

# Sacred Skin: The Religious Significance of Medieval Scars

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## ABSTRACT

While numerous studies have addressed medieval wounds, few scholars have critically examined the religious role of scars in medieval Europe. This article incorporates theological writings, hagiography (saints' biographies), chivalric romances, and the visual arts to assess the semiotic significance of medieval scars. This article uses Roland Barthes's notion of semanticization as an organizing principle. As Barthes has shown, the process of meaning-making is contingent upon its social context. Indeed, semanticization allows the conventionality of signs to operate. This article explores how Western medieval Christianity, with its repository of values and symbolism, enabled scars to function as signs. The religious context undergirding medieval scars allowed them to transcend from traces of accidental bodily markings to portals to rich theological significance.

A fifteenth-century manuscript illustration for *Le Roman de la violette* (The romance of the violet, ca. 1227–29) conflates three narrative scenes (fig. 1). On the right side, Lady Euriant instructs her servant. In the middle scene, Sir Liziart has conspired with the servant to spy on Euriant. On the left side, Euriant takes her bath, unaware that she is being watched. The viewer can perceive the birthmark on her breast, which is the shape and color of a violet, hence the story's title. In the context of the story, Euriant is betrothed to the knight Gérard. However, Liziart falls in love with Euriant and tries to seduce her. When Euriant resists his advances, he hatches a plan. Liziart gets Euriant's servant to enable his access to Euriant's chamber. When spying on her in the bath, he notices the birthmark on her breast. He uses this knowledge to his advantage, suggesting to Gérard that he knows about the birthmark because he has deflowered Euriant. For the rest

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**Figure 1.** Gerbert de Montreuil, *La Roman de la Violette*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France ms. fr. 24378, fol. 31r, French, fifteenth century.

of the story, Gérard and Euriant must clear her reputation and reestablish her honor. Fortunately all is resolved and the story ends happily (Gerbert de Montreuil 1928). As literary scholar Helen Solterer has argued in her analysis of this text and the related story *Le Roman de la rose* (The romance of the rose) by Jean Renart, the voyeuristic perception of a woman's physical marking turns her body into a sign (1993, 214).<sup>1</sup> In other words, the birthmark, once a trace of flawed flesh, accrues and emits meaning in a specific social context.

In medieval Europe, perhaps no other bodily marking was as semiotically rich as the scar. Given their flexible semiotic capacity in hagiographic, theological, and iconographical sources, medieval scars (Latin *cicatrices*; sg. *cicatrix*) mark the body of a religious practitioner as testimony to a pivotal event or in validation of doctrinal truths. With the exception of self-inflicted scars, scars are typically accidental markings, yet their religious valences remade them into providential signifiers. Western medieval Christianity, with its repository of values and symbolism, enabled scars to be transmuted into signs (Latin *signa*; sg. *signum*).

1. The thirteenth-century writer Jean Renart (1963) produced a similar story in which the bodily mark is a rosy mark located on the heroine's upper thigh.

The pioneering semiology of Roland Barthes can help illuminate the semiotic constitution of medieval scars. His structural approach to signs reassessed how the conventionality of signs operates. The production of knowledge and dissemination of meaning at the societal level fueled his interest in semiology. Barthes's method of studying signs aimed to dismantle their mythological veneer. Like myths, signs naturalize socially acquired meaning as givens and effectively mask their own manufactured constitution.<sup>2</sup> Barthes conceded that the social phenomenon of meaning-making ("semantization") is inevitable: "as soon as there is a society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself." As Barthes (1967, 41) elaborates: "The universal semantization of the usages is crucial: it expresses the fact that there is no reality except when it is intelligible, and should eventually lead to the merging of sociology with socio-logic. But once the sign is constituted, society can very well refunctionalize it, and speak about it as if it were an object made for use: a fur-coat will be described as if it served only to protect for the cold." What is at stake in this passage is not the actual meaning signified but rather the cultural codes that engender and naturalize such meanings. In the given example, a thing that originates to serve fashion may reemerge semiotically to privilege function over form. By exposing the conventions that engineer mythologies and construct social realities, Barthes unmask the very ideologies that undergird them.

Barthes was not the first semiotician to point out the conventionality of signs. Sign theory of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages made comparable arguments. For St. Augustine (d. 430), one of the most influential premodern semioticians, the power of a sign resides in its ability to convey an idea beyond itself: "A sign [*signum*] is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing makes upon the senses" (Augustine 1952, 32; 1958, 34).<sup>3</sup> Elaborating upon this definition, Augustine classified two types of signs: natural signs (*signa naturalia*) and conventional signs (*signa data*). Whereas fire serves as smoke's natural referent, signs that communicate ideas, feelings, and desires derive from socially constructed conventions (1952, 32–33). In accordance with Augustine's theoretical formulation, medieval scars accumulated different meanings that are intelligible only when situated in their proper social context. Medieval

2. As Barthes explains, "myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones" (1973, 109). Jonathan Culler (1983, chaps. 2–3) provides a useful summary of Barthes's semiotic method.

3. As Robert Markus notes, epistemologically speaking, Augustine believed that signs were indispensable tools of learning (1972, 68–70).

scars performed acts of signification that transgressed the skin's barrier. In medieval Europe, it was religious meaning that predominated in the semiotic function of scars.

Using Barthes's theory of semanticization as an organizing principle, this article examines how medieval scars could signify varieties of sanctity or sin. As Barthes emphasizes, society is the necessary precondition for the manufacturing of signs. Accordingly, in this study, I explore how religion, specifically Western medieval Christianity, created and encoded a context that rendered the scar-as-sign legible. This study differs from past scholarship that assesses the performative nature of wounds and flowing bodily fluids, namely blood, tears, and effluvia (Bynum 1987, 2007; Gertsman 2011; Ritchey 2019).<sup>4</sup> I instead focus on the trace or remainder of bodily trauma to the skin, in the form of a scar.<sup>5</sup> I analyze primarily religious discourse on medieval scars, in which the Barthesian process of semanticization is most evident. Approaching medieval scars from a semiotic perspective not only unveils the plurality of meanings conjured by a single sign (Eco 1981, 44). On a deeper level, a semiotic frame of reference makes us aware of the cultural frameworks that influence and color such interpretations. In the first section, I show how the medieval cult of relics, virginity, and mysticism contributed to the legibility of women's scars. In the second section I briefly assess select men's scars. My analysis demonstrates how the Christianization of knighthood shaped the semanticization of the scars of religious warriors. The third section addresses the relationship between scars and orthodoxy. Here I reveal how scars helped perform the naturalization of signs while concealing their own fabrication. The final section focuses on the stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi. I posit that political maneuvers within the early Franciscan Order contributed to the semanticization of Francis's scars. Evoking the simulation of Christ, Francis's scars collapsed the distinction between the sign and the signified. Ultimately this article reveals how religion, as a repertoire of humanity's collective values and political posturings, effects the manufacturing of signs and endows them with multiple meanings.

4. Some exceptional studies that address scars, surgery, or tattooing (though often in passing) include DeVries (1990); Mellinkoff (1993, 164, 168, 173–74, 185, 230); Bynum (1995, 104–7, 129, 144–45); Frank (2000); Burrus (2003); Groebner (2004, 13); MacKendrick (2004); Bruna (2005); Ostorero (2005); Blanton (2007); Holsinger (2009); Arp (2012); Kirkham and Warr (2014); Whittington (2014); Tracy and DeVries (2015); Alvarez (2016); Gunderson (2016); Wallis (2016); Kay (2017). See also Bakker (1999); Auerbach (2013). For a helpful multicultural overview of scarification practices, see Wright (2008). For a non-Western study of scars, see Krutak (2018).

5. I use the term *trace* literally and metaphorically (as in material fragments, remnants of the past, or sketching progression over time). While I do not invoke Jacques Derrida's deconstruction in this article, his concept of the trace and its ability to signify between presence and absence is another productive way to think about scars as signs (1978, 2016).



### Women's Scars: Sanctity and Legitimacy

According to medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum, medieval women were often associated with flesh, whereas men were typically associated with spirit (1987). This gave women a paradoxical relationship with Christianity. Their fleshiness aligned them with sin, especially the sin of lust. However, given the predominance of the Incarnation—that is, the act of a divinity taking human form—in medieval Christianity, women's embodiment rendered them closer to God. In this section, I explore the scars of medieval religious women. In religious discourses and images, women's scars could signify their sanctity or provide proof of their mystical legitimacy. In line with Barthes's concept of semanticization, I focus on the socio-religious contexts that made the scar-as-sign intelligible.

For select medieval women, scars could encapsulate the journey from sin to sanctity. In the Middle Ages, these women's religious communities helped construct the conventionality of the scar-as-sign, thereby facilitating the process of semanticization. This is the case for St. Æthelthryth (d. 679), a holy woman from medieval England. According to the English abbot Ælfric's version of her vita, the virgin princess-turned-nun acquired a throat tumor during her tenure as abbess. She initially regarded this malady as a retribution for her past vanity:

Then in the eighth year after she was made abbess,  
 she was grievously afflicted, as she had herself foretold;  
 for a large tumor grew on her throat  
 just under her chin-bone, and she earnestly thanked God  
 in that she suffered a pain in her neck,  
 saying: "I know verily that I am well deserving  
 that my neck should be afflicted with so great a malady,  
 because in my youth I adorned my neck  
 with manifold neck-chains, and now me thinketh  
 that God's justice may cleanse my guilt,  
 since now I have this swelling, which shineth instead of gold,  
 and this scorching heart instead of sparkling gems."  
 (Ælfric 1885, 434–37)

What is initially interesting about this passage is how Æthelthryth, in Augustinian terms, reinterprets a natural sign as a conventional one. The throat tumor is a natural sign of illness. However, Æthelthryth believes that her tumor is the sign of sinful behavior. In this sense, she has internalized the medieval misogyny

that aligned women with ornament and falsity. The context of misogyny helped forge the conventionality of the tumor as a sign.

According to the medieval sources, Æthelthryth eventually developed a scar on her neck. This came about when Cynefrith, a local doctor, attempted to drain the tumor to cure her, but Æthelthryth died on the third day following the procedure. However, after death the wound healed into a miraculous sign that prevented her bodily corruption and delivered healing miracles to the living.<sup>6</sup> In the English monk Bede's (d. 735) account (the earliest biographical source for this saint), Cynefrith testifies to the presence of the healed wound on Æthelthryth's dead body: "They drew back the cloth which covered her face and showed me the wound I had made by my incision, now healed, so that instead of the open gaping wound which she had when she was buried, there now appeared, marvelous to relate, only the slightest traces of a scar" (cited in Blanton 2007, 40–41).<sup>7</sup> After Æthelthryth's death, sources report that people who came into contact with her shroud (on the place where she had been wounded) were instantly cured.<sup>8</sup> The efficacy of Æthelthryth's scar presupposes a belief in the supernatural. Given the immense popularity of the cult of relics (or saintly remains) in medieval Europe, Æthelthryth's community could logically apprehend her scar as the progenitor of miracles. Medieval theology therefore provided the presemiotic conditions that enabled the scar to operate as a sign of sanctity.

Beyond the cult of relics, the cult of virginity also allowed Æthelthryth's scar to signify her sanctity. According to Bede, her scar, as a sealer of the flesh, came to signify Æthelthryth's perpetual virginity even after her soul departed from her body in death (Blanton 2007, 19).<sup>9</sup> Although Æthelthryth had been previously married and thus was not likely a virgin, Bede's articulation of her scar effectively, to use Barthes's concept, mythologized her status as pure and untouched. Moreover, by ascribing a virginal meaning to her scar, Bede bolstered the growth of early monastic communities. Writing in the context of divorce debates of the early Middle

6. An obvious correlation between Æthelthryth's scar and those of the martyrs can be seen in the mark of Macrina the Younger (d. 379). According to Gregory of Nyssa, her brother and hagiographer, Macrina retained a physical trace of her former breast tumor, which God healed for her as a reward for her piety; see Gregory of Nyssa (1857, 991; 1989, 55). For analyses of Macrina's scar, see Frank (2000, 513); Burrus (2003, 404–16 nn. 4–20).

7. Blanton (2007, 41) notes that Bede used the doctor's testimony to render the narrative credible and authoritative.

8. Æthelthryth's equation between adornment and the scar of sin correlates with Tertullian's condemnation of scars from pierced ears in his *De cultu feminarum* 2.8 (1971, 146; 1959, 143). Elsewhere Tertullian chides the scars of vanity among boxers in the arena, see *De spectaculis* 23 (1880, 24).

9. In later centuries, clerics inspected the scars on postmortem bodies as a part of the canonization procedure (Wolf 2010, 21).

Ages, Bede's laudatory representation of Æthelthryth suggests that men and women (provided that they are still carnally pure) can obtain a legitimate divorce if they desire to join a monastery (Steele 2009, 62–63). Despite scriptural provisions against divorce in the New Testament (Matt. 5:32; Luke 16:18; Mark 10:6–12; Rom. 7:2–3; 1 Cor. 7:39–40), Æthelthryth's scar marks her own undefilement and projects beyond her body to ratify divorce for other women destined for cloistered life. In the context of medieval monasticism, Æthelthryth's scar helped communicate to other women that they could abandon their domestic lives for a more fulfilling life behind convent walls. Medieval Christianity's cult of virginity helped craft the intelligibility of her scar for religious women.

Visual representations of Æthelthryth show how institutionalized religion effected the semanticization of her scar. A mid-fifteenth-century painted retablo (originally placed in Ely Cathedral, England, Æthelthryth's most important cultic center), visualizes four key moments of her life (fig. 2).<sup>10</sup> In the upper left quadrant, Æthelthryth the princess partakes in the sacrament of marriage with her first husband, Tondberct, an Anglo-Saxon prince. The upper right section shows the spatial separation between Æthelthryth and her husband, signifying the maintenance of her virginity even after her second marriage with King Ecgrith of Northumbria. On the lower left, Æthelthryth oversees the building of Ely Cathedral. The final image of this cycle illustrates the translation (transfer of relics) of Æthelthryth. A group of religious women and ecclesiastical authorities hover over her tomb, in adoration of the saint's incorruptible corpse. One of the spiritual sisters points to the scar on Æthelthryth's neck, depicted in the form of a thin red line. This gesture mobilizes the semiotic thrust of the scar-as-sign. While Bede praised her scar for the purposes of monastic growth and gender prescription, members of her cult ascribed a healing function to her scarred body, which came to attract pilgrims to Ely Cathedral.<sup>11</sup> Æthelthryth's scar therefore acquired an institutional function as it could increase the prestige, renown, and revenue of Ely Cathedral. In other images of Æthelthryth, she bears her scar among a group of virgin martyrs, transforming the scar into a sign of endurance or even of penance (Blanton 2007, 54–55; Lees 1997, 25; Pulsiano 1999, 39). Given the public nature of these images of Æthelthryth, the visualization of her scar allowed viewers to apprehend the symbolic power of the sign.

10. For more detailed information on Æthelthryth's cult at Ely, see Coldstream and Draper (1979); Blanton-Whetsell (2002a, 55–107; 2002b, 227–67); Meadows and Ramsay (2003).

11. For additional materials that associate miraculous healing with scars, see Finucane (1995, 61, 89, 101); Heffernan (1995, 318); Jacobus de Voragine (1998, 408); Armstrong et al. 1999, 446; 2001, 74); Raymond of Capua (2004, 532).



**Figure 2.** Scenes from the life of St. Aethelthryth, attributed to Robert Pygot of Bury St. Edmunds, painted retablo, Ely Cathedral, England, ca. 1455, London Society of Antiquaries, cat. no. 35 235460.

While Æthelthryth's scar functioned to signify her sanctity, the scars of other medieval women validated their mystical legitimacy. Although mysticism varies between different cultures and different historical moments, it often involves a moment of union between the religious practitioner and the deity. Perhaps because they did not have access to the priesthood and other more conventional avenues of religious expression, medieval women engaged in mystical encounters that helped shape their religious identity. While mysticism often denotes a privatized affair, mystics communicated their otherwise ineffable experiences through texts. In these documents, the mystic's scar authenticates her body as

a locus of divine intervention. For example, one evening after compline, in an attempt to emulate St. Agnes, the holy woman Lutgard of Aywières (d. 1246) entered into a state of cardiac arrest. After Christ revived her, “the scar of the burst vein [*cicatrix ruptae venae*] was also a witness until the day when her soul passed from this world” (Thomas of Cantimpré 1867, 200; 1991, 137 n. 175). The fact that St. Lutgard’s hagiographer likens her scar to a witness demonstrates the scar’s ability to operate as a sign of her religious credibility. The private encounters between Lutgard and Christ are now available for public consumption and validation. Similarly, the beguine Gertrude van Oosten (d. 1358) received all five stigmata when praying before a crucifix. The wounds bled periodically during ecstasy, but she eventually asked God to stop the bleeding and was thereafter left with trace marks of her former wounds (*insignia diuinorum mirabilium*) (Anon. 1863, 351; Bynum 1987, 351 n. 32).<sup>12</sup> With her fervent prayer, Gertrude’s body began to resemble that of Christ. The Christian symbolism of the Passion facilitated the semanticization of her scar. Given the centrality of the Passion in the Christian myth, Gertrude’s scar could communicate the narrative of redemption while upholding her mystical legitimacy.

In a mystical context, women’s scars could provide proof of the intimacy of a mystical encounter. For instance, in the aftermath of a divine heart transplant, St. Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) received a life-altering scar. Catherine asked God to take her own heart and will from her after reciting Psalm 50:12: “Create a clean heart in me, O God: and renew a right spirit within my bowels.” The Lord answered her prayer when appearing in the following vision:

Coming to her in the now accustomed way, [Christ] seemed to open her left side, take out the heart, and carry it away . . . Some days later, it happened that she was with the other Sisters of Penance of Saint Dominic in a certain chapel of the church of the Dominican Friars in Siena, which still serves as their meeting place. She remained behind, after the others, absorbed in prayer. Returning to herself at last from a state of trance which had now become habitual with her, she rose to her feet and prepared to return home. Suddenly a light from heaven shone round about her. In the midst of the light our Lord appeared, bearing in his sacred hands a human heart, ruby in color and ablaze with light. All a-tremble at the dazzling advent of her Creator, she fell to the ground. Our Lord approached

12. For an analysis of stigmatics inspired by Georges Bataille, see MacKendrick (2009, 133–37).

her, opened her left side once more, and placed it within the heart which he was carrying. "See, dearest daughter," he said, "a few days ago I took your heart from you; now, in the same way, I give you my own heart. For the future, it is by that you must live." With these words he closed up the opening he had made in her side, and made it fast. But a sign of this miracle [*signum miraculi*] ever afterwards remained in the form of a scar [*cicatrix*] on her side at that spot. Her women companions informed myself [i.e., Raymond of Capua] and many others that they had often seen the scar. And when in the course of my duty I questioned her closely about it, she could not deny its existence and acknowledged it as a fact (Raymond of Capua 2004, 256; 1980 174–75).

In the dialogical exchange of showing and viewing, Catherine's scar provides an evidentiary marker of her mystical legitimacy. Given the scar's location over her heart, it exemplifies her privileged and intimate relationship with Christ. According to her biographer Raymond of Capua, Catherine's transplanted heart would throb with joy upon receiving the Eucharist (the Communion rite). A gurgling sound that others could hear accompanied this pleasurable pain.<sup>13</sup> Catherine's cardio-*jubilus* drew attention to the scar on her body and integrated her past into the present moment (or murmur) of Eucharistic devotion. Catherine's scarred body activated the Freudian process of somaticization, in which mental and emotional states becoming inscribed on the body. The scarred heart allows Catherine to relive a miracle physiologically and enables others to apprehend its significance sensually. Moreover, the medieval heart, providing as it did the source of heat, sensation, and movement for the entire body, multiplies the semiotic repertoire of Catherine's scar (Webb 2005, 807).<sup>14</sup> In her later years, Catherine wrote about her heart pangs as symptomatic of the bride of Christ (i.e., Ecclesia, the feminine allegory of the church) being torn from the groom (i.e., Christ) during the papal schism of the late fourteenth century. Unsuccessful in her appeal to Pope Urban VI to resume his seat in Rome (rather than Avignon), Catherine reimagined her heart as the site of ecclesiastical conflict.<sup>15</sup> The assaults raging within Catherine's body rescarified her heart, thereby weaving stories of physical and political instability into her past experiences of mystical union.

13. Eric Jager (2000, 94) suggests that the inscribed heart contributed to the public role of holy women.

14. One noteworthy secular reference to scarred hearts involves Love's rescarification of the heart: "Morbo felix infelici / renative cicatrici / toto mentis nisu / suffragabar, set prudentem / alienat Flora mentem / osculo vel risu" (Primas 2010, 78–79).

15. Barbara Newman (2012, 10–12 nn. 40–42) provides an insightful analysis of Catherine's letters.



Ecclesiastical and political conflict therefore diversified the legibility of Catherine's scar-as-sign. The semiotic constitution of Catherine's scar transformed a deeply personal encounter with God into a political statement.

Elsewhere in Catherine of Siena's mystical program, her relationship with Christ's scars helped signify her virtue. Her hagiographer Raymond of Capua recounted that after Catherine exhibited excess charity to Christ in the guise of a beggar, she received a celestial garment from Christ's side scar:

"Yesterday, with unstinting generosity, you gave me this vest to clothe my nakedness, shielding me with the warmth of your charity from the biting cold and from the shame of going in rags. Now I in turn will give you, from out of my sacred body, a dress invisible to other eyes but visible to your own. It will keep warm your outer and inner self against suffering from the cold, until the time shall come for you to be clad with glory and honor in the presence of the angels and saints." With that he drew out with [his own most blessed hands] from the scar of the wound on his side [*seu cicatrice proprij lateris suis*] a dress of blood-red color, refulgent with rays of light, and made to measure for Catherine herself. With his own hands he clothed her in it, saying: "This dress, with all it stands for, I give you as your own while you are still on earth. It is the sign and pledge of the garment of glory with which, when the time comes, you will be clothed in heaven." Then the vision disappeared. (Raymond of Capua 2004, 196; 1980, 132)<sup>16</sup>

In this passage, Christ's scar becomes a locus of social interaction. The scar symbolizes Christ's Passion and Resurrection but reclothes itself (literally) to communicate on multiple registers. As a signifying surface, Christ's scar re-opens to visualize Catherine's virtue. Out of God's body comes a second skin for Catherine, semantically intertwining the close contiguity of clothing and flesh. Catherine's unmediated contact with Christ shows that she understands the significance of the dress. But for "other eyes," the sacred garment's ultimate significance will be deferred until the end of time. Catherine's hagiographer instills the text with denotation (i.e., illusion of universal truth), yet readers may graft connotations (i.e., constructed meanings) onto an otherwise imperceptible

16. Cordelia Warr (2004, 192) suggests that these heavenly textiles demonstrate how clothing, as a second skin, elastically emerges as a sign of inner holiness.

sign.<sup>17</sup> Clothed with celestial splendor, her body morphs into a hermeneutic entity to be read; the *textura* of her new garment (encapsulating imagery of both blood and light) coincides with the *textus* (Latin for woven cloth and text) of interwoven meanings projected onto her body. Here mystical union is placed into a social context. While mysticism typically denotes an intimate and privatized experience of divine presence, Catherine's interaction with Christ's scar allows her mystical encounter to be available for public consumption and religious edification. Moreover, the redemptive quality of Christ's scar now forms a parallel with the remarkable nature of Catherine's virtue. Underscoring a narrative of redemption, medieval Christianity grafted charity and divine love onto the meaning of scars.

In other mystical contexts, medieval scars could memorialize and authenticate a sacred tryst between mystic and God. In a mystical encounter between Christ and Gertrude of Helfta (d. 1302), the mystic is left with a mark of divine-human contact that is reactivated upon consuming the host (the Eucharistic wafer signifying the body of Christ):

After a little while, raising herself, she perceived that through the contact with the wound of love in the Lord's most sacred side, her left side had been drawn into a kind of ruddy scar [*roseam cicatricem*]. Then, as she was going to receive the body of Christ, the Lord himself seemed to receive the consecrated host in his divine mouth. It passed through his body and proceeded to issue from the wound in the most sacred side of Christ, and to fix itself almost like a dressing over the life-giving wound. And the Lord said to her: "Behold this host will unite you to me in such a way that on one side it touches your scar and on the other my wound [*contegat cicatricem tuam, et ex alia parte vulnus meum*], like a dressing for both of us." (Gertrude of Helfta 1875, 161; 1992, 184)

An erotic exchange transpires between Gertrude and God on Christ's side wound. In this transaction, interior (love ignited) and exterior (skin eroded) changes take place. As Christ partakes of himself by eating the host, his body/food reemerges

17. As Barthes (1974, 9) explains, "structurally, the existence of two supposedly different systems—denotation and connotation—enables the text to operate like a game, each system referring to the other according to the requirements of a certain *illusion* . . . denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the connotations . . . the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature."

through the side wound and morphs into a protective layer. Gertrude's body, now indelibly scarred from this experience, will also become a living palimpsest as the memory of this experience rekindles each time the two scars touch during the Eucharist, or communion rite.<sup>18</sup> Though the Helfta nuns' devotion to Christ favored his side wound, this passage underscores a unique mutual engraving of the divine on the female and the female on the divine (Voaden 1997, 86).<sup>19</sup> The scar, as an epidermal excess, or remainder, disrupts the normal continuity of the human hide (Cuskelly 2011). Extending medievalist Karma Lochrie's treatment of wounds in mystical literature, the scar both anchors and reinvents itself as a site of radical creativity, unconventionality, and contestation (Lochrie 1997, 189–94).<sup>20</sup> However, Gertrude's scar relied on conventional Christian symbols to achieve semanticization. The Eucharist was the most important component in medieval liturgy. With the doctrine of the Transubstantiation, medieval Christians believed that they actually ingested God when partaking in the bread and wine. It is therefore not surprising that in mystical literature most miracles and instances of mystical union occur during a Eucharistic ritual. The transformative and salvific associations with the Eucharist encoded Gertrude's scar as a sign of her miraculous proximity to Christ.

In addition to the semiotics of Roland Barthes, Gertrude's scar also resonates with the revisionist sign theory of Richard Parmentier. His work provides a useful means to assess the historical significance of medieval scars (Mertz and Parmentier 1985, 3).<sup>21</sup> As Parmentier states, "a society's self-understanding is largely a function of historical signs that mediate between its past, present, and future states; and semiotic mediation is not just about present transmission of culture but also can include the transmission of meanings diachronically" (1985, 149–50). Parmentier places historical signs within two frames of reference: first, with "signs of history," a society can objectify its own past. Second, with "signs in history," societal signs are constantly modified by social change and thereby accrue the complexity of historical processes (1985, 131–32).<sup>22</sup> Using historical semiotics

18. Both during and after this contact, Gertrude's scars enable a haptic mode of mysticism that renders accessible Christ's otherwise inaccessible mysteries (cf. Derrida 2005, 104).

19. Voaden's essay features a helpful analysis of Gertrude's devotion to the Sacred Heart, but does not venture into the significance of her scar.

20. Lochrie's analysis of Christ's gendered wounds (as vulva, vagina, etc.) creates a possibility for the queering of mystical experience.

21. Though Parmentier draws from the foundational semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, he prefers Peirce to Saussure, as the former theorist facilitates thinking about signs in history and context (1994, xiii, 23–25).

22. Drawing from his own ethnographic research on Belau villages (in western Micronesia), Parmentier's case study demonstrates how material signs operate both synchronically and diachronically, particularly

as a lens through which to view medieval scars underscores how scars both historicize the individual body (as a sign of history) and build on its semantic repository (as a sign in history). Rather than remaining static, temporality contributes to semiotic depth and variance within a single sign. In the case of Gertrude, the scar engraves her body with the history of her original encounter.<sup>23</sup> But with each reception of the host, her scar resignifies its past through the dynamism of a present performance. Together, the diachronicity of Gertrude's scar and the social dynamics of her encounters are mutually informing. A sign of history becomes a sign in history.

### Men's Scars: A Christianized Knighthood

Whereas the scars of female mystics publicized personal contact with God, the markings on male bodies could emblazon warriors with emblems of piety and military courage. The Christianization of knighthood was especially evident during the Crusades (1095–1291/1396), or a series of military ventures in which European warriors invaded Islamic territories and tried to reclaim the Holy Land from Muslims, or the so-called infidels. In medieval culture, the crusader was considered a warrior-pilgrim hybrid. Therefore, crusading constituted a sacred act. According to historical and literary sources, Christian warriors often bore scars that were either self-inflicted or the result of battle. As this section shows, the sacralization of knighthood in the late Middle Ages effected the semanticization of the warriors' scars-as-signs. By integrating the activity on the battlefield with religious motifs, men's scars lent a sacral aura to the otherwise secular male body.

In a crusading context, men's scars functioned semiotically by imbibing constructs of masculinity and religious symbolism. According to the chronicler Guibert of Nogent, the dead bodies of shipwrecked crusaders in 1097 were seared with crosses (*cruces signo*) as proof of their faith (1960, 329–30; see also Alvarez 2016). Guibert further reported that, in addition to sewing crosses onto their clothing, some crusaders impressed the sign of the cross onto their flesh, in the form of branding or tattoos: “[Abbot Baldwin of Josaphat] imposed on his forehead . . . the sign of the cross [*stigmatis*], which was customarily placed on the clothing, made out of some cloth, so that he was inflicted by iron not just with a depiction

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within a funerary context (1985, 134–40; 1994, 51–67). For more ethnographic detail, see Parmentier (1988). For additional perspectives on diachronicity in semiotics, see Hodge and Kress (1988, 163).

23. Compare Seeta Chaganti's concept of “enshrinement,” or how relics/reliquaries recall the past while producing the present. As Chaganti (2008, 38–39) notes, this idea mirrors Augustine's notion of the sign as *vestigium* (likened to an animal footprint), which enables past presence to signify in its absence.

but with the image of the military stigmata” (1960, 197; Constable 2008, 67–68).<sup>24</sup> Unlike the scars discussed thus far, the crusaders’ scars were self-inflicted. Crusader scarification practices consciously exploited the Crusades’ conflation of martyrdom and military prowess. The sign of the cross aligned the crusaders with Christ indefinitely. Yet in a military context, the crusaders’ scars embossed their bodies with secular heroism; classic ideals of sanctity mingled with historically specific tokens of masculinity. As deliberate acts of scarification, crusaders’ bodily markings seemed to perform a type of self-fashioning that can be called “auto-canonization,” or a self-directed martyrdom that would lead the crusader to heavenly rewards. The late medieval spiritualization of warfare codified the semiosis of crusaders’ scars.

In conjunction with the Crusades, the mythology of the Holy Grail lent a sacral dimension to men’s scars in secular chivalric literature. In Arthurian literature, the Grail was typically a dish or stone that eventually came to possess miraculous powers. According to some medieval legends, the Grail was the same chalice that held Christ’s blood that he shed during the Crucifixion. Within chivalric literature, the Grail animated the knight’s quest and was the ultimate source of his spiritual fulfillment. In a late medieval Arthurian cycle, Sir Lancelot tells another knight that Sir Bors, one of the knights of the Round Table, can be recognized “by a wound [scar] in his forehead” (Malory 2009, 557). Significantly, Bors, along with Galahad and Perceval, was one of the few knights to behold the mysteries of the Holy Grail, and the only one to return alive from the Grail quest. Within the context of medieval Arthuriana, Bors’s scar marks his exceptionalism, not unlike the contemporary children’s hero Harry Potter, who also bears a scar on his forehead. From an Augustinian semiotic perspective, Bors’s scar is a natural sign of trauma to the skin, most likely derived from combat. Within the mythology of the Holy Gail, Bors’s scar becomes a conventional sign that signifies his proximity to the sacred. The medieval preoccupation with the Grail quest further sacralized knighthood and enabled Bors’s scar to function as a religious sign as opposed to a mere sign of injury.

Elsewhere in chivalric literature, men’s scars can sacralize an otherwise secular narrative. In the twelfth-century romance *Yvain, or Le Chevalier au lion* (The knight of the lion) of Chrétien de Troyes, the scar reconciles romance with religion. After abandoning his beloved lady for over a year in favor of knightly adventures, the Arthurian knight Yvain succumbs to madness. Three damsels

24. Henri d’Avranches envisions the scars of St. Francis of Assisi in terms of an epic hero. See Henricus Abricensis, *Legenda Sancti Francisci versificata* 1.12, in Menestò and Brufani (1995, 1131–32, 1199).

come across Sir Yvain lying in the forest where he passed out after his bout of madness. One of the ladies approached him and recognized him by a facial scar (presumably attained in a tournament or battle): “She was slow to recognize him, but she kept looking until she realized that a scar [*plaie*] he had on his face was like a scar that my lord Yvain had on his; she was sure of this, for she had often noticed it. She recognized him by the scar and was certain beyond doubt that it was he” (Chrétien de Troyes 1994, 230; 1991, 331).<sup>25</sup> Despite the accidental nature of Yvain’s scar, it becomes integral to his identity as a knight of King Arthur’s court. In the larger context of the story, Yvain’s scar, by allowing him to be recognized by a gracious damsel, helps save him from his madness and returns him to a state of civilization. Therefore, his scar can be construed as a sign of salvation. Indeed, the paramount importance of salvation in the Christian myth semanticizes Yvain’s scar. With its reliance upon Christianity’s salvific function, Yvain’s scar can signal grace.

Thus far, this section has analyzed the religious significance of the scars of military heroes. However, medieval sources also imagined the scars of impious or villainous men. In these cases, religious discourse still influenced the semanticization of men’s scars. Consider a medieval legend of Judas, the infamous disciple who betrayed Jesus. A twelfth-century version of the legend recounts how Judas’s parents abandoned him after his father dreamed that his son would one day kill him. Shepherds residing in a forest called Scariot raised Judas, and he was later placed in the service of Herod. While fetching fruit, he slew his own father and shortly thereafter married the deceased’s widow. When they were together, Judas inadvertently exposed a scar from his childhood, and mother and son recognized one another in the midst of an incestuous union (Wolf 1989, 464). At the moment of encounter, the scar jolts the mother’s memory. Judas’s scar not only activates recognition, it also encodes the oedipal sin. Moreover, by marking the body of a traitorous disciple, Judas’s scar exhibits his sinister role within Christian history. Interestingly, his scar may also foreshadow the infamous witches’ mark, or telltale birthmark on women’s bodies that supposedly provided evidence of their pact with the devil (Ostorero 2005). In contrast to upholding the Christianization of knighthood, Judas’s scar constitutes a form of disfigurement that foreshadows his betrayal and cowardice. Although initially the result of a childhood

25. The Old French *plaie* could refer to wound and scar. Even though Yvain’s scar likely resulted from battle, Chrétien may have used *plaie* to further accentuate the wound of love motif (nom. sg. *cors* indicates both heart and body); see Chrétien de Troyes (1994, lines 1375–81, 2369–54). For a helpful introduction to this topos, see Camille (1998, chap. 4).



accident, a Christian context enables Judas's scar to be resignified as an incest taboo and a precursor to evil.

### Scars and Orthodoxy

Thus far, this article has analyzed how medieval Christianity made possible the societal encoding of women's and men's scars. Another component of Barthes's sign theory is the naturalization of the sign. In other words, signs can naturalize socially construed meaning as ontological givens and dissimulate their own fabrication. In the medieval European sources, the naturalization of the scar-as-sign is especially evident when scars work to signify orthodoxy or to counter heresy. As this section demonstrates, scars could communicate theological truth claims while concealing their own constructedness.

Within doctrinal writings, scars could provide incontestable proof of Christian orthodoxy. As such, scars' semiotic function presented religious doctrine as self-evident rather than socially constructed. In his *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* (Answer to Faustus the Manichean), Augustine paints Christ's scars as valid proof of scriptural incontestability:

Moreover, you want to be taught like the Christian [and apostle] Thomas, whom "Christ did not spurn when he doubted him, but showed him the scars on his body [corporis sui cicatrices] in order to heal the wounds of his mind!" . . . Believe, therefore, in the scars of Christ because, if those scars were real, those wounds were also real [*Crede ergo cicatricibus Christi, quia si cicatrices illae verae errant*], and only real flesh could have had real wounds. . . . If, however, Christ showed false scars [*falsas cicatrices*] to his doubting disciple, you make him a deceiver when he teaches in that way, and you want to be deceived when you learn in that way. But because there is no one who wants to be deceived, though many may want to deceive, I understand that you want to teach by deceiving, as if following Christ's example, rather than to learn by being deceived, as if following Thomas's example. Hence, if you believe that Christ deceived the doubting disciple with false scars [*falsis cicatricibus*], who would want to believe you as a teacher and not rather avoid you as a deceiver? But if that disciple touched Christ's real scars [*veras cicatrices*], you are forced to admit that Christ's flesh is so real. In that way you will not remain a Manichean [heretic] if you believe as Thomas did. But you will remain an unbeliever if you do not believe as Thomas did. (1891, 482; 2007, 226)

In this polemic passage, Augustine proffers Faustus an apologetic reading of John 20:19–31, in which Christ displays his scarred body before his skeptical disciple, the so-called doubting Thomas, to broadcast the truth of the Resurrection.<sup>26</sup> Christ's scars verify and champion the Christian myth. Far from being trivial, Thomas realized that these fleshy apertures subsume the passage between life and death. Augustine transposes this biblical excerpt onto his theological debate with someone who denies the miraculous and salvific nature of the flesh. Whereas John's gospel presented Christ's scars as palpable proof of his postmortem existence, Augustine refashions his scars as signs of true teachings. His exegetical strategy excludes any but hegemonic and orthodox theological readings, and, therefore, endows Christ's scars with the status of ontological and totalizing truths. Christ's scars function as a kind of empirical evidence for the reality of Christian orthodoxy and in doing so mask their own mythological constitution.

In other settings, scars could demonstrate the triumph of Christianity over the errors of paganism. In this sense, martyrs' scars helped construct and communicate the validity of Christian doctrine. The dramatic physicality of late antique and early medieval literature resituates the semiotics of scars in the theater of martyrdom. Christian martyrs often suffered severe torture as they affirmed their faith in the pagan-dominated world of the Roman Empire. As recounted by Prudentius (d. 413), St. Vincent (d. 304) refused pagan authorities' demand to set holy scripture aflame. During his ensuing martyrdom, Vincent suffered a series of wounds and (re)scarification at the command of a Roman judge: "When the wounds are quite dry and the congealed blood is gathering in a scar [*cicatrix*], your hand will plough them up again and tear them open" (Ross 2008, 62–63). At the very moment of Vincent's healing, his skin erodes into a state of vulnerability. The manner in which Prudentius staged the scar illustrates its semiotic slippage between secular condemnation and religious testimony. On a superficial level, the relaceration of his flesh exhibited imperial justice imposing itself onto a rebellious body. To a late antique Christian community of readers, however, Vincent's scar/wound signals his status as a true martyr (from the Latin *martyrus*, or legal witness) who is willing to suffer and perish in the name of religion.<sup>27</sup> Vincent's scar

26. The *Glossa ordinaria* interprets this passage as the power of Christ's physical presence to remove doubt (Froehlich et al. 1992, 269). Whereas the *Glossa* and corresponding Vulgate passage do not specify if Christ's side (*latus*) bears a wound or a scar, "O decus apostolicum," the hymn dedicated to the feast day of St. Thomas the Apostle by the sixteenth-century Spanish composer Tomás Luis de Victoria, makes Christ's scars explicit: "O decus apostolicum, Christe Redemptor gentium, / quem Thomas apostolus, tactis cicatricibus, Deum cognovit Dominum: / gregem tuum protege, quem redemisti sanguine. / Alleluia."

27. This communicative pain runs counter to Elaine Scarry's influential understanding of pain, which "is achieved through its unsharability," as well as a "resistance to language" (1985, 4).

thereby provided a testimony to his steadfast faith. His scars signified his sheer endurance, which in turn broadcasted, naturalized, and universalized Christian dogma while suggesting pagan error. And according to his legend, a group of ravens protected Vincent's dead body from being desecrated by vultures, thus validating and justifying his martyrdom. Inhabiting a topographical borderland of signification, the scarred martyr's body emerges as a site of indeterminacy made determinate by the interpreter's convictions.<sup>28</sup>

Other instances of the naturalization of the scar-as-sign appear in the realm of penitence. For medieval Christians, penitence involved the process of being sorry for one's sins and trying to atone for one's sins. Within orthodox doctrine, penitence is closely related to penance, in which the faithful are absolved of their sins and reconciled with the Christian community. Penance comprises one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic tradition. The priest or cleric was indispensable to the penitential process, as only he could diagnose the sin and prescribe its remedy. A sermon by Gregory the Great (d. 604) describes atonement as the scar of penitence (*cicatrix poenitentiae*). Gregory begins by glossing Psalm 37:6, "My scars [*cicatrices meae*] have become noisome [putrefied] and corrupt in the face of my folly." Gregory proceeds by discoursing on the significance of the scar of penitence: "One who corrects and laments his error draws a scar over the wound. But when a deceived mind recalls for its pleasure the sin of which it has already repented, the scar of penitence [*cicatrix poenitentiae*] which had formed reverts to festering of the wound so that evil delight has a stench after the scar has already showed the healing of the injury with restored skin" (Gregory the Great 1971, 427; 2008, 488).<sup>29</sup>

From an aesthetic standpoint, Gregory redirected the notion of the scar as a form of disfigurement. For instance, medieval surgical manuals developed techniques that aimed to minimize the appearance of scarring (Guglielmo da Saliceto and Henri de Mondeville, in McVaugh 2006, 99, 124; Gasse 2004, 193–94 n. 12).<sup>30</sup>

28. I have found two scholarly treatments of the border concept particularly illuminating in relation to this project. In describing the US-Mexico border and its range of significance, Gloria Anzaldúa writes, "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition" (2007, 25). Examining the use of medicine and medical technology in performance art, Petra Kuppers argues that the spectator cannot apprehend the lived experience of the other. The scar, according to Kuppers, erects borders between self and other. This barrier is, however, a productive one, as it resists any single, dominant truth or meaning (2007, 153).

29. This sermon only exists as a fragment. Gregory discusses scarring in a similar fashion in a letter to Secundius, an anchorite monk (Gregory the Great 2004, 890).

30. For other sources related to the aesthetics of medieval scarring, see Blumenfeld-Kosinski (1990, 33, 39); Bruckner et al. (2000, 96–97); Da Soller (2005, 118); Santoni-Rugiu and Sykes (2007, 55).

Dante Alighieri (d. 1321), writing in political exile, fulminated against the corrupt papacy which he described as a “scar of infamy [that] will disfigure the Apostolic See” (*cicatrixque infamis Apostolicam Sedem*) (Dante 1920, 142, 147).<sup>31</sup> By contrast, Gregory demonstrates how a scar can provide legibility of the remedies for sin. Moreover, the Gregorian scar can erupt and suppurate into a messy wound with the reappearance of sin. For the repentant individual, the scar becomes a corrective sign indexing the reformed soul.<sup>32</sup> Gregory’s formulation heightens and exploits the arbitrary relationship between the signifying scar and the object or concept signified (guilt versus contrition, sin versus redemption). Moreover, this scar conjoins pastoral language with sensorial imagery to accentuate what historian Peter Brown has named “the peccatization of the world” (2000, 58). The motif of penitence lends a sacramental tenor to scarred individuals and in doing so reaffirms the superiority of priests who hear confession and deliver absolution. Thus, the scar’s religious significance naturalizes the spiritual inequality between priest and penitent. The spiritual superiority of priests, in actuality a tactical achievement, becomes naturalized through the semiosis of the scar.

### St. Francis and the Stigmata

This section turns to the scarified Christian par excellence, St. Francis of Assisi (d. 1226). According to his legends, Francis received the five wounds of Christ’s Passion, after which they congealed into scars. Francis’s trace wounds helped authenticate the piety of an otherwise eccentric saint. As I argue, the politics of the early Franciscan movement contributed to the semanticization of Francis’s scars. In order to temper the saint’s idiosyncrasies, his early followers fashioned him as a transparent mirror of divinity. The Franciscan Order therefore exploited the signification of Francis’s stigmatic scars to legitimate their founder and bolster the fledgling order. In doing so, Francis’s scars came to activate an essentialist semiotics, in which the copy (i.e., Francis) duplicated the model (i.e., Christ) and thus collapsed the distinction between the sign and the signified. By forging the simulation of Christ rather than a mere imitation of Christ, the stigmata of Francis provide a culminating example of medieval scars-as-signs.

Early accounts of Francis’s life show how his scars render him Christ-like. According to Thomas of Celano (d. 1260), an early follower and hagiographer

31. However, even the ugliness of scars could recall the *Christus deformis* (deformed Christ) tradition, according to which Christ was the most beautiful man even when undergoing torture, suffering, and death.

32. For other references to penitential scars, see Jacques de Vitry (1867, 551–52; 2006, 59–60); Jordan of Saxony (1867, 211); Kieckhefer (1984, 138–39; Zaleski (1987, 78–79); Dante (2003, lines 112–14); Elliott (2004, 102 n. 73); Wolf (2010, 212).

of the saint, Francis received the stigmata in maturity, two years before his death. At Mount Alverna (Tuscany), Christ appeared to Francis as a winged seraph bound to a cross. This encounter indelibly scarred the saint, piercing his hands, feet, and side in replication of the Crucifixion (Mentestò and Brufani 1995, 98–100). Embossed with the image of Christ, Francis was the paragon of individual and integral holiness. He received numerous scars that signified his exceptional sainthood and portrayed him as the crucified Christ. For instance, a letter of Elias of Cortona (d. 1253), one of the earliest members of the Franciscan Order, extols Francis's scars:

And now I announce to you a great joy, a new miracle. The world has never heard of such a miracle, except in the Son of God, who is Christ our Lord. A little while before his death, our brother and father appeared crucified, bearing in his body the five wounds, which are truly the stigmata of Christ. His hands and feet were as if punctured by nails, pierced on both sides, and had scars that were the black color of nails [*cicatrices et clavorum nigredinem ostendentes*]. His side appeared pierced by a lance, and often gave forth droplets of blood.<sup>33</sup> (Menestò and Brufani 1995, 245; Davidson 2009, 458)

Francis's stigmatic body emblemized his extraordinary sanctity. Duplicating the trace wounds of Christ's body, as medieval Chrisitans understood them, Francis bore the true likeness of God. His scars both set him apart (in the true sense of the Latin word *sacer* 'set apart from the rest') and refashioned him as a transparent image of divinity imprinted onto matter.

In the visual arts, artifacts also portrayed the semblance between Francis and Christ when depicting the stigmata. In these images, Francis's scars signified his close proximity to Christ. Consider Antonio Vite's sacristy fresco of St. Francis in Glory. Located at the San Francesco church in Pistoia, the image shows Francis enthroned in paradise (fig. 3). Cherubim and seraphim frame his throne. Angelic dancers twirl atop clouds, partnering one another with undulating *port de bras* (carriage of the arms). Genuflecting angels accompany them with instruments typically associated with secular dance music: shawms, bagpipes, hurdy-gurdies, and nakers (kettledrums) (Brown 1984, 214). Italian iconography of the Ascension or Resurrection of Christ depicted similar scenes. Andrea di Bonaiuti, for instance, painted a comparable image (fig. 4); his Ascension fresco at the Spanish Chapel in Florence depicts an airborne Christ cheered on by dancing angels

33. The term *stigmata* derives from the Greek word for mark, but can also refer to a sign or scar. The Vulgate employs the same term in Gal. 6:17.





**Figure 3.** *St. Francis in Glory*, Antonio di Vita (Antonio Vite) San Francesco, Sala del Capitolo, fresco, Pistoia, ca. 1385–90, photograph by Mongolo, 1984, Wikimedia Commons.



**Figure 4.** *Ascension of Christ*, Andrea di Bonaiuto, Spanish Chapel in Santa Maria Novella (Florence), fourteenth century, courtesy of Alamy.com.



and musicians. The Virgin Mary and sainted apostles honor him below, flanked by archangels Michael and Gabriel. As with the Pistoia fresco, this image was painted over a vault, heightening the verticality of the heavenly realm it depicts. In Bonaiuti's fresco, Christ displays traces of his wounds on his hands and feet. In Vite's fresco, Francis bears stigmatic scars on his feet and left hand.<sup>34</sup> Foregrounding the stigmata became the *pièce de résistance* in Franciscan iconography. It showed the visual commonality between Christ and Francis and met the challenge of representation in the late Middle Ages, when less attention was paid to relics and reliquaries, or relic containers (Vauchez 2008, 453). The stigmata emblazoned Francis with the trace wounds of Christ's body, verifying his likeness to God. The stigmata rendered Francis as a living relic, authenticating his *simulatio Christi* (simulation of Christ) instead of a mere *imitatio Christi* (imitation of Christ) (Dickason 2021, 73–74). In semiotic terms, the sign became what it signified.

Early Franciscans contributed further to the essentialist semiotics of Francis's scars. For example, St. Bonaventure (d. 1274), another biographer of Francis, was concerned with discoursing on the ultimate significance of his stigmata. He identified Francis as the sixth seal of Revelation (Rev. 6:12–17), the great earthquake (*terraemotus*) that will prelude the Last Judgment. Elsewhere he validated Francis's stigmata with the image of the papal seal (Menestò and Brufani 1995, 813). As medievalist and sigillographer (seal expert) Brigitte Bedos-Rezak has shown, seals, with their mechanical precision, partook in an essentialist semiotics, in which the sign was the thing it signified (Bedos-Rezak 2000, 2011).<sup>35</sup> Likening Francis's scarred body to a seal, Bonaventure imbues Francis's stigmata with spiritual authenticity and ecclesiastical *auctoritas* (authority). More careful and academic than other early biographers of Francis, Bonaventure was reluctant to overexpose the saint's eccentricities. He portrayed the saint as a transparent mirror of divinity. Francis's puncture wounds revealed him not only as a *membra Christi* (a piece of Christ) but as *totus Christus* (all Christ). The scarified saint duplicated the savior and prefaced his return at the end of time. Indeed, Francis's scars pointed to the future, given their associations with Christian eschatology and the Last Judgment. But his scars also pointed to the past. His likeness to Christ recalls the creation of Adam, the first human being made in the image of God (*imago Dei*; Gen. 1:26). Francis's scars therefore constructed a prelapsarian likeness to God. Oscillating between past, present, and future, the stigmata of Francis accumulated transhistorical implications. Indeed, the double temporality of medieval Christianity, at

34. An adjacent vault fresco at Pistoia depicts the Resurrection of Christ, also a stigmatic.

35. Elsewhere (Dickason 2015) I have put forth a comparative perspective on medieval scars and seals.

once anchored in historical and eschatological time, encodes the Francis's scars with providential significance.

The politics of the early Franciscan movement helped engender the semanticization of Francis's scars. Shortly after the death of the order's founder, the Franciscan brothers split into two principal factions. The Spirituals were less orthodox, as they aimed to maintain Francis's own lifestyle and to practice their devotion to him outside the strictures of ecclesiastical authority. By contrast, the Conventuals sought to assimilate the order into the world while working within the institutional framework of the church. In 1260, the Chapter of Narbonne commissioned Bonaventure (a Conventual and the elected minister general) to compose an authoritative biography of Francis, presumably to harmonize the order's festering conflicts. From Bonaventure's perspective, it was necessary to downplay the eccentricities of Francis and portray him as a more orthodox and Christ-like figure (Huber 1944, 522–27; Vorreux 1983, 615–26; Hubert 1998, 48–49).<sup>36</sup> In Francis's early legends, he often behaves in bizarre ways. For example, a young Francis, in attempt to shield himself from his father's rage, resided in a cave for about a month. When he emerged from the cave, he was besmirched with filth and resembled a corpse more than a living being. Other stories of Francis relate how he played with animals. Francis's first biographer, Thomas of Celano, told how the saint would dance and sing in French while he preached. He thus resembled more of a popular entertainer than a holy man. A famous anecdote about Francis narrates how his merchant father accused him of squandering his inheritance on charitable contributions to the poor. Francis proceeded to strip naked before his father and all the townspeople, renounce his hereditary rights, and give his fine clothes back to his astonished father. Even by medieval standards, Francis was an especially idiosyncratic saint. Bonaventure therefore tried to brand him with recognizable symbols, such as the papal seal and the book of Revelation. The political posturing of the Conventuals, I contend, enabled Francis's stigmata to operate as a sign of his close rapport with Christ. However strange Francis's life was, his scars functioned as a conventional sign that validated his allegiance to orthodox Christianity.

These examples have shown how Western medieval Christianity played a central role in the semanticization of scars. With its influence upon symbols, beliefs, gender, and politics, the medieval Christian context transformed accidental bodily markings into multivalent signifiers. Compared to other cultures and other historical contexts, medieval scars are both strange and familiar. Within

36. See also Dante (2011), 11.106–8.

the tradition of Judaism, circumcision marks men's bodies with a sign of their allegiance to God's covenant. In traditional Nigerian society, devotees of the Yoruba religion become scarred after rites of initiation and major life events, such as puberty or childbirth. In contemporary culture, secular practices of scarification provide markers of individualism while fulfilling aesthetic and experiential goals. Medieval scars could provide testimony of a radically personal event. However, under the aegis of Christianity, medieval Christians' scars always contributed to a corporate selfhood. Far from remaining skin-deep, medieval scars opened up portals to rich theological significance. Through their scars, medieval social actors could participate in the totality of Christian history.

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