



Early Social Performance

CHRIST ON A DONKEY

**PALM SUNDAY, TRIUMPHAL ENTRIES,
AND BLASPHEMOUS PAGEANTS**

by
MAX HARRIS

CHRIST ON A DONKEY

Early Social Performance

This series publishes monographs, themed collections of essays, and editions relating to performance in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period that includes, but is not confined to, drama, visual art, music, and dance. It addresses those areas of social performance which slip down the conventional disciplinary cracks, such as processions, tournaments, proclamations, and other courtly, civic, and rural ritual practices. It also considers treatments of, for instance, clothing, poetry, architecture, sport, story-telling, and any other human social activity which can be construed as performative.

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ARC_{HUMANITIES PRESS}

To Ann, again

"Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:
'Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.' "

(Proverbs 31:28-29)

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
ANF	The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to AD 325
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis
CCM	Corpus Consuetudinum Monasticarum
<i>CCMET</i>	<i>The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre</i>
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
<i>EMD</i>	<i>European Medieval Drama</i>
FC	Fathers of the Church
HBS	Henry Bradshaw Society
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
Knapen	Knapen and Valvekens, eds., <i>Palmezelprocessie</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
<i>Lib. Cens.</i>	<i>Liber Censuum</i>
<i>Lib. pont.</i>	<i>Liber pontificalis</i>
LPPTS	Library of the Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society
MGH,DRIG	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Diplomatum regum et imperatorum Germaniae
MGH,E	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae
MGH,FIGA,USSE	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Fontes iuris Germanici antiqui in usum scholarum separatim editi
MGH,L	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Legum
MGH,PLMA	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Poetarum Latinorum medii aevi
MGH,SRG,NS	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorum rerum Germanicarum, Nova Series
MGH,SS	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores
MGH,SS,USSE	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi
<i>MP</i>	<i>Mercurius Politicus</i>
NPNE,FS	A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series
NPNE,SS	A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series
OAE	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
<i>ODB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium</i>

<i>OLD</i>	<i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus [...] series Graeca</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus [...] series Latina</i>
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SRG	Scriptores rerum Germanicarum
SRL	Scriptores rerum Livonicarum
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TTH	Translated Texts for Historians
TTH,LS	Translated Texts for Historians, Latin Series
Wenger	Wenger, ed., <i>Palmesel</i>

NOTE ON FORM

I HAVE MODERNIZED fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century English spelling and grammar. Since translations from foreign languages, however ancient the original, are rendered into modern English, it seems only fair to grant the reader the same degree of accessibility to early modern English.

For similar reasons, I use the terms “Byzantine Empire” and “Holy Roman Empire” to refer to the eastern and western Roman empires after the times of Constantine and Charlemagne respectively. In their day, each power preferred the exclusive designation “the Empire,” but the non-specialist modern reader may prefer a clear distinction.

I have adopted two distinct ways of citing online sources. When directing readers to a specific web page, I have provided full bibliographical data. When multiple websites offer pertinent text, images, or video, I have provided select keywords.

Finally, scholarly convention requires me to note that “Mark” signifies “the author of the gospel traditionally ascribed to Mark.” Similar caution applies to “Matthew,” “Luke,” and “John.” Unless otherwise identified, biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

INTRODUCTION: FROM POMP TO DONKEYS

ON PALM SUNDAY, 1558, a prosperous English merchant by the name of Anthony Jenkinson was in Moscow, representing both his queen, Elizabeth I, and an international trading enterprise known as the Muscovy Company. While there, he saw Moscow's annual "donkey walk," like many other Palm Sunday processions an elaborate outdoor liturgical rite recalling Christ's entry into Jerusalem on a donkey five days before his crucifixion. Despite the name of the event, no donkey took part. The metropolitan archbishop of Moscow and all Russia was led in procession seated on "a horse, covered with white linen down to the ground, his ears being made long with the same cloth, like to an ass's ears." The archbishop, in full pontifical regalia, played the part of Christ, while a white horse, wearing white linen ass's ears, played the part of the donkey. Holding the end of the horse's rein was no less a dignitary than Tsar Ivan IV (1547–1584), also known to history as Ivan the Terrible.¹

Three centuries later, in 1865, a Russian realist painter, Vyacheslav Schwartz, completed a large oil painting called *Palm Sunday in Moscow under Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich: The Procession of the Patriarch on a Donkey*.² The painting, which now hangs in the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, depicts in meticulous detail a later instance of the same processional tradition (Fig. 1). A grey-bearded boyar guides the reins of the patriarch's horse, while Tsar Alexis I (1645–1676), holding the tasseled end of the rein in his right hand and a palm in his left hand, walks ahead. The metropolitan archbishop of Moscow and all Russia, whose predecessor had been elevated to the status of patriarch in 1589, sits atop the white horse. Crowned and richly vested, he holds a golden, three-beamed orthodox cross in his right hand and a gilded gospel book in his left. The animal's costume remains the same: a full-length white linen cloth, topped with long, white, pointed donkey's ears.

Moscow's horse with donkey's ears is one of the more colourful cases of historical dissonance between an enacted representation of Christ's entry and the biblical story it was believed to represent. The horse's false ears testified to the shared conviction of those taking part that Christ rode a donkey. The white horse bore annual witness to the fact that no archbishop of Moscow deigned to ride a real donkey in the city's Palm Sunday procession. Nor did a tsar ever lead one.

A more modest Palm Sunday celebration takes place each year in the village of San José de Chiquitos in lowland Bolivia. There, a life-size wooden image of Christ on a donkey, mounted on a low, wheeled platform, is the star of the show. In the late afternoon, a crowd of people accompany the image through the village to the church, where "Jesus of Nazareth" and "his little donkey" are received "with a shower of yellow flowers, the fluttering of palms, the chiming of bells, songs proclaiming him the son of David ...

¹ Morgan and Coote, *Early*, 2:364.

² Vereshchagina, *Viacheslav*, 75–79.



Figure 1 Vyacheslav Schwartz, *Palm Sunday in Moscow under Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich: The Procession of the Patriarch on a Donkey*. Oil on canvas, 1865. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. Wikimedia Commons. (The Yorck Project (2002), 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei (DVD-ROM), distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing.)

and the sound of bass drums and violins” (Fig. 2).³ The tradition of wheeled processional images of Christ on a donkey probably travelled to South America with German-speaking Jesuit missionaries in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Christ on a Donkey explores Palm Sunday processions and other public representations of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem as both spectacular instances of processional theatre and highly charged interpretations of the biblical narrative to which they claim allegiance. Biblical scholars generally understand Christ’s donkey as a sign that he came neither as a warrior nor as one drawn to the trappings of power, but in peace and humility. A wheeled wooden image of Christ on a donkey is arguably consistent with this interpretation. A Palm Sunday procession that gives pride of place to a high-ranking member of the clergy on a white horse is not.

Even more at odds with the biblical model are those triumphal royal entries that borrow the language and iconography of Palm Sunday, allowing a king to play the role of Christ while celebrating military victory. Charlemagne, king of the Franks, entered Rome for the first time on Easter Saturday, April 2, 774. Fresh from military victories against the Lombards, Charlemagne was met outside the city by young boys carrying palm and olive branches and singing acclamations. As Charlemagne and the pope entered the Basilica of Saint Peter, clergy and monks sang the Palm Sunday antiphon, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” The ceremony’s allusions to Christ’s entry into Jerusalem not only set a precedent for subsequent appropriations of the language and iconography of Palm Sunday by rulers of church and state, but also for elite Palm Sunday processions themselves to appropriate the language and iconography of royal entries.

3 Cambara Flores, “Semana.”



**Figure 2 Palm Sunday, San José de Chiquitos, Bolivia (2011).
Photograph by Limber Lionel Cambara Flores.**

The narrative arc of my book moves from this dissonant mingling of elite genres toward the simpler and more congruent use of wheeled images of Christ on a donkey. Although I have respected chronological order within each chapter and, to a lesser extent, within each cluster of chapters, I have arranged the parts themselves according to their place in this thematic arc.

In the first half of Part 1, I evaluate the phenomenon of triumphal pomp in selective royal (and not quite royal) entries from the time of Charlemagne to that of Oliver Cromwell and in papal entries, some of them explicitly celebrating military triumph, from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. In the second half of Part 1, I assess the same phenomenon in Palm Sunday processions. The first surviving record of a Palm Sunday procession comes from late fourth-century Jerusalem. Neither this nor any other record of such a procession during the next four and a half centuries betrays any sign of triumphal pomp. Palm Sunday processions only began to resemble royal entries some eighty years after Charlemagne rode into Rome.

Part 2 serves as the hinge on which my story turns from pomp to donkeys. It does so by focusing on two arguably unique moments in the entangled history of Palm Sunday and triumphal entries. The first took place in Bristol on October 24, 1656. James Nayler, a leader of the first generation of Quakers in England, approached the city on horseback, accompanied by a small group of men and women reportedly singing “holy, holy, holy.” It was raining heavily, and the Quakers trudged knee-deep through mud in the part of the road where only horses and carts usually travelled. Charged with “horrid blasphemy,” Nayler was tried in London by the Puritan-dominated parliament. Found

guilty, he narrowly escaped the death penalty and was condemned instead to a series of painful humiliations: he was pilloried, his tongue was bored through with a red-hot iron (Fig. 10), and his forehead was branded with the letter B for blasphemer. He was then returned to Bristol, where he was made to enter the city seated backwards on a horse, after which he was whipped through the streets and finally imprisoned. With few exceptions, historians have assumed that Nayler's entry into Bristol was a deliberate "reenactment of Christ's entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday."⁴ The records, I believe, suggest a different reading: Nayler's entry is better understood not as a shabby imitation of the first Palm Sunday, but as a muddy parody of triumphal royal entries.

The second arguably unique moment is Jesus of Nazareth's own entry into Jerusalem. Biblical scholars have come to understand Jesus's entry as a parody of the imperial and other military entries of his own time. Stanley Hauerwas describes Jesus's entry into Jerusalem as "an unmistakable political act," one that "parodies the entry of kings and their armies."⁵ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan see it as "a deliberate lampoon" of such entries,⁶ including that of Pontius Pilate, who probably rode into Jerusalem "seated upon a horse or riding a chariot," and accompanied by "something on the order of one thousand" cavalry and foot soldiers.⁷ Jesus's entry was not the "triumphal entry" imagined by a long tradition of later Christian rhetoric and processional performance; it was "nontriumphal,"⁸ "atriumphal,"⁹ or even "anti-triumphal."¹⁰ James Nayler's rain-soaked parody of royal entries may have been more faithful to the biblical story of Jesus of Nazareth's entry into Jerusalem than were any number of royal triumphs or elite Palm Sunday processions.

If not pomp, then what? One might suppose that live donkeys would have played a major part in Palm Sunday processions over the centuries, but to the best of my knowledge the earliest surviving record of anyone riding a live donkey in a Palm Sunday procession is found only in 1424. In that year, a brief entry in the chapter accounts of Udine cathedral records payment of "twelve soldi [pence]" on Palm Sunday "to the boy who went on the ass in place of Christ."¹¹ The question naturally arises of why, if all Christendom believed that Jesus rode a donkey, so few live donkeys and so many white horses were ridden in Palm Sunday processions. The first half of Part 3 finds the answer at least in part in medieval bestiaries and in a forged papal document known as the *Donation of Constantine*. These chapters also note the absence of triumphalism from Palm Sunday processions under Muslim rule in Jerusalem, where a donkey was first ridden in liturgical procession in the late fifteenth century.

⁴ Loewenstein, *Treacherous*, 227.

⁵ Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 181–82.

⁶ Borg and Crossan, *Last*, 32.

⁷ Kinman, *Jesus*, 160–72.

⁸ Duff, "March," 55.

⁹ Kinman, *Jesus*, 90–122; Blomberg, "Matthew," 65.

¹⁰ Crossan, *Jesus*, 128; Borg and Crossan, *Last*, 32.

¹¹ Vale, "Liturgia," 29, citing the "libri dei Dapiferi del Capitolo di Aquileia (Udine, Archivio Capitolare)."

Life-size wooden images of Christ on a donkey arrived on the Palm Sunday processional scene nearly five hundred years before live donkeys. Gerhard of Augsburg's *Life of Saint Ulrich*, written within two decades of the death of Ulrich, prince-bishop of Augsburg, in 973, reports that Ulrich walked in procession each Palm Sunday in the company of "an image of the Lord seated on an ass."¹² This is believed to be the earliest surviving record of a class of processional images known to English-speaking scholars by the German name of *Palmesel* (palm donkey). The timing is noteworthy. Introduced less than two hundred years after Charlemagne rode into Rome and around a hundred years after elite Palm Sunday processions began to resemble royal entries, *palmesels* offered a strikingly different mode of representing Christ's entry into Jerusalem. Not only were they the first processional images to acknowledge that Christ rode a donkey, but they also avoided the urge to visual splendour evident in other processional images of the period. Moreover, they were mounted on wheels and pulled at street level rather than held aloft or carried in ornate portable shrines on the shoulders of their bearers. In the second half of Part 3, I trace the history of *palmesels*, which were for many centuries a popular feature of the processional theatre of Palm Sunday in Germany and its immediate neighbours. In many towns, children were given rides on the donkey behind Jesus. In Biberach, Palm Sunday with the *palmesel* was known as "the day of the humble king."¹³

Palmesels were also victims of religious violence. Hussite radicals threw a *palmesel* from the battlements of Prague's cathedral in 1421. A century later, during outbreaks of Zwinglian iconoclasm in and around Zurich, *palmesels* were denounced as "idols" and burned, hacked into pieces, used as firewood, or drowned in lakes. During the late eighteenth-century Catholic Enlightenment, in southern Germany, Austria, and Poland, *palmesels* were condemned as "superstitious" and destroyed or forcibly retired by order of regional archbishops. Most of those that survive have found homes in museums; some are on display in their original churches. A growing number, including a few new models, are taking part in Palm Sunday processions as far apart as Tokarnia (Poland), Thaur (Austria), Ammerschwihr (Alsace), and lowland Bolivia. The final chapter of Part 3 includes an account of my own participation in two such Palm Sunday processions in the Austrian Tirol.

The narrative arc of *Christ on a Donkey* thus moves, not without its bumps and detours, from elite dissonance to a greater (but never complete) popular accord between professed beliefs and processional practice. A curious theme emerges: those embodied representations of Christ's entry into Jerusalem that were, at one time or another, labelled blasphemous, idolatrous, or superstitious by those in power were arguably most faithful to the biblical narrative of Palm Sunday, while those staged with the purpose of exalting those in power and celebrating military triumph were arguably blasphemous pageants.

¹² Gerhard, *Vita*, 124–25.

¹³ Schilling, "Religiösen," 120.

