



Scott B. Montgomery

St. Ursula

and the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne

*Relics, Reliquaries and the Visual Culture of Group Sanctity
in Late Medieval Europe*

PETER LANG





THE CULT OF St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgin Martyrs of Cologne was the most widespread relic cult in medieval Europe. The sheer abundance of relics of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, which allowed for the display of immense collections, shaped the notion of corporate cohesion that characterized the cult. Though the primacy of St. Ursula as the leader of this holy band was established by the tenth century, she was conceived as the head of a corporate body. Innumerable inventories and liturgical texts attest to the fact that this cult was commemorated and referenced as a collective mass – *Undecim millium virginum*. This group identity informed, and was formulated by, the presentation of their relics, as well as much of the imagery associated with this cult. This book explores the visual, textual, performative, and perceptual aspects of this phenomenon, with particular emphasis on painting and sculpture in late medieval Cologne. Examining the ways in which both texts and images worked as vestments, garbing the true core of relics which formed the body of the cult, the book examines the cult from the core outward, seeking to understand hagiographic texts and images in terms of their role in articulating relic cults.

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Detail with reliquary busts. Cologne, Cathedral. Photo: Dombau, Köln.
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Gratia Undecima Mille – Acknowledgements

A number of years ago, in the darkest hours of a cold winter's night, I found myself stuck in the middle of Cologne with nowhere to go and nowhere safe to stay. There was, as they say, no room at the inn. After wandering in vain for several hours in search of a hotel or safe haven, I found myself drawn to what seemed (at the time) to be the only plausible recourse – the tiny platz on the north side of town that is sheltered by the entrance to the church of St. Ursula. There, on the doorstep of this exquisite, but all-too-often ignored basilica, I passed the night – cold and sleepless, but safe and oddly comforted. Upon weathering the chilly night with nothing lost but peaceful dreams, I awaited the opening of the church portal so that I could offer my thanks for a safe night's passage. By way of a votive offering, the amount that I would have expected to pay for a hotel, found its way into the tiny collections box in the narthex. This only seemed fair and proper, as I had half-expected to be robbed or worse during the night. It has since been many times that I have returned to this church and city and always I have been treated graciously and courteously by its denizens – both mortal and saintly. As this study is essentially dedicated to the St. Ursula and her Eleven Thousand Virgin Companions and their cult's visual expression in Cologne, it strikes me that I might consider it as the second part of my votive offering in thanks for sheltering me under their mantle so many years ago. *Gratia ad Ursulae et sodalibus.*

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I. Heads and Tales:

Envisioning the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne

In his *Dialogue on Miracles*, compiled between 1219 and 1223, the kölnisch Cistercian Caesarius of Heisterbach (1180–c.1240) presents a discussion between a monk and a novice regarding the corporate identity of the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne. The novice asks: “Since bones of the eleven thousand blessed virgins are found everywhere in the streets and gardens of the city of Cologne, it seems to me scarcely possible that strange bones should not be mixed with theirs.” To this, seemingly reasonable query, the monk responds by relating that: “A certain monk of Altenberg where there are said to be a thousand bodies, told me they do not allow any false relics to be mixed up with them.”¹ In support of this claim, Caesarius repeats a tale in which the bones of a horse, accidentally mixed in with relics of the Holy Virgins of Cologne, are miraculously cast forth from their company.² The underlying, central theme is the linking of the relics’ power with their physical manifestation of the notion of group solidarity. The potency of the relics is not only expressed, but is also insured, by the fact that the Holy Virgins adhere as a single entity – their relics serving as manifestations of the corporate body of the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne. Caesarius’ tales are clearly intended to provide a lucid discussion of the powers and traits of this cult which doubtless had a profound impact upon his intellectual and spiritual growth. Educated in Cologne at the turn of the thirteenth century, Caesarius could not have missed the exciting expansion of the cult that erupted from the early twelfth-century discovery of

1 Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogue on Miracles*, 2 vols., trans., H. von E. Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929, II, p. 91 (Chapter 88). Also: Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Caesari Heisterbacensis Monachi Ordinis Cisterciensis Dialogus miraculorum*, ed. Joseph Strange, 2 vols., Bonn: Colonia, 1871.

2 Caesarius of Heisterbach, 1929, II, pp. 91–92 (Chapter 89).

the vast cache of their relics at the perimeter of the city. As an intellectual member of a monastic order that was not only centrally involved in the massing and veneration of relics of the Holy Virgins of Cologne, but also in the development of their legend, Caesarius has what could fairly be termed an insider's perspective on the cult. As the prior of the monastic community of Heisterbach, Caesarius was responsible for the novices – a position that seems to have shaped the didactic quality of the *Dialogue on Miracles*. Combining popular sensibility and moral purpose, the accounts contained within Caesarius' volume have a rich and entertaining vitality coupled with a pedantic intent that emulates a textbook on proper belief and behavior. Caesarius fashions *exempla* – many of which appear to have been conceived as directed toward both the immediate audience of his monastic charges and a broader audience particularly composed of holy women and their confessors.³ Like Caesarius of Heisterbach's conversational manual of faith, the tale of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne has qualities that are both epic in scope and astoundingly sensory in allure – it is both romance and morality play. We are drawn into it through its rich tapestry of tragic romance, drama, and travel into an exotic realm of epic, fairytale proportions. But this fantastic narrative is so deeply and culturally grounded in such quintessential and adamantly physical signifiers of corporeality as relics (specifically bones) that the ensuing elision of hagiographic tale and material evidence forges an astoundingly rich and potent perceptual nexus in which pedagogical possibilities merge with the seemingly innate human desire for sensory confirmation.

What is Caesarius trying to communicate, to teach, with his discussions of this phenomenon of a cult of seemingly innumerably numerated Holy Virgins in Cologne? Most dramatically, these fantastic tales underscore the adamant group cohesion of the Holy Virgins, whose unity gives them their principal and most profound identity. The miraculously-expelled equine

3 See: J. J. van Moolenbroek, "Caesarius von Heisterbach über Zisterzienserinnen," *Citeaux*, 41 (1990) 45–65. For an extremely pithy but solid introduction to Caesarius of Heisterbach, see Rosemary Drage Hale's entry in *Medieval Germany. An Encyclopedia*, John M. Jeep, ed., New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2001, p. 83.

bones imply that all others are interlopers – human or animal – who are not welcome among the jealously protected horde of holy virgins. Such exclusionary parameters could be interpreted as adamantly distinguishing the Holy Virgins from all others – human, saint, and animal alike, but it seems that they also created a scenario in which pious devotees could shape their own identities so as to mystically join the company of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, thereby attaining some of the mark of beatific distinction enjoyed by these myriad role models. Imaginative entry into the ranks of the Holy Virgins, frequently fashioned through the practice of mental pilgrimage in their company, allowed for the Eleven Thousand Virgins to serve as ideal *exempla* for pious behavior, particularly the steadfast retention of convictions of faith and consecrated virginity (or chastity). As such, the Eleven Thousand Virgins provided an ideal example of a religious community – one that surely held great currency for Caesarius of Heisterbach and his novitiates.

Indeed, the sheer abundance of relics of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, which allowed for the display of immense collections such as noted at Altenberg, helped to shape the notion of corporate cohesion expressed by Caesarius of Heisterbach. Though the primacy of St. Ursula as the leader of this holy band was established by the tenth century, she was conceived as the head of a corporate body. As illustrated by Caesarius of Heisterbach's account, as well as innumerable inventories and liturgical texts, this cult was commemorated and referenced as a collective mass – *Undecim millium virginum* (Eleven Thousand Virgins) throughout the medieval period. This group identity both informed, and was informed by, the presentation of their relics, as well as the form of much of the imagery associated with this cult. This study endeavors to explore the phenomenon of this collective imaging, investigating how text, image and relic display worked in concert to fashion a total cult environment that expressed the power, presence and cohesion of this company of the Holy Virgins of Cologne.

Readers will certainly note that I iterate and reiterate this point about the collective identity of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, perhaps ad nauseam. While I beg the reader's forgiveness for any gastronomic discomfort resultant from my relentless assertion of this point, I repeat it precisely because it warrants repeating. This simple concept is a very central tenet of the

entire cult, and as such cannot be overstated. Furthermore, I have found that it is all-too-frequently forgotten, ignored, or simply overlooked in our predilection toward the post-Medieval emphasis on Ursula as the distinct, and individual, namesake of this larger cult. Additionally, I support my repeated emphasis on the corporate nature of the cult in the Middle Ages, by noting that the very repetition of this collectivity seems to be a veritable mantra of the cult – repeated so as to drive the point into the conscience, and even subconscious, of the devotee. In following the practice of the cult, I wish to insure that the notion is similarly inculcated into the reader's understanding. As such, I opt for the repetitions of hagiography over the pithy predilections of secondary source scholarship in pursuing this elucidation of the cult's identity.

We should note the absolute centrality of relics in the development and the presentation of the cult. Text is not the primary directive here, but rather seems to serve the purpose of fleshing-out the bones by providing them with identity, history, and proof of potency. Like the visual arts, text surrounds the central core of the bones, wrapping it in expressions of extended meaning. In many ways, both texts and images work as vestments, garbing the true, corporeal core of relics. Thus the form of the body of the cult is established with the bones dressed in the glorious raiments of the tale's narrative and the lavish imagery fashioned to contain and illustrate the bones' power, presence, and identity. Reliquary heads and hagiographic tales work to express and clarify the basic hagiologic tenets of the cult, as physically maintained in the saints' abundant relics. As much as it is a study of the cult of the Holy Virgins of Cologne, this is additionally a book about the central role played by relics in developing saints' cults and the dynamic relationship between images, relics and audiences in medieval life. Through this focused study on the widespread cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne, I hope to illustrate the value of this method of working outward from the physical, ossific core of the cult. All too often art historians stress an exclusive centrality of images while hagiographers assume the absolute primacy of text. While these foci are both warranted and understandable within these visual and textual disciplines, they tell us more about our own academic predilections than they do about the actual practice of the cult of saints. I offer this volume, not only as a study

of Europe's most widespread relic cult, but also as a template for further investigation of the central role played by relics in shaping and directing textual, visual, and performative expressions of saints' cults.

I have not sought to offer a comprehensive study of the cult, as such a task would be well-nigh impossible given its far-flung nature. Just detailing the location of every relic of the Holy Virgins of Cologne would be a seemingly never-ending task. Though I am proficient enough in mathematics to count to eleven thousand, to enumerate all fragments of these saints would be tantamount to counting to infinity, for the collected relics of the Holy Virgins would not even fit inside an ark made of all the fragments of the True Cross. Instead, I have endeavored to characterize the cult as it was practiced and perceived throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. In doing so, I have chosen to largely maintain a relatively tight focus on the cult's center – Cologne and the Rhineland. As the point of origin, and the beating heart of the cult, Cologne led the development of the liturgical, textual, artistic, and performative natures of the cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins. In concentrating attention on the cult's core, I have endeavored to investigate the visual culture of the Holy Virgins in Cologne, following the theory that, more often than not, saints' cults radiate outward from their home base. What establishes this base, or cult center, is the presence of relics. My contention is that the visual culture, as well as the textual development, of the cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins was predicated by the central role of relics. Each development within the legend or material culture of the cult was prompted by the desire to respond to this ossific core – to explain new discoveries of relics, to flesh-out effective means of visualizing the significance of these relics, and to fashion means of understanding for the audiences of this relic cult. While some discussion of more widely distributed works of art is offered, it is by no means intended to be comprehensive. As I have attempted to demonstrate, other loci tended to follow the model established in Cologne, albeit with localized variations on artistic traditions. I posit that the conceptual framework of the cult, as developed in Cologne, became the driving force in the development of visual culture of the Eleven Thousand Virgins as expressed throughout Europe and beyond.

This book is organized to serve as both a unified volume and a collection of studies. Each study is related to the rest forming a complete picture – thus the notion of “pars pro toto” is at work in the very organization of the book. I would like to think that this maintenance of the spirit of the cult within a study of its permutations somehow lends an air of working from within the cult, despite the fact that the author would surely be cast forth from the company like an unwelcome equine spine. The intention is to begin with the relics and legend and work outward. To my mind, saints’ cults begin with their bodies, specifically with their precious, preserved bodies – their relics. Virtually all other facets of the cult emanate from this core of bones. The cult of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins is no different, as it seems that even the development and mutation of the legend was predicated by the revelation of holy bones. Furthermore, the design and ornamentation of their titular church, as well as their physiognomic reconstruction via reliquary busts were but visual extensions of this desire to flesh-out the accepted truths housed within those bones. That some of these reliquary images were incorporated into larger altarpieces is hardly surprising, as this allowed the saints to participate in grander theological, liturgical and ecclesiological narratives. Narrative cycles of the Holy Virgins’ tale fleshed-out the truth of the story as well as the origin and significance of the relics. These visual expressions of the cult successfully inspired, shaped, and enhanced the pious (and perhaps impious) performance of devotion. Finally, I note how the ubiquitous presence of Ursula and her companions in Cologne led to their incorporation into the pantheon of civic protectors and even into the symbolic face of the city – the civic coat of arms. By way of tracing both continuity and change within the cult in the Early Modern period, I close with a look at the use of relics in a rather shocking decorative function – as pietistic intent and Baroque decorative aesthetic fuse in the *Goldene Kammer* of Sankt Ursula. As such, it is an epic story, but a story that begins (and ends) with a mass of holy bones.

Interestingly, the two most art-historically well-known works of art related to the cult are both creations of the late fifteenth century – Hans Memling’s *Shrine of St. Ursula* for the Hospital of St. John in Bruges and Vittore Carpaccio’s *Cycle of St. Ursula* for the Scuola Grande di Sant’Orsola in Venice. The renown of these two magnificent cycles is doubtless due

less to their subject matter than to the fame of the artists responsible for them. As such, these are most frequently explored within the monographic context of examining the oeuvre of the individual artist. While there is nothing wrong with such an approach, as each pictorial cycle is indeed a superb and exemplary work of its author, it would also be revelatory to explore the ways in which these images fit within the larger framework of the cult which they purport to illustrate. I propose here to situate these two cycles within this larger framework, examining them not as masterpieces of these noted fifteenth-century painters, though masterpieces they are, but as manifestations of the visual culture of the cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne. Both cycles were made in conjunction with relics – either directly in the case of the Memling cycle which adorns a reliquary, or indirectly in the case of the Carpaccio cycle which adorns the walls of a confraternal chapel which held relics. In both cases, these great pictorial epics help to explicate the significance and presence of these very relics – a phenomenon very much in keeping with the larger impetus to imagery within the cult, as I hope to demonstrate.

While it need not surprise us that these two most noted works related to the cult come from the hands of famed fifteenth-century artists, it does bear comment. On the one hand, the apogee of the cult's proliferation and visual articulation occurred during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It therefore seems right that the works which put this cult on the general art-historical radar act as the visual culmination of this development. However, it is also curious that these two works come not from the cult's center, but rather are evidence of its spread to outlying areas. Even though these two locations – Bruges and Venice – were significant as rising urban centers and hubs of commerce, it is still an uncontestable fact that neither was the center of the cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins. This honor goes to Cologne, and Cologne alone. As such, it seems worthwhile to begin with the core, examining how the cult was formulated and articulated in Cologne. Along with the extensive export of relics of the Holy Virgins of Cologne, so too went the concept of corporate cohesion as well as the visual articulation of the cult's central tenets in both iconic and narrative formulae. To be sure, each location had its own specific idiom of representation, as clearly illustrated in works made in Carpaccio's Venice and

Memling's Bruges. However, I posit that in each case, the local tendencies, styles, and penchants were put to use so as to articulate on a locally tangible level the overarching core of belief and practice that constituted the unifying element of the practice of the cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne. These central ideas originated, like the cult itself, in Cologne. Prompted by the abundance of relics, the visual and textual manifestations of the cult were formulated, amended, and clarified in the host city – the city of the Holy Virgins.

In asserting this radiation of influence, I am not arguing a center-periphery point here, as much as trying to articulate a phenomenon of origin and dissemination. While in many ways this parallels the concept of the primacy of the center and the relatively dependent status of the peripheral regions, we should not see the outlying locations as purely dependent, but rather as loci for the fascinating translation of ideas imported from the center into a language – visual and cultural – that is cogent and lucid to the audience of the supposed periphery, which in point of fact is its own center. The Memling shrine and Carpaccio cycle are excellent cases in point, as each demonstrates the adept way in which the local artist could successfully flesh-out the tale and its imagery to suit local demands. If there be a center implied in this study, it would be the adamant center of bones – the relics which provide the skeletal armature for the cult of saints. Following this, the periphery implied here consists of ink, parchment, wood, metal, and paint – the materials with which the accretion of textual and visual articulation of the relics' significance was wrought. Without these bones, the cult would be ... spineless.