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## CARNAL CONSUMPTION, MIRACULOUS DELIVERANCE

*Saint Margaret and Caesarean Section in the Late Middle Ages*

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Saint Margaret of Antioch was one of the most popular saints in late medieval Europe, largely due to her status as patron saint of childbirth. Depictions of Saint Margaret's confrontation with a dragon populated the visual landscape in Books of Hours, birthing amulets, devotional sculpture, and altarpieces. These images most often centered on the moment in which the devil, disguised as a dragon, swallows the saint and then bursts open to release her. The moment of Margaret's miraculous emergence from the dragon's body was understood as a form of metaphorical rebirth, a reading that contributed to the saint's perceived effectiveness as an intercessor on behalf of parturient women.

One representative example of these late medieval representations of Margaret and the Dragon is the oak sculpture from fifteenth-century France that is on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Fig. 1). The saint's body is emphatically vertical as she rises out of the dragon's back, her expression calm though her lower half remains trapped within the beast's abdomen.

Despite the stillness evoked by her posture, the swiftness of

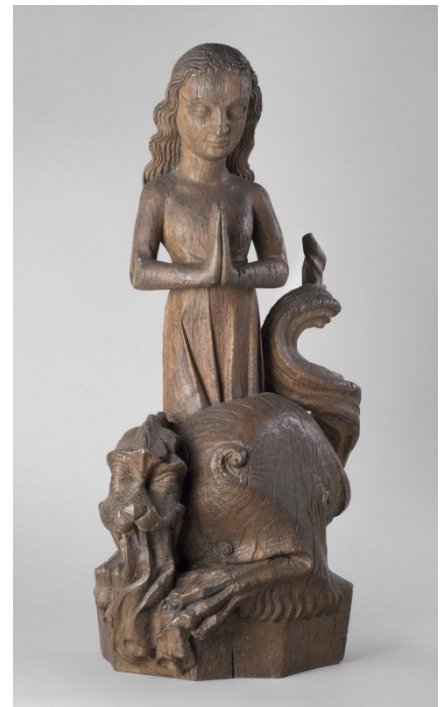


Figure 1

Margaret's release is indicated by the fact that the bottom of her dress still hangs out of the dragon's mouth – this is a moment of simultaneous consumption and deliverance. Margaret's dress fits closely to her body, the folds of her skirt compressed by the sides of the dragon's almond-shaped wound. This wound is clearly visible, and its sharp, smooth edges are remarkable in their neatness.

It is this neatness that is dissonant; where the narratives describe bursting—a violent rupture of the dragon's body—visual representations of the dragon resist hagiographers' descriptions, and are instead united by surgically precise openings instead of ragged wounds. I will argue that Margaret's unnatural emergence from the dragon, along with her intercessory association with birth, leads to the incorporation of caesarean imagery into representations of her miracle. The neat, almond-shaped wounds on the dragons' bodies echo contemporaneous images of the abdominal incisions made during the operation, a connection that is reinforced by narrative parallels between Margaret's experience and that of a child delivered via caesarean section. Specifically, I will explore the ways in which visual allusions to caesarean section in several public devotional sculptures of Saint Margaret from late medieval France and England engender a semiotic chain of signification that prompts viewers to credit Margaret with a broader range of intercessory capabilities and contemplate parallels between the narratives of Margaret and Christ.

### **The Legend of Saint Margaret**

According to the text of the *Golden Legend*, just prior to her martyrdom, Saint Margaret asked that “any woman who invoked her aid when faced with a difficult labor would give birth to a healthy child,” drawing upon her own miraculous delivery to establish herself as an ideal intercessor for women in labor to call upon when concerned for their child's life.<sup>1</sup> Margaret's *Vita* was understood to possess such power that copies were used as amulets to ensure safe and successful labor. This

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, “Saint Margaret” in *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 368.

practice was especially popular in late medieval England and France.<sup>2</sup> The *Legenda Aurea*, or *Golden Legend*, a tremendously popular compendium of medieval saints' lives written by Jacobus de Voragine, will serve here as the standard version of Margaret's narrative. It was one of the most influential texts in the later Middle Ages, with over one thousand surviving copies of the Latin text and about five hundred manuscripts with complete or partial translations in various European vernaculars remaining extant.<sup>3</sup> The breadth of the text's audience makes it an ideal standard narrative for Margaret's life because it is the one for which scholars can establish the broadest dissemination.

According to legend, Saint Margaret lived in Antioch during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian (284-305 CE).<sup>4</sup> One day, Margaret catches the eye of a Roman prefect named Olybrius. Margaret rejects Olybrius's marriage proposal, and, upon learning that Margaret is a Christian, Olybrius throws her in jail. Jacobus de Voragine goes on to describe the various and sundry tortures that are inflicted upon Margaret's body, and her willingness to endure such suffering as a demonstration of her faith. On her second night in prison, Margaret pleads for the Lord to reveal her tormentor, and a dragon appears in her cell.

Jacobus recounts Margaret's famed confrontation with this dragon in two versions – one of which he approves and the other of which he dismisses as apocryphal and “not to be taken seriously.”<sup>5</sup> In the sanctioned version of the miracle, the dragon moves to swallow Margaret, but she makes the sign of the cross and banishes the dragon before it attacks her. In the apocryphal version of the story, the dragon successfully swallows the saint. Margaret then makes the sign of the cross from within the body of the beast, causing “the dragon [to] burst open” and allowing “the virgin to emerge unscathed”

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<sup>2</sup> Don Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 235-278.

<sup>3</sup> Eamon Duffy, “Introduction,” in *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, xi.

<sup>4</sup> Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of the Saints*.

<sup>5</sup> Jacobus de Voragine 2012, 368.

from its body.<sup>6</sup> Despite Jacobus's skepticism, it is this second version of the story that became the source for nearly all visual representations of the saint. This is no doubt because it provides a more visually compelling narrative and because Margaret's status as victor is more readily apparent in her emergence directly from the dragon's eviscerated body.

The following morning, the legend continues, Margaret is stripped naked by her captors and burned with torches. A Roman judge then places her in a tub of water to "increase [her] suffering by varying the pain," but "suddenly the earth shook," the tub was broken, and "the virgin came out unharmed."<sup>7</sup> Saint Margaret's submersion in a tub of water and subsequent re-emergence are clear references to the Christian ritual of baptism.<sup>8</sup> Margaret then identifies herself as an intercessor for parturient women who wish to protect their children, and is publicly executed.

Two important elements in Margaret's story – namely entrapment within and violent release from another body, and baptism immediately prior to death – find parallels in the medieval medical practice of caesarean section. In the case of Saint Margaret, both the text's description of her miraculous delivery from the body of the dragon and her role as patron saint of childbirth made her exceptionally well-suited to iconographic allusions to the operation, as Elina Gertsman and Cynthia Nazarian have argued previously in connection to a print of Saint Margaret.<sup>9</sup> I seek to expand upon their assertion by demonstrating how caesarean operations shed light on the parallels between Margaret's emergence from the dragon and the narrative of Christ's Harrowing of Hell – another

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<sup>6</sup> Jacobus de Voragine 2012, 369.

<sup>7</sup> Jacobus de Voragine 2012, 370.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret's miraculous emergence from the tub also results in the instantaneous conversion of the crowd of spectators, furthering the baptismal connotations of the scene. It is possible that a reader would also draw an anachronistic connection between the bursting of the tub and a woman's water breaking during childbirth—the timeline is not entirely consistent since the metaphorical birth out of the dragon occurs the evening before. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), 2 and 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Elina Gertsman and Cynthia Nazarian, "Performing Childbirth: On the Life of Saint Margaret," NEH Ritual and Ceremony Summer Institute and the Folger Library.

episode involving consumption, miraculous egress, and salvation. Although allusions to caesarean section in images of Saint Margaret appear in various types of media throughout Europe, I will focus specifically on sculptural representations of Margaret and the dragon from late medieval England and France.

### Caesarean Section and Medieval Obstetrics

Caesarean sections have an exceptionally long history in the world of obstetrics, albeit in a decidedly different form than their modern iteration.<sup>10</sup> Up until the late sixteenth century, caesarean sections were performed exclusively on the corpses of mothers who had failed to deliver their children while alive. They were undertaken in the hope that the infant might be saved – at least spiritually, through baptism, if not bodily.<sup>11</sup> Like Margaret, infants delivered by caesarean section received the sacrament immediately after the operation and just before their (usually imminent) death. Since the primary goal of caesarean section in the Middle Ages was to ensure baptism, the medical procedure came to be inextricably linked to spiritual salvation, and thus became a concern for the Church.<sup>12</sup> For example, Parisian Archbishop Odon de Sully (1196-1208) was the first church official to recommend that a caesarean section be performed to save a child should the mother die before the child's delivery.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the Council of Canterbury in 1236 dictated that, should the mother die during

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<sup>10</sup> The oldest allusion to caesarean section comes from the second millennium BCE in Mesopotamia, and the oldest direct evidence dates to 715 BCE, where it appears in legal code. Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Live caesarean sections did not become the subject of debate in medical circles until the late sixteenth-century. Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 2 and 26-27, 38-46.

<sup>12</sup> Not without some anxiety on the part of clergy, however. There was debate over whether midwives should be permitted to perform emergency baptisms, which were supposed to be the exclusive purview of ordained clergy. In the end, midwives were granted the privilege to perform emergency baptisms, and parish priests instructed midwives on the proper procedure. Monica Green, *Women's Healthcare in the Medieval West: Texts and Contexts* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Variorum, 2000), IV, 57.

<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the first medieval visual representation of caesarean section does not appear until 1300, and the first explicit mention of the operation in a medieval medical text dates to 1305. Blumenfeld-Kosinski suggests that the relaxation of taboos relating to dissection, dating to the late thirteenth century, may have led to artists feeling comfortable with rendering the body's interior as visible, and thus to illustrate caesarean birth for the first time. France's flourishing university system and medical curriculum may be responsible for the localized nature of these milestones. The first medical text to reference a caesarean operation was Bernard of Gordon's *Practica sive liliun medicinae*. Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 24-30.





Figure 2

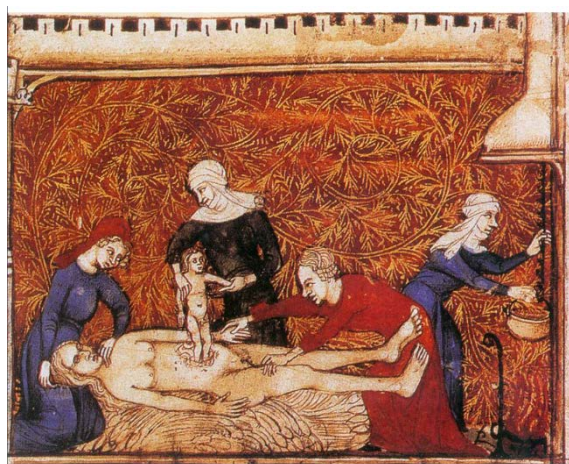


Figure 3

childbirth, her child ought to be extracted. The council also urged women to confess before going into labor and midwives to prepare water for emergency baptisms.<sup>14</sup>

Medieval depictions of caesarean operations are most commonly found not in medical texts, as one might expect, but in secular histories of the Roman Empire such as the *Faits des Romains* and French translations of Caesar's *Commentaries*.<sup>15</sup> The inhabited initial from a fourteenth-century copy of the *Faits des Romains*, for example, shows the moment of Julius Caesar's famed surgical delivery from his mother's corpse (Fig. 2). Caesar's mother is nude and reclining, and a midwife holds one of her lifeless arms out of the way of the second attendant, who extracts the child's body from the incision in the mother's

abdomen. The second attendant still holds the surgical knife, which is poised disconcertingly close to the infant's delicate flesh. In both this image and the miniature found in the fifteenth-century version of the *Faits des Romains* (Fig. 3), the caesarean incision is shown as a mandorla, or almond-shaped wound, much like the one out of which Margaret emerges in the fifteenth-century French sculpture (see Fig. 1).

<sup>14</sup> Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Katharine Park argues that images of Caesar's birth were the only models available of a nude female corpse whose uterus was open for inspection or dissection prior to Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica*. Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 240; Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 54-59, 61-90, and 161.

The primary difference between the two manuscript illuminations is the presence of a male surgeon amongst the midwives in the later miniature (Fig. 3). Births were typically attended solely by midwives unless complications presented themselves, at which point a male surgeon or barber would be called in; surgery, in general, was considered to be a last resort and not a privileged form of treatment, a sentiment that gradually changed in the later Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup> Although birth had long been understood as a private act that took place in interior spaces dominated by women, male doctors and surgeons began to assume a more prominent role in the birthing chamber over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as medical training was increasingly codified at universities.<sup>17</sup> The act of birth no longer resided strictly within the female sphere, and men had increasing intellectual and physical access to birthing chambers and the “secret” workings of female bodies. Thus, the audience who would have been familiar with caesarean operations and capable of recognizing them was expanded.

It is important to understand that, throughout the Middle Ages and into the early modern period, caesarean sections were not understood to be “births” per se. Children delivered via caesarean section were designated as “unborn” or even “not of woman born,” due to the paradoxical and strange nature of their entry into the world.<sup>18</sup> Since caesarean sections bypassed the birth canal – the expected pathway through which a fetus would exit the female body – the operation was seen to subvert the God-given function of female anatomical organs. In this way, the children were not, strictly speaking, born from a woman. Furthermore, as the children were taken from a corpse and their mothers did not *enact* or participate in their birth, it made sense to refer to the infants as “unborn” or “nonborn.”

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<sup>16</sup> Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 32, 91-119; Monica Green, *Women's Healthcare in the Medieval West: Texts and Contexts*, IV, 57.

<sup>17</sup> Monica Green and Daniel Lord Smail, “The Trial of Floreta d’Ays (1403): Jews, Christians, and Obstetrics in Later Medieval Marseilles,” *Journal of Medieval History* 34 (2008): 189; see also Monica Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine: the Rise of Male Authority in Pre-Modern Gynecology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1990, 1.

Caesarean operations, then, occupied a liminal zone between surgical operations and childbirth, performed by a surgeon or barber instead of a midwife, that nonetheless resulted in a child's emergence from the body of a woman into the world.

The children delivered via caesarean section were not only given a label that set them apart from the rest of society, but were also thought to be marked for a special destiny. In their work on the monstrous body, Asa Mittman and Susan Kim have commented on the way that Margaret, by placing herself "beside, or within, the body of the beast" ultimately "reminds us of the similarity the saint bears to that creature," as a non-normative body of spectacular power.<sup>19</sup> Both Margaret's ability to survive passage through the dragon and the dragon's ability to perform an unnatural generative act identify them as non-normative bodies with extraordinary capabilities. The legend's iconographic connection to caesarean section, by extension, also identifies children who survive the operation as privileged or non-normative beings. The unique status that these unborn infants were afforded is further manifested in the degree of agency ascribed to them as they issue from their mother's abdomen. In images, the child emerges upright and aware as though actively participating in his or her own delivery, perhaps taking over once the mother is no longer capable of action. The similarity between the rigid verticality of the infant's body in the figuration of caesarian sections is remarkably similar to Margaret's posture as she emerges from the dragon (*cf.* Figs. 1 and 3). These similarities suggest an understanding of the metaphorical kinship between the saint and the unborn infants, who are joined by their miraculous emergences.

Saint Margaret's ability to survive her rebirth from the dragon's body would have resonated with medieval Christians who prayed to her for the safe delivery of their own children. Birth was always a risky venture for mother and child, even before any complications. At stake was the child's spiritual

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<sup>19</sup> Asa Mittman and Susan Kim, "Monsters and the Exotic in Early Medieval England," *Literature Compass* 6 (2009): 12-13.

salvation, more so than his or her physical survival. While the imagery of Margaret and the dragon could, and did, serve an apotropaic function during vaginal birth, the allusion to caesarean operations may have provided additional assurance of Margaret's intercession should the mother die during labor and surgical intervention thus become necessary.<sup>20</sup>

### Carnal Consumption: Mother as Monster

Although Elina Gertsman and Cynthia Nazarian have previously argued for identification of the dragon with a male aggressor, for the men and women who recognized the indexing of caesarean operations in the form of the dragon's wound, the implications would be quite different. On the contrary, if we as viewers are to understand Margaret in the role of miraculously delivered child, then the dragon stands in necessary parallel to the mother.<sup>21</sup> Even as Margaret is upheld as a paragon of feminine virtue – “shining white by her virginity, small by humility” – the imagery of the dragon draws attention to the monstrous aspects of the feminine.<sup>22</sup> As Asa Mittman and Susan Kim state:

The language of the monstrous [...] lay at the very heart of constructions of both the hero and the Christian saint. In these constructions we can see clearly the contradiction integral to the figure of the monstrous “other” in the early Middle Ages: the monstrous “other” is not absolute, stable, or firmly outside of the boundaries of the normative...[but] remains recognizable, strange yet familiar, *a possible version of oneself*.<sup>23</sup>

The same women who prayed to Margaret for her aid in childbirth were in turn confronted with their own reality as daughters of Eve, cursed to endure dangerous and difficult childbirth.

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<sup>20</sup> Note that the mother's physical experience is treated separately from the infant's spiritual safety in a fifteenth-century French prayer to Saint Margaret: “You [Saint Margaret] who called many times on God when your head was going to be cut off, especially so that women who are with child might turn to you wholeheartedly and ask for your help so that God might preserve them from peril and come quickly to their aid. I beg you, honored virgin and noble martyr [...] to pray God for me and ask Him sweetly in his mercy to comfort me in the pains that I must suffer without peril to my soul or body. Let my child be born healthy and safe so that I may see it baptized well and joyfully.” *La Vie de ma dame sainte Marguerite vierge [et] martyre avec son oraison*, (A3r-A8r), trans. Cynthia Nazarian (Washington, D.C.: NEH Summer Institute on Ritual and Ceremony and the Folger Shakespeare Library, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Gertsman and Nazarian focus on the dragon as male aggressor, as identified by its phallic, erect tail in “Performing Childbirth: On the Life of Saint Margaret.”

<sup>22</sup> Jacobus de Voragine 2012, 368.

<sup>23</sup> Mittman and Kim 2009, 2. Emphasis is mine.

The state of women as fallen, sexual creatures was reinforced by natural philosophy; according to humoral theory, women were, as a group, understood to be cold and wet, driven by their very constitution to desire the warm/dry character of the male – to desire sex in particular.<sup>24</sup> Lust was often described in terms of appetite, a connection only heightened by the conflation of female sexual organs, most obviously the labia, with the mouth. Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’s description of female anatomical



Figure 4

organs relies on similes of appetite and hunger: “Her seed runs out from those organs because of delectation just like saliva runs out of the mouth of a starving person.”<sup>25</sup> Martha Easton enumerates a plethora of medieval associations between the mouth and the vagina. These include the writings of physician Henri de Mondeville, who used “*labia*” or “lips” as a means of describing the edges of wounds, and who used the mouth as a model for his descriptions of the vagina.<sup>26</sup> An even more instructive example of the predatory nature of this so-called

“hunger” may be found in the fourteenth-century *dit* “*Les Blasme des Fames*” (“The Vices of Women”): “She’s like a roadside watering hole,/ Attracting each and every soul.../ She’s a hell mouth that is cursed/ With an all-consuming thirst” (Lines 89-100).<sup>27</sup> The female at her most fundamental and dangerous does not lie back and endure sexual congress but actively seeks it out, and indeed has an insatiable appetite for it. The Sheela na-gigs (Fig. 4) that decorated the

<sup>24</sup> Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *Women’s Secrets: a Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’s De secretis mulierum with Commentaries*, ed. Helen Rodnite Lemay. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 62.

<sup>25</sup> Pseudo-Albertus Magnus 1992, 62.

<sup>26</sup> Martha Easton, “The Wound of Christ, The Mouth of Hell: Appropriations and Inversions of Female Anatomy in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Tributes to Jonathan J.G. Alexander: The Making and Meaning of Illuminated Medieval & Renaissance Manuscripts, Art & Architecture*, ed. Susan L’Engle and Gerald Guest (London: Harvey Miller, 2006), 402.

<sup>27</sup> Gloria K. Fiero, Wendy Pfeffer and Mathé Allain, eds. and trans. *Three Medieval Views of Women: La Contenance des fames, Le Bien des Fames, Le Blasme des Fames*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 127.

exteriors of some English churches, with their grotesquely enlarged vaginas with “lips” stretched wide to emphasize the consuming interior of the female sex organ, provide one of the best visualizations of this understanding of the female as driven by appetite to consume—much as the dragon consumes the saint.<sup>28</sup>

Within the narrative, the dragon’s consumption of Margaret through its mouth stands in parallel to Olybrius’s lusty pursuit. Where Olybrius (the male) fails, the dragon (as female) succeeds by force, taking the necessary material into its body through the mouth (vagina) in order to “birth” Margaret. Ultimately, the dragon enacts the role of lustful woman. Louise Lippincott argues that the “characteristics of Margaret's struggle – seduction, passivity, resistance – seem to have been derived from the archetypal encounter between woman and serpent, Eve's temptation in the Garden of Eden.”<sup>29</sup> There is a certain poetic irony in the fact that Eve’s consumption of the apple causes Man’s Fall; her desire (her hunger) is responsible for the painful and hazardous nature of childbirth, which Margaret, as the consumed, protects against.<sup>30</sup>



Figure 5

The connection between female anatomy and the dragon's body is made visually manifest in a fifteenth-century French alabaster sculpture, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 5). A serene Margaret in billowing robes emerges from the dragon’s body via an incision along its spine. The incision bulges

<sup>28</sup> For more on Sheela na-gigs, see Catherine E. Karkov, “Sheela-na-gigs and Other Unruly Women: Images of Land and Gender in Medieval Ireland,” in *From Ireland Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and Its European Context*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton, 2001), 313-331; Anthony Weir and James Jerman, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (London, 1986).

<sup>29</sup> Lippincott 1981, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Gen. 3:16.

around Margaret's body, but its edges are smooth and clearly delineated, resembling not only the vaginal opening during a natural birth, but also, and more emphatically, the surgical abdominal cavity of caesarean operations. The patterned texture of the fabric of Saint Margaret's cloak mimics the scaly texture of the dragon's hide, and the mandorla-like opening in the robe that reveals her body is an echo of the shape of the wound from which she emerges, establishing a compositional parallel between



Figure 6

the body of the saint and the body of the dragon. This same trope appears in another, slightly later, French sculpture of Saint Margaret from the parish church of Saint Germain, near Troyes (Fig. 6).<sup>31</sup> Once again, a calm Margaret emerges from the dragon's back, her eyes cast down demurely. In this sculpture, however, one of Margaret's feet has already emerged from the dragon's body, emphasizing the saint's imminent freedom and triumph. Although the site of Margaret's release is largely obscured by the dragon's wings and the voluminous folds of Margaret's clothing, the soft, concentric v-forms of the drapery clearly emphasize

Saint Margaret's womb, which is further outlined by the mandorla-shaped opening of her cloak. The emphasis that these sculptures place on the female saint's womb reinforces the generative potential that the bodies of Margaret and the dragon share. But whereas Margaret's potential for procreation is never realized because she is chaste (as any good Christian saint ought to be), the dragon's appetite results in an unnatural act of generation.

<sup>31</sup> "Saint Margaret," Victoria and Albert Museum; Charles Avery, *Sculpture from Troyes in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1974), 62-70.

### Harrowing Emergences

The medieval devotees who viewed these images of Margaret within their parish churches and sought her intercessory favor may have drawn associations between Margaret and other figures who experienced or enacted similar miraculous, non-normative births or rebirths. For example, Margaret's emergence from a reptilian body and explicit association with dangerous deliveries may have brought to mind the unnatural birthing methods of other reptiles, who, according to medieval bestiaries, gave birth in strange and violent ways. There is one reptile in particular whose behavioral characteristics align closely with Margaret's narrative, and establish a parallel between the saint and Christ himself. The creature in question is the hydrus, who purposefully enters the body of its enemy, the crocodile, via its open mouth and then, "tearing open the crocodile's intestines, comes out whole and unharmed."<sup>32</sup> Both Margaret and the hydrus are consumed by their enemy, pass through the enemy's body, and enact their own violent release by tearing through the enemy's abdomen. The illustration

of the hydrus's emergence from the crocodile from a thirteenth-century Franco-Flemish bestiary (Fig. 7) shares several elements with sculptural representations of Margaret. The hydrus' rapid passage through the crocodile's body is indicated by the fact that its tail still hangs from the crocodile's mouth, much



Figure 7

like Margaret's robes hang from the dragon's maw in the sculpture from Troyes (see Fig. 6). The hydrus also escapes the crocodile's abdomen through a clean-edged opening in the beast's side, much

<sup>32</sup> *Aberdeen Bestiary*, fol. 69r.



like the wound in the Philadelphia Margaret, and even the caesarean incision in the miniature from a fifteenth-century copy of the *Faits des Romains* (see Figs. 1 and 3).

Moralizing commentaries in medieval bestiaries explicitly likened the hydrus to Christ, and the crocodile to Hell:

For this reason death and hell are symbolised [sic] by the crocodile; their enemy is our Lord Jesus Christ. For taking human flesh, he descended into hell and, tearing open its inner parts, he led forth those who were unjustly held there. He destroyed death itself by rising from the dead.<sup>33</sup>

This episode is known as the Harrowing of Hell, or Christ's Descent into Limbo, and its narrative is derived from the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus and other early Christian patristic writings.<sup>34</sup> According to this narrative, Christ descended into Hell during his three-day interment to free from it those who were deserving of redemption. These individuals were specifically chosen and deemed worthy by God, and distinguished from the rest of those in Hell by their miraculous exodus from the Hell Mouth. Perhaps, by extension, infants born by caesarean section were also thought to survive their ordeal as a result of divine intervention, further establishing their privileged status as souls quite literally saved by God.

The visualization of Hell as an anthropomorphized body that may be entered through a monstrous mouth appears in a variety of media, including manuscript illuminations and sculpture (Figs. 8 and 9). The mouth as the site of entrance to a monstrous body is thus shared by the narratives

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<sup>33</sup> The moralizing commentaries from bestiaries, like the one above, were at times incorporated into the vernacular sermons that came after the Latin liturgy, and so could have been familiar to even illiterate members of society, and thus to the broad swath of people who would have seen these images of Margaret in church. Frances and Joseph Gies, *Daily Life in Medieval Times: A Vivid, Detailed Account of Birth, Marriage and Death; Food Clothing and Housing; Love and Labor in the Middle Ages* (New York: Black Dog and Leventhal, 1990), 292-93; "Bestiary," Getty Museum. The quoted text is from *Aberdeen Bestiary*, fol. 69r.

<sup>34</sup> "Harrowing of Hell," Encyclopedia Britannica Online. For more on the Harrowing of Hell, see Karl Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England*, (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer, 2007); *The Middle-English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus*, ed. William Henry Hulme, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); John S. Howard, "Dialectic and Spectacle in the Harrowing of Hell," *Essays in Literature* 21, no. 1 (1994): 3.

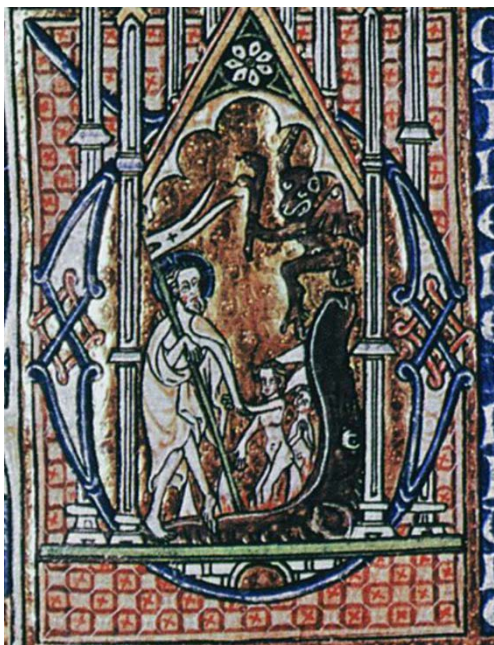


Figure 8



Figure 9

of Margaret and the dragon, the hydrus and the crocodile, and Christ's descent into Hell. Since female sexual promiscuity was associated with appetite and the vagina was conflated with a mouth capable of consumption, the human process of conception (which necessarily preceded a caesarean operation) also involves the entrance of male seed into the female body via a "mouth." As Easton argues, the Hell Mouth in particular was conflated with the vagina, thus rendering Hell itself as a kind of metaphorical womb through which Christ passes before he is resurrected or reborn.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the respective environments in which each of the protagonists (Christ, Margaret, and the infant) are subsequently trapped were understood to be toxic and hostile – Margaret is trapped within a demonic body, Christ enters Hell itself, and even the female body was understood to be inherently dangerous to the fetus during pregnancy. Menstrual blood was believed to be extremely poisonous; according to Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, "if menses touch the twig of a green tree it immediately dries up."<sup>36</sup> Pseudo-

Albertus Magnus goes on to explain that pregnant women did not menstruate because "two veins lead from the womb to the breasts, and thus the menses are transferred to the breasts, where they are

<sup>35</sup> Easton 2006, 395-414.

<sup>36</sup> Pseudo-Albertus Magnus 1992, 75.

cooked and receive the form of milk, and carried back through these veins to nourish the fetus in the mother's womb."<sup>37</sup> Every fetus was nourished by a substance which was necessarily venomous, precisely because it was produced by the fallen female body. Thus, the experience of children who are freed from their mothers' toxic bodies via caesarean section can be likened to Christ's exodus from Hell and Saint Margaret's miraculous release from the demonic body of the dragon.

The dragon's wound, the Hell Mouth, and caesarean incisions all enable a form of non-normative birth or rebirth, and serve as loci for miraculous events. Their semiotic flexibility enables them to function as wounds, mouths, vaginal openings, and generative exit points.<sup>38</sup> The presence of a caesarean-like opening in works like those discussed here may have served more broadly as a visual shorthand for a non-normative generative body – it provided artists with a means of illustrating something that was somehow not-quite-birth. Ultimately, the indexing of caesarean sections establishes Margaret as a Christ-like figure by drawing attention to both Margaret's and Christ's miraculous emergences from toxic environments, much as the unborn infants delivered by caesarean operation were rescued from their mothers' wombs.

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<sup>37</sup> This view was also held by medieval physician Henri de Mondeville: "woman's 'digestive virtue makes[s] the red color turn to white, so that it becomes the same color as the breasts.'" Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, 77; Mondeville quoted in Martha Easton, 399.

<sup>38</sup> Easton comes to a similar conclusion just before her discussion of caesarean incisions: "The perception was that generative acts involved wounding by causing ruptures. A hagiographic parallel is the eruption of St. Margaret from within the belly of the dragon, thus designating her the patron saint of childbirth." Easton, 401.

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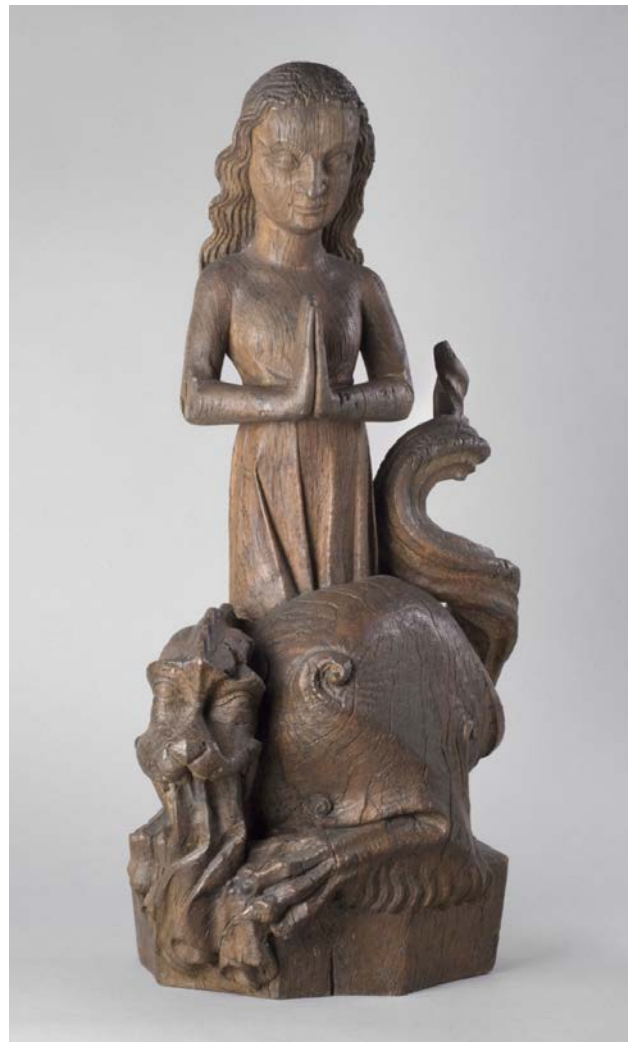


Figure 1  
*Saint Margaret and the Dragon*  
French, 15th century  
Oak  
29 x 14 x 9 inches (73.7 x 35.6 x 22.9 cm)  
Philadelphia Museum of Art  
Accession Number:1929-66-4  
Credit Line: Purchased with funds contributed  
by Mr. and Mrs. Roland L. Taylor, 1929



Figure 2  
*Faits des Romains*  
Initial C, fol. 144r  
1325-1349  
Princeton Library, MS Garrett 128.



Figure 3  
*Faits des Romains*  
fol. 197r: "Birth of Julius Caesar"  
15th cent.  
Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, ms. fr. 3576.

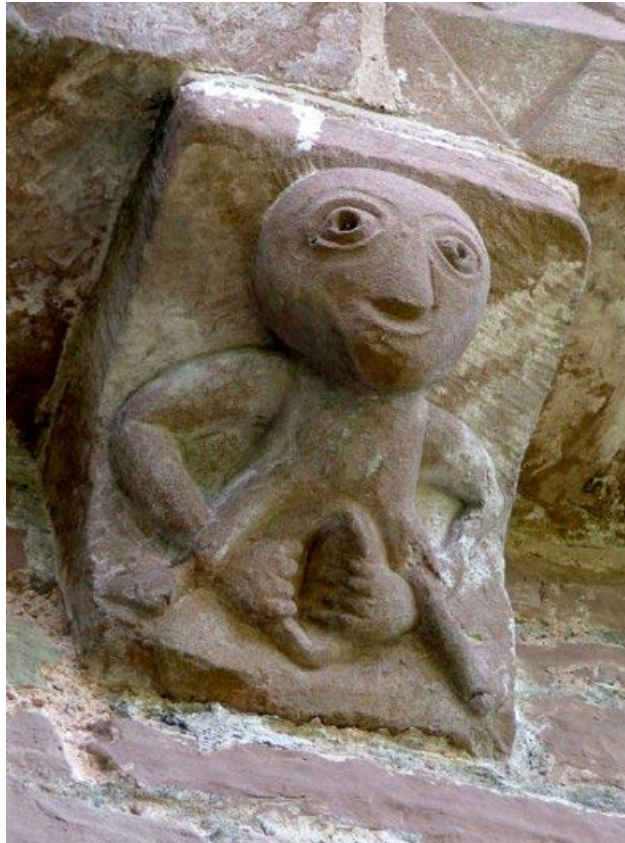


Figure 4  
Sheela na-gig  
12th century, English  
Stone  
Church at Kilpeck, Hertfordshire, England.



Figure 5  
*Saint Margaret*  
ca. 1475.  
French. (Toulouse?)  
Alabaster, traces of gilding.  
15 3/8 x 9 5/8 x 6 9/16 in.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of  
Anthony and Lois Blumka, in memory of  
Ruth and Victoria Blumka, 2000 (2000.641).





Figure 6  
*Saint Margaret and the Dragon*  
Troyes, France  
1530-1540  
carved limestone  
Height: 113 cm, Width: 46.8 cm, Depth: 33 cm  
Victoria and Albert, A.4-1947  
Originally from the parish church of Saint Germain, near Troyes.



Figure 7  
"A Crocodile and a Hydrus"  
Franco-Flemish  
ca. 1270  
Tempera, gold leaf and ink on parchment.  
Leaf: 19.1 x 14.3 cm (7 1/2 x 5 5/8 in.)  
J. Paul Getty Museum, MS Ludwig XV 3, fol. 84v.

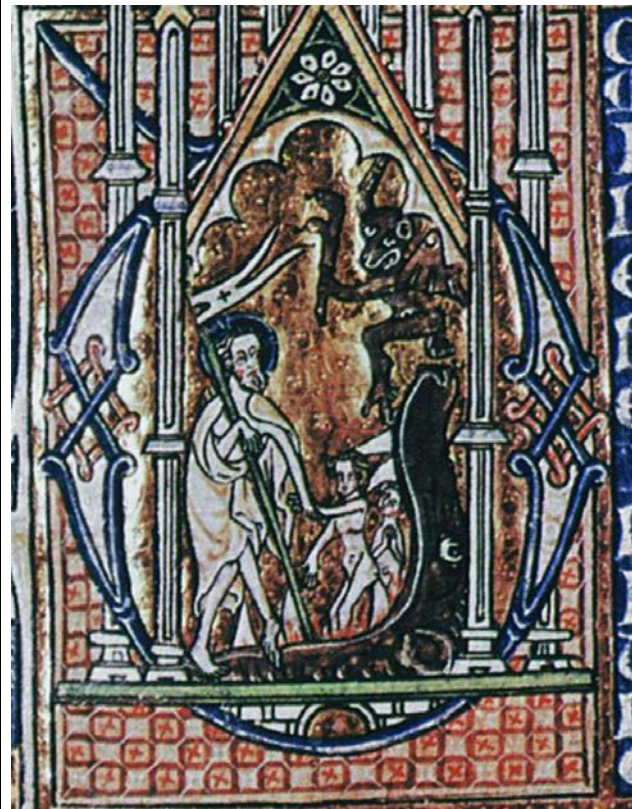


Figure 8  
f. 59v-60: "Harrowing of Hell"  
after 1318, Saint-Omer  
Hours of Marguerite de Beaujeu  
British Museum, ms. add. 36684.



Figure 9  
*The Harrowing of Hell*  
England, 15th century  
Carved, painted and gilt alabaster  
Given by Dr W. L. Hildburgh FSA  
Victoria and Albert Museum, A.1-1955