

**Transcript of the episode of Privacy Studies Podcast: Angels off the Record: Public Intercession in Hungarian Private Judgment Frescoes – Presentation by Dr. Edina Eszenyi (Maritime Training Academy, UK)**

Hello, my name is Felicia Fricke and I am Natacha Klein Käfer, and you are listening to the Privacy Studies Podcast.

This season of the Privacy Studies Podcast follows the discussions of the symposium *PRIVACY AND DEATH: Past and Present*, which took place at the University of Copenhagen and online between October 12th and 13th, 2023. This event aimed to bring to the fore the discussions of what kind of privacy, if any, we have given to our dead in different cultural and historical contexts. We will hear presentations by historians, archaeologists, sociologists, and other experts.

Transcriptions of the episodes can be found on the Centre for Privacy Studies' website.

In today's episode, we will hear from Dr. Edina Eszenyi from the Maritime Training Academy in Portsmouth. Her presentation is entitled 'Angels off the Record: Public Intercession in Hungarian Private Judgment Frescoes'.

So, my presentation is going to take you to the Middle Ages. The title is 'Angels Off the Record, Public Intercession in Hungarian Private Judgment Frescoes'. Yes, that's the title.

Although it was not altogether abandoned, the theme of the last judgment had outlived itself after the 1300s as the fate of humankind gave place to a new interest in the fate of the individual. The woodcut illustration of printed *Ars Moriendi* treatises, functioning as late medieval handbooks for the proper way of pious dying, reached the literate masses and left their mark on the ideas and iconography of appropriate and inappropriate death.

The compositions that my presentation analyzes from the point of view of privacy lie between two common points of medieval devotional imagery, namely, the between death and the last judgment. These two events were not just assumed in medieval minds, but were also clarified dogmatically. But no certainty was offered by theologians about what happens between the death of the individual and the last judgment. The starting point of this confusion was that the Bible is not clear regarding the time when souls will be judged.

In Matthew 25 and revelations 20 just to quote two examples the bible says that everything will be decided on the last judgment at the second coming of Christ at the end of times. At Luke 16 through from 19 through 31 and in 23 verse 49 however the bible claims that souls are judged immediately and individually right at the moment of death or very shortly after. After the church fathers had been concerned with this question the topic received extensive attention in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries by influential scholastic theologians including Peter Abélard, Hugh of Saint Victor, Richard of Saint Victor and Thomas Aquinas. This confusion merged into the *Visio Beatifica* debate when Pope John 22nd initiated a public debate about the possibility of judgment immediately at the moment of death. A positive opinion of this question was confirmed by the *Benedictus Deus* Bull of his successor pope Benedict the 12th on the 29th of January 1336. These dogmatic changes and debates were not only presented in contemporary theological writings and devotional literature but also appeared in art and in religious iconography. Depictions of private judgment or particular judgments - sometimes they are called private judgments sometimes they are referred to as particular judgments - became popular in

context of this debate. In contrast to the mass retribution of the last judgments this picture showed the death and judgment of an individual in the moment or very shortly after the individual's death

The Confirmation of the Possibility of Judgment at the Moment of Death created the opportunity for various visual representations of the scene. And the 1300s and 1400s saw the emergence and the solution of private judgment compositions that focused not on universal salvation but on divine judgment over an individual in the movement of death or very shortly after. As the interval between divine judgement and physical death disappeared, these compositions depicted earthly dramas at the deathbed of the dying person, with supernatural beings crowding around the bedside of the main characters. At least 16 illuminations, wall paintings, and glass windows from the 14th to the 16th century demonstrate the existence of this iconographical type, all showing with smaller, minor variations, the same characters and the same inscriptions registering the conversation these supernatural beings convened at the deathbed. The subsidiary figures of last judgment compositions grew both in scale and in importance in these images, as supernatural beings invaded the very private bedroom and crowded around the bedside of the dying person. The whole of picture is essentially built on the dual intercession of the Virgin Mary and Christ before God the father for the soul of the dying person. As the last judgment compositions gave their place over to private judgment scenes, these subsidiary figures have been growing both in physical scales within the composition and in importance. The dying, were commonly accompanied by the Virgin and varying other saints, interceding for the dying soul at the deathbed, and the debate between angels and devils for the dead soul also became a common motive for these things.

The same figures and motives also appear in two medieval Hungarian private judgment frescoes, Zseliz, created before 1388, and Poniky, dated to around 1415, both of them are located in present-day Slovakia, but that territory belonged to medieval Hungary at the time of the creation of these compositions. Both frescoes render a double intercession scene at the deathbed, where Christ, angels, and saints debate devils for the soul of the dying person. They debate in a literal sense, as the phrases the participants utter during the conversation appear in serpentine ribbons within, the compositions.

The wall painting in the St. James Church in Zseliz (Levoca) shows the combat between heavenly and hellish powers for the soul of a local landlord and illustrious knight, György Becsei (George). The scene takes place as some sort of a trial, narrated on text bands in rhythmical Latin inscriptions. On the right side, the red-winged devil, demands the soul of George, who appears at the bottom as a lonely, vulnerable figure lying on his deathbed. The devil is saying: I know that this soul is full of sins like Nineveh. However, a red-winged and red-dressed angel stands up against this devil, reposting that even if he has sinned, this one asked for help under the pressure of death. Eventually, the Virgin Mary comes to the aid of the knight, and asks for help from her son, saying: I pray for forgiveness for what you have suffered, my son. Christ transmits this supplication and calls for the mercy of the father: Father, behold the wounds. Do what my mother asks. At the top of the image, the long-bearded, grey-haired God the Father magnanimously grants mercy to the troubled soul of George as a result of these intercessions. Ask to be reborn, and I will give you whatever you wish. I will deny you nothing. Another angel looks out from the clouds and testifies to God's decision. The furnace of virtues absorbs one from sins. An enigmatic saint is also represented in the composition, also supporting the intercession of the Virgin and Christ.

This is an image of the Poniky composition, the church. So I'd just like to add a few words regarding Poniky. Poniky is a very, very, very small village, very difficult to approach, not even a train station, so

you have to take a train to Banska Bystrica, from there you have to take a bus, and in this very small village, a very, very, very richly decorated little medieval church can be found, very nicely restored. The composition we are talking about, is here, very high up above the Triumphal Arch, and unfortunately, as a consequence, it's extremely difficult to photograph. I do apologize for the quality of this image. This is my own photo, the best I could find. I do apologize, but I think just by looking at the little blurred contours of the figures, you can more or less see what's going on. The point is that, um, the characters are more or less the same as in Zseliz, as in pretty much every one of these representations. The characters are standard. Uh, the things they say, uh, again, they are repeated, perhaps not word by word, but the message is the same. Um, the devil says: I demand this soul because I know it's full of sins. Uh, the dying person says: oh, oh, please be with me as I approach death. The angel replies: if he has sinned, crushed by death, he asked for help. The Virgin Mary intervenes: I pray for forgiveness for what you have suffered my son, speaking to Christ. Christ hears this and says: father, behold the wounds, do what my mother asks. And finally, a figure commonly identified as John the Evangelist replies: the souls of virtues commands that you be set free.

The initiators of the tangle of this debate are the devil and an angel whose quarrel requires the intercession of God to solve. In the private judgment scene of George Becsei in the Zseliz composition two angels are represented. One angel is waiting for the soul in heaven. The other is debating the devil beside the corpse. Their pair can also be found in the Poniky composition. We see composite anthropomorphic figures. The devil appears in his or her own form. The devils are not small, but of the same size as their debating partner, the angel, and as well as all other characters in the scene, suggesting not a defeated adversary, but rather a serious evil antagonist. The upper angel in Zseliz might even be Archangel Michael in his capacity as Susceptor Animarum or Prepositus Paradisi. So Michael the Archangel in his role as the figure accompanying the soul to heaven, or welcoming the soul in heaven - very similar to Hermes in Greek mythology, as we have just heard. These iconographic types of St. Michael the Archangel usually lack any attributes and the angel depicted is identified as the Archangel on the basis of pictorial traditions. The angel standing beside the corpse might also be the guardian angel of the soul. But since for the medieval mind, Michael was the, patron saint of the dying people, the protector of the body and soul, it cannot be excluded that the medieval audience identified the angel debating with the devil, by the corpse, with the archangel.

I would not like to argue that either of these two angels should be identified as Archangel Michael, but I consider it reasonable that the Archangel's biblical debate over the corpse of Moses in the book of Jude verse 9 might have provoked a textual base for the representations of the angel-demon debates for the soul. In other words, a certain differentiation is required between the various levels of identification. Whether the artist's intention was to represent the archangel and/or whether the public identified the angel represented as the archangel are two different matters. As noted above, these compositions are built on the combat of good and evil forces for the soul, these psychomachia type compositions, and this dynamic's fearful and violent nature made these images memorable. Their use for contemplation and mediation could have been the primary role of these wall paintings as well, as they not only reminded the viewers of their own temporality in this world, but also of their defenselessness in the fight between the infernal and heavenly powers.

Along these lines, the weighing of souls itself can also be found in private judgment compositions. The inscriptions on a 15th century German woodcut, for instance, imply that a soul is being weighed by the angel in the dexter pen, measured against a round object in the sinister pen, in any case

emblematic of the grace of God freeing the soul from the sin referred to in the works on the scroll over the central figure.

The concept of privacy within the context of private judgment representations in art is as fascinating as it is complex. These artworks often raise questions about the boundaries between personal and public matters as well as the portrayal of deeply private and individual experiences within a communal and religious setting of the church interior. On the level of imagery, these images are testimonies of private devotion, but both frescoes encompass an inherent duality between privacy and publicity. While they represent people dying alone in a very private moment, the very creation of these artworks in public spaces themselves have made these moments fully public. The dead do not paint frescoes of themselves, which raises the question of private versus public intention in context of the frescoes' commissions. The legible works of the dead souls' supernatural enemies and defenders give publicity to numerous scenes that the individuals most probably did not publicize in their lifetimes. Within the overall picture, the individual identification of the participating angel figures as Saint Michael the Archangel as general intercessor for humanity versus the individual and very private guardian angels of the souls opens a separate debate over notions of privacy in context of these frescoes. Instead of the last judgment, these compositions represented a more personalized scene and this individualistic feature could have been the key to their success.

As opposed to the monumental Hungarian fresco compositions, the use of similar images occurs almost entirely in illumination art. In nearly all cases, these images were located in books of hours in connection with the beginning of the office of the dead. These books of hours were intended for personal use and images of private judgment could have functioned better for this purpose, than the general representations of mass judgments. One of the central controversies surrounding private judgment representations is the public display of what is essentially a deeply personal and private moment, namely the judgment of an individual soul upon death. As opposed to similar scenes in illuminated books of hours and other manuscripts, these Hungarian representations are typically found in church interiors where they are accessible to a wide audience. This raises questions about the reasons behind making such a private and intimate event a matter of public display and challenges the traditional notion that matters of the soul and one's ultimate fate are deeply personal and private. Another layer of complexity arises from the inclusion of subsidiary figures, such as angels and demons, engaged in discussions or actions related to the scenes of the deceased. These representations suggest that not only the private judgment on public display, but also the individual's moral failings are being scrutinized and discussed openly in public. This element introduces a communal aspect to the private judgement, as if the scenes of the deceased are being laid bare for everybody to witness. From the perspective of the artists and religious institutions commissioning these artworks, the inclusion of private judgement representation in public spaces serves several purposes. These representations often carry didactic elements aiming to instruct and guide the viewer towards moral and spiritual reflection through the experience of one particular individual. They can be seen as a reminder to the living of the consequences of their actions and of the importance of living a virtuous Christian life. From a theological standpoint, these representations may be seen as emphasizing the idea that the individual's private judgment ultimately has implications for the entire community. The public display of the judgment and the discussion of sins can be interpreted as a reminder that one's actions and choices are not only a private affair, but have a wider impact on society and on the spiritual community.

We must also wonder, finally, whether the portrayal of the judgment of an individual's soul may be symbolic or allegorical rather than a literal representation of what is believed to happen after death given the theological background detailed at the beginning. In the light of theology, these artworks use metaphors and imagery to convey broader theological or moral lessons rather than a detailed account of a specific individual's faith.

In summary, private judgement compositions highlight the changing notion of privacy over the centuries. These compositions challenge the boundaries of public and private in art by bringing intensely personal moments into the public sphere. They serve as a means of conveying moral and spiritual messages to a wider audience while also raising questions about the appropriateness of making private moments a subject of public display. These artworks are rich in symbolism and their interpretation can vary depending on the viewer's perspective, cultural background, religious beliefs. The combat of angels and demons for a soul in these images tells a personal story that may be full of fear and uncertainty, but at the same time, it brings modern viewers closer to understanding the religious imagery presented to the common people of the medieval world. Thank you for your attention.

PRIVACY AND DEATH was organized by Felicia Fricke and Natacha Klein Käfer with the support of the Centre for Privacy Studies and the Conference Grant of the Carlsberg Foundation.

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Thank you so much for listening.