

Sex on the Stove **A Fifteenth-Century Tile from Banská Bystrica**

Ana-Maria Gruia (Budapest and Bucarest)

*By God, I come from fucking!
And it was our host's daughter, no less!
I took her from the front and from the side;
I breached her wine barrel,
And gave her the ring
From the iron cooking pan!*

Jean Bodel,
Gombert and the Two Clerks
(1190-1194)

Sexuality and eroticism have long been a focal point in popular culture. Academic discourse has, however, only recently begun to free itself from prudery and prejudice in discussing views of sexuality in past eras.¹ In this contribution I use the results of those studies for approaching one category of medieval iconography generally labelled as ‘obscenity’, ‘pornography’ or simply ‘sexual display’.² “Shocking” images appear on the most diverse media throughout, but especially towards the end of the Middle Ages: in manuscripts, on capitals and consoles, misericords, badges, furniture, prints, etc. But what do they mean? No consensus has yet been reached as to the possible medieval functions and interpretations of such images. There is evidence supporting several different interpretations, which will be discussed below, but the overall conclusion is that the obscene images, although they must have triggered different reactions than ours today, were multivalent and ambiguous.³

¹ Starting with Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), which set a series of basic concepts applicable to earlier periods as well, although he dealt only with the 18th to the 20th century.

² Jan M. Ziolkowski (ed.), *Obscenity. Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Nicola McDonald (ed.), *Medieval Obscenities* (York: York Medieval Press, 2006) (hereafter: McDonald, *Obscenities*); Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002), especially chapter 12 (hereafter: Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*).

³ Madeline H. Caviness, “Obscenity and Alterity. Images that Shock and Offend Us/Them, Now/Then?” in *Obscenity. Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 155-175.

The ongoing debate concentrates on Western and Northern European sources. This article expands the discussion towards Central and Eastern Europe, which the Anglo-Saxon literature has all too frequently ignored. It also draws attention to another type of ‘strange’ images, namely those on stove tiles. I will focus on a realistic fifteenth-century depiction of a copulating couple found on a green-glazed stove tile in present-day Slovakia (figs. 1–2a).

Stove tiles form a special group of material objects. They have been preserved in large numbers, can be fairly well dated and connected to different social groups. Even more, when put together in the ensemble of a stove, tiles form complex groups of images, creating a rich iconographical context. I have used a straightforward methodological approach: gathering as much contextual information on the stove tile as possible and analysing its imagery by comparison to medieval analogies. The problem is that only limited contextual data are available and the analogies themselves have received diverging interpretations. Due to such drawbacks, the present discussion does not reach definitive conclusions but presents possible interpretations of the image in its geographical, political, ethnic, chronological, and social context.



Fig. 1: Drawing of the ‘sex tile’ from Banská Bystrica. Out of: Marta Mácelová, “Gotické kachlové pece z banskobystrickej radnice” (Gothic stove tiles from the town hall of Banská Bystrica), *Archaeologia historica* 24 (1999), 409-420, 416, fig. 76.

The tile depicting a fully naked copulating couple was once part of a fifteenth-century stove heating the town hall of Banská Bystrica. Other green-glazed tiles from several stoves that were found there are decorated with images of saints, religious symbols, animals, monsters and lay fables. This tile caught my attention because it was, to the best of my knowledge, the only medieval depiction of an explicit sexual encounter featuring the woman on top.⁴ The available drawing has been published as such in several articles (fig. 1).⁵



Fig. 2: Copulating couple on the Banská Bystrica tile (courtesy of Stredoslovenské Múzeum v Banskej Bystrici; by kind permission of Marta Mácelová). Out of: *Banská Bystrica á Stredoslovenské Múzeum v Banskej Bystrici* (Bratislava: Bedeker, 2006), 15.

⁴ Marta Mácelová, “Gotické kachlové pece z banskobystrickej radnice” (Gothic stove tiles from the town hall of Banská Bystrica), *Archaeologia historica* 24 (1999), 409-420, here 416, fig. 76 (hereafter Mácelová, “Gotické kachlové”).

⁵ It appears in the first articles of the archaeologist who made the discovery in 1996: Marta Mácelová, “Archeologický výskum Mestského hradu v Banskej Bystrici” (Archaeological research in Mestský hrad, Banská Bystrica), *Archaeologia historica* 22 (1997), 181-190, here 187, fig. 6.4 (hereafter: Mácelová, “Archeologický výskum”; eadem, “Gotické kachlové,” 416, fig. 76; eadem, “Ikongrafia gotických kachlic z banskobystrickej radnice” (The iconography of Gothic stove tiles from the town hall of Banská Bystrica), in *Gotické a renesančné kachlice v Karpatoch*, ed. Ján Chovanec (Trebišov: Arx Paris, 2005), 205-216 and 264, fig. 3.1 (hereafter: Mácelová, “Ikongrafia”). The drawing does not seem to contradict the photographic black-and white reproduction: Jozef Hoššo, “Gotická keramika na Slovensku” (Gothic ceramic from Slovakia), in *Gotika* (Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 2003), 545-551, fig. 505.

After some time I had the opportunity to examine this intriguing stove tile personally in the collection of the Stredoslovenské Múzeum in Banská Bystrica.⁶ On closer inspection, it became clear that in fact the male partner assumes the upper position, in conformity to all medieval canonical and hygienic prescriptions of sexual positions (fig. 2).⁷ The drawing is inaccurate in two important details: the naked breast of the female lying on her back and the erect penis belonging to the man on top (fig. 2a: detail).⁸



Fig. 2a: The copulating couple (detail)

The tile depicts a naked couple in the x-position (named after the crossing of their legs, later known as the missionary position). The man with fashionable long hair embraces the woman lying on her back on a mattress with tassels. She

⁶ Thanks to a Central European University Doctoral Research Support Grant and the generous help of Jan Zachar from the Stredoslovenské Múzeum. I am also grateful to Marta Mácelová for detailing the archaeological context of the finds for me. Technical data of the tile: flat tile, 26.5-27 x 22-23cm, fired clay decorated in relief and covered with green glaze, inventory no. 21469/SV.

⁷ James Brundage “Let Me Count the Ways: Canonists and Theologians Contemplate Coital Positions,” in idem, *Sex, Law and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, Collected Studies Series 397 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1993), 81-93 (hereafter: Brundage, “Let Me Count”).

⁸ *Banská Bystrica á Stredoslovenské Múzeum v Banskej Bystrici* (Bratislava: Bedeker, 2006), 15. Another color reproduction was published in *Schauplatz Mittelalter*, Kärntner Landesausstellung, 2001 (Klagenfurt: Land Kärnten, 2001), vol. II, 264, cat. n. 13.03.08, also available online at: <http://www.uni-klu.ac.at/kultdoku/kataloge/14/html/1211.htm>. I thank Marta Mácelová for this reference.

is holding her lover with both hands on his back. The couple seems to lie on a bed with canopy.

Although the tile has been published in six places⁹ since 1997, it has not raised any particular comment. Most scholars have labelled it simply as depicting an ‘erotic motif’. But even if the first drawing is inaccurate, and the image does not scandalously show the woman on top, the tile is still quite unusual and atypical. How did it fit into the general program of tile stoves? How was it perceived in the context of a public, official space such as the town hall? What was its function? Before considering such questions, let us examine the context of Banská Bystrica in the late Middle Ages more closely.

Finding context

Banská Bystrica (German: Neusohl, Hungarian: Besztercebánya) became a city through royal privileges granted by King Béla IV of Hungary in 1255. It owed its significance to copper mines, for the exploitation of which the skilled German miners enjoyed royal favor. The town became one of the most important mining centers of Upper Hungary in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was linked by trade routes to all of Europe and merchants from Buda came to settle and do business there. In 1494 the *Ungarische Handel* was founded in the town, a joint enterprise of the affluent Fugger and Thurzo families, exploiting the copper mines and exporting their products on a European-wide scale.

The town castle dominated the central area of Banská Bystrica, with its imposing defensive walls, towers and barbican (1480-1510). The enclosed area contained a Romanesque church, the Town Hall, the house of King Matthias’ wife and several other buildings. The houses of important merchants and mine owners surrounded the central square beside the town castle. As for the religious devotions of the town, one may note those for the Virgin (the main church is dedicated to her Assumption) and for St. Barbara, the patron of miners (a side-chapel with an important altar of Master Paul of Levoča is dedicated to her, and she is also depicted in a fresco from an urban house known as the Thurzo

⁹ See notes 4 and 5, and Marta Mácelová, “Kachlová pec z 15. storocia z Banskej Bystrice” (Fifteenth-century stove tiles from Banská Bystrica), *Studia Archaeologica Slovaca Medievialia* 1 (1998), 85-96.

House¹⁰). In 1503 the St. Anne hospital is mentioned as having a lay founder, and in 1526 a confraternity of the Holy Sacrament appears in documents.¹¹

By the fifteenth century the town was a prosperous German settlement. Not surprisingly, stove tiles appear in large numbers in archaeological excavations. A tile workshop has even been uncovered in the town. Tiles produced in Banská Bystrica spread throughout the region.¹² Square flat tiles or rectangular semi/cylindrical ones decorated with images of St. Peter, St. Paul, John the Evangelist, St. Catherine, St. Margaret, and St. Barbara are typical for the workshop in Dolná street 35,¹³ active around 1480-1500. Tiles created with identical molds have been excavated as far away as Bratislava castle (St. Margaret),¹⁴ and the fortification of Štintava in Upper Hungary (St. Margaret and St. Barbara).¹⁵ Several products of the workshop are to be found in museum collections in Budapest, Bratislava, Cervený Kamen, and Kremnica.¹⁶

Numerous fragments of tiles, with green glaze, come from two different locations in the town: the old town hall (inside the walls of the castle) and the house of Mayor Stefan Jung (in the Central Square, now Slovenské Národné Povstanie no. 1, in modern times the City Hall). There are altogether hundreds of fragments in the deposits of the History Museum of Banská Bystrica, still being catalogued and reconstructed. The tiles from the town castle were excavated from the destruction area of the Old Town Hall, in secondary deposition. In the modern City Hall, the remains of at least three stoves were discovered on the ground and first floors, destroyed during the reconstruction of the building in the sixteenth century (the 'sex tile' was uncovered on the first

¹⁰ Other subjects depicted on the wall paintings there (1465-1478) are: the Dance with the Bear, St. George and the dragon, the legend of Daniel, Susanna and the old men, Christ and the Samaritan woman, the prayer on the Mount of Olives, the Last Judgment; see Eva Durdiaková, "Slovenská neskorogotická ornamentálna nástenná maľba v profánnej architektúre" (Late Gothic ornamental wall paintings in profane Slovak architecture), *Ars* 1-2/1971, 121-144, 128, fig. 8.

¹¹ Marie-Madeleine de Cevins, *L'église dans les villes hongroises à la fin du moyen âge (vers 1320-vers 1490)*, (Budapest-Paris-Szeged: L'Institut Hongrois de Paris-METEM, 2003), 74, 194, 225.

¹² Eva S. Cserey, "Adatok a beszttercebányai (Banská Bystrica) kályhacsempékhez" (On the stove tiles from Banská Bystrica), *Folia archaeologica* 25 (1974), 205-217 (hereafter: Cserey, "Adatok").

¹³ Štefan P. Holčík, "Stredoveká kachliarska dielňa v Banskej Bystrici" (The medieval stove tile workshop from Banská Bystrica), *Zborník Slovenského Národného Múzea* 68 (1974), 175-193 (hereafter: Holčík, "Stredoveká kachliarska dielňa").

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 177, fig.1; – B. Egyház-Jurovská, *Stredoveké kachlice. Katalóg* (Medieval stove tiles. Catalogue), (Bratislava: SNM-Archeologické Múzeum, 1993), cat. 8 (hereafter: Egyház-Jurovská, *Stredoveké kachlice*); Štefan P. Holčík, *Stredoveké kachliarstvo* (Medieval Stove Tiles), (Bratislava: Pallas, 1978), fig. 64.

¹⁵ Egyház-Jurovská, *Stredoveké kachlice*, cat. 11, 12.

¹⁶ Štefan P. Holčík, "Ešte raz k nálezom gotických kachlíc v Banskej Bystrici" (Again on the discovery of the Gothic stove tiles in Banská Bystrica), *Zborník Slovenského Národného Múzea – Historia* 17 (1977), 133-138; the author debates with regard to the data published by Cserey, "Adatok".

floor). The Buda burgher Vit Mühlstein probably bought the house from Stefan Jung in 1465. The latter, mayor of Banská Bystrica between 1450-1454 and owner of a mining business, probably commissioned the stoves in both his house and the Old Town Hall. Other documents show that he had been previously mayor of Kremnica (Kremnitz, Kömöcbánya) and a member of a wealthy family owning property in and around Banská Bystrica. One interesting piece of information tells us that the mayor had a nickname: *Schamgrättel* or *Schweinegre-tel*.¹⁷ Its actual meaning remains obscure, though further research might show whether it was meant as a commentary on the mayor's moral faults, as an association to the medieval image of the vicious pig. It might indicate that the choice of motifs on the tile stoves discussed here depended on him, but lacking written evidence this will not clarify much the reasons for such a choice or the interpretation he gave to the images.

The 'sex tile', closely resembling the other tiles it was found with, is the product of an unknown workshop. They depict the Madonna (fig. 3a), St. George (fig. 3b), St. Ladislav (fig. 3c), St. Catherine (fig. 3d), the Agnus Dei (fig. 3e), the Pelican in its Piety (fig. 3f), the two-tailed siren (fig. 3g), the wolf preaching to the geese (fig. 3h), geometrical motifs (fig. 3i-k), a heraldic lion (fig. 3l) and another lion, described in bestiaries as bent over its dead cubs and resurrecting them with its breath after three days¹⁸ (fig. 3m).¹⁹ According to their shapes and dimensions, the tiles occupied different positions in the stoves: the triangular ones were part of a stove's crown, and the narrower ones part of the corners. Such corner tiles were preserved and they connected St. Catherine with the preaching wolf, St. George or the rectangular geometrical motif.

The iconography of this group is very heterogeneous, but technical and stylistic aspects indicate the hand of the same master. It might be that the stoves with this mixed iconography were created through a combined public and private commission. The large number of tiles necessary for building at least four stoves and the presence of local workshops suggest they were produced locally, though the work may have been done by a traveling master or with imported molds.

¹⁷ Mácelová, "Ikonografia," 208.

¹⁸ See an analogy with a depiction of the cubs in the lower right corner in Konrad Strauss, *Die Kachelkunst des 15. bis 17. Jahrhunderts in europäischen Ländern*, vol. III (Munich: Heydenreich, 1983), table 9, fig. 1.

¹⁹ The drawings of fig. 3a-3m are out of Mácelová, "Gotické kachlové," 214, fig. 2, p. 215, fig. 3, p. 216, fig. 4; the pelican (fig. 3f), found only in the castle area, out of Mácelová, "Archeologický výskum," 187, fig. 6.5.



Fig. 3a: Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': The Madonna (second half of the 15th century)



Fig. 3b: Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': St. George (second half of the 15th century)

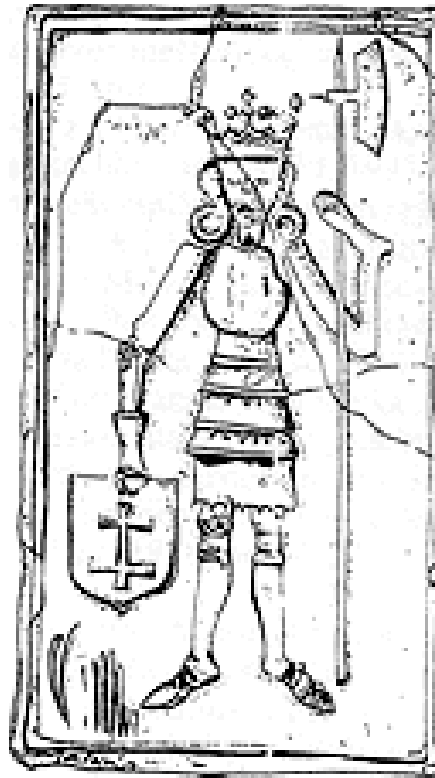


Fig. 3c: Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': St. Ladislav (second half of the 15th century)



Fig. 3d: Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': St. Catherine (second half of the 15th century)



Fig. 3e: Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': Agnus Dei (second half of the 15th century)

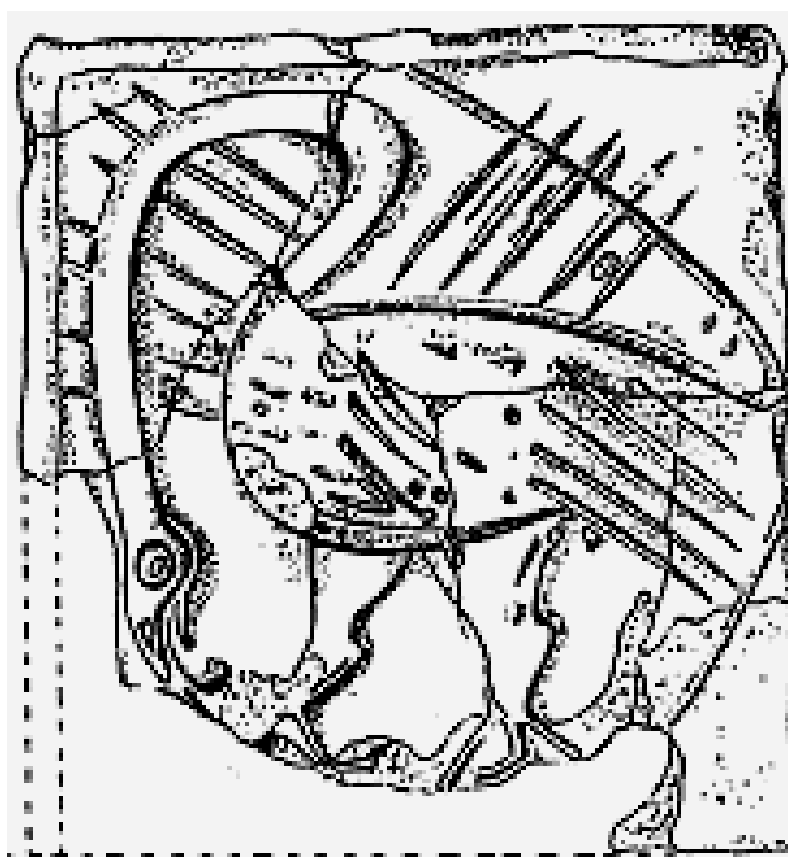


Fig. 3f: Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': the Pelican in its Piety (second half of the 15th century)



Fig. 3g: Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': the two-tailed siren (second half of the 15th century)



Fig. 3h: Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': the wolf preaching to the geese (second half of the 15th century)

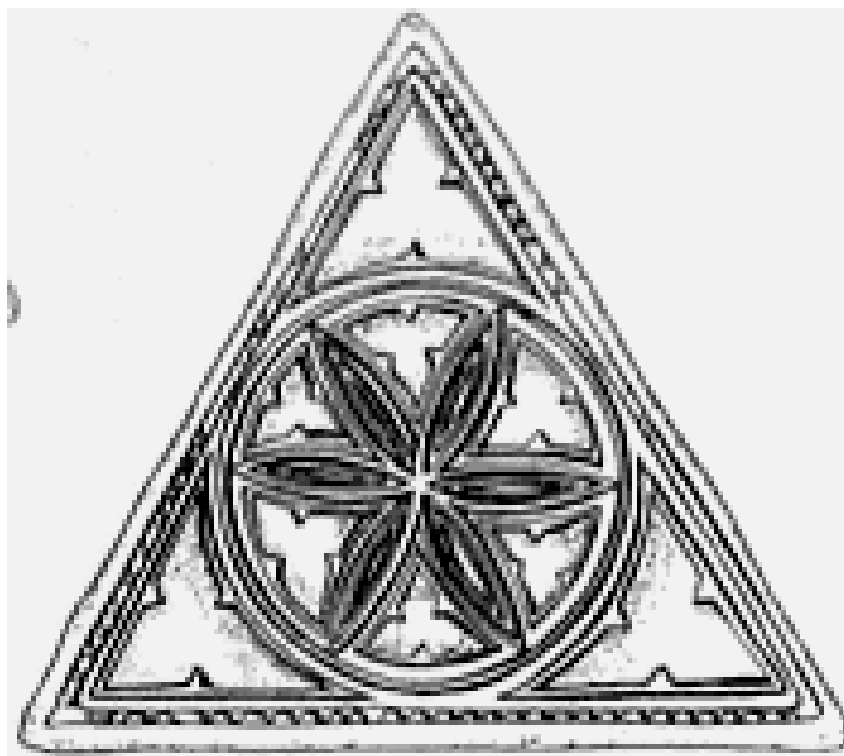


Fig. 3i: : Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': geometrical motifs (second half of the 15th century)

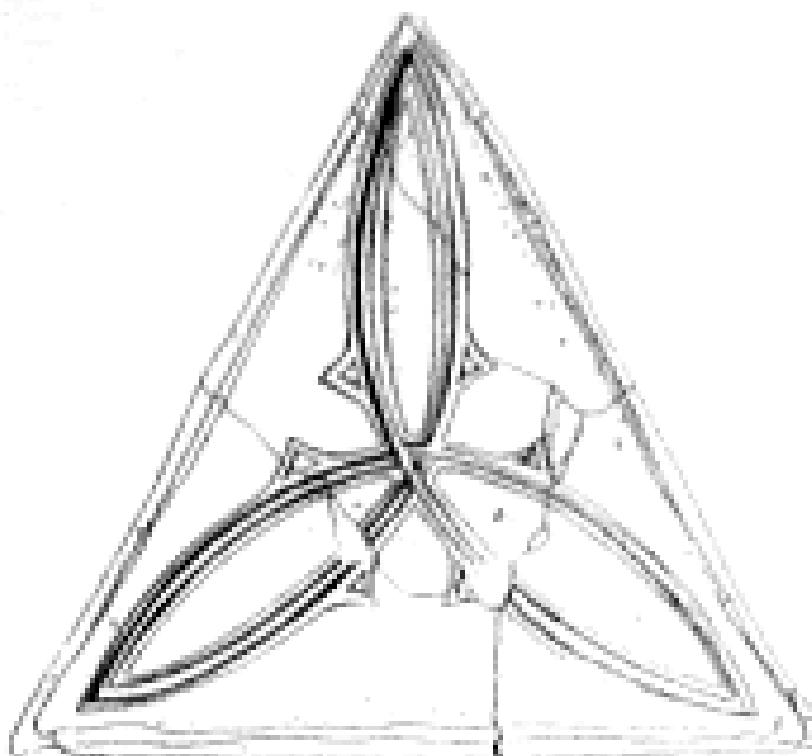


Fig. 3j: Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': geometrical motifs (second half of the 15th century)

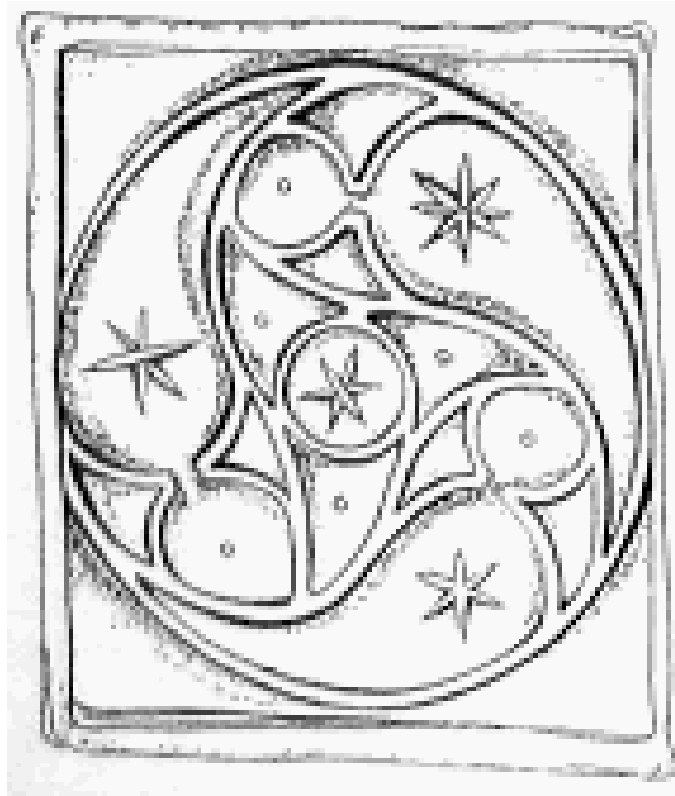


Fig. 3k: Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': geometrical motifs (second half of the 15th century)



Fig. 3l: Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': heraldic lion (second half of the 15th century)



Fig. 3m: Stove tile from the same finding context in Banská Bystrica as the 'sex tile': lion (second half of the 15th century)

The issue of erotic art and medieval sexual positions

The 'sex tile' can be interpreted within its social context and by reference to iconographic analogies. It is therefore relevant to discuss the issue of sexual/erotic/obscene/pornographic art up to the Middle Ages, especially those images depicting copulating couples as on the tile.

Erotic art is as old as humankind. Classical Antiquity is better studied in this respect, if only because nudity and sexuality were more freely depicted.²⁰ Copulation scenes are not at all infrequent in ancient Greek and Roman art, but again their function has been debated, although a frequent interpretation leans towards a protective role.²¹ A Roman oil lamp shows an erotic image very similar to that on the stove tile: a copulating couple in the x-position (fig. 4²²). There are close similarities: the fully naked and uncovered couple, the man on top, and the mattress on the bed. The antique image is, however, more erotic: the bodies are more relaxed and the couple is kissing. Hansmann and Kriss-Rettenbeck

²⁰ Amy Richlin, *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); McDonald, *Obscenities*; see the introduction for a discussion of terminology and definition of obscenity.

²¹ Catherine Johns, *Sex or Symbol. Erotic Images of Greece and Rome* (London: British Museum, 1989).

²² Out of: Liselotte Hansmann and Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Amulett und Talisman. Erscheinungsform und Geschichte* (Munich: Georg D.W. Callwey, 1966), 209, fig. 684 hereafter: Hansmann and Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Amulett*).

have suggested that it had an apotropaic function, similar to Roman phallic amulets.²³



Fig. 4: Roman oil lamp decorated with sex scene.

In medieval art the representation of sexual encounters is generally much more veiled. Christian theological discourse had an impact, although it was sometimes nuanced or even contradicted by medical studies or courtly literature.²⁴ By the thirteenth century, the ‘standard’ position with the man on top was strongly established and sexuality was associated with shame (as result of the Fall). Representations of copulation occur mostly in manuscripts until the fifteenth century. When not allusive or euphemistic, they show the couple in bed ‘sleeping’, covered or even fully dressed.²⁵ As a general characteristic of medieval representations of copulating couples, note that the man is always on top. The couple is dressed or covered in the matrimonial bed; there is rarely any nudity. There might sometimes be bare breasts, but never erect penises; the accent is not on pleasure but on procreation. With the man almost always ‘on top’, women’s bodies are perceived literally beneath men: of a different complexion,

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexualité et savoir médical au Moyen Age* (Paris: PUF, 1985) (hereafter: Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexualité*).

²⁵ Michael Camille, “Manuscript Illumination and the Art of Copulation,” in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggie McCracken, James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 58-90 (hereafter: Camille “Manuscript Illumination”); *idem*, *The Medieval Art of Love. Objects and Subjects of Desire* (London: Laurence King, 1998), subchapter “Doing it,” 140-155 (hereafter: Camille, *Art of Love*).

biologically, ontologically and socially inferior and secondary. In figure 5,²⁶ illustrating a medical treatise of the thirteenth century, the x-position can be guessed under the covers. Figure 6²⁷ shows sex through a legal perspective. The observers of the dressed couple hidden by curtains in the matrimonial bed are probably fathers ensuring that the marriage was properly consummated and therefore valid. Even when the scene is labeled as feminine seduction and appears in a purely lay context such as the story of Alexander the Great, the man is still on top and the couple covered. Figure 7²⁸ shows the crowned Alexander having sex with the Queen of Nubia, to the accompaniment of female musicians.



Fig. 5: Aldobrandino of Siena, *Le Regime du Corps*, Lille, c. 1285.
London, British Library, MS Sloane 2435, fol. 9v.

²⁶ Out of: *ibidem*, 143, fig. 130.

²⁷ Out of: *ibidem*, 140, fig. 127.

²⁸ Out of: Régine Pernoud, *La femme au temps des cathédrales* (Paris: Stock-Pernoud, 2001), 152.

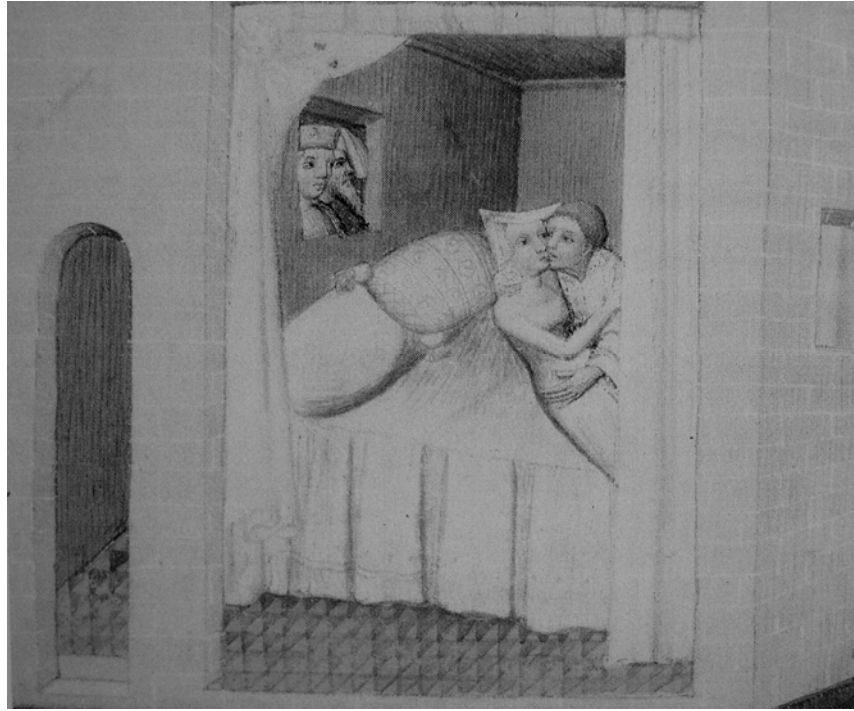


Fig. 6: Bartholomeus Anglicus, *Livre des Proprietez des Choses*, Paris, c. 1400.
Wolfenbüttel, Herzog-Augustus-Bibliothek. 1.3.5.1 Aug.2 fol. 146r.



Fig. 7: Alexander the Great seduced by Candace, Queen of Nubia, England, c. 1308-1312

The rare representations of ‘sinful sex’ can be recognized through a series of indications: It takes place in some location outside the marital bed (outdoors, on the ground, etc.), in a hurry (the partners still have some clothes on), with signs of pleasure (visible or caressed breasts, the man looking up, the woman smiling), or in an unusual position. Canonists criticized the ‘woman on top’ position on moral grounds as a reversal of the normal subjected female role, but also as health hazard and contraceptive due to the reversed position of the womb. Probably as a discouragement, the canonists even warned that such a position might result in less pleasure.²⁹ It was also viewed as dangerous since the

²⁹ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages. Medicine, Science and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 245-247.

female seed might fall into the penis, causing various diseases.³⁰ According to Avicenna, lesions of the male organ could be caused by the effort to expulse the sperm.³¹ Other positions criticized were lateral, seated, standing, from behind (*retro*), oral, anal (*a tergo* or *in terga*) or any position with the woman facing away from the man.³² They were condemned on the grounds that they attracted God's wrath, offended the natural laws, and could lead to the birth of monstrous creatures.³³



Fig. 8: Copulating couple devoured by monsters; Psalter, Northern France, c. 1275-1300

Some twelfth- and thirteenth-century representations depict a rare and rather acrobatic position obviously deemed as sinful since the partners are de-

³⁰ Jean Verdon, *Le Plaisir au Moyen Age* (Paris: Perrin, 1996), 43-46 (hereafter: Verdon, *Le plaisir*).

³¹ Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexualité*, 129.

³² Brundage, "Let me count," discussing the variation in time on the meaning of "unnatural sex" and the penance imposed; Joyce E. Salisbury, "Sexuality," in *Medieval Folklore: an Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*, ed. Carl Lindahl, John McNamara, and John Lindow (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 902-906, here 903 (hereafter: Salisbury, "Sexuality").

³³ Jacques Rossiaud, "Sexualitatea" (Sexuality), in *Dicționar tematic al Evului Mediu Occidental*, ed. Jacques Le Goff, Jean-Claude Schmitt (Iași: Polirom, 2002), 722-733, here 724 (trans. of *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'Occident médiéval* [Paris: Fayard, 1969]) (hereafter: Rossiaud, "Sexualitatea").

voured by monsters (Fig. 8³⁴). One might note that even if logic indicates that both partners are in fact lying on their backs, the text still presents the man on top from the perspective of the reader.

A marginal manuscript illumination from around 1320 depicts a man performing cunnilingus on a woman while attacked by a red bird which pierces his anus with its large beak (Fig. 9³⁵). The manuscript is a Franco-Flemish Book of Hours. In this religious context the image might have been intended to associate oral sex with sodomy or to warn against the alleged dangers of performing such a deed.

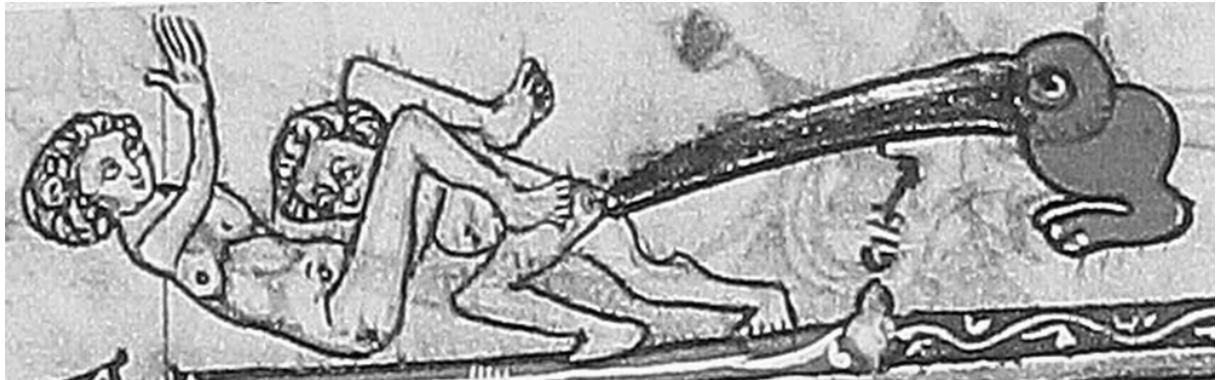


Fig. 9: Morgan Hours M 754, second half of the “Marguerite de Beaujeu Hours”, Franco-Flemish, c. 1320. New York, Piedmont Morgan Library MS M 754, folio 16v.

A final example of condemned sex comes from an Arthurian Vulgate Romance manuscript (fig. 10³⁶). Besides a rich marginal decoration including women with churns, knightly jousts, musicians and animals, in the bottom right corner of the page one can see a hooded man on top of a nun under a tree. This copulation scene is clearly ‘bad’: it involves a nun, it is done in a hurry (he has his pants on and her habit is lifted up to her waist) and in nature. The position nevertheless remains classic, with the man on top, in the x-position.

Attitudes on the topic varied through time, but even by the end of the Middle Ages it seems that no general consensus has been reached on the seriousness of such deviations. Popular opinion held that no sexual contact inside marriage could be sinful, and several made excuses for deviations (like illness, obesity, pregnancy, etc.). Some texts, like the unusual Catalan sex manual *Speculum al foder*, written by an anonymous late-fourteenth-century author

³⁴ Out of: Ruth Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons. The Protective Power of Medieval Visual Motifs and Themes* (Los Angeles: Ruth Mellinkoff Publications, 2004), fig. VI.21 (hereafter: Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons*). The same position can be found on reliefs outside churches in Italy and France; see *ibidem*, figs. VI.77 and VI. 78; Claude Gaignebet and J. Dominique Lajoux, *Art profane et religion populaire au moyen âge* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), 198, fig. 1, 199, fig. 4 (hereafter: Gaignebet and Lajoux, *Art profane*). In these cases the couple is depicted horizontally, with the man either on the right or on the left.

³⁵ Out of: Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons*, fig. VI.24.

³⁶ Out of: Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons*, fig. I.55 (full folio), fig. VI.47 (detail).

and influenced by similar Arab and Indian texts, describe an entire series of positions.³⁷ The *Speculum* lists 24 ways of lovemaking. The man on top is considered the best because it is healthier and produces more pleasure. The woman on top might result in lesions of the sexual organs and similar afflictions.³⁸ It seems that this unique text did not enjoy wide dissemination, but some authors believe it might represent a larger group of now-lost texts closer in content to the oriental *ars erotica*. But as far as we know, the *Speculum* is the only treatise explicitly describing sexual positions before the Renaissance.³⁹



Fig. 10. Nun having sex with a monk. Arthurian Vulgate, Northern France, 1316.
London, British library MS Add 10294, folio 1r (detail)

Another danger hovering in popular mentality was that of the pregnant man. It was believed that whoever was ‘under’ his or her sex partner would be inseminated. The story is to be found in a fourteenth-century text playing on the fears of a young cleric initiated by a woman.⁴⁰ The return to a more rigorous view came with the Reformation, when one moral writer suggested that the Biblical flood had been sent by God to cure the perversion of having sex with the woman on top.⁴¹ There are very few representations of the woman on top, and even then the action takes place under the sheets. A manuscript illumination

³⁷ *Le Kamasutra catalan. Le miroir du foutre*, translation et introduction by Patrick Gifreu (Paris: Éd. Le Rocher, 2000).

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 68.

³⁹ Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexualité*, 187-192.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 186.

⁴¹ Brundage, “Let me count,” 87.

depicting David and Bathsheba in bed shows her on top, probably alluding to her dangerous desire to rule over him (fig. 11⁴²).



Fig. 11: Bathsheba on top of David, Psalter, Arras, France, late 13th century

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, sexual display became more frequent in public media like secular badges,⁴³ furniture (misericords),⁴⁴ consoles and capitals, prints,⁴⁵ etc. These minor arts feature copulation scenes (human or animal), male and female sexual organs, exhibitionists, or sexual and scatological dis-

⁴² Out of: Camille “Manuscript Illumination,” fig. 4.10.

⁴³ Jan Baptist Bedaux, “Laatmiddeleeuwse sexuele amuletten,” in *Annus Quadriga Mundi*, ed. J. B. Bedaux (Utrecht: De Walburg Press), 1989, 16-30 (hereafter: Bedaux, “Amuletten ;” H.J.E. van Beuningen, and A.M. Koldeweij, *Heilig en Profaan. 1000 laat-middeleeuwse insignes uit de collectie H.J.E. van Beuningen*, Rotterdam Papers 8 (Cothen: Stichting Middeleeuwse Religieuze en Profane Insignes, 1993) (hereafter: Beuningen and Koldeweij, *Heilig en Profaan*); H.J.E. van Beuningen, A.M. Koldeweij, and D. Kicken, *Heilig en Profaan 2: 1200 laatmiddeleeuwse insignes uit openbare en particuliere collectivess*, Rotterdam Papers 12 (Cothen: Stichting Middeleeuwse Religieuze en Profane Insignes, 2001); Jos Koldeweij, “The Wearing of Significant Badges, Religious and Secular: The Social Meaning of a Behavioural Pattern,” in *Showing Status: Representation of Social Positions in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Wim Blockmans and Antheun Janse (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 307-328 (hereafter: Koldeweij, “The Wearing”); Tomáš Velímský, “K nálezům středověkých potních adznaků v českých zemích” (On the medieval pilgrim badges found in Bohemia), *Archaeologia historica* 23 (1998), 435-455; . Bruna, *Enseignes de pèlerinage et enseignes profanes* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux., 1996).

⁴⁴ C. Elaine Block, *Misericords in the Rhineland* (Rives Junction: R.D. Sheldon Enterprises Inc., 1996); Christa Grössinger, *The World Upside-Down: English Misericords* (London: Gordon & Breach Publishing Group, 1997).

⁴⁵ Christa Grössinger, *Humour and Folly in Secular and Profane Prints of Northern Europe, 1430-1540* (London and Tournhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2002).

plays.⁴⁶ Belonging to a more popular context, the sexual images in the minor arts are more obscene (possibly offensive or of a cruder type of humor and satire). They can be studied in parallel with the popular types of fabliaux, satires and puns that express the same explicit/ironic attitude towards sexuality.⁴⁷ Some of the popular images even depict the forbidden positions, like the fourteenth-century French wooden casket whose lid depicts a couple having sex while standing (fig. 12⁴⁸).



Fig. 12: Couple having sex standing, France, 14th century, lid of wood casket, Cluny.
Patis: Musée du Moyen Âge

An almanac from 1483 illustrates the months of the year and the corresponding occupations and pastimes in colored woodcuts. The image reproduced here (fig. 13a and b⁴⁹) shows the pleasures of bathing, lovemaking, eating and listening to music. The personification of the planet Venus, ruling over the signs of Taurus and Libra, governs the opposite page and the activities depicted. The copulating couple is unusually explicit and morally ‘bad,’ since the lovers are fully naked and lying on the ground. Even more, the woman exposes her naked breasts and her pubic hair and she wears an ankle bracelet.

⁴⁶ Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons*, chapter VI: “Sexual and Scatological Display” (123-143); Brian Spencer, *Pilgrim souvenirs and secular badges* (London: Museum of London, 1998); McDonald, *Obscenities*; Gaignebet and Lajoux, *Art profane*.

⁴⁷ Arnaud de la Croix, *L’erotisme au moyen âge. Le corps, le désir et l’amour* (Paris: Tallandier, 2003), chapter “Sexualité populaire” (115-136).

⁴⁸ Out of: Camille, *Art of Love*, 146, fig. 133.

⁴⁹ Out of: Allmuth Schuttwolf (ed.), *Jahreszeiten der Gefühle. Das Gothaer Liebespaar und die Minne im Spätmittelalter* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje, 1998), 101, fig. 40.

She might be a prostitute, even more since communal bathing and bathhouses were regularly associated with prostitution.⁵⁰ Still, the man is on top. This should be related to the preserved data that indicates that the most frequent sexual position practiced by medieval prostitutes was the standard ‘missionary’.⁵¹



Fig. 13a: The Garden of Love, Almanac, 1483, colored woodcut, place of origin unknown

⁵⁰ W. F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999); Rossiaud, “Sexualitatea,” 722-733, 731; *idem*, *Medieval Prostitution* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

⁵¹ Verdon, *Le plaisir*, 44: about the prostitutes in 15th-century Dijon who mostly used the ‘natural position’.

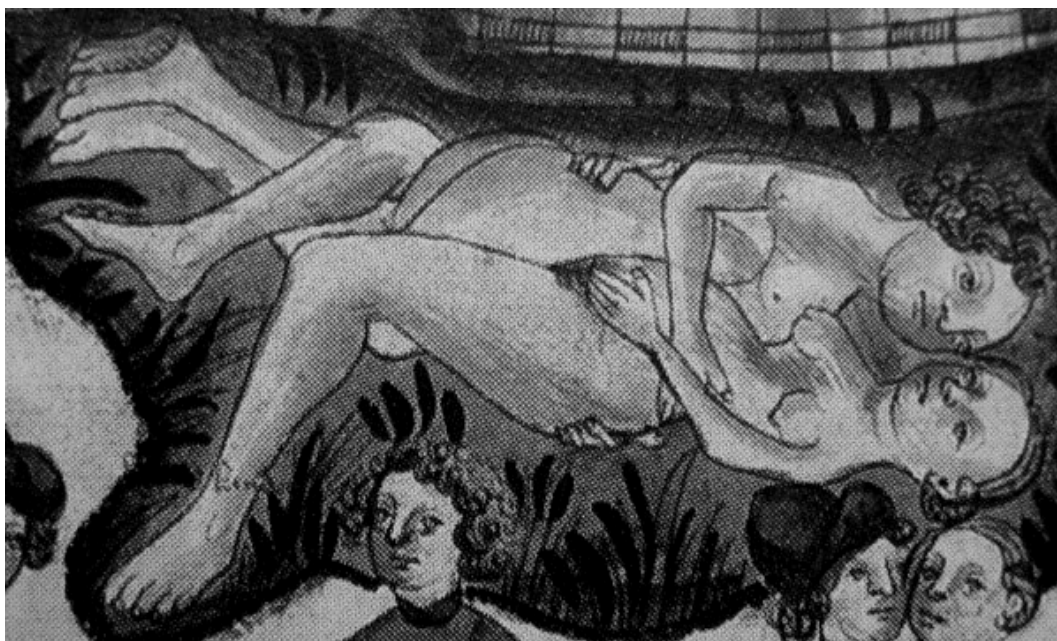


Fig. 13b: The Garden of Love, Almanac, 1483, detail: the copulating couple

An Italian copper plate from the end of the fifteenth century depicts a couple having intercourse sitting on a bench. A winged phallus with a bell stand beside them (fig. 14⁵²). The copper plate has another sexual allegory engraved on the recto entitled “Various Occupations” and both sides are worn and probably re-engraved, testimony to an intense use. The verso of the plate reproduced here shows what is certainly a morally sinful scene. The couple is having sex in a forbidden position, sitting on a tasseled pillow very similar to the mattress on the stove tile. They are kissing, a sign of pleasure condemned by the Church; the woman has long, untied hair, showing that she is not married. The winged phallus and the inscription, however, are essential to the interpretation. The winged phallus, with tail and bell, has close analogies to Roman *fascina* (charms) with *tintinabula* (small bells) and to medieval badges presumed to be apotropaic. The inscription reads: *PURINEGA TI[EN]E DURO*, and it has not been satisfactorily translated so far (Purinega has it hard?), but it suggests a reference to some narrative.

⁵² Out of: Thomas Fusenig, *Liebe, Laster und Gelächter. Komödienhafte Bilder in der italienischen Malerei im ersten Drittel des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Bonn: Romanistischer Verlag, 1997), fig. 22. See also Jay A. Levenson, Konrad Oberhuber, and Jacquelyn L. Sheehan, *Early Italian Engraving from the National Gallery of Art* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1973), 526-527; Arthur M. Hind, *Early Italian Engravings*, vol. 1 (London: Quaritch, 1938), 260, no. E.III.30; Malcolm Jones, “Phallic Imagery,” in *Medieval Folklore: an Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*, ed. Carl Lindahl, John McNamara, and John Lindow (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 778-782, here 779 (hereafter: Jones, “Phallic Imagery”). I thank Thomas O’Callaghan and Barbara Wood from the National Gallery of Art for the useful details concerning the item.



Fig. 14: North Italian copper plate, 1470-1480

A sixteenth-century woodcut of a young witch copulating with a man depicts her being ‘unnaturally’ on top, in the title page of the *Neu Layenspiegel* (New Mirror for Laymen, Augsburg, 1511).⁵³ The allusion in this case might be that the woman on top is like the witch on the broom.⁵⁴ Another print from the end of the fifteenth century is even more explicit on the presumed sexual habits of witches (fig. 15⁵⁵). A witch embraced by the devil is depicted in the foreground, with her on top, and another witch is riding a goat in the sky above. It is interesting to note that the ultimate evil sex is that with the woman assuming the upper position. Even more, the image presents them in the x-position. However illogical that might be in reality, the purpose of the image is to show that the witch assumes the upper and ‘active’ position and that this is a devilish practice. Taking the argument even further, it seems that the devil, depicted here as an old man, is not the one perverting the woman, but rather she is the one engaging actively in the embrace.

⁵³ Jones, “Phallic Imagery,” 510.

⁵⁴ Verdon, *Le plaisir*, 45.

⁵⁵ Out of : Hans Biedermann, *Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole* (Munich: Droemer Knaur, 1994), 190.



Fig. 15: A witch embraced by the devil and another one flying on a goat;
print by Hans Schäufelein, c. 1480

Probable interpretations of the ‘sex tile’

One hypothesis which would make intricate interpretations futile is that the images on the tiles from Banská Bystrica had no particular meaning, that they were simply a collection of representations deemed interesting and put together for sheer availability. But, as previously shown, they are all the creation of one master and they were probably produced locally, under the express commission of Stefan Jung. It is therefore hard to believe that the selection of images depended only on their sheer availability.

One should keep in mind that the same images were seen in the public context of the city hall and in the private home of the mayor. But without knowing the exact function of the rooms heated by these stoves, both spaces can be labeled as semi-private (or semi-public). Perhaps they did not reflect the values or devotions of the community but the private taste of the mayor. Alternatively, they may have been commissioned for the town hall and then used by the mayor in his own house just because they were available. In either way, what values, views or devotions did this selection of images express?

If they were meant to represent the devotions in Banská Bystrica, it is strange that St. Barbara, patron of miners, should be missing. The Madonna was the most popular saint of the later Middle Ages and patron saint of the parish. St. Ladislav, Hungarian royal saint, could indicate loyalty to the crown, St. Catherine of Alexandria may have enjoyed some popularity in the town. The wolf preaching to the geese may have shown the public condemnation of foul preachers⁵⁶ and the ‘sex tile’ may have been a condemnation of vice.

Several sex scenes that appear in religious contexts, such as manuscripts (illustrated bibles, psalters, etc.) or on church capitals, consoles, and misericords, have been interpreted as representations of vices: fornication or *luxuria*.⁵⁷ Presumably, seen through the discourse of the Church, these images were meant to ridicule and condemn the pleasure of such encounters. In the case of Romanesque examples, the couples seem ‘caught in the act’. Their crossed legs might represent the x-position or they may refer to some unidentified popular story (fig. 16 and 17).⁵⁸ A French relief is very explicit in representing the man on top of a woman and his erect penis (fig. 18a and b⁵⁹).



Fig. 16: Relief on the exterior of the apse, church of St. Cybald, Vêrac, France, 12th century

⁵⁶ Zdeněk Měřinský, “Iterum ‘Ad lupum predicantem’”, in *Život v archeologii středověku, sborník příspěvků věnovaných Miroslavu Richterovi a Zdeňku Smetáňkovi* (Prague: Archeologický ústav, 1997), 459-466 (hereafter : Měřinský, “Iterum ‘Ad lupum predicantem’”).

⁵⁷ Camille, *Art of Love*, 19.

⁵⁸ Fig. 16 out of: Anthony Weir and James Jerman, *Images of Lust. Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (London: Batsford, 1993), 84, fig. 53a (hereafter: Weir and Jerman, *Images of Lust*); Fig. 17 out of: Camille, *Art of Love*, 18, fig. 10.

⁵⁹ Out of: Weir and Jerman, *Images of Lust*, 84, fig. 53a; and <http://www.art-roman.net/melle/melle2.htm>).

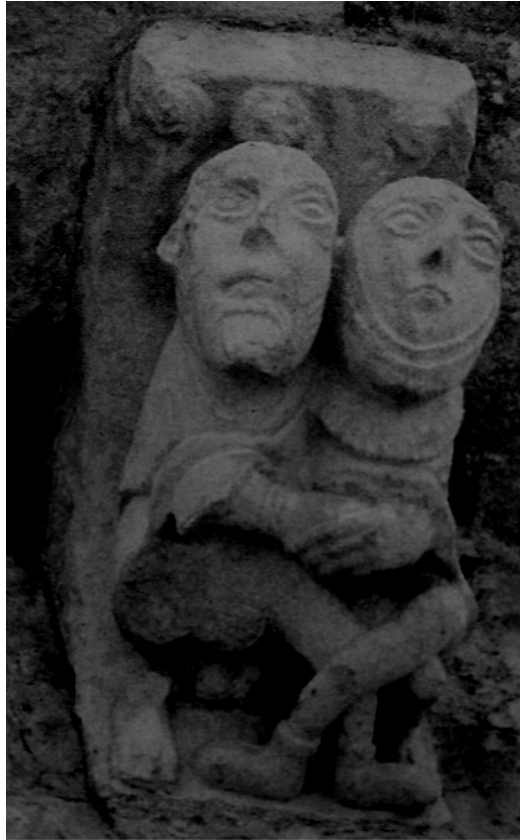


Fig. 17: Apse corbel, church of Saint-Julien in Cénac-et-Saint-Julien, Dordogne, France, 12th century

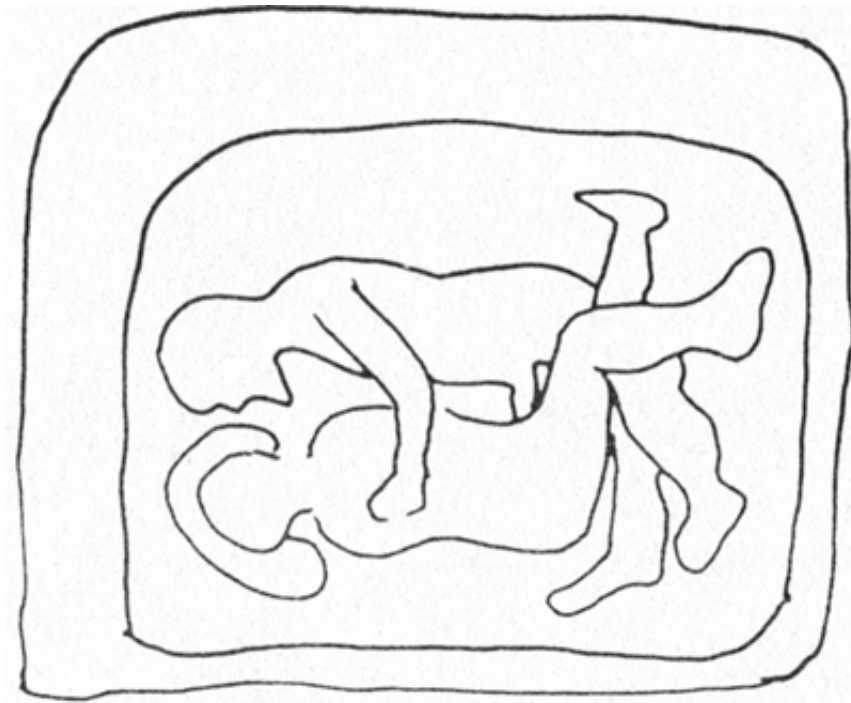


Fig. 18a: Drawing after the relief, church of Saint-Savinien, Melle (Poitou). France, 12th century



Fig. 18b: Relief, church of Saint-Savinien, Melle (Poitou), France, 12th century

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries confessors were instructed not to describe perverse sexual practices, for fear of stimulating those very desires.⁶⁰ Paradoxically, an explicit description of a sexual encounter, such as that on the French relief, could have been meant to show what one should not do.

In the case of the stove tile, the image could be a representation of a vice, condemned by the public authority, although this would not really account for the extremely explicit character of the depiction. But if in other church contexts the sexual imagery appeared in hidden places or in marginal decoration, what was the position of the ‘sex tile’ in the complex of the stove? Was it in a peripheral or hidden position? Did it appear less frequently than the other tiles? One cannot answer these questions until the final catalogue of the preserved fragments and the hypothetical reconstruction of the stove become available. Still, it can be noted that most of the tiles have the same dimensions on one side (22-23 cm), therefore they could have been easily combined in horizontal rows. This indicates that the ‘sex tile’ might not have been ‘rarer’ than the tiles with the other twelve representations.

* * *

The ‘sex tile’ could reflect a popular story. In trying to decipher the reception of ‘unusual’ images in popular artistic media, including the sexual ones, one has to consider possible literary models. One of such courtly stories is that of the *Chatelaine of Vergi*,⁶¹ probably depicted on a secular badge discovered in the

⁶⁰ Camille, “Manuscript Illumination,” 77-78.

⁶¹ *The Chatelaine of Vergi*, trans. Alice Kemp-Welsh (reprint, Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses Publications, 1999); the book is also available online at: http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/vergi_kemp.pdf.

Netherlands and dated to about 1375-1425 (fig. 19⁶²). The Lady of Vergi meets her secret lover after her little lapdog gave him the sign that the way is clear. The duke follows the scene from behind a tree. The banderole spells *AMORS*. The story is actually tragic, since in the end both lovers die. The image can represent the tragic outcome of love betrayed. Other fifteenth-century badges from the Netherlands (Niewlande) representing copulating couples might equally refer to different stories. Unfortunately, the inscriptions accompanying them are often unreadable. Such items show couples in the x-position having sex in taverns,⁶³ sitting or even lying down on what seems to be a plate.⁶⁴



Fig. 19: Secular badge, Netherlands, 1375-1425

Other popular stories, fables (*fabliaux*) or riddles⁶⁵ could be the source for such representations. The stove tile does not offer enough details to make such a connection possible. There are not enough clues for whether the image was symbolic or narrative. One cannot even decide if the image was valued positively (as ‘proper sex’) or the act was being condemned as sinful. The position of the man on top and the presence of the bed stand as arguments for a positive valorization. The complete nakedness of the couple, the visibility of breast and penis, the lack of indications of a married status (in coiffure or headdress) count for a negative valorization.

Considerable scholarship, discussing the possible meanings of various marginal decorations⁶⁶ (also called grotesque, *drôleries*, *babuini*), suggests that

⁶² Out of: Koldeweij, “The Wearing,” 314, fig. 5; see also Camille, *Art of Love*, 121, fig. 107.

⁶³ Bedaux, “Amuletten,” 25, fig. 12.

⁶⁴ Beuningen and Koldeweij, *Heilig en Profaan*, 254-256, figs. 610-615.

⁶⁵ Howard R. Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986); *Fabliaux*, trans. Robert Hellman (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965).

⁶⁶ Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge. The Margins of Medieval Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992); Steen Schjødt Christensen, “Mysterious Images – Grimacing, Grotesque, Obscene, Popular: Anti- or Commentary Images?” *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 39 (1998), 55-75; Jean Wirth, “Les marges à drôleries des manuscrits gothiques: problèmes de méthode”, in *History of Images. Towards a New Iconology*, ed. Alex Bolvig and Phillip Lindley (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 277-300; Lillian Randall, *Images in the Margins of*

these representations must have had an apotropaic function.⁶⁷ Some of them have a sexual content, and much ink has been spilled on how sexual images and gestures avert evil or bring good-luck, wealth, or fertility. Even more has been written on erotic magic, especially for the Middle Ages.⁶⁸

This paradigm suggests that the Banská Bystrica stove tiles bear protective images. They could reflect several belief systems: official religion (through the representation of the saints, the *Agnus Dei* and the pelican in her piety), as well as images of lay magic charged with power against evil (the two-tailed siren, in a way sexual, as a representation of *Luxuria* and as an exhibitionist and aquatic symbol probably used to counter-act a fire-related danger, that of the stove; the copulating couple. The sex scene could, on a symbolic level, have sought to bring prosperity to the town and its inhabitants. The theory of apotropaions is based on a presumed universal belief. Even if one is skeptical about beliefs shared by people across cultures and historical eras, there still remains the hypothesis of shared beliefs inside one society during a certain period of time. If the image of copulating couples were such a recognized apotropaion, however, it would appear more frequently. I do not believe that the amuletic use of the phallus (presumably also of images of vulvas) can be extended to cover the much more rare scenes of copulating couples.

Another medieval interpretation might be analogies with alchemical imagery. In alchemical language, “the conjunction (mixture or union of elements or substances) was figured as marriage, copulation, uniting of male and female or brother or sister or king and queen sometimes to form an androgyny”.⁶⁹ Alchemical texts linked the creation of the philosopher’s stone to human conception; therefore the moment of the intercourse was a powerful symbol for the fusion of elements. Most frequently the alchemical conjunction took the form of fusion of the male semen or red sulphur, symbolized by the sun, with the female element or mercury, symbolized by the moon. Conjunction could therefore be

Gothic Manuscripts (Berkley: University of California Press, 1966); Gaignebet and Lajoux, *Art profane*; Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Le moyen âge fantastique* (Paris: Armand Collin, 1955); review of Andrew Otwell’s “Medieval Manuscript Marginalia and Proverbs,” 1995, available at: <http://www.heyotwell.com/work/arthistory/marginalia.html>.

⁶⁷ Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons*; Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*; Christa Suttlerin, “Universals in Apotropaic Symbolism. A Behavioral and Comparative Approach to Some Medieval Sculptures,” *Leonardo* 1 (1989), 65-74; L. J. A. Loewenthal, “Amulets in Medieval Sculpture: I. General Outline,” *Folklore* 1 (1978), 3-12; Hansmann and Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Amulett*, 208-218; Bedaux, “Amuletten”.

⁶⁸ Richard Kickhefer, “Erotic Magic in Medieval Europe,” in *Sex in the Middle Ages. A Book of Essays*, ed. Joyce E. Salisbury (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1991), 30-55; Hubertus Lutterbach, *Sexualität im Mittelalter: Eine Kulturstudie anhand von Bußbüchern des 6. bis 12. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1999), for erotic magic see 195-214.

⁶⁹ Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy. Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (London: The British Library, 1994), 105 (hereafter Roberts, *Mirror*).

depicted as the red king (*Sol*) and the white queen (*Luna*) copulating in the mercurial sea⁷⁰ (fig. 20⁷¹).



Fig. 20. *Conjunctio sive coitus* in *Rosarium philosophicorum*, Frankfurt/Main, 1550

In support of this argument, one can observe that the famous alchemist, Sir John Dee, visited Banská Bystrica in the second half of the sixteenth century with his medium, Kelly.⁷² In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries alchemy enjoyed great popularity throughout Europe. More and more manuscripts, and after 1500 also prints, of alchemical treatises and collections were circulating in upper social contexts. Alchemical information appeared in various other types of texts, from medicine, dialogues and correspondence to cosmetics.⁷³ As early as 1317

⁷⁰ Jonathan Hughes, "Alchemy and the Exploration of Late Medieval Sexuality," in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 141-166.

⁷¹ Out of: Roberts, *Mirror*, fig. 43; See also Lyndl Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 36, fig. 8, s. v. "chemical wedding"; Salisbury, "Sexuality," 904.

⁷² Nicholas Clulee, *John Dee's Natural Philosophy: Between Science and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1988). I thank Benedek Láng from the University of Technology and Economics, Budapest, for this and other bibliographic references.

⁷³ Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934-1941), vol. 3, ch. 3, vol. 4, ch. 53, and vol. 5, ch. 24 (hereafter: Thorndike, *History*).

the papal bull *Spondet quas non exhibent* had outlawed alchemy.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, this did not lead to any consensus in contemporary and immediately subsequent legal opinion. The popular attitudes towards alchemy were much more lenient, even favorable.⁷⁵

One might wonder whether some alchemical interest may have existed in the town even a century before Dee's visit. The intensive mining in the area and at least the familiarity with metalworking could have created or supported such an interest.⁷⁶ Alchemical representations on stove tiles are known from German areas,⁷⁷ dated to the sixteenth century: they were discovered in an alchemical laboratory in the castle of Oberstockstall (today's Lower Austria). They are highly symbolic, depicting an open door with different symbols decorating the portal, and a male head flanked by a humanized sun and the moon.(a fragment). Iconographically, they belong to the Renaissance style, but they show that alchemical imagery was also applied to the medium of stove tiles.

Still, the Banská Bystrica tile does not conform entirely to an alchemical schema: the partners do not wear crowns nor are they accompanied by representations of the sun and moon. Nothing indicates their value as symbols. Also, images of the alchemical conjunction do not depict the scene in such realistic detail. Furthermore, none of the other depictions on the same stoves can be interpreted as containing alchemical symbols.

* * *

What if the tile was simply pornographic? Cutting across cultural differences, one could suspect that our interpretation of a sexual image could have been a medieval one as well. In Italy towards the end of the fifteenth and during the sixteenth, century certain prints certainly fit this genre. The most famous are the prints illustrating Pietro Aretino's sonnets, the so-called *I modi* (The Postures). Created in the early 1520s and modeled on classical sources, they were almost all destroyed by the order of the papacy, so only fragments of the original prints have survived (fig. 21).⁷⁸

⁷⁴ William Newman, "Technology and the Alchemical Debate in the Late Middle Ages," *Isis* 3 (1989), 423-445.

⁷⁵ Thorndike, *History*, vol. 3, 48.

⁷⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible. The Origins and Structure of Alchemy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979).

⁷⁷ Sigrid von Osten, *Das Alchemistenlaboratorium Oberstockstall. Ein Fundkomplex des 16. Jahrhunderts aus Niederösterreich*, Monographien zur Frühgeschichte und Mittelalterarchäologie 6 (Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1998), 61-62, 66, fig. 38, table 42, fig. N1, fig. 12.

⁷⁸ Lynne Lawner, *I Modi: the Sixteen Pleasures: An Erotic Album of the Sixteenth Century* (London: Peter Owen, 1988). Image out of <http://www.libidomag.com/nakedbrunch/archive/europorn01.html>.

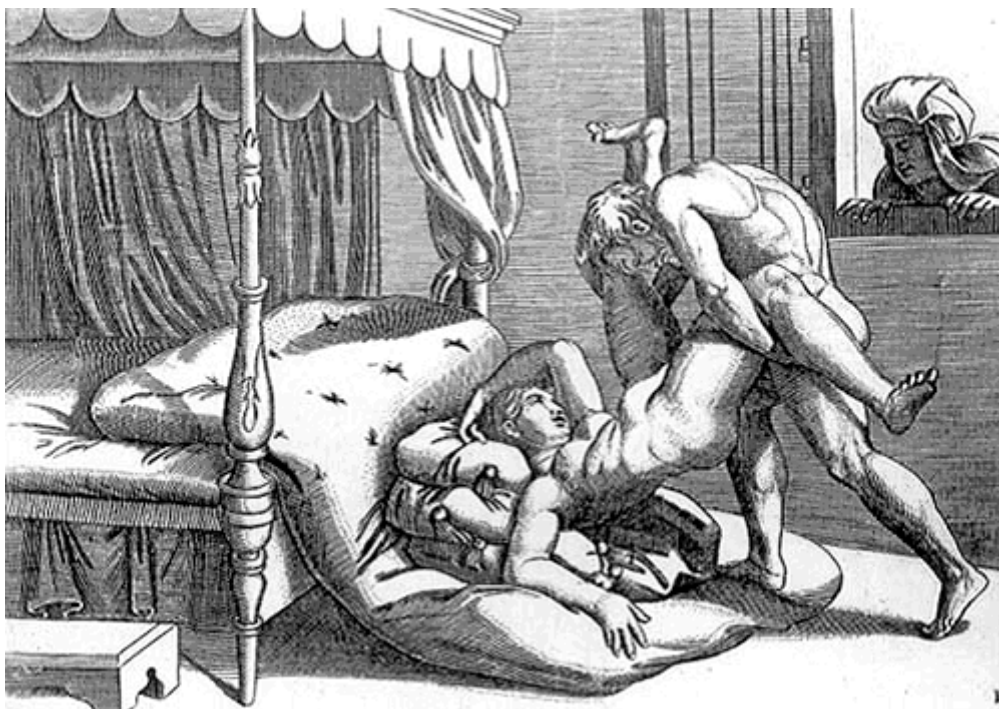


Fig. 21: One of the positions illustrating *I modi*, 16th century

But how could a pornographic image find its way into the company of the saints on a public stove? I suspect this is not the case, particularly since the Italian examples represent another mentality. They belong to the spirit of the Renaissance and to the rediscovery of ancient erotica.

Other allusive tiles

Even if not so explicit, other images on stove tiles may allude to sexual positions. The representation of a woman riding a man, referring to the story of Aristotle and Phyllis, may be as much a reference to deviant sexual positions as to dominating women. According to the text, Aristotle, the old and wise advisor of Alexander the Great, accepted being ridden like a horse out of lust for the young Phyllis. The scene, with multiple analogies in various media, from textiles, misericords, capitals, household items, secular badges, prints, and playing cards, is also found on stove tiles from Austria (Salzachtal) and Hungary (Buda) (fig. 22a and b).⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Alfred Walcher-Moltheim, "Die deutschen Keramiken der Sammlung Figdor," *Kunst und Kunsthandwerk* 12 (1909), pp. 301-362, here 321, fig. 94; Imre Holl, "Középkori kályhacsempék Magyarországon III" (Medieval Stove Tiles from Hungary), *Archeológiai Értesítő* 110 (1983), 201-228, here 219, 220, fig. 36, 221; Imre Holl, "Spätgotische Öfen aus Österreich. Mittelalterliche Ofenkacheln in Ungarn IX," *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 52 (2001), 353-414, here 361, fig. 10.



Fig. 22a: Stove tile decorated with the scene of Aristotle and Phyllis (the Mounted Aristotle):
Salzachtal (Austria, around 1500)



Fig 22b: Fragment of the Aristoteles and Phyllis scene
from the Royal Palace in Buda (Hungary, 16th c.)

An image on a tile from Banská Stiavnica (Schemnitz, Selmezbánya) is very similar, except that the man being is very young; the narrative reference to the story of Aristotle had been lost (fig. 23).⁸⁰ Still, the image preserves its full connotations, of men being made fools of and being under the power of women.



Fig. 23: Woman riding and whipping a man on a tile from Banská Stiavnica, aristocratic residence. Slovakia, 15th century

The image of women beating men (on their naked behinds, to their full humiliation) is another scene used in the decoration of stove tiles and other popular media. (fig. 24⁸¹).

⁸⁰ Out of: Jozef Labuda, “Zaujímavé kachlice z Banskej Stiavnice a Sitna” (Interesting Stove Tiles from Banská Stiavnica (Schemnitz) and the Castle of Sitno), in *Gotické a renesančné kachlice v Karpatoch*, ed. Ján Chovanec (Trebišov: Arx Paris, 2005), 175-182, here 180, fig. 4; see also Holčík, “Stredoveká kachliarska dielňa,” fig.10; *Sprievodca po expozíciách Kammerhofu Slovenské Banské múzeum Banská Stiavnica* (The Kammerhof House. The Slovak Mining Museum in Banská Stiavnica) (Bratislava: Bedecker, 2006), 24.

⁸¹ Out of: Eva Roth Kaufmann, René Buschor, and Daniel Gutscher, *Spätmittelalterliche reliefierte Ofenkeramik in Bern* (Bern: Verlag Paul Haupt, 1994), 146-147, cat. 104 (hereafter: Roth Kaufmann *et al.*, *Ofenkeramik*); see also Konrad Strauss, *Die Kachelkunst des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz I* (Strassburg: Heitz, 1966), fig. 3, table 25.



Fig. 24: Woman beating a man with a broom. Stove tile excavated in Bern, Switzerland, end of the 15th century

Still related to the subject is another tile depicting a wife beating her husband (fig. 25⁸²). It reflects the fear/derision/power discourse involved in such domestic fights and it also features in marginal art.

These images are part of a larger group elaborating on the topos of the power of women. As Susan Smith has shown,⁸³ according to the context, intention and reception, the topos has received several diverging interpretations for the Middle Ages. A representation such as the mounted Aristotle could have been ‘read’ along a misogynist line, or symbolically, as showing the power of love, or even as being subversive, inserting women to rebel. Whatever the purpose such images of gender reversal, another aspect of the carnivalesque ‘world turned upside-down’, do tell us something about the norm and its opposites.⁸⁴

⁸² Out of: <http://www.imareal.oeaw.ac.at/realonline/>.

⁸³ Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women: A “Topos” in Medieval Art and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

⁸⁴ Malcolm Jones, “Folklore Motifs in Late Medieval Art II: Sexist Satire and popular Punishment,” *Folklore* 1 (1990), 69-87, here 71-72.



Fig. 25: Wife beating her husband, tile from Upper Hungary, Banská Bystrica?, 15th century

I would place at the end of a series which could certainly be extended further, a stove tile from Bern depicting a woman being ridden by a devil (fig. 26⁸⁵). It suggests that women usurping the authority of men are in their turn ruled by devils. The most interesting detail is that on this stove tile the demon is also feminine (it has visible breasts). So besides being a visual gloss to images of 'women on top', this particular tile seems to indicate that a similar gender division extends to the underworld.

⁸⁵ Out of: Roth Kaufmann *et al.*, *Ofenkeramik*, 124, cat. 60.



Fig. 26: Woman mounted by a she-devil. Bern, Switzerland, second half of the 14th century

Closing thoughts

The copulating couple depicted on the medieval stove tile from Banská Bystrica can support several interpretations. There must have been some particular interpretation of it, since it was created by the commission of Mayor Stefan Jung in a town with at least one tile workshop. In such conditions the selection of stove tiles for the Town Hall and the urban house of the mayor did not simply depend on the sheer availability of tiles, since a certain variety must have been available. But what could the interpretation of the image be? Why was a sex scene placed beside religious images in, at least, semi-public contexts?

It seems to me that the copulating image was neither alchemical, nor apotropaic and certainly not pornographic. It could have been a didactic representation of a vice or a sin, just like another tile from the same stoves, depicting the two-tailed siren, could have been a representation of *Luxuria*. The 'sex tile' could also have had an explanation based on literary texts or on popular culture. If fables such as that of the preaching wolf were transposed to tiles from the same stoves,⁸⁶ some other medieval narrative could have been be-

⁸⁶ For the fable represented on stove tiles see Měřinský, "Iterum 'Ad lupum predicantem'"; Zdenek Smetánka, "Ad lupum predicantem. Reliéf pozdně gotického středověkého kachle jako historický pramen" (Late Gothic medieval relief stove tiles as historical sources), *Archeologické rozhledy*, 36 (1983), 326-360; Adrian Andrei Rusu, "Cahle din Transilvania

hind the creation of the 'sex tile'. It could also have been part of the 'popular' local culture which made its way to a more elevated context, that of the town hall.

To the present state of research, however, it is just a multivalent sign. Until further information becomes available, the 'sex tile' of Banská Bystrica remains an ambiguous, unique, and partly unexplained medieval representation. Some scholars have reached similar conclusion when speaking of marginal images in manuscripts. Andrew Otwell believes that "marginal illustration stands in a 'proverbial' relationship to both reader and text ..., carrying meaning in a way similar to a proverb, and at an equivalent distance from its iconographic origin and from its recipient". According to him, "marginal images exist in the middle state between meaning and meaningless ..., open to interpretation."⁸⁷ This might well be the case, or it might just cover the fact that we have not yet identified the literary stories behind such images and are at lost among the multiple meanings they seem to carry.

III. Trei motive decorative medievale" (Stove tiles from Transylvania III. Three medieval decorative motifs), *Acta Musei Napocensis* 39-40 (2002-2003), 107-114.

⁸⁷ <http://www.heyotwell.com/work/arhistory/marginalia.html>.

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55

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HERAUSGEGEBEN
VON GERHARD JARITZ

GEDRUCKT MIT UNTERSTÜTZUNG DER KULTURABTEILUNG
DES AMTES DER NIEDERÖSTERREICHISCHEN LANDESREGIERUNG

niederösterreich kultur

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Inhaltsverzeichnis

Vorwort	4
Matthias Johannes Bauer, <i>Extra muros</i> . Systemimmanente grundherrschaftliche Probleme im mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen städtischen Ziegeleiwesen am Beispiel der Stadt Erding (Oberbayern)	5
Ana-Maria Gruia, Sex on the Stove. A Fifteenth-Century Stove Tile from Banská Bystrica	19
Thomas Kühtreiber, „Raum-Ordnungen“. Raumfunktionen und Ausstattungsmuster auf Adelssitzen im 14.-16. Jahrhundert. Ein Forschungsprojekt am ‚Institut für Realienkunde‘ der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften	59
Matthias Johannes Bauer, Die unbekannte illustrierte Fechthandschrift des Hugold Behr. Vorbemerkungen zur Edition von Rostock UB Mss. var. 83	80
Buchbesprechungen	86

Vorwort

Der vorliegende Band von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* beschäftigt sich vorrangig mit einem Bereich des historischen Alltags, welcher seit dem 19. Jahrhundert für die kultur- und sozialgeschichtliche Forschung immer wieder von besonderem Interesse gewesen ist: mit Wohnkultur im weitesten Sinne, vom Bauwesen bis zu einem Detail spätmittelalterlicher häuslicher Innenausstattung. Eine solche Konzentration steht im Zusammenhang mit einem Projekt am ‚Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit‘, welches letzteres eng mit *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* zusammenarbeitet. Dieses Forschungsprojekt, ‚Raum-Ordnungen‘ widmet sich vor allem den Raumfunktionen und häuslichen Ausstattungsmustern im adeligen Wohnbereich Mitteleuropas vom 14. bis zum 16. Jahrhundert und wird in diesem Heft von Thomas Kühtreiber kurz beschrieben.

Das genannte Forschungsvorhaben sieht auch die internationale Kooperation von ausgesprochener Bedeutung. Erste Ergebnisse dieser Zusammenarbeit sollen zwei weitere Beiträge dieses Heftes vermitteln. Matthias Johannes Bauer beschäftigt sich für den oberbayrischen Raum mit Fragen des spätmittelalterlichen städtischen Ziegeleiwesens, welches natürlich eine wichtige Rolle gerade in Bezug auf jedwede öffentliche und private Bautätigkeit spielte. Ana Maria Gruia setzt sich dagegen mit einem Detail des häuslichen Innenraumbereiches im spätmittelalterlichen Oberungarn auseinander, und zwar mit den Bildprogrammen glasierter Kachelöfen. Es geht ihr dabei besonders um den Versuch einer Erklärung und Entschlüsselung des Kontextes der Darstellung eines Kopulationsaktes auf einer Ofenkachel des 15. Jahrhunderts aus der heute slowakischen Stadt Banská Bystrica. Gerade diese Abhandlung zeigt die Varietät von zu berücksichtigenden Analysemöglichkeiten, welche akribische Detailuntersuchungen zu Fragen der mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Wohnkultur eröffnen können.

Gerhard Jaritz