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# Instruments of Devotion in Close Bodily Contact – Jewellery, Costume Details and Other Personal Belongings in Relation to Late Medieval Piety

*Stina Fallberg Sundmark\**

## Abbreviations

NM National Museum of Finland  
 LUHMLund University History Museum  
 RKM Röhsska Museum of Design and Craft  
 SHM Swedish History Museum  
 SSM Stockholm City Museum

## Introduction

Finger rings, knives, hooks and eyes, daggers, brooches, hanging crosses, pendants and swords – all different in execution and use – what might they have had in common during the late Middle Ages? The point of departure here is that alongside the fact that they all fit into the category of personal belongings, they were carried on the body and could be provided with a similar kind of religious inscriptions and iconography.

Archaeological finds in urban and rural settings, in monastic milieux, in church interiors, castles and hoards point towards a great variety of jewellery, accessories and personal belongings carried on the body or dress, mainly deriving from the 15th and the early sixteenth century, but also earlier periods of

the Middle Ages. The provenances of the finds point towards different groups of users such as ecclesiastical ministers, monastic people, layfolk in the upper layer of society but perhaps also to wealthy burghers and landowning peasants.

In focus for this article is this kind of personal material culture from late medieval Sweden, principally in the collection of the Swedish History Museum (SHM) in Stockholm. In particular, the interest is directed at jewellery, costume details and other categories of personal belongings provided with prayer inscriptions and pious images of Christ and the saints. This is a smaller group among personal items without decoration or with decorative elements that are not of religious character. Objects in focus are hanging crosses and other pendants such as reliquaries and Agnus Dei, finger rings, dress details such as hooks and eyes, brooches or girdles and practical instruments and weapons such as knives, daggers and swords. There were of course aesthetic, practical, social and economic aspects of wearing or carrying these

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objects but the purpose of this article is to discuss the possibility of looking at different categories of items found within the borders of present-day Sweden as instruments of devotion in some sense. The questions to be posed in this article are: *Why were images of Christ and the saints, and words directed to them, placed on jewellery, costume details and personal belongings and what was the function and meaning of doing so? What kind of knowledge about devotional culture can be extracted from this kind of material objects carried close to the body?*

In earlier research in a Swedish context, certain categories of this kind of material culture have been studied separately and mostly from the perspective of the technical aspect. Images and inscriptions are however only briefly mentioned in those works.<sup>1</sup> Other studies mention iconography and inscriptions on objects relevant for this article, but without deeper analysis of symbolic meanings and theological interpretations.<sup>2</sup>

Further studies add aspects of the human body to the material culture and thereby relate them to ways of clothing and decorating men and women during the late Middle Ages, mainly with issues pointing to fashion, gender, and more practical and aesthetic aspects.<sup>3</sup>

Other examples of studies take material culture as their point of departure and add not only aspects of body but also of personal devotion to contribute to more thorough discussions about the function and meaning of the artifacts. However, hitherto no studies on the Swedish circumstances have in an integrated way, approached varying types of jewellery, costume details and personal belongings with focus on the function and meaning of pious iconography and inscriptions and their relation to devotional culture and the body.<sup>4</sup> By doing that, this article aims to contribute

to a wider understanding of personal and everyday artifacts as related to devotional culture. From a more precise angle, this article aims to investigate how the understanding of Christ and the saints in the late Middle Ages was expressed in everyday artefacts specifically related to the body.

The field of research focusing on visual and material culture as instruments of devotion in relation to bodily expressions has expanded during the last couple of decades, not least concerning the late Middle Ages. These works focus on devotional perspectives on material and visual culture of different character, sometimes in relation with the body and the senses.

In these and other earlier studies, most emphasis has, though, been placed on altar screens, mural paintings, wooden sculpture, illuminations in prayer books, woodcuts and prints, relics and reliquaries, and liturgical vessels.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, there are very few who have paid attention to personal small scale and less obvious items for everyday religion. In the same way as it is relevant to look upon pious images and inscriptions on utility goods for dinner culture, such as cutlery and drinking vessels, as expressions of help and protection and tools for devotion in relation to the senses and on an everyday basis,<sup>6</sup> we will here examine the relevance of regarding jewellery, costume details and other personal belongings as instruments of devotion.

Caroline Walker Bynum's understanding of the term "materiality" is a chosen point of departure for this study. What Bynum does is to focus on the function of medieval objects and matter regarded as holy and to examine their devotional meaning. Bynum is therefore not interested in the objects as such but the reasons why they were created, how they were used in specific contexts of devotion and how they, in different situations, related

to the human body. Bynum also examine the agency of sacred objects, how for instance relics and images related to indulgence in some sense became actors with the ability to change a situation or a condition.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Bynum's work, this article pays attention to objects that are more seldom regarded as having devotional connotations. But since these personal objects are ornamented with images and texts of devotional character and therefore resemble those objects at centre in Bynum's work, I will here look at them from a perspective similar to Bynum's, and generate a study of their possible devotional functions as carriers of pious and theological meanings.

As mentioned, one focus will be placed on how these personal objects were possibly used in relation to personal devotion in some sense, practiced in the domestic setting or in church within or outside the Mass. Therefore, an overarching perspective in the study relates to aspects of "everyday religion" and "lived religion", that is on devotion on an everyday basis, in relation to visual and material culture and bodily practice.<sup>8</sup>

It is therefore relevant to extend the material to include, for example, preserved vernacular prayers from the monastic sphere and ruling elite, such as the Brigittine sisters in Vadstena abbey and from Kristina Nilsdotter (Gyllenstierna c. 1494–1559), the wife of the regent Sten Sture the Younger (c. 1492–1520).<sup>9</sup> This, because late medieval devotional culture as a whole was rather homogeneous.<sup>10</sup> The concept of "lived religion" however often puts the lay people's devotion at centre. This group of devotional actors is indeed important to highlight, but the term "lived religion" should exclude neither the ecclesiastical and secular elite nor monastic men and women.<sup>11</sup>

These two theoretical concepts and methods of materiality and lived religion are useful to

highlight the particular categories of artefacts but also as instruments to broaden the perspective of their functions and reach deeper into their meanings. After an introduction to the relation between body and late medieval devotion, the different categories of material culture and their imagery and inscriptions will be analysed in relation to devotional culture.

## Body and Devotion

The spirituality of the late Middle Ages was by and large characterised by the material and physical. The sacred aspects of the world view of that time were consistently looked upon as something possible to experience and in some sense grasp through the body. The fundamental prerequisite for this was the fact that God was incarnated – born *in carne* – through the Son Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup> The other focal point of Christian faith and doctrine, the passion and death of Christ, is also loaded with bodiliness. Christ's sacrifice was actualised in every Mass and was looked upon as the substance of bread and wine being transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ. As a consequence, Christ became sacramentally present in every Mass. The priest received the body and blood of Christ in the daily Mass while the layfolk normally received the Host once a year, at Easter. In Mass during all other parts of the year, people received the sacramentally present Christ visually, through meditative gazing upon the Eucharistic elements elevated by the priest (*Augenkommunion*).<sup>13</sup>

Another bodily aspect of devotion was connected with positions and gestures. The general bodily position at prayer was kneeling with folded hands. This was the common position at certain moments during Mass and in situations of personal devotion, in front of the exposed or

carried Host, relics, the crucifix or images of holy men and women, no matter where or when: in church, at home, at the sound of the Angelus ringing or when the Eucharistic procession passed on its way to dying people. Other positions were lifted hands, beating of the chest, bowing one's head, prostration etc.<sup>14</sup> Taken all together these gestures and positions expressed reverence, remorse, humbleness and subordination towards God.<sup>15</sup>

Devotion and body did not only mean calm positions but also involved the body during mobility. One such situation was at pilgrimage. Not only the specific situation of devotion at the relics, holy images or wells at the goal for the pilgrimages was related to devotion. To get to a local or far distanced goal of pilgrimage one could use different ways of transport, but the probably most common and the most relating to penance was walking by foot. The travelling route was, however, not solely a question of transportation from one point to another but could in itself be used for devotion as the pilgrim could meditate over Biblical or other texts or pray with the help of a Rosary along the way.<sup>16</sup> Also the pilgrim badge attained at the site, fixed to the hat or clothes and in that way carried on the way home, became a carrier of the holiness of the site.<sup>17</sup> Also, all sorts of processions could act as mobile settings for devotion with varying purpose and function such as Eucharistic adoration at *Festum Corporis Christi* or when the priest carried the Host to the sick or dying, at processions for good weather and rich harvest or for penance.<sup>18</sup>

Even if the body, as shown here, was related clearly to the sacred in different ways, the body was regarded as a rather simple shell for the soul and therefore inferior. In this dichotomy the body was related to the world, lust and sin while the soul would be kept clean and distanced from the worldly circumstances.

Every person had, through her way of life, the opportunity to influence the destination of the soul after death, ideally having the heavenly goal in view. The ideal way of life was to keep the body and soul together to avoid any dichotomy. The instruments often pointed at were the virtues with which one would weed out the vices.<sup>19</sup>

One way in which the body was regarded with negative connotations was the view of the bodily senses as doors for sin. Through sight, hearing, smell, taste and tactility sin entered the body and damaged the soul.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, at the performance of extreme unction, the sins expressed through the senses were absolved through detailed instructions for confession of sins related to the senses and through the priest's anointing of the bodily parts related to the senses; eyelids, ears, nostrils, lips, hands and feet.<sup>21</sup>

The body was also related to all sorts of prayer, devotion and liturgy through the senses in one way or another. Even though the soul was valued higher than the body, the body was not in all circumstances loaded with negative connotations. At the same time as the senses were regarded as doors for sin, they were openings for the sacred. During the liturgy in church people could hear the ringing of the church bells, the sung and read liturgy by the priest and other people's prayers. Through their nostrils, people were able to experience the smell of burning wax tapers and incense, which transmitted blessings over buildings, persons and matter. At the yearly Easter communion, they could feel the Host by the tongue. The sacred was also thought to be experienced through tactility when one was immersed by water at baptism, sprinkled with holy water at the beginning of Mass, anointed with holy oil or chrism at baptism, confirmation or extreme unction

and when one touched the beads of the rosary. Sight was regarded as the foremost of the senses and was activated when people meditatively gazed upon the body and blood of Christ as the priest elevated the Host and the chalice and through that gazing received salvation in the same way as through physical communion. In addition, the body was activated when people expressed themselves verbally through praying the Hail Mary, the Lord's Prayer and the Creed or when they walked on pilgrimage.<sup>22</sup> The body was accordingly activated in different ways at devotion, not the least through the senses and could thus experience the holy.

With this as a background it is worth a try to look at the artifacts chosen for this article in relation to personal devotion.

### **Personal belongings, the Body and late medieval Piety**

One point of departure for the analysis of why images of Christ and the saints and pious inscriptions were placed on personal items, is the definition of devotion. Devotion could be understood as strictly regulated devotion expressed by religious orders through the hours and the recitation of the 150 Psalms or through deep and lengthy meditation and contemplation in front of a reliquary or holy image.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to those lengthier and deeper forms of concentrating and absorbing meditation and contemplation taking place inside or outside of the Mass in church or more privately at home or in the monastic cell, devotion could also be much simpler. It could be formulated with spontaneity and simplicity through short prayers of one sentence or even single words, expressed aloud or in a fleeting thought. Different forms of texts and images could likely give associations and inspire those

prayers. In addition, the situation and setting relating to domestic occupation and other kinds of work, rather likely influenced the form of this kind of everyday religion.

One way to look at these forms of everyday prayers generated by short inscriptions and small images on personal objects is with the perspective of *micro devotion*. By micro devotion is meant here a short form of prayers and quick pious associations in everyday life, started by a short glance at a tiny image or a short inscription with a prayer or holy name. This was possible because every person in the medieval society would know certain related prayers by heart from young age and because people had seen and acted in relation to devotional images in church in a way that was handed down from generation to generation when children imitated their parents.

Concerning the investigated material, one could of course, and rightly, claim that there is quite a large difference between a wooden sculpture placed on an altar in church and a finger ring, or between an illumination in a prayer book and a dagger. While the wooden sculpture and illumination are usually identified as devotional images or objects, the finger ring and dagger are not. With a point of departure in the character and contents, function and meaning of inscriptions, images and the composition of the personal objects, we will however try to show *that* and *how* these items relate to piety and devotion and *whether* and *in what sense* one actually might talk of them as instruments of devotion.

### **Personal Belongings with devotional inscriptions**

To start with, many of the objects, such as finger rings, brooches, knives and daggers are provided with *inscriptions* in the form of the first words of

the explicit prayer Ave Maria/Hail Mary, one of the most common prayers during the late Middle Ages.<sup>24</sup> Together with the Lord's Prayer and the Creed the Hail Mary belonged to the common bank of knowledge in medieval society and was to be known by everyone.<sup>25</sup> Different *exempla* (sermon illustrations and didactic stories) indicate that the whole prayer Hail Mary or just the two words Ave Maria was used in a variety of everyday situations. In one of the stories is told of a seamstress who used to say the words Ave Maria when she got a prick by the needle. According to another story a little girl was rescued from heavy waves by the mantle of the Virgin Mary through the pronouncement of the words Ave Maria.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the words Ave Maria engraved on an object in a similar way were regarded as a short prayer for help (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1. Brooch with the inscription AVE MARIA G (RATIA PLENA). SHM inv. no 17343:1595. Photo: Helena Rosengren, Swedish History Museum /SHM (CC BY).**

Another type of inscription containing short but obvious prayers are: Help God, Jesus and/or Mary appearing on pendants, finger rings and on shafts made of silver from larger knives or daggers.<sup>27</sup> The function of those inscriptions was without any doubt to give the owner and user of the object help and protection in any situation. Some finger rings or brooches contain an inscription with *Iesus Nazareus Rex Iudeorum* or the abbreviation INRI.<sup>28</sup> The conclusion of an *exemplum* says that these words followed by “have mercy on us” gave protection against sudden death that day.<sup>29</sup>

Certain names appear on crucifixes, pendants, finger rings and cases for knives and daggers. The most common names and monograms are Jesus and the Virgin Mary.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes the names are stated solitarily and are then to be categorised as expressions for *nomina sacra*, names that were regarded as holy.<sup>31</sup> As such, the inscriptions of the names are not categorised as regular prayers like Ave Maria or Help Maria. As holy names, they might instead have been regarded as small-scale prayers, through a short invocation (Fig. 2).

The Swedish 14th century theologian Magister Mathias refers to the early martyrs who invoked the name of Jesus.<sup>32</sup> *Exempla* tell of people in need calling upon or shouting “Jesus Christ”. In the commentary to the stories, these shouting people are regarded as role models; the name of Jesus was looked upon as having the potential to strengthen and help people in all sorrow and pain and was regarded as protection against the temptation of the devil and evil people.<sup>33</sup> In another example in Old Swedish, Jesus and his name are addressed:

Dearest name of Jesus. O sweetest name of Jesus. Jesus is a gentle name. Jesus is a promising name. Who is Jesus if not our Saviour? Therefore I pray to you, o mildest Jesus, that





**Fig. 2. a-b Reliquary pendant crucifix with images of Christ and the Virgin Mary and the inscriptions “ihs” and “maria”. SHM inv. no 3715. Photo: Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum /SHM (CC BY).**

you save me through your holy name, and that you do not allow me to become an impenitent in your creation. (...).<sup>34</sup>

In the introduction and instruction to that prayer, we get the intended effect, namely that one who is in the state of a deadly sin and says the following prayer honouring the name of Jesus, will have that sin converted by God into pain in purgatory and thereby get a chance to amend.<sup>35</sup> We see here the saving effect of invoking the name of Jesus. Here and in other stories the point is that through that invocation a person changes his or her disposition and puts Christ at centre in life.<sup>36</sup>

The names of the Holy Magi on personal belongings such as pendants and finger rings deserve a special comment.<sup>37</sup> According to preserved prayers the names themselves were looked upon as vital: “O, Holy Three Magi, King Jasper, Melchior, and Balthazar, I pray to you by each of your names” or “by your most holy names”.<sup>38</sup> The praying person

would beg the Holy Magi for help and consolation in sorrow and need. They were also addressed for intercession before Christ, so that he would save from harmful enemies and protect from sudden death.<sup>39</sup>

The pastoral literature on devotion emphasises the importance of not mentioning the name of Jesus Christ in a mechanical way, but in a godly manner and with reverence.<sup>40</sup> The sources thus give the indication that people could use the holy names without the right inner attitude, while the outer and inner character of devotion had to be the same.

### **Personal Belongings with devotional Motifs**

What is also interesting is to look specifically at the *visual motifs* of the objects. Several of them show motifs with Christ, such as the face of Christ, the Calvary scene, Pietà, Agnus Dei, the pelican and the Seat of



Mercy (*Gnadenstuhl*).<sup>41</sup> These motifs are all related to Christ's passion and death and thereby to salvation of humankind. In that way these motifs on personal objects were probably not only related to help and protection against everyday and earthly threats like fire and illness, but also against the fears of Hell and the eternal fire.

The image of the face of Christ or Veronica's vernicle appear on finger rings and pendants such as reliquaries and *Agnus Dei*.<sup>42</sup> The motif was regarded to express the presence of Christ in a particular sense. Since the face of Christ is depicted *en face* the viewer could encounter Christ's gaze with directedness, which gave the viewer a particular impression of an encounter with her Savior.<sup>43</sup> This was reasonably also the case when a tiny representation of the face of Christ was attached to a finger ring.

The motifs of the face of Christ and Veronica's vernicle were both related to indulgence and therefore appreciated as devotional images of different kinds.<sup>44</sup> Such images used as devotional instruments in relation to a certain number of sometimes specific prayers could work as useful aids for gaining a prescribed amount of indulgence. When the motifs were located on a personal belonging such as a finger ring the images became highly accessible for devotion for the owner. This accessibility also increased the ability of gaining indulgence. There were also other visual motifs that were regarded as generating indulgence. Introductions to preserved prayers state that if the prayer was said in front of a devotional image of the Virgin Mary – sometimes specified as the Apocalyptic Madonna – or of St Anne then that would generate indulgence.<sup>45</sup> Most likely, such an image was normally a larger piece of work in the shape of an altar screen, mural painting

or illumination in a prayer book, but, in fact, the instruction does not say anything about the size or status of such an image. That should mean that it would have been possible to use a tiny image on a personal belonging for the same purpose.<sup>46</sup> An image on a finger ring meant that the image was portable and could generate indulgence, no matter where or when the owner prayed in relation to that particular motif. In that case, the image on a finger ring became not only a portable instrument of devotion but also a mobile tool for indulgence. Items with images in connection with indulgence are examples of objects of agency, objects which seems to



**Fig. 3. Girdle pendant with the Apocalyptic Madonna. SHM inv. no 20188:1. Photo: Ulrik Skans, Swedish History Museum /SHM (CC BY).**

have been regarded as able to work as actors towards their users in some sense (Fig. 3).

One of the motifs mentioned – the Calvary scene – appears on finger rings.<sup>47</sup> This motif on three specific finger rings, will here be presented and analysed a little more thoroughly with the perspective of function and meaning of such a ring and its iconography. Through archaeological excavations in the Brigittine monastery in Vadstena some finger rings made of gold were found with clear provenances to the church and to the nuns' part of the monastery.<sup>48</sup> They are all executed with a casted Calvary scene. The motif on finger rings is typical for the late Middle Ages as well as for the specific Brigittine devotional culture. One of them is provided with the inscription "sancte berita", which further emphasises the Brigittine context. These are usually attributed as nuns' finger rings.<sup>49</sup>

According to St Birgitta's instructions for the consecration of nuns, they would receive a ring at that occasion. At the prayer over the ring, the bishop would say:

Almighty, eternal God, who in your mercy has become engaged to this new bride, bless this finger ring, that she, like your maidservant externally on her hand carries the sign of her new bridegroom, and interiorly carries the faith and love for you.<sup>50</sup>

This short prayer provides us with quite a lot of information on the use, function and meaning of the finger ring. The consecration of a nun constituted an engagement between Christ the bridegroom and the nun who became his bride and as a sign of this engagement and of her binding to her bridegroom, she received a finger ring to be carried on her right hand.

In addition, we possibly get an indication of the execution of the finger ring. In the prayer it

says that the finger ring was an exterior sign of her new bridegroom. That could certainly be interpreted as the finger ring reminding her of Christ, irrespective of its appearance. But, on the other hand, it could indicate that some kind of visual representation of Christ actually existed on the finger ring. In the prayer, there is also a clarification of the importance that the nun looked upon her exterior and interior life as a whole. The exterior, material finger ring on her finger would remind her of Christ, but also be a sign of her faith and love towards God. The Brigittine nun would according to the instructions for consecration, take part in her bridegroom's passion and suffer with him throughout her whole life.<sup>51</sup> The ring with that specific motif would probably have worked as a valuable and daily instrument in that ongoing relation and thus work as a clear example of the importance of visual and material culture as instruments of devotion.

Some of the other motifs appearing on personal belongings are related to the incarnation, to the Christ Child and the Virgin Mary, a motif that appears on finger rings, hooks and eyes and on the sheath for a dagger (Fig. 5).<sup>52</sup> Clearly related to the Virgin Mary is her mother St Anne who appears on finger rings as a part of *Anna Selbdritt* (Fig. 4).<sup>53</sup> She is also addressed verbally on a finger ring.<sup>54</sup> According to preserved prayers, St Anne was regarded as a pure mother of the Virgin Mary and necessary for redemption. She was therefore approached with pleading for intercession before the judge so that the praying person would receive eternal joy. One prayer gives clear expression for this as it points to a chain of intercession; the praying person would approach St Anne who would turn to her daughter who in her turn would pray to her son.<sup>55</sup>



**Fig. 4. Finger ring with Anna Selbdritt and two saints. SHM inv. no 28813:E45. Photo: Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum/SHM (CC BY).**

The third category of motifs consists of representations of certain saints. A particular group of fourteen or fifteen saints were called ‘the helpers’ and were considered to help and protect people in time of great need such as in case of fire, thunder, fever and plague. Among them were St Barbara, St Catherine of Alexandria and St George. They appear on finger rings, hooks and eyes or knives.<sup>56</sup> Preserved prayers in Old Swedish address these particular saints with pleas for help and protection for instance from deadly sins and for help to keep the body and soul safe from evil people or the devil (Fig. 4 and 6).<sup>57</sup>

### **Personal Belongings with Compositions related to Devotion**

Apart from devotional inscriptions and motifs, it is also relevant to study certain

devotionally related *compositions* in which a certain motif is integrated. On some finger rings, the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child or *Anna Selbdritt* are placed inside a rectangular frame, making it look like a shrine on an altar in church or at a devotional place in the domestic or monastic milieu.<sup>58</sup> On another finger ring, the representation of the *Anna Selbdritt* surrounded by two saints looks like a triptych with *corpus* and two wings.<sup>59</sup>

These associations to shrines are strengthened by two finger rings from Medieval England. One of them has two panels like a diptych or the closed wings of a triptych.<sup>60</sup> The other one is provided with wings that can be opened and closed around a central image.<sup>61</sup> This kind of association with devotion was probably precisely the intention of that particular form. Perhaps the composition



**Fig. 5. Sheath of a dagger with the Virgin Mary and Christ Child. SHM inv. no 1217. Photo: Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum /SHM (CC BY).**

inspired the bearer to act in some pious way in relation to the motifs on the rings and with the same inner intention as in front of an altar screen or shrine in church? In that case, the finger ring became an instrument of devotion – at least on a micro-level – ready to interact with its owner.

Another composition of devotional relevance is the chaplet of roses found on some brooches.<sup>62</sup> The rosary consisted of praying a certain number of Ave Maria and Pater noster, sometimes in relation with meditation and became during the late Middle Ages a well spread form of prayer, also for common people. One could pray the rosary with the help of a devotional instrument, a string of



**Fig. 6. Hooks and eyes with St George and the dragon. SHM inv. no 8191:23. Photo: Helena Rosengren, The Swedish History Museum (CC BY).**

beads.<sup>63</sup> One could also quite likely pray the rosary with the help of a larger visual presentation of a rosary at the centre of an altarpiece or painted on the wall in church, where the praying person could follow each rose with the eyes or keep counting with the fingers and knuckles.<sup>64</sup>

On some finger rings, the chaplet of roses surrounds a certain motif like the Apocalyptic Madonna, the Calvary scene or the Seat of Mercy.<sup>65</sup> The Apocalyptic Madonna frequently appears at centre of altar screens or mural paintings with rosaries.<sup>66</sup> Taken altogether, personal belongings with chaplets of roses with or without that combination of motifs might have given the owner explicit associations to devotional images, settings and practices in church, associations that might have inspired to at least a short form of prayer.

## Material and Bodily Aspects of Devotion

So far, we have made contact with the different categories of jewellery, costume details

and other kinds of personal belongings, and searched for and through analysis found direct or indirect expressions of devotion or associations with diverse forms of piety. In this part, we will detect bodily aspects of devotion in relation to this material culture and try to answer the initially posed question: *What did it possibly mean, from a devotional perspective, to carry these kinds of decorated items close to the body?* As mentioned earlier the physical and material side of late medieval devotion was prominent and related often to the different senses. This was also valid for these particular personal objects, which were all visible, portable on the body and had tactile dimensions.

First of all, the objects were *visible* and possible to apprehend with the sense of sight. Through the eyes, the owner could view the inscriptions, images and the shape of the items. The common interior of the church provided a rich variety of images executed in wood, paint, textile and metal. People had viewed these images and acted in relation to them since they were children. Without doubt, people could recall these images and motifs explicitly or implicitly in different situations and settings outside the church interior. Through a process of conscious or unconscious visual and memorising activity, people should have had a well-developed skill of associating between images with the same or similar motif no matter the size, material or setting. In that way, the images on the personal objects must have given people instant associations to images seen in church or other devotional sites and thus have provided them with an instrument to interpret the motifs and to use them in accordance with the meaning of those images.

With their eyes, they could not only *see* the images on the surface, but also *view* them in

a deeper sense. Images were used as focus for meditation and contemplation. Naturally, we do not know exactly and in detail, how individuals used the images visually or what they thought of when meditating over an image of any kind. There are however introductions to preserved prayers that state that a certain prayer was related to a devotional image with a specific motif such as the Virgin Mary, the Apocalyptic Madonna or an image of St Anne.<sup>67</sup> It is likely that those images were often three-dimensional wooden sculptures, triptychs or mural paintings, but nothing should have prevented people from using any kinds of images and objects with the motif in question. As mentioned earlier, people probably did not, however, use images on personal objects for deeper and longtime meditations – even if nothing strictly speaks against that possibility – but perhaps rather for prayers in short form. The prerequisite for that was however probably the devotional training and practice of lengthier prayers and use of images of larger size.

Another perspective of the sense of sight and this kind of material culture, is the focus not only on the owner but also on other people seeing those objects carried on others' bodies. How did they act when they met someone who had a visible crucifix around the neck, hooks and eyes or a dagger with saints? Again, we cannot say anything on an individual level, but we can assume that also those people were affected by the objects.

Another bodily sense which was activated in relation to the personal objects, was the sense of feeling. All of the objects analysed above have a *tactile* dimension. The items were in direct contact with the skin, either as a ring placed on the finger or a crucifix



hanging around the neck, perhaps under the clothes or when the owner consciously touched the item.<sup>68</sup>

The tangible side of late medieval devotion was expressed in church where people could touch, kiss or lick devotional images and relics and thereby come in direct contact with the divine and holy.<sup>69</sup> The written sources used do not give any information whether people acted similarly in relation to personal belongings with pious character. Some of the objects show signs of wear but it is often difficult to determine whether that was caused by frequent use or by the archaeological circumstances. But *if* that wear was caused by regular touching, then that is perhaps the result of conscious contact to gain safety and blessing in an everyday situation or in acute danger, when having something to cling to. The verbal prayer might have been accompanied by that kind of touching.

Another aspect of the sense of feeling is a bit different and has more to do with a general closeness between a material object and the body. Some of the objects are namely provided with images or texts on more than one side, such as an inscription with *ih̄s Maria* on the one side of a pendant and an image of the Apocalyptic Madonna on the other (Fig. 3); the Apocalyptic Madonna on the back of a girdle pendant; the Virgin Mary on the reverse side of a crucifix (Fig. 2 a-b); a short prayer or holy name inside a finger ring and the face of Christ and the lamb of God on either side of an Agnus Dei.<sup>70</sup> Why would one place an inscription or image on the back or on the inside of an object, hidden for the gaze of the exterior observer? Perhaps there was a practical reason of making use of the whole surface or perhaps there was a deeper meaning,

which makes it irrelevant to speak of images placed on the front and the back. If we think of the image “on the back” as the one being placed closest to the body, to the heart and perhaps to the soul, that brings another dimension to a multi-sided object in relation to the body.

Similar perspectives are fruitful, as we look at the girdle pendant with the Apocalyptic Madonna on the back or closest to the body. If there was no such or similar meaning as presumed above, why would one put an elaborated engraving where no one else than the owner would see it? Perhaps we see here a parallel with other images in the margin, such as inside a ciborium, and tabernacle or a jug for pouring and drinking, only visible for the priest when he distributed communion or for those who poured or drank beer and wine.<sup>71</sup> When the doors of the tabernacle or the lids of the containers for Hosts or beverages were closed, the images were facing the content inside. In the same sense, the inscriptions and images on the back of personal belongings were turned in the direction of the body and to its interior with soul and heart. Such images were probably regarded as bringing protection and salvation to those who received the Host or drank from the jug, the hidden images and inscriptions on personal objects might have had the same connotations and meanings. In that case, we are getting closer to a view where the object itself took on an active role in devotion. Apart from exclusively being something that the owner used, the object in itself seems to have been regarded as an agent.<sup>72</sup>

One further bodily aspect of a personal belonging of this kind were relics consisting of tiny parts of bones from a saint. During the later Middle Ages hanging crucifixes or other kinds of pendants were sometimes



constructed with one or more spaces intended to keep relics.<sup>73</sup> In those cases, a person did not only carry a particular image or inscription close to the body, but a small-sized reliquary with sacred bodily remnants regarded as an object of protecting agency towards its owner.

These different kinds of material culture were meant to be carried on the body; close to the skin, attached to the clothes or carried at the girdle (to the girdle one could also attach a purse containing a personal and precious object for devotion such as a Rosary or a prayer book<sup>74</sup>). That provided the devotional objects with *mobile* and *portable* aspects. Unlike a devotional image in church or in one's chamber or cell, the personal belongings were possible to carry and use irrespective of place. People could wear them and use them at home, at work, at a banquet and on a journey, which presumably facilitated the performance of everyday devotion.

The importance of the mobile and portable character of such a personal object with devotional connotations is illustrated by an *exemplum*. A man went by horse and was scared by thunder and lightning and therefore hung a wax image of the Lamb of God in a silver receptacle around his neck. At the stroke of lightning, the silver receptacle was destroyed but not the actual Agnus Dei inside.<sup>75</sup> The story does not only provide information *that* an Agnus Dei was carried around one's neck, but also *how* the function of an Agnus Dei was regarded. We can presume that an Agnus Dei could be carried everyday and always but here it is emphasized that the owner put it on at an unexpected situation of emergency. In addition, the story stresses the relation between the inside and outside of the object and indirectly how people were supposed to relate to that; it was not the

visible receptacle that was the thing to put one's trust in, but the blessed piece of wax, the Agnus Dei itself.

### Concluding remarks

As we have seen, late medieval personal belongings such as jewellery, costume details, weapons and tools could contain inscriptions with direct and indirect prayers for help and protection, images of Christ and the saints relating to motifs in the interior of the church and image composition giving associations to altar-screens and shrines. Taken altogether these objects explicitly have a devotional character, which has been further strengthened through analysis of written sources such as prayer books and example stories. The majority of the motives and inscriptions relate to two of the main themes of theology and devotion in late medieval Europe, namely the focusing on the saints and mainly on the Virgin Mary and those focusing on the passion of Christ – a fact that also strengthens the devotional character of the items.

This points towards the relevance of talking of these objects as instruments of devotion. That is possible with an interpretation of devotion as something that could be small scale and simple (*micro devotion*) such as short prayers, holy names and other meaningful single words with pious connotations. In addition, prayers were not just verbal on the tongue or in the head of a praying person but also wordless. Through glances at images with sacred motives on personal objects, devotion could also include prayers with visual and material character. In that way, the items became tools for the performance of lived religion and everyday devotion.

Persons in the Middle Ages were in constant need of protecting themselves against everyday threats of any kind and anywhere. The absence of proper resources to keep food and water fresh meant a constant risk of related disease. There were permanent threats from fire, enemies and armed conflicts in different levels of society. On a journey, people could be attacked by robbers and wild animals. In addition, people found the temptation of the devil present always and everywhere, which meant a constant risk of turning away from God. This made external and internal life in many ways unsecure and dangerous. The personal belongings with images of Christ and interceding saints, and direct and indirect prayers give a clear impression that the objects played an important role in giving people hope in all kinds of everyday situations, which is further indicated or confirmed by textual sources. Due to the small size, the mobility and portability of the personal objects on one's body, the objects were regarded as transmitters of divine help, protection, consolation and blessings irrespective of time and space.

Analyses of small-scale personal objects with sacred inscriptions, images and compositions contribute to the study of late medieval devotion and lived religion as a complex, albeit everyday based phenomenon.

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## Summary

Late medieval personal belongings such as jewellery, costume details, weapons and tools are sometimes provided with direct and indirect prayers for help and protection, images of Christ and saints relating to motifs in the church interior and in prayer books, and image composition giving associations to

altar-screens and shrines. Taken altogether these objects explicitly have a devotional character, which has been further strengthened through analysis of written sources such as *exempla* and preserved more extensive prayers. This point towards the relevance of talking about these objects as instruments of small-scale and everyday devotion. People were in constant need of help and protection from everyday threats. By relating to preserved prayers and *exempla* from late medieval Sweden, the article shows that these objects with prayers and holy images were regarded as transmitting divine

help, protection, consolation and blessing. Due to the small size and portability of the personal objects carried on the body, divine intervention could take place irrespective of time and space. Lived religion and everyday devotion could therefore be performed anywhere, including on the move.

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