

ECCE LEONES!

OM DJUR OCH ODJUR I BILDKONSTEN

REDAKTÖRER

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Ecce leones! Djur och odjur i bildkonsten

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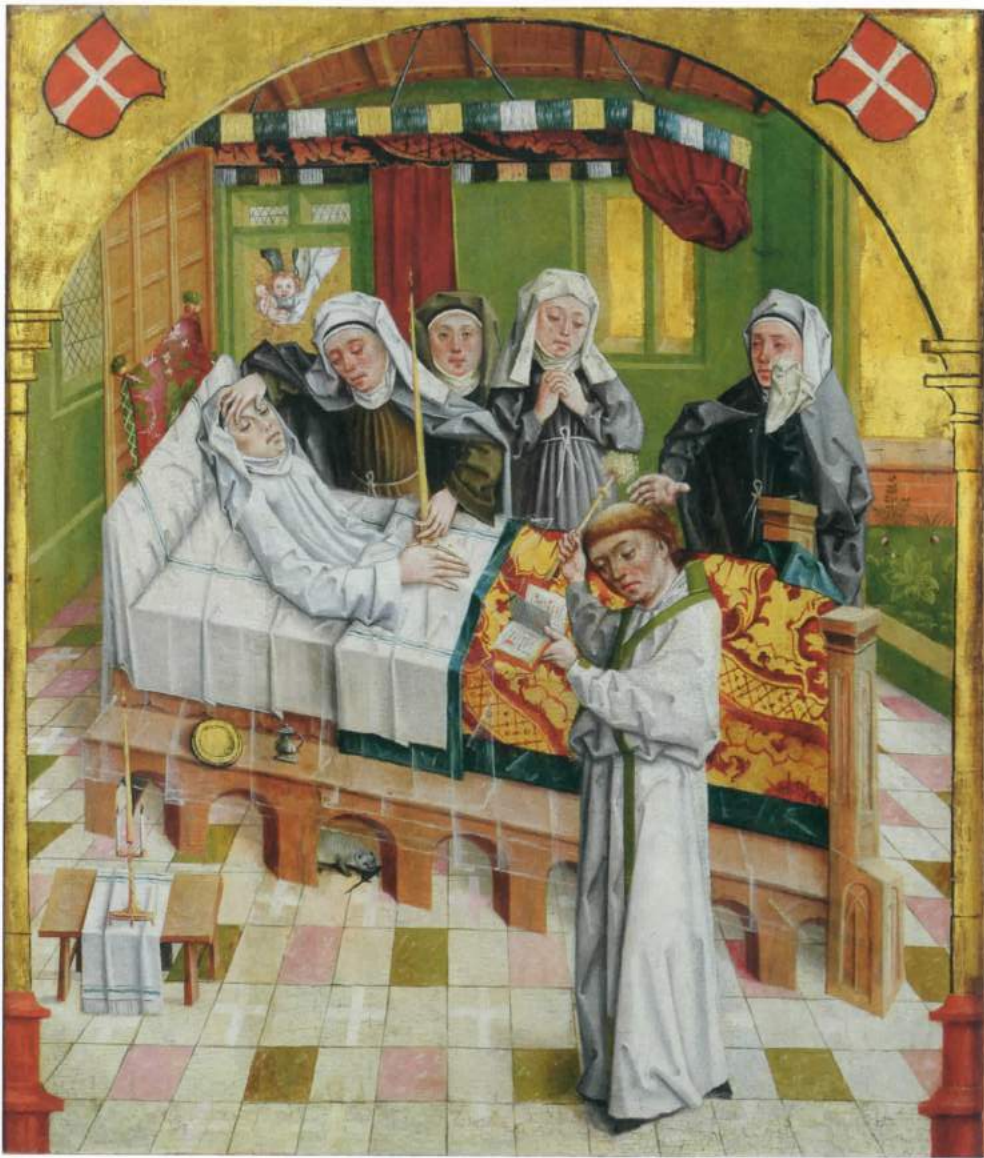


Fig. 1. Workshop of Bernt Notke (Lübeck), *Death of St Elizabeth*, 1483. Altarpiece in the Holy Spirit Church, Tallinn. Photo Stanislav Stepashko.

A Mouser in the Bedroom

Anu Mänd

In the altarpiece of the Holy Spirit Church in Tallinn, completed in the workshop of Bernt Notke in 1483, one can find a somewhat unexpected figure – a cat hiding under the deathbed of St Elizabeth of Thuringia (figs. 1–2). The cat is light grey, with a striped back, and it has just caught a black rat or a mouse. At first sight, one does not even notice the animal, because the focus is on the dying saint, the priest and the mourning retinue. In the background, an angel is taking the soul of St Elizabeth to heaven. The atmosphere of the image is solemn and sorrowful. But why has the artist included a mouser?

In another altarpiece in Tallinn, painted by Hermen Rode for the high altar of St Nicholas' Church, there was an intention – as revealed by the infra-red studies of the underdrawings conducted in 2010 – to add a mouser under the bed of Emperor Constantine, but the artist gave up the idea (figs. 3–4). The image in question depicts the legend of St Nicholas, in which the saint appears to Constantine to convince him to release the three innocent noblemen seen in the background in shackles.¹ In addition to the cat, Rode has also left out some other details from the same scene, such as the chamber pot and the slippers of the Emperor at the left side of the bed (i.e. at the viewer's right).² This altarpiece was completed just two years earlier than Notke's, in 1481.

It is not the goal of this article to analyse the possible mutual influences of

the two great Lübeck masters but to discuss the meaning of the mouser in the described images. A similar motif – a cat in a bedroom – can also be found in some other 15th century artworks in the Baltic Sea region. A carved altarpiece from the Boeslunde church, now in the National Museum in Copenhagen, displays a white cat under a bench in the “Birth of the Virgin Mary” (figs. 5–6).³ It is difficult to determine if it also had a mouse between its teeth because the right side of its mouth is damaged. In the altarpiece of the Östra Ny church in Östergötland, also in the “Birth of the Virgin”, a white or light grey cat is chasing a mouse under the bed of St Anne (fig. 7). The mouse has no hope of escaping because the paw of the hunter is already on its back. Both altarpieces were produced in northern Germany. Finally, in the murals of Bromma church, one can see a chubby white cat under a staircase in the “Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple” (figs. 8–9). The cat has caught a mouse and looks extremely satisfied. True, there the animal is not in the bedchamber but in a crypt or a vaulted cellar of a temple; however, iconographically it belongs to the same type as the previously described images. The Bromma murals, from the last decades of the 15th century, have been attributed to the workshop of Albertus Pictor.⁴

Fig. 2. A cat with its prey under the bed of St Elizabeth. Detail of fig. 1. The underdrawing reveals the intention of placing the cat under the left arch.



Fig. 3. Hermen Rode (Lübeck), *St Nicholas appears to Emperor Constantine*, 1478–81. Altarpiece in the Niguliste Museum, Tallinn. Photo Stanislav Stepashko.



Fig. 4. An infra-red reflectogram revealed the outlines of a cat under the bed of Constantine. Detail of fig. 3. Reflectogram by Alar Nurkse.

Fig. 5. Northern German workshop, Birth of Virgin Mary, c. 1430. Boeslunde altarpiece, National Museum, Copenhagen. Photo Anu Mänd.

Fig. 6. The cat, detail of fig. 5.



What is the meaning of the cat in these images? Does it carry a religious symbolism and, if so, what are the possible interpretations? The role of animals in art and society is a topic that has gained considerable popularity in recent decades,⁵ particularly in the field of medieval studies.⁶ By exploring cultural attitudes towards animals and their multiple functions in Christian art, one can obtain a deeper understanding of the medieval sign system and visual language. It is common knowledge that animals in medieval art often (or even predominantly) functioned as moral allegories and as didactic tools to convey religious messages.⁷ The cat, like most symbols, could have a positive or a negative connotation. Everything depended on the context of a particular image, and sometimes there was no symbolic meaning behind the animal.⁸ Clearly, it is not possible to present here a thorough overview of the attitudes and prejudices towards the cat in medieval society and of its representation in art.⁹

Therefore, I will merely outline the main stereotypical views of cats characteristic of the late Middle Ages.

In general, late medieval attitudes towards the cat can be described as negative or at least ambivalent. Cats were frequently associated with demons, evil spirits, Satan, witchcraft, black magic and heretics. The cat was regarded as an allegory of the Devil chasing souls, or even as a personification of Satan: it was a common belief that Satan liked to appear in the shape of a large black cat.¹⁰ The cat symbolised the sins of sloth and lust, and it was also associated with deceit and hypocrisy.¹¹ Partly due to these cultural and religious prejudices and partly because of its semi-wild nature, the cat was considered to be of lower status than the dog. Therefore, cats were also less popular in the households of high ranking people.¹²

On the other hand, cats were highly appreciated as useful predators of mice and other rodents who damaged the food supply. And by no means were they kept only in lesser households: there is evidence of ecclesiastical and secular institutions keeping official cats, whose task was to keep the pest population under control. One of the best examples, frequently cited in scholarly literature, is the obituary accounts of Exeter Cathedral from 1305–1476. These contain regular payments for cats – a penny per week, apparently to supplement the diet of the effective mouser.¹³ In 1260, the General Chapter of the Franciscans at Narbonne decided that no brother or convent was allowed to keep animals, except cats and certain birds that removed unclean things.¹⁴ It is worthwhile to add that such “institutional” cats were also kept in late medieval Tallinn: in the account book of the warden of the Great Guild of merchants, there is an entry from 1508 indicating that the guild paid two shillings for the feeding of cats (*de katten to spyse*).¹⁵ It is possible that these cats were “in service” in the guild’s corn-storage, which first appears in sources in 1505 and was situated behind the main building under the quarters of the guild servants.¹⁶ Thus, as Irina Metzler has pointed out, in daily life the utilitarian value of cats mattered more than their somewhat dubious association with evil forces.¹⁷

However, even this highly useful feature – the catching of rodents – can be interpreted symbolically. In several 14th and 15th century *exempla*, the authors compared a cat chasing a mouse (or playing with its prey) with the Devil playing with the human soul.¹⁸

In medieval art, the cat is certainly not among the “top ten” animals.¹⁹ In bestiaries, it is usually depicted with a captured mouse or as chasing one,²⁰ that is, performing the domestic duty which, from the human point of view, was the justification of its existence.²¹ The cat appears as a mouser in a variety of media, but mainly in images that are classified as marginal art: book illuminations, woodcarvings (e.g. misericords), engravings, woodcuts and so on. Occasionally, an allegorical-didactic text was added to the image. For instance, in the German cultural sphere, the following proverb, warning against hypocrisy, was frequently used in woodcuts and engravings: “Beware of cats who lick your face but scratch your back.”²² In addition to the confrontation between the cat and the mouse, the animosity between the cat and the dog was also a frequently exploited theme in Medieval and Renaissance art.²³

But let us return to the motif in the Tallinn altarpieces. I hope to demonstrate that there are at least two possible ways to analyse the presence of the mouser in these images. The first is to proceed from the combination of the cat and the mouse. Quite often, scholars have interpreted this pair in a manner consistent with the above-mentioned message of the late medieval *exempla*: the cat is an allegory of the devil chasing unwary souls.²⁴ However, this explanation does not fit in every context. It should be noted that the “victims” of the cat carried a much more negative meaning than their hunter: in medieval animal symbolism, the mouse and the rat were allegories of evil, death, sin, demons and Satan.²⁵ In late medieval art, this is particularly well illustrated by the Passion altarpiece (1411) from the Tempzin church in Mecklenburg. In the scene of the “Birth of the Virgin Mary”, one can see two cats and a mouse (or a rat). The latter is clearly a demonic creature: it is black, it has webbed toes (like a frog), and it teases the larger cat by sticking out its tongue and turning its back on it.²⁶ Thus, I propose that a cat that has caught a mouse symbolises the victory over evil and impurity, i.e. the mouser can be identified as a positive figure. This suggestion is further supported by colour symbolism: in several artworks described at the beginning of the article the cat is either white or light grey (in the altarpieces of the Holy Spirit, Boeslunde and Östra Ny churches, and in the Bromma murals) and, therefore, is differentiated from demonic cats, who are usually depicted as black.

In late medieval art, the Devil was often present at holy events in the shape

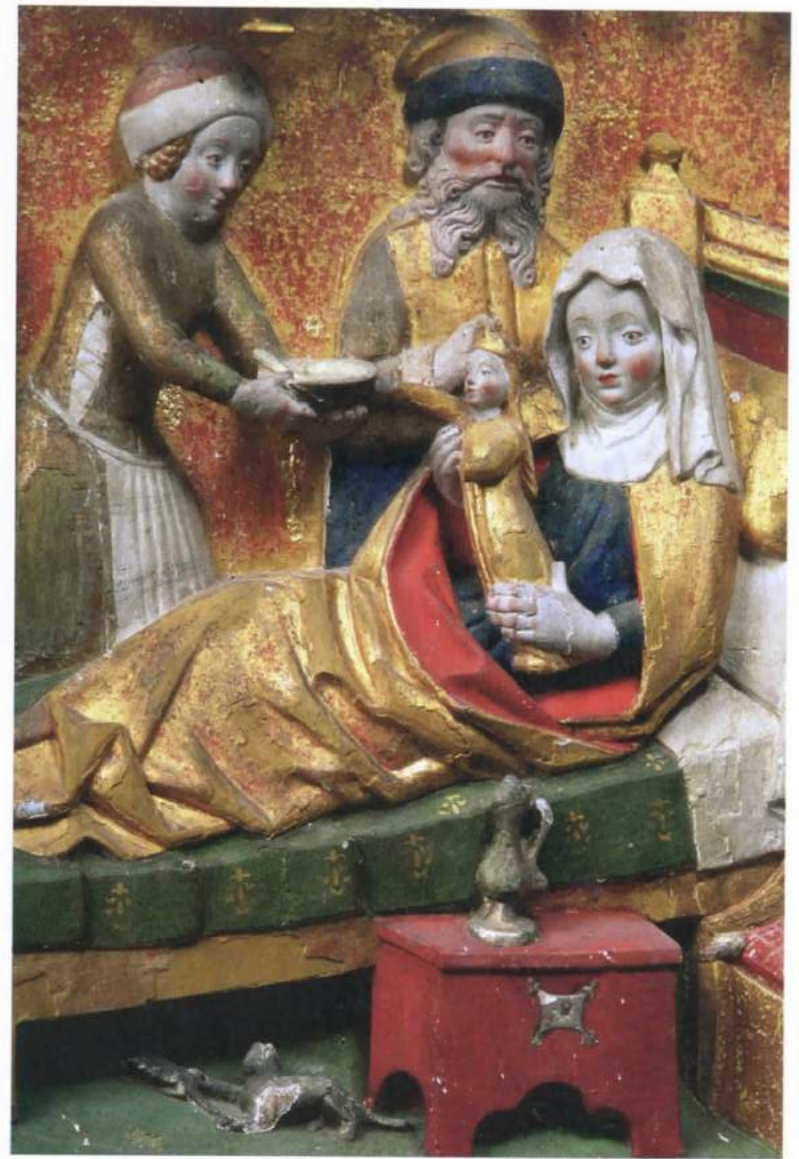


Fig. 7. Northern German workshop, Birth of Virgin Mary, third quarter of the 15th century. Östra Ny altarpiece, Östergötland, Sweden. Photo Lennart Karlsson.



Fig. 8. Albertus Pictor, *Presentation of Virgin Mary*, fourth quarter of the 15th century. Mural in Bromma Church, Uppland, Sweden. Photo Anu Mänd.

of an unclean creature, such as a fly,²⁷ or disguised in some other way.²⁸ The moral message of the images could be the following: the Devil, in the form of a mouse, is secretly witnessing holy events, such as the birth of the Virgin Mary or the death of St Elizabeth, and trying to capture the souls of saints in these vulnerable moments. But the cat – a good hunter – prevents him. The mouser under the bed of Constantine (figs. 3–4) may emphasise the message that the three noblemen in the background, whose innocence was revealed to the Emperor by St Nicholas, were imprisoned on false charges, due to the plotting of the Evil One.

Another possible way to interpret the presence of the mouser in these images is to analyse the spatial context in which the cat occurs: in the majority of cases, this is the bedchamber, the most intimate room in a household. Several late medieval panel paintings and murals indicate that by the 15th century (in



Fig. 9. A cat with its prey under the staircase. Detail of the *Presentation of Virgin Mary* in Bromma Church (cf. fig. 8). Photo Anu Mänd.

Italy, even somewhat earlier) the cat in art had developed into a symbol of domesticity. True, it shared this function with its rival, the dog, but dogs are normally to be found in reception halls and other rooms that display one's status, whereas the cat is usually in the kitchen (the female space) or in the bedchamber, the innermost private space.²⁹ It seems that one of the functions of the cat was to emphasise the intimacy, comfort and warmth of the home atmosphere.

Late medieval (religious) images, particularly those produced in the Low Countries, have frequently been described as "realistic", full of familiar details and objects. Of course, this "realism" must not be understood as a means used by artists to reflect or "document" the surrounding physical world, but as a vehicle of visual communication, as a cultural construct that depends on the cultural values of the time of the creation of a particular artwork.³⁰ Small details or figures (including animals) that were added in the margins of the main

scene often had a humorous undertone. These marginal figures, engaged in some kind of daily activity or placed in a spatial setting familiar to medieval viewers, assisted viewers to better remember the sacred story represented in the main scene, as well as conveying its didactic-moral message.³¹

There are several images with cats (and dogs) in this kind of humoristic-didactic role. For example, in the “Last Supper” (1315–19) by Pietro Lorenzetti in the lower church of the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi, a kitchen is added to the solemn dining hall, visually separated by a painted wall. In contrast to the biblical event taking place in the main scene, the view into the kitchen reveals a setting that can by no means be characterised as holy: servants are washing dishes, a dog is licking the plates on the floor and a cat, with its eyes closed, is enjoying the warmth of a fire.³²

In late 15th and the early 16th century images, the cat begins to occur in the home environment more frequently, particularly in illustrated manuscripts. For instance, the month of February in the breviary (1510–20) of Cardinal Grimani depicts a simple peasant’s cottage: a family has gathered around a fire, a woman is spinning, a boy is urinating into the snow, and a tabby cat is sitting at the threshold.³³ There, the animal has no symbolic connotation: the viewer recognizes it as a regular member of the peasant household and part of their daily life. The same can be said about the month of January in an early 16th century Flemish calendar, where a rather fat cat (as such, indicating a wealthy household) is looking at a maid and a kitchen table, expecting to be treated to something tasty.³⁴

One of the earliest representations of a cat in a bedchamber is a fresco in the apse of Orvieto Cathedral, depicting the “Birth of the Virgin” (c. 1370–80).³⁵ The sacred event takes place in a homely atmosphere, accentuated by two domestic animals, a cat and a dog. A white cat is tugging on a tablecloth, trying to get some of the delicious food meant for St Anne, who is trying to regain her strength after childbirth. A dog, in the lower right corner, is chewing on a bone. The saint, the midwife and the maids are paying no attention to the animals – these form an inseparable part of the household and there is nothing unusual or unnatural in their presence in the bedchamber.

A cat and a dog can also be seen in the miniature by Jan van Eyck in the Turin-Milan Hours depicting the “Birth of St John the Baptist” (1426–28).³⁶

The interior of the bedchamber looks very “realistic”; it is full of objects characteristic of and familiar to a well-off household: a bed with a baldachin, a chest with textiles and other commodities, a table with a jug and glasses, and so forth. The cat and the dog in the lower part of the image are not fighting but eating peacefully next to each other. The entire scene looks idyllic, full of peace and harmony. In the “Virgin and Child” by Petrus Christus, completed about 1450, one can see a tiny white cat in the background, warming its back at a fireplace, which emphasises the cosiness of the room.³⁷ There, again, holy figures are represented in an intimate, domestic setting easily recognizable to viewers and, as such, assisting in their devotional practices and strengthening their emotional bond with the sacred story.

The question is whether we can also interpret the cat as a symbol of domesticity in the altarpieces of Notke and Rode. On the one hand, this seems possible. After all, the other details that were left out of the same scene by Rode – the chamber pot and slippers of Emperor Constantine – are a part of the context of the bedchamber and have no symbolic meaning. Likewise, the cat under the deathbed of St Elizabeth could stress the intimacy of the bedchamber and be viewed as part of her household and the female space. The same may be true for the altarpieces of Boeslunde and Östra Ny. The cat in the Bromma murals, however, does not fit well in this category: there, the mouser seems to function as the guardian of the temple and as a predator of evil forces. It is also noteworthy that, in most of the western European examples, including those described above, the cat in the bedchamber is not chasing mice but resting near the fire or eating food that is served to it. Therefore, I agree with the first interpretation: that the cat in the Tallinn (and Scandinavian) altarpieces does indeed carry a religious symbolism: it is a good hunter who catches the Devil and evil spirits.

Like several other animals, the cat in late medieval art functioned as a polysemic sign: it could have a good or a bad connotation. One does not always have to search for religious symbolism – sometimes a cat is just a cat. It is evident that each image should be analysed on the basis of its temporal and geographical context, the commissioners and potential viewers, and the cultural codes of the time.

- 1 The scene (like all scenes in the second view of the altarpiece) is provided with a Middle Low German inscription: *Hir worden de suluen rider vnschuldighen ghevungen vnd sunte nycolaus openbarde syck den keser se los to gheuen.*
- 2 Mänd 2012: fig. 5.
- 3 About the altarpiece, see Plathe & Bruun 2010: 124–128.
- 4 Öberg 2009: 30.
- 5 The best example of this is the six-volume collection *A Cultural History of Animals*, Oxford, New York 2007.
- 6 See the webpages with references to relevant literature: The Medieval Bestiary. Animals in the Middle Ages: <http://www.bestiary.ca>; The Medieval Animal Data-Network (MAD): <http://www.imareal.sbg.ac.at/mad>, or <http://www.imareal.sbg.ac.at/animalwikiz>. On the MAD, see also Choyke 2009: 33–36.
- 7 Resl 2007: 179–180.
- 8 Resl 2007: 195.
- 9 On these topics, see Blaschitz 1992, Engels 1999, Bobis 2001, Zuffi 2007.
- 10 Metzler 2009: 16–32, especially 18–26; Bobis 2001: 177–210.
- 11 Ferguson 1977: 14; Bobis 2001: 101–108.
- 12 Pascua 2007: 101.
- 13 Reeves 1997: 129.
- 14 Metzler 2009: 31.
- 15 Account book of the warden of the Great Guild in Tallinn, 1508–1576 (Foliant H), Academic library of the University of Latvia in Riga, Dept. of Manuscripts and Rare Books, Ms 14: fol. 3.
- 16 Mänd, Leimus & Männisalu 2011: 319.
- 17 Metzler 2009: 31.
- 18 Metzler 2009: 18; Jones 2002: 39.
- 19 The most frequently depicted animals had a special meaning in Christian symbolism and heraldry: the lamb, the lion, the snake, the deer, the dog, the ox and others, as well as fantastic animals, such as the dragon and the unicorn.
- 20 See e.g. Catalogue of Illustrated Manuscripts, British Library: <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts> (Royal 12 C XIX, f. 36v; Royal 12 F XIII, f. 43; Sloane 3544, f. 20v) [last access 12.03.2012].
- 21 Salisbury 1994: 7, 14–15. The Latin names of the cat are *catus* and *musio*. In his *Etymologiae*, Isidore of Seville explains that the cat received its name (*musio*) because it was the enemy of the mouse (*mus*).
- 22 Blaschitz 1992: 589; Zuffi 2007: 15; Jones 2002: 41.
- 23 See Metzler 2009: 28–30, figs. 7–9; Zuffi 2007: 62–63, 66–67, 88–89, 330–331.

- 24 Metzler 2009: 18–20; Jones 2002: 38–39.
- 25 Ferguson 1977: 24; LCI, vol. 3: 234–235; S. Tucker, ChristStory Rat and Mouse Page. ChristStory Christian Bestiary, 1998: <http://ww2.netnitco.net/users/legendo1/rat.htm> [last access 12.03.2012].
- 26 *Mittelalterliche Kunst* 1979: back cover (information about this altarpiece: 19–20, no. 14).
- 27 On 15th century altarpieces, see Mellinkoff 1993, vol. 1: 52, vol. 2: figs. I.72, II.14, II.41, VIII.13.
- 28 For example, in 2011, a face of the Devil, hidden in the clouds, was discovered in Giotto's fresco depicting the death of St Francis in the Basilica of St Francis of Assisi; see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8872780/Smirking-face-of-the-Devil-discovered-in-Giotto-fresco.html> [last access 12.03.2012].
- 29 Bobis 2001: 58–59.
- 30 Moxey 1996: 15–17.
- 31 Jaritz 2002: 333–334.
- 32 Zuffi 2007: 58–59.
- 33 Zuffi 2007: 68–69.
- 34 Bobis 2001: 60.
- 35 Zuffi 2007: 60–61.
- 36 Zuffi 2007: 78–79.
- 37 Zuffi 2007: 82–83.

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Account book of the warden of the Great Guild in Tallinn, 1508–1576 (Foliant H), Academic library of the University of Latvia in Riga, Dept. of Manuscripts and Rare Books, Ms 14.

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