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A MEDIEVAL DEPICTION OF INFANT-FEEDING IN WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL (Figs. 11, 12; Pl. X, A)

There are sixty-eight misericord seats in the early 14th-century choir stalls of Winchester Cathedral, all but two of which have scenes carved upon their undersides. With the exception of a carving of a mitred bishop, all of the subjects depicted on the seats are secular in content, depicting the usual medley of animals, monsters, and grotesque faces, common to this particular form of medieval art. The Winchester carvings have been

fully catalogued by Remnant,[1] though the subject of this note has not been previously identified correctly.

Remnant describes the carving on the seventh seat from the W. in the S. upper row as that of a 'man in a hood blowing a hunting horn. Supporters: Left and Right, a foliate mask.' This description is repeated by Smith, who rightly pours scorn upon the ridiculous suggestion that it depicts a man smoking a pipe![2] At first glance Remnant's identification of the subject appear to be not unreasonable, but if the carving is closely scrutinized it becomes untenable. A study of the annexed photograph (Pl. 8A) shows a horn held in a right hand with thumb uppermost and fingers below, being applied to the mouth of a hooded person. A hunting horn may be held this way, and in some medieval hunting scenes it is so depicted, but in all such pictures the wrist naturally extends downwards towards the elbow of the arm of the person holding the instrument. In the present instance the wrist extends upward with the arm being placed behind the head, a position no horn-blower could achieve if holding the horn himself. This position is however quite in accordance with that of a right-handed person standing above and behind an infant whilst feeding it liquid from a horn feeding vessel, an hypothesis sustained by the position of the left hand, which is quite unmistakeably providing support for the head of an infant. The infantile face and the size of the hands in relation to that of the head confirms this interpretation.

The hand-feeding of infants with a suitable breast-milk substitute is a custom well-known in antiquity, particularly in the Graeco-Roman world. The death of a mother in child-birth, or her survival but failure to lactate made it imperative for the infant to be reared by hand if a wet-nurse could not be found. Large numbers of fictile feeding vessels found in the graves of infants of this period also suggests that even where the mother was present and healthy, early weaning off the breast was a social custom among the better-of sections of Graeco-Roman society.[3]

On the hand-rearing of infants in post-Roman Britain contemporary authors are silent, nor are infant-feeding vessels recognized among Anglo-Saxon pottery types. It may however reasonably be inferred that the practice was occasionally restored to by the Anglo-Saxons when circumstances deemed it necessary, perhaps using feeding vessels made of leather or other perishable materials that only survive in the archaeological record in optimum conditions. The adaptation of a cow's horn as an infant feeder most probably began in the remote prehistoric past, for horn-shaped feeders fashioned in terracotta from Ancient Egypt were almost certainly modelled on horn prototypes. But in Europe it is not until the Middle Saxon period that the horn as an infant feeding vessel is first mentioned. This occurs in the biography of St Liudgar of Frisia (A.D. 744–809), written by his nephew Altfried. At this time it was customary for unwanted female babies to be killed. Liudgar's mother was one such infant condemned to be drowned, but fortunately for her she was rescued from the tub by a kind-hearted neighbour who reared her on milk and honey from a horn feeder.[4] Abandoned and orphaned infants in the early medieval period were also sometimes directly suckled by cows or goats obviating the need for special feeding vessels, but this method of nurture appears not to have been popular due to a belief that an infant so suckled risked developing the animal characteristics of its surrogate mother.[5]

A small but significant number of pottery infant feeding vessels of the period A.D. 1000–1550 have come to light at various locations in Europe, their occurrence making it very likely that other vessels of perishable materials were also in use at this time, a supposition supported by medieval German, French, Icelandic and Swedish literature in which the horn-feeder is mentioned, and by several representations of it in the art of the 9th–15th century.[6] A detail of an accouchement scene from a French MSS. of the 13th century shows the horn feeder being employed (Fig. 11).

The cow's horn infant-feeder was employed well beyond the medieval period into comparatively modern times. Its use in the second half of the 16th century is evidenced by Pieter van der Heyden's engraving of the Elder Brueghel's *The Poor Kitchen* (1563), in the foreground of which may be seen an impoverished mother feeding her emaciated infant

FIG. 11
Detail of an infant using a feeder, from a French 13th-century MS.

FIG. 12
Detail of an infant using a horn feeder, the elder Breughel, 1563

from a horn (Fig. 12). Two years after the publication of this print the French physician and paediatrician Simon de Vallambert published the first French treatise on the diseases of children. On the subject of infant feeding, he recommends that it be expedited by means of 'a horn with an opening at both ends, one being made into the shape of a teat, through which the infant sucks pap just as it sucks breast milk by the nipple.'[7]

All of the far from common illustrations of the horn-feeder in use in medieval and later manuscripts are of Continental origin. The author is unaware of any English

examples. Sculpted representations of it are of the greatest rarity anywhere, and the Winchester carving may well the unique English example. Its recognition provides an interesting glimpse into an aspect of medieval infant-rearing that is seldom discussed outside of journals of paediatric history.

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The photograph is reproduced by kind permission of J. C. D. Smith from his book.[8]

NOTES

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