

WOMEN IN BIBLICAL AND CHRISTIAN NARRATIVES

The contextualisation of Biblical female figures as well as their historical perception is dealt with in the second path

The Christian Bible, which comprises the Old Testament and the New Testament, is a book that emanates from a patriarchal culture. It is assumed that all the texts, or at least the vast majority of them, were written, updated, and interpreted by men from their overwhelmingly androcentric perspective in which the man – unlike the woman – is taken as the norm. Although women play a prominent role in actual Christian congregational life today, as they did then, women's voices are under-represented in the official teachings and in the established practice of Bible interpretation (exegesis). Since the 1960s, feminist theology and theological gender research have been increasingly counteracting this deficit. Feminist theology, which together with theological gender research had its beginnings in the women's movement of the 19th century, is an area of focus that systematically and gender-critically deals with traditions, practices, writings, and teachings of several religions. Women's and gender studies in Christian theology examines, among other things, the unequal treatment of people of different genders in the past and present as well as the experiences of discrimination in society, churches, and in scientific discourse, always from a multidisciplinary and scientific perspective. However, compared to the almost three millennia of the development and interpretation of Biblical writings in the Judeo-Christian tradition, these perspectives are still relatively new and therefore not anchored in the collective consciousness. The multidisciplinary aspect of women's and gender studies is having an impact on archaeology and art history and has led, especially in the last decades, to renewed examination of archaeological finds and art objects by means of new questions. This approach offers the possibility of addressing the portrayals of women in the canonical and extracanonical narratives in the Old and New Testaments and considering their deeds and gender-specific roles within societies. From an archaeological and art historical perspective, this is a dual undertaking, since an object not only reflects a woman from a specific narrative, it at the same time reflects what the people who created it and who commissioned it projected onto this woman.

The extracanonical writings, also known as the Apocrypha, encompass religious texts of Jewish or Christian origin that were not accepted into a Biblical canon. In Judaism as well as Christianity, the Biblical canon

stipulates which writings or books are part of their Bibles. The collection of Jewish Holy Scripture is the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), comprising three main parts: Torah, Nevi'im, and Kethuvim. In Christianity, the writings of the Tanakh were inherited and were combined with additional writings of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which also contains other Jewish texts) to make the Old Testament, which was placed in front of the books of the New Testament. However, the canon of the Old Testament differs among the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Churches, since they came to different conclusions about whether the writings that were not part of the Tanakh should be included in the Old Testament. The New Testament canon includes 27 books (Gospels, History/Letters of the Apostles and the Book of Revelations), which were originally written in Greek. It was fixed in the 4th century and is recognised in all Christian churches. However, many of the writings not included in the canon were widely disseminated among the Christian communities and had an influence, sometimes considerable, on Christian iconography.

The women that are presented here were selected because of their relationship with the holdings of the Sculpture Collection and the Museum of Byzantine Art. This implies that the women in this path are presented because, for many reasons, they were considered worthy of being portrayed and were retained in the collective memory due to the religious connotations of their deeds and words. This does not mean that there are not many more women whose stories deserve to be told, nor are forgotten all the anonymous women with their everyday realities who, in Biblical and Christian stories, were only mentioned in passing or who were not deemed worthy of being artistically represented.

When we talk about the lived experiences of women during the times of the Old and New Testaments and later Christian texts, it would be desirable from the get-go to talk about the usual lived experience of women in Judaism and early Christianity. However, it is not really possible to construct a general characterisation of »a woman« in Judaism or early Christianity. The differences among the individual epochs, regions, and religious as well as national political systems in which they moved are too varied. One can perhaps say that a woman's

position cannot always be generally defined as oppressed, without rights, uneducated, and dominated by men, even if that was certainly true for women from the lower social classes and slaves. For there are also isolated instances of influential, educated, and more independent female figures in the first centuries before and after Christ whose privileges, however, should not be confused with an emancipated existence.

According to the creation story in Genesis, the first book of the Tanakh and the Old Testament, the first woman was created by God (Genesis 1:27). She was, together with man, created in God's image. In Christian art, however, God is only ever portrayed as an older man, which is iconographically derived from the Greco-Roman father deities like Jupiter (Greek: Zeus).

However, to convey the legend of the creation of the first human couple, especially artistically, it was mostly the second creation story that was considered. According to this version, God first formed Adam from clay and afterwards made Eve from one of Adam's ribs (Genesis 2:2). The interpretation that man, being created first, inherently stands above woman had far-reaching consequences for woman's position. The misogynistic reception history concerning Eve finds its zenith in the story of the Fall of Man, according to which Eve was beguiled by the serpent into eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: »For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.« So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate.« (RSV, Genesis 3:5-6). This moment is rendered on a relief by Ludwig Krug (ca. 1488/90–1532) that is found in the Bode Museum (fig. 2-1). Eve, who is facing the viewer, reaches with her left hand towards a branch of the fruit-laden Tree of Knowledge, around whose trunk the serpent is wound. Only on second glance does one recognise that here, Adam is holding the half-eaten fruit, traditionally represented as an apple, while Eve lays her

hand on his shoulder and looks at him. No other theme from Bible stories gave artists the opportunity to depict the naked human body, especially the woman's, as this one did.

Adam and Eve were subsequently expelled from Paradise so that they would not also eat from the Tree of Life and become immortal. Man was condemned henceforth to labour in the fields. Woman was punished with pain during childbirth and with sexual desire for the husband who would rule over her. Thus Eve became the original sinner who seems to embody everything that is bad.

But the story definitely conveys a considerably more multifaceted image of Eve: she is the one who acts, who because of her dispute with the serpent learns that through knowledge, humans do not die, but gain



2-1

Ludwig Krug [ca. 1488/90–1532]

Adam and Eve (The Fall of Man), 1514

Solnhofen stone, 14,9 × 9 × 1,2 cm

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something that is divine. Eve is characterised as curious, active, rebellious, and thirsty for knowledge and is made by God the mother of all, she who defines life.

During early Christianity, starting around the 2nd century AD, Eve, as a sinner and the origin of all misery, became the counter figure to Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus, who was stylised as a saviour figure. In this Eve-Mary parallel, Mary, chosen by God as the »second Eve«, atones for the evil deeds of the »first Eve«. As an example, this concept is realised in the polychromed stucco relief in the style of Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378 (?)-1455) that was probably used for private devotion (fig. 2-2). Mary, wearing a golden robe and holding the Christ child, surmounts Eve, who is dressed in red – the colour of sin. But to speak of a »second Eve« is highly problematic. For a start, it allows the misogynistic interpretation of Eve's creation and the Fall of Man to remain unquestioned. Furthermore, it constructs an antithesis of the »evil« and the »good« woman, which became formative for Christian people. The division of women into saints and sinners is the result of an androcentric projection that does not allow for an existence between these two extremes.

When it suits the situation, an alleged sinner and seductress can also act as a positive example, as in the story of Lot and his daughters (Genesis 18 and 19). The inhabitants of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah led such wicked lives that God destroyed the cities. Only Lot and his family – the names of his wife and his two daughters are not provided in the narrative – were chosen to survive the catastrophe. In the end, only Lot and his daughters reached a safe haven in the mountains, his wife having turned into a pillar of salt after she looked back at the city while fleeing. In a mountain cave incest took place, which is ostensibly described as the father, made drunk by his daughters, being raped by them to help them have offspring, since their fiancés died in Sodom. According to the narrative, the two daughters did not act spontaneously, but rather thought up a ruse for this »theft of seed«. They got their father so drunk that he did not realise that he was having sex, first with his older daughter and on the following night with the younger one. Both daughters became pregnant by their father and each bore a son: Moab und Ammon.

2-2

Style of Lorenzo Ghiberti [1378?-1455]

Madonna, Eve lying underneath, ca. 1430

Stucco, set, 80 × 56,5 × 21 cm

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In the scholarly literature there are various interpretations as to what message this story was even meant to convey. Is it about the sinfulness of the inhabitants of Sodom? Or rather about the vilification of two of Israel's neighbouring tribes, arising from incest, who centuries later would become bitter enemies of Israel: the Moabites and the Ammonites, the descendants of Moab and Ammon? The daughters are readily accused of being highly cunning, unscrupulous, and yes even occasionally of being emancipated, because they took sperm from their father to fulfil their »natural« wish for motherhood and thus ensure the preservation of their family.

The supposedly erotic moment between Lot and his daughters became one of the most popular motifs in the Renaissance and Baroque eras. This is shown in the marble relief by an unknown (to us) artist that was created around 1600 in the Netherlands (fig. 2-3). Hidden from the view of the outside world by a cloth, the father, only partially covered with a cloak, and his fully naked daughter are already approaching each other. Through her sister's subtle act of pouring wine, which the father does not notice, the active players are clearly established. What will happen next is indicated by the father's hand on his daughter's thigh and her slightly opened labia. The viewers are also visually steered toward this aspect of the story, since the father's hand and the daughter's pubic region lie in the compositional centre of the relief.

What the Baroque portrayal of this theme does not reflect is a different reading, which perceives in this story the rape of two daughters made drunk and therefore defenceless by the father. Because how probable is it that both times an older, completely drunk man would be able to achieve an ejaculation leading to pregnancy? Because alcohol – to use the words of the English writer William Shakespeare (1564–1616) – »provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance« (*Macbeth*). To this day, it is a common strategy of incestuous fathers, and of a body of literature that appeals for rapists to be understood, to portray the sexual assault of a daughter as her sexually overpowering her father. Even the protective function of the mother does not apply in this story; the relief shows her in the background, solidified into a pillar of salt as she gazes back at the city.

By this narrative strategy of the raping girls being passed down through the visual arts, as done by renowned artists such as Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) or Otto Dix (1891–1969), this problematic viewpoint is also conveyed visually into the collective consciousness. That in most of the works Lot looks quite cheerful and eager and is not depicted as a practically comatose victim is not an accident; this better serves the voyeuristic predilection of the observers.



2-3

The Netherlands

Lot and his daughters, ca. 1600

Marble, 43 × 32 × 5,5 cm

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That such an artistic staging, as in the case of the relief, actually deals with child and adolescent pornography is rendered unrecognisable by portraying the girls as the active seductresses and making their bodies look like those of young adults. However, caution should be used in reading the unmarried girls as autonomous adult women, considering that the average age of marriage for girls at the time began at about 13.

Delilah is often described as a guileful seductress and is rendered accordingly in art (Judges 16:1-31). She lived in the Sorek valley, was apparently unmarried, and presumably belonged to the Philistine tribe, which was often involved in armed conflict with Israel. Samson fell in

love with her: he was an Israeli warrior – up to that point undefeated and an enemy of the Philistines – whose God-given strength was bound up in his hair, which therefore had never been allowed to be cut. When Samson's love for Delilah became known, the Philistine tribal chiefs offered her a great deal of money if she could find out how Samson could be defeated. She coaxed the secret from him and passed it on, and Samson's hair was cut off while he slept in her lap, either by her or a barber who was sent for, depending on the narrative tradition. Samson was arrested and eventually died. What happened to Delilah is not related. This woman, who managed to bring down a man chosen by God, was henceforth deemed a prostitute,

2-4

Artus Quellinus the Elder
[1609–1668]**Samson and Delila,
ca. 1640**

Terracotta, 37,5 × 43 × 31 cm

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traitor, and arch enemy of the Hebrews. However, it remains to be determined whether Delilah, on the basis of the story, can be called a prostitute. In fact, at no point in the text is it reported that she returned Samson's feelings or had sex with him. How the relationship between the two was constructed and whether it was voluntary on Delilah's part remain open questions. As a result, one can also say very little about her motives for »betraying« Samson. Was it patriotism? An opportunity to free herself from Samson? Or was it for the money, which offered her a secure and independent life?

The clay sculpture by Artus Quellinus the Elder (1609–1668) from around 1640, however, leaves no leeway around the role assigned to Delilah (fig. 2-4). The naked Samson, sleeping in her lap, the exposed breast of Delilah, and the act of her cutting off his hair herself all make clear that she not only pried the secret from him with carnal efforts, but that she also actively robbed him of his divine strength. In contrast to Delilah, Judith quite deliberately held out to her adversary the prospect of a night of love together in order to kill him (Judith 8:13). The Jewish widow Judith, who is described as rich, beautiful, and god-fearing, ventured unarmed into the military camp of the Assyrian general Holofernes, who was besieging the mountain fortress of Bethulia in

northern Palestine. By means of her eloquence and her beautiful appearance, she managed to spend a night in Holofernes' tent. However, he drank himself into a stupor, and Judith seizes the opportunity to cut off his head with two strokes of his own sword. The moment when Judith holds his severed head in her hand is captured in this Netherlandish sculpture from the early 16th century (fig. 2-5). Since as an Israelite she stood on the »right« side from the standpoint of the storyteller, she was stylised in the Biblical written history as the saviour of her people. Delilah and Judith – two women who protected their people against the enemy. One is defamed as a prostitute and arch enemy of the God of Israel, the other stylised as a heroine of Israel.

No other woman has been so frequently portrayed in Christian art than the Virgin Mary. The image of Mary is inseparably linked with her role as the mother of Jesus, whom she conceived as a virgin through God and whom she witnessed dying on the cross, the most brutal method of torture for political agitators in the Roman Empire. While the gospels of the New Testament give little account of her life, we learn about her at length in the *Protoevangelium of James*, an Apocryphal book from the 2nd century AD. It relates that she was the daughter of Anna and Joachim, an old, childless couple from the city of Nazareth. As thanks for their late offspring, they presented Mary at the temple, where she was raised until the age of twelve. Afterward she was betrothed to the widower Joseph, who already had children from his previous marriage. A few years later, an angel visited her and announced to her that she, as a virgin, would conceive a son through the Holy Spirit. Mary agreed to this and became pregnant. Thus it happens that Mary embodies two contradictory ideals, both propagated by the Church: virginity and motherhood.

The Christian veneration of the Virgin Mary saw a significant boost in the 5th century AD when the Council of Ephesus, in 431 AD, adopted the dogma of Mary as theotokos, or God-bearer. For a start, the importance of Mary was enhanced by the Council; while before she was mostly present in Christian art in narrative



scenes, such as the birth of Christ or the Adoration of the Magi (also known as the Three Kings), now her image, with and without the Christ child, becomes autonomous and detached from narrative context. However, with the title of God-bearer she was severely restricted to her role as mother. The majority of the depictions show her with her child, such as the masterful marble relief by Donatello (ca. 1386–1466) (fig. 2-6). Seeing them gaze at each other forehead to forehead, one can recognise in Mary's expression not only her love for her child but also melancholy. This is a reference to her son's fate to die young. Love and fear for a child are feelings that mothers, seeing such portrayals, could certainly identify with, particularly in light of the high infant mortality but also the high maternal mortality, i. e. a woman's death during pregnancy or in the first weeks after giving birth. Parents who experienced the traumatic event of losing a child found comfort in Mary, who shares their fate. This pain found its expression in Christian art in the depictions of the Descent from the Cross or the Pietà, the image of Mary holding her dead



2-5

The Netherlands

Judith with the head of Holofernes, 1520/30

Alabaster, 19 × 13 × 11 cm

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2-6

Donatello [ca. 1386–1466]

**The Virgin and Child (The Pazzi Madonna),
ca. 1420**

Marmor, 74,5 × 73 × 6,5 cm

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son in her arms. A small sculpture from southern Germany from the second half of the 18th century shows very powerfully how Christ's pale, lifeless body, covered only by a loincloth, lies in Mary's lap (fig. 2-7). Mary's gaze into the heavens, her knitted eyebrows, and her slightly open mouth all reflect pain and despair. At the same time, it stands out that Mary is portrayed as a fairly young

2-7

South Germany [Bavaria]

Pietà, ca. 1750-1800

Terracotta with original polychromy, 26,5 × 28 cm

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woman, although at the time of the Crucifixion she must have been in her middle or late forties. Thus the sculpture presents an idealised image of Mary that stylises her as an eternally young woman and mother.

But by no means can Mary be viewed as one-sidedly as the bulk of the works of art suggest. In the *Gospel of Luke*, Mary delivers a song of praise (*Magnificat*) in which she praises God and prophesies the change in conditions and circumstances under God's reign: for example, in the power structures of genders, between poor and rich, between the mighty and the subordinate. In light of the circumstances of her life in the Palestine of the late 1st century BC, which at the time stood under Roman



supremacy and where the security of the rulers was ensured by the deployment of military force, the song seems to be an explicit criticism of domination that would not have been tolerated in political discourse. In the Apocryphal *Gospel of Bartholomew* from the 3rd century AD, Mary is portrayed as a liturgical authority when she is called on by the apostles, explicitly by Peter, to take on the role of prayer leader. The oldest known *Dormition* manuscript, a recounting of the death of the Virgin, is dated to the 5th century AD, but could possibly be traced back to older sources. According to this writing, Mary taught, expostulated, carried out exorcisms, healed, preached the Gospel, led the male apostles in prayer, and sent women with Scripture to cities through the Mediterranean region. Starting in the 6th century, Mary's liturgical responsibility was expressed visually in depictions in which, for example, she wore a scarf-like band that is interpreted as a pallium, an episcopal insignia (the equivalent in the Eastern Church is the omophorion). Fragments of this kind of liturgical band in the Bode Museum, which were found in a cemetery in Akhmim Panopolis in Egypt and date from the 9th to the early 11th century, display precious silk embroidery of Christian scenes, geometric motifs, and crucifixes (fig. 2-8). However, this type of image lost importance in the following centuries, unlike the image of mother and child. Mary's role was thus strategically reduced over the centuries to her virginity and motherhood. This was not without consequence for Christian women, for whom Mary was supposed to serve as a role model. Any deviation from these ideals immediately placed women in opposition to the saint in the public perception.

As a contrast to the »pure« Mary can be seen the account of the healing of the Haemorrhissa, the bleeding woman, whose name we do not know (Mark 5:24-34). She suffered from bleedings for twelve years. She spent all of her assets on medical treatments. And although she suffered much at the hands of doctors, no treatment helped her; quite the contrary, she got steadily worse. When Jesus came to her village, she believed that he could heal her illness if she could only touch him or his garment. Amidst a crowd of people, she finally managed to secretly touch the hem of his garment, upon which her bleeding suddenly stopped. The fragment of a sarcophagus relief from the early 4th century from Rome possibly shows this very moment (fig. 2-9). From the scene, only the kneeling woman on the lower left edge has survived; Jesus probably stood farther left of the broken edge. The reports do not describe a clear clinical picture. However, it is generally accepted that she was suffering from a vaginal or uterine haemorrhage, which could have had completely different causes. Even today about 30% of women suffer from such heavy menstrual bleeding that it negatively impacts their life.



2-8

Akhmim-Panopolis (Egypt)

Liturgical band, 9th–early 11th c.

Linen and silk, 217 × 10 cm in total

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Bodily secretions, whether from men or from women, were considered impure according to Mosaic law. For women, this pertained above all to menstrual bleeding. During the duration of her period, a woman was considered unclean, as were people or objects who touched her while she was menstruating; with long-term bleeding, the woman also remained impure long term (Leviticus 12:7; 15:19-33 and 20:18). The Jewish laws were also taken up by the Christians. Even though there were dissenting voices that wanted to protect women from isolation by keeping them in familiar surroundings, in particular the presence of a menstruating woman in a sacred space was highly controversial; for a long time she was denied access to the altar during the celebration of the Eucharist. At the same time, it seems ambiguous that the healing miracle of the bleeding woman was often portrayed in the church interior itself. The healing of the bleeding woman also pops up in late antique and early Byzantine exorcism rituals and in gems and protective amulets. These were used to invoke the uterus and to help with uterine problems, for example during birth, afterbirth, labour, contraception, and heavy menstrual bleeding. If, in questions of health, women turned to the realm of faith, it is not a surprise, given that the practice of medicine, which was always male-dominated, was not familiar enough with the workings of the female body. That the male body is understood to be the norm in

2-9

Rome

Fragment of the box of a single zone frieze sarcophagus, beginning of the 4th c.

Marble, 45 × 64 × 9 cm

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the field of medicine can be traced back at least as far as the ancient Greeks. Even though modern medicine has outgrown the Aristotelian view (Aristotle, 384–322 BC) of the female body as a »mutilated male« body, sex- and gender-specific medicine is to this day on the fringes, with fatal consequences for women. The practice of treating genital bleeding as a taboo and excluding menstruating people from daily life persists to this day, even if it varies widely depending on the cultural sphere. Even in rich industrialised countries like Germany, menstruation can still lead to social exclusion, for example if girls and women cannot afford hygiene articles like sanitary pads, tampons, or other products such as painkillers and therefore stay away from school or work. This condition, known as period poverty, especially affects women who are living on the edge of poverty or are homeless. In Germany in January 2020, after a successful petition, the VAT for tampons and pads was reduced from 19 to seven percent.



2-10

Tilman Riemenschneider [1460–1531]

Christ appears to Mary Magdalene [portion of the Münnerstadt Altarpiece], 1490–92

Lime wood, formerly polychrome,

143 × 101,5 × 7 cm

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As a consequence they are no longer considered luxury articles, but rather basic essentials. Also in 2020, the Scottish government enacted a country-wide law that provided for pads and tampons to be supplied free of charge in public buildings such as schools and universities.

Whore, sinner, lover, disciple, apostle – no other woman in the Bible has been appraised so differently and sometimes defamed as Mary of Magdala, also called Mary Magdalene. There are no sources that could give precise information about Mary's family or her social status. Her identification with the place of origin Magdala, a city on the Sea of Galilee, leads to the conclusion that she was not married and that she was perceived to have no family ties. After Jesus had freed her from seven

demons, the Jewish Mary of Magdala became one of his female disciples and played a leading role that varies according to the canonical or extracanonical source. The Gospels hand down the tradition, not always consistently, that Mary was present at Christ's crucifixion and deposition and discovered the empty tomb on Easter morning. In addition, she is the first person whom the resurrected Christ meets. He instructed her to announce his resurrection to the other disciples (John 20:14-18). This meeting between Mary of Magdala and the risen Christ is rendered on the relief from the Münnerstadt Altarpiece by Tilman Riemenschneider (1460–1531) (fig. 2-10). This task of annunciation, as it were, is the reason that she is interpreted as an authority figure and specifically as a female apostle. Furthermore, her conspicuous position as a close companion of Jesus, discussion partner, teacher, apostle, and yes, even a member of the Twelve becomes clear in the writings that became the Apocrypha, for example in the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, the *Pistis Sophia*, or the *Gospel of Philip*; these are texts that originated later and were not accepted into the canon of the New Testament, although some of them enjoyed wide popularity. Already at the beginning of the 3rd century, Mary's apostolic authority is put into words with the title *apostola apostolorum* (apostle to the apostles) (Hippolyte of Rome, ca. 170–235), which was especially used starting in the 11th/12th century. However, the authority and position of Mary was not undisputed. Thus in the *Gospel of Luke*, the first appearance of the resurrected Jesus is given to the apostle Peter, while the Apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* as well as the *Gospel of Mary* tells of a state of competition between Mary of Magdala and Peter over the claim to leadership. While in the Eastern Church, Mary of Magdala continues to be accepted and venerated as an Equal of the Apostles, in the Western Church a momentous transformation of Mary occurs that is reflected in art, cultural, and literary histories.

Starting already in the 2nd century AD there are tendencies to confound different New Testament stories of women, whether they were named Mary or remained anonymous, with Mary of Magdala. This peaked at the end of the 6th century AD with the equating of Mary of Magdala with Mary of Bethany (John 12:1-8) and with the sinful woman in a pharisee's house (Luke 7:36-50) by Pope Gregory I (pontificate 590–604) in his Magdalene homilies. In addition, because this nameless sinner who washes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and anoints them was interpreted in a sexualised way, Mary of Magdala was posthumously declared a whore. Thus arose the widespread image of the repentant Mary of Magdala, often portrayed with long, loose hair, bare breasts, and the ointment vessel. The *Legenda aurea* (Golden Legend), a popular collection of saints' legends from the 13th century, recognises even more



2-11
 Hans Multscher [ca. 1400–1467]
**Saint Mary Magdalene carried up to heaven by
 angels, ca. 1430**
 Walnut, old polychromy, 132 × 57 × 37 cm
 Inv. Nr. 5923 © Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische
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legends about Mary of Magdala. She supposedly came to southern France after Christ's death and was active as a preacher there. However, it is also reported that as a hermit and penitent she retreated to a cave in a remote, desert-like region. Through the elaboration of these latter legends she was equated with another historical Mary, the woman known as Maria Aegyptiaca. In the 4th/5th century she was a former prostitute from Alexandria who converted to Christianity and lived as an ascetic in the desert and whose body was covered with a coat of hair. Hans Multscher (ca. 1400–1467) seized upon this amalgamation of legends for his sculpture, created around 1430 in Ulm, and depicted Mary of Magdala with the long, golden coat of hair that is actually the iconographic attribute of Maria Aegyptiaca (fig. 2-11).

The sculpture by Hans Multscher thematises the complicated history of how, over time, the story of Mary of Magdala that was passed down changed from her being Jesus' companion and an apostle to her being a sinner and a remorseful, ascetic penitent. In the relevant scholarship it has been frequently pointed out that this was not a matter of accidental confusion but mostly about gender constructions in patriarchal forms of society. In a certain way, the modern narrative of Mary of Magdala takes the same line when, in Dan Brown's 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code*, narratives from the New Testament, the Apocryphal Gospels, and the *Legenda aurea* are interpreted to the effect that Mary of Magdala and Jesus would have had a sexual relationship, including offspring. Even here, Mary of Magdala is reduced to her role as wife of Jesus and mother of his children.

Another woman in the Western Church experienced a similar displacement, although to this day she is revered in the Eastern Church as an Equal of the Apostles and a protomartyr. That would be Thecla, who according to legend was a beautiful young woman of good standing from Iconium, which is today Konya in Turkey. The Apostle Paul came to this city during his first missionary journey (in approximately 46/47 AD). She heard Paul talk about Christian faith and austerity, pledged herself to Christ, and subsequently broke off her engagement. It finally came about that her own mother urged the governor to burn Thecla at the stake as a warning to all the other women who had been converted by Paul. By divine providence, she survived the martyrdom by fire and followed the Apostle Paul on his journey. When they both arrived in Antioch, Thecla met a man named Alexander, who lusted after her and harassed her in broad daylight. Thecla defended herself against this attack and cried: »Do not force yourself on an unfamiliar woman, do not force yourself on the handmaid of God!« Out of the humiliation



2-12

Abu Mena (Egypt)

Ampulla (Flask) of Saint Menas, end of 5th c. / middle of 7th c.

Light clay, 13,8 × 11 × 1,1 cm

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of being rejected, Alexander brought her before the governor, who sentenced her to death *ad bestias*, i. e. in a fight against wild animals. The judgment unleashed horror among the women of the city and Tryphena, queen and relative of the emperor, took care of Thecla until the battle so that she would not be defiled in captivity. The results of this animal battle were compressed together for display on a pilgrim ampoule from Egypt (fig. 2-12). Thecla stands in the middle of the animals that she was supposed to kill her: a lion, a bear, and two bulls. Thecla is completely defenceless, she is dressed with only a cloth around her hips, and her arms are tied behind her back. Her bound arms are connected to each of the two bulls by ropes so that, after she had survived the attacks by the other animals, they could tear her asunder.

After she, in the face of death, carried out a kind of self-baptism and survived all the attacks by the wild beasts, she was finally set free. When she wanted to return to her hometown, Paul said to her: »Go forth and teach the word of God!« Thus Paul conferred on Thecla the duties of teaching and proselytising (for more on Paul, see pp. 71–72).

The story of Saint Thecla of Iconium is famous from the Apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, also called *The Acts of Thecla*, which were published sometime in the 2nd half of the 2nd century. Although the Carthaginian jurist Tertullian already claimed in 200 AD, in his text *de baptismo* (On Baptism), that the story of Thecla was made up, her story and her cult spread throughout the entire Mediterranean region, and in the early centuries Thecla became the most venerated Christian saint. In the West, her cult weakened in the 5th century, since the Acts of Thecla, alongside other texts, had now been »condemned« to the status of Apocryphal books by the *Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis* (end of the 5th/start of the 6th century). At the same time, the strengthened cult of the Virgin came to the fore, and the veneration of the God-bearer (theotokos) apparently superseded that of Saint Thecla as Equal of the Apostles and protomartyr. The Acts of Thecla give a complex insight into the living environment of women and address, among other things, the dependence on family, female solidarity, and the teaching and proselytising activities of women. It comes as no surprise that Tertullian designated the Acts of Thecla as fictional, since women in his day called upon them to confirm their authorisation to teach and baptise.

The most important commandment of the New Testament is charity (Greek: *Diakonia*; Latin: *Caritas*). *Caritas* is the love from and for God and moreover the love for one's neighbour, as is already required in the Torah. This love is expressed as compassion, when people turn to each other without reservation.

Charity was so defining for Christianity because social networks and the systematic care of the poor and needy were not anchored in Roman antiquity, even though the principle of welfare was already known and was put into practice in various ways. Christian communities tried to fill these gaps in care through the support of the poor, orphans, widows, and old people. Charity expressed itself, for example, in feeding the poor, taking in homeless persons, caring for the sick, ransoming prisoners, or providing a decent burial. Subsequently, active charity by each individual was institutionalised in the church. As a result, since then charitable works have been recognised as important aspect of Christian faith and an important component of the institution of the church.

Starting in the 12th century, *Caritas* in Christian art was increasingly portrayed as a female personification. Whether a personification is represented as female (Latin: *femininum*) or male (Latin: *masculinum*) depends on the grammatical gender of the Latin word that underlies the embodiment. She can be recognised either in context with images of other virtues or through attributes such as a loaf of bread, a cloak that she gives to a beggar, or a heart. Since the 14th century, as an identifying attribute *Caritas* is given one or several children, and in the Renaissance and Baroque eras her image as a personified virtue was replaced with a conventional image of maternal love. Subsequently, the personification of charity in public and private spaces is rendered as a nursing young mother of several children. So it is in the bozzetto by Melchiorre Caffà from the middle of the 17th century, which shows *Caritas* nursing an infant while a second child presses against her side (fig. 2-13). Thus something was illustrated in art that was already anchored in the reality of many societies: the strategic use of the ideal of female solicitude.

Caring is not only expressed in the sustenance of children but also includes housework and caring for relatives, nowadays generally termed caregiving work. This type of unpaid work, which in the vast majority of cases has been done by women all along, is assigned an economic worth, yet it does not count in the economy. That unpaid work by women is recognised, not only in the family sphere, but also in charitable organizations as a no-cost resource is nowadays a notorious factor that contributes to gender inequality. Even in 2020, women in the EU performed 75% of the unpaid caregiving and housework and during the Corona pandemic were especially

affected by additional burdens or overload, for example when child care was discontinued. Yet pandemic aside, even today the compatibility of work life and private life – due to, among other things, the lack of child care possibilities and of other care services – is for many women not possible or very difficult; this, in turn, affects their work situations, incomes, and retirement pensions as well as their health when they are constantly exposed to dual burdens.

In the meantime, women's and gender studies in archaeology and art history are now an accepted field of research, and an increasing number of research projects and publications offer opportunities for critical examination of an androcentric interpretation of history and of gender constructs. In light of the works of art that represent women from Biblical and Christian stories, it is essential to bring into the equation the theological and literary histories of how these narratives were passed down. In many cases, this allows the woman behind the work of art to be perceived and enables a critical analysis of how and why women were depicted the way we encounter them in the Bode Museum today.

2-13

Melchiorre Caffà [1631–1667]

Caritas [Allegory of Charity], 1661/67

Terracotta, 22,3 cm

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