PALMS, POWER, AND POLISHED METAL

MEDIEVAL DOOR KNOCKERS UP CLOSE

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ABSTRACT

A point of perceptual interest and sensory interaction, figural door knockers offer a possibility for examining diverse notions of proximity and distance for medieval doors. The article approaches thresholds through door knockers, their functional, ecclesiastical, legal, pictorial, and material contexts. It analyses the historiated doors at San Zeno, Verona, with their door knockers surrounded by pictorial instances of healing and salvific as well as transgressive or illicit touch. A solitary door knocker in the Victoria and Albert Museum likewise offers a range of possible interpretations. These fittings, their images, visual echoes, and associations contribute to the threshold as a complex and contrastive space, entangling past and present.

KEYWORDS

Threshold; Medieval doors; Door knockers; Senses; Touch; Bronze; Metalwork.

I. Introduction. "A World within Hand's Reach"

A 1930 photograph by surrealist Lee Miller shows, obliquely and through a glass door, a manicured hand wearing a ring, placed upon a door handle [Fig. 1]. We see the arm outstretched, fingers curled around the handle, though not exerting enough strength to push it down completely. The connecting frame of the door is not visible, the panes of glass within the door and beyond reflecting a seemingly continuous scene of traffic and a row of trees against the dark interior. It remains unclear whether the door is being held open at arm's length for someone to pass through, or whether the hand has only just reached out to begin pushing it open. The photograph is entitled "Exploding Hand", and indeed, at first we might see sparks erupting from the hand itself, their trajectories traced by the photographic medium.[1] Closer inspection reveals that this is not a phenomenon of light captured by the camera, but a material phenomenon documented by it: the many scratches on the glass door create a fuzzy area with spidery threads and long gauges issuing from it, partially obscuring both handle and hand. Realization dawns that these scratches must have been made by hands similar to the one here, hands wearing hard rings capable of creating this sort of damage when knocking against the glass in the act of reaching for and turning the handle.

Miller's pun relies on perspective. In recognizing the joke, we swap the indexicality of light in photography (explosion) for the traces of the door's past use (scratches), an optical for a material phenomenon. Her framing of the shot fuses the past, the material, and the fleeting everyday moment. Where body and object collide, both in the handling of the door and in her photograph, an excess of action becomes visible as a result. It is the transparency of the glass door, doubled by the camera lens, which is framed to highlight the liminality of the moment.

Glass door and door handle are, of course, both modern items, the latter characterizing – perhaps, according to Bernhard Siegert – the "epoch of bourgeois architecture", situated historically at the far end of the old era of the "nomological door" within which my examples in this article are firmly positioned.[2] My concern in the following is with door fittings only superficially similar to the door handle in their approximate placement and partial mobility: in the Middle Ages, door knockers are a feature predominantly found on the doors of religious buildings, and their best-known form remained extant since antiquity, a mask in the shape of a lion holding the

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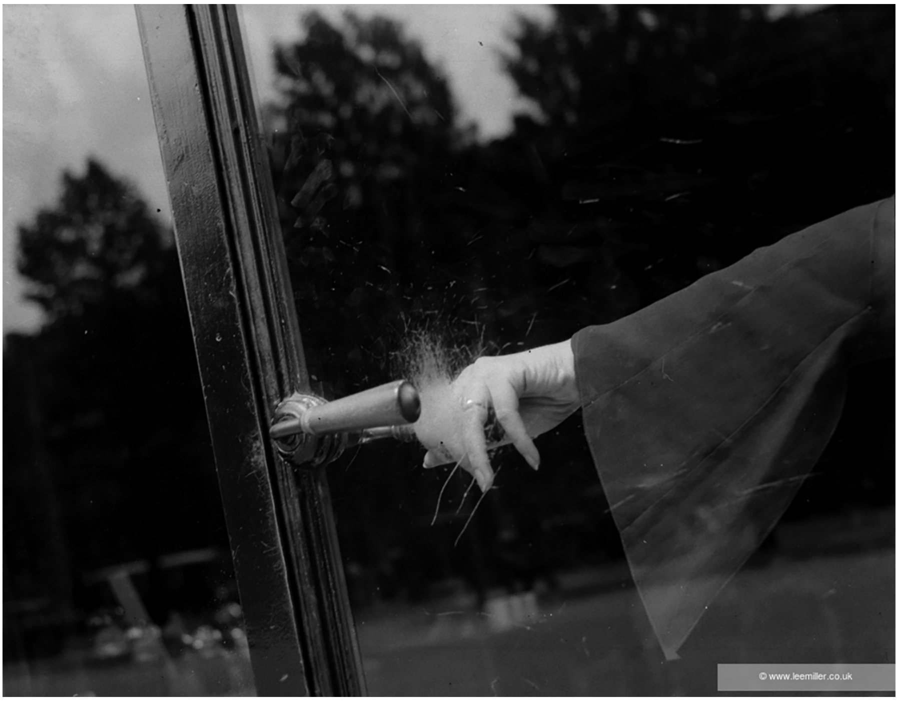
[1] For a discussion of the photograph in the context of Miller's work, see Katharine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness*, Lincoln, NE/London 2013, 95f.

[2] Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques. Grids, Filters, Doors and Other Articulations of the Real*, New York 2015, 202, 201.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[Fig. 1]
Lee Miller, Exploding Hand, 1930 © Lee Miller Archives, England 2019. All rights reserved www.leemiller.co.uk.

knocker (usually a ring) in its mouth [Fig. 2].[3] They were neither purely practical nor simply representative. By protruding from the surface of the door, door knockers offered a point of interest and interaction; my article explores the ramifications of this premise for the study of medieval thresholds and their imagery.

Despite the obvious differences to a medieval door and its fittings, Miller's photograph introduces several themes addressed in the following article. The first is the threshold as a sensory space. Medieval door knockers, like modern door handles, invite proximity and even touch; grasping the ring is a response elicited by their shape and placement. They are a point of actual or imagined physical contact between someone approaching the door and the door itself. This has repercussions for both the materiality and perception of doors. As Miller's photograph demonstrates for the door handle, touch in turn draws visual and auditory senses along with it (think rings scraping against the glass). A second – connected – theme is that of the traces left by frequent and enduring use, which render touch visible. The realization that rings with hard stones must have gouged these scratches into the glass gives us quite specific information about the door's users.[4] Its material manifestations, resulting in visibility and legibility, however, do not enable us to formulate a precise date range for these practices of touch by any of the methods usually employed by (art/cultural) historians. While past touch is just as elusive as other past sense perceptions, it can have enduring material consequences.

Constance Classen has argued that visual and tactile proximity is characteristic of medieval art and literature, which "disdained distant views in favor of intimate, close-up depictions of a world within hand's reach".[5] Perception itself was considered dependent on proximity or even contact. It is this notion, the preference of the close at hand, easily brought about by the invitation to touch formulated by the door knockers, which informs my readings of a medieval historiated door and a solitary extant door knocker. In the following, I connect the semantics of the threshold, its gestural codes, legal connotations, and iconography, with the somatic perception enabled by the door knocker. A first part gives an overview of the functional and gestural contexts for church doors and door knockers to establish opportunities and contexts for perceptual engagement with them. A second part follows the haptic pull of the two door knockers on the bronze-paneled door at San Zeno in Ver-

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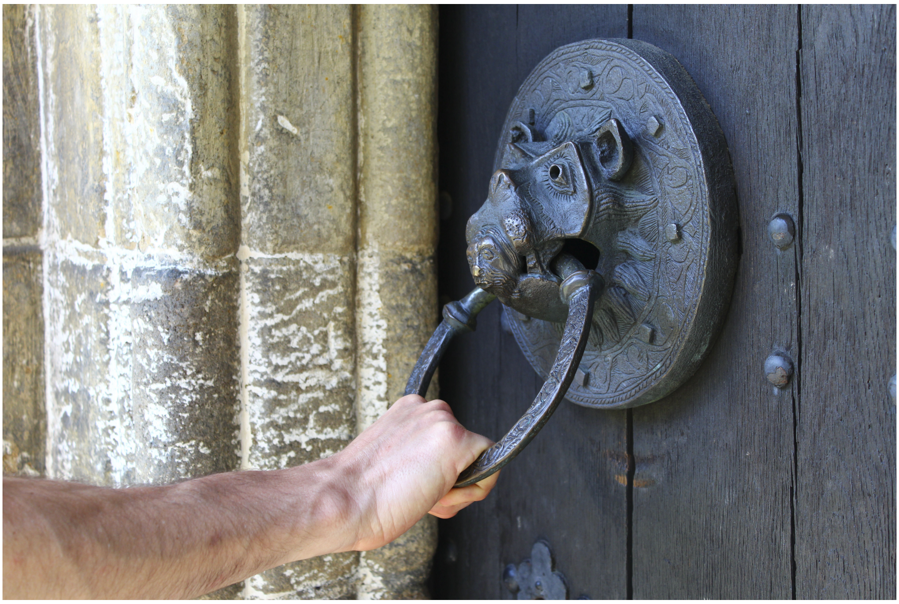
[3] For a historical overview of European examples, see Ursula Mende, *Die Türzieher des Mittelalters*, Berlin 1981, 128–136; also for her catalogue of 212 medieval examples, which remains fundamental.

[4] The Lee Miller Archive gives the location as "Guerlain Parfumérie".

[5] Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense. A Cultural History of Touch*, Urbana/Chicago/Springfield, IL 2012, 123. Cf. Chris Woolgar, The Social Life of the Senses. Experiencing the Self, Others, and Environments, in: Richard G. Newhauser (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages*, London 2014, 23–43, here 24.



[Fig. 2]
Door knocker, Adel, Leeds (Yorkshire, UK). The door knocker in use in the picture is a replica of the original, dated around 1200, which was stolen from this church door in 2002. Photograph: Tina Bawden, 2016.

ona (ca. 1138) to ask how its much-studied imagery presents itself from this position and point of view, spotlighting scenes close by within the monumental program which resonate with the knockers' imagery and the practices associated with them. No secure location or contextual imagery is known for the solitary lion door knocker (twelfth century) which I analyze in the third part of my article, therefore forcing a close analysis from the outset, which, however, likewise reveals polyvalences at play in its figural pair.

Approaches to the famous medieval historiated bronze and wooden doors have usually made sense of them by elucidating the underlying structure and logic of their often intricate iconographic programs. Understanding a "program" – a problematic concept for the historiated doors at San Zeno – thus takes the perspective of an ideal overview. The alternative reading offered here is necessarily partial, but by moving in on the door, it alerts us to complex narratives of desire, hope, and ultimately exclusion. Getting up close to the images in this case highlights instances of distancing as well as enticement, in addition to enduring practices of touch. It allows parsing the textual, visual, and material space of the medieval threshold in its entanglements between authoritative regulations (ecclesiastical and legal) and enduring practices (of touching), the mechanics of proximity and the aesthetics of distance.

II. The Medieval Church Door and Its Functions

Demonstrating the importance of object affordance, the shape, size, and placement of door knockers can serve as indicators for their intended function. In Scandinavia, for example, thicker upsets are added to the rings and enable use as a knocker.[6] Islamic examples from the twelfth century CE onwards are likewise treated as functional door knockers.[7] In these medieval traditions, animal heads keep the handle in its position. In contrast, examples from classical antiquity and most of those from central Europe in the Middle Ages have a simple smooth circular ring resting in a lion's mouth. Where the ring is extant along with the head, it often turns within its hold, thus making it not very stable mechanically. These "door knockers" were therefore neither intended to be used for knocking, nor to help with the task of opening the door: Although most church doors open towards the interior, the masks with their rings were often placed centrally, a position not suited to pushing on a heavy door to open it. In addition, most big church doors were locked from the inside. The physical action these rings allow is more one of pulling rather than pushing.[8] Where there are multiple rings, for example on Italian and Scandinavian doors, they are often thought to have had representative and apotropaic functions, and the sound made by the metal rings upon movement of the door was thought to dispel evil spirits.[9] Extant examples therefore provide a heterogeneous picture of purpose, placement, and design.

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[6] Lennart Karlsson, *Medieval Ironwork in Sweden*, 2 vols., Stockholm 1988, here vol. 1, 347–360 on ring handles.

[7] The copper alloy knockers that adorned the doors of the Great Mosque (Ulu Cami) of Cizre have two entwined and confronted dragons whose tails end in birds' heads as the knocker handle, and a mask as the knob: first half of the thirteenth century. Türk ve Islam Eserleri Müzesi in Istanbul, Inv. No. 3749. Cf. The illumination of a similar door knocker from the Diyārbakr palace, in a copy of al-Jazarī, *Kitāb fī maʿrifat al-ḥiyāl al-handasiyya* (Book of knowledge of ingenious mechanical devices, ca. 1200), Anatolia. Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, Ms. Ahmet III, A.3472, fol. 165b. For a reproduction of each, see Sara Kuehn, *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art*, Leiden/Boston 2011, fig. 83 and fig. 134.

Door knockers contribute to the symbolism and tradition of church doors in ecclesiastical, moral, and legal contexts. It is important to keep in mind a catalogue of potential functional contexts for doors and their fittings, which resist unilateral interpretation. Rings, as well as the imagery of the door, were part of the intersecting and concentrically arranged spaces of the threshold proper, the atrium, narthex, or porch in front of the entrance, the church building, the façade, and often the open space in front of a cathedral or larger urban church. Their visibility and accessibility meant that church portals were sites for various important functions in the Middle Ages.[10] As entrance into a church and therefore sacred space, the portal functioned as a station in liturgical and ritual contexts, such as the feast of the dedication of the church or processions on other feast days. The atrium was a place for catechumens or penitents to wait for admittance in the context of particular liturgical rituals.[11] Church asylum was formally introduced at the Council of Orange in 441, and sanctuary seekers presented themselves and were defended at the door, the practicalities confronted with changing notions of sacred space into the Carolingian era.[12] Grasping the ring at a church door was not only a sanctuary-seeking gesture, but also one associated with an oath being spoken, or taking possession of a house (*traditio per anulum*).[13] Door knockers are extant at sites which are known for their role as sanctuary, for example in Durham, a place of chartered or special sanctuary.[14]

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[8] In German, the term "Türzieher" has accordingly prevailed. Mende, Türzieher, 10.

[9] Karlsson, Ironwork, vol. 1, 309–311. In addition, these rings are often placed so high up that they cannot be touched from a standing position.

[10] See also Tina Bawden, *Die Schwelle im Mittelalter. Bildmotiv und Bildort*, Cologne/Vienna 2014, 194–205.

[11] Most recently discussed for the fifth-century doors of Santa Sabina in Rome as a soundscape by Ivan Foletti, Singing Doors. Images, Space, and Sound in the Santa Sabina Narthex, in: Bissera V. Pentcheva (ed.), *Icons of Sound. Voice, Architecture, and Imagination in Medieval Art*, New York/London 2021, 19–35.

[12] See the famous debate between Alcuin of York and Theodulf, bishop of Orléans, over a fugitive cleric seeking asylum at St. Martin of Tours in 801/802 CE: Samuel W. Collins, *The Carolingian Debate over Sacred Space*, New York 2012, esp. 1–5; for the notion of sacred space, see Miriam Czock, *Gottes Haus. Untersuchungen zur Kirche als heiligem Raum von der Spätantike bis ins Frühmittelalter*, Berlin 2012. One of the best-known later transgressions of asylum was the murder of Thomas Becket 1170 in Canterbury cathedral. On asylum, see William Jordan, A Fresh Look at Medieval Sanctuary, in: Ruth Mazo Karras, Joel Kaye, and E. Ann Matter (eds.), *Law and the Illicit in Medieval Europe*, Philadelphia 2008, 17–32.

The interdependence of ecclesiastical and legal acts and gestures is revealed by medieval church door practices, even though it is seldom possible to establish a clear correlation between textual sources and the extant fabric. Adjacent to an open place of assembly – e.g., marketplace – church portals could serve as “courtroom”, providing a backdrop of authority and enough space for witnesses of the proceedings.[15] Practices can often be traced through repeated decrees against them, so that the practice of holding court in the forecourt of the church (*in atrio ecclesiae*) can be assumed from Carolingian times, even though sources increase from the eleventh century onwards.[16] Legal sources often refer to red doors in this context. Many wooden doors have extant traces of red pigment, however, without being otherwise documented as a place of law.[17] In the *Schedula diversarum artium*, where doors are treated along with altarpieces, Theophilus describes in detail how to paint doors red, indicating that this was a convention.[18] The association with judgment must have struck a particular chord with viewers at portals visualizing the Last Judgment and related eschatological themes, though a thematic connection between the portal as place of law and its iconography was not established as a rule.[19] As a place of legal authority, both ecclesiastic and secular, the portal was an area for publicizing various further economic and social "contracts" such as official weights and measures for wares sold at the adjacent marketplace (incised at Freiburg cathedral 1270–1320). There are several cases of inscriptions on doors adopting legal language to announce privileges (Willigis's bronze doors, Mainz 1135; Worms 1182) or charters (Speyer 1111).[20] A ring from Forsa (Hälsingland, Sweden) preserves a runic inscription with what is thought to be a legal text, denoting payment for transgressions.[21]

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[13] Cf. Hans R. Hahnloser, Urkunden zur Bedeutung des Türrings, in: Werner Gramberg, Carl Georg Heise, and Lieselotte Möller (eds.), *Festschrift für Erich Meyer zum sechzigsten Geburtstag. Studien zu Werken in den Sammlungen des Museums für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg*, Hamburg 1959, 125–146, with sources. Mende, Türzieher, 161–167.

[14] John Charles Cox, *The Sanctuaries and Sanctuary Seekers of Mediaeval England*, London 1911.

[15] Barbara Deimling, The Courtroom. From Church Portal to Town Hall, in: Wilfried Hartmann and Kenneth Pennington (eds.), *The History of Courts and Procedure in Medieval Canon Law*, Washington 2016, 30–50.

[16] Deimling, The Courtroom, 33.

[17] Even historiated wooden doors seem to have been painted this color, as in Le-Puy-en-Velay (1143–1189) or Cologne (ca. 1050).

[18] Book I, Ch. 17–20: “De tabulis altarium et ostiorum…” – “De rubricandis ostiis et de oleo lini”. Edition: *Theophilus Presbyter und das mittelalterliche Kunsthandwerk. Gesamtausgabe der Schrift “De diversis artibus” in einem Band*, ed. Erhard Brepohl, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna 2013, 64–66. Translation: *On divers Arts. The Treatise of Theophilus*, transl. and introd. by John G. Hawthorne and Cyril Stanley Smith, Chicago 1963.

[19] There are correspondences in Strasbourg, where a sculpture of the enthroned judge Salomon, equipped with a sword (one of the objects present at medieval court) is placed centrally between the two south portals. On Strasbourg: Adalbert Erler, *Das Strassburger Münster im Rechtsleben des Mittelalters*, Frankfurt a. M. 1954. On swords and other objects of interest to legal archaeology, see Heiner Lück, Der Magdeburger Dom als Rechtsort. Eine rechtsarchäologische Annäherung, in: Wolfgang Schenkluhn and Andreas Waschbüsch (eds.), *Der Magdeburger Dom im europäischen Kontext* (Beiträge des internationalen wissenschaftlichen Kolloquiums zum 800-jährigen Domjubiläum in Magdeburg vom 1. bis 4. Oktober 2009), Regensburg 2012, 297–308. Other relatively secure cases where

Very few door knockers make their potential function in legal contexts explicit in this way, and the apotropaic significance of the lion mask has been emphasized more frequently than the web of practices and gestures the rings were bound into as elements of the door. It seems clear that the Carolingian lion head examples at Aachen and Mainz refer back to antique types and topics like imperial authority, while in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the motif seems to have frequently been manipulated to allow a wide variety of connotations. Some of these can, in parallel to the sculpture of the time, be traced to the varied symbolism and characteristics of the lion and related beasts or lion-related figures and themes in mythology and the Bible. More widely, they partake of the less text-based, visual world of the (church) threshold with its topics of moral struggle and judgment, but also orality and the fear of being bitten, devoured, and ingested, themes of physical strength and stability. One example of this is door knockers interpreted as the mouth of hell, with the heads of souls protruding out of the beast's maw along with the ring [cf. Fig. 2], which therefore according to apotropaic function might have been thought to reflect and thus protect against ending up in hell.[22] The possibility and enticement of touching this threatening image is key to the way it works.

III. Power and Transgression. Verona

The twelfth-century door of San Zeno, Verona, is historiated by way of rectangular panels of bronze reliefs attached to the wooden

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iconographic program and court activity coincide: Bamberg, Freiberg (Goldene Pforte), Freiburg, Léon.

[20] Lück, Magdeburger Dom als Rechtsort, 301. For Freiburg, cf. Deimling, The Courtroom, 37. Mainz: Ursula Mende, *Die Bronzetüren des Mittelalters 800–1200*, 2nd rev. ed., Munich 1994, 25–27.

[21] Karlsson, Ironwork, vol. 2, cat. no. 112, 129–130. Transcription and dating are controversial (ninth–twelfth century).

[22] Examples: Novgorod, Halle an der Saale, Czerwińsk, Hadmersleben (Mende, Türzieher, 240–242, cat. nos. 78–81); Norwich, Adel (Leeds), York (Mende, Türzieher, 276–277, cat. nos. 153–156).

core [Fig. 3].[23] Openwork bars with masks at the crossings form the panels' borders. The panels themselves are believed to have been made in at least two consecutive campaigns. Those of the so-called first style are mainly located on the left wing of the door and are usually assumed to have been finished around 1100, while most of those of the second style are found on the right side and may date as late as the end of the twelfth or early thirteenth century.[24] There are duplicate scenes, for example the expulsion of Adam and Eve in the bottom row of the left and the top row of the right door, which is even found a third time in the façade stone reliefs flanking the portal. Each of these instances is part of a new campaign. Repetition and accumulation were evidently taken into account, maybe even actively intended as a sign of respect for the older material.[25] The main sources of iconography on the doors are the Bible, with scenes from Genesis and the life of Moses. Around the door knockers on either side, there are scenes from the life of John the Baptist and the *vita* of St. Zeno, the patron saint. More allegorical scenes are also found in this lower, more accessible part of the doors.[26] Even though a homogenous "program" was therefore never the aim, placements of scenes are oriented towards viewers, and the following analysis shows that some references to or echoes of older scenes may have been intended after all.

The door knockers themselves are treated in the same way as the narrative reliefs, occupying a rectangular panel each but fashioned in higher relief and with a larger opening to house the ring. They combine both human and animal elements, the left mask more recognizably human with its beard, mustache, and cap of hair, but with small animal ears like those of the more lion-like mask on the right. Above the bearded humanoid head two snakes form an arch, echoing the shape of the ring below (now lost) [Fig. 4]. The tips of their tails meet above the head's crown, their mouths biting

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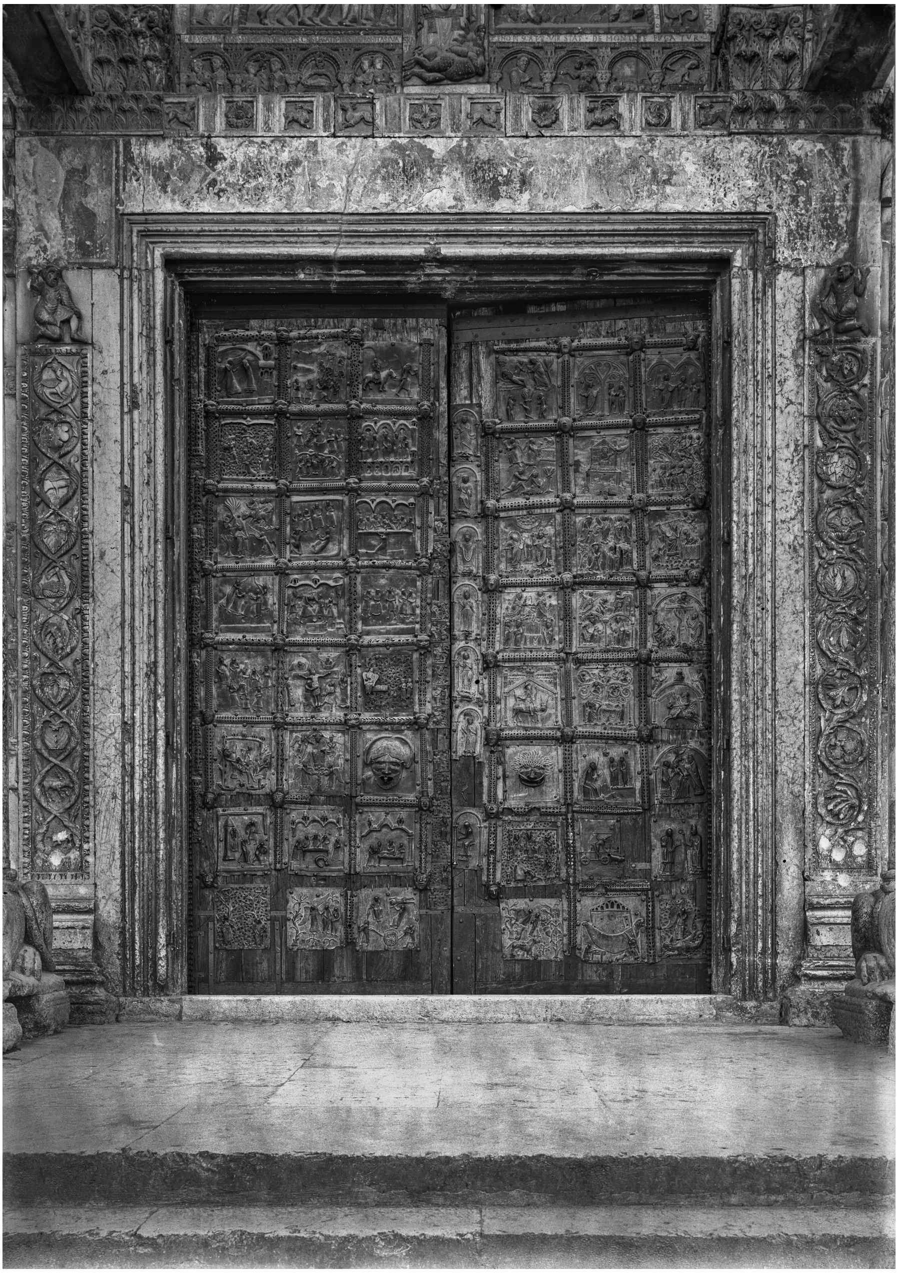
[23] The doors are 498 cm in height, with the left door 193 cm wide, and the right one 187 cm. The forty-eight large panels measure roughly 34 × 27 cm, and narrower and smaller panels are placed along the inner frame of the door. On this door, see Waltraud Neumann, *Studien zu den Bildfeldern der Bronzetür von San Zeno in Verona*, Frankfurt a. M. 1979; Chiara Frugoni, La Porta di Bronzo della chiesa di San Zeno a Verona, in: Andrea Castagnetti and Gian Maria Varanini (eds.), *Il Veneto nel medioevo. Dai comuni cittadini al predominio scaligero nella Marca*, Verona 1991, 163–208; Mende, Bronzetüren, 57–73; Ittai Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2016, 110–124; Fabio Coden and Tiziana Franco, *San Zeno. Le porte bronzee*, Sommacampagna 2017.

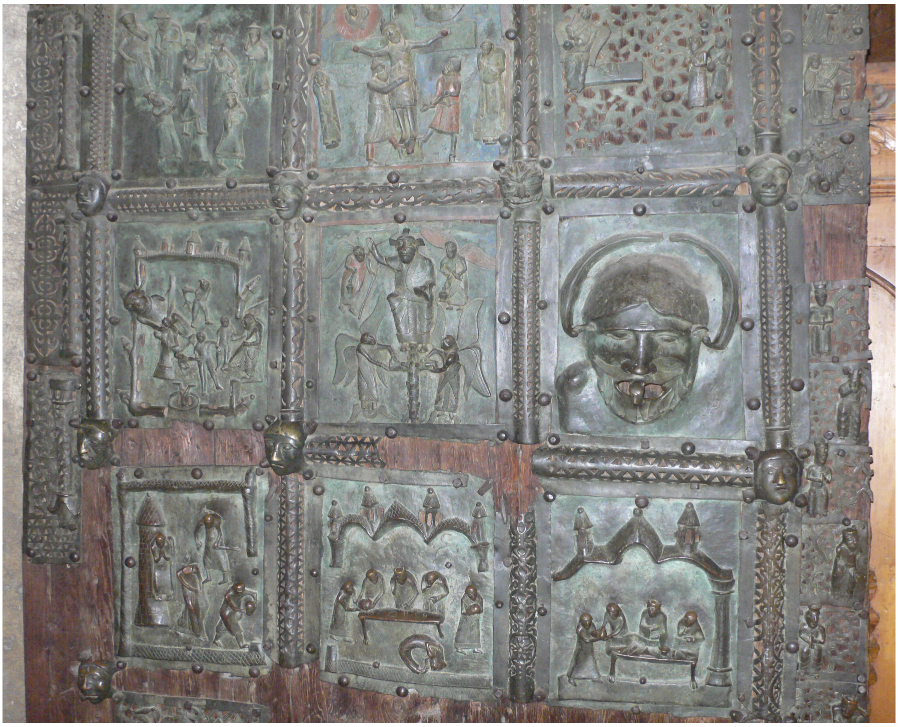
[24] Mende sees them bound to the "Zeitstil" of Wiligelmus and Nicolaus, whose work on the façade reliefs at San Zeno is dated 1138/39: Mende, Bronzetüren, 61. According to Weinryb, "some of the panels were produced as early as the 1080s, and others are the products of the early years of the thirteenth century". Weinryb, Bronze Object, 112.

[25] There are many examples of "programs" being added to, expanded, or duplicated in medieval art, and reasons for this have not been systematically studied. Manuscript example: An Irish "pocket gospel" from ca. 750 with a portrait of Luke on fol. 22v, to which another portrait of Luke was added in the second quarter of the tenth century on fol. 22v (London, British Library, Add. MS 40618).

[26] These include: the archangel Michael fighting the dragon in the lower right corner, the tree of virtues and vices, and the personifications of Terra and Mare.



[Fig. 3]
Bronze door, west portal of San Zeno, Verona, ca. 1138 © Bildarchiv Foto Marburg / Frieda Dettweiler, Menzel. Photograph taken 1937.



[Fig. 4]
Left door with door knocker, west portal of San Zeno, Verona, ca. 1138. Photograph: Tina Bawden, 2007.

into the ears.[27] Another animal head issues from the mouth, once keeping the ring in place. It faces forward, either biting the bearded mask's tongue, or extending its own tongue to curl back towards the open mouth.[28] In either scenario, both ears and tongue of this figure are occupied by beasts, a clear indication of corruption by sin.[29] Beset by beasts and yet offering a ring itself, this figure embodies the interlaced medieval understanding of sin as both self-inflicted and incidental. The image is neither purely threatening, nor does it hold the promise of redemption – it is both. Someone reaching for this ring brings their hand close to a head beset by evil snakes and beasts at different orifices. At the same time, holding the ring lodged behind one of these beast's heads invites the (mental) image of freeing the bearded figure from this particular parasite by pulling on the ring.

The image of lending a helping hand has a visual echo in a scene nearby: three panels further to the right, St. Zeno works a miracle on a possessed princess, daughter of the emperor Gallieno [Fig. 5].[30] In the garb of a bishop, he holds her left hand at the wrist, speaking a blessing which causes her to recoil physically, releasing a small snake-encircled demon from her mouth. Her right arm is held back by an assisting deacon. The liberation from evil is here formulated pictorially as a very manual task, performed by a saint-bishop legitimized by hagiography.[31] The bronze body of the princess, her stomach and chest, has been polished by frequent touch, raising questions of motive. This example makes it very clear that with regard to historical touch, we necessarily flounder in the dark: was this a way for visitors to align themselves with the princess, expressing their hope to be likewise unburdened from evil with the help of St. Zeno whom they could pray to as intercessor on behalf of their souls within this church? Or is this the result of a more desiring kind of touch? The princess assumes a posture of strong movement, which is explained by the exorcism performed by the churchmen framing and controlling her, but which in and of itself also had negative connotations in medieval visual culture. One register below on the adjacent door, the acrobatic and annular posture

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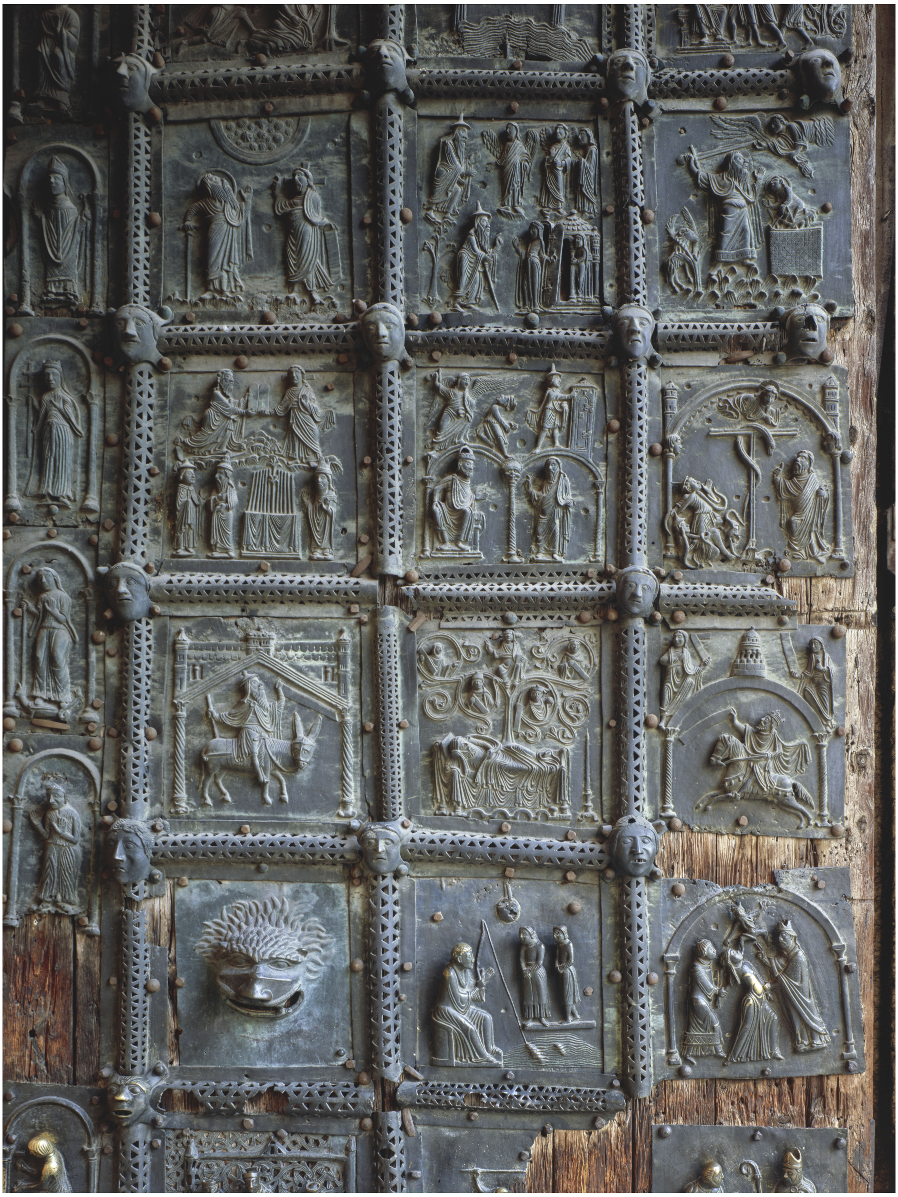
[27] Neumann, Studien, 33, reads them as whispering.

[28] Coden and Franco, Le porte bronzee, 63, read it as the canine animal's tongue.

[29] The figure is bearded, and this may have given contemporaries an indication of whether its sin was to be associated with a particular belief or ethnicity, and thereby meant as a visual polemic against a particular community in Verona or further afield. To my knowledge, this has not been discussed for Verona, and styles of hair and beards were associated with various groups of people at different times, cf. Ian Wood, Hair and Beards in the Early Medieval West, in: *Al-Masāq* 30, 2018, 107–116.

[30] Vita Zenonis, in: *Acta Sanctorum*, vol. 10, Apr. II (April 12), Antwerp 1675, 70–71.

[31] For an analysis of the pictorial construction of the holy bishop, see: Valerie Figge, *Das Bild des Bischofs. Bischofsviten in Bilderzählungen des 9. bis 13. Jahrhunderts*, Weimar 2000.



[Fig. 5]
Right door with door knocker and St. Zeno healing the princess two panels further to the right, west portal of San Zeno, Verona, ca. 1138. Photograph: © Bildarchiv Foto Marburg / Albert Hirmer, Irmgard Ernstmeier-Hirmer.

assumed by the dancing Salome gives an example of an even more extreme figure of physical movement [see Fig. 4]. Her dance, along with all dancing, was itself highly ambivalent within medieval cultures: “The motif of the dancing girl who receives a trophy in the form of a gorgonic head is [...] complex and paradoxical: disease-carrying, epileptic, and eroticising.”[32] The princess presents a milder visual echo of Salome’s movement, but the impulse to touch her body, revealed in its polished metal, would stem from a similarly complex range of feelings between hope (for healing) and desire. This kind of touching might not have been envisaged, perhaps, but was equally possible and probable in heavily frequented and multi-purpose spaces such as church buildings and church entrances.[33]

Images centering on touch abound on this door, and as Ittai Weinryb has argued regarding bronze objects generally, there is a production side to this. In the number of figures projecting out of the door in iconographically unusual poses, we can easily see traces of the flexibility and malleability inherent in shaping the wax model for cast bronze, and the way in which the model-makers capitalize on this.[34] One example is that of Satan in hell on the same level as the door knockers, whose figure leans out of the panel, turned towards the viewer standing in front of the closed door [see Fig. 4]. The dexterity invested in shaping these small sculptures in the round finds its parallel in a pictorial focus on touch: Christ has opened the gates of hell, and seizes Adam’s wrist, who in turn pulls Eve along behind him, while (partially extant) devils try to hold them back. This tactile chain of release from hell parallels and reverses that of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise one register below at the bottom of the door, where the angel lays his hand on Eve’s shoulder, who in turn touches Adam. The overall impression is that of a very physical and especially tactile side to the fight with sin and sinfulness; touching the rings of the door knockers should be seen in this context.

There is even a scene revolving around the use of a door knocker, and it is worth examining its complexities closely to see what the pictorial rendering of a gesture may add to the legal and ecclesiastic contexts described above. Within the sequence of scenes from Abraham's Old Testament story, a two-part panel features Abraham speaking with three angels above, and an exchange between Abraham and a woman standing at the entrance to a house, within which we can see a second woman listening from between two columns [Fig. 6]. The scene is usually interpreted as Abraham casting out Hagar and her son Ishmael upon the request of his wife Sarah (Gen. 21:10).[35] In the Vulgate, Hagar is the Egyptian maid (*ancilla*) made Abraham's wife (*uxor*) by Sarah to bear her children (Gen. 16:3: "si forte saltem ex illa suscipiam filios"). After Sarah gives birth to Isaac after all, however, she wants rid of Hagar, and Abraham is told by God to listen to his wife (Gen. 21:12). Hagar and Ishmael are banished to the desert, and become the forebears of the Ishmaelites or Hagarenes, the names associated with pre-Islamic and Arab peoples in the early Middle Ages.[36]

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[32] Barbara Baert, *Interruptions and Transitions. Essays on the Senses in Medieval and Early Modern Visual Culture*, Leiden 2019, esp. ch. 5 “‘When the Daughter Came in and Danced’. Revisiting Salome’s Dance in Medieval and Early Modern Iconology”, 169–220, here 197.

[33] For an analysis of the multiple mundane actions taking place in Chartres cathedral, among them lovers’ meetings and prostitution, see Dawn Marie Hayes, Mundane Uses of Sacred Places in the Central and Later Middle Ages, with a Focus on Chartres Cathedral, in: *Comitatus* 30, 1999, 11–37. On entrances as sites of somatic imagery in monastic contexts of the twelfth century, see the fundamental Michael Camille, Mouths and Meanings. Towards an Anti-Iconography of Medieval Art, in: Brendan Cassidy (ed.), *Iconography at the Crossroads*, Princeton, NJ 1993, 43–57.

[34] Weinryb, Bronze Object, esp. 47–51 (on Hildesheim objects). Among the most unusual figures iconographically in Verona would be that of Christ washing the Apostles’ feet, who is shaped almost fully in the round and seen from the back.

The second interpretation offers a tighter connection with the scene above, which shows Abraham meeting three men (= God) at Mambre (Gen. 18:1–15). Sarah provides them with food and water, and after the three men have eaten, they announce the birth of his son. Sarah overhears the announcement (in the tent) and laughs, because both her and Abraham are old. Replacing the tent with a house, the scene could show Abraham telling Sarah to bake bread for the guests (Gen. 18:6), most likely visually conflating this message with the announcement of the birth of Isaac, as hospitality and future conception are causally linked by the biblical text.[37] The two female figures could then be versions of Sarah at three moments of biblical narrative, receiving Abraham's order for bread with her raised hand, overhearing the annunciation of the three men, relayed visually by Abraham, in the iconographic guise of *ancilla*, and finally doubling as the figure of a bride at the door.[38] Scholars describing the scene have drawn on the youthfulness of the figure at the door to identify her as Hagar, but youthfulness could here be not an attribute, but a visual sign of Sarah's announced motherhood. In its rendering, the open door with its prominent ring and ironwork certainly cites the closed door behind Mary in the Annunciation by the first workshop at the top of the left door, pointing out, in

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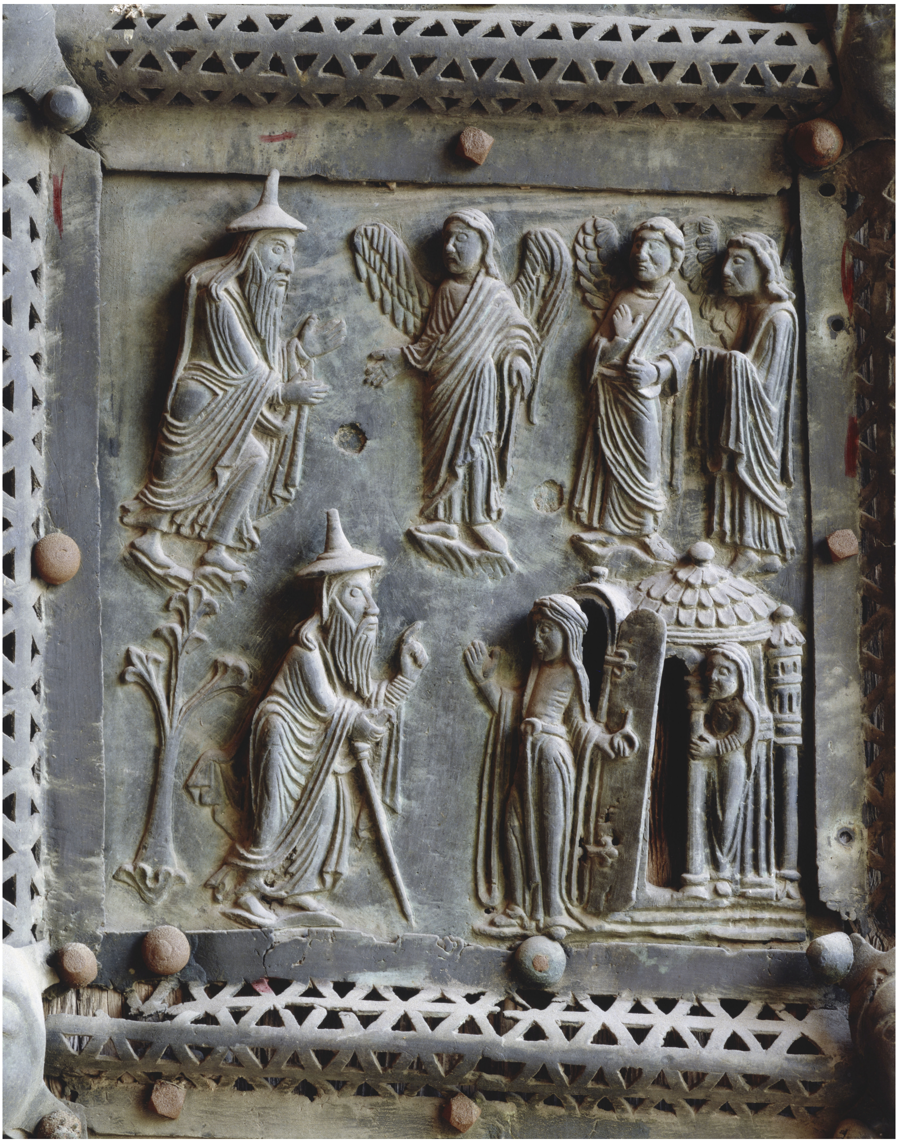
[35] Mende, Bronzetüren, 69. For an early representation of this scene, see Ravenna, San Vitale, lunette mosaic with Abraham's hospitality and the Sacrifice of Isaac (sixth century).

[36] Catherine E. Karkov, Hagar and Ishmael. The Uncanny and the Exile, in: Zamantha Zacher (ed.), *Imagining the Jew in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Culture*, Toronto 2016, 197–218, here 200. M. Lindsay Kaplan, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity*, Oxford 2019, esp. ch. 5 "Cain, Ham, and Ishmael. The African Travels of Perpetual Servitude", 135–165.

[37] This reading of the woman in the door as Sarah is preferred by Frugoni, La porta di bronzo, 189, and Coden and Franco, Le porte bronzee.

[38] It is not unusual to have communication overlapping by way of figures read twice and gestures read separately, cf. the example of an illumination of the parable of Dives and Lazarus in a thirteenth-century psalter in Bawden, Die Schwelle, 65–66.



[Fig. 6]
Abraham and the three men at Mamre; Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, west portal of San Zeno, Verona (right), panel in the “second style”, twelfth/thirteenth century. Photograph: © Bildarchiv Foto Marburg / Albert Hirmer, Irmgard Ernstmeier-Hirmer.

typological fashion, the similarity and difference between Sarah and the Virgin.

The image is therefore more ambiguous than scholarship has noted, and this is due in no small part to the association of a female figure with the door of a house. The figure at the door is depicted with a tight-fitting dress similar to the princess healed by St. Zeno below, additionally embellished with very large sleeves and a belt with a prominent loop, which provides a visual echo of the ring on the door. As Hagar, the figure's gesture of grasping the ring of the door would be highlighted as a futile claim to a house that has never been hers, a bid for sanctuary not granted. We could read her fashionably clad body as sexualized and transgressive, as it often was in medieval biblical commentaries, which go to great lengths to make it clear that it is Hagar's body and not Abraham's which is to be identified with lust and desire in their union – a transposition which may here be visualized.[39] If we take the gesture as a legal claim on the house, however, then this must be Sarah, mother of Isaac and therefore the Old Testament's celebrated tribe, precursor of Mary, asserting her position as wife of this house (and, thereby, genealogy). The figure of the maid listening in has an iconographic tradition of its own,[40] and the composition as a whole resembles an earlier depiction of the scene in the Old English Hexateuch [Fig. 7]. Here, likewise, there is an empty arcade between Sarah, complaining to Abraham on the left, and Hagar, head and body bent to listen in, her posture demonstrating her guilt clearly to reader-viewers.[41] In Verona, both women are physically involved with the building, holding the door ring and the column respectively. As the visual reference to the Annunciation scene makes clear, buildings always potentially represent bodies. Mary is the *porta clausa* at the incarnation, and *porta caeli*, having opened – as second Eve – the door closed with the Fall. Catherine Karkov has highlighted the way in which Abraham's wives merge in biblical commentary, with Hagar a particularly uncanny figure.[42] The merging and doubling of Sarah and Hagar does not only play out in the ambiguous representation of the figures themselves in the Verona scene; medieval authors made much of the way in which Hagar's womb functioned as an extension of Sarah's body. Both adorned with a ring, Sarah-Hagar's body and the house with its door are visually aligned. The physical handling of the ring makes it clear that this, in contrast to Mary's *porta clausa* above, is a different (non-virginal) body.[43]

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[39] Augustine, City of God, book XVI, ch. 25. Sancti Aurelii Augustini, *De Civitate Dei*, Libri XI–XXII (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, vol. XLVIII), Turnhout 1955, 529. English Translation: Saint Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans in 7 vols.*, vol. 5 (Book XVI–Book XVIII), transl. by Eva Matthews Sanford and William McAllen Green, London/Cambridge, MA 1965, 121–123.

[40] Window and door are related in the history of this iconography to the same extent as door curtains and firm doors are interchangeable: the Smyrna Octateuch, MS A.I, fol. 30 (twelfth century, now destroyed) depicted Sarah as watching out of a window. See Robert Deshman, Servants of the Mother of God in Byzantine and Medieval Art, in: *Word & Image* 5, 1989, 33–70, here 51 and 53, fig. 26, with further examples. See also Wolfgang Kemp, *Die Räume der Maler. Zur Bilderzählung seit Giotto*, Munich 1996, 33–35.

[41] Made in Canterbury between 1020 and 1040: British Library, Cotton Claudius B.iv, fol. 27v. For a close reading of this scene: Karkov, Hagar and Ishmael, 211.

[42] Karkov, Hagar and Ishmael, throughout.

The image of a woman holding the ring of a door, whether denoting power or sin, is therefore always potentially transgressive. The ambivalence of female figures' appearance and gestures in medieval art is one that is showcased by many examples. Most prominently, perhaps, this ambivalence plays out in visualizations of the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Mt. 25:1–13). In the tympanum of the Galluspforte at the Basel Münster (late twelfth century), the Foolish Virgins are designated by tight-fitting dresses and uncovered hair, whereas the Wise ones wear loose dresses with large sleeves and wimples usually worn by married women on their heads [Fig. 8 and Fig. 9]. The situation can also be reversed, however: Jacqueline E. Jung has traced how at Magdeburg in the middle of the thirteenth century, sculptors used the same methods of representation to show the Wise Virgins as fashionable and elegant in their dress and gestures, communicating their deserved joy over gaining entry into the kingdom.[44] The many highlighted female figures of the Verona doors suggest that the ambivalence has older roots: because it is their bodies more than their actions which become vehicles for expression – an aspect for which Gothic artists of the Wise and Foolish Virgins sculptures have been celebrated[45] – notions of physical and ideal, personified and abstract bodies become entangled. The Foolish Virgin at the front of the queue in Basel reaches out to grasp the ring on the door – a futile gesture, since the heavenly bridegroom has already opened the door opposite to welcome the Wise Virgins. The gesture spotlights the

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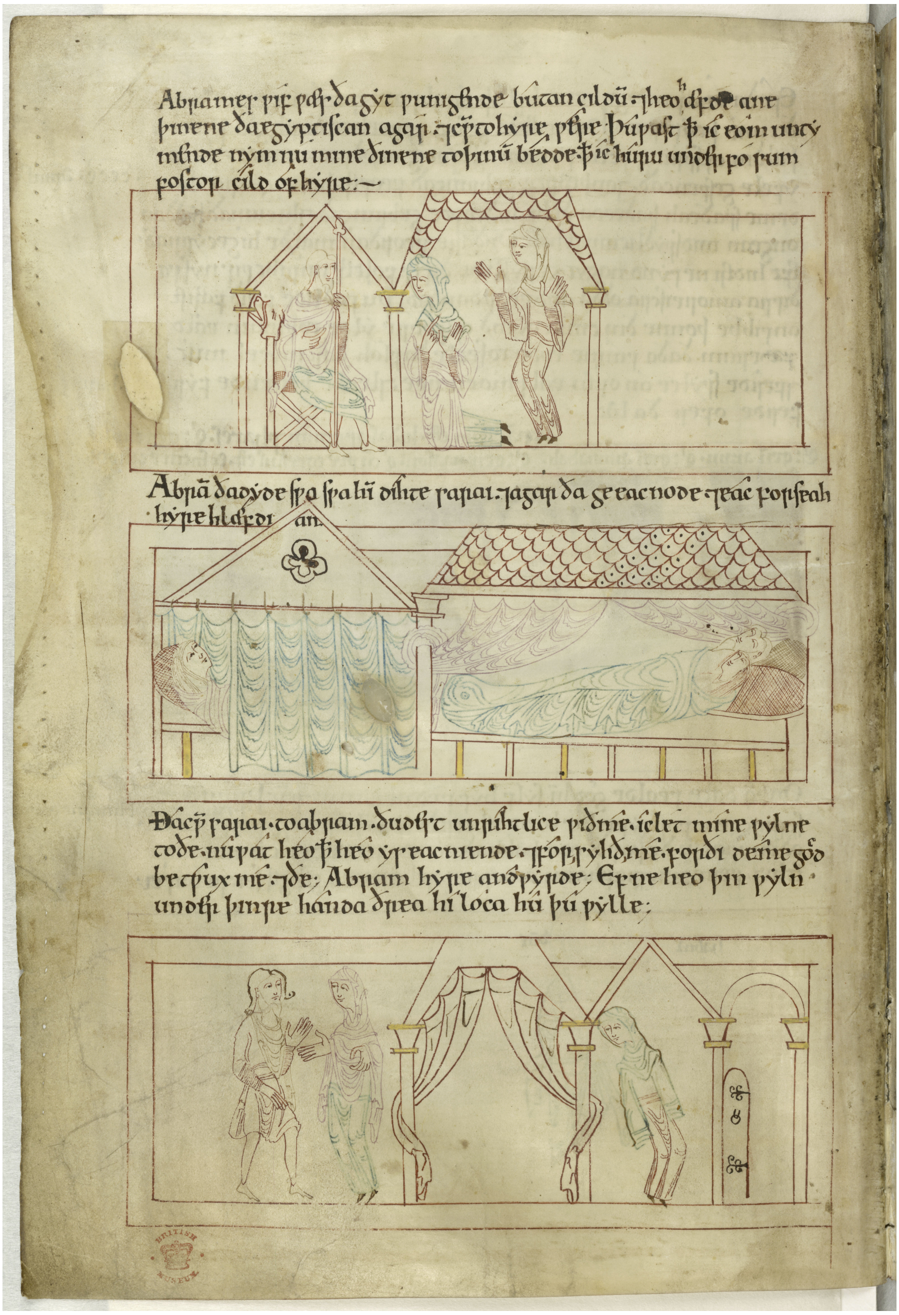
[43] For a similar association of body with architecture, see the scene involving Aelfgyva and the cleric reaching past the framing column to touch her face in the Bayeux Tapestry (ca. 1080), complete with naked man in the margin below echoing and therefore underscoring the sexual and aggressive meaning of the cleric's gesture. Bayeux, Musée de la Tapisserie. Loops, rings, and belts were also associated with conception and birth. Birthing girdles were widespread in the Middle Ages. Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out how the apotropaic principle of *similia similibus* was influential in late medieval examples adorned with Christ's side wound "in the hope that one gaping slit would aid another in opening": Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality. An Essay in Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, New York 2015, 200. The – untouched! – door ring is used in this allusive way in an Annunciation panel by the Master of the Madonna Straus (Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia, Acc. No. 1890, No. 3146), ca. 1395–1405. Here, the ring lies precisely in the middle of the trajectory of the angel's greeting directed at Mary and parallels the opening used by the holy ghost on its flight path.

[44] Jacqueline E. Jung, *Eloquent Bodies. Movement, Expression, and the Human Figure in Gothic Sculpture*, New Haven, CT/London 2020, 151–169.

[45] Stephen C. Jaeger argued how, at Strasbourg, on the south portal of the west façade, one of the most striking features of these figures is their "moral transparency. They are representations of vices and virtues, but this meaning has to be read from their bodies, their posture, their facial expressions, the tilt of their heads." C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels. Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950–1200*, Philadelphia 1995, app. A, 331.



[Fig. 7]
Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. Old English Illustrated Hexateuch, 1020–1040, with twelfth-century additions, Canterbury. London, British Library, Cotton MS Claudius B.iv, fol. 27v.
© British Library Board, Cotton MS Claudius B.iv, fol. 27v.

powerlessness of the Foolish Virgins, who cannot actively change their fate. By assuming through touch an agency she is not entitled to, the Foolish Virgin is set to perform her desperation, adding transgression to futility.

The images at Verona and Basel reveal the undercurrents of the legal gesture of grasping the ring of a door. Not everyone was eligible to claim church asylum,[46] and therefore the gesture was suffused with prerequisites. While they visually perform a well-known kind of touching, Sarah-Hagar and the Foolish Virgins present its non-performative nature. The ring at the door is a promise formulated in tactile terms, but actual touch might be futile or even be considered transgressive because of its connotations of claiming a right or ownership. A runic inscription on the ring of Delsbo church (Sweden) formulates this conundrum, stipulating "You may look at me. You cannot have(/get) me. Gunnar made me. The Church owns me. Blessed Mary".[47] The door knockers at San Zeno may invite touch by way of their object affordance, but their iconography and the material traces and visual formulations of touching that surround them are set to introduce some hesitation and codification into the balance, complicating the immediacy usually accompanying the tactile sense. The following example of a single door knocker shows that this hesitance may also find its equivalence in the ambiguity of its figures.

IV. Strength and Helplessness. The Door Knocker in the Victoria and Albert Museum

A door knocker now at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London features the main beast of the door, a lion, and a small figure perched behind the lion's neck on the escutcheon [Fig. 10].[48] Door knocker and figure were cast in one piece, the gap between the back of the lion's head and the figure's front rough and unfinished.[49] The figure is crouching, feet placed on the plate, knees and upper body

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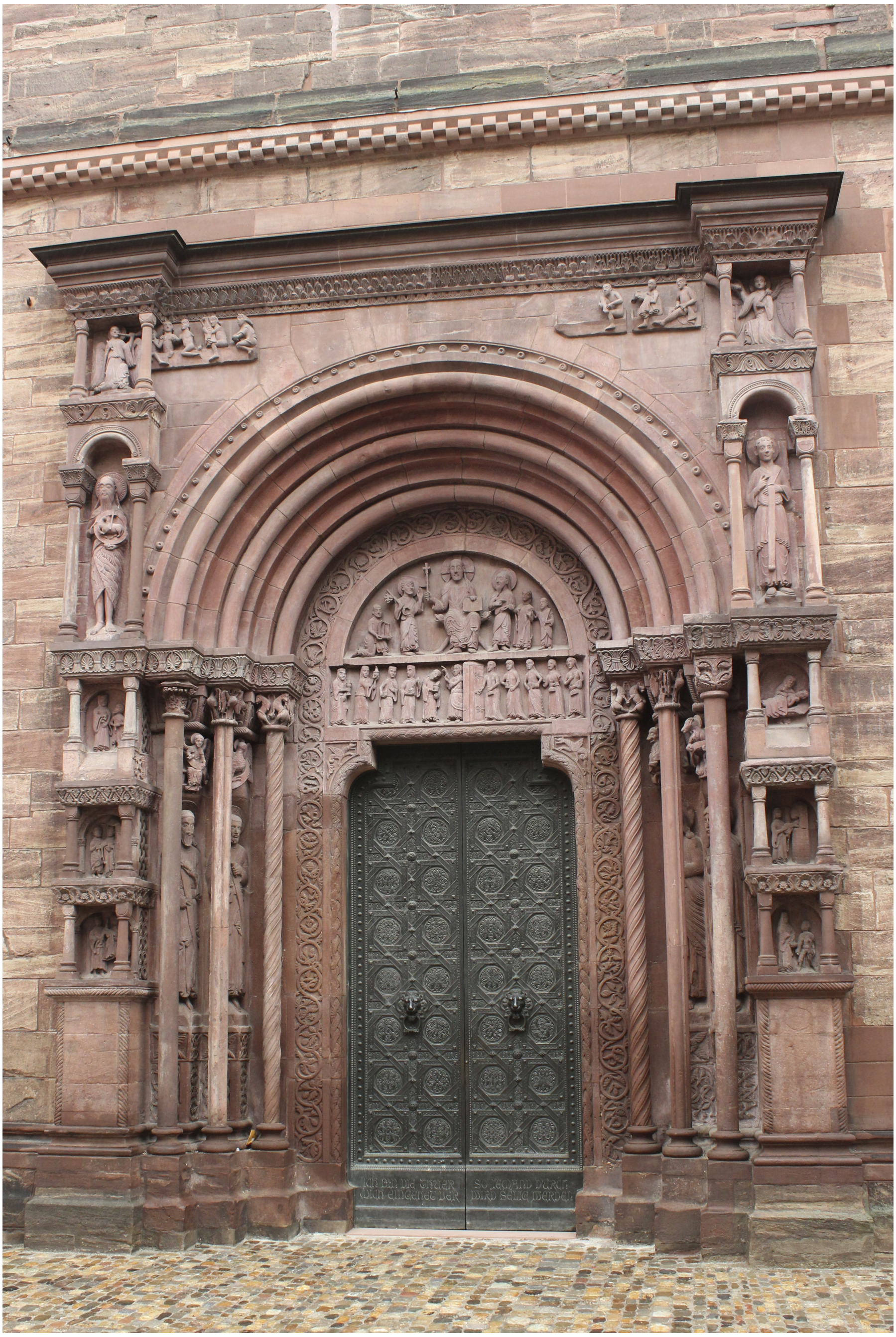
[46] Jews, serfs, excommunicates, and heretics were excluded from eligibility: Jordan, Medieval Sanctuary, 21. Married women could only seek sanctuary with the allowance of their husbands (cf. ibid.) – perhaps also relevant for a reading of the woman at the door as Hagar.

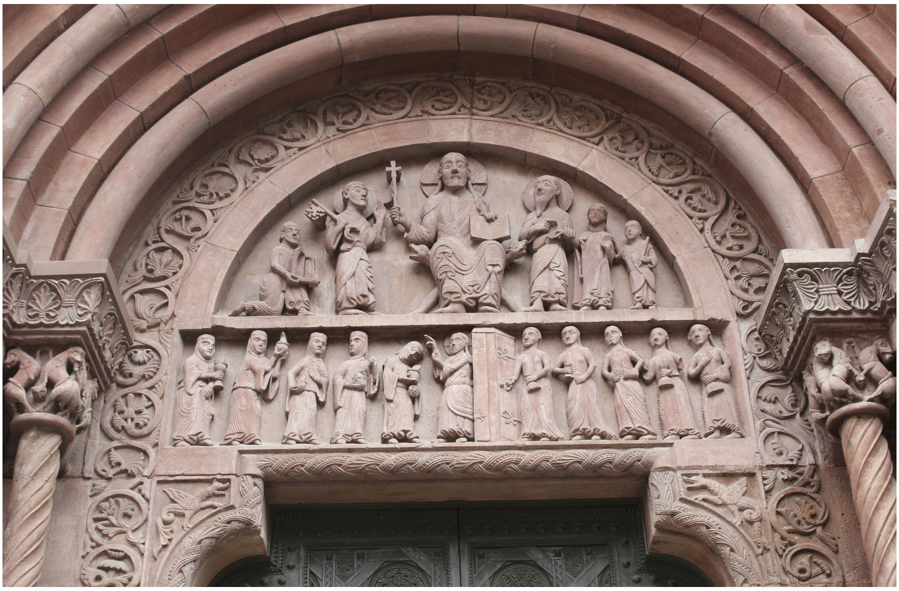
[47] For an image and transliteration, see http://www.runesdb.eu. Karlsson, Ironwork, vol. 2, 75, cat. no. 69.

[48] Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. No. 163–1894. Dated end twelfth century. All mentions follow Mende's 1981 localization to Magdeburg or northern Germany. Frans Carlsson, *The Iconology of Tectonics in Romanesque Art*, Hässleholm 1976, 88; Mende, Türzieher, cat. no. 85, 244–245; Ursula Mende, *Die mittelalterlichen Bronzen im Germanischen Nationalmuseum, Bestandskatalog*, Nürnberg 2013, 177; Joanna Olchawa, *Aquamanilien. Genese, Verbreitung und Bedeutung in islamischen und christlichen Zeremonien*, Regensburg 2019, 341.

[49] I am very grateful to Dr. Kirstin Kennedy, Curator of Decorative Art and Sculpture – Metalwork at the V&A, for sending me additional photos and alerting me to the rough area on the underside of the figure.


ICH BIN DIE THUER
MICH EINGEHET DER
SO JEMAND DURCH
WIRD SELIG WERDEN

[Fig. 8]
Galluspforte (north portal), Basel cathedral, late twelfth century. Photograph: Tina Bawden, 2013.



[Fig. 9]
The Wise and Foolish Virgins, lintel and tympanum of the Galluspforte (north portal), Basel cathedral, late twelfth century. Photograph: Tina Bawden, 2013.

pressed against the lion's head, and arms outstretched across the lion's brow. It wears a garment with folds, and a distinctive belt with a round plate in the small of its back [Fig. 11]. Three long braids or strands of hair extend onto its back.

The hair and the belt associate the figure with the theme of lion fighters in medieval visual culture. Ursula Mende has pointed towards comparable figures connected with bronze aquamaniles, which are usually interpreted as Samson fighting the lion.[50] As George Zarnecki demonstrated in 1964, the belt of the type worn by the V&A figure is quite a well-known attribute across Europe, extant in sculpture, frieze, bronze, and manuscript painting.[51] Frequently, this "belt of strength" indicates the physical prowess of a figure such as Samson, Hercules, or anonymous atlantes, and/or their gigantic size. It is mainly associated with "tectonic elements such as columns, bases, capitals, springings and keystones", where it refers to the "strength of the *Ecclesia Universalis*".[52] While the door knocker is not a tectonic element, it may stand *pars pro toto* for the stability of the door in this sense. Zarnecki distinguishes from the "belt of strength" the "belt of evil", a similar belt worn by figures such as Cain, Judas, or the flagellators of Christ.[53] As well as an attribute allowing viewers to identify someone as particularly strong, then, this belt motif is also a means of othering, marking figures as different, perhaps due to their size or strength, but potentially for their virtuousness *or* sinfulness.

Focusing on Romanesque sculpture, Kirk Ambrose has shown that we do well not to see "lion fighter carvings as ideograms that always and everywhere mean the same".[54] Artists made use of and adapted a varied tradition of this motif, and the examples studied by Ambrose and others are semantically rich, with multiple potential meanings. The ambiguity of the figure and its principal attribute, the belt, is only heightened in its interaction with the lion: is it wrestling the lion, controlling it, keeping it in its place, or indeed presenting

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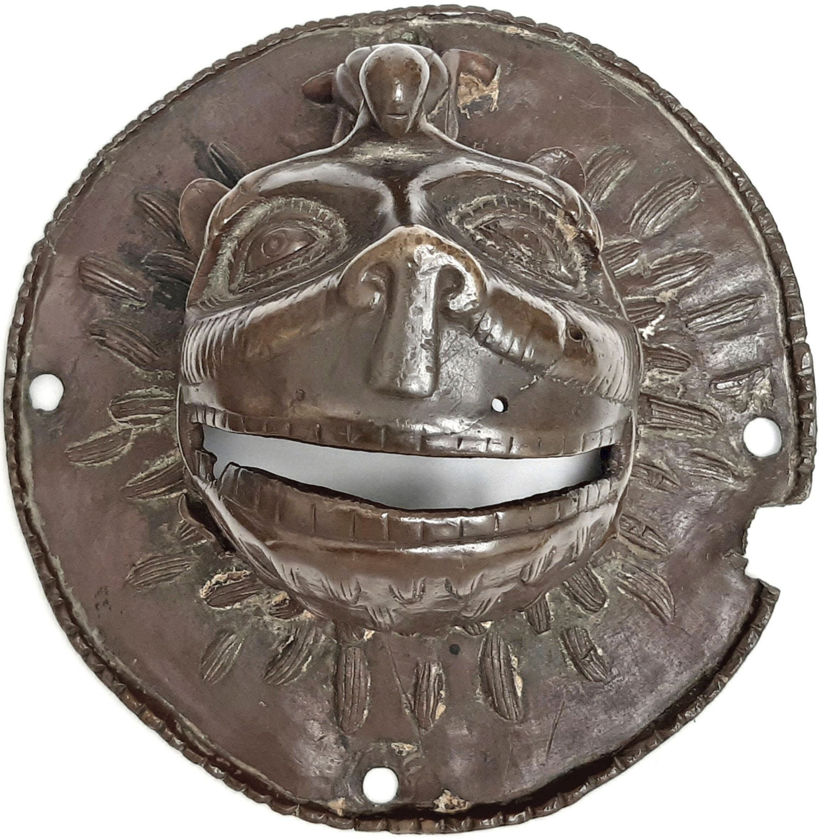
[50] Mende, Türzieher, 244–245, cat. no. 85.

[51] George Zarnecki, A Romanesque Bronze Candlestick in Oslo and the Problem of the "Belts of Strength", in: Årbok, Kunstindustrimuseet I Oslo, 1964, 45–66. Further, very distinct examples include the holy water stoup at Saint-Saveur, Dinan, with four figures holding the bowl, or the people carrying large fish in the portal archivolts at Sainte-Marie d'Oloron, and a bronze figure maybe once holding a candle-stick at Oslo, Kunstindustrimuseet, which is the reason for Zarnecki's article.

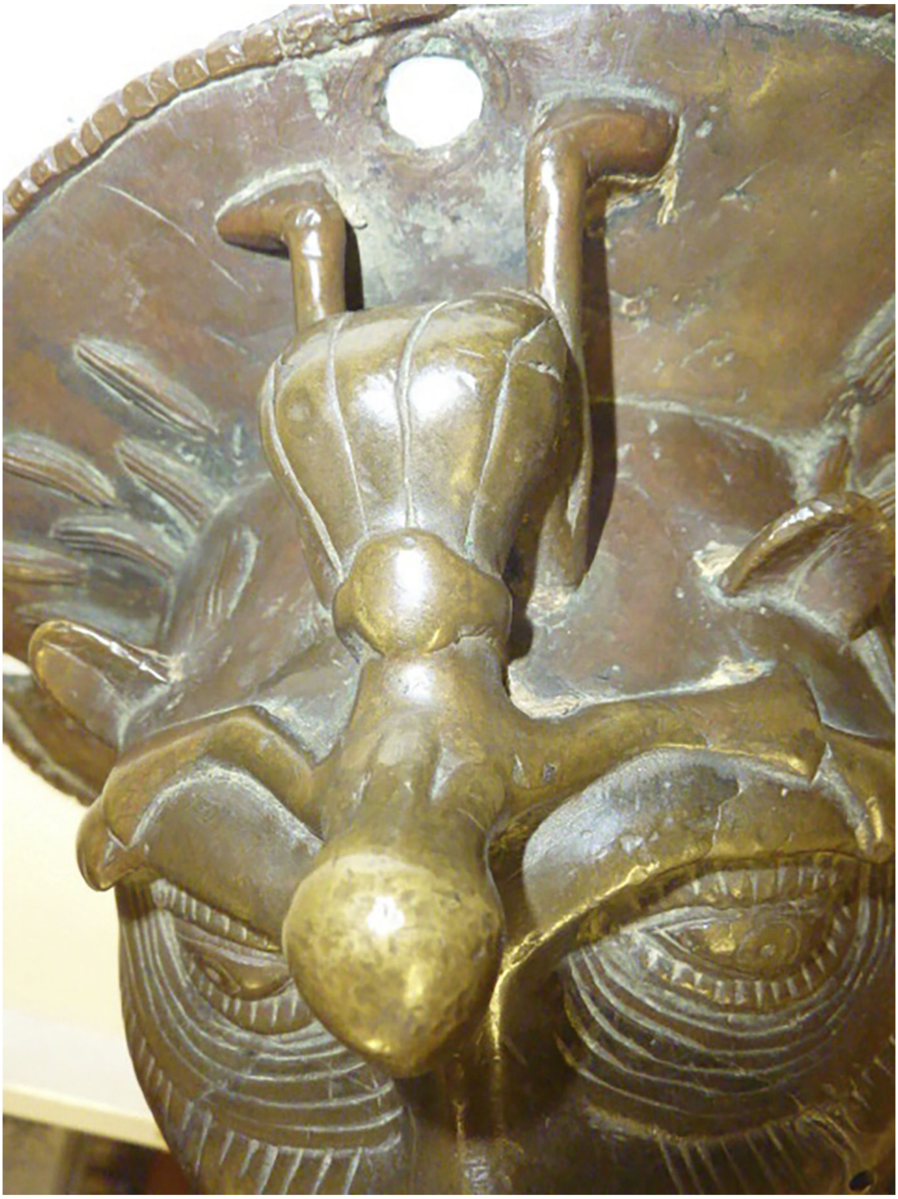
[52] Carlsson, Iconology of Tectonics, 88. Examples: figure holding the column in the doorway of Ste Gertrude at Nivelles in Belgium; figure crouching at the column in the crypt at Lund cathedral (consecrated 1123); lion fighter in a stone relief at the Museo Civico, Como.

[53] Zarnecki, Belts of Strength, 54–56, citing the Winchester Psalter, British Library, Cotton MS Nero C.IV, fol. 2r; Life of St. Edmund, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 736, fol. 13v; representations of demons pulling Judas up by a belt with a round plate in capitals at Saulieu and Autun.

[54] Kirk Ambrose, Samson, David, or Hercules? Ambiguous Identities in Some Romanesque Sculptures of Lion Fighters, in: *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 74 (2005), 131–147, here 133.



[Fig. 10]
Door knocker, German, twelfth century, bronze, 21.6 cm diameter. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, No. 163-1894 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



[Fig. 11]
Door knocker, German, twelfth century, view of the small figure from above. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, No. 163-1894 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

it? The multiple potential readings of the lion in medieval art add further to the polyvalence of this group. Contrary to other door knockers, this lion does not threaten a vulnerable hand brought near it with sharp metal teeth. Positive images of the lion focus on its maw to the same extent as negative interpretations: after defeating the lion, Samson finds its cadaver surrounded by bees, and honey in its mouth (Judges 14:8–9), a detail interpreted as the sweet word of God, for example in a sermon by Caesarius of Arles.[55] The highly influential *Physiologus*, a Christian allegorical text on nature from Alexandria composed before 200 CE describes the lion's third characteristic as its ability to awaken its three-day-old young, born dead, by breathing upon them.[56]

Sweet words and life-giving breath are at one end of the spectrum of connotations of the lion opened up by the inscriptions around the door knockers of the church of St. Julien in Brioude (Auvergne, ca. 1200) [Fig. 12a and Fig. 12b]. One more human, one a lion head, both knockers pair alliteration with semantic and visual contrast. The inscription surrounding the humanoid mask warns of the ensnarement of the worldly mouth, pairing mouth (*oris*) with world (*orbis*), while the lion's inscription seems to refer quite clearly to the meaning of the *Physiologus* lion and its life-giving breath (*orior* [...] *oris* in the clockwise inscription, visually paired *oris+orior* above the lion's brow).[57] The repetition of the letter "O" points to the importance of the kinesthetic dimension of speech and the visual form of the written word at the same time.[58] Its shape finds echoes in the round plates of the door knockers and their rings, potentially lulling viewers into falsely thinking these knockers contain the same message – were it not for the masks' differences in appearance. The association of mouth and door has a tradition: in Isidore of Seville's seventh-century *Etymologies* the association is likewise established by similarity: "The mouth (*os*) is so called, because through the mouth as if through a door (*ostium*) we bring food in and throw spit

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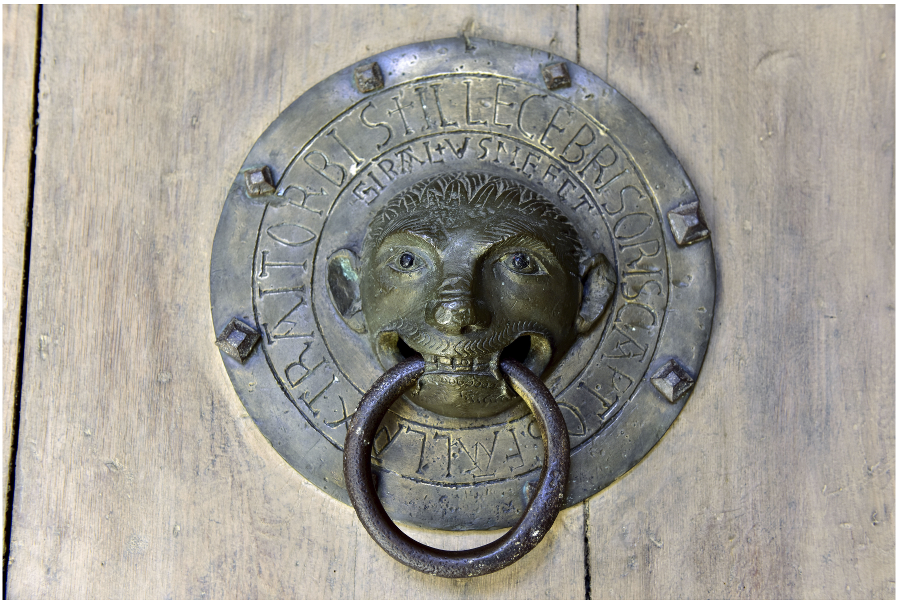
[55] Caesarius of Arles, Sermo 119, in: *Sermones* I, ed. G. Morin (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, vol. CIV), Turnhout 1953. Saint Caesarius of Arles, *Sermons*, vol. II, trans. Mary Magdaleine Mueller, Fathers of the Church vol. 47, Washington DC 1964, 189.

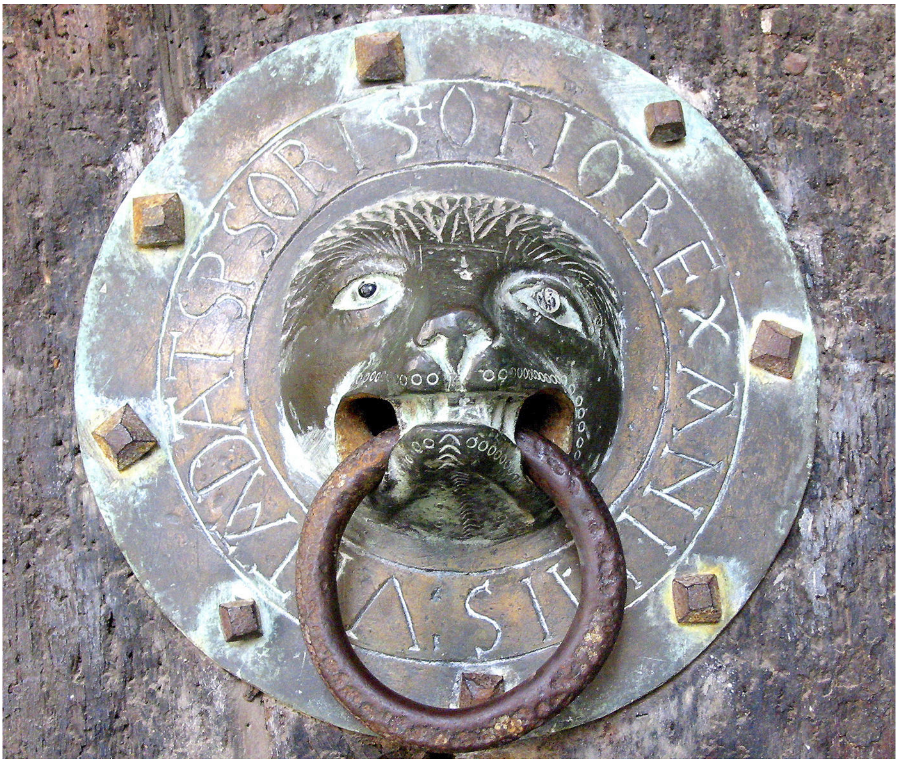
[56] *Physiologus. A Medieval Book of Nature Lore*, transl. by M.J. Curley, Chicago 2009, 3–4.

[57] ILLECEBRIS ORIS CAPTOS FALLAX TRA(H)IT ORBIS; ORIOR EX ANIMIS: VITA(M) DAT SP(IRITU)S ORIS. "The world deceitfully pulls along those captured by tempting mouths"; "I arise out of souls. Mouth's breath gives life." My translations are based on the German ones discussed with Helge Baumann: Bawden, Die Schwelle, 264n1061. For two quite different translations within the older literature, see Mende, Türzieher, 211–212, cat. no. 20. Weinryb, Bronze Object, 52–53 reads the inscription around the lion head knocker as an echo of the production process of cast bronze, where the wax model is substituted with the bronze form. The inscription GIRAL(D)US ME F(E)C(I)T is a direct reference to this process, which, however, is found on the inner frame of the humanoid mask.

[58] Cf. Classen, The Deepest Sense, 124.



[Fig. 12a]
Door knocker in the shape of a human head, south portal, St. Julien, Brioude, ca. 1200, bronze escutcheon with iron ring, 26 × 6.3 cm. Photograph: Raymond Faure, Goslar (with kind permission).



[Fig. 12b]
Door knocker in the shape of a lion, south portal, St. Julien, Brioude, ca. 1200, bronze escutcheon with iron ring, 25.5 × 7.5 cm. Photograph: Jean-Pol Grandmont, Wikimedia Commons CC BY 3.0 License.

out; or else because from that place food goes in and words come out."[59]

The Brioude door knockers thus demonstrate perfectly the medieval distinctions made between texts and images with regard to ambiguity: where the Bible text, according to Augustine, was ambiguous and obscure to tame human pride, Gregory's *dictum* emphasized the legibility of images by the illiterate.[60] On account of its wild hair, the human face was probably intended to be recognized as evil or at least mischievous at first glance, while the lion was in contrast a more authoritative and established image. Even without knowing the content of the inscriptions, assuming the correct attitude towards the knockers was possible, and conversely, once the inscriptions were known, the faces of the knockers made them memorable. The Brioude knockers demonstrate, in concentrated form, the variety of ways in which viewers could arrive at an understanding of the impulses contained by the threshold, which are fundamentally contrastive: doors issue both invitation and warning; their images formulate promises and call for self-examination as a condition for entry.

The London knocker, in contrast to those of Brioude, lacks inscription but is more complex in terms of visual motifs and their combination, and therefore more difficult to align with the supposed ideal of clarity (*perspicuitas*) for images. The size of the figure is difficult to reconcile with mythological and biblical lion fighters and with the strength attributed to it by way of the belt; this has the potential to introduce a humorous or polemic note. Seen from the front, only the arms and head of the figure are in fact visible, and it might appear as someone taking shelter behind the lion's ears.[61] Its affordances of a smooth sculpted surface reflecting the light when moved or approached give bronze a potential for animation.[62] This would have been enhanced at the door, where fittings move along with the door when it is opened or closed, and light might enliven the interaction between the figure and the lion as viewers walk past.

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[59] *The* Etymologies *of Isidore of Seville*, ed. and trans. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof, Cambridge 2006, Book XI "The Human Being and Portents" (De homine et portentis), i, 49, here p. 234.

[60] For a lucid discussion of the contrasting arguments concerning ambiguity in the Middle Ages, see Silke Tammen, Stelzenfisch und Bildnisse in einer Baumkrone, Unähnlichkeit und Montage. Gedanken zu Ambiguität mittelalterlicher Bilder, in: Verena Krieger and Rachel Mader (eds.), *Ambiguität in der Kunst. Typen und Funktionen eines ästhetischen Paradigmas*, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna 2010, 53–71, here esp. 53–59. On Gregory's *dictum* in the period under discussion here, see Herbert L. Kessler, Gregory the Great and Image Theory in Northern Europe during the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, in: Conrad Rudolph (ed.), *A Companion to Medieval Art. Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, Oxford/Chichester 2010, 151–172. Gregory the Great, *Registrum epistularium*, ed. Dag Norberg (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 140–140A), Turnhout 1982.

[61] This is the interpretation suggested on the V&A website, where the figure is identified as sanctuary seeker.

[62] See Weinryb, Bronze Object, 147–200.

Potential readings of this scene thus cover a whole spectrum, from the lion-tamer Samson or Hercules to a generic sanctuary seeker, unequivocally exemplary personification of virtue to pitiable creature or even someone viewers would be encouraged to distance themselves from morally. It is likely that individual viewers with differing levels of knowledge recognized and reacted to any and all of these aspects at different times and circumstances.

Touching the figure's head, however, must have been an enduring practice as it has been worn down and polished to a nub. Its features have almost disappeared in consequence, the position of nose and eyes can be guessed at, but only the strong line of the mouth is still visible. Whether touch aimed at letting some of the virtuous strength literally rub off onto the person touching the figure (after all, it was Samson's hair that was the seat of his physical power), whether it was touched protectively in recognition of aligning one's own status as a poor helpless soul with that of the representation of one, or finally whether the figure's worn status could even be seen as the result of aggressive effacement is not clear.[63] There are plenty of medieval examples for each of these tactile practices with contradictory aims, each of them situated within the realms of the apotropaic, superstitious, and mundane rather than that of formal instruction. Tactile practices acquire a distinct relevance with regard to bronze, however: while rubbing serves erasure in the context of most painted media,[64] it polishes in the context of the materials of the door. Bronze objects were always prized for their ability to shine.[65] Most famously, the inscription on the 1076 bronze doors of Monte Sant'Angelo stipulates that the rectors of St. Michael the Archangel should clean the doors annually "in the manner shown, so that they are always splendid and bright (*lucide et clare*)".[66] In the way it relates back to one concrete demonstration of how to clean them and requires this as a repeated act, the inscription is couched in legal language and infers ritual action for the doors, as Jill Caskey has noted.[67] Cleaning the doors, in turn, served to remember the patron Pantaleone, likewise inscribed upon the doors, which he "had made" (*fieri iussit*) for the redemption of his soul. The connection between the continuous validity of the terms and the regular manual engagement demonstrates "the various ways in which the agency that initially unfolded in the patronal field can accrue around the object itself and continue to affect change long after the demise of the [...] agent or *auctor*".[68]

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[63] Samson, after all, was blinded (Judges 16:21). He was an ambivalent figure in both Jewish and Christian exegesis.

[64] This can be observed most widely in medieval manuscripts, where it enabled correction as well as censorship. Cf. Michael Camille, Obscenity under Erasure. Censorship in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts, in: Jan M. Ziolkowski (ed.), *Obscenity. Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, Leiden 1998, 139–154. See also forthcoming publications by Kathryn Rudy (St. Andrews) and Henry Ravenhall (Berkeley).

[65] Discussed by Weinryb, Bronze Object, 16–19, 115.

[66] Rogo et adiuro rectores s(anct)I angeli Micha(elis) ut semel in anno detergere faciatis has portas sicuti nos nunc ostendere fecimus ut sint semper lucide et clare.

[67] Jill Caskey, Medieval Patronage and Its Potentialities, in: Colum Hourihane (ed.), *Patronage. Power and Agency in Medieval Art*, Princeton, NJ 2013, 3–30, here 29f. with further examples.

We lack every kind of context for the London door knocker, from something so specific as guidance and instruction by a text to the most general spatial and material door-context. Nevertheless, polished areas in and of themselves present this aspect of continuity. Evidence of touch and the honeyed glow of polished bronze invites further touch, in particular at an accessible site of movement and repeated perception such as a doorway.[69] The realm of formal purposes fades further: conscious touch or touch with a reason might be succeeded by touching as a communal reflex or touch without purpose; in this way, incidental or illicit touch has the potential to be made into an enduring practice to the same degree as directed forms of touching.

V. Conclusion

Door knockers complicate the categories and conventions of accessibility and engagement for the Middle Ages. Like the door, they sit between the mechanical and the representational, the functional and the aesthetic, modern categories which govern the way we think about these objects. The entanglement of physical and historical distance and proximity is particularly pronounced with doors and their fittings: as something we use every day, any recognizable door feels familiar in its mechanism. A specific old door as an historical artifact complicates this familiarity. In historical doors and their fittings, past and present overlap, and this is particularly compounded because their type remains recognizable, their basic mechanism and effect palpable, while their functions are historically encoded.

The door knocker in the Victoria and Albert Museum materially documents a past practice of touching that must have endured for some time. It shifts our attention from the ring of a door knocker, its mechanism, known to have been held as a gesture in different legal contexts, to its imagery. Traces of touch on small bronze heads and bodies as in the case of the princess exorcised by St. Zeno, seem to invoke a different set of reasons from the talismanic and apotropaic to the incidental. While the scene of Sarah-Hagar grasping the ring of the door refers us back to conventional practices of seeking sanctuary or claiming ownership, though alerting us to the way they were gendered and not everyone was allowed to perform them, polished areas by way of more somatic than semantic appeal transport more of the immediacy of touch. The object's past(s) flash(es) up in the polished areas, but without explanation. Unlike the scratches in Miller's glass door once we start deciphering them, these traces are not primarily a by-product of functional use, since they concern not the ring but the sculpted figures.

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[68] Caskey, Medieval Patronage, 30. The second inscription reads "Roga vos om(ne)s qui hic venitis causa orationis ut prius / Inspiciatis tam pulchrum / Laborem et sic intrantes / Precamini D(omi)n(u)m proni pro anima / Pantaleonis qui fuit auctor huius laboris // O summe princeps Michael / Nos te rogamus qui venimus /Ad orandum tuam gratiam ut nostris precib(us) adias pro / Auctoris huius anima ut / Una nobiscu(m) fruatur se(m)pi / Terna gaudia qui tui nominis / S(an)c(t)itas fecit decorare talia." "I pray to you all who come here. To pray, that first you admire this very beautiful work and then when you've entered call out on your knees to the Lord for the soul of Pantaleone who was the auctor of this work." Followed by a prayer to St. Michael for the soul of Pantaleone. Translation: Caskey, Medieval Patronage, 30.

[69] There are plenty of examples even today that might demonstrate this idea, most of them very local. Residents of Munich, for example, touch the noses of the seventeenth-century bronze lions on the escutcheons presented by lions outside the Residenz in Munich for luck (replaced by replicas a few years ago). As a result, these areas shine brightly, in contrast to the darkened sculptures.

The examples discussed here demonstrate that medieval church doors and their fittings elicit rather complex and contradictory approaches and viewer responses. Inviting hands by projecting outwards, offering a solid and moveable, sometimes creaking ring, and the promise of a shining material cool to the touch, they present a point of contact and proximity. Very pragmatically, they provide a starting point for perceptual engagement with historiated doors, and the sculptors and carvers of medieval doors capitalized on this.[70] In San Zeno, we see echoes of the knockers' image themes within the surrounding narrative scenes. Their figural imagery and the images they point to in the case of the San Zeno doors, however, are also set to work against getting too close, adding preconditions, norms, and threats to the potential of touch. However physically close viewers (could) get to door knockers, actual touch raises doubts that re-establish distance. The way touching a door knocker is gendered, even sexualized, in the Sarah-Hagar scene, and its iconographical echoes in the pictorial tradition of the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins indicates that touch was also potentially transgressive. In this case, then, the realm of representation qualifies object affordance. While form and material invited touch, and documented practices establish that it took place, images were – it seems – at least partially geared to control or discourage it, thus complicating sensory matters at the threshold and contributing significantly to the necessary ambivalence of this space reigned by push-and-pull impulses.

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[70] Cf. Bawden, Die Schwelle, 260–269.

Die Schwelle im Mittelalter. Bildmotiv und Bildort, published by Böhlau in 2014. Further interests include the art and materiality of early medieval manuscripts from northwestern Europe before 1100, and especially the way in which pictorial constructions of space interact with principles of layout and production, paradrawings in manuscripts, and the material culture of the late medieval English parish church. Articles have appeared in *Different Visions*, *Convivium*, and in several edited volumes.