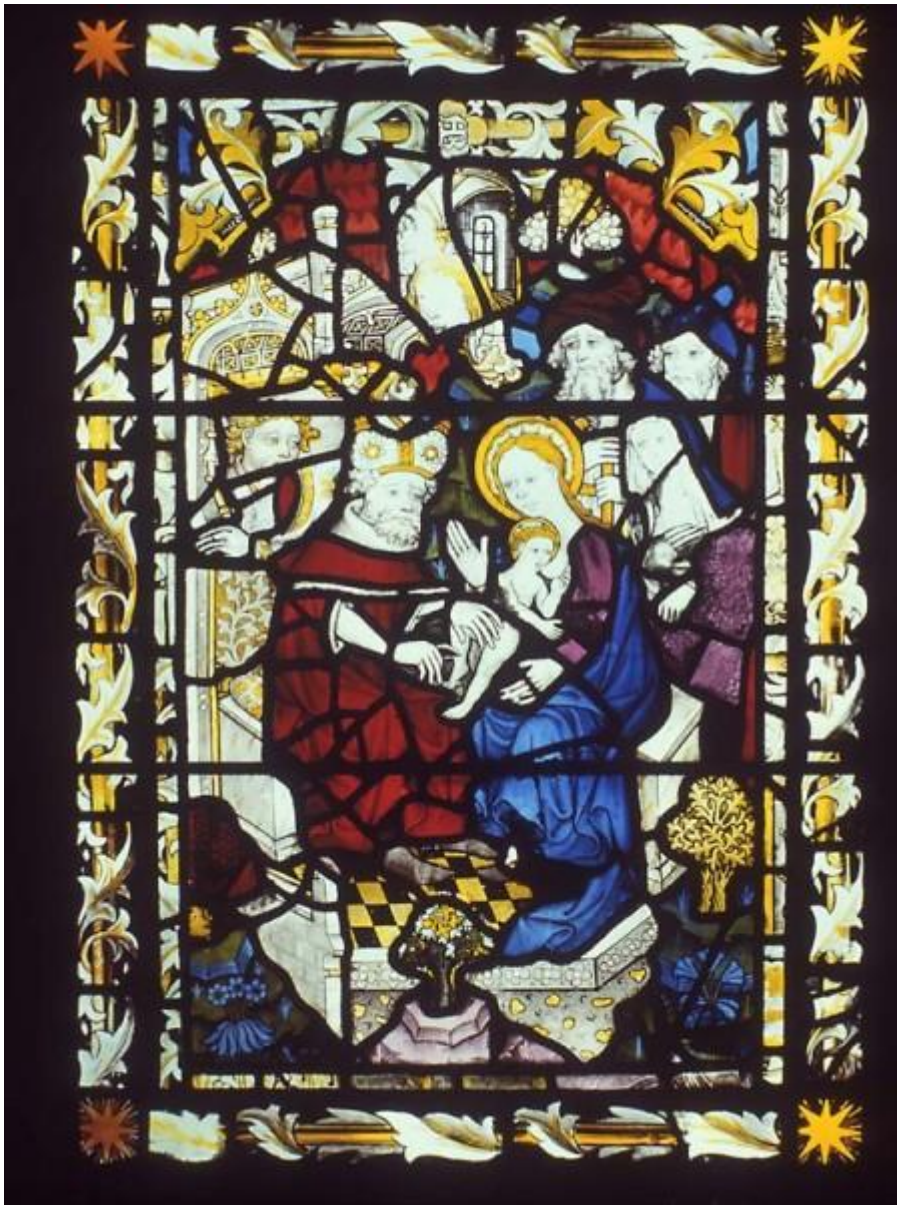


Exposing Body Parts in Norwich: The Circumcision of Christ, St Peter Mancroft



The Virgin Mary breastfeeding the Christ Child at his Circumcision in the east window of St Peter Mancroft, Norwich, is rather charming in its portrayal of the tenderness between mother and son. Supported on his mother's right knee, the child twists his upper torso away from the knife, clutching at his mother's breast with his left hand and holding on to her belly with the other as he suckles. However, sentiment does not appear to have been the primary intention of this fifteenth-century version of the scene. Leo Steinberg's book on the iconography of Christ's naked body has drawn attention to the theological meanings underpinning naturalistic representations of the Virgin and Child. His attention to the manhood of Christ is particularly relevant here. Beth Williamson's more recent investigation of depictions of the lactating Virgin offers further insight into the symbolic value of the relationship between Christ and his mother. It is therefore important to consider this panel in the context of these two studies. It is the recent publication of the late medieval stained glass at St Peter Mancroft by David King that has made it possible to understand this choice of pose in its immediate context. Indeed, this seemingly minor detail of the Circumcision composition fits remarkably well into King's reconstruction of the Toppes Window of which it once formed part.

The unusual subject of the Circumcision of Christ, rare in the early medieval period, became more common in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Later on, it would feature prominently in Protestant art because of its theological associations with baptism as a rite of initiation. In the period in question however its

popularity was largely due to its associations with the cult of the Virgin Mary and with popular devotion to Christ's Passion. This is because the shedding of Christ's blood in the act of circumcision was understood to foreshadow the Passion. For this reason it was considered one of the Sorrows of the Virgin, and the knife sometimes featured amongst late medieval depictions of the Instruments of the Passion. In the representation of the event in the glass of St Peter Mancroft, the knife is at the centre of the composition and the Virgin Mary is prominently figured (see the main picture). The Virgin Mary sits opposite the *mohel* or Jewish specialist trained in the ritual and procedure of circumcision, who brandishes the knife as he leans in towards the child on her knee. Although both figures are seated, she is taller than the *mohel*, a fact accentuated by the length of her robe, which hangs over the edge of the checkered pedestal and has the effect of further elongating her figure.

Christ's circumcision is mentioned in the gospel of St Luke: 'And after eight days were accomplished, that the child should be circumcised, his name was called Jesus, which was called by the angel, before he was conceived in the womb' (Luke, II: 21). In accordance with Jewish practice, Christ's circumcision is said to have taken place on the eighth day after the birth. As the circumcision was also the occasion for the naming of the child, the event is associated with the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. Richard Pfaff has traced the precocious development of this new feast in late medieval England. Its commemoration began as a devotional cult progressing by stages from votive mass to regular feast, and various genuine as well as spurious indulgences were attached to the Jesus Mass. Pfaff cites an early fifteenth-century missal from the diocese of Norwich (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hatton MS 1, f.219v) as an example of the extravagance of some of these indulgences: 'whoever celebrates the mass, or causes it to be celebrated, for thirty days will not die ... In addition, for each such mass three thousand years' indulgence is granted.' The popularity of the feast was manifested in Jesus guilds and richly furnished Jesus altars.

David King has suggested that the panel of the Circumcision of Christ, along with other events that emphasize the name of Jesus, functioned to identify the liturgical focus of the altar that stood in front of the Toppes Window. Antiquarian sources locate the panel in the east window of the north chancel chapel, where the altar was dedicated to St John the Baptist. However the Mass of St John features only twice in the wills examined by King compared to twenty-nine references to the Mass of the Name of Jesus. The Jesus Mass was therefore the principal liturgy for this location in the church. King has further deduced that the altar was unlikely to have been furnished with a retable prior to the sixteenth century. Instead, he argues that the window may have functioned 'as a kind of gigantic retable' alluding to the Mass of the Name of Jesus through the organization of its pictorial content.



Fig. 1. St Peter Mancroft, Norwich: the east window.



Fig. 2. St Peter Mancroft, Norwich: the Virgin and Child at the Adoration of the Magi.



Fig. 3. St Peter Mancroft, Norwich: the Massacre of the Innocents.

The Circumcision of Christ is currently in the east window of St Peter Mancroft along with most of the other surviving medieval glass from the church, brought together there from all over the building (Fig. 1). In his CVMA volume on the church, David King proposed how this and other surviving panels could have originally fitted into the five-light window in the east wall of the north chancel chapel, and deduced the subjects of lost panels. His reconstruction is based upon the surviving glass and antiquarian descriptions from before the disruption of the glazing scheme and relocation of surviving glass into the east window. Coats of arms and portraits of the donor and his family occupied the lowest register of the window. The sequence of subjects across the next five registers together constitute a public life of the Virgin, with events surrounding the birth and infancy of Christ in the second and third registers, and the death, funeral and Assumption of the Virgin in the fourth, fifth and sixth registers. They form a chronological sequence when read from left to right and bottom to top. As with Gothic narrative windows, the arrangement also serves to emphasize additional relationships between the events depicted. Thus the Virgin presenting the infant Christ to the Magi could be contrasted with the appalling treatment of the unfortunate infants in the Massacre of the Innocents above it (Figs 2 and 3). The central light can also be said to provide something of a synopsis of the window's meaning, containing as it does (from bottom to top) the Nativity, Joseph's Dream(?), the Virgin handing the palm to St John, the conversion of the Jew at her funeral, and finally the Assumption. The Circumcision panel is placed in the third register of left-hand light, directly above the Annunciation. The descriptions of these two events in the gospel of St Luke both mention the name of Jesus. The scene of the conversion of the Jew in the centre light contained a scroll announcing '*ecce credo in Jhesum*' (from an antiquarian description), and thus the Annunciation and Circumcision can be seen as leading towards the Conversion panel in an upward arc on the theme of the name of Jesus. This is significant for King's interpretation of the window, as he relates the conversion of the Jew to recent political events involving the donor in Norwich. This is not however the only way in which this panel relates to other subjects in the window. The meaning of this panel in the larger window has multiple layers.

David King has compared the composition of the Circumcision panel in St Peter Mancroft with a roof boss of the same date in Salle Church, Norfolk. John Salmon has photographed [this carving](#) for the Norfolk Churches website. The correspondences include the number of figures, details of costume and the act of breastfeeding at the Circumcision; the pointed hat of the auxiliary female figure behind the Virgin Mary is particularly distinctive. The degree of similarity, says King, is perhaps evidence of a common model, probably in the form an illuminated manuscript. He cites the purchase of an illuminated Apocalypse

manuscript associated with the production of the extensive scheme of roof bosses in the cloister of Norwich Cathedral. However, the two versions of the scene in glass and wood differ in their portrayal of the Infant Christ's naked body. While one might reasonably expect the depiction of Christ's penis in the scene of his circumcision, it is avoided at Salle. The child's lower body is depicted in profile with his left leg concealing his genitals. Their display in the scene in St Peter Mancroft cannot be traced to the model with certainty. If the two versions of the scene are so familiar, it is intriguing that they differ in this regard.

At St Peter Mancroft, in the panel of the Presentation in the Temple that follows the Circumcision in King's reconstruction, the infant Christ is dressed in a long white robe (Fig. 4). Representations of the infant in the window prior to the Presentation depict him in the nude (Figs 5 and 2). Although the sex of the child is displayed in the scenes of the Circumcision and Nativity (main picture and Fig. 5), in the scene of the Adoration of the Magi the infant curiously lacks genitals (Fig. 2); the infants in the panel above this scene (in the Massacre of the Innocents) are also depicted as sexless (Fig. 3). David King has compared the manner in which the Virgin Mary presents her child to the Magi with the manner in which a priest would present the consecrated host to his congregation. However, an interpretation of the differences in the representation of his anatomy between this and other panels in the window has not yet been advanced.

Leo Steinberg's perceptive analysis of the iconography of Christ's body in Renaissance art, especially his infant body, has done much to re-sensitize modern viewers to the theological meanings behind naturalistic scenes. Steinberg wrote particularly about the significance of Christ's genitals in depictions of the Virgin and Child and the Crucifixion. On the most obvious level, Christ's manhood was important evidence of his incarnation as a human being; it signified his humanity. It also coincided with practices amongst the nobility of displaying the sex of newborn sons. Sergio Bertelli has remarked upon this practice with reference to depictions of the Adoration of the Magi in medieval and Renaissance art, referring to a number of works that depict the Magi inspecting the infant. However, as we have just observed, the Adoration in St Peter Mancroft avoids such display, even though this is a central feature of the Nativity and Circumcision scenes (Figs 2, 5 and main picture). What unites the latter two panels, however, is that they are both representations of the nursing Madonna.



Fig. 4. Felbrigg Hall (Norfolk): the Presentation.



Fig. 5. St Peter Mancroft, Norwich: the Nativity.



Fig. 6. St Peter Mancroft, Norwich: Robert Toppes and family.

The depiction of the Virgin Mary's breast has also been a subject of art-historical study. In her history of the breast in western art, Marilyn Yalom reviewed the range of possible causal factors that have been suggested for the popularity of the nursing Madonna, particularly in fourteenth-century Italy. These include food shortage, the practice of wet-nursing, changes to women's costume, the new focus on earthly experience, and the increasing naturalism of Renaissance art. More recently, Beth Williamson has analysed the range of meanings behind specific types of the *Virgo lactans*. Her account of the concept of double intercession is relevant here. This refers to images of the lactating Virgin and Christ with his wounds side-by-side. The Virgin Mary's power to intercede on behalf of human souls was strongly associated with her maternal relationship to Christ. In images of the double intercession type, the Virgin is paralleled with Christ as the Man of Sorrows, whose wounds are also an outward sign of his ability to intercede on behalf of humanity. Thus the Virgin's lactating breast and Christ's wounds are presented as equivalent signs of their ability to secure salvation. This correspondence was popularized in a number of medieval texts, including the early fourteenth-century *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*.

Returning to Norwich, the exposed body parts are not only at the centre of the composition, but are the objects being acted upon. The *mohel* is about to circumcise Christ, who is suckling at the Virgin's breast. These two actions are emphasized by the positions of the three pairs of hands of the main figures, which serve to direct the viewer's gaze. We can perhaps interpret the visual parallel as being between Christ's circumcision as a proto-Passion wound and the nursing Madonna, and therefore a kind of double intercession image. Both body parts have salvific potency.

The subject of the panel in Norwich is Christ's circumcision, but he is not the main figure in this version of the scene. As already mentioned, the Virgin is taller than the mohel, and she towers over the child cradled in her lap. She is the most frequent figure in the two registers of scenes relating to the Infancy of Christ, and her death is the subject of the extended narrative in the upper half of the window. David King rightly describes the subject of the window as a public life of the Virgin. The window thus explains the miraculous circumstances of her death in terms of her service in the Incarnation. David King has identified the text on the donor's scroll as the third verse of the hymn 'Veni creator spiritus', which appears at Prime, Terce, Sext and None in the Little Office of the Virgin: '*Maria plena gratie mater mi(sericordi)e tu nos ab (h)os[te]/p(ro)tege i(n) (h)ora mort[is] su(s)cipe*' ('Mary full of grace, mother of mercy, protect us from the enemy and take us up at the hour of death'). The desire to receive forewarning of death, as the Virgin had received, was a particular feature of devotion to the Virgin Mary in late medieval England. The petition on the scroll held by the window's donor attests to this in addressing the Virgin's assistance at the time of death (Fig. 6).

The intention of the donor's petition best relates to the panels in the first light of the window. The first two panels identify the person to whom the petition is addressed, the Virgin Mary, as handmaiden of Christ in her acceptance of the incarnation at the Annunciation and as double intercessor with Christ at his Circumcision. The angel announcing her imminent death is the forewarning so much desired in late medieval piety. The final two panels are scenes of the rituals of death that the donor could expect for himself: the Virgin's funeral and the disciples' vigil at her tomb. This alternative reading of the panel of the Circumcision of Christ in St Peter Mancroft unites a discrete set of narrative panels across the first light of the window, reinforcing the Virgin Mary as the primary subject of the window. The St Peter Mancroft

Circumcision of Christ therefore presents a meaningful version of the subject for this particular commission in more ways than one.

Rosie Mills

Further Reading

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