Reiss, Athene: *The Sunday Christ. Sabbatarianism in English medieval wall painting (= BAR British series)*, Oxford: Archaeopress 2000
ISBN-10: 1-84171-040-7, XVI, 209 S

Reviewed by: Achim Timmermann, Ann Arbor

This study constitutes the first book-length monograph on the late medieval image of the Sunday Christ [1], found almost exclusively in wall paintings from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century. The image occurs in two geographically distinct areas, namely southern England and Wales, and the Alpine regions of France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Slovenia and northern Italy. Some isolated examples also appear in Bohemia and on the Baltic coast. Images of this kind usually feature a central Man of Sorrows surrounded by a multitude of pictograms depicting tools and activities of the various crafts and trades, such as axes, knives, scissors, wheels (milling), or a balance of scales; in a number of especially violent examples, these tools not only encroach upon, but lacerate the Corpus Christi, causing him to bleed from numerous additional wounds.

To a late medieval audience intimately familiar with the moral code of the Ten Commandments, this image pictorialized the disastrous effects of working on Sundays and other feast days, particularly as it directly implicated the viewer's own actions (symbolized by the tools) in the perpetuity of Christ's Passion. To a modern scholar, the imagery of the Sunday Christ not only provides a significant source for the study of material culture, but also furnishes useful inroads into a better understanding of late medieval image-making and image-viewing in general. Part of what makes the Sunday Christ so remarkable to both its medieval and modern audiences is the way in which it converts the day-to-day to the symbolic, tangibly linking the mundane to the eternal.

Based on the author's doctoral dissertation written under the late Michael Camille, this book focuses on the English and Welsh Sunday Christs, though occasional images from the Continent are also considered. The text is divided into six principal chapters and a conclusion; these are complemented by a detailed catalogue of the twenty-three examples surviving in the area here under consideration, and by appendices listing a number of continental images and the various tools found on their insular counterparts.

Chapter One traces the historiography of the Sunday Christ from the image's rediscovery in Victorian England to the present, analyzing the way in which modern attitudes both to labour and to the Middle Ages have affected the various often conflicting - interpretations of the subject. In her discussion of the early scholarly discourse on this iconography Reiss thus finds that "the medieval image of Christ surrounded by the tools of workers can easily be seen as a fitting visual embodiment of [William] Morris' dreams about medieval labourers, well suited to the nineteenth-century idealist medievalism that he influenced" (p. 7). While Reiss' analysis of the earlier reception history is exemplary, her review of the contemporary scholarship is far less impressive, especially since quite a number of recent publications on the continental images of the Sunday Christ appear to have completely escaped her attention [2]. Her subsequent discussion of the non-insu-

lar images is thus largely based on an article written by Robert Wildhaber nearly half a century ago [3]. Reiss' omissions would have been fatal had she chosen to focus on the continental material; given the author's actual emphasis, these oversights are - if nothing else - annoying, and detract from the otherwise scholarly nature of her work.

In the following chapter, the author looks at the peculiar geographic distribution of the Sunday Christ both in England and Wales, and on the Continent. Reiss shows that as it is impossible to date most of these images with any accuracy, all attempts to determine where the iconography originated, how it may have been transmitted from one area to another, or whether indeed there were any direct links between the two areas of its inception at all, will have to remain conjectural. This chapter also discusses the paintings in question as physical and artistic objects, considering, for instance, the relationship between the available wall space and the various components of the image itself; quickly moving from one image to another, this discussion may have benefited from a more thorough visual analysis of one or two of the better- preserved examples, for instance those at Breage in Cornwall, or Michaelchurch Escley in Herefordshire. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the possible medieval appellation of the Sunday Christ - namely 'Saint Sunday' - evaluating, among other sources, fifteenth-century English translations of the so-called Sunday Letter, a text encouraging strict observance of Sunday devotion and originally authored in seventh-century Spain.

The next chapter explores the origins of the Sunday Christ iconography. Reiss cogently argues that since the closest parallels to the image are visual rather than textual, the Sunday Christ needs to be evaluated as a fundamental visual conceptualization. In compositional terms, the closest counterpart to the Sunday Christ is that of the Man of Sorrows surrounded by the Instruments of the Passion; indeed, in a number of continental images, as at St. Georg near Raezuens in Graubuenden, the two subjects are conflated so that Christ's sufferings are shown both in their historical and their contemporary dimension. Discussing a similar example at Crngrob near Skofja Loka in Slovenia, which features a series of fully-fledged scenes of people engaged in daily work rather than the usual array of trade implements, Reiss tentatively suggests that such hybrid images "could represent the origin of the Sunday Christ as a pictorial subject, with later paintings gradually abstracting elements of the image, first removing the Passion Instruments, then the figures from the scenes of work" (p. 26). Unfortunately this hypothesis is based on Wildhaber's grossly inaccurate dating of the Crngrob Sunday Christ to the 1360s, which would indeed make it one of the earliest examples of its kind (the Crngrob paintings are now dated to ca. 1460/70 [4]). A second image considered by Reiss in relation to the Sunday Christ is that of the 'Warning to Blasphemers', which occasionally appears in conjunction with the former (for instance at Walsham le Willows in Suffolk), and in which gambling, wrestling or drinking blasphemers are shown holding the mutilated parts of Christ's body by which they swear, such as his heart, foot or hand. As Reiss demonstrates, both the Sunday Christ and the Warning to Blasphemers have a common theological basis, as both pictorialize the perpetuation of Christ's sufferings by specific sins of medieval people. Given the author's emphasis on the particularly visual nature of the Sunday Christ, her search for possible pictorial and conceptual parallels could have been more extensive. Other visual sources may include medical iconography, and the imagery of bloodletting in particular, which could account for the curious bloodlines that link the tools of the trades to the bodies of Christ at Breage in Cornwall, St. Georg near Raezuens in Graubuenden, and elsewhere.

Chapter Four, entitled 'Understanding the Sunday Christ', examines how the individual elements of the image combine to communicate its message that Sunday work injures Christ. Analyzing a plethora of texts that provide an exegesis of the Decalogue, and the Third Commandment in particular, such as penitential manuals or religious plays, Reiss shows that the constituent components of the image were indeed widely accessible in late medieval parochial culture. She also provides fascinating insights into how devotional practices and the imagery associated with them encouraged contemporary audiences to perceive a bond between themselves and the God they venerated, and how an awareness of personal representation by means of the implements allowed the cause of Christ's sufferings to be identified as the individual beholder's trespasses. Contributing factors included the projection of sacred history into the day-to- day environment of late medieval parishioners, for instance through the inclusion of local geographical references or materials of everyday life in contemporary religious drama, the so-called Cornish cycle and the crucifixion play of the Chester ironmongers being cases in point.

Next Reiss focuses on the trade implements themselves and discusses their ramifications for specific social groups, such as farm workers, blacksmiths, leatherworkers, but also women. She regards the collection of tools around each representation of the Sunday Christ as a social and economic portrait of the community in which the specific image is located. Not surprisingly, perhaps, she finds that the choice of tools and the industries they denote vary from location to location. The Sunday Christ at St. Just in Cornwall thus features a boat carrying a catch of sturgeon and trailing a fishing net, while that of Purton in Wiltshire depicts a sophisticated fulling wheel used in the manufacture of cloth. In some cases, the tools represented were also invested with a more symbolic dimension: distaff and spindle thus not only referred to the business of cloth-making, in which a high percentage of female labourers were involved, but also functioned as attributes of a post-lapsarian Eve. In order to determine the relationship between the paintings and documented medieval labour practice, Reiss also investigates a variety of textual sources, such as a fourteenth- century preacher's reference manual and fifteenth-century Sunday trade regulations.

The final chapter, which once again impresses with its command of comparative textual material, examines the broader sphere of related activities within which the Sunday Christ functioned as a multi-purpose image. More than being a mere morality image, Reiss finds, the Sunday Christ also served to highlight devotional, economical and social causes and implications, such as the definition of the community through collective Sabbath-keeping and simultaneous refraining from work. She concludes that "these facets of the Sunday Christ coalesce in the enforcement of holy day ideology, both by the courts and in the afterlife, through the eschatological implications inherent in the wall paintings themselves" (p. 47).

Engagingly written, for the most part impressively researched, and immensely readable, this splendid study has not only rescued a fascinating late medieval image from relative obscurity, but also contributes significantly to our understanding of late medieval visual culture in general. Likewise, its broad, interdisciplinary approach is bound to appeal to a broad spectrum of scholars and students. Often reading like a microhistory of parochial life in the later Middle Ages - of the kind made famous by Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie and others - this is the kind of study that would have made an excellent, and no doubt very marketable, book with one of the major publishing houses in Britain or the States. The present format of publication may leave much to be desired, though

Archaeopress certainly deserves praise for recognizing the value of this text and getting in out.

[1] Also known as 'Feiertagschristus' in German, 'Christ du Dimanche' in French, 'Cristo della domenica' in Italian, and 'Sveta nedelja' in Slovenian.

[2] In particular: Alfons Maissen, "Die bildlichen Darstellungen des Feiertagschristus in der Surselva," in Terra Grischuna, December 1980, 382-385; Oskar Moser, "Der 'Feiertagschristus' als Mahnbild und Quelle der Sachforschung: Zu zwei neuen Funden mittelalterlicher Fresken in Kaernten," in Oesterreichische Zeitschrift fuer Volkskunde, 93 (1990), 331-371; Silvana Sibille-Sizia, "Il Cristo della domenica," in Sot la Nape, 44/3 (1992), 5-20; Leopold Kretzenbacher, "Nachtridentinisch untergegangene Bildthemen und Sonderkulte der 'Volksfroemmigkeit' in den Suedost-Alpenlaendern," in Sitzungsberichte der Bayrischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, philosophisch-historische Klasse 1994/1 (Munich, 1995), 34-73; the same, "Neufunde spaetmittelalterlicher Fresken vom 'Mahnbild'-Typus 'Feiertags-Christus' in Kaernten," in Oesterreichische Zeitschrift fuer Volkskunde, 100 (1997), 157-183. The publication of Reiss' monograph coincided with that of Otto Fraydenegg-Monzello's study "Der Feiertagschristus: Ein volksmystisches Mahnbild des Spaetmittelalters als Quelle zur Rechtlichen Volkskunde," in Forschungen zur Rechtsarchaeologie und rechtlichen Volkskunde, 18 (2000), 61-96. For the iconography of the Sunday Christ, see now also Uta Henning, "Der Feiertagschristus in Kaernten als musikalisches Bildzeugnis," in musica instrumentalis, 3 (2001); Dusan Koman, "Sveta nedelja - nedeljski Kristus in nedeljska cerkev," in Alenka Klemenc (ed.), "Hodil po zemlji sem nasi...": Marijanu Zadnikarju ob osemdesetletnici, Festschrift Marijan Zadnikar (Ljubljana, 2001), 233-242.

[3] Robert Wildhaber, "Der 'Feiertagschristus' als ikonographischer Ausdruck der Sonntagsheiligung," in Zeitschrift fuer schweizerische Archaeologie und Kunstgeschichte, 16 (1956), 1-34. Though still valid in many respects, this study contains numerous lacunae and factual errors. Reiss' list of continental Sunday Christs (Appendix A) is largely based on Wildhaber and accordingly incomplete. Since the publication of Wildhaber's article other examples of the Sunday Christ have come to light at San Vitale at Bormio in Friuli; St. Johann at Taufers/Tubre and St. Jakob at Groeden/Gardena, both in the South Tyrol; the so-called Knappenkirche at Oberzeiring and the parish church of St. Lorenzen im Muerztal, both in Styria; St. Oswald in St. Oswald ob Kleinkirchheim and St. Filippen ob Sonneg at Pfannsdorf, both in Carinthia; St. Peter at Mistail in Graubuenden. Further images of the Sunday Christ have also been identified or uncovered in Slovenia; cf. Koman, "Sveta nedelja" (as in note 2), as well as this author's review of Reiss' monograph, "Angleski prispevek k poznavanju upodobitev ikonografskega motiva Svete nedelje," Acta historiae artis Slovenica, 6 (2001), 189-190. Reiss' list of continental Sunday Christs also omits the isolated example of St. Nikolaus at Wismar on the Baltic Sea.

[4] Fraydenegg-Monzello, "Der Feiertagschristus" (as in note 3).

Recommended Citation:
Achim Timmermann: [Review of:] Reiss, Athene: *The Sunday Christ. Sabbatarianism in English medieval wall painting (= BAR British series)*, Oxford 2000. In: ArtHist.net, Aug 27, 2002 (accessed Nov 16, 2026), <https://arthist.net/reviews/197>.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License. For the conditions under which you may distribute, copy and transmit the work, please go to https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/