: 206-17.

<sup>25</sup> Watson, *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse*, 99-102; Franklin, 'Dream of the Virgin,' 221.

<sup>26</sup> Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 1:197 and 2:153. Early on in Christianity the prophecy could also be related to the blossoming of Aaron's rod (Numbers 17:5-8), a symbol of divine election, where the rod can also be interpreted as a flowering staff. See José Maria Salvador-González, "'In virga Aaron Maria ostendebatur'. A new interpretation of the stem of lilies in the Spanish Gothic 'Annunciation' from patristic and theological sources," in *De Medio Aevo*, 10, 2016, 117-44: 132-33; Watson, *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse*, 5 and 53; and Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:15, 54.

<sup>27</sup> Salvador-González, "'Flos de radice lesse'", 183-222. Salvador-González sees Isaiah's prophecy as the principal explanation for the lilies in the vase based on the theological tradition, repeatedly expounded, which associated Christ with the flower and the Virgin with the stem (Salvador-González, "'In virga Aaron Maria ostendebatur'. A new interpretation of the stem of lilies', 118-119). John Ward interpreted the lilies in Jan van Eyck's Washington *Annunciation* as representing Isaiah's prophecy, and the pavement on which the vase sits as also making a reference to the Tree of Jesse (John L. Ward, 'Hidden Symbolism in Jan van Eyck's Annunciations', *The Art Bulletin*, 57, 1975, 196-220: 197).

<sup>28</sup> The altarpiece is by 'the master of Netzer altar triptych' and discussed in Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:46 (Fig 103). In the crown of the tree is the figure of David.



tree includes both Joseph and an Annunciation group featuring a lily crucifixion between Gabriel and the Virgin Mary (fig. 7).<sup>29</sup> This is the only known instance of the lily crucifixion motif forming part of a Tree of Jesse, and is particularly worth noting as it may not just connect Isaiah's prophecy to the incarnation of Christ through the Annunciation scene, in that it also expresses the merging of two themes, the 'tree-cross' with the Tree of Jesse. A twelfth-century sermon by Nicholas of Clairvaux pictured the Tree of Jesse as the beginning of the process of redemption, and the tree of the cross as its realisation or, in other words, the point of victory.<sup>30</sup> The conjunction of these two themes in iconography is suggested in England early in the fourteenth century in the Gorleston Psalter, an East Anglian manuscript of c. 1310-20, where the crucifixion is represented within a Tree of Jesse.<sup>31</sup> But an even clearer representation of the cross as a tree, as part of a Tree of Jesse, is found illustrated in an early manuscript copy of the *Speculum humanae salvationis* ('Mirror of human salvation'), a work of popular theology comparing New Testament events to those from the Old, produced in Austria in 1330, not long after the Gorleston Psalter.<sup>32</sup> The text of the *Speculum humanae salvationis* is equating the 'flower' rising from the root of Jesse not only with Christ, but with the crucified Christ specifically, as in a medieval English translation of the work: 'Of this floure, Crist-on-crosse'.<sup>33</sup> Visual representations of the Tree of Jesse with the crucifixion became

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<sup>29</sup> Hulbert, 'Conservation of the Fourteenth-Century ceiling', 88; Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation*, 281 n.93. More common is for the Tree of Jesse to be depicted culminating in an image of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Christ in her lap.

<sup>30</sup> Arthur Watson (in *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse*, 52-53) attributed this homily to the theologian Peter Damian (d. 1072/3); however, Kennerly Woody has argued that it is actually by Nicholas of Clairvaux who acted as secretary to St. Bernard (1090-1153), the founder of the abbey at Clairvaux, until 1151 (Margot E. Fassler, *The Virgin of Chartres*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, 332 and 550 n.20). At the beginning of the sermon titled *De exaltatione Sanctae Crucis*, which may have been copied and studied at Chartres in the twelfth and thirteenth century, it says, 'from the rod of Jesse we come to the rod of the cross, and we bring the beginning to its conclusion, which is redemption' (Fassler, *The Virgin of Chartres*, 331-32). On the pictorial combination of the two themes, the 'tree-cross' and the Tree of Jesse, see Schiller, *Iconography*, 2:135. The two themes are also discussed by Jill Franklin in relation to the *Dream of the Virgin* (Franklin, 'Dream of the Virgin', 221). There are pictorial parallels between the figure of Jesse at the stem of Christ's genealogical tree and that of Adam beneath the cross. There are images of the Crucifixion, earlier than those of the Tree of Jesse, which depict the stem of the cross growing out of Adam (Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:17-18). The Legend of the Wood of the Cross has the cross originate in a shoot planted by Seth on the grave of Adam, but also related to this is the legend that Adam was buried in Calvary, which might be represented by him, or his skull, appearing at the foot of the Cross in Crucifixion scenes (Watson, 1934, p.52-3). Schiller suggests that both the cross of Christ and the Tree of Jesse may be interpreted as the Tree of Life (Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:18).

<sup>31</sup> British Library MS 49622, fol.8. Janet Backhouse, *The Illuminated Page*, 1997, 107 plate 87. Discussed by Franklin, 2015, 221. The illumination of the Tree of Jesse includes a medallion of the crucifixion surmounting one featuring the Virgin and child.

<sup>32</sup> Green, *Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern Europe*, 144-45; Schiller, *Iconography*, 2:135.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted by Mary Anderson who saw this passage in the *Speculum humanae salvationis* as being an explanation for the lily crucifixion motif itself (Anderson, *The Imagery of British Churches*, 103). *Speculum humanae*

## *The lily among thorns*

much more common in northern Europe in the early sixteenth century, as Susan Green has recently observed. They are found in the Netherlands within a number of Antwerp carved altarpieces and in stained glass in Brittany in northern France.<sup>34</sup> The Tree of Jesse can also often be found actually embroidered onto the cross itself on the backs of liturgical vestments from the fifteenth and sixteenth century in the Netherlands and Germany, to which the fifteenth-century lily-cross on a vestment at Campion Hall can be seen as having a clear parallel (fig. 8).<sup>35</sup> The Campion Hall cross, from the top of which emerges the lily (fig. 9), expresses the idea of the cross as the Tree of Life, and, in its own way, points towards the link between the incarnation and redemption.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Lily: 'The Flower of Our Lady.'**<sup>37</sup>

Isaiah's prophecy may use the metaphor of a 'flower', but it is a lily specifically that is by definition a hallmark of the 'lily crucifixion' motif. While lilies have long been synonymous with whiteness, and consequently purity and virginity, they may be open to interpretation.<sup>38</sup> Even in Greek and Roman mythology lilies had ambiguity, and they have been associated with both death and procreation. In the context of transformational change lilies could act as flowers of glory, and in this respect it has been suggested that they have equivalency with the lotus flower.<sup>39</sup> In the fifth century Eucherius of Lyon said that Christ was a 'lily' because of

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*salvationis* existed in manuscript form from c.1324. Anderson quotes from one of the few known medieval English translations. When it was printed in woodcut versions, as a block-book, it became a 'bestseller' and began to exercise considerable influence on the arts (Hilary Wayment, *The Windows of King's College Chapel Cambridge*, London: Oxford University Press, 1972, 7).

<sup>34</sup> Green, *Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern Europe*, 141-44, 187. In the stained-glass examples from Brittany the Tree of Jesse supports the tree of the cross rather than just framing the crucifixion as in the Antwerp altarpieces.

<sup>35</sup> In relation to the Tree of Jesse examples see Green, *Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern Europe*, 144.

<sup>36</sup> A lily also grows out of the end of a cross in a wall-painting from the second half of the fourteenth century, in Görmin (Schiller, *Iconography*, 2:207 and fig.714). However, there the cross is held by Christ as Judge, along with a sword in his other hand, while below sits a Man of Sorrows, the Christ who has suffered and through his suffering brought redemption. In that case Catherine Oakes related the symbol of the lily, coming from the cross, specifically to the redeeming virtue of the crucifixion (Catherine, Oakes, *Ora Pro Nobis: The Virgin as Intercessor in Medieval Art and Devotion*, Turnhout: Harvey Miller, 2008, 93).

<sup>37</sup> Duncan Smith, "The Many Mysteries of the Lily Cross," 2019, 8. The lily is often referred to as 'the flower of the Virgin' (Salvador-González, "Flos de radice Iesse", 202).

<sup>38</sup> Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant (eds), *Dictionary of Symbols*, London: Penguin, 1996, 608-9. For some classical and medieval references to the symbolic value of the lily see Gordon Rushforth, *Medieval Christian Imagery*, 1936, 85.

<sup>39</sup> Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Symbols*, 608-9, 616. The lotus has an association with the continuity of birth and rebirth. The art historian Louis Réau suggested that in Christian iconography the lily has the same importance as the lotus in the Buddhist art of India (Salvador-González, "Flos de radice Iesse", 202). In relation to the lily

the glory of his resurrection; 'externally white because of the glory of His Body, golden within by reason of the resplendence of His soul'.<sup>40</sup> Later the English monk Bede (d. 735), one of the greatest writers of the early medieval period, also suggested that the lily, with its white petals and golden stamens, served to act as a symbol of the glory of Christ's resurrection; 'for the sparkling whiteness of the flower betokens the outward brightness of his body now never more to die again'.<sup>41</sup>

The lily appears in early Christian art as a symbol of life, or light, but only became common in iconography from the thirteenth century when it started to appear in the Annunciation image, where in the fourteenth and fifteenth century it was 'seldom absent'.<sup>42</sup> In the iconography of the Annunciation the white lily, *Lilium candidum*, which has long been referred to as the 'Madonna lily', is generally regarded as a symbol of the Virgin's purity or virginity, although the significance of the flower has been subject to some debate.<sup>43</sup> At the

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crucifix specifically, earlier in the twentieth century, Walter Hildburgh noted in a paper in the *Antiquaries Journal* a parallel with a painting, dating to the start of the sixteenth century, of the Japanese divinity Dainichi Nyorai 'seated on a many-petalled lotus supported on a "lion throne" [*simhasana*]' (W. L. Hildburgh, 'Some further Notes,' 25). The lotus, it was observed, denotes the divine birth of the being it supports, and also emphasises purity and perfection.

<sup>40</sup> Littledale, *Song of Songs*, 59.

<sup>41</sup> From *De Templo Salomonis*, xix. [P.L., xci. 789] as quoted by Daniel Rock, *The Church of Our Fathers*, London: John Murray, 1905, 206. Reference cited by Hildburgh, 'An Alabaster Table', 226: Hildburgh also noted that writers on Jewish mysticism employed the lily as a symbol of the resurrection, and he mentions the record of a poet from later in the medieval period who described God's rising on the "third day" as lily coming forth from its bulb hidden in the earth.

<sup>42</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1: 51. In relation to the Annunciation scene Émile Mâle argued that the motif originated in France in the thirteenth century as a vase of unspecified flowers (Émile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France in the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Dora Nussey, London: Collins, 1961, 244). It is often said that this flower was introduced simply to suggest that the Annunciation took place in the spring, and that it was probably introduced as a result of a comment of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in the twelfth century, based on the idea that the place name Nazareth meant 'flower': 'The flower willed to be born of a flower, in a flower, at the time of flowers.' Bernard's comment is referenced in the thirteenth century *Golden Legend* (Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 1:197). Mary Anderson, however, cited an early twelfth-century example of a vase of flowers being used in an Annunciation scene as an attribute of Mary in Southwell Minster, Nottinghamshire, and suggested that the symbol may have appeared first in England (Anderson, *The Imagery of British Churches*, 1955, 102). Anderson also noted the lily specifically, appears in Annunciation iconography in Britain in the thirteenth century. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the lily motif was not only common in European Annunciation iconography but has been said by some to have been 'seldom absent' (Robb, 'The Iconography of the Annunciation', 482; Salvador-González, "'Flos de radice lesse'", 217).

<sup>43</sup> David Robb, 'The Iconography of the Annunciation in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries', *Art Bulletin*, 18, 1936: 480-526, 482. Gordon Rushforth commented that the 'lily-pot' depicted in Annunciation scenes 'is usually regarded as a symbol of the Virgin's purity' (Gordon McNeil Rushforth, *Medieval Christian Imagery as Illustrated by the Painted Windows of Great Malvern Priory Church Worcestershire*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936, 84-85). Salvador-González has listed many well-known scholars who have interpreted the lily in a sense of either purity, or more specifically virginity, including Louis Réau who suggested that while it was a symbol of purity, it was 'more especially' a symbol of the virginity of Mary (Salvador-González, "'Flos de radice lesse'", 202-5; Salvador-González, "'In virga Aaron Maria ostendebatur: A new interpretation of the stem of lilies in the Spanish Gothic

Annunciation either a lily may be brought to Mary by the angel Gabriel or, more commonly in northern European art, a lily-plant stands in a vase, or lily-pot, placed between the angel and the Virgin.<sup>44</sup> While this flower has long been seen as potentially significant in the symbolism associated with the scene, scholars have tended to overlook the significance of the vase itself. Recently, however, José Maria Salvador-González has suggested that the vase in the Annunciation, which almost always resembles ‘an inverted human uterus’, symbolises the Virgin Mary as the container and mother of God.<sup>45</sup> An interpretation that is based upon a well-established patristic and theological tradition, consolidated by ‘countless’ medieval liturgical prayers and hymns, that considered the Virgin Mary as a sacred vessel or ‘vase’ (*vas*).<sup>46</sup> What might also be noted, though, is that as well as the vase as a container symbolising a womb, there was a belief in the ancient world that jars or pots might hold the secret of transmutation.<sup>47</sup> The vase in the lily crucifixion might therefore preserve a link to this once held belief by alluding to the womb-tomb analogy mentioned earlier which was finding expression in art, in the West, between the second half of the fourteenth century and the sixteenth century.<sup>48</sup> Christ hanging crucified over an open vase undoubtedly communicates a resurrection message on some level, which may help explain some of the examples of the motif on tomb decoration.<sup>49</sup> The lily crucifixion on the rood screen at the

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“Annunciation” from patristic and theological sources’, *De Medio Aevo*, 10, 2016, 117-44: 118). When the lily has three blooms, as is often found in early Italian examples, this has been interpreted as symbolising Mary’s ‘perpetual virginity’, the doctrine that she was a virgin before, during and after childbirth (Rushforth, *Medieval Christian Imagery*, 1936, 85; and Réau, as quoted by Salvador-González in “Flos de radice lesse”, 203), although other scholars have argued the three flowers suggest the Trinity (Ward, ‘Hidden Symbolism’, 197 n.9). The title ‘Madonna lily’, was said by Eleanour Rohde to go back to Tudor times, (Rohde, *The Story of the Garden*, 34).

<sup>44</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1: 51. Gordon Rushforth notes that in Italian art the lily often appears in Gabriel’s hand instead of the sceptre, but that this rarely occurs in northern European art (Rushforth, *Medieval Christian Imagery*, 1936, 85). For examples of the angel holding the lily see Stefano Zuffi, *Gospel Figures in Art*, trans. Thomas Hartmann, Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2003, 57-60.

<sup>45</sup> José Maria Salvador-González, ‘The Vase in paintings of the Annunciation, a Polyvalent Symbol of the Virgin Mary,’ in *Religions*, 13, 2022: 1-43: 38.

<sup>46</sup> Salvador-González, ‘The Vase in paintings of the Annunciation,’ 38. Medieval Christianity is well-known for both describing, and praising, Mary as a ‘container’ or vessel (*vas*): See also Catherine Oakes, *Ora Pro Nobis*, 2008, 220; Rachel Fulton Brown, *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, 74.

<sup>47</sup> Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Symbols*, 1060-1; and see Michael Calder, ‘Savoldo’s Magdalene: “True Reformations are Internal”’, *Journal of Icon Studies*, vol.2, 2019, 8-12, esp. n.74: The interment of bodies in all types of ceramic vessels, known as pot burials or jar burials, was a widespread practice in the ancient world suggesting an analogy with the womb.

<sup>48</sup> The late medieval textual sources for this analogy were noted earlier. In art, the *Dream of the Virgin*, by Simone dei Crocifissi, discussed earlier, is one fourteenth-century example. Fifteenth-century Italian examples are discussed by Timothy Verdon, in *Mary In Western Art* (New York: Hudson Hills, 2005, 166-68). Michelangelo’s *Pieta* for Vittoria Colona is a sixteenth century example (Calder, ‘Savoldo’s Magdalene,’ 10).

<sup>49</sup> There are two examples on tombs which clearly have a vase. Cervone has commented that the use of the motif on tombs indicates that it was ‘deemed particularly suitable for thinking about the afterlife’ (Cervone,

church of St. Andrew in Kenn, Devon, emerges from a vase where the handles are in the form of dragons or serpents (fig. 10).<sup>50</sup> The serpent is regularly coiled around the stem of the cross in early crucifixion scenes, alluding to the Fall, and as Gertrud Schiller said, it ‘pinpoints the idea of the Son of God’s death as a victory over death.’<sup>51</sup>

In the twelfth century the influential St. Bernard, founder of Clairvaux Abbey, linked Isaiah’s Old Testament prophecy of a flower rising from the root of Jesse (Isa. 11:1) to his allegorical reading of the Old Testament Song of Songs, where in the second chapter there is a mention of a ‘lily’ specifically: ‘I am the flower of the field, and the lily of the valleys’ (Song 2:1).<sup>52</sup> Bernard interpreted this lily as a symbol of Christ following an older mystical interpretation of this line of the poem.<sup>53</sup> In his commentary on the Song of Songs Bernard related all the mysteries of Christ’s life to the lily, including the Annunciation.<sup>54</sup> As a result Schiller considered that the lily in Annunciation scenes, which in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries so often appeared in a vase before Mary, could actually be regarded as a symbol of Christ.<sup>55</sup> The comparison had certainly already been made elsewhere in art. From as early as the twelfth century, in representations of the Tree of Jesse, Christ could be depicted holding a scroll with the words from the first line of the second chapter of the Song of Songs: *Ego flos*

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*Poetics of the Incarnation*, 198). Hildburgh’s ultimate conclusion was that the motif was an allusion to the resurrection, (Hildburgh, *Folklore*, 47).

<sup>50</sup> Gordon McNeil Rushforth, ‘A Lily-Crucifix and an Unidentified Saint in Kenn Church, Devon,’ *Antiquaries Journal*, 7, 1927, 72-73; 72.

<sup>51</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 2: 105 and 113; see also Hildburgh, ‘A Medieval Bronze Pectoral Cross’, 95.

<sup>52</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1: 15 and 51; Salvador-González, ‘“Flos campi et lilium convallium”’. Third interpretation of the lily in the iconography of “The Annunciation” in Italian Trecento art from patristic and theological sources,’ in *Eikón Imago*, 5, 2014, 75-95: 91-93. Later in the twelfth century Phillip of Harveng (d. 1183) also associated the ‘ego flos campi’ (I am the ‘flower’ of the field) with the *flos* growing from the root of Jesse and interpreted the lily as an image of Christ (Ward, ‘Hidden Symbolism’, 197 n.7). The traditional rendering of the flower ‘of the valleys’ in 2:1 of the *Song* is given as ‘lily’; however, the word actually derives from an Egyptian term meaning lotus flower (Pope, *Song of Songs*, 368). The plant was probably understood from early on as *Lilium candidum* (white lily), which became associated with the Annunciation, rather than the *Lilium convallium*, or ‘lily-of-the-valley;’ a flower that may also allude to the virtues of Mary and act as a symbol of Christ (Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:51). The ‘lily-of-the-valley’ now has the scientific name *Convallaria majalis*. Biblical commentators have, over time, varied in their attribution of this verse in the *Song* and can credit the speech to either the Bridegroom or the Bride, as will be mentioned further (Pope, *Song of Songs*, 369).

<sup>53</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1: 51; and Littledale, *Song of Songs*, 56-61. Origen (c.185-c.253) recorded the second-century mystical interpretation, where it is the lily (Christ), which will restore a pure life and salvation, so directly relating the lily of the *Song of Songs* to the tree of life of Paradise in Gen. 2.9 (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Symbols*, 609). For a list of other early theologians who interpreted the flower and the lily in this line of the *Song* as Christ, see Salvador-González, ‘“Flos campi et lilium convallium”’, 86-92.

<sup>54</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1: 51.

<sup>55</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1, 51.

*campi et liliū conuallium*.<sup>56</sup> There is also later evidence from England that associates Christ with a lily, including a fifteenth century manuscript that contains a selection of sermons in Middle English from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century.<sup>57</sup> One of these sermons uses the analogy in the context of a description how the knight Christ came on earth to fight a battle with the devil and to secure redemption for humankind. Here the lily of white does not just represent Christ, though, but his crucified body: 'a lillie of whyte, that was is owne precieuse bodye in all is bittur penaunce'.<sup>58</sup> Also a late fifteenth-century painted panel, originally from a church screen at Great Barton (Suffolk), that includes a lily crucifixion, has the 'Ihc' monogram, deriving from the Greek spelling of Jesus, as a label on the lily-pot suggesting a link between the lily and Christ, who is depicted crucified among the stems (see fig. 13).<sup>59</sup>

However, whilst Christ may have been compared to a lily relatively early on in Christianity, from the twelfth century onwards, as Marian symbolism gained in significance it related the symbols of Christ to the 'Mother of God.' It was this, according to Schiller, that led to the lily in the Annunciation scene being seen as associated with Mary and to symbolise her purity.<sup>60</sup> The link between Mary and a lily appears to have existed even earlier though.<sup>61</sup> A representation of the Tree of Jesse in an illuminated German antiphony, which dates to the twelfth century, well before the lily became an established feature of the Annunciation scene, includes a scroll with the first line from the second chapter of the Song of Songs, but

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<sup>56</sup> Watson, 1934, 105 and 110-11. Arthur Watson includes French and German manuscript examples: The twelfth century 'Bible De Saint-Bertin de Saint-Omer' and the 'Trier Evangelium' dating to c.1200.

<sup>57</sup> This fifteenth century manuscript is in the British Museum; MS. Royal 18 B. xxiii (Woodburn O. Ross, *Middle English Sermons*, London: Oxford University Press, 1960). For an earlier English association of the lily with Christ, Mary Anderson cited the Anglo-Saxon poem, *Solomon and Saturn*, where Solomon states that the lily 'denoteth Christ' (Anderson, *The Imagery of British Churches*, 102).

<sup>58</sup> Woodburn O. Ross, *Middle English Sermons*, London: Oxford University Press, 1960, 38 (S8). The original 1940 publication by Ross was cited by Tristram, *English Wall Painting*, 1955, 22.

<sup>59</sup> This late fifteenth-century painted panel, which was removed from a parclose screen in the north nave aisle of the church in Great Barton (Suffolk) sometime before 1850, is usually considered to depict an 'Annunciation', even though the angel Gabriel is not included, because it has a scroll with an inscription of the Virgin Mary's response to the angelic salutation: 'Ecce ancilla do[mini]', along with a depiction of the two handled lily-pot. It is now in the V&A museum in London: ([https://collections.vam.ac.uk/search/?id\\_place=x33696](https://collections.vam.ac.uk/search/?id_place=x33696)). Walter Hildburgh interpreted the 'ihc' monogram as suggesting that the lily-plant symbolises Christ (Hildburgh, 'An Alabaster Table', 209 and 226-7).

<sup>60</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:51.

<sup>61</sup> While St. Bernard had interpreted the lily as a symbol of Christ following an older mystical interpretation, he had also praised the Virgin Mary as *inviolabile castitatis lilium* (lily of inviolable chastity), as noted by both Louis Réau and Gabriel Millet (Salvador-González in "'Flos de radice lesse'", 202-3). Bede had also described Mary as white in association with flowers (in the poem *de die iudicii* cited by Rock, *The Church of Our Fathers*, 205).

this time held by the Virgin instead of Christ.<sup>62</sup> It certainly became not uncommon to apply the name lily to Mary, even if she was pre-eminently the rose, and some late medieval commentators on the Song of Songs also gave the 'lily of the valleys' line to Mary, including in the fifteenth century Denis the Carthusian (1402-1471).<sup>63</sup>

Given this association between the lily and both Christ and Mary some scholars have suggested that the lily at the Annunciation could have more than one meaning, as the virtues of the Virgin and the body of the son, or, a 'double symbolism', as Salvador-González says, that is 'simultaneously Mariological and Christological', with Christ as the flower, and Mary, in her 'virginal divine motherhood', as the stem, or shoot of Jesse.<sup>64</sup> Whilst there may be some validity to the idea of multivalency many scholars might still be inclined to accept the conclusion Mary Anderson reached in the middle of the last century that 'the precise meaning of this symbol has not been established.'<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, looking specifically at medieval England, there is evidence for the popularisation of the lily flower as a symbol in relation to the incarnation of Christ, which is worth considering further, beginning with a text of the York mystery plays, which are known to have been performed from the second half of the fourteenth century.<sup>66</sup> The York

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<sup>62</sup> Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canticles*, 1990, 90. The location of the twelfth-century German antiphony is unknown but is reproduced by Arthur Watson (in *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse*, pl. xxxi). Christ is depicted above the Virgin Mary holding a book in which is written; *Ego sum lux mundi* (John 8:12). Later, at the end of the fifteenth century, in the Netherlands and Germany, depictions of an abbreviated Tree of Jesse with St. Anne, can represent the Virgin alone in a flower blossom, without the Christ-child, which may suggest that she is no longer the *virga*, but the flower, the *flos* (Green, *Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern Europe*, 61). However, as Salvador-González observes, it is fairly rare in iconography for a lily to appear in scenes with the Virgin Mary other than in the Annunciation (Salvador-González in "'Flos de radice lesse'", 205).

<sup>63</sup> On commentary on the Song of Songs see Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *An Allegory of Divine Love: The Netherlandish Blockbook 'Canticum Canticorum'*, Philadelphia; Saint Joseph's University Press, 2014, 81. In the thirteenth century the Italian chronicler, and author of the Golden Legend, Jacobus de Voragine (d. 1298), applied both of the names, lily and rose, to Mary, amongst many others (Rachel Fulton Brown, *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, 78; see also 91). The text of the so-called 'Rothschild Canticles,' a devotional book produced in Flanders, or the Rhineland, around the beginning of the fourteenth century also identifies the Virgin as the lily (Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canticles*, 1990, 90). In England specifically, in the late fourteenth century, Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* describes the Virgin Mary as a 'white lyllye flour' (a white lily-flower), in the prologue of the Prioresses Tale (line 461), as noted by Hildburgh, in 'An Alabaster Table', 211; and in a late fifteenth-century English alabaster of the Virgin and Child, Mary holds in her left hand a sceptre-like lily (Marks, Richard Marks and Paul Williamson [eds.], *Gothic*, 2003, 393).

<sup>64</sup> Tristram, *English Wall Painting*, 22; Salvador-González in "'Flos de radice lesse'", 205; Salvador-González, "'In virga Aaron Maria ostendebatur'", 133-34, 142; and Salvador-González, "'Flos campi et lilium convallium'", 94.

<sup>65</sup> Anderson, *The Imagery of British Churches*, 102. G. W. Kemp, reached a similar conclusion in 1986 in 'The Annunciation and the Lily Crucifixion,' 430 and 437.

<sup>66</sup> The York plays are first mentioned in the city archives from 1377-1380 (Richard Beadle, *The York Plays: A Critical Edition of the York Corpus Christi Play as Recorded in British Library Additional MS 35290*, 2 vols., Oxford:

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*Annunciation* play begins with a prologue that is a form of prophet play expounded by the 'Doctour,' who paraphrases the prophecy of the rod of Jesse given in Isaiah 11:1-2, making specific reference to the house or lineage of Jesse, and where the flower ('floure') that blossoms is said to be Jesus.<sup>67</sup> He also appears to equate the 'mayden,' or virgin (*virgo*) with the 'wande' or young shoot (*virga*), as theologians so often did.<sup>68</sup> Here, though, the play goes on to link Isaiah's prophecy to Hosea 14:6, with the reference given in the play text being feminised, as Richard Beadle has noted, by the addition of the word '*virgo*,' so: 'I will be as the dew unto Israel, [s]he shall grow as the lily'.<sup>69</sup> The Doctor explains that the Virgin Mary herself is to be 'lilly lyke,' which is 'bycause of hir clene liffe' (because of her pure life).<sup>70</sup> This might be seen as to be alluding specifically to the 'virgin birth'.<sup>71</sup> However, a parallel may be drawn here with the Cecilia legend, which was the only saints legend retold by Chaucer. The ultimate source of the legend is *Passio Caeciliae* that dates to the early medieval period but was abridged in the thirteenth-century by Jacobus de Voragine in the *Golden Legend* before being taken up by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*, which is traditionally dated to 1387.<sup>72</sup> The

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Oxford University Press, 2009 and 2013, 2: xvii). 'Mystery plays', which were performed by craftsmen's guilds and whose crafts were known as 'mysteries', are also so-called, in part, because they aimed at making the mysteries of God present and accessible. They are sometimes referred to as 'cycle plays' because they are made up of discrete individual pageants, usually forty-eight short playlets.

<sup>67</sup> Beadle, *The York Plays*, 1: 80 (12:75-84).

<sup>68</sup> Beadle, *The York Plays*, 1: 80 (12:81-82); 2: 79-81, 85. On the theological interpretation of Isaiah's Old Testament prophecy (Isa. 11:1), as noted in relation to the discussion on the *Dream of the Virgin* attributed to Simone dei Crocifissi, for a recent analysis see Salvador-González, "'Flos de radice Iesse'", 183-222.

<sup>69</sup> Beadle, *The York Plays*, 1: 80 (12: After line 88): *E[r]o quasi ros; et virgo Israel germinabit sicut liliu[m]*. Translation is as given by Beadle, *The York Plays*, 2:85. The descending of the dew is used as a metaphor for the Incarnation in many hymns and biblical commentaries (see Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, 104-5). Some theologians described Mary as Israel, such as Nicholas of Lyra in the fourteenth century (Lavin, *Canticum Canticorum*, 81). However, in the biblical tradition of the Song of Songs this reference in the play may assert the Virgin Mary's privileged position among the daughters of Israel (see Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Symbols*, 609).

<sup>70</sup> Beadle, *The York Plays*, 1: 81 (12:97-98). In Middle English 'clene' as an adjective can be defined as pure or perfect, as well as clean or sinless (see the glossary in Beadle, *The York Plays*, 2: 475, and the one provided by Michael Sargent, *Nicholas Love: The Mirror*, 2004, 268).

<sup>71</sup> The Middle English 'clene,' when used to describe a 'mayden' can mean a 'virgin' (Susan Powell, *John Mirk's 'Festial'*, ed. from British Library MS Cotton Claudius A.II, 2 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 and 2011, 2: 469); and the Virgin Mary's 'purity' was sometimes primarily associated with the doctrine of the 'Virgin Birth' and as a corollary her 'perpetual virginity,' the important Christian doctrine that was noted earlier. Walter Hildburgh suggests the possibility that the 'clene liffe' justification given by the York playwright for the use of the lily description on Mary, may have been intended to simply express the mystery of the virgin birth, but concluded himself that it probably had a more general meaning (Hildburgh, 'An Alabaster Table', 211).

<sup>72</sup> Sherry L. Reames, 'The Cecilia Legend as Chaucer Inherited It and Retold It: The Disappearance of an Augustinian Ideal,' *Speculum*, 55, 1, 1980, 38-57: 38. Extant manuscripts of the *Passio* go back at least to the eighth century. The Cecilia legend appears in the 'Second Nun's Prologue' in *The Canterbury Tales* where it makes clear in the text before line 85 that what follows is: 'The interpretation of the name Cecilia which Brother Jacob of Genoa put in the Legend.'



*Golden Legend* suggests that Saint Cecilia's name may have come from *coeli lilia*, lily of heaven, for 'Saint Cecilia was a heavenly lily by the modesty of her virginity.'<sup>73</sup> In explanation Jacobus then goes on to say that Cecilia is called a lily 'because of her shining cleanness, her clear conscience, and the aroma of her good renown', which may be echoed in the York play by being what is meant by 'clene liffe', the reason given for Mary being lily-like.<sup>74</sup> In the *Golden Legend* Cecilia is said to set a good example for 'the blind', and that in her, 'people saw how to imitate heaven, by the perspicacity of her wisdom, the magnanimity of her faith, and the variety of her virtues.' The point here is that the ideal of perfection at the heart of the *Passio* is an ideal of virginity that is not so much rooted in virginity in the literal sense, as in the Augustinian sense of a 'holy virginity', where one commits wholly to a loving union with God through betrothal to Christ.<sup>75</sup> There is further English evidence from the art and literature of the fourteenth century for the example that is set by the Virgin Mary and her 'clene liffe'. In 'A Prayer by the Five Joys' that was widely circulated in England, the devotee appeals to the Virgin to help him to live a 'clene lyue' (pure life), while on a wall-painting of the Coronation of the Virgin in Broughton, Oxfordshire a tonsured cleric, holding an inscribed scroll, praises the Virgin for her 'five joys' having led him in the 'wey of clene lyve' (way of a pure life).<sup>76</sup> This evidence supports the idea that the lily reference in the York play, like that foremost, a spiritual purity of the heart, rather than a physical purity of the body.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 2:318.

<sup>74</sup> Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 2:318.

<sup>75</sup> Reames, 'The Cecelia Legend as Chaucer Inherited It and Retold It', 38-42. Saint Augustine's (354-430) treatise '*Holy Virginity*' was noted by Sherry Reames to bring together most of the ideas and symbols that came to underlie the plot of the *Passio*, although Augustine put forward the Virgin Mary as the example. The association of a lily with 'holy virginity' may have existed relatively early in art in a tenth century manuscript, the Benedictional of St. Ethelwold of Winchester, in the British Library. This includes an illumination of the Saxon queen Etheldreda, the foundress of Ely Cathedral, who had committed to a religious vocation, and had taken a vow of perpetual virginity. She is depicted holding in one hand what has been suggested to be a book of the Gospels and in the other a white lily (Eleanor Sinclair Rohde, *The Story of the Garden*, London: Medici Society, 1932, 34).

<sup>76</sup> The prayer is from Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, 1924, 216-17: no.122. it is found in over thirty-five manuscripts and received even greater circulation following its inclusion in the *Speculum Christiani*, a treatise of instruction which was widely popular (Brown, *Religious Lyrics*, 283). The full verse is quoted as the epigraph of this paper. The line from the lyric referred to here was cited in Ernest Tristram, *English Wall Painting of the Fourteenth Century*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955, 22. The wall-painting, which includes on the scroll the inscription, 'Leudedy [Lady] for thi Joyzes five led me the wey of clene lyve,' is discussed by both Tristram, *English Wall Painting*, 1955, 22; and E. T. Long, 'Medieval Wall Paintings of Oxfordshire Churches,' *Oxoniensia*, 37, 1972, 86-108, 92-93.

<sup>77</sup> Ernest Tristram highlighted a passage from the mid-fourteenth-century Middle English confessional prose *Aynebite of Inwyt* where the virtues of the Virgin were likened to a lily that has six leaves, and these included her purity of heart along with her purity of body (Tristram, *English Wall Painting*, 1955, 22).

A number of the early biblical commentators, in their interpretation of the first line of the second chapter of the Song of Songs, were of the view that any human soul, by following the example of Christ, could *become* a lily, but most especially the Virgin Mary, his beloved.<sup>78</sup> A representation of a scene from the Netherlandish block-book *Canticum Canticorum* ('Song of Songs'), first produced around 1465, appears to be based on the standard Annunciation image in having two figures confront each other and by including a lily plant growing from the ground between them (fig. 11).

One of those figures, the bride, who can be understood here to represent the Virgin Mary, identifies herself as a lily through an inscription on a banderole flying above her head with the line from the Song: 'I am the flower of the field, and the lily of the valleys'.<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile, the bridegroom, Christ, holds a single lily stem, which may act as an attribute but also parallels a common image of the annunciating angel. The inscription in the banderole above Christ is line 2:16 from the Song: 'My beloved to me, and I to him who feedeth among the lilies'.<sup>80</sup> Marilyn Lavin has suggested that in attributing this line to Christ, by the use of the word '*pascitur*' (feed) Christ alludes to his own 'lamb-like sacrifice'.<sup>81</sup> Through the eucharistic meal, in the Amalarian tradition of liturgical interpretation, we are incorporated into the mystical body: 'By the Eucharist Christ remains in us and we in him through His human incarnation.'<sup>82</sup>

Some commentators on the Song of Songs have taken the lily reference at the start of the second chapter to denote humility, and the humbling of oneself.<sup>83</sup> That interpretation perhaps particularly applying when the reference is taken in the context of the Gospels of

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<sup>78</sup> Littledale, *Song of Songs*, 56-61; Pope, *Song of Songs*, 370.

<sup>79</sup> The second edition of *Canticum Canticorum*, which exists in many printings, included a caption at the top of the first image, in the vernacular, confirming the identity of the *Sponsa* as being associated with the Virgin Mary: 'This (suite of prints) is the prefiguration of Mary the Mother of God, and is called in Latin *Canticum Canticorum*' (Translation from Lavin, *Canticum Canticorum*, 15 and 216)

<sup>80</sup> Lavin, *Canticum Canticorum*, 81. In the varied medieval commentary on the Song of Songs the lilies, as referred to in line 2:16, could be understood as pure souls, or as St. Bernard once said, our 'lilies of good works' (Littledale, *Song of Songs*, 105).

<sup>81</sup> Lavin, *Canticum Canticorum*, 81. The word 'lamb' in Greek means 'pure or pious', and as William Durand (c.1230-1296) said 'He Himself is the true Lamb, who through His sole purity, offered Himself as a sacrifice for us and redeemed us' (William Durand, *Rationale IV: On the Mass and Each Action Pertaining to it*. Translated by Timothy Thibodeau. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013, 457).

<sup>82</sup> O. B. Hardison, *Christian Rite & Christian Drama in the Middle Ages*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1969, 75.

<sup>83</sup> Littledale, *Song of Songs*, 60; citing cardinal Hailgrin in the thirteenth century. See also Pope, *Song of Songs*, 70. Peter Damian in the eleventh century said that this lily which is Christ, is born in the valleys, since God, 'dwells in the hearts of the humble' (Salvador-González, "'Flos campi et lilium convallium'", 91).

Mathew and Luke, which provide a meaning for lilies where they can symbolise the surrendering to divine providence: 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they labour not, neither do they spin. But I say to you, that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed as one of these' (Mt. 6:28-29; Lk. 12:27).<sup>84</sup> By giving themselves over to the hands of God, lilies are more finely arrayed than even Solomon in all his glory. Lilies thus symbolise 'the mystical surrender to God's grace.'<sup>85</sup> To not accept God's governance is to be 'of little faith' (Mt. 6:30; Lk. 12:28).<sup>86</sup>

There might then be a case for suggesting that in the iconography of the Annunciation a lily-plant may have been intended to simply represent a way of relating to God, a human response to divine truth with the trusting acceptance of the will of God. The Gospel account of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary begins with the angel Gabriel praising Mary for being full of grace and that God is with her (Lk. 1:28).<sup>87</sup> In a mid-fourteenth-century Italian translation of the Latin *Meditationes Vitae Christi* ('Meditations on the Life of Christ'), one of the most influential devotional narratives of the late Middle Ages, it is of note that an illustration of the initial announcement to Mary by the angel Gabriel, includes a vase with four lily stems, whereas it is not included in the illustration of her response.<sup>88</sup> Here, the lilies

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<sup>84</sup> Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Symbols*, 608-9. The lily is also seen as 'a symbol of confidence in providence' by Federico Revilla who relates it to Mathew 6:28 (Federico Revilla, *Diccionario de iconografía y simbología*, 1990, as cited by Salvador-González, "Flos de radice lesse", 204). The Gospel of Mathew (12:42) suggests that Christ is greater than Solomon, who was seen by early Christian theologians as a 'type' of Christ (Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:23). St. Bernard explained that Christ is a 'flower of the field, not of a garden; for the flowers of the field bloom without man's care' (Quote from Gray, *Themes and Images*, 105). St. Bernard says in a homily that Christ is 'a flower of the field, not of a garden; for flowers of the field bloom without man's care ...' (Gray, *Themes and Images*, 105). Bernard then goes on in the homily to make reference to the Virgin's womb, as if to suggest that his description of Christ serves as a metaphor for 'Mary's virginal divine motherhood' (Salvador-González, "Flos campi et lilium convallium", 91-92). Nevertheless, Bernard would also appear to be alluding to Song 2:1 in more general terms in relation to divine providence.

<sup>85</sup> Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Symbols*, 609: This contribution to Chevalier and Gheerbrant's dictionary, although not directly attributed as such in the English translation, is understood to come from Marie-Madeleine Davy (see Salvador-González, "Flos de radice lesse", 203).

<sup>86</sup> See J. C. Fenton, *Saint Mathew*, London: Penguin, 1963, 107.

<sup>87</sup> 'Hail, (you who are) full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women' (Lk. 1:28).

<sup>88</sup> Ragusa and Green, *Meditations*, 17-18; illustration nos.12 and 13. The Franciscan *Meditationes Vitae Christi* is generally believed to have been written around 1300, although the date, and its earliest form, is still subject to debate amongst scholars (Holy Flora and Peter Tóth, 'Introduction', in Holly Flora and Peter Tóth (eds.), *The 'Meditationes Vitae Christi' Reconsidered*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2021, 7-16: 8-11). The Italian translation of the Latin *Meditationes* discussed here is held in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (BnF. Ital. 115) and has been dated to the mid-fourteenth century (Sarah McNamer, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, 2018, cxxix). Most scholars now accept the difficulty of determining the extent to which the text influenced art, but the first examples of a clear case for a direct use of *Meditationes* for fourteenth-century artists are the three known illuminated manuscripts, of which the Italian translation in Paris is one. However, even these manuscript illuminations have been found

appear unlikely to be intended to denote Christ. That is because the dove, representing the holy spirit, is depicted flying towards Mary holding a branch, which was probably intended as the 'flos' of Isaiah 11:1 and to serve as a symbol of Christ's human descent.<sup>89</sup> The vase of lilies being included with Gabriel's initial announcement suggests symbolically, what the angel's words indicate literally, that Mary has already surrendered herself to God's grace. The text of *Meditationes* describes the life of the Virgin before the Incarnation in the Temple, where she had been presented at the age of three: 'When my father and mother left me in the temple I resolved in my heart to have God for my father... so that He might deign to give me His grace.' And as Mary adds; 'Truly you must know that grace does not descend to the soul except by prayer and corporal affliction.'<sup>90</sup> *Meditationes* then goes on to describe her life in the temple by quoting Jerome, who said that Mary was the 'most humble in humility' and the 'purist in purity,' while according to the *Golden Legend*, which cites St. Bernard, four kinds of grace shone in Mary's spirit.<sup>91</sup>

Further English evidence from the fourteenth century that might provide support this interpretation of lilies, comes from John Mirk's *Festial*, written in 1380. Mirk's *Festial* became the most widely read vernacular sermon collection of late-medieval England, appearing in twenty-four printed editions from 1483 to 1532.<sup>92</sup> In a sermon dealing with the Annunciation Mirk explains the presence of a pot and a lily between the Virgin Mary and the angel Gabriel in the Annunciation scene. He tells the story of a dispute between a Christian and a Jew concerning the credibility of the virgin birth, which is settled by the miraculous growth of a lily out of a wine-pot that sits between them.<sup>93</sup> The sermon draws a parallel between this

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to be not simple illustrations of the text and can follow local representational traditions (Sarah McNamer, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, 2018, cxxxiii).

<sup>89</sup> Ragusa and Green, *Meditations*, 406: It is suggested by Ragusa and Green that by using this unusual motif the artist might be trying to convey the idea of the Holy Trinity which is emphasised in the text. As has been noted earlier, translations of the Hebrew Bible, other than to Latin, can render what rises out of the root of Jesse as not a flower (*flos*) but, rather, a branch or fruit. Schiller also highlights that the shoot (*virga*) can act as an attribute and be placed in the hand of the Virgin, or her son, where it serves as the symbol of Christ's human descent (Schiller, *Iconography*, 1: 15-17). The concepts of the shoot and the flower can also merge in iconography when reference is being made to Isaiah's prophecy.

<sup>90</sup> Ragusa and Green, *Meditations*, 406; 10-12

<sup>91</sup> Ragusa and Green, *Meditations*, 406; 12-13. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 1:197-98: The grace than shone in Mary's spirit was said by Bernard to include the 'greatness of her faith,' and the 'martyrdom of her heart.'

<sup>92</sup> Judy Ann Ford, *John Mirk's Festial*, Cambridge: Brewer, 2006, 2 and 8-10: John Mirk was an Augustinian priest in Shropshire. The *Festial* has been labelled a homiletic 'best seller'.

<sup>93</sup> Hildburgh, 'An Alabaster Table', 228-30: The story was commonly cited by scholars in the twentieth century but apart from Hildburgh rarely was there any attempt to try and explain exactly how the analogy may have

dispute and Mary's questioning of the angel at the Annunciation on the manner of how she should conceive. In one manuscript version of the *Festial*, from the early fifteenth century, it says that Mary at her salutation conceived by 'syght' ('sight') with the implication of the story being that the lily between Mary and Gabriel at the Annunciation operated as a visible example of an intervention by God that served to convince Mary to agree to the divine plan.<sup>94</sup> However, in other manuscripts versions from the late fifteenth century, as well as in all the early printed versions, including Caxton's of 1483 and Wynkyn de Worde's of 1499, the sermon explains the presence of the lily-pot between Mary and Gabriel by giving the reason that Mary conceived by 'fayth' ('faith').<sup>95</sup> The meaning of the lily here is then quite different and it may possibly preserve an older understanding that alludes to the grace that already shone in Mary's spirit and better aligns with the emphasis given to Mary's faith in the virgin birth in the *Golden Legend*, the main source on which Mirk admits to drawing upon for his sermons.<sup>96</sup>

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worked. The story was mentioned by: Rushforth, *Medieval Christian Imagery*, 85; Anderson, *The Imagery of British Churches*, 102; and Kemp, 'The Annunciation', 430. In terms of the dispute in the story, Miri Rubin has pointed to how in the Middle Ages intellectual debate could itself turn to polemic, and in relation to the Incarnation, Anselm of Canterbury, amongst others, wrote of an imagined debate with a Jew (Miri Rubin, *Emotion and Devotion*, 2009, 54).

<sup>94</sup> The same emphasis on the need for proof is found in the Geneva Nativity play, when Mary declares that it is just as likely that 'this rod will blossom in the pot' as a Virgin will bear a child (Lynette Muir, *The Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 94).

<sup>95</sup> Hildburgh, 'An Alabaster Table', 228-30: Two manuscripts versions from the late fifteenth century, which contained the story, were consulted by Hildburgh, and both included 'faith.' It may be noted that all the printed editions, and two manuscripts, which may, or may not, be the ones Hildburgh consulted, are based on a revised version of the *Festial* that was created in the fifteenth century and designed to appeal to a more educated audience (Ford, *John Mirk's Festial*, 9). However, this is not to say that the later version was necessarily more corrupt as there is nothing to suggest that it does not preserve an earlier more authentic reading of the text as has been found elsewhere (see Sarah MacNamer, *Meditations*, 2018, xxiv). Hildburgh, himself, concluded that it is more likely that the early fifteenth-century manuscript copy contained an error, as the wording conception by 'sight' risked being taken literally, which would have raised issues for the church (see Hildburgh, 'An Alabaster Table', 230-1).

<sup>96</sup> In the *Golden Legend*, in the chapter on 'The Annunciation of the Lord', when discussing Mary's questioning of the angel, it makes a parallel where it contrasts Mary's response with that of Zechariah's to Gabriel over the announcement of the birth of John. Zechariah demanded a sign and was struck dumb because of his doubt (Lk. 1:12-17), whereas Mary's faith in the virgin birth is said to not be in question, and that she merely sought clarity on the method by which it was to come about (Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1: 196-202). Mirk indicated in a prologue to the *Festial*, which was included within a number of the manuscript versions, that he has; "drawn up this treatise based on the *Legenda Aurea* but with more added" (Ford, *John Mirk's Festial*, 11-13). However, as Susan Powell has noted, whilst the source of the *Festial* sermons is almost always the *Golden Legend*, Mirk is selective in the use of material (Powell, *John Mirk's 'Festial'*, 1: xxxii).

## **The Lily Crucifixion and Christ's Sacrificial Death**

Returning to the lily crucifixion, when this motif appears as part of a conflation of the iconography of the Annunciation with that of the crucifixion, the lilies might not only allude to the fact that Mary 'hast found grace with God' (Lk. 1:30), but also point to Christ's submission to death on the cross, with his own surrendering to divine providence. Christ displays mortal agony in the Garden of Gethsemane immediately prior to his arrest when he asks his Father to 'remove this chalice' whilst at the same time accepting the will of God (Lk. 22:42).<sup>97</sup> It is at this point, according to Luke, that Christ is consoled by an angel (Lk. 22:43), before his final submission on the cross (Lk. 23:46).

A more abstract variation on the lily crucifixion, not normally acknowledged, is found in St. George's Chapel in Windsor Castle (fig. 12).<sup>98</sup> In the late fifteenth-century woodwork of the choir is the carving of an Annunciation scene in three parts where the central carving is of a triple lobed vase with three lilies, which sits between the angel Gabriel on one side, and the Virgin Mary, to whom the dove of the holy spirit descends, on the other. In front of the stalks of the lilies is a bleeding heart.<sup>99</sup> This heart is encircled by, what has been said to be, a crown of thorns, but what may also have been intended to be understood as a victor's wreath.<sup>100</sup> The bleeding heart acts as an emblem of the Passion and suggests Christ's sacrifice on the cross, while the crown, or wreath, may symbolise his eternal victory over death.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> The cup or chalice is an Old Testament symbol for the anger and judgement of God (Schiller, *Iconography*, 2:48). The story is repeated in all the synoptic Gospels.

<sup>98</sup> Highlighted by Christopher Woodforde, *The Norwich School of Glass-Painting in the Fifteenth century*, London: Oxford University Press, 1950, 93.

<sup>99</sup> Christopher Woodforde drew a possible parallel between this carving of the Annunciation with a bleeding heart and an emblem of the sorrows of the Virgin Mary where a heart pierced by a sword can have wings that reference the angel of the Annunciation (Woodforde, *The Norwich School of Glass-Painting*, 93; cites Ethelbert Horne, 'A Wings, Sword and Heart Badge,' in *The Antiquaries Journal*, Vol. 11, 1931, 286-8).

<sup>100</sup> The bleeding heart in the Windsor Annunciation has been interpreted as being within a crown of thorns (M.R James, *St. George's Chapel, Windsor: The Woodwork of the Choir*, Windsor: St. George's Chapel, 1933; pages unnumbered). For an example of a wounded heart within a crown of thorns see Schiller, *Iconography*, 2: 195, fig. 668 (Buxheim Altar), and Anderson, *The Imagery of British Churches*, 59-61, Plate 12 (North Cadbury bench end). At Windsor the crown may have been intended not only to suggest suffering but also the victor's wreath, which was at one time a common feature the crucifixion image (see Hildburgh, 'A Medieval Bronze Pectoral Cross', 81; Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:12; and 2:107, 122).

<sup>101</sup> On the wounded heart as an emblem of the Passion see Schiller, *Iconography*, 2: 194-95.

Following the line of argument put forward in this paper the lily flowers could be seen as representing a trusting acceptance of the grace of God, whose presence is symbolised by a hand appearing in a cloud immediately to the left of the flowers. In medieval art the hand of God could sometimes feature in representations of both the Annunciation and the crucifixion, as well as in depictions of the agony in the Garden episode.<sup>102</sup> When used in association with the crucified Christ it usually signified God's acceptance of Christ's sacrificial death, which was probably also the intention behind the hand of God in this variant of the lily crucifixion.<sup>103</sup> Here, on the other side of the flowers, is a Lamb on a book, which sits above a serpent acting as a reference to the Fall.<sup>104</sup> The Lamb, as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice, serving as an allusion to the redemption of humankind: 'Behold the Lamb of God. Behold him who taketh away the sin of the world' (Jn. 1:29).<sup>105</sup> The subject of Christ's sacrificial death can also be associated with an iconographic motif known as the 'Throne of Grace.'

In medieval northern European art, after emerging in the twelfth century, the Throne of Grace developed as a form of Trinity in a vertical linear arrangement, with Christ on the cross, and became quite common in the fourteenth and fifteenth century.<sup>106</sup> It was originally based upon the image of the crucifixion where the hand of God had been included to indicate God's acceptance of Christ's sacrifice. Something similar might be suggested by the lily crucifixion on the Sawston Hall altar frontal where God the Father is represented as a half-length figure emerging from a cloud directly above the crucifixion giving his blessing as

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<sup>102</sup> The hand of God, coming from above, appears in a number of contexts in early Christian art. It was used early on in Annunciation scenes but from the thirteenth century, God the Father was usually portrayed by a half-length figure that might be depicted blessing, which acted as a direct reference to the activity of the Trinity in the Incarnation (Schiller, *Iconography*, 1: 45-46). The hand of God appeared in images of the crucified Christ in the tenth and eleventh centuries (Schiller, *Iconography*, 2:122; Hildburgh, 'A Medieval Bronze Pectoral Cross', 80-1), and featured in representations of the agony in the Garden episode, right through the medieval period, including in northern Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (see Schiller, *Iconography*, 2:48-51). The fourteenth-century *Dream of the Virgin*, attributed to Simone dei Crocifissi, that has already been discussed features a hand that descends from a cloud at the base of the cross to grasp Adam's hand, anticipating the imagery associated with the so called 'Living Cross' that developed in northern and central Europe from 1400, which was noted earlier (see Franklin, 2015, 221).

<sup>103</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 2: 49 and 122-23

<sup>104</sup> See earlier discussion on the serpent; and see Schiller, *Iconography*, 2: 105 and 113.

<sup>105</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1: 8, 12; 2: 117-21: The lamb on the book may also reference the Apocalyptic Lamb and Book in Revelation 5, where the Book can also signify God's programme of salvation. The Lamb of God as a symbol of Christ's sacrificial death can occasionally be depicted in art wearing a victor's wreath.

<sup>106</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 2: 122-4: The 'Throne of Grace' was the name given to this motif in Germany in the nineteenth century. Also see Hildburgh, 'A Medieval Bronze Pectoral Cross', 84-87. A 'throne of grace' is mentioned in Hebrews 4:16, but Francis Cheetham suggests that only a type of Trinity which includes a representation of the souls of the saved refers to this specific 'throne of grace' (Francis Cheetham, *English Medieval Alabasters*, Woodbridge; the Boydell Press, 2nd ed. 2005, 296: type B).

acceptance of the sacrifice.<sup>107</sup> The fact that this image with its emphasis on sacrifice was once on a vestment, quite possibly the back of a chasuble, would connect it with the Mass, and the Eucharistic rite specifically, much like the Throne of Grace which can be found upon liturgical items such as paten.<sup>108</sup> The late fifteenth-century lily crucifixion from a church screen at Great Barton (Suffolk), which was mentioned earlier, has a very similar vertical arrangement to that on the Sawston Hall altar frontal, but here this iconographic form is located off-centre to the side of the Virgin Mary, who instead occupies the central axis, enthroned under a circular canopy with gathered curtains that might here serve to imbue the scene with eucharistic overtones, by suggesting the cloth coverings of the Host in hanging tabernacles (fig. 13).<sup>109</sup>

There are also two lily crucifixions where the Annunciation is very clearly conflated with what is a Trinity image, with God the Father seated on what is presumably his throne; one from the start of the fifteenth century in alabaster (fig. 14), and one from the start of the sixteenth century on the rood screen in the church of St. Andrew in Kenn, Devon, which was first given the descriptive title of the 'Holy Trinity and the Annunciation' at the end of the nineteenth century (see fig. 10).<sup>110</sup> Here, the crucifixion on the lily becomes the bridging

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<sup>107</sup> 'God revealed himself in the sacrament above both ark and altar' (Schiller, *Iconography*, 2:123). In English alabasters of the Trinity that are in a vertical arrangement God the Father is usually shown with his hands in blessing (Cheetham, *English Medieval Alabasters*, cat. nos.224, 225, 226, 228, 229, 230, 232, 234, and 235), as he sometime is in representations of the Trinity that are found elsewhere (Schiller, *Iconography*, 2: Fig. 414). In the English alabaster scenes the Holy Spirit may not have always been depicted (Cheetham, *English Medieval Alabasters*, 296). Whilst the motif of a dove, representing the Holy Spirit, descending towards a figure of the Virgin Mary once existed on a piece of textile used in the Sawston Hall altar frontal it is uncertain if this would originally have been seen with the Lily Crucifixion and even came from the same vestment (Brooks, *et al*, 'Fragments of Faith', 292-97).

<sup>108</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 2: 123.

<sup>109</sup> The circular canopy in which the Virgin is enthroned can be seen in the context of a tradition in the West in the fourteenth and fifteenth century of depicting Mary in a circular pavilion with the flaps open. She most often holds the infant Christ, such as on the fourteenth century façade of Orvieto Cathedral (Marilyn Lavin, *Piero della Francesca*, 197), or in the well-known *Medici Madonna* by Rogier van der Weyden that dates to 1460-64. Contemporary with Rogier's *Medici Madonna* is the *Madonna del Parto* by Piero della Francesca, where the opening of the tent reveals the pregnant Virgin. This latter two examples only just pre-dating the painted panel on the Great Barton church screen. The pavilion in Rogier's *Medici Madonna* has been recognised by scholars as a literal representation of the tabernacle and having eucharistic significance (Lane, *The Altar and the Altarpiece*, 32; Dirk de Vos, *Rogier van der Wyden*, 31). The painted panel on the Great Barton church screen may not depict the angel Gabriel, but as noted earlier, it does include a scroll with an inscription of the Virgin Mary's response to the angelic salutation at the Annunciation: 'Ecce ancilla do[mini]' (Lk. 1:38). This appears along with other iconographic elements that might be associated with the Annunciation, the vase of lilies, the half-figure God the Father, and the holy spirit in the form of a dove. However, rather than simply depicting a traditional Annunciation scene, as with the Sawston Hall altar frontal the focus here may be more on Christ's sacrificial death with God the Father, who is directly above the lily crucifixion, indicating his acceptance of the sacrifice by his blessing.

<sup>110</sup> For the alabaster example see Hildburgh, 'An Alabaster Table', 203-5; and Francis Cheetham, 167 (cat no.94). The one at Kenn, Devon, is first recorded as 'The Holy Trinity and the Annunciation' by Charles Keyser, 'On the



element that links the two subjects into one, and in doing so unites heaven and earth.<sup>111</sup> These representations have the Trinity in a vertical linear arrangement, similar to that found in the Throne of Grace.

The Throne of Grace and the crucifixion are, of course, not the only subjects in western art to have an association with Christ's sacrificial death. After 1300, the Annunciation image itself might make this link. Representations of the Annunciation could sometimes express a coming together of two ideas based on Franciscan theology, one which stressed the fact that the Trinity was the active force that brought about the incarnation, and the other that the only reason for the incarnation was to bring about the redemption of humanity.<sup>112</sup> Christ's earthly mission of redeeming sacrifice is suggested by the Annunciation motif of the descending Christ-child, which became popular in northern Europe from the end of the fourteenth century, when Christ might bear the cross over his shoulder in his descent to earth.<sup>113</sup>

The idea of the persons of the Trinity deliberating on the redemption arose relatively early on in Christianity, including a tradition for seeing the plan of salvation as being a mutual one shared by God and his son.<sup>114</sup> That tradition became more established in the twelfth

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Panel Paintings of Saints on the Devonshire Screens,' in *Archaeologia*, vol. 56, 1, London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 1898, 183-222; 192 and 215, but is better described by Gordon McNeil Rushforth, 'A Lily-Crucifix and an Unidentified Saint in Kenn Church, Devon,' *Antiquaries Journal*, 7, 1927, 72-3. Hildburgh also noted that the presence of a Trinity in conjunction with an Annunciation and lily crucifixion on the sides of the alabaster tomb chest in St. Mary's Church, Nottingham, but here, albeit they are adjacent, the Trinity is presented separately on the end of the tomb (Hildburgh, 'An Alabaster Table', 209).

<sup>111</sup> Cheetham, *English Medieval Alabasters*, cat. no.94, 167: The alabaster panel 'is divided by a stepped cloud-like ledge into two sections.'

<sup>112</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:45 see also 9-10.

<sup>113</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:45-6; Robb, 'The Iconography of the Annunciation', 523-25 (appendix). A northern German example of the descending Christ-child with cross is the Annunciation panel on the Passion altar from Netze discussed earlier in this paper in relation to the Tree of Jesse. For English examples of this motif, which are found in a variety of media dating to the fifteenth century, see Kemp, 'The Annunciation', 433-34, 440 n.21; and in English Alabaster see Cheetham, *English Medieval Alabasters*, 174: cat. no. 101. On the subject more generally also see Hirn, *The Sacred Shrine*, 314-15 and 527 n.54. In early representations of the Annunciation a small cross might also occasionally appear at the end of the announcing angel's wand (Hildburgh, 'An Alabaster Table', 224-5). While in later representations even the architecture of the portico, in which Mary stands, might describe a cross such as in Piero della Francesca's fresco cycle of the 'Legend of the True Cross' in San Francesco in Arezzo (Verdon, *Mary In Western Art*, 105). The cross can even sometimes be suggested by the form of the lily plant itself, as in the early fifteenth-century glazing at Holy Trinity Church, Poyning (West Sussex), where the lily-plant with three heads in this case is clearly cross-shaped.

<sup>114</sup> The idea appears to stem from Pope Leo I in the fifth century (Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:10; see also Timothy Verdon, *Picturing Mary: Woman, Mother, Idea*, in T. Verdon et al (eds), *Picturing Mary: Woman, Mother, Idea*, New York: Scala Arts, 2014, 11-26; 16). In the Bible the Epistle to the Hebrews makes clear that Christ understood his sacrifice from the moment he came into the world (Heb. 10:5-10).

century when Bernard of Clairvaux, in one of his sermons, described Christ's willingness to help redeem humanity.<sup>115</sup> However, according to Gertrud Schiller, the idea of the mutual plan only assumed importance in western art towards the end of the medieval period after a vision of the deliberation of the Trinity described by Mechthild von Magdeburg (c.1207-c.1282) in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*.<sup>116</sup> Mechthild speaks of the 'hot fire of the Godhead' and the 'flowing fire of God's love,' where the image of flowing is not only used of God's love, but also of his grace.<sup>117</sup> The lily crucifixion represented at the church of St. Andrew in Kenn may be based on Mechthild's vision, as it includes light flowing from the head of the Father (fig. 15), and there is evidence of a strong association between the imagery on the rood screen at Kenn and continental women mystics.<sup>118</sup> In her vision Mechthild sees the Father respond to his son, after Christ's offer to redeem humanity, by saying: 'But you, Son, must take your Cross upon yourself.'<sup>119</sup> In this context Christ crucified upon a lily in the Kenn example might express, rather poetically, Christ's act of self-sacrifice where the lily connotes his receptive self-surrender.<sup>120</sup> Even the whole idea of Christ crucified on a living cross may have come from an intention to represent Christ's willingness to suffer.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1: 10-11: In the sermon Bernard gives an allegorical interpretation of Psalm 85:11. He starts out with the four virtues who appeal to Christ to settle their differences over how to behave towards humanity. Christ decides that the death of an innocent for the sake of humanity would resolve the matter, and failing to find an innocent he offers himself for the sacrifice. A rare example in English alabaster of the persons of the Trinity deliberating on the redemption, which is from the late fifteenth century, was described by Francis Cheetham as 'The Incarnation with the Parliament of Heaven.' This includes God the Father at the top of the panel, seated holding an orb, next to a personified Holy Spirit holding a book, and includes representations of the 'Four Daughters of God,' as personifications of the four virtues (Cheetham, *English Medieval Alabasters*, 175: cat.no. 102). On the four virtues also see the discussion on the 'Lily of Mercy' in Catherine Oakes, *Ora Pro Nobis*, 92-94.

<sup>116</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:10-11.

<sup>117</sup> Oliver Davies 'Transformational Processes in the Work of Julian of Norwich and Mechthild of Magdeburg,' in M. Glasscoe (ed.), in *the Medieval Mystical Tradition; Exeter Symposium V*, Cambridge: Brewer, 1992, 39-52; 48-9.

<sup>118</sup> David Griffith, 'The Reception of Continental Women Mystics,' in E. A. Jones (ed), in *the Medieval Mystical tradition; Exeter Symposium VII*, Cambridge: Brewer, 2004, 97-118; 112-116: The church of St. Andrew in Kenn contains the only known surviving depiction of St. Bridget of Sweden in the South West of England.

<sup>119</sup> Schiller, *Iconography*, 1:11.

<sup>120</sup> As an example of Christ's self-sacrifice Gertrud Schiller cites an illustration from the Netherlands of the persons of the Trinity deliberating on the redemption in a Book of Hours of Catherine of Cleves (c.1420-30), where the basic message of the illustration, in which Christ receives from his Father a little cross in his hand, is Christ's acceptance of divine will (Schiller, *Iconography*, 1: 11 and fig.12).

<sup>121</sup> Schiller suggests that the image of the tree-cross, which is often associated with the Tree of Life, may be based on the rose-tree, or rose-bush, for the rose is one of the flowers of Paradise, and in the mysticism of the Passion symbolises Christ's willingness to suffer (Schiller, *Iconography*, 2:135).

## Conclusion

The lily crucifixion motif, although peculiar to Britain, is an expression of the cross as a living being and as such part of a wider tradition in Christian art, where the 'tree-cross' alludes to the general concept of redemption. The motif draws upon an image of the Tree of Life that associates Christ's body on the cross with organic growth, and specifically a life force, in a way that emphasises rebirth and renewal in the dynamic between life and death.<sup>122</sup> The crucified Christ, as the Tree of Life of the new dispensation, like the Tree of Jesse, can be seen as a tree of salvation.<sup>123</sup> However, rather than focusing on Christ's actual suffering on the cross, which from the thirteenth century had become the defining way to depict his Passion, the motif instead points to Christ's willingness to suffer symbolised by the lily.<sup>124</sup> A receptive self-surrender to divine providence, a bridal temperament, which, as Edmee Kingsmill has said, 'desires not so much to act as to be *acted in*.'<sup>125</sup> A way of relating to God for which the Virgin Mary was an exemplar.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Gerhart Ladner observed that from early-on in Christianity the Tree of Life was identified with both, "the Cross and the Crucified Christ" (Ladner, 'Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism', 256). On the literary tradition in England for the image of Christ's body as 'plant, growth, or life force', in the second half of the fourteenth century, see Cervone, *Poetics of Incarnation*, 5. As Douglas Gray highlighted, in the medieval English lyric the incarnation could be linked to the renewal of nature and the rebirth of fertility (Gray, *Themes and Images*, 105).

<sup>123</sup> Ladner, 'Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism', 257; Watson, *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse*, 52; Green, *Tree of Jesse Iconography*, 14.

<sup>124</sup> Anne Derbes, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 7-11 and 138; Cervone, *Poetics of Incarnation*, 5.

<sup>125</sup> Edmee Kingsmill, *Song of Songs*, 7.

<sup>126</sup> From the twelfth to the sixteenth century, while the crucifixion continued to dominate devotion to Christ in his suffering and Mary in her grief, nnunciation offered an alternative subject for imaginative prayer (see Laura Saetveit Miles, *The Virgin Mary's Book at the Annunciation*, Cambridge: Brewer, 2020, 5).

FIGURES



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

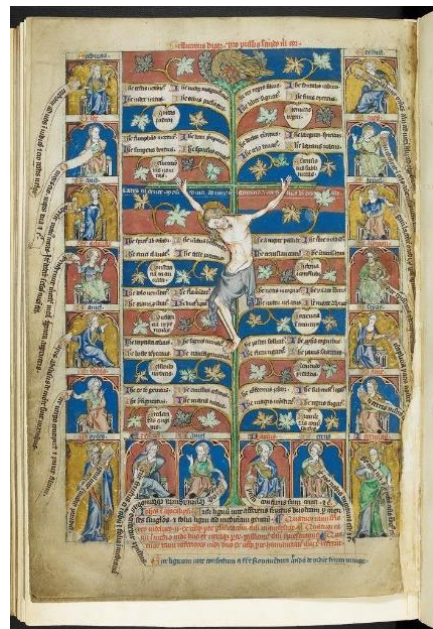


Fig. 4

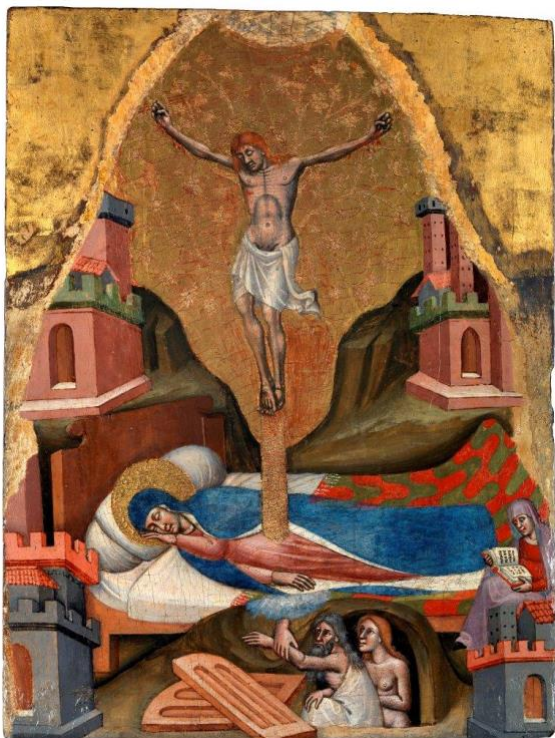


Fig. 5



Fig. 6

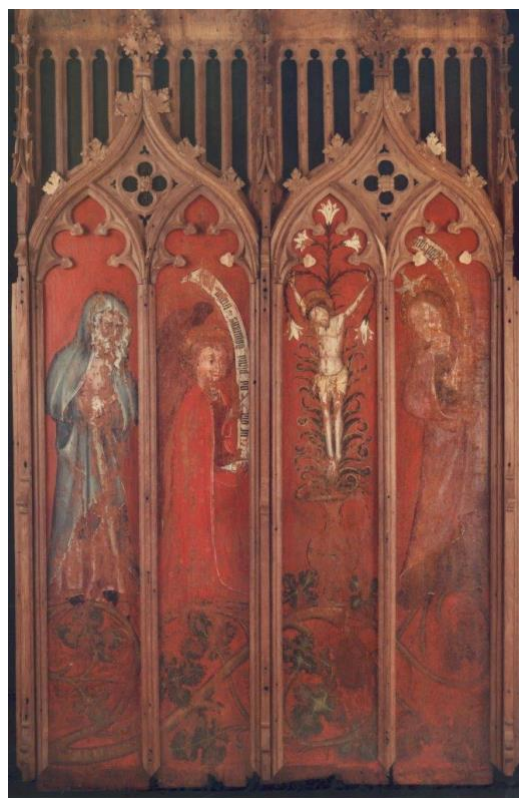


Fig. 7

*The lily among thorns*



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 9 (detail)

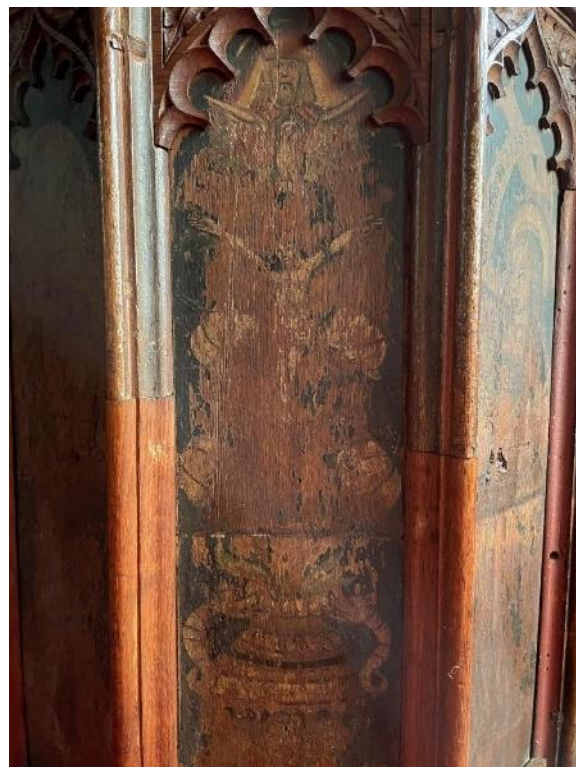


Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

*The lily among thorns*



Fig. 13

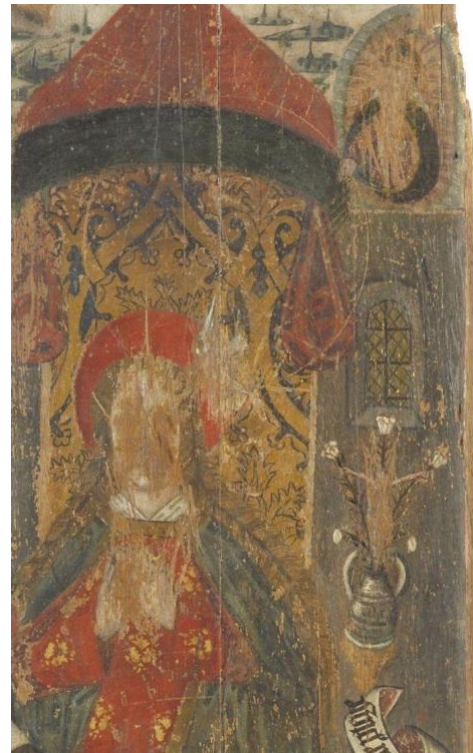


Fig. 13 (detail)



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



## FIGURES LIST

**Fig. 1:** St. Helen's Abingdon, Oxfordshire, painted ceiling, 1390s: Lily Crucifix panel from the east end of the north side of the Lady Chapel *Tree of Jesse* painted ceiling (Photograph: Anthony Burrett, with permission of St. Helen's Church).

**Fig.2:** All Saints, Godshill, Isle of Wight, wall painting, late fourteenth century: Lily Crucifix (Photograph: © author).

**Fig. 3:** English altar frontal, late fifteenth century (later reworked): silk velvet with silk, gold and silver thread. Detail of Lily Crucifix (© Faith Museum, Bishop Auckland).

**Fig. 4:** The De Lisle Psalter of Robert (c.1308-c.1340): The Tree of Life. Courtesy of the British Library Board (MS Arundel 83 II fol.125v).

**Fig. 5:** *The Dream of the Virgin* (c.1365–1380) by Simone dei Crocifissi © The Society of Antiquaries of London.

**Fig. 6:** *Annunciation* from a winged altarpiece, left panel, c.1370, former Cistercian convent Marienthal, Netze, Waldeck (INTERFOTO Alamy Stock Photo).

**Fig. 7:** St. Helen's Abingdon, Oxfordshire, painted ceiling, 1390s: Saint Joseph, the archangel Gabriel, the Lily Crucifix, and the Virgin Mary, panels from the east end of the north side of the Lady Chapel *Tree of Jesse* painted ceiling (Photograph: Anthony Burrett, with permission of St. Helen's Church).

**Fig. 8:** Chasuble produced in Flanders, fifteenth century: The *Tree of Jesse* embroidered onto the cross. Musée de Cluny (Paris): Cl. 23269. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (musée de Cluny - musée national du Moyen Âge) / Gérard Blot.

**Fig. 9:** Chasuble (English), fifteenth century: Lily Crucifix (back) and detail of the lily emerging from the cross (With permission of Campion Hall, Oxford).

**Fig 10:** St. Andrew's Kenn, Devon, rood screen dado panels, c. 1500-30: *Holy Trinity and the Annunciation*, detail of the Lily Crucifix (Photograph: © author).

**Fig 11:** *Canticum Canticorum* (second edition), Netherlands c.1470 (British Library digital collections IC.47, Licence: <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0>)

**Fig 12:** St. George's Chapel, Windsor, Quire woodwork, desk front, c.1480: *Annunciation*, detail of the vase of lilies with bleeding heart (© With permission of the Dean and Canons of Windsor).

**Fig 13:** 'The Annunciation' and detail of Lily Crucifix, painted panel from a church screen in Holy Innocents, Great Barton, Suffolk, 1470-90 (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

*The lily among thorns*

**Fig 14:** *Annunciation with Trinity*, carved, painted and gilt alabaster panel, English, c.1400 (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

**Fig 15:** St. Andrew's Kenn, Devon, rood screen dado panels, c. 1500-30: *Holy Trinity and the Annunciation*, Lily Crucifix detail (Photograph: © author).