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From Centre to Periphery. The Propagation of the *Virgo virga* motif and the Case of the 12th Century Høylandet Tapestry

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Abstract

The Høylandet Tapestry is a medieval wall hanging from central Norway that depicts scenes from the infancy of Christ and the arrival of the Magi. We do not know exactly when it was made. Scholars have attempted to date it on stylistic and technical grounds. In this article I will try to do the same on an iconographical basis. Concentrating on the flower that the Virgin holds in her hand, I will trace the origin of the *Virgo virga* theme in central European art of the early 12th century and examine how this motif can have found its way from there to the outskirts of Norway. In addition, I will discuss the symbolic meaning of Mary holding a flower or a twig, which, in my view, refers to the Jesse root theme from Isaiah and the word play on *virgo* (Virgin) and *virga* (twig, branch), and alludes to Jesus' ancestry as a member of the House of David.

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Høylandsteppet è un tessuto ricamato medievale, proveniente dalla Norvegia centrale, i cui decori rappresentano scene della Natività di Cristo e l'arrivo dei Magi. Non si conosce con esattezza la sua data di origine. Gli studiosi hanno tentato di datarlo basandosi sia sulla tecnica di tessitura che sull'analisi dello stile delle figure. In quest'articolo cercherò di fare lo stesso attraverso un'analisi dettagliata dell'iconografia. Partendo dal fiore che la Vergine tiene in mano, vorrei tracciare le origini del soggetto *Virgo virga* nell'arte dell'Europa centrale della prima metà del XII secolo e indagare sulla diffusione dello stesso fino ad approdare in un posto alquanto periferico della Norvegia centrale. Inoltre analizzerò il significato simbolico di questo soggetto che, alludendo al tema della radice di Iesse e al gioco di parole tra *virgo* (vergine) e *virga* (ramo, verga), fa riferimento alla discendenza di Gesù dalla tribù di Davide, re d'Israele.

The Høylandet Tapestry is a wall hanging of just over two metres in length (211x44 cm), that has been in the collection of the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences in Trondheim (central Norway) since 1886. We do not know much about the tapestry's history, except that it was removed from the old church at Høylandet when the building was torn down and replaced by a new church in 1859[1]. The tapestry is of medieval origin, but we do not know its exact age. Although it has not yet been analysed by radiocarbon methods, some hints of its age are given by the clothes worn by the figures represented on it. Seen from the left, its embroidered decorations show the three Magi and a mysterious horseman approaching the Virgin and the Child at the centre of the scene (fig. 1). On the right we see two men in a bed, but there may originally have been three. At some point the tapestry was cropped on both sides, perhaps leaving out one or more scenes. The men in the bed may therefore be the Magi, and the fact that they are in bed may refer to the fact that the Gospel tells that they were warned in a dream about Herod's plan to slay all children in the region of Bethlehem (Mt 2:12).

The tapestry's main characters, the Virgin and the Child, are circumscribed by an arch and two open doors that separate them from the other figures on the left and right (fig. 2). But let us start by discussing the figures' accessories and clothing, since this is important for the dating. The tapestry has variously been dated between the second half of the 12th century[2] and the first decades of the 13th[3]. The fact that the Virgin has no crown on her head suggests an early date, since this element was well established in Marian iconography in Norway by the first half of the 13th century. Nor is a date before AD 1200 contradicted by the fact that two of the three Magi wear crowns, since crowns as an alternative to the traditional Phrygian caps can be found in manuscript illuminations of the Magi as far back as the 10th century[4]. The particular type of crown worn by

1 Flø 1997, p. 16.
2 Engelstad 1952, p. 71.
3 Franzén 1960, pp. 87-103; Flø 1997, p. 16.
4 Engelstad 1952, p. 69; Rohault de Fleury 1878, p. 164.

the Magi, which covered the back of the neck and the ears, seems to indicate an origin sometime in the 12th century[5]. A sculpted head representing King Eystein Magnusson († 1123) from Munkeliv Abbey in Bergen (now in Bergen Museum) shows the king with this type of crown. The Magis' short and wide trousers belong to the same period[6].

Hence, from an analysis of the style of clothes, it is likely that the tapestry was made in the 1100s. Examinations of the embroidery technique seem to point in the same direction: in the Høylandet Tapestry the floss is sewn in such a way that it looks as though it is woven into the linen fabric; a technique called *smøyg* in Norwegian. This method, which was often used for geometrical patterns, was common in Scandinavian craftwork in the Middle Ages. Technically, the Høylandet Tapestry has much in common with the more famous Baldishol Tapestry from the small church of Baldishol in Ringsaker (eastern Norway)[7]. The dating of the latter by radiocarbon methods to sometime between 1140 and 1190[8] also gives an indication of the period in which the Høylandet Tapestry may have been made.

However, there is at least one element, which so far has not been discussed in literature on the Høylandet Tapestry, that makes a dating in the first half of this century unlikely: in her right hand, the Virgin holds an object that looks like a flower, with a long stalk, tiny leaves and four round petals. The Child, who might be holding a round object in his left hand (although this part is partially ruined and difficult to see), is reaching out towards the flower. There is a certain date that the floral motif cannot have been made before. Exactly which date depends on where the tapestry was made. Although the tapestry may have been brought to Høylandet from afar, most agree that it was made in a nearby town, possibly Nidaros (medieval Trondheim)[9]. Since it is extremely unlikely that the motif appeared for the first time in central Norway, the tapestry must have been embroidered at a time when the flower in the hand of the Virgin was well established in medieval Marian iconography. The flower thus constitutes a *terminus post quem* for the origin of the tapestry. In the following, I will try to demonstrate that this element emerged in European art for the first time around 1150 or shortly before. In addition, I will highlight some reflections on its symbolic meaning and its rapid diffusion even to a part of the world that until a few generations before was governed by pagan rulers.

Let us start by considering the question of diffusion. As we have seen, there are some indications that the Tapestry was made in Central Norway, possibly

5 I am grateful to Dr. Øystein Ekroll for this information.

6 Engelstad 1952, pp. 69-71.

7 The weaving technique has been studied by Engelstad 1952 and Franzén 1960, among others. In 1987 a copy of the original was made that, among other things, sought to recover the tapestry's original colours. The copy is today on display in the Nidaros Cathedral (Flø 1997, p. 15).

8 Lunnan 2012, p. 4, note 15.

9 Franzén 1960, p. 97.

Nidaros, in the second half of the 12th century. The proximity between this region and England in this period is well documented. We know that Øystein Erlendsson, who was archbishop of Nidaros from the 1150s (probably appointed in 1158 or 1159) until his death in 1188, was educated abroad, either in England or France. Later in his life a controversy with King Sverre forced him to flee, after which he spent about three years in northern England. It is a common opinion that similarities between the Nidaros Cathedral and English churches, such as the Lincoln Cathedral, are results of the contact between these regions that was first established by Bishop Øystein in these years (and later repeated by Sigurd Eindrideson after 1248)[10].

Considering the connections that we know existed between the ecclesiastic community in Nidaros and northern England in this period, it would perhaps be natural to search for iconographic and stylistic models across the North Sea. If the Høylandet Tapestry was made in Nidaros in the second half of the 12th century, there are good reasons to assume that its iconography betrays influences from the places that Bishop Øystein visited. Indeed, at least when it comes to Marian iconography, such precursors can be found in the very town in which the bishop dwelt during much of his exile – namely Lincoln. In his book on the Romanesque sculpture of the Lincoln Cathedral, George Zarnecki reproduces a silver matrix that was used by the Cathedral Chapter from around 1150 (fig. 3)[11]. It shows the Virgin Mary, enthroned, with her Child on her right knee and a flower in her left hand. Being a matrix, the relative positions of Child and flower are, of course, intended to be reversed; thus, like in the Høylandet tapestry, the Virgin actually holds the flower in her right hand. In both cases the petals are attached to a long stalk, but in the Lincoln case the lower part of the stalk is shaped like a small bulb, whereas the flower attains a shape that is very similar to a classical French *fleur-de-lis*.

Thomas A. Heslop connected the Lincoln matrix with a seal from St. Mary's Abbey in York. It is probable that the latter, which must be dated to sometime between the founding and dedication of the Abbey in the 1080s and mid-1100s, antedates that of Lincoln[12]. Like the Høylandet tapestry, the St. Mary's seal shows a star above the head of the Child, but there is no flower in the Virgin's hand. Instead, she reaches out to grasp a fruit from a tree that grows from beneath her throne. According to Heslop, this is based on the story of Balaam in Numbers 24:17, which reads: «there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel». This accounts for the star above the Child's head, but what about the sceptre? One must bear in mind that the Bible known by the creators of the seal was the Latin *Vulgata*. Here, the same passage

10 Gunnes 1996, p. 34. For the architectural influence, see Fischer 1965.
11 Zarnecki 1988, cover and p. 77.
12 Heslop 1981, p. 53.

reads: «orietur stella ex Iacob et consurget *virga* de Israhel»[13]. As we see, the word corresponding to «sceptre» in Latin is *virga*, which also means «rod» or «twig». Besides accounting for the blooming twig in the Virgin's hand, this also constitutes an interesting play with the word *virgo* (virgin), which I will return to later on[14].

In the Høylandet Tapestry the main characters are accompanied by other figures, most notably the Magi. That this is not the case in the examples we have seen from England can easily be explained by the fact that the limited space on seals leaves little room for other figures. The Lincoln matrix, especially, constitutes a highly interesting iconographical analogy to the Virgin at Høylandet, but when it comes to size and composition I am unaware of close parallels from this region. However, such precursors can be found on the European continent. A marble relief from Fontfroide in Languedoc, now in the Montpellier Museum, has many similarities with the Høylandet Tapestry (fig. 4). Like in the old Norwegian example, the Virgin is placed beneath the arch of a canopy, which is supported by columns that are surmounted by small turrets. The columns' function is to separate scenes, just like the door openings in the Høylandet Tapestry. On the right is Joseph, who appears to be weeping, and on the left is the first of the three Magi, kneeling as he brings forth his gift. But, most importantly, here, like at Høylandet, in the Virgin's right hand we see the leaves of a growing plant.

The Fontfroide relief was originally thought to be from the 13th century, but Richard Hamann places it in the second quarter of the 12th century[15]. Both Hamann and Arthur Kingsley-Porter connects it with the style of the master behind the sculptures of the main façade of the abbey church of Saint-Gilles in Gard (southern France), which, according to Kingsley-Porter, in great part were created between 1135 and 1142[16]. Meyer Schapiro basically agrees with Kingsley-Porters early dating of the Saint-Gilles sculptures, but criticizes what he takes to be an «inversion» of relations between Saint-Gilles and a frieze from nearby Beaucaire, which would imply the attribution of the latter to the very beginning of the 12th century.

13 My italics, LH.

14 Heslop connects the virga with the medieval *Jeu d'Adam*. The bulb at the end of the twig is a sign that the plant can grow and flourish even without moist soil: «Iceste verge senz planter poet faire flors» (Heslop 1981, p. 56-57). Heslop is quite right that this is a symbol of Mary's virginity, but the topic is very familiar. It is also found in Prudentius *Psychomachia* (Prudentius 1949, p. 341).

15 Kingsley Porter 1924, p. 8; Hamann 1927, p. 105 and 141. However, using the comparison with the sculpture of the Saint-Gilles facade to date the Fontfroide *Madonna* is difficult. The origin of the latter is much debated. According to R. Saint-Jean, the «querelle de Saint-Gilles» divides scholars in three different positions, «tenants d'une chronologie haute (Ie moitié du XIIe siècle), et partisans d'une chronologie basse (fin du XIIe), voire très basse (Ier tiers du XIIIe)» (Saint-Jean 1975, p. 301). For Saint-Gilles, see also Stoddard 1973.

16 Kingsley-Porter 1923, p. 297.

In addition to the frieze, at Beaucaire there is also a *Madonna and Child* that Schapiro dates to the second half of the 12th century[17]. The Beaucaire *Madonna* is in many respects similar to that of Fontfroide (fig. 5). Being a sculpture in the round, the Virgin's body here moves more freely and her face is turned outwards, towards the spectator. In addition, unlike the Fontfroide Madonna, in this case neither the Virgin nor the child wears a crown. Yet the style from Fontfroide can be detected in the surrounding canopy, as well as the folds of the drapery. No figures are included outside of the Virgin and the Child, but Kingsley Porter reported that old descriptions testify that the sculpture group was originally part of a tympanum that represented the Adoration of the Magi[18]. Hamann dated this to the same period as the Fontfroide Madonna: the second quarter of the 12th century[19].

In Beaucaire, the Madonna holds a flower, whereas the Child holds a fruit[20]. It is important that the fruit is in the hands of the Child. In Hamann's study on the *Salzwedeler Madonna*, the aim was to trace the type of sculpture where the Madonna holds a sphere in her hand. According to him, the first example is the *Golden Madonna from Essen* (a statue made of thin golden leaf covering a core of wood), which is dated as early as c. AD 980 (fig. 6)[21]. The Golden Madonna holds in her hand an orb that some interpret as a *globus cruciger*, which in the Middle Ages was part of the Holy Roman regalia (although attested as such only from a slightly later date). It seems, however, that Hamann rejected this idea, preferring instead to see the spherical object as the fruit of Original Sin, which affirms Mary's role as *alter Eva* – the New Eve.

But in none of the images that we have studied so far there is any orb in the hand of the Virgin. Nor can the theme – that I here prefer to call the *Virgo virga* motif – be traced as far back in time as before AD 1000. To my knowledge, the two examples from southern France described above are among the earliest known examples of this motif in monumental sculpture. From there, it rapidly spread to Catalonia. A beautifully elaborate Madonna, with a crown on her head and long braids, from Solsona in Lleida, northeastern Spain, shows this. The rod in the Virgin's right hand has the bulb at the lower end, as we have seen in other examples, and its stalk is shaped like a sceptre[22]. Stylistically, this work, which is dated to around 1150, is so close to the above examples that Hamann suggested it is the work of a master active in Toulouse[23].

17 Schapiro 1935, p. 430 and note 43.

18 Kingsley Porter 1923, p. 297.

19 Hamann 1927, p. 141.

20 Stoddard, who dates the Beaucaire *Madonna* to c. 1160, says that the head and hands of Christ and the right hand and the head of the Virgin are restorations. Stoddard 1973, p. 193.

21 Hamann 1927, pp. 81-87.

22 The Solsona *Madonna* is dated to sometime between 1150 and 1160, cfr. Guldan 1966, fig. 106. See also above regarding the relationship between the word virga in the Vulgata and its translation as «sceptre» in many editions, not only the English version.

23 Hamann 1927, pp. 106-107.

By the second half of the 12th century, the motif of the Virgin (*virgo*) with the rod (*virga*) was known in most of western Europe. From the Emilian region of northern Italy the element can be found in a number of works by Benedetto Antelami (active from around 1178), most notably his sculptures on the Parma Baptistery. The *Madonna and Child*, with traces of original polychromy that Antelami made for the tympanum above the Baptistery's north portal, is of this type (fig. 7). The Child, with a fruit in his left hand and his right raised in a blessing gesture, turns towards his mother who, in turn, holds a flower that resembles an artichoke. What is interesting in this case is that the jamb on the door's right side is decorated with reliefs that represent the Tree of Jesse, showing Jesse himself asleep at its root and the Virgin at its top with a fruit in her hand (fig. 8a and 8b)[24].

As we can see, the *Virgo virga* motif was well established by the second half of the 12th century, but when did it first occur? Having scrolled through a number of catalogues on medieval sculpture, I have not been able to find any preserved example from monumental art that antedates the works from Beaucaire and Fontfroide. To my knowledge, the motif must have occurred in France for the first time slightly before 1150. This does not preclude the possibility of its occurring in the minor arts at an even earlier stage. In his two-volume work on Marian iconography, *La Sainte Vierge: Études archeologiques et iconograhiques*, Charles Rohault de Fleury reproduced a drawing from a 9th century German missal that shows the Virgin with a flower in her hand (fig. 9). In my view, however, it would be too hasty to conclude that the motif is of Carolingian origin, for Rohault de Fleury's source, *Reisen in einige Klöster Schwabens* from 1781, and the simple drawing he reproduces from it, appears to me to be quite questionable[25].

In addition to this illustration from an early medieval missal, Rohault de Fleury also gave examples from seals. There is one seal from the Cathedral Chapter of Paris that shows the Virgin alone with a flower in her hand. The seal itself is from 1146, but de Fleury suggests that it is possible that the matrix is from the 11th century. However, the oldest seal he mentions that is of «our type» (Mary with a twig in her hand, accompanied by her son) that can be dated with certainty is one from the Vicogne abbey from 1149[26].

From this it should be clear that the existence of the *Virgo virga* motif before c. 1125, even in the minor arts, is quite hypothetical. One cannot totally exclude the existence of earlier examples, but at any rate it was only known as a common theme in Christian iconography from the mid-12th century onwards.

The popularity of the *Virgo virga* theme in the Late Middle Ages is demonstrated by the frequency with which it is found in the *incipit* (opening

[24] For a discussion of Antelami's Baptistery sculptures, see Hodne 2007, pp. 35-38.
[25] Rohault de Fleury 1878, p. 508.
[26] Ivi, p. 347.

words) of songs from the period. When medieval exegetes like Alain of Lille (c. 1128-1203) said that the similarity between these two words could not be a coincidence[27], they based their ideas on patristic interpretations of Isaiah 11:1: «There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow from his roots.» This means that the iconography is not based on only one Biblical source – the above-mentioned passage from Numbers – but also on the Jesse root prophecy from Isaiah. Discussing how the Jesse tree theme was popularized towards the mid-12th century – exactly the same period that the *Virgo virga* motif first occurs – Rohault de Fleury said that «one often sees that the flower [...] is Mary and the fruit is Jesus; the tree itself is almost suppressed»[28].

The *Tree of Jesse* was a motif in its own right. It showed the Biblical patriarch as described above in the case of the Parma Baptistery jamb: Jesse himself asleep at the bottom with a plant growing from his side. Between leaves of an acanthus are the figures of the kings of Israel, and on its top we see Mary and Christ. According to Émile Mâle, the *Tree of Jesse* was found among the early Gothic stained glass windows of St. Denis from 1140-1144[29]. Interestingly, the reinvention of this motif seems to parallel the introduction of the *Virgo virga*.

One can well understand why the tree metaphor in Jesse, even in biblical times, was read as a genealogical tree, for Jesse was the father of David and grandfather of Solomon. No wonder, then, that the fathers of the church sought to reconstruct it all, adding flowers and fruits to its branches, for Jesus, as we know, was of the House of David. Accordingly, one of the branches (*virga*) of this tree has to be the Virgin Mary, and on this branch sits a flower that corresponds to Jesus. Hence, ecclesiastical authorities like Tertullian, Jerome, Justin and Leo the Great all identified the tree's root (*radix*) with Jesse himself, forefather of Israel's great kings[30]. Likewise, Saint Ambrose explicitly said that «Mary is the rod [and] Christ the flower of Mary»[31].

The idea of the Virgin (*virgo*) as a rod (*virga*) and her Son as a flower was repeated in the Middle Ages by authors like Fulbert of Chartres († 1028) and Eadmer of Canterbury (c. 1060-c. 1126)[32]. But towards the end of the Middle Ages speculation began as to whether the tree of Jesse also bore fruit[33]. This created room for more names, thereby prolonging Christ's ancestral line

27 Migne 1995, CCX, col. 246.

28 Rohault de Fleury 1878, p. 19. My translation from French, LH.

29 Mâle 2000, p. 165. Mâle has been criticized by Watson and Johnson for claiming that the Jesse tree motif occurs for the first time in this period, but this is never stated explicitly by Mâle. Instead, he refers to Rohault de Fleury, who finds examples dating all the way back to the 10th century. Rohault de Fleury 1878, p. 17. See also Johnson 1961, p. 3 and Watson 1934, p. 80.

30 Tertullian (Roberts 1971, vol. III, p. 164); Jerome (Roberts 1971, vol. VI, p. 29); Justin (Roberts 1971, vol. I, pp. 173-174). See also Moffitt 1997, pp. 77-86.

31 Ambrose (Roberts 1971, vol. X, p. 119).

32 Heslop 1981, p. 57.

33 Breeze 1993, pp. 55-62.

backwards in time. Thus, authors included Mary's mother Anne, as well as her (alleged) grandmother Emerentia. According to a *Vita* (life) of Anne, written by an anonymous Franciscan, Emerentia was the trunk of this tree. The trunk of this most beautiful tree, the story goes,

> represents the visible purity of the virgin Emerentia [...] that branch which outdoes the others in beauty means that she will bear a daughter named Anne; from her will come a flower that is a virgin full of grace named Mary who in all eternity will remain immaculate. From this flower that is the Virgin Mary the sweetest and honey-flowing fruit, the Son of God and the redeemer of the whole race of men will come to the light of day and allow himself to be seen[34].

This probably explains why the Virgin, in some cases (for instance Beaucaire), has a flower in her hand instead of a rod, and the Child has a fruit. Especially in the case of French statues and seals, this flower often has the shape of a heraldic lily or *fleur-de-lis*.

It is quite clear that this contradicts Hamann's interpretation of the spherical object as an apple. In the period under study here, Mary is usually not associated with the orb at all, but it is at times found in the hand of the infant Jesus. The blooming rod is much more common as a Marian symbol, and this cannot be explained by reference to Mary's role as the New Eve. From this it is also clear that the origin of the theme cannot be sought in works like the *Essen Madonna*.

In my view, it is obvious that the meaning of this motif is related to the Biblical metaphor of the blooming rod. The centrality of this metaphor as a symbol of heritance was confirmed by the *apocrypha*. The *Infancy Gospel* tells how unmarried members of the House of David were requested to bring forth a rod to the altar of the Temple, and «that he whose rod after it was brought should produce a flower, […] was the man to whom the Virgin ought to be entrusted and espoused»[35]. The author of the *Infancy Gospel* relates this with explicit reference to the Jesse episode of the Old Testament. One important question remains, however: if the exegetical understanding of the relevant passages from Numbers and Isaiah was essentially the same in the High Middle Ages as it had been at the time of the Fathers of the Church, its appearance in this period must be related to some specific historical and cultural circumstance – but which one?

Heslop suggests that the motif's introduction parallels the increasing interest in representations of Mary as Queen of Heavens. In England, he says, «the widespread use of seals on charters coincides with the period at which the representation in England of Maria Regina was being developed»[36]. The most striking expression of the Virgin's royal status is the crown that she wears on

[34] Quoted through Nixon 2004, p. 138.
[35] Roberts 1971, vol. VIII, p. 386.
[36] Ivi, p. 53.

her head. To a certain extent, I agree that the *Virgo virga* motif has to do with royalty. The crown on Mary's head confirms this and at first glance the orb, which could be interpreted as a *globus*, and the rod, which looks like a sceptre, seems to point in the same direction. The globe and the sceptre belong together and have been used as symbols of worldly power since the time of the Roman emperors. Adopting symbols that people associated with royalty could have been an efficient way to affirm Christ's role as almighty ruler of the world and the universe.

The problem is that the object in Mary's right hand only rarely resembles a sceptre; it is usually depicted as a twig with leaves, or even a flower. Furthermore, the sphere which, without doubt, could be interpreted as a *globus*, could just as well be a fruit. It is difficult to see what meaning a *globus* could have in connection with a growing plant, whereas the fruit's relation to the plant is quite obvious. There is therefore no reason to think that the Church, by commissioning images such as these, conceived the Eternal Kingdom by way of analogy with a nation governed by worldly rulers. Nor was Christ anything like a king or an emperor.

The answer to the apparent contrast between the crown on Mary's head and the object in her hand – which is more than a sceptre – is already hinted at above: the blooming rod is the *virga Iesse* that identifies her and her offspring as descendants of a great tribe of kings, members of the House of David. That medieval man thought in this way is confirmed by the monk Hærveus, who explained that «the patriarch Jesse belonged to the royal family, that is why the root of Jesse signifies the lineage of kings. As to the rod, it symbolises Mary as the flower symbolises Jesus Christ»[37].

At this point, some might ask what the point is of stressing that royalty, in the case of Mary and her Child, is signalled by means of Old Testament symbols instead of the insignia of the Holy Roman Emperor. In my view, this is important because it has to do with the age-old opposition between *regnum et sacerdotium*; the eternal conflict between Church and papacy, on one hand, and temporal rulers, on the other. It shows the church's desire that its authority be independent of the state. Indeed, there seems to be a kind of inversion of relations between sacred and profane in the 12th century. Worldly leaders, it appears, increasingly felt a need to legitimate their power not by reference to a tradition of secular rule, but by taking saints, martyrs, and Biblical characters as their models. As their forerunners they preferred not the emperors of Rome, but the kings of Israel.

As mentioned above, when Mary holds a flower instead of a twig it is often, at least in France, shaped like a *fleur-de-lis*. In a book on heraldry, Michel Pastoureau approached the question of the flower in Mary's hand from a different point of view than that explored here. His aim was not iconographical, but rather to

[37] Mâle 2000, p. 165.

reveal and explain the origins of arms. The French *fleur-de-lis* is one of the most common elements in heraldry, and also one of the most ancient. Pastoureau demonstrated that the meaning of the flower was originally Christological, and that a Marian symbolism was grafted onto it only subsequently[38]. This is in harmony with our discovery, discussed above, that in patristic sources Mary is usually identified with the rod and Christ with the flower, whereas in medieval texts the attention often shifts from rod-flower to flower-fruit, with Mary being the flower. It is also interesting that, with reference to the origin of the *fleur-de-lis* motif, Pastoureau mentions the chapter seal of 1146 from Notre Dame in Paris discussed by Rohault de Fleury.

The conformity between the religious and the profane use of this heraldic symbol is striking. On seals, Capetian rulers were depicted sitting on lion thrones (a Solomonic element), with a sceptre in their left hand and a flower in their right. At some point during the second half of the 12th century, the flower attained its canonical form: the *fleur-de-lis* (fig. 10). Pastoureau refers to a seal of Louis VII (1120-1180) as the earliest known example[39], but claims that it was probably introduced under the influence of Abbot Suger of Saint Denis and Saint Bernard during the reign of the king's father, Louis VI (1081-1137)[40].

I think that the introduction of the new symbol must be seen in light of the role that religion had for these two Capetian rulers. Louis VII wanted to be a monk and his father, Louis VI, had Abbot Suger as his advisor, but the key figure here was probably St. Bernard. The Saint was central in Louis VII's conversion to a more religious style of life following the latter's defeat in the war at Champagne in 1144. Overcome with guilt, especially for his burning down of the town of Vitry-le-François, Louis decided to remove his armies from the battlefield. Desiring to atone for his sins, Louis publicly expressed his intention of going on a crusade. He then went on to Vezelay to see Bernard of Clairvaux. It is here that St. Bernard, in a famous Sermon held on 31 March 1146 in the presence of Louis VII himself and an enormous crowd, gave his blessing to the plans for the Second Crusade. Taking cues from the Song of Solomon, «I am the lily of the valleys» (Ct. 2:1), Bernard described the Christian soldiers as flowers of the field: «Let him who loves me enter the field. Let him not refuse to engage in the conflict for my sake and by my side, so that he may be able to say, 'I have fought the good fight'»[41]. By referring to the soldiers as lilies of the field, Bernard made them see themselves as belonging to an army led by holy kings in the tradition of David and Solomon to free the Holy Land and its sacred places from the reign of infidels.

Interestingly, the Second Crusade marks the first great occasion during

38 Pastoureau 2010, p. 99.
39 Ivi, p. 20.
40 Ivi, p. 100.
41 Johnson 1961, p. 66.

which members of noble families entered the war scene with personal symbols painted on their shields, the later coat of arms. «Arms did not exist at the time of the first Crusade; they were well established by the time of the second» Pastoureau noted[42]. The practical function of these symbols was to identify their bearer when he wore a helm. However, it soon obtained a function in civil life by situating individuals within groups, and groups within social systems. In this way the arms, which were originally strictly personal emblems, became hereditary – a process that Pastoureau described as already taking place by the end of the 12th century[43].

As mentioned above, one of the first – and also most common – symbols to be used in arms was the *fleur-de-lis*, or heraldic lily. It was introduced in Marian iconography slightly before its adoption as a dynastic symbol by the Capetians, and it is no coincidence that the first kings to use it were famous for their piety and religious fervour. The Capetian kings must have been aware of its religious consonance, and they used it because they considered the tribe of great rulers of Israel, from David and Solomon until Jesus Christ, as their forerunners and models. Even though it is likely that the lily was used in religious iconography before its adoption by rulers and members of royal families, the interest that the nobility took in it as a family symbol clearly shows what kind of meaning it was associated with in high- and late-medieval society.

By the second half of the 12th century it was quite common to see a rod or a flower in the hand of the Virgin when she was depicted together with her Child, and there is no need, I believe, to impose a specific interpretation when the image occurs in rural Norway. Although it somehow reflects the opposition between church and monarchy, it is not necessarily a symptom of, for instance, the antagonism between Bishop Øystein and King Sverre. It is, however, possible to say something about the date of the Høylandet Tapestry, and we also have an idea of how it was transmitted to remote areas. We have seen that stylistic analysis (the type of crowns, the trousers, and so on), as well as analysis of the weaving technique, points towards an early date, which means that the tapestry must have been made in the 12th century. On the other hand, it seems that the most ancient examples of this type of Madonna in France are from shortly before 1150, and it is unlikely that such depictions existed in England before that. The Høylandet Tapestry can therefore not have been made before the second half of the 12th century, but is it possible to determine the exact time with more precision? This is a very difficult question, for the exact date depends on how quickly artistic and iconographic impulses travelled from one place to another. Since in England most examples of a Madonna with *virga* are on seals, the propagation of this motif has been associated with the beginning

[42] Ivi, p. 17. According to Luuk Houwen, «Heraldry in the strict sense of the word had been around since the second quarter of the twelfth century» (Houwen 2009, p. 214, note 32).

[43] Ivi, p. 20.

of the widespread use of seals on charters[44]. Images on seals circulated along with letters that arrived at quite remote destinations in weeks. For this reason we must assume that the simple, emblematic images of seals were known in outskirt regions long before the arrival of monumental art and narrative cycles. That a new emblem or motif was known in remote regions only a few decades after its first occurrence in central Europe is highly possible in cases when it was used on seals. If we assume that the *Virgo virga* was introduced on chapter seals in England in the 1150s, and made its way to the various dioceses during the 1160s and 1170s, then it could very well have been brought to Nidaros along with bishop Øystein at his return from England in 1183.

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[44] Heslop 1981, p. 53.

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Appendix

Fig. 1. *Høylandsteppet*, Trondheim, Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences

Fig. 2. *Høylandsteppet*, detail of fig. 1

Fig. 3. *Madonna and Child*, Matrix of seal, Lincoln, Cathedral

Fig. 4. *Madonna and Child*, Marble relief from Fontfroide, Montpellier, Museum

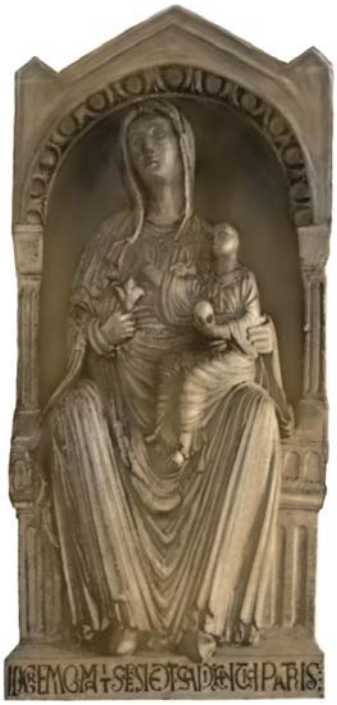

Fig. 5. *Madonna and Child,* Beaucaire, (Gard), Parsonage

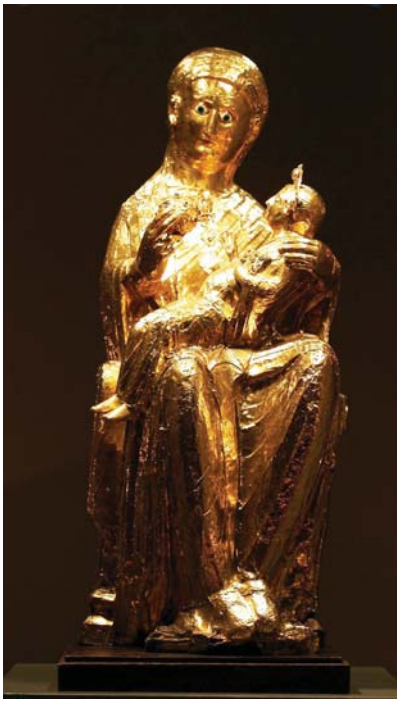

Fig. 6. *Golden Madonna*, Essen, Treasury of the Cathedral

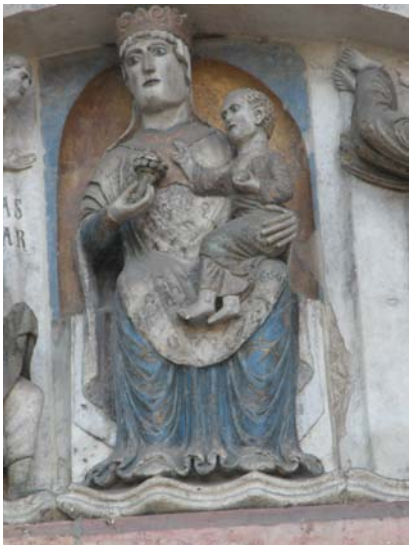

Fig. 7. Benedetto Antelami, *Madonna and Child*, Parma, Baptistery, sculpture group above the north portal

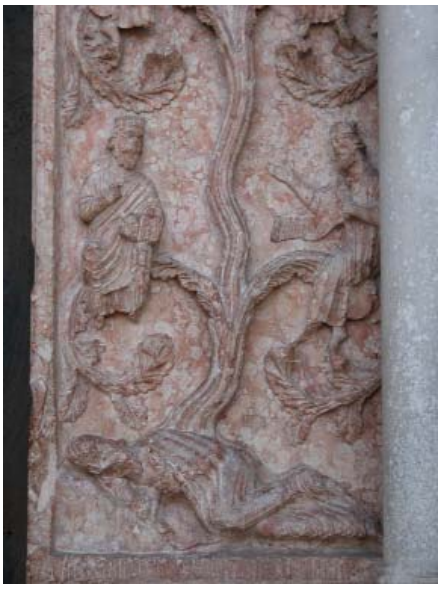

Fig. 8a. Benedetto Antelami, *Jesse,* Parma, Baptistery, relief by on the north portal

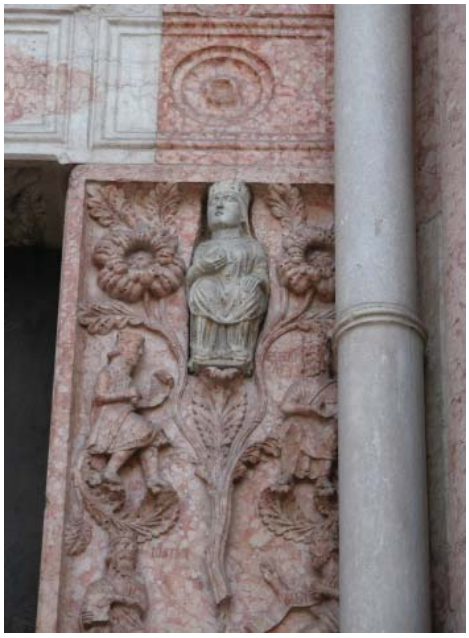

Fig. 8b. Benedetto Antelami, *The Virgin*, Parma, Baptistery, relief by on the north portal

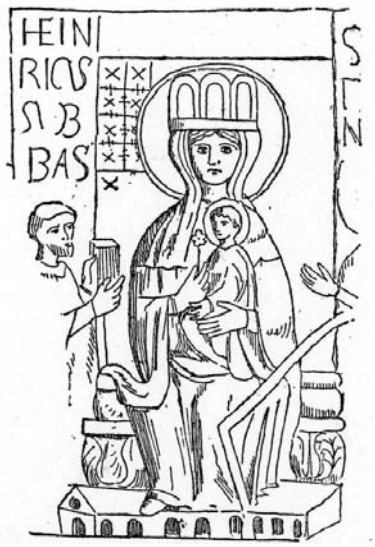

Fig. 9. *Madonna and Child*, reproduced by Charles Rohault de Fleury from a 9th-century German missal

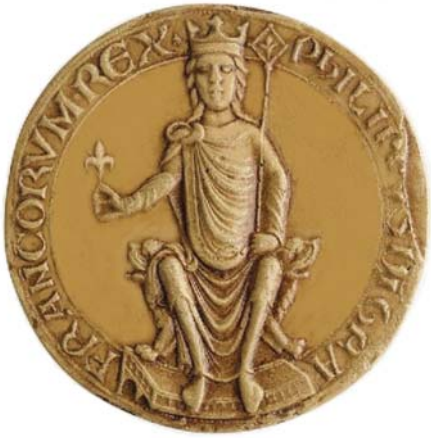

Fig. 10. Seal of Philip II of France, Paris, Archives Nationales

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