Framing lines in the Desert of Religion

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University College Dublin, July 8th, 2019

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
Framing lines in the *Desert of Religion*

The *Desert of Religion* (DIMEV 1099) is a Middle English doctrinal poem on contemplative life, of slightly less than one thousand lines, extant in three manuscripts from the British Library, Additional 37049, Stowe 39 and Cotton Faustina B vi Part 2. The Carthusian miscellany Additional 37049 has received great critical attention and is now digitised. The *Desert of Religion* is so far only edited from Additional 37049 by HÜBNER (1911), and in a PhD; Anne MOURON (2016) has announced a forthcoming edition for the Early English Text Society from yet the same manuscript.

I intend to focus today on the circulation, alongside the *Desert*, of quatrains which accompany each of the twenty-two sections of the poem. They are only loosely related by theme to the sections of the poem, and are combined with images, mostly portraits of hermit saints, and on a few occasions with diagrams. The one associated with a portrait of Richard Rolle in both the Carthusian miscellany and the Faustina copy (DIMEV 158) was noticed early, as remarked by BRANTLEY in her definitive study of all three manuscripts' layout.

Indeed, all surveys of the quatrains so far were conducted by way of studying Additional 37049, which is by rights a fascinating instance of compilation. Some feel for the form in which the quatrains circulated can be ascertained from comparing folios from all three manuscripts (see plates Ⓐ Ⓑ and Ⓒ). Because all three manuscripts preserve most or all of these quatrains, it is reasonable to assume that they circulated alongside the *Desert of religion* from the time of its composition.

The only manuscript in which the quatrains appear systematically as quatrains is Stowe 39. The lines are copied perpendicular to the normal writing direction, and rubricated with care. Each block of verse has its capitulum mark and rhyme brackets. The reader only needs to tilt the head on the side to read these 'extra lines'. Very often, these four lines are uttered by the very hermit they accompany, as prayers, or they provide further recommendations about heremitical practice. The very first one is in the form of petition and reply: 'Ihu graunte

me to dres ./ all mi deedes w<u>ith</u> delite. þat no beeste of þis wildernes./ bittterli me bitte. ffle in to þis wildernes ./ if þu /// will be p<u>er</u>fitt./ And halde þe þare in /// halines : als falles to gude hermitte"[1].The next one is an autobiographical utterance by Paul the Hermit, etc.

It may be this dialogic turn which prompted the Carthusian compiler(s) of Additional 37049 to use them in the most various forms: as spoken, and hence inscribed on scroll(s), as meant for contemplational reading, hence their 'horizontal' layout. My plate Ⓑ (Additional 37049, folio 60v) is perhaps the least adventurous of all these modifications. Quotation Ⓓ is my transcription of the 'frame text'. It is a commentary upon the powers of the shield of the passion, which is being granted to the hermit for contemplation. The inscription begins at bottom left, and arches above the image.

LEFT   Fra heuene god sendes þe here a schelde./ to haue in wildernes. To fighte whene þow wendes in to þe felde./ þis schelde on

TOP   þe þ<u>u</u> dres. For it mai gare þi enmys

RIGHT   ȝelde./ þaim al mare and les. Þe victori þus mai þ<u>u</u> welde ./ be þis gree als . I . ges.[2]

The layout, both in Faustina and 37049, at this juncture, is quite similar, with the inscription beginning at bottom left, and working its way around the historiated scene— the only difference being that Faustina, just as around the Rolle portrait, uses blue capitals to mark the beginning of couplets. Perhaps this indicates that this was the way in which those lines were copied originally.

Let me first address this particular issue of rubrication in Faustina as it gives a clue to the scribe's intentions. There are no coloured capitals on the first recto of the text, and the text which surrounds the image actually ends a quarter down the right side. On the first verso, the text is written in a slightly larger script, and there are blue initials. The scribe has made the effort to begin the top part of the inscription with a new couplet – but there is a blank where this capital should have stood – perhaps because he was expecting the rubricator to supply a red capital:

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[1] My transcription. "Jesus grant me to do accomplish all my deeds with delight, and that no beast bite me cruelly in this wilderness.' 'Flee into this wilderness if you wish to be perfect, and keep yourself there in holiness, as befits a good hermit."
[2] My transcription. 'From heaven god sends you here a shield to keep in the wilderness. To fight, when you enter the field, take up this shield and wear it. For it may counter completely your enemies all, large and smal. Thus you may wield victory, I guess.'

LEFT   Fourti ȝere in wildernes ./ I dwellede in a cave. Whare god of his greet gudnes./ graunte me for to haue ~ ~

TOP   And ilk a dai to me gune drees ./

RIGHT   with a ravene halfe a laue ./ Thare mi clathes ware mare and les. of lefis þat me gune saue .~[3]

As one reads quatrain after quatrain in the Faustina *Desert of Religion*, the scribe's efforts to spread his writing along all three sides of the illuminated scene become apparent. When his text falls short, he uses tildes in the way of line fillers. He is also very careful when it comes to managing corners. If his word ends short of the junction between the left and top lines, he sometimes proceeds as in Ⓐ, and fills the corner space with horizontal text. But most often, he will continue writing to the very top of the frame, then begin at right angles the top tier, whose text also extends flush with the frame of the inscription, as in folio 5v featuring St Mary of Egypt (plate Ⓣ).

Clearly, the exemplar provided little help, which explains why the scribe devoted some energy to testing and trying. There are so many occasions when the text stops in the descending line 'just' where the trees sprout, or 'just' where the green mound begins, that my little all is on a scribe who planned his interventions very carefully, and probably in close collaboration with the illuminator. Note how, in the case of Mary of Egypt, the illuminated capital on the left aligns with the tree, and how the text ends alongside her feet. By contrast, the management of lines and frames in 37049 is more energetic and confident, far less fussy.

Transcribing these twenty-odd quatrains in a row meant endlessly turning the codex around. Such constraints and impairments to easy writing (for the working scribe) and reading (for the manuscript's owner) suggest that this bizarre layout was preferred because it echoed another writing model. Brantley's work on the identification of Italian models for the pair of icon-like representations of the Virgin and Man of Sorrows, plate Ⓔ, prompted me to examine paintings with inscriptions, from English but also Italian origin.

Most of the 'paintings with inscriptions prior to 1450' I could trace were not satisfactory analogues. The inscriptions only occupied the top or bottom of the frame, or they were merely brief contents captions. I struck momentary gold with a crucifixion from the first half of the

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[3] My transcription. 'For forty years in the wilderness I lived in a cave, where God, in his great charity, granted me to have— and each day he sent me via a raven—half a loaf of bread. There, my clothes were more or less made of leaves that saved me.'

fifteenth-century. It is attributed with some level of certainty to a Stefano of Ferrara who was active in the early part of the century. The panel painting may be as early as 1430. The inscription is written clockwise, so it is oriented exactly as the surround quatrains in Faustina and Additional 37049. It spreads along the whole of the available frame space. The Latin was easy enough to decipher, and I have isolated the lines of inscription as three bars for your paleographical enjoyment. It took me some time but I had to admit to it. Despite all my syntactical efforts, the text, which is an augmented and modified version of the INRI placard, *must* be read from the top left corner, then down the right side, and up the left one:

① yhesu nazarenus rex
② iudeorum et saluator
③ om<u>n</u>ium gentiu<u>m</u> et d<u>ominus</u> n<u>oster</u>
'Jesus the Nazarene, king of the Jews and saviour of all mankind and our lord'

Another alley I explored was those of tombs with surround inscriptions, like the one mentioned in *St Erkenwald*, lines 47-52:

Hit was a throghe of thykke ston thryuandly hewen,
Wyt gargeles garnysht aboute alle of gray marbre.
The sperle of þe spelunke þat sparde hit o-lofte
Was metely made of þe marbre and menskefully planede,
And þe bordure enbelicit wyt bryȝt golde lettres,
Bot roynyshe were þe resones þat þer on row stoden.⁴

Indeed, I found many instances of graves with surround inscriptions, but very few graves where the text was meant to be read, as it were, 'from the inside'. The other difficulty was that the inscription is not continuous in our manuscript. The bottom bar is either empty or accommodates the name of the figure, written counter clockwise. I found several fifteenth-century instances of prayers in brass, written in Latin as a paragraph underneath the feet of deceased couples, and one 1400 tomb with a running legend to be read clockwise, as with our quatrains. Unfortunately, the extant slab is much damaged, and there is no way to reconstruct the inscription positively. Some surround inscriptions, meant to be read from the outside by visitors, manage to isolate amen or orate at the feet of the gisant, particularly in early military tombs.

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⁴ Trans. after Clifford PETERSON: 'It was a coffin of thick stone excellently cut, / Decorated with gargoyles around, all in the gray marble. / The bar of the tomb that locked it on top / Was properly made of marble and gracefully smoothed, / And the border was decorated with bright gold letters, / But the rows of sentences that stood there were mysterious.'

From this exploration, the only certainty I have formed is that the representation of the feet of the hermits, which, when they are visible, hang limply it seems, and suggest that the body they are attached to is floating freely, these limp feet are directly inspired by tomb figures. Most of the instances of ribbon inscriptions meant to be read from the inside are often on much later *transi* or cadaver tombs.

One iconographical trove was the depiction of tombs and grave markers in illuminated manuscripts of the *Romance of the Rose* or Arthurian narratives. In the Pygmalion illumination of British Library Additional MS 12042 (folio 159r, plate ⊞), the Galatea figure which is being sculpted is already inscribed in a frame, despite the absence of any writing. The tomb makers in the *Estoire de Merlin* illumination produce, as early as 1316 (plate ⒢ British Library, ⒢ Additional 10292, fol. 55v detail), quite exceptional ribbon clockwise inscriptions. The illumination's setup makes most of the inscription quite easily readable without having to turn the volume around (it is quite a hefty tome). And there, in that very moment, I realized where the analogues for this layout were going to be found. Not in manuscripts or on immovable wall paintings or tombstones. In objects one can easily finger and manipulate, so that any inscription can be read if need be.

Seals were tempting, as inscriptions on them are almost systematically clockwise, but I quickly discovered, and checked with my archivist colleagues, that they do conform to pretty systematic shapes. Inscriptions are read 'from the top', and in the round, but almost never start 'bottom left' as in our manuscript. Plates ⊞ and ⊡ of an ecclesiastic seal, mandorla-shaped, and of Edward III's seal, exemplify how mandorla and round seals are commonly read. The only instance I could find where the caption indeed begins tentatively at 7 o' clock is that of the Coventry fullers (plate ⊠), for which the British Museum suggests 1439 as a date.

After seals, the next logical step was to examine pilgrimage badges. Many imitate the seal format, and indeed sometimes the inscription on them begins with the word *sigillum*. There are now quite excellent volumes of census of pilgrimage badges, notably for England and the Netherlands, with quite reliable identifications.

Plate ⊡ is a classic example of Thomas Becket's head, where the inscription begins with a cross at the top of the surrounding disc. In the case of ampullas, the inscription often begins on the right, as the top border is decorated to mimic an actual ampulla, and a very commonly

found badge displaying these features is that of a pilgrimage quite popular in England and on the Continent, that of Notre Dame de Boulogne-sur-Mer, ☒. Very often, the bottom bar of the pilgrimage badge bears the name of a saint or city—there are famous rebus ones for E-ton. Plate ☒ provides a very abbreviated instance with *sca* for *sancta*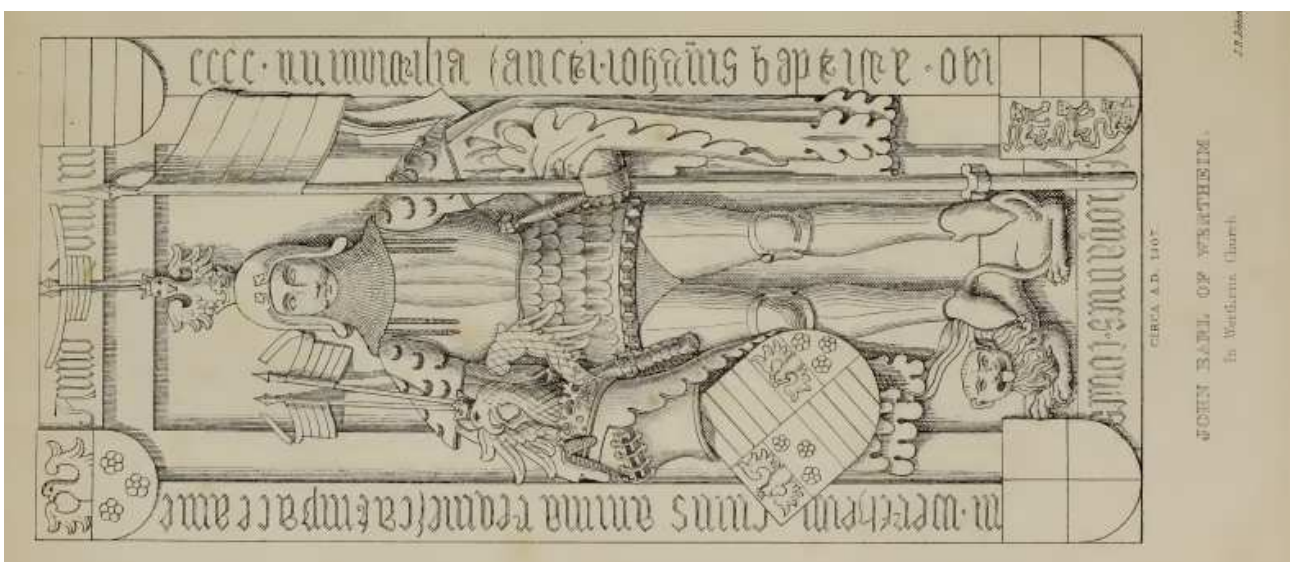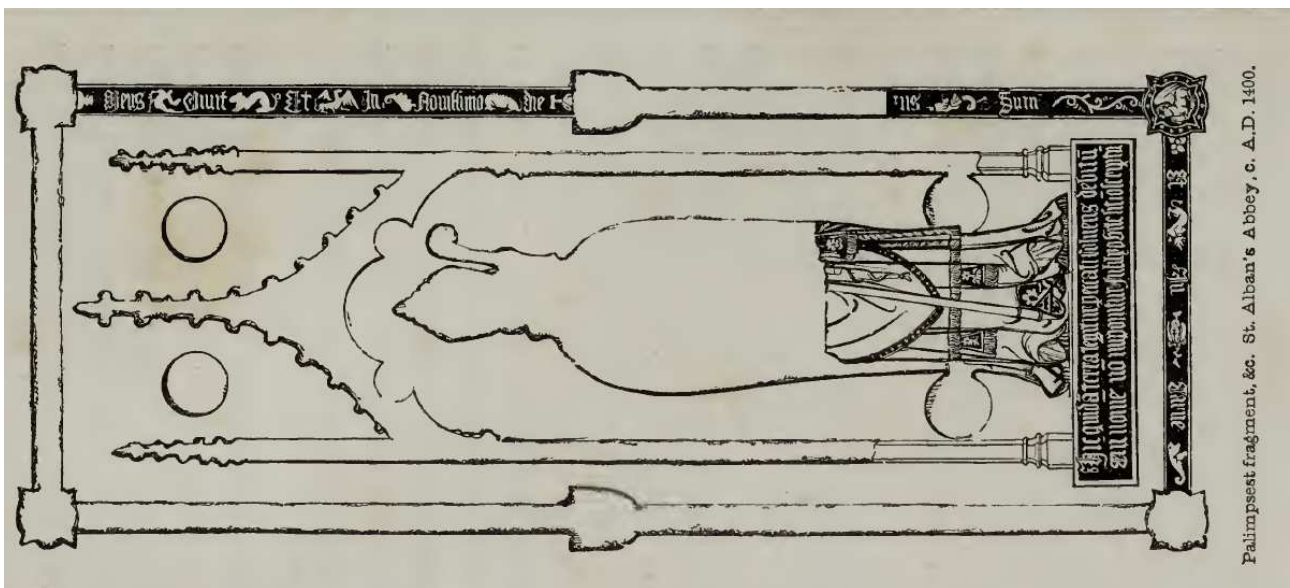, and *Birgd* for St Bridget of Syon. Plate ☒ shows the extant bottom part of a badge, which represents two saints whose shrines are only eleven-mile distant. Their names, John, are omitted, and the two horizontal captions simply read Beverley and Bridlington. These first four instances are extremely common formats for pilgrim badges circulating in England. Clockwise or horizontal captions are quite common, but inscriptions in the round tend to be read from the top.

I found two instances of religious badges where the inscriptions follow an arc above the saint's figure. Plate ☒ represents a badge commemorating ND de Chartres which dates from the second half of the fourteenth century, and has a surround inscription which begins bottom left: *santa beate merie cartotesis*. The lower section of the badge, below the inscription, contains depiction of relics. The caption is thus around the figure of the Virgin proper. The same type of display is found on ☒, a secular royal badge in which the caption suggests the celebration of a Trinity feast: *The king and his / mainie set in / trennit*. The way in which the inscription is managed, making sure it goes 'to the end of the line' before switching to the new direction of writing, resembles the scribal strategy in Faustina.

In ☒, a badge made in Stavelot, for which there is only one English find attested, the inscription follows an architectural niche, and begins bottom left. The 'surround' effect is very similar to that of our heremitical niches. Also, the caption is not a mere identification, it is a prayer addressed to Remacle, who is supposed to purify bodies and souls. *Corporis ac anime tollis vitiosa, remacle* ['Take away the corruption of both body and soul, o Remacle']. This phrasing echoes that of most of the quatrains, which are prayers or words of advice.

☒ is another instance of a secular badge, which also offers a cautionary warning 'hony soit ke mal y pence'. The garter motto is mobilized to celebrate the memory of the recently deceased heir to the throne. Edward of Woodstock kneels in front of a throne of grace, whilst two angels assist in his worship. One brings his heraldic shield, the other carries his helmet. Once again, the surround device is associated with orality.

To sum up, the earliest extant witness of the *Desert of Religion* is the one where the scribe *constantly* uses the quatrains to frame eremitical figures. The same device is also used in Additional 37049 despite its extremely originality, so it is quite probable that this was a feature of both their *exemplar*. Clockwise inscriptions *are* difficult to read. This may explain why they are not used on the bottom bar, which would force the reader to turn the book upside down. Indeed, the only way to read clockwise inscriptions easily is when they are on a small object, which can be manipulated easily. Some pilgrim and secular badges bear similar clockwise inscriptions. With its series of set images, which suggest various ways into and of the text, the *Desert of Religion* is an imagetext, as Brantley has shown. I would like to add that the quatrains which circulated as part of the *Desert* also function as objectexts, and remind the poem's readers of instances of writing outside *codices*.

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## Framing lines in the *Desert of Religion*

The *Desert of Religion* (DIMEV 1099) is a Middle English doctrinal poem on contemplative life extant in three manuscripts (British Library, Additional 37049, Stowe 39 and Cotton Faustina B vi Part 2). The Carthusian miscellany Additional 37049 has received great attention (esp. BRANTLEY 2007) and is now digitised. The *Desert of Religion* is so far only edited from Additional 37049 by HÜBNER (1911), and in a PhD; MOURON (2016) announces a forthcoming edition for EETS from the same manuscript.

I will focus on the circulation, alongside the *Desert*, of quatrains loosely related by theme to the sections of the poem, and combined with images. The one paired with a portrait of Richard Rolle in both the Carthusian miscellany and the Faustina copy (DIMEV 158) was noticed early, and studied by BRANTLEY in this capacity in her definitive study of all three manuscripts' layout.

All surveys of the quatrains so far were conducted by way of studying Additional 37049, which is by rights a fascinating instance of compilation. My interest lies instead in the more mundane and mainstream reservoir from which the Carthusian scribe drew. I will examine the layout of the quatrains in Faustina, our earliest extant witness. The *Desert of Religion* is indeed an imagetext, as BRANTLEY has demonstrated, but I will further argue that the quatrains are, more specifically, objectexts, which have counterparts outside *codices* in early fifteenth-century England.

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British Library, MS Additional 10292 [*L'estoire del Saint Graal* and *L'estoire de Merlin*, Tournai? c. 1316]
British Library, MS Additional 12042 [*Roman de la Rose*, France, c. 1450]
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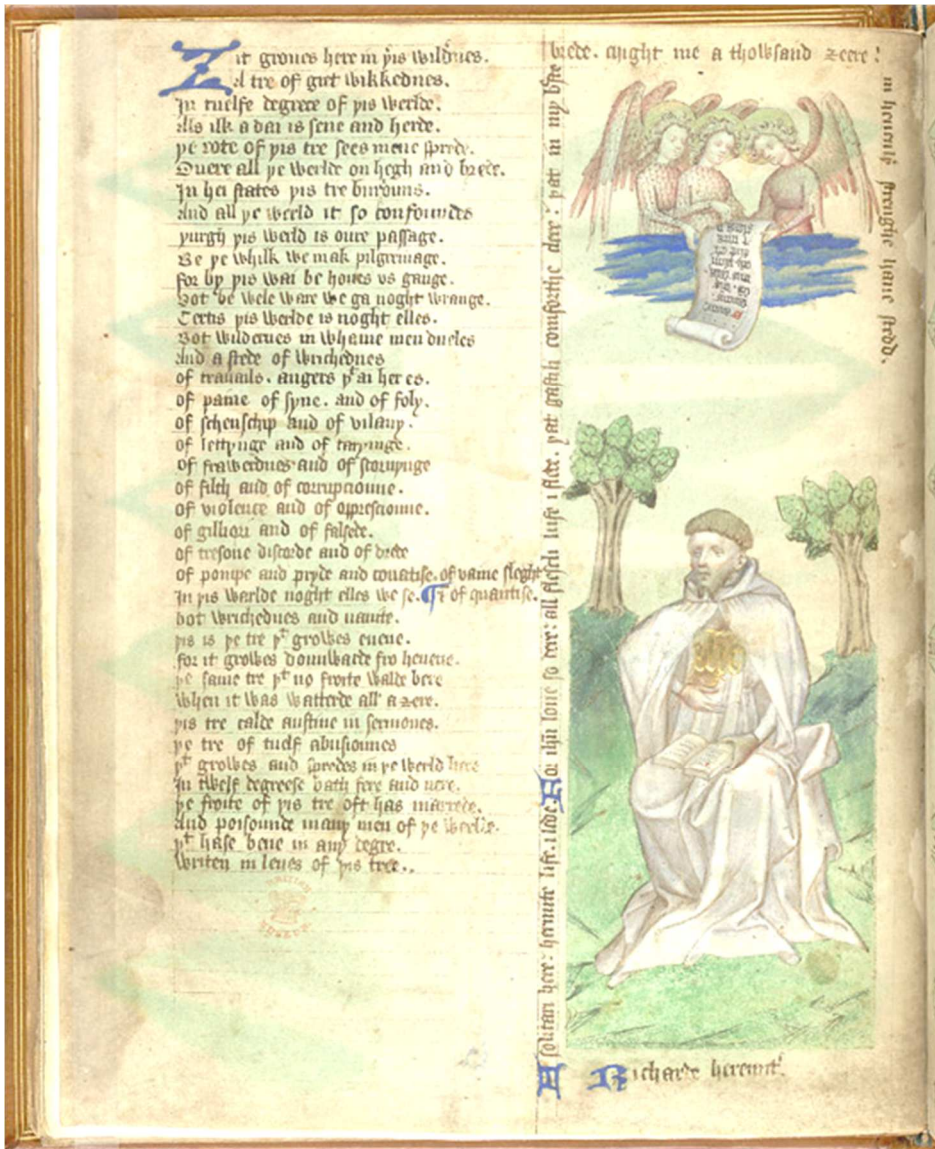
Ⓐ Faustina B vi, fol. 8v Richard Rolle　　　　　　　　Ⓑ Additional 37049, fol. 60v detail

Ⓒ Stowe 39, fol. 24v, lower part of the folio, showing the perpendicular quatrain

D *is for direct address, narrative and dialogues – The* Scutum passionis *text from Faustina B vi, fol. 17v*

LEFT **F**ra heuene god sendes þe here a schelde./ to haue in wildernes. **T**o fighte whene þow wendes in to þe felde./ þis schelde on

TOP þe þu dres. **F**or it mai gare þi enmys

RIGHT ȝelde./ þaim al mare and les. **Þ**e victori þus mai þu welde ./ be þis gree als . I . ges .

The text surrounding the portrait of Paul the first hermit, Faustina B vi, fol. 3v

LEFT **F**ourti ȝere in wildernes ./ I dwellede in a cave. Whare god of his greet gudnes./ graunte me for to haue ~ ~

TOP **A**nd ilk a dai to me gune drees ./

RIGHT with a ravene halfe a laue ./ Thare mi clathes ware mare and les. of lefis þat me gune saue .~

The Byzantine-Italian lead
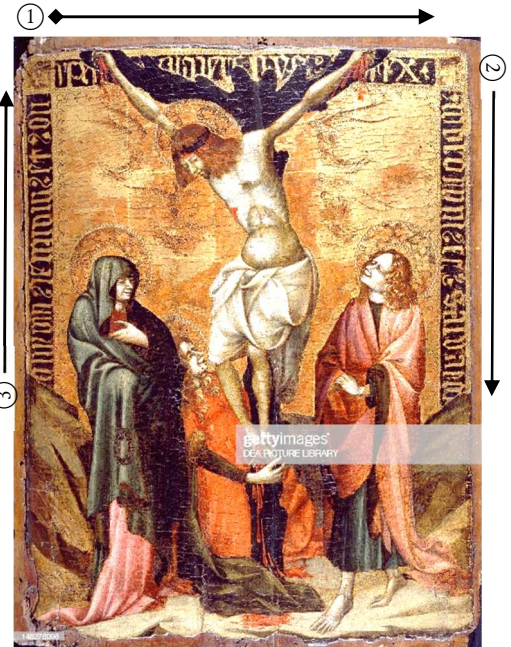
E Additional 37049, fols 1v-2r

F Stefano da **F**errara, *Crucifixion* (xv ½)

① yhesu nazarenus rex

② iudeorum et saluator

③ om<u>n</u>ium gentiu<u>m</u> et d<u>o</u>minus <u>n</u>oster

The French connection? **G** BL Additional 10292, fol. 55v detail

H BL Additional 12042, fol. 159r detail: Pygmalion

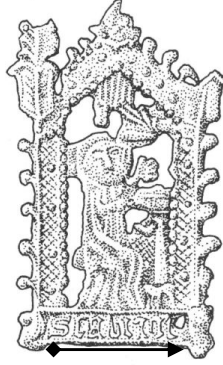Ⓘ Roger de Meulan, bp 1288-1296 (BLOOM p. 116) Ⓙ Edward III's seal (BLOOM p. 71) Ⓚ Fullers of Coventry (BLOOM p. 233)
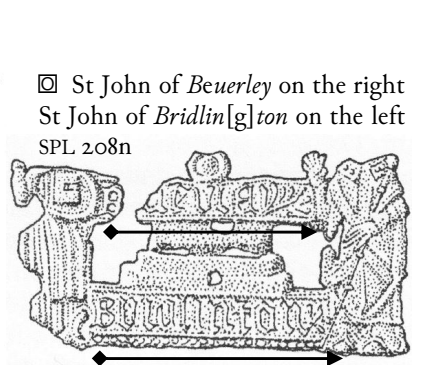
The seal matrix

Ⓛ *Caput Thome* (Becket) SPL 100a

Ⓜ ND Boulogne (FORGEAIS 23) Ⓝ *Sca Birgd* of Syon SPS 125

Ⓞ St John of *Beuerley* on the right
St John of *Bridlin*[g]*ton* on the left
SPL 208n

Ⓟ ND Chartres HP1 445 Ⓠ *The King and his / mainie set in / trennit* (Trinity) SPS 209-210

210

Ⓡ St Remaclus of Stavelot xiv saec. HP2 1226
+*corporis ac a/nime tollis viti/osa remacle*

Ⓣ Mary of Egypt, Faustina fol. 5v

Ⓢ
*Hony coit
ke mal y pence*
Funerary badge of
Edward Woodstock
c. 1377 SPL 266a