

Religious woman-man-symbolic (11th-14th Century)

Did the church of the Middle Ages – as a widely spread cliché presumes – truly show a negative attitude towards sexuality? Does not the erotic of man and woman experience an essentially positive assessment within the context of the theology of creation?

These and similar questions shall be pursued within the scope of a research project to the woman-man-symbolic. And this with the intention to put a subject matter on a more solid base which even in the present experiences a multifaceted discussion in society and church.

Since there are for this endeavour extraordinary financial means necessary (as to the specifications see the appendix), an application concerning this matter is handed in with the Austrian Science Fund.

1 Aims of the project:

1.1 Field research for iconographic evidences in respect to the woman-man-understanding in and on churches above all during the High Middle Ages

- Starting point of the field research will be the male-female-symbolic on the western façade of St. Stephens, Vienna I.

- Here on half pillars, to the left and right of the main gate, more closely: in the range of the heathen towers, the female and male genitals are to be found [for a long period it was controversial whether genitals were displayed at all – as the added photo material shows and the question is asked: “what is here shown at all?” which can be answered though when looked at it from near]

Since the symbols are affixed fairly high up, they are hardly noticed by passersby – yet when approached from Jasomirgottstrasse (= the old entrance to St. Stephens) the female-male-symbolic is prominently demonstrated (in this positioning ‘according to the location’ one could detect some backing for the ’theory’ of the shame of the body” by Hans Peter Duerr: “insofar as the woman treads her genitals as a sphere of privacy, she controls to a certain degree the visibility of her willingness to copulate” [Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozeß 2, Frankfurt/Main 1990, 257).

- In order to be able to understand the woman-man-symbolic on St. Stephens comparative material has to be used.

- for this purpose a research visit was undertaken during a sabbatical leave in may 2008 to abbeys and churches – even so called ‘unimportant ones’ – of the Middle Ages in the West of Switzerland and Burgundy.

- a fundamental result of this proved to be, that the reference to man and woman in the monastic context differs remarkably from the one in cathedrals and parish churches. That means: it is to be surmised, that the female-male-sculptures are to be placed within a pastoral context.

- the definition of the project for the field research to gain data is thereby enlarged respectively specialised: on the one hand in respect of all pastorally affixed man-woman-depictions on sacred buildings and on the

other hand in terms of a differentiation of woman-man-symbols which stand within a pastoral context from those which are based on other intentions (e.g. apotropaic). The field research can be exemplified by the following sculptures of the Middle Ages:

a.) The topic of the direct loving but not primarily sexual relation: as it is presented in the robed figures, interpreted as Abaelard and Héloïse, in the church Saint-Nicolas in Maillezais (Deux-Sèvres).

b.) The topic of the pronounced sexual relation (cf. the sculptures of man and woman [with special emphasis on the genitals] left and right of the apsis window of the church San Pedro in Cervatos).

◦ For the purpose of a differentiating classification the following are to be drawn upon e.g.:

a.) The so-called Sheela-na-Gig-sculptures. These stick out by their sheer femaleness and by the demonstration of their sexual character. This indicates – so my hypothesis – that the woman-man-symbols of St. Stephens presumably show no connection to witchcraft or sorcery.

b.) Male and female representations by the original founders for which sexuality plainly does not play a role (yet the perspective of gender does)

1.2 The Understanding of iconographic evidence of the woman-man topic of the High Middle Ages (subsequently outlined on the example of St. Stephens) on the basis of

1.2.1 Studies on form, positioning etc.

- A first approach to the understanding of the female-male-symbolic was presented in a thesis paper developed since 2003 (cf. the text on:

<http://www.univie.ac.at/ktf/content/site/kg/mitarbeiterinnen/cv/article/2195.html>)

- Frequently the male genital is interpreted as “phallic” or as phallus symbol without to discern though on the one hand, that -in terms of art history- phallus is understood in a more distinctive way and on the other hand that not only the male genital is meant alone, but that the woman is included in its meaning as well (not only masculinity is the theme – interpretations which equate man and manhood have no place here).

- It is a fact that the male and the female genitals are found: is thereby – in the context of the horizon of the Middle Ages! – the question raised, which Gerl-Falkovitz has posed, whether male and female thinking and experiencing do differ? In any case it can be presumed that the male-female-gender on St. Stephens addresses prosperity.

- For the interpretation also proves important the criterion of positioning of the male-female-symbolic

- the male and the female genitals each are found on pillars that means at a “respectable” height. At this distance to the observer the exact recognition is hampered, that is the male and female genitals are there in a mystical-absorbing way. From that flows as well that interpretations which allude to the demonstration of obscenities are uncalled-for.

- furthermore it has to be pointed out, that there is no positioning on the bottom side of the corbel. Interpretations which fancy recognising anything supporting-bracing in the genital-sculpture are therefore inappropriate. With this in mind there are no indications for approaches of an explanation which intend to identify in the male-female-genitals something primordial.

- the left-right-order of man and woman has to be observed as well (seen from the one who approaches the sculptures). It does not correspond to the mundane world order of the man.
- From the points mentioned so far it can be said that there are no instructions for any sexual practice, positions etc. represented here.

1.2.2. Its embeddedness in contemporary ecclesiastical and relevant societal events/developments

- If one searches for the addressee of the man-woman-symbolic on the outside of a parish church (at that time), it is to be considered that a period in time is addressed during which the question of implementation of the concepts of matrimony by the church was prevalent.
 - with this those results of research into the history of the church are addressed which show, that concepts of matrimony held by the church at first permeated the aristocratic society and then the broader circles of the populace.
 - in view of the special placing in the vicinity of the great entrance (flanking it), this means that it has to be considered that during the Middle Ages liturgical acts took place at the entrance to a church by which a bridal couple, not without the instilled concepts of the church, received the blessing of the church to the “yes” of both. The understanding of the man-woman-symbolic on St. Stephens is therefore to be placed in the results of research in the history of liturgy.
- As a hypothesis it is maintained, that the male-female-symbolic to be analysed does not contain any tendency towards denunciation or discrimination of the Islam or Judaism (as they are observable in other sculptures of that period)
- Hypothetically it is considered though, that the male-female-symbolic of St. Stephens can be placed within the context of a conflict between the church leadership and those condemned as heretics. Here it is the place to think of the repudiation of the rejection of matrimony by the Cathari on part of the governing body of the church.

1.2.3 Its contextualisation with contemporary theologies/philosophies/exegeses

- Paradise and the fall of man: the man-woman-symbolic on St. Stephens is not to be integrated into that direction of interpretation which puts the appearance of the genitals into the context of the fall of man (e.g. those views which conceive humans in paradise as pure and angel like bodies without any sexual organs [cf. Angenendt, Mensch und Familie 284]). The same holds true of a mariological analysis (in the sense of theologies of Immaculate Conception and the birth of Jesus by a “new Eve” [cf. Stock 3, 102-123]): instead, it’s all about the topic of procreation.
- More to the point – so my hypothesis – it has to do with a theology of creation oriented on Genesis I. On the façade of St. Stephens is proclaimed to “the world”/married couples that and how they have to latch on to the event of creation. If this hypothesis holds true, than it also explains that man and woman – to be seen

from the inner perspective of St. Stephens – are arranged in the “right order” (that is, viewed from the inside of St. Stephens the male genital is located on the right side).

- Moreover commentaries of that period to the Song of Songs will have to be considered: compare the analysis by McGinn, Ruh and Turner.
- Potentially the question can be considered as a subtheme, whether the ideas of Timaios, which during the 12th Century played an integral part of the reading matter at Universities as texts where at the central point of philosophical and theological interest. The Timaios, one of the major works of Plato dealing with the philosophy of nature, could possibly enlighten us in our understanding of the gender-plastics of St. Stephens.

1.3 Application of the present main-stream research in the history of ecclesiology, theology, canonistic and history of culture and articulation of the innovative potentials of the current research

- In respect to the question whether the woman/man-symbolic has sexual/libidinous content respectively whether the knowledge of the gender relationship is discredited, it has to be referred to the exegesis of the “tree of knowledge” by Karl Barth respectively the eating from the tree of knowledge. Therein he argues, that “the fruit of this tree has been some kind of aphrodisiac, the consequence of its consumption the discovery of the difference of gender and the corresponding libido.....It is to be admitted (so Barth) that the passages 2, 23 and 3, 7, which speak of the nakedness of both paradisiacal humans before and after the fall of man, indicate that the illegitimately won life-endangering knowledge of good and evil immediately proves to be effective at first in the perversion of their relationship to one another, in fact in their relationship of gender, in so far as they mean having to be ashamed of that which they should not be ashamed of, of their otherness and their reciprocal relatedness. Immediately and primarily here, in so far as the natural turns into pudenda, it comes to a perverted sentence by the human judging now from the divine throne, and it is to be observed how this sentence and the attempted self-help based thereon by the humans (fig leafs!) is disavowed by the fact that God makes coats of skins for them according to 3,21.....But by far there cannot be any mention of a discrediting of the knowledge about the relationship of gender neither here nor in the Old Testament (Barth Karl, Die Lehre von der Schöpfung. Erster Teil [= Barth Karl, Die kirchliche Dogmatik, 3/1], Zollikon-Zürich 1945, 326).

- As a hypothesis it is advocated that the man-woman-symbolic on St. Stephen does not deal directly with the relationship of a couple (that would mean there is no emphasis on the reciprocal character of contract of marriage; neither is it a matter of sources of tension, patterns of disruption, processes of clarification nor models for solution), but rather with the becoming bonded of both by a third dimension. This can be – as is surmised in the case of St. Stephens – a primordial one or/respectively this can be understood as an orientation on a common goal (as an example for such an orientation refer to the characteristics given by McGinn in the chapter about “the coexistence of men and women” in view of the “special love of Francis

for Claris, whom he used to call ‘the Christian’’. “Both [have to be – as has been suggested] viewed as partners, who work closely together at the creation of a new apostolic form of life”. Applied to St. Stephens this would mean that woman and man are to be understood as co-creator of a new life (only from this reference to the Creator respectively to the child follows – as I maintain – the by McGinn in respect to Francis and Claris accentuated “impressive example for the important reciprocations between men and women at the beginning of mysticism” [McGinn, *Mystik* 3, 129]).

This understanding of the man-woman-symbolic on St. Stephen – in case it could be proved appropriate – would contrast with a modern understanding of love, therefore correlate with pre-modern understandings, in which “love was thought as dwelling in the cosmos; she counted as an expression of an absolute, which disseminates in the cosmos;...Human life was understood in other words as participation in the absolute”. From this one has to distinguish “the understanding of loving” as Dux suggests when he exempts it “from all ontological connotations” (Dux, *Geschlecht und Gesellschaft*, 42).

As a hypothesis it is furthermore not disclosed that the man-woman-symbolic on St. Stephens is to be understood in analogy to the steps of ascent in a mystical movement (cf. the characteristics of Bernhards of Clairvaux by McGinn, who speaks of – characterising Bernhard’s theology – of a “pilgrimage fortified by love, which renders God ever more a perceived reality” [Mc Ginn, *Mystik* 2, 290]: the married couple should relate to God as the Creator and become witness of new life in this way. In this – it shall be formulated hypothetically – Bernhard’s understanding of love could play a role: “love, as it is planted in us by nature, strives for its creator, and even in the debased condition of self-centeredness (*cupiditas*), it urges us on the way to heavenly joy and love” [McGinn, *Mystik*, 298].

- On the façade of St. Stephens – another hypothesis – theology of sacraments is articulated. The point is, as Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz concisely puts it, that “the Divine ... is contained in the concept of the *sacrament* of matrimony and even better: remains unscathed. In this one has to start from the original meaning of sacraments, which in the sensual token of God puts into present the invisible Grace. At the execution of sexual unification and the consummation of love, especially on the corporeal level, occurs God’s epiphany” (Gerl-Falkovitz, *Eros, Glück, Tod* 19).

The reference to the monastic mysticism of love addresses one factor which had a part in the “new understanding of matrimony”. For Bernhard of Clairvaux (died 1153) a true unification in love brought about equality, in any case it happens like this between the heavenly bridegroom and his mundane bride, the church respectively the soul. Theologically the new understanding of matrimony is based on the demand that all religious acting must flow from the heart, which then holds true of marriage as well, insofar as since the High Middle Ages marriage counted as a sacrament and which like any other act of piety should come from the heart. The scholastic featured matrimony as a sacrament and declared it including sexuality to be a way to salvation” (Angenendt, *Ehe*, 361).

- The positioning within the context of the history of ecclesiology is going to draw on source material, in which on the one hand the marriage pastoral and on the other the dispute in respect to the question of sexuality is recognisable (as for example in the controversy about the ideal of purity between the governing body of the church and the Catharis [hypothetically it is assumed that in this controversy it could be resorted to the “positive line of Augustine which was rooted in his rejection of dualism and Gnosticism...”. “Sexuality and matrimony were a property and an order of Creation and in Paradise its practice remained free from corruptible lust. From its beginning matrimony retained for Augustine a positive fundamental value...”] [Angenendt, Mensch und Familie, 284]).

- Principally the theses of James A. Brundage have to be observed: „Most Christians, however, have never been willing or able to achieve total abstinence from sex. The minority who did aspire to banish sex from their lives, such as monks, nuns, and sometimes priests and other ministers accordingly considered themselves a spiritual elite within the church.” This spiritual elite resides – presently applied to St. Stephens – within the church; priests – not monks – in order to administer ecclesiastical assistance at the occasion of wedding vows step out from the interior of the church over the threshold of the entrance. At St. Stephens this area of the entrance is flanked by the male and female genitals. Therefore here cannot happen what has been observed elsewhere: “Members of this elite claimed that their own sexual abstinence qualified them to guide their weaker brethren along the paths of godliness. Celibate clerics ultimately secured a monopoly of leadership positions within the church establishment and, naturally enough, urged their followers to do their best to banish sexual pleasure from their lives and thoughts. Some married Christians responded to such exhortations by renouncing sexual relations entirely, while continuing to live with their spouses in a ‘spiritual marriage’ from which they had banished sex. This type of arrangement, however, remained exceptional even among the devout.” (Brundage, Sex and Canon Law, 35).

- With the steps taken so far a fundament should be established which allows us to examine current interpretations: analyses of the symbolic of the genitals at St. Stephens so far were dominated by interpretations which see them as apotropaic and/or as ‘mere embellishment’. Hypothetically I rather presume that it is a matter of ecclesiastical annunciations; more closely such by which theological-pastoral contents should be conveyed to the populace.

1.4 Brought to a head the orientation of the project results in:

- Embedding the mentioned art-evidence within the pastoral-cultural life above all of the 12th and 13th Centuries (e.g. in the context of the establishing of the ecclesiastical wedding [with its being interlocked with the societal context – cf. Weber]; in correlation to the Lateran-councils etc.).
 - the pastoral-cultural life (cf. Vauchez, Geschichte des Christentums, 5) oriented itself/should orient itself on the one hand on the definition of the ideal erotic behavior (“ The paramount relevance of love as a spiritual power and source of life during the 12th Century is uncontested and has been highlighted

repeatedly. Love is the true ensign of this seculum. It is the era of reading Ovid and the vagrants, agents of free love, the Century of troubadours and the first novelists with fin amour and sensual love flowing from the heart, above all the era of monastic spirituality which in prayers, tractates and the exegesis of the Song of Songs celebrates the love of God” [Ruh, *Mystik*, 1, 387]) and on the other on prohibitions (in this context are to be considered the penitential books [cf. Lutterbach] and the prohibition of marriage for clerics).

a.) it is to be questioned how far this can be viewed in analogy to the “regard [P. Benedikts XVI.] of the image of *Eros* in history and presence...: on the one hand (as it has become clear) that love somehow has to do with the Divine: it augurs infinity, eternity – the grander and totally other compared to everyday life. At the same time it became apparent that the way to this goal cannot simply be found by being overpowered by desire. Purification and maturity are required which lead as well to the road of sacrifice. That is not a refusal of *Eros*, not its ‘poisoning’, but the cure to its true greatness” (‘Deus caritas est’, 5).

- With the above setting, the possibility is rendered to gain experiences in respect to the realization of ideals. More to the point the hypothesis can be tested whether the marriage with ecclesiastical support respectively according to ecclesiastical concepts (marriage is dissociated from the scope of family planning as the church strengthens the Sacrament of matrimony and establishes it with the respective controls as the norm. The targets are liaisons for which the highest aim is progeny; the religious basis of this goal was the principle of indissoluble unity of married couples. In the ecclesiastical matrimony the marriage couple articulates its willingness to place itself within the causal and final horizon) was decisive in the sense of moulding the sexual life of woman and man. Of course the possibility of an “ambivalent structure of meaning” has to be reckoned with, as Gert Kaiser has it characterized in his analysis of “Liebe außerhalb der Gesellschaft” (p. 96).

- the “religious woman-man-symbolic” on St. Stephens is – so my hypothesis – finds its place in the above given contexts: especially if it is considered that marriage vows were vouched in/at portals (cf. Deimling, medieval portals of churches in their legal historical meaning, 324-327) it becomes clear that the program of matrimony was iconographically formulated at these crossovers/thresholds. Therefore the woman-man-symbolic on the west side of St. Stephens deals with the theology of Creation which as a guideline was passed on to the marriage couple.

- not addressed on St. Stephens in respect to the wedding appear interdictions regarding certain sexual practices. But if it is considered that the church portal was also the court of law (cf. in the case of St. Stephens the “thorn remover” who is construed as “judge”), then it can be surmised exactly in connection to the wedding in front of the priest that rules were brought to bear which inhibited marriage among close relatives.

- therefore the wedding taking place in the area of the portal eclipsed existing ties by family relation or any intentions stemming from it (e.g. in respect to possessions). Contrariwise is exactly this the area from

which the priest comes. Therefore wedding takes place at the transitional zone between the mundane world and the sacred space.

◦ incompatible appears the gender-symbolic on St. Stephens with the “obsessive idea that the genitals are the source of evil.... Many inhibitions are derived from this idea, which the supreme leaders of the Latin Church enunciated... So that newly-wed would learn the right self-control, they should stay abstinent the first three nights after the wedding” (Duby, Ritter, Frau und Priester, 35).

◦ do the last remarks of Duby counteract the gender-symbolic of St. Stephens? Not necessarily, if one consults the thesis by Largier: “Only in the apotheosis of the stimulus, purely in the cult of desire the epicure and the ascetic are rendered capable in the artificial paradise – or the conjured up hell – to surmount restrained pleasure and the ever recurring melancholic boredom. Therefore one can speak of a history of sensuality born from the spirit of asceticism which settles beyond – or rather on this side – of nature and reason” (Largier, Kunst des Begehrens, 7).

1.5 Discussion of the results in the framework of a scientific argumentation of the concept of symbol

- In the talk of female respectively male sculptures on /in churches of the Middle Ages these are currently often referred to as “depictions” – the question though is whether this characteristic holds true for the female-male-symbolic of St. Stephens as well (it differs plainly from the figures of the couple of founders, duke Rudolf IV of Habsburg and his wife Katharina. Here apparently it is the case of depictions and not symbolic: the founder pair shows itself in that quality).

- Does it not prove meaningful – exactly with respect of the female-male-symbolic of St. Stephen – to take recourse to the concept of symbol in the Greek meaning of the word (then the interest would be arrested by the assembly of two parts in the sense of a restoration of a formerly whole)?

To wit – following the analysis of Aristotle by Allen – it is to be questioned: “In What Way are Male and Female Opposite?”, “What are the Receptive Functions of Mothering and Fathering in Generation?”

- Are therefore the male-female-plastics on the western façade of St. Stephens not only mere signs for a deeper reality but do they articulate the religious origin of gender?

2 Methodology

Merely the observance of the place of mounting the mentioned male-female-symbols on the west façade of St. Stephens, that is in the area of transition, not division (accordingly the “threshold”) of the Holy and the profane, allows conclusions in respect to the selection of an appropriate methodology: in analogy to this complex the *scientific research* relating to this should be located *in the scope of a research field which is distinguished by the tension of the poles of cult and culture* – and exactly in between is “located” the

possibility of interpretation. By this those problems can be overcome which Penelope Margaret Magee characterizes in “The Sacred as Master-Knowledge” (106) as follows: „The very awkward and doubtful essentialist oppositions between theism and a-theism, between political strategy and religious belief, between ‚academic‘ and ‚mystical‘ are symptomatic of the difficulties major strands of Anglo/American/Australian feminism have in beginning to rethink the sacred/profane opposition.”

The methodology brought to bear will correspondingly have to be organised in an interdisciplinary way with feedback from theology, the humanities and cultural sciences.

To wit: in order to be able to identify and evaluate the above mentioned data of the woman-man-symbolic it needs (again explained on the example of St. Stephens)

- first of all an exact determination of the time of affixing the male-female-symbolic. Especially analysis of the rock used is of help in this endeavour (as it is possible and financeable in connection with restoration – it is to be hoped that scaffolding will be erected around the female genital as well so that detailed analysis can be performed).
- placing in contemporary theology/philosophy in respect to man and woman (the gender symbolic should be emphasized in comparison to the Adam-Eve-iconography and it has to be pointed out that the sculptures on St. Stephens deal neither with the topic of the fall of man/temptation nor with any insinuation to the history of Creation in Genesis 2).
- then a contextualising in the ecclesiastical history of this period
- and this on the basis of iconographic research (immediate precursors or contemporaneous depictions have to be visited on the one hand; on the other various forms of addressing the topic woman and man [on the west façade] of churches of the Romanesque to Gothic have to be analysed).

Thereupon one can focus – as Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza (193 ff.) formulates – on a “non-positivistic, scientific-rhetorical understanding of text [in the present case: architectural sculpture] and interpretation”, which “by four decisive epistemological turnarounds and changes (that is: rhetorical reverses, socio-political reverses, change from hermeneutics to critique of ideology, change towards political-theological ethics) has been enabled within the understanding of sciences”.