

Kissing the Kiss of Betrayal: A Study of Veneration in the Berners' Book of Hours

Since the days of the early Church, Catholics have fostered intense devotion to God and the saints. Some expressed their spiritual dedication in verbal prayers, but for others, physical veneration was their chief way of connecting with the sacred. In *The Berners Hours*, a fifteenth-century book of hours housed in Goucher College's Special Collections, signs of physical veneration are numerous. In this paper, I aim to show that by examining patterns of veneration in *The Berners Hours*, we can draw conclusions about the devotional practices of its owners. To accomplish this, I will look at the illuminated miniatures in *The Berners Hours* that have been most frequently venerated. While we can't know exactly why certain images were used more than others, the patterns of veneration can give us valuable clues about the lives of medieval, Renaissance, and early modern Christians.

Books of Hours and Veneration Practices in the Middle Ages

The Berners Hours is made up of 237 parchment leaves, rich Gothic text, and numerous illustrative elements. The book has nine full-page illuminations, as well as twenty-one historiated initials. It was created in the late fifteenth century, in the shop of Willem Vrelant, a prominent Burgundian illuminator. It was made for the use of Sarum, the rite used at Salisbury Cathedral in England, suggesting that it was designed specifically for an English client. It was owned by an Englishman named William Berners in the early sixteenth century, who recorded the birthdates of his four children in the book's calendar.

The Berners Hours also made its way to France, an inscription on one of its leaves places it in Friancourt. The book returned to England and was rebound sometime in the eighteenth century.

Books of hours were produced in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as private devotional items for Catholics. They were extremely popular among the laity, as Elizabeth Morris, senior manuscript curator at the J. Paul Getty Museum, notes in her study of Denise Poncher's book of hours: "Because no other type of manuscript was created in greater quantity in the late Middle Ages, the book of hours has come to be called the medieval best seller." Books of hours typically featured intercessory prayers, a calendar that included saints' feast days, psalms, and other items used for private worship. Usually, books of hours were small, made to be held and transported easily.

Books of hours with light use are considered more valuable and are highly sought after by collectors. Many have been cut up, with the best illuminations being sold for hefty prices. Henry Walters, a wealthy philanthropist and art collector, purchased around two hundred books of hours, many of which are now in the possession of the Walters Art Museum. However, Walters tended to be interested in manuscripts that were in pristine condition or had historical significance, and the books he collected: "reveal Walters's taste for fine printing, illustration, and binding." *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*, which share similar thematic imagery to *The Berners Hours*, show signs of wear in the calendar section, in the marginalia, and along the edges of the page, but the grisaille illuminations are mostly untouched (See Fig. 1).

What makes *The Berners Hours* so unique is that it carries the legacy of extensive use. The pages have been turned and touched hundreds of times, and many of the illuminations and historiated initials show signs of touching and kissing. Some have even been worn away from excessive veneration.

Kissing had social and religious significance in the Middle Ages. In the feudalist ceremony of homage, a vassal's promise to serve a lord in exchange for protection and land use was sealed with a kiss. This gesture represented the vassal's deference and the lord's acceptance of the homage. In Catholicism, a priest would kiss the altar's relic stone, as well as gospel books and missals, in a show of reverence and surrender to the Word of God. Kathryn Rudy notes that priests' ritualistic kissing of the canon page of missals caused the images to degrade over time, but also left physical evidence of their devotion to God: "Traces of priests' kisses appear in the form of smears, weakened parchment, and deposited facial grease, which all reveal the intimate interactions between book and user." Rudy argues that the laity witnessed these acts of veneration by authority figures and clergy, and adopted them in their own private prayer life. The osculation of similar pages and thematic elements across books of hours and other prayer books suggests that there may have been a convention among the laity for image veneration.

In *The Berners Hours*, some of the images most damaged from worship are the full-page miniatures of Saint Margaret of Antioch, Saint Christopher, and Saint George (See Figs. 2, 3, and 4). A closer look at these saints' vitae and their patronage may give us some clarity as to why they came to be so venerated.

Saint Margaret of Antioch's vita tells us that she converted to Christianity in her youth and was imprisoned for practicing her faith, and for refusing to marry the pagan governor of Antioch. While in prison, the devil appeared as a dragon and attempted to eat her, but Margaret carried a cross with her, which miraculously allowed her to burst out from the dragon's stomach, unscathed. She was then martyred by beheading. Margaret became the patron saint of childbirth, perhaps because of the visceral imagery of her exploding out of the dragon's insides without harm. We know that William Berners recorded the births of three sons and a daughter, and he may have sought Margaret's intercession during his wife's pregnancies and labors. His wife may have also used the book and venerated the image of Saint Margaret.

Saint Christopher's vita describes him as a giant, originally called Offero or Reprobus, who vowed only to serve the most powerful master. He assumed this to be the devil, but was quickly dissuaded from this belief when he saw the devil flee from a cross in fear. Deciding to become a Christian, Offero was advised by a hermit to carry travelers across a stream as an act of service and penance. One day, Offero carried a small child across the river but found that the child became heavier and heavier as they traveled. The child revealed that he was in fact Jesus, and that Offero had borne the weight of the world on his shoulders. He caused Offero's staff to bloom with lilies and then vanished. From then on, Offero was known as Christopher, or "Christ-Bearer." Christopher was later martyred for his faith.

Saint Christopher was a very popular saint and the patron of travelers, and any one of the owners of *The Berners Hours* may have turned to him for protection, whether they were

traveling for short distances or great journeys. William Berners may have traveled to Burgundy during his life, as *The Berners Hours* was commissioned and made there. The book moved from England to France and then back to England, which suggests that at least one of its owners engaged in voyages across the English Channel. Christopher was also invoked against sudden death, and images of him were often inscribed with: "Whoever shall behold the image of St. Christopher shall not faint or fall on that day." William Berners' son John died shortly after his birth - his birth and death date are both recorded on October 6 - and this event may have inspired Berners to venerate the image, perhaps in grief over his son's sudden passing.

Saint George was a soldier, and an early church martyr from Lydda, modern-day Israel. There are numerous stories ascribed to him, the most famous being his slaying of a dragon. The story goes that a dragon had been ravaging a city in Libya, and the only way to appease it was by offering it a human victim. Saint George happened to pass by the city and found a young woman who was to be sacrificed to the dragon. Determined to rescue her, George lay in wait to defeat the dragon. Once the monster approached, George stabbed it with his spear. He then used the woman's girdle to capture it, led it into the city, and cut off its head.

Saint George's birth in the Holy Land and knightly actions made him popular in the Crusades, which likely led to his adoption as England's patron saint. His feast day of April 23 was treated as a holiday in England, and he was highly venerated and celebrated as a national hero. The veneration of the Saint George illumination may have been an act of

patriotism performed by William Berners or another English owner throughout the years, with particular zeal on George's feast day.

The Strange Case of Judas Iscariot

The most curious instance of veneration in *The Berners Hours* appears not on a saint's illumination, but on an image of a grave sinner. The face of Judas Iscariot in the "Kiss of Betrayal" miniature on fol. 48v has been osculated numerous times, so much so that Judas' features have worn away. Even more curious is that the face of Jesus Christ remains intact (see Figs. 5 and 6). It seems strange that a Catholic would venerate the face of such a sinister figure. There certainly could be no confusion about Judas' role as an evildoer who had put himself outside the Church. Each of the gospel writers labels him as a traitor. In the gospel of John, Judas is also chastised for thievery. However, some positive, or at least nuanced, interpretations of Judas' role in the Passion saga exist, and these interpretations may explain the veneration in *The Berners Hours*.

An early work that shed a different light on Judas was the *Gospel of Judas*, a piece of New Testament Apocrypha, likely written in the second century by followers of Gnosticism. Gnosticism is a term used to describe a philosophical movement that emerged in the first and second centuries that blended Christian ideas of Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Savior, and Greco-Roman ideas of polytheism. Gnostics generally believed a lesser god ruled over the earth and because of this, the material world contained lesser qualities. However, a supreme deity of order and reason also existed, far more powerful and wise than the lesser

god, inhabiting a spiritual realm separate from the lesser earth. This supreme deity sent Jesus to awaken knowledge (Gnosis) of the spiritual otherworld.

The *Gospel of Judas* posits that Judas, rather than betrayer, was actually the closest companion of Jesus and shared a special bond with Him. Because of this, Jesus confided in Judas about His intentions to die and personally designated Judas as the disciple to give Him over to the authorities. In this light, rather than being a traitor, Judas is an instrument in fulfilling the supreme deity's plans for salvation and even seems an obedient servant, making the necessary sacrifice to free Jesus from His earthly body and the lesser world. Irenaeus, an early Christian theologian, was aware of the *Gospel of Judas*, and addressed it in his book *Against Heresies*, written around 180. Irenaeus attributed the gospel's authorship to Cainites, a subset of Gnostics who venerated Cain, and condemned the text as heretical:

Others again declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above, and acknowledge that Esau, Korah, the Sodomites, and all such persons, are related to themselves. On this account, they add, they have been assailed by the Creator, yet no one of them has suffered injury. For Sophia was in the habit of carrying off that which belonged to her from them to herself. They declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things, and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal; by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the Gospel of Judas.

The *Gospel of Judas* was lost at some point, and not rediscovered until the twentieth century. It was finally translated into English in 2006 by National Geographic. It is difficult to know how prominent the Gospel of Judas would have been to medieval folk, and the widespread condemnation of the text from Church leaders makes it somewhat doubtful that this text was influential to the owners of *The Berners Hours*.

The *Navigatio Brendani* or *Voyage of Saint Brendan* was a medieval *immram*, a type of Irish sea voyage story, that featured a more nuanced assessment of Judas' character. In the story, Saint Brendan of Ireland and his companions are sailing for the Promised Land, when they come across Judas on a rock in the middle of the sea. Judas tells the saint that he receives brief respites from the tortures of hell on certain days thanks to the compassion of God and in honor of Jesus' resurrection. The traitor explains that once his time of rest is completed, demons appear to take him back to hell. Judas also has a few items with him that offer him comfort, commemorating some of the good deeds he carried out during his life. He begs for Brendan's intercession, which Brendan gives, staving off the demons and giving Judas an additional day of rest.

John D. Anderson writes of the enduring legacy of the *Voyage of Saint Brendan*, characterizing it as an exciting medieval success story, where a man of God reaches the promised land of the saints by remaining steadfast to his faith. The story was widely produced across Europe: "The popular story of the Atlantic sea voyage of Brendan is extant in over 120 manuscripts covering a 600-year period, from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries." It seems possible that the owners of *The Berners Hours* would have been familiar with this story. The thought of Judas being spared eternal punishment despite his

heinous crimes may have instilled greater faith in God's mercy in the reader. However, this does not seem to be a compelling explanation for kissing an image of Judas, as the *Voyage of Saint Brendan* does not shy away from Judas' treacherous actions or his inevitable return to hell.

Another devotion offers a better justification for the veneration of the "Kiss of Betrayal" miniature. Intense fervor for the Passion of Christ was prevalent in the Middle Ages. This devotion began as a celebration of the salvation of man, but scholars argue that by the late Middle Ages, the focus had shifted to the pain of Christ's Passion. The victory of the Cross was still of the utmost significance, but Catholics had become captivated by the wounds and suffering of Jesus. Imagery that captured this pain was sought to aid in their prayer, as Salvador Ryan notes in "The *Arma Christi* in Medieval and Early Modern Ireland." He writes: "a growing devotional emphasis on contemplating the mysteries of Christ's Passion and death in an affective manner – in Angela Lucas' words, to 'feel the pain and see the blood' – increased the need for suitable images on which to meditate."

A series of images and symbols were cultivated to accompany this type of meditation. Especially popular were the *Arma Christi*, or the Instruments of the Passion. These instruments were the objects used to torture and kill Jesus, such as the Cross, the Crown of Thorns, and the nails that pierced Christ's hands and feet. Many manuscripts were produced with images of the Instruments, and poems were written to commemorate their importance. Over a dozen large "rolls" with a devotional poem called "O Vernicle" and accompanying images of the *Arma Christi* were produced in England towards the end of the fourteenth century. Rossell Hope Robbins theorized that these rolls were for public use,

either displayed or used by a priest to instruct the laity. Other historians argue that these rolls were instead intended for private devotion: "...it is more likely that the rolls were intended for individual devotion. As the user wound through the manuscript, the climatic events of salvation history were unrolled before his or her very eyes, instrument by bloody instrument." In any case, Catholics would have been familiar with the Instruments of the Passion, whether by exposure in a church setting or at home, and would have venerated them as part of the Redemptive mystery.

Included among these instruments were the thirty pieces of silver that Judas exchanged for the life of Jesus, which were depicted in the form of a money bag, a hand filled with money, or a row of coins (See Figs. 7 and 8). In "The *Arma Christi* and the Ethics of Reckoning," Martha Rust argues that the coins in the *Arma Christi* served a dual purpose: to remind and warn the faithful of Judas' greed and to guard them against his chief sins. She writes: "The stanza in 'O Vernicle' devoted to Judas' thirty pence endows this Instrument of the Passion with the power to shield a worshipper 'fro treson and couaytise.'" A chance for protection against the sinful behaviors of disloyalty and greed may have driven the owner of *The Berners Hours* to kiss the face of Judas as a sort of proxy for kissing the physical coins themselves. Upon close inspection of the "Kiss of Betrayal" miniature, Judas' fingers seem to be in a gripping position, and a small circle hanging beneath his hand is visible. This circle is heavily worn from veneration, but it may have been the outline of the bag containing the thirty silver pieces (See Fig. 9).

The Berners Hours contains further evidence of a devotion to the Passion. On fol.73v, a miniature depicting "The Flagellation," or the Scourging at the Pillar, has been so heavily

kissed that only the legs of Jesus and the scourgers are visible (See Fig. 10). Additionally, when *The Berners Hours* was rebound in the eighteenth century, the binding was decorated with Instruments of the Passion stamps, one on the front cover, one on the back cover, and three on the spine (See Figs. 11, 12, and 13). Rebinding had emotional and devotional significance, as Kathryn Rudy explains in *Piety in Pieces*: “Updates and additions made by votaries to their prayerbooks...can reveal how they responded to new devotions and indulgences. When owners added texts or images to their manuscripts, they did so because they strongly desired those texts and images and actively selected them.” Rudy goes on to describe how books passed down in families were often added to and rebound in line with new piety trends. While an early owner of the book like William Berners may not have venerated the Kiss of Betrayal and Flagellation miniatures, it seems plausible that whoever had it rebound may have done so, owing to a strong devotion to the Arma Christi, and a desire to connect with the suffering of Christ.

Lingering Questions and Final Thoughts

After spending some time with *The Berners Hours*, I feel that I was able to learn more about its history, and that of the people who used it. There are still some lingering questions that I would like to answer in the future. Few images of Jesus are heavily venerated in the book, with the exception of the Flagellation (fol. 73v) and Last Judgement (fol. 125v) miniatures. Most surprisingly, the historiated initials depicting the five wounds of Christ are virtually untouched. I strongly believe that one of *The Berners Hours*' owners had an attachment to the Passion based on the physical evidence in other leaves, and I find it

strange that someone with such a devotion would not venerate images of the wounds. One possible theory is that the book's owner may have felt unworthy to kiss certain images of Jesus, but more research would be necessary to make a firm conclusion.

The historiated initial of Saint Laurence was also worn away from veneration. Laurence was an early church martyr who served as the Pope's official almsgiver. After refusing to turn over the papal coffers to the Roman Emperor Valerian, instead distributing it among the poor, he was condemned to be burned to death on a griddle. Laurence is best remembered for his humor and good spirit during his martyrdom. While being burned, he told his executioners to turn him over, so that he could cook on both sides. Laurence is the patron of comedians, the poor, and, ironically, cooks. I could not find an association between Laurence and the known owners of *The Berners Hours*. Still, I would like to trace the book's provenance further to possibly find a connection.

In conclusion, *The Berners Hours* reveals the intimate connection between religious books and their readers and helps to show us the development of devotional practices among Catholics in the pre-and post-Reformation world. It is an important part of Goucher College's Special Collections, and I look forward to doing more work with it in the future.

Figures

os 15v-16r, "The Betrayal of Christ / The Annunciation" from *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux, Queen of France*. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/470309>)



Figure 2: Folios 36v-37r, Saint Margaret of Antioch, from *The Berners Hours*.



Figure 3: Folios 31v-32r, Saint Christopher and the Child Jesus, from *The Berners Hours*.



Figure 4: Folios 29v-30r, Saint George, from *The Berners Hours*.



Figure 5: Folios.48v-49r, *The Kiss of Betrayal*, from *The Berners Hours*.



Figure 6: Folio 48v, *Kiss of Betrayal (detail)*, from *The Berners Hours*.



Figure 7: 'Arma Christi prayer roll," ca. 1500 (detail). The coins of Judas rest atop an arm of the Cross. (Yale University Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/15502542>)

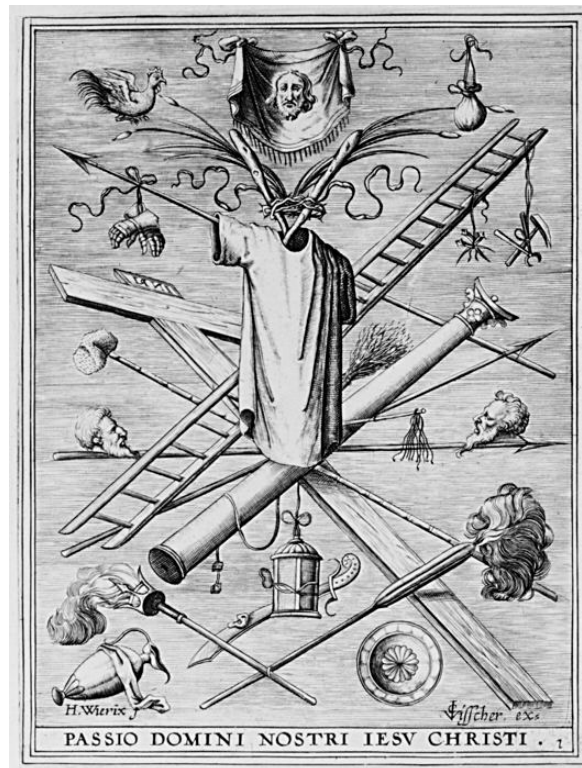


Figure 8: "Christ's Robe Surrounded by the Instruments of the Passion, from 'The Passion of Christ (Passio Domni Nostri Jesu Christi)'" by Hieronymus (Jerome) Wierix. Judas' money bag appears in the top right of the image. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/360395>)



Figure 9: Folio 48v, Kiss of Betrayal (detail), from *The Berners Hours*. Judas appears to be gripping something, and a small circle is visible beneath his hand.



Figure 10: Folios 73v-74r, *The Flagellation*, from *The Berners Hours*.



Figure 11: The front cover of The Berners Hours, with Instruments of the Passion stamp

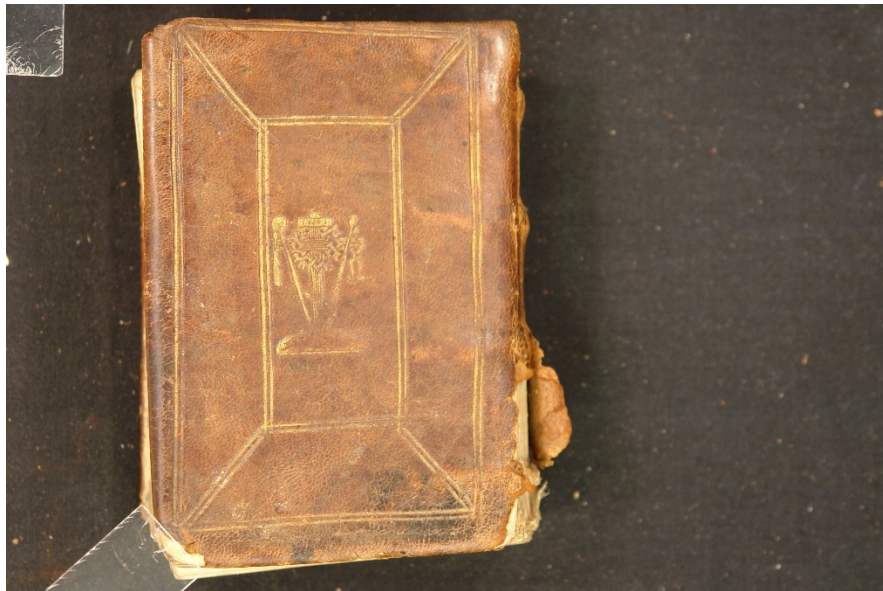


Figure 12: Back cover of The Berners Hours, with Instruments of the Passion stamp



Figure 13: Spine of The Berners Hours, with three Instruments of the Passion stamps

Images of The Berners Hours were generously provided by Arnold Sanders, Emeritus Professor of English at Goucher College.

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