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The True Cross in Künzelsau
Devotional Relics and the 'Absent' Crucifixion Scene of the Künzelsau Corpus Christi Play

Abstract: For some time now, theater historians have been puzzled by the absence of a crucifixion scene in the 'Künzelsau Corpus Christi Play'. In its place, an adoration of the cross ('adoratio crucis') occurred, in which a priest displayed a cross to the audience. Based on connections between the 1479 play text and the Künzelsau procession of holy relics documented for 1499, it is apparent that the cross in question was a reliquary crucifix containing what contemporaries believed to be a fragment of the True Cross. The crucifixion was thus not absent from the play, but rather represented through other, non-mimetic means. The essay reconstructs the role of the reliquary crucifix in procession and play, which augmented the presence of the Eucharist on stage in demonstrating the authority of the Künzelsau clergy.

The absence of a crucifixion scene in the 1479 Corpus Christi play of Künzelsau, a small town of the Hohenlohe region situated at the time in the Würzburg diocese, has long puzzled theater historians. The savior’s death on the cross comprised the ultimate sine qua non for medieval Christianity, not only in the sacrament of the Eucharist, but also in countless forms of popular piety. In the devotional theater of medieval Germany, passion plays (Passionsspiele) were the traditional genre to represent Christ’s act of salvation on stage, while Corpus Christi plays (Fronleichnamsspiele) made Christ’s sacrifice present by parading the consecrated host through the streets of the local community in theophoric (‘God-bearing’) processions. Künzelsau’s missing crucifixion is all the more unique, however, because over the course of the later middle ages several German Corpus Christi plays broke with a purely processional frame of performance and incorporated dramatized enactments of the crucifixion, allowing their audiences to experience Christ’s suffering vicariously. The Corpus Christi play of Freiburg im Breisgau is the best-known example of this tendency, in which the passion section of the procession eventually emerged as its own scenic unit, performed on a fixed stage before the local minster following
the completion of the local procession.\(^1\) The Friedberg Corpus Christi procession also ended with a separate performance of the passion, although it is difficult to say which component developed first, the passion scenes or the procession.\(^2\) The Künzelsau director’s manuscript (Regiehandschrift), which preserves at least three distinct redactions of the play, clearly shows the same expansionary tendencies. Later scribes inserted several scenes to the original core of the play, particularly in the so-called ‘e-supplement’ (e-Beilage), which adds Christ’s appearances before Annas, Caiphas, and Herod and also augments existing sections with Pontius Pilate.\(^3\) Yet despite this accumulation of additional material, which otherwise aligns the Künzelsau Corpus Christi tradition with developments in Freiburg and Friedberg, subsequent revisions of the Künzelsau manuscript preserved the original complex of passion scenes from the original 1479 text. Here, in place of the crucifixion, the play features an adoratio crucis scene, in which a priest mounts the stage, sings the antiphon ‘Ecce lignum crucis’ from the Good Friday liturgy with choral accompaniment, and invites the audience to venerate the cross upon which Christ hung.

Given our expanded understanding of medieval performance practices in recent years,\(^4\) we must ask ourselves whether the apparent inability to explain the appearance of a seemingly ‘wrong’ scene, i.e. the adoration of the cross, at the salvational climax of the Künzelsau Corpus Christi Play is rooted in the limited presuppositions of twentieth-century theater historical research, rather than in any presumed fault in the play’s design. Until recently, past approaches to German Fronleichnamsspiele have been hampered by taxonomic distinctions between ‘play’, the mimetic role play captured in the rhyming verses and stage directions of surviving dramatic texts, and ‘procession’, the non-mimetic, but no less performative symbolic actions undertaken by clergy and parishoners as they accompanied the sacrament on its route through the local community on the Feast of Corpus Christi. While research on the Künzelsau play has generally acknowledged the play’s processional frame – actors in costume proceeded with clergy and audience through the town and mounted platforms at three separate stations to perform their parts – the incomplete consideration of late medieval processional culture in the interpretation of the adoratio crucis scene

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4 Cf. among others Kasten and Fischer-Lichte (eds.), Transformationen des Religiösen; Eming, Lehmann and Maassen (eds.), Mediale Performanzen; Stevenson, Performance, Cognitive Theory, and Devotional Culture.
has left researchers blind to its function for local devotional practice. Compounding this problem has been the failure to clearly identify the Künzelsau parish church of St. John the Baptist as the play’s sponsor. As organizers of the procession, the clergy of the Künzelsau Johanneskirche had full and unfettered access to the parish church treasure (Kirchenschatz), not just liturgical objects for the celebration of mass, but also its own collection of holy relics. As documented for the town’s 1499 reliquary procession on the Feast of St. John the Baptist, the Künzelsau collection of relics was smaller, but just as significant for local religious culture as the reliquary treasures of cities like Nuremberg, Vienna, and Halle, whose annual public display drew large crowds in the late middle ages. As we will see, Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was absent only in the play’s manuscript, not in performance: the ‘missing’ crucifixion was the natural location for the display of Künzelsau’s most sacred object, a reliquary cross containing several Eucharistic relics, including a fragment of the Holy Rood.

The Disputed Adoratio Crucis Scene

The play’s disputed adoratio crucis section follows upon the presentation of three living tableaux featuring central moments of Christ’s passion: the savior’s thorny crowning, his flagellation, and his bearing of the cross. A subsequent fifth scene with Mary as mater dolorosa, also presented as a living tableau, rounds out the play’s core passion section. As with nearly all scenes of the play, each tableau is framed for audience reception by the introductory exegetical comments of the rector processionis, the ‘director of the procession’. The adoratio scene is unique, however: here, a priest assumes the rector’s exegetical function, immediately connecting the scene to sacramental worship. The corresponding excerpt, which begins here with the preceding cross bearing, illustrates the resulting shift in the play’s reception frame:

Accedat Salvator cum cruce
    cum duobus militibus.
Rector Processionis
    legat ad populum:
    ulna ipse portans
    crucem legat:
    Sehent an, ir frawen vnd ir man,

Vnd lat das euch zu hertzen gan,
Das got trug ein crewtz so swer
Durch alle sunderin vnd sunder,
Vnd wolt dar an gemartert werden
Der christenhait zu frumen hy uff erden,
Vnd wolt dar an leiden den dat sein.
Das solt ir jm alle danckber sein.

Accedat vnus sacerdos
de sacerdotibus, Et laycus
vnus cum eo portans
signum crucis,
Tunc idem Sacerdos tenens
crucem jn manu Et cantat:
Ecce lignum crucis jn quo salus
mundi pependit.
venite, adoremus ter.

Chorus Respondeat:
Beati jn maculati jn via
qui ambulant jn l<ege domini>.

Tunc idem Sacerdos legat ad populum:
Nu sehent, liben lewt,
Das tzaichen des hailigen creütz hewt.
Got, der starb dar an allen spot
Vmb vnser willen laid er des dats nat.
Das solt ir jn ewern hertzen tragen
Vnd jn ewern sunden nit vertzagen,
Das ir nit verdint gotes zorn
Vnd sein leiden nit werd an euch verlorn. (ll. 3690–705)

The Savior with the cross shall come forward with two soldiers. The Director of the Procession shall read to the audience; while carrying the cross in the crook of his arm he shall recite: Behold, you women and you men, and let your hearts be moved that God bore a cross so heavy for the sake of all sinners, both female and male, and wished to be martyred thereon for the benefit of Christendom here on earth and wished to suffer his death upon it. You should all be grateful to him for this.

One of the priests shall come forward and a layman shall come with him, carrying the sign of the cross. Then the same priest, holding the cross in his hands, sings: Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the salvation of the world. Come, let us adore him [three times].

The choir shall respond: Blessed are those whose path is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.

Then the same priest shall recite to the audience: Behold now today, dear people, the sign of the Holy Cross. God died thereupon. For our sake, he suffered the torment of
death. This you should bear in your hearts and not despair of your sins, so that you will not earn God’s wrath nor fail to profit from his suffering.

The antiphon ‘Ecce lignum crucis’, belonging to the Good Friday liturgy, additionally links the adoratio acoustically to the commemoration of the crucifixion as part of Easter worship. There is no interpolation of later material here: together with the three passion scenes and the subsequent Marian lament, the adoratio crucis is unmistakably part of the C section of the original manuscript of 1479 and hence part of the original design of the play. We must thus treat the passion complex of scenes as one unit.

Previous attempts to explain the absence of a crucifixion scene in Künzelsau have generally focused on two issues: 1) the constraints of processional performance vs. the greater dramatic possibilities of a fixed stage; and 2) the assumed tension between the imagined presence of Christ on stage and the savior’s real presence in the Eucharist. According to Wilhelm Breuer, the portrayal of the crucifixion would be impossible during a procession on foot, since a stationary cross could not move with the players, and others generalize this view without specific reference to Künzelsau. Yet the Corpus Christi play of Zerbst contains scenes with a fixed cross, such as Longinus’s piercing of Jesus’s side, and the Zerbst rector explicitly states during the crucifixion scene that a cross has been erected. Ursula Schulze and Rainer Warning see instead a reluctance on the part of the plays’ organizers to depict the crucifixion mimaetically when Christ’s body was already present in a form that commanded respect of medieval parishioners, namely in the Eucharistic host, which was likely present on stage during the adoratio. Without invoking the sacrament per se, Ralph Blasting has similarly suggested that the solemn nature of the feast prevented any depiction of violence. However, given that the additional Künzelsau passion scenes fully emphasize Christ’s ‘grose marter vnd pein’ (‘great martyring and pain’; l. 3675), the supposed line separating the representation of the savior’s broken body from the simultaneous presence of the host seems thin.

In short, all of these proposals place medieval theatrical practice in opposition to the tradition of theophoric processions on the Feast of Corpus Christi. Such an opposition creates artificial dichotomies in the valences of medieval popular piety. Indeed, the processional culture of pre-Enlightenment Europe

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8 Cf. Ivanceanu and Hoflehner, Prozessionstheater, p. 28.
9 ‘Das krewcze ist aufgericht’ (Zerbster Prozessionsspiel, l. 283).
was itself inherently theatrical; tableaux vivants and portable statuary appeared in Holy Week and Corpus Christi processions throughout Europe, reinforcing rather than detracting from sacramental devotion. In particular, previous approaches to the Künzelsau play neglect medieval processions’ traditional incorporation of devotional ‘props,’ i.e., relics, icons, and other objects of veneration. [superscript 12] In contrast to modern theater practice, however, these material objects were not subordinate to the mimetic events on stage; rather, the theatricality of the event served their display and heightened their auratic presence.

Late Medieval Processional Culture and the Künzelsau Context

The central object of all Corpus Christi processions was the consecrated host, usually borne in an ornate monstrance or tabernacle by a member of the clergy, who walked with solemn gait at the middle of the procession beneath a canopy, frequently referred to in German documents as the Himmel (‘heaven’). Fresh greenery adorned the streets along the procession route, and youths, commonly dressed as angels, strewed rose petals before the sacrament. In particular, previous approaches to the Künzelsau play neglect medieval processions’ traditional incorporation of devotional ‘props,’ i.e., relics, icons, and other objects of veneration. In contrast to modern theater practice, however, these material objects were not subordinate to the mimetic events on stage; rather, the theatricality of the event served their display and heightened their auratic presence.

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the crown of St. Helen. By the late fifteenth century, the procession of Nuremberg’s Hospice of the Holy Spirit had begun to pass through the city’s St. Lorenz church, where the sacristan was instructed to open the shrine of St. Deocar for viewing. In Bamberg, the procession included the heads of St. Kunigunde and Emperor Henry II; in Würzburg, the head of St. Kilian. In addition to the feast of Corpus Christi, moreover, the processional display of Eucharistic relics or related holy objects took place at other times in the liturgical calendar, such as the procession of the Holy Blood of Bruges (originally May 3, now Ascension), the Blutrritt (equestrian ‘blood ride’) in honor of the Holy Blood reliquary of Weingarten (the Friday immediately following Ascension), or the procession of the Holy Cross of Tournai (the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross on 14 September). The presence of relics in ceremonies of Eucharistic devotion did not detract from the host, but instead added to its aura. Indeed, reliquaries formed key interactive junctures between processions and their spectators, who became performers themselves in their prayers and venerative response before such objects.

The function of such processions varied. They afforded not only an opportunity for Eucharistic veneration – the period of eight days (‘octave’) between the Thursday of Corpus Christi and the following Thursday was the only period of the liturgical calendar when the laity could view the Eucharist unveiled – but also gave physical expression to the visible church and sanctified the space of the city along their routes. The path of participants often physically traced the ties that bound the late medieval city together as a Sakralgemeinschaft, a community founded upon civic religion. For the 1381 Corpus Christi procession in Würzburg, Künzelsau’s home diocese, representatives of the city’s clergy, guilds, and eight administrative quarters gathered in the cathedral and then traveled via the marketplace and along the city walls to other symbolic sites throughout the town, thus reproducing ‘the bonds of authority and dependence within and between the ecclesiastical and civic structures’.

However, processions could also demarcate boundaries that separated civic institutions rather than linked them, physically tracing spheres of influence.

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18 Cf. Löther, Prozessionen in spätmittelalterlichen Städten, p. 81.
Given that ecclesiastical institutions, city councilors, and local burghers frequently made competing claims on civic space, processional routes were at times the subject of delicate negotiations. Various groups fought over the right to sponsor their own procession, often resulting in multiple parades in larger cities. Nuremberg hosted a total of four Corpus Christi processions by the end of the fifteenth-century: the city’s two parish churches of St. Sebald and St. Lorenz, the Heilig-Geist-Spital, and the local Church of Our Lady (Frauenkirche) each sponsored its own event. In such cases, a particular procession might fulfill or develop a particular function in relation to the others: the prestigious positions of ‘guide’ (Führer), the two laymen who escorted the priest carrying the host in the Nuremberg processions, were reserved for city councilors; before serving as guide in the procession of St. Sebald, Nuremberg’s patron saint, council members customarily apprenticed as guide in the Frauenkirche procession. When only a single procession in a given city took place, increased jockeying among groups for the more prestigious positions closer to the sacrament was usually the result. As participation in an established procession conferred recognition in the social fabric of the community, city councilors did not always look kindly on petitions by new groups to join in the event; we know for example that the town council of Frankfurt proved reluctant to allow members of the local passion play confraternity to proceed in the city’s annual theophoric procession on the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene. In contrast to readings that interpret Corpus Christi processions as inherently integrative rituals around which the social body of medieval communities cohered, Miri Rubin has emphasized that processions could just as frequently expose the rifts within communal life, and Andrea Löther has similarly noted that some processions, when reserved for an exclusive circle of participants, distinguished them from other community members and reinforced their elite status. In all cases, a close examination of local sources is necessary to determine the symbolism and ritual function of any given procession.

Unfortunately, beyond the Künzelsau play text itself, little else is known about the local Corpus Christi tradition. No record of the procession route nor of specific participants survives. However, we can determine some rudimentary circumstances of the event based on knowledge of Künzelsau’s secular and religious institutions during the late fifteenth century. The town itself was quite

small, numbering an estimated 900 residents ca. 1500, and did not acquire the legal status of a Stadt (‘city’) until the eighteenth century.\footnote{On the following, cf. Wainwright, \textit{Studien zum deutschen Prozessionsspiel}, pp. 38–50.} Local craft trades seem to have been limited at this time to textiles and pottery. Most importantly, guilds, the key lay organizational unit of late medieval processions, did not emerge in Künzelsau until later in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, just as confraternities were also largely absent. Indeed, one of the play’s past editors has suggested that the town was too small to have mounted the Corpus Christi performance, proposing nearby Crailshaim, Schwäbisch Hall, or Rothenburg ob der Tauber as more likely homes for the play.\footnote{Cf. Reeves, ‘The Künzelsau Corpus Christi Play’, p. 120*.}

Nonetheless, Künzelsau was an important economic and ecclesiastical center for the surrounding Hohenlohe region, and there is no reason to doubt its ability to support the play and corresponding procession.\footnote{Cf. Blasting, ‘The Künzelsau Corpus Christi Play’, pp. 26–31.} A regional market took place every Thursday during the winter, and the town had the privilege of holding extended two-day markets on four occasions during the warmer months of the year.\footnote{On the following, cf. Wainwright, \textit{Studien zum deutschen Prozessionsspiel}, pp. 40–47.} Künzelsau was also a chapter seat within the diocese of Würzburg, one of only sixteen such rural chapters in the bishopric. The annual chapter meeting of regional clergy coincided with the first two-day market of the year, held two weeks after Maundy Thursday. Above all, late medieval processional culture was well established in the town. Each chapter meeting featured a theophoric procession with corresponding indulgences for attendance,\footnote{On the processional tradition of rural chapters in the Würzburg diocese, cf. Krieg, \textit{Die Landkapitel im Bistum Würzburg}, pp. 87, 93 and 106.} which contributed to the stream of visitors to the concurrent market as well. Following the loss of the chapter seat to neighboring Ingelfingen in 1487,\footnote{On the details, cf. Krieg, \textit{Die Landkapitel im Bistum Würzburg}, p. 23, note 1.} the community apparently felt the need for a replacement tradition that could similarly combine financial and spiritual profit. In 1499, it received permission from the Bishop of Würzburg to hold a reliquary procession with corresponding indulgences on the nativity feast of St. John the Baptist (June 24), patron saint of Künzelsau, which conveniently coincided with another of the town’s two-day markets.

were respected lay members of the community who were traditionally entrusted with the care of the poor. In some cases, they oversaw not only alms accounts, but also the overall parish expenditures, as was apparently the case in Künzelsau. In all instances, the Künzelsau almoners were affiliated with the town’s St. John parish and did not belong to a confraternity or ‘Society of St. John the Baptist’, as has been suggested.

These Heiligenpflegrechnungen document that the St. John parish sponsored an additional third procession on the Feast of Corpus Christi, one that was firmly established by 1474, five years before the initial fixing of the play text in 1479. Parish sponsorship is borne out by the Künzelsau play manuscript itself, which was discovered in the parish registry (Registratur) in the mid-nineteenth century, and since the most recent edition of the play by Peter Liebenow appeared in 1969, the manuscript has been united with a fascicle of identical format containing additional almoner expenditures from 1508. The records reveal expenditures for costumes as well as income generated by the processions, as seen in the following representative entries from 1474:

1. ‘Item 3 ß d umb leynonnt; dy hot man genommen zu dem Trachn’ (Neumann, no. 1999 – ‘3 silver pennies [Weiβpfennige] for linen which was used for the dragon’; Blasting, no. 3),

2. ‘Item 5 ß d umb 3 fel dem gerwer zu den kronen’ (Neumann, no. 2000 – ‘5 silver pennies for 3 pelts to the tanner for the crowns’; Blasting, no. 4),

leichnamsspiels (II)’. Cf. also the original publication of these records on a folded, unattached cardstock sheet, now lost in most cases, between pages XII and XIII of the older edition of the play by Schumann.


40 The recent history of this additional fascicle is unknown. Cf. the catalogue description of the manuscript in Bergmann, Katalog, no. 128, pp. 283–86, here p. 283. Unlike the Heiligenpflegrechnungsbücher examined by Liebenow and Neumann, the expenditure records attached to the play manuscript have not been studied for possible evidence of local Corpus Christi performances.

3. 'Item aber 10 ß d haben mir gesamet an der processen' (Neumann, no. 2004 – '10 silver pennies we collected again at the procession'; Blasting, no. 11),
4. 'Item 16 ß d haben mir gesamet an Santi / hans tag' ('16 silver pennies we collected on St. John’s Day'; Blasting, no. 12). 42

Although these entries are not dated, the disbursements for the dragon and crowns in the first two entries likely occurred sometime between 3 May and 2 July 1474, with Corpus Christi falling on 9 June. 43 Moreover, these items correspond directly to costumes required for the Corpus Christi play of 1479: The dragon likely refers to the dragon slain by St. George during the play’s 'Procession of Saints' (Künzelsauer Fronleichnamspiel, l. 4306), 44 while the crowns could be those of the three wise men (Künzelsauer Fronleichnamspiel, ll. 1663c–1998). 45 Meanwhile, the final two records, taken together, indicate that the procession held was distinct from the parish’s activities on the feast of John the Baptist, 46 i.e., the ‘processen’ documented in the third entry cannot have been an early version of the reliquary procession that became formalized in 1499.

To summarize, surviving evidence points to the existence of three distinct processions in Künzelsau in the latter half of the fifteenth century:
1. The procession of clergy from the Künzelsau chapter of the Würzburg diocese, held on the occasion of the annual chapter meeting two weeks after Maundy Thursday, i.e., sometime between April 2 and May 6 of any given year. This procession ended in 1487 with the transfer of the chapter seat to nearby Ingolfingen.
2. The reliquary procession instituted in 1499 on the Feast of St. John the Baptist (June 24).
3. The local Corpus Christi procession that occurred between late May and late June, documented in the local Heiligenpflegrechnungsbücher as early as 1474, as well as by the manuscript of the Künzelsauer Fronleichnamsspiel, which originated in 1479.

All three processions were organized by Künzelsau’s St. John parish, i.e., there is no record of participation by local confraternities or guilds. Moreover, given that one and the same sponsor was responsible for all three events, there is every reason to assume some form of cross-pollination among them for local processional culture.

42 Since this record has no clear connection to the Künzelsau Corpus Christi Play, Neumann omits it from his collection. I cite the record here according to Blasting, 'The Künzelsau Corpus Christi Play', p. 228.
The Reliquary Cross of the Künzelsau St. John Parish

Unfortunately, the performance records found in the St. John almoner books offer little evidence regarding a probable cross or crucifix that might have served as the center point of the play’s adoratio crucis scene. A cross does appear in an entry from the 1474 Corpus Christi season, but the wording of the entry is vague and bears no clear relationship to the procession. However, two crosses are documented for the procession instituted in 1499 on the Feast of St. John, which featured the collection of relics owned by the St. John parish. The corresponding Prozessionsordnung (‘order of the procession’) offers a descriptive list of each reliquary borne in the procession, most likely read aloud by a priest while presenting the objects from a raised platform to the gathered crowd for veneration. The 1499 procession began with a crucifix containing the relics of notable saints, in particular remains from the head of St. Kilian, the patron saint of Würzburg. In this manner, the beloved martyr of Künzelsau’s home diocese symbolically led participants through the streets of the town. The second cross appeared at the sacramental climax of the procession, namely immediately before the presentation of the veiled Host, and contained relics of the passion and Christ’s ministry on earth:


In this crucifix the following holy relics are mounted, namely a piece of the post of the Holy Cross, a piece of the tomb of Our Lord Jesus Christ, a piece of the rock on which

47 'Item 1 ort und 1 gulden umb das Creutz / das man uff das gulden stuck gemacht' (1 ort [= ¼ gulden] and 1 gulden for the cross which was put on the gold stick [staff or piece?]; as cited in Blasting, ‘The Künzelsau Corpus Christi Play’, pp. 228 and 239–40). Blasting considers the possibility that stick is a variant of Stock (‘staff’), so that the entry might refer to a processional cross used during Corpus Christi. However, Neumann, Geistliches Schauspiel I, p. 429 does not include this entry among his collection of records for Künzelsau, indicating that he sees no connection to the procession or play.


50 As cited in Wainwright, Studien zum deutschen Prozessionsspiel, p. 255. Neumann, Geistliches Schauspiel I, p. 430 does not consider the reliquary descriptions of the 1499 Prozessionsordnung to be relevant for the local Corpus Christi Play and thus omits them from his collection of performance records for Künzelsau.
Our Lord Jesus Christ preached, and a piece of the rock on which lay the Holy Cross, Lance, Crown, and Nails.

The position of this cross next to the Eucharist was clearly not accidental: it offered not just one, but four holy relics that had been in physical contact with the body of Christ, either directly or vicariously. The crucifix derived its sacramental presence not only from the remnant of the True Cross that it housed, but also from the stone fragments that tied it to True Sepulchre of the Lord as well as to the Instruments of the Passion, represented by the crown, lance, and nails.

Given the strong connections of this final reliquary cross to the crucifixion, its suitability for the adoratio crucis scene of the Künzelsau Corpus Christi Play is readily apparent. Moreover, further ties between the crucifix and the play exist. Following the description of the reliquary and the singing of the responsory O Crux Gloriosa, the Prozessionsordnung of the 1499 St. John procession continues as follows:

Nach dem so nimpt der pfarrer das itzig crucifix unnd singt treu mal den Antiph, so hernach volgt, unnd also lautet 'Omnis terra adoret te et psallat tibi'. Nach dem unnd das also geschicht, so gen die reumen mit Herodes an, unnd so die ein ende haben, so get der pfarrer wider uf die brucken mit dem Sacrament unnd singt 'Salvum fac populum tuum domine et benedic hereditati tue et rege eos et extolle illos usque in eternum'. Das singt er treu mal. Dornach get die process wider an die kirchen mit dem responsorium 'Isti sunt sancti'.

Afterwards, the priest takes the same crucifix and sings the following antiphon three times: 'Omnis terra adoret te et psallat tibi.' Once that occurs, the rhyming verses concerning Herod begin, and when they are over, the priest once again mounts the platform with the Sacrament and sings 'Salvum fac populum tuum domine et benedic hereditati tue et rege eos et extolle illos usque in eternum.' He sings this three times. The procession then returns to the church with the responsory 'Isti sunt sancti.'

The presentation of the processional crucifix found here parallels that of the play: In both cases, a priest mounts a platform to present the corresponding cross to attendees while an antiphon is sung three times: in the play, this is the antiphon 'Ecce lignum crucis'; in the St. John procession, 'Omnis terra adoret te', which follows upon the cross-related responsory 'O Crux Gloriosa'. Even more conspicuous are the 'reumen mit Herodes' that occur immediately after the presentation of the cross in 1499. These verses apparently represented a brief theatrical performance, either concerning Herod’s persecution of the Christ child or, given that the reliquary procession occurred on the Feast of

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St. John the Baptist, the decapitation of the saint. There is widespread consensus that these ‘rhymes’ likely stemmed in some form from the corresponding Herod scenes of the 1479 play text (ll. 1664–2138).

Given that Corpus Christi, as a movable feast, took place at times in late June, it could often occur quite close to the feast of John the Baptist. In fourteenth-century Florence, this led to competition between nascent Corpus Christi celebrations and established performances to honor the city’s patron saint. In Künzelsau, the opposite apparently took place: here, the newly established reliquary procession on the feast of St. John adapted traditions that had developed earlier for the celebration of Corpus Christi. It is highly likely that the 1499 ‘borrowings’ from the play included not only sections of verse and the singing of antiphons, but also the devotional display of the city’s Eucharistic relics, contained in the reliquary crucifix. Other reliquaries documented for the 1499 St. John procession may also have been part of Künzelsau’s annual Corpus Christi processions, including the reliquary busts of John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene and St. Margaret now found in the Städtische Sammlung Künzelsau (fig. 1–3). These saints all receive special attention in the 1499 Prozessionsordnung and also appeared in key scenes of the local Corpus Christi play (ll. 2140–405, 3782–85; 2406–523, 3798–817; 4351–58).

The Cross and Sacrament in Performance

If we return to the play text of 1479, we can now reconstruct how the Künzelsau reliquary crucifix functioned as a juncture between procession and play in the local celebration of Corpus Christi. As in other cities throughout Europe,

52 Rubin, Corpus Christi, pp. 273, 277 and 279, briefly discusses the function of Herod plays in the English Corpus Christi tradition.
53 Cf. Wainwright, Studien zum deutschen Prozessionsspiel, p. 49.
56 For a discussion of the busts, cf. Gabor (ed.), Lust auf Geschichte, p. 44, fig. 30–32. On 18 December 2012, I had the opportunity to view these reliquary busts as part of the exhibition ‘Viele Herren, eine Stadt. Künzelsau unter den Ganerben’ in the Stadtmuseum Künzelsau, co-organized by the art historian Ursula Angelmaier, whom I wish to thank for sharing her expertise. The fate of the reliquary crucifix is unknown. – C. Clifford Flanigan, ‘Liminality, Carnival, and Social Structure’, states that ‘the relics of the saints preserved in the local churches were carried’ (p. 50) in the Künzelsau Corpus Christi procession. Although his intuition was likely correct, his later comments on Künzelsau’s loss of the diocesan chapter seat to Ingoltingen make apparent that he has conflated the 1499 St. John reliquary procession with the 1479 Corpus Christi play text (cf. p. 51).
the town’s theophoric procession of clergy and burghers was the focal point of the day. As mentioned above, the play was not a separate performance distinct from the procession, but rather an integral part of it, functioning wholly within a processional framework. The manuscript of the play is thus titled Registrum processionis corporis Christi (Künzelsauer Fronleichnamspiel, p. 1), just as the ‘director’ of the play is referred to primarily as the rector processiosis, with the term rector ludi (‘director of the play’) appearing in later scenes. Actors, both those with spoken dialogue and those without, proceeded in costume with other members of the procession, assumedly in ensembles based upon the individual scenes of the play in the approximate sequence of their performance.

The procession paused three times along its route to present separate sections of the play. We can deduce this from the appearance of angels at the outset of the play and at two later moments, on each occasion requesting silence among the spectators at the beginning of a new set of scenes. In the latter two cases, the manuscript specifies that these angels chant ‘In Secunda Staccione’ (l. 684a) and later ‘In tercia staccione’ (l. 2139b). These stations were likely small platforms that stood along the processional route, assumedly similar to those at which the Corpus Christi processions of other cities paused for the singing of antiphons. Most importantly, the use of statio also suggests the presence of relics in the procession, since this term denoted the designated site of a Heilsumweisung, or ostensio reliquiarum, the annual display of local relics found in cities throughout medieval Europe. At each of these three stations, successive groups of actors mounted the stage to present their parts following an introductory explication of each scene by the rector processionis. After the conclusion of each of the first two performance sequences, actors,

57 Cf. Brooks’ refutation of the staging scenarios of Schumann (ed.), Das Künzelsauer Fronleichnamspiel, pp. XIV and 210 (three-day performance on multiple platforms on meadow outside city walls), Brooks, ‘Processional Drama’, pp. 162–65; Müller, Der schauspielerische Stil, p. 101 (single-stage performance in or before local church); Sengpiel, Die Bedeutung der Prozessionen, pp. 96–105 (three-day single-stage performance, with each day corresponding to a ‘station’).
60 Cf. Breuer, ‘Zur Aufführungspraxis vorreformatorischer Fronleichnamsspiele’, pp. 57–58. Liebenow (ed.), Das Künzelsauer Fronleichnamspiel, who assumes a single stage for all three sections of the play (p. 258), proposes that the staccione references mean that the angels sing ‘for the second time’ and ‘for the third time’ (p. 264).
additional procession participants, and spectators moved as a group to the next station. As noted by Elizabeth Wainwright, each station focused on a particular period of salvation history, namely ‘the time of the unwritten law’, ‘the time of the written law from Moses to Christ, and the time of grace that begins with the activity of Christ’,63 as seen in the following overview:

1. Opening/God’s Creation of the Angels – The Sacrifice of Melchizedek (ll. 1–684),
2. The Ten Commandments – Herod’s Slaughter of the Innocents (ll. 685–2139),

Although we unfortunately have no record of the route of the procession, each of the stations was likely situated at or near important church or civic institutions for the town. The episcopal charter for the 1499 St. John reliquary procession mentions that it traveled ‘per forum’,64 possibly the town’s Unterer Markt (‘Lower Market Square’) near the Church of St. John,65 and its route could very well have been modeled on the established Corpus Christi procession. Moreover, given the event’s sponsorship by the local St. John parish, one platform may have stood outside the church itself.

The portrayal of the passion occurred at the third station. With over 3700 verses, this section represents nearly two-thirds of the total play text in its final redaction and treats Christ’s ministry on earth, his redemption of humanity, the acts of the saints, and the final eschatological events of the Book of Revelation. Not only do the central passion scenes all appear in the C section of the original play manuscript, as discussed above, they also belong to the so-called Grundstock, an even older, original core of the play more closely tied to the procession.66 For the scenes depicting the crown of thorns, the flogging, and the bearing of the cross, three distinct actors were required to portray Jesus, first parading in the corresponding tableau of the procession, and then later individually mounting the performance platform in tertia staccione.67 More-
over, unlike the talking, walking Savior encountered by the audience in previous third-station scenes of Christ’s ministry, miracles, and arrest, the three passion scenes preceding the \textit{adoratio crucis} are striking for their lack of dialogue, i.e., the scenes consist solely of commentary by the \textit{rector processionis}, unique among all New Testament sections of the play.\footnote{Two Old Testament figures are presented in a similar manner: Joshua (ll. 863–80) and Samson (ll. 881–94).} The actors did not engage in pantomime during the \textit{rector’s} speech,\footnote{Cf. Breuer, ‘Zur Aufführungspraxis vorreformatorischer Fronleichnamsspiele’, p. 58.} but rather, in typical tableau vivant fashion,\footnote{Cf. Liebenow (ed.), \textit{Das Künzelsauer Fronleichnamspiel}, p. 276.} each performer assumed a static iconic pose: the \textit{Salvator cum corona}, still erect and robed, but with blood-spattered visage from the thorns piercing his brow; next, the \textit{Salvator cum statua}, stripped to his loincloth and bound to a whipping column, his back a gory mass from the scourging he has received; finally, the \textit{Salvator cum cruce}, bent and bleeding, lugging the full-sized cross on which he soon must hang. The absence of dialogue here is intentional, allowing the silent, immobile Savior of these scenes to present his broken body to the gaze of spectators for contemplation and compassion. Meanwhile, the unmoving and unmoved presence of the two soldiers who accompany Christ in each tableau evokes the implacable intent of authorities to inflict maximum suffering, as the \textit{rector} reminds the audience: ‘Dy ritter nichs gantz an seinem leib lisen | von der scheittel biß uff dy fusse’ (‘The soldiers left nothing whole on his body from his head to his toes’; ll. 3684–85).

These embodied images of the martyred Savior are thus freshly fixed in the audience’s mind when, in place of their customary denouement in the crucifixion, a priest mounts the stage, accompanied by a layperson bearing, in the words of the text, the \textit{signum crucis}. When applied to a reliquary with a fragment of the Holy Rood, this term becomes truly multivalent. The vessel functioned as a ‘sign of the cross’ not only in its cruciform shape, but also \textit{pars pro toto} in its signification of the original cross on which Christ hung. We thus find the term used for reliquary crosses in other contexts as well.\footnote{Cf. Wittekind, \textit{Altar – Reliquiär – Retabel}, p. 261; Mersch, \textit{Soziale Dimensionen}, p. 56, note 102; Neininger, \textit{Konrad von Urach}, p. 87; Plum, \textit{Adoratio Crucis}, pp. 114–15; Braun, \textit{Reliquiare}, p. 481.} During the late medieval exhibition of relics belonging to the St. Stephan cathedral of Vienna, for example, the responsory \textit{Hoc signum crucis} accompanied the display of the cathedral’s most precious holdings, its collection of over thirty-five reliquary crosses containing ‘das heyltumb das vnserm herrn Jesu Christo zugehört’ (‘the holy relics belonging to our Lord Jesus Christ’; \textit{Wiener Heiligthum-}

\textit{unus captivum, alter in veste alba, tertius columnam ferebat, quartus crucem, quintus resurrectionem representans} (as quoted in Freise, \textit{Geistliche Spiele in der Stadt}, p. 157).
buch, a4"). The corresponding woodcut images of the *Wiener Heiligtumbuch* depict both figureless crosses as well as crucifixes such as that likely used in the Künzelsau Corpus Christi celebration. The antiphon ‘Ecce lignum crucis’, sung by the priest while displaying the crucifix in Künzelsau, takes a multivalent turn as well: ‘Behold the wood of the cross’ suddenly becomes a literal command to view the ligneous relic held up to the crowd, a return to the antiphon’s origins in the Roman *adoratio crucis* of the eighth century. Indeed, given the antiphon’s liturgical connections, we must consider the likelihood that the reliquary crucifix was also used during the *adoratio crucis* portion of Good Friday services in the Künzelsau Church of St. John, just as the Holy Cross reliquary of the Cathedral of Tournai, the focal point of Tournai’s Exaltation of the Cross procession on September 14, was an integral part of the cathedral’s celebration of Good Friday (*Vendredi-Saint*) during the Middle Ages. Considering the frequent theatrical embellishment of the Easter liturgy in general, most apparent in the *visitatio sepulchri*, the performative possibilities of the reliquary cross for the Künzelsau Corpus Christi procession may have originated in paraliturgical practices of the St. John parish during Holy Week.

By bringing the reliquary cross in direct connection with the third-station passion scenes, the play creates a reciprocal relationship between the enactment of salvation history and the venerated tokens of Christ’s sacrifice, one in which imagined presence and real presence reinforce one another. As was fitting for the Feast of Corpus Christi, the tableaux vivants of the battered and bloody Savior, which evoked familiar iconographic motifs from medieval art, charged the reliquary with the sacramental presence of Christ’s body. It is moreover no accident that the tableau immediately preceding the *adoratio* is that of the *Salvator cum cruce*: there, spectators had encountered an actor straining under ‘ein crewtz so swer’ (l. 3692), i.e., a full-scale replica of Christ’s cross; now, they viewed the genuine object, if only a portion thereof, and could more easily project the corresponding sufferings of the Lord upon the object of veneration. Nor was ‘real presence’ on the performance platform limited to the wood of the True Cross: as discussed later, the sacrament itself was likely present on the third-station stage during the *adoratio crucis*.

The Mary scene that followed immediately upon the *adoratio* similarly charged the cross on display with Christ’s presence, rendering it an object of compassion:

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74 Cf. de Cuyper et al., *La croix byzantine*, p. 20.
Then the apostle John shall come forward together with Mary bearing her sword and with her the three Marys without their unguent boxes. The director of the procession shall recite to the audience: Regard now, women and men, Mary, mother of God. A sword pierced her heart – o, what great pain she bore – when she watched her son suffer death, as Simeon had foretold her. All loyal hearts should consider this and bear her sorrows with her today. Then she will be your comforter so that you will be saved from eternal suffering.

Mary, with her sword, shall recite: A sword pierces my soul, just as lord Simeon foretold me. All loyal hearts should consider this and bear my sorrows with me today. Then they all withdraw at the same time.

In modeling a response of affective compassion, the character of Mary traditionally provided an identification figure for spectators. Semi-dramatic Marienklagen (planctus) of varying length were well established in German-speaking Europe and often influenced corresponding lamentation scenes in passion plays.76 It is thus all the more notable that, although Mary has a speaking role here, this scene parallels the other core passion tableaux in engaging the audience via iconographic conventions. Mary is presented as the mater dolorosa, much like the central panel of Albrecht Dürer’s Die sieben Schmerzen Mariä (ca. 1494–97), which portrays the Virgin with a sword through her heart sym-

bolizing the pain she must suffer upon seeing the death of her son upon the cross, as was prophesized by Simeon (Luke 2,35). The stage directions also note that the three Marys should appear ‘sine pixide’ (without their salve boxes; l. 3705d), which is similarly rooted in medieval iconographic conventions, as Liebenow notes. However, it also indicates that they bore such salve containers during the procession itself as an iconographic marker, but since it was not yet time for the play’s visitatio sepulchri scene, which specifically thematizes the women’s intention to anoint the body of the Lord (l. 3795), the boxes should not appear on stage at this point. For the same reason, the stage directions for Mary during the play’s Annunciation scene, encountered below, specify that she is to appear without the Christ child, whom she otherwise bore in the procession. The play text does not reveal whether the tableau’s additional figures, i.e., John the Apostle and the two other Marys, assumed an iconographic pose during the scene; they may have formed some type of ensemble modeled upon the Lamentation of Christ, but if the crucified Savior was part of this grouping, he can only have been represented via the reliquary crucifix, since the manuscript consistently identifies the actors required for each scene and makes no mention of a ‘Salvator’ here. I am more inclined to believe that Mary formed the center point of this tableau, with John and the other Marys framing her, but the reliquary cross may have nonetheless conspicuously remained on display following the previous scene.

In the local devotional context served by the play manuscript, it need not surprise us that the text does not explicitly identify the signum crucis of the adoratio scene as a reliquary cross. With its multiple revisions and tipped-in scraps of paper, the manuscript is clearly a Regiehandschrift, meant for internal use by those charged with the play’s organization. As with the brief passing mentions of the second and third stations, stage directions were kept to a bare minimum and assumed an established familiarity with local performance practice. It is likely that the signum crucis of the text was such an integral part of local devotional culture that its further identification was unnecessary, particularly if it was the cross used for the adoratio crucis in the Good Friday services of the local parish church. In the Prozessionsordnung for the St. John reliquary procession of 1499, the description of the prized crucifix and its four passion-related relics bears the similarly simple title Crux. Even if the cross used for the adoratio crucis was not the reliquary crucifix of the later St. John procession, there can be little doubt that the scene relied on some type of reliquary

78 Cf. Wainwright, Studien zum deutschen Prozessionsspiel, p. 255.
The True Cross in Künzelsau

cross, one of the most popular and widespread objects of veneration in medieval Europe.\(^9\)

Although a layperson bears the reliquary crucifix to the stage, this was probably a temporary role. In accordance with late medieval tradition, the crucifix most likely proceeded through the streets of Künzelsau in the hands of a priest. Since the play text tells us that ‘one of the priests’ (‘unus sacerdos de sacerdotibus’; l. 3697a–b) performs the \textit{adoratio crucis}, we can assume that he was one of a larger group of ordained clergy who paraded in the procession, either the four clergymen based in the St. John parish at the end of the fifteenth century,\(^{80}\) or possibly some of the sixty-four associated with the Künzelsau chapter of the Würzburg diocese.\(^{81}\) Since we also know that clergy traditionally accompanied the host in the middle of Corpus Christi processions, we can further conclude that the passion tableaux constituted the symbolic core of the Künzelsau parade. Since the order of play scenes assumedly followed that of processional ensembles, this would place the passion actors at the approximate middle of the train, meaning that cross and sacrament moved in proximity to each other. The \textit{laycus} mentioned in the stage directions may have fulfilled a role similar to the \textit{Führer} (‘guides’) of Nuremberg Corpus Christi processions, as discussed above. The cross may have had its own canopy as well, whose bearers were also traditionally recruited from among prominent citizens.\(^{82}\) In all cases, the \textit{laycus} in question likely accompanied the cross during the procession, took it into his keeping at some point during the preparations for the \textit{adoratio} scene, and then entrusted it again to the officiating priest once they mounted the performance platform. The \textit{rector processionis} fulfills a similar role as intermediary between secular and ecclesiastical spheres in the play; given his authoritative position as biblical exegete, particularly in his assumption of the Ecclesia role in the traditional disputation scene between the Synagogue and the Church (ll. 4419–669),\(^{83}\) it seems reasonable to assume that a member of the clergy played this part.

While the reliquary crucifix amplified the presence of the consecrated host, it did not replace it as the centerpoint of procession and play. We know from the opening speech of the \textit{rector processionis} (ll. 5–26) that the sacrament was

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79 Cf. Braun, \textit{Reliquiare}, p. 469. For examples, cf. the nearly forty reliquary crosses from the fifth to the eighteenth centuries reproduced in Braun, \textit{Reliquiare}, tables 139–49 and fig. 532–70.
81 Cf. Schumann (ed.), \textit{Das Künzelsauer Fronleichnamspiel}, p. XIII.
83 On the play’s anti-Jewish elements, cf. Flanigan, ‘Liminality, Carnival, and Social Structure’, p. 53. I unfortunately find no evidence that the play’s rabbinical figures wore the traditional vestments of Christian clergy, as Flanigan suggests.
prominently displayed at the play’s first station. Indeed, following the opening call for silence by the angels, the *rector* turns not to the audience, but to the Eucharist, which he personifies as ‘dear God from heaven’ (l. 5) and ‘Lord Jesus Christ’ (l. 16). He concludes this initial portion of his address by commanding the members of the attending choir to genuflect and sing the hymn ‘O vere digna hostia’. Only then does he turn to the audience, explain Christ’s institution of the sacrament, and promise to interpret ‘in rhymes’ (l. 47) the tableaux of the procession. Paralleling the initial command to the choir, the *rector* now instructs the audience to fall to its knees as well, this time with a joint recitation of the ‘Ave Maria’ (ll. 57–60).

The sacrament is also present on stage at the play’s second station, as is clear from the introductory stage direction for the Annunciation scene: ‘accedat Maria sine puero sedens in sede versus sacramentum’ (‘Mary should come forward without the child and sit in her seat across from the sacrament’; ll. 1429d–f). The practice of situating the host on stage almost certainly continued at the third station as well, where the *rector processions* through a deictic motion drew the audience’s attention to ‘the heavenly bread, which is present there’ (l. 3870) while introducing the twelve articles of faith. Indeed, the *rector* and other actors likely gestured towards the Eucharist in their midst at the play’s numerous other allusions to ‘bread’ and ‘Christ’s body’. This is especially true for the third-station speech of the pope at the close of the play, who during his monologue apparently either pointed to the host or – if played by a member of the clergy, which seems likely in this case – held it aloft before the audience.

Er sprach: nu essent mein fleißh
und trinck mein plut,
Das vergossen sol werden fur boß vnd fur gut.
Das ist das mild bratt,
Das von den Juden laidt groß nat.
Das ist das edel bratt,
Das an dem creutz hing vor blut rat.
Das ist das himelisch bratt,
Das an dem creutz laidt den bittern dat.
Das ist das kostlich bratt,
Das Adam erlost auß der helle natt.
Das ist das mechtich bratt,
Das vff stund von des dats natt.
Das ist die edel speiß,
Dy zu himel fur mit preyß.
Das ist dy susse kost,
Die den jungern samt des heiligen gaistes trost.
He spoke: Now eat my flesh and drink my blood that shall be spilled for both good and evil. This is the benevolent bread that suffered greatly from Jews. This is the noble bread that hung on the cross red with blood. This is the heavenly bread that suffered bitter death on the cross. This is the delectable bread that freed Adam from the jaws of hell. This is the mighty bread that rose from the sufferings of death. This is the noble food that ascended with praise to heaven. This is the sweet nourishment that comforted the disciples with the Holy Spirit. Thus do as I advise and pay him all great honor.  

The anaphoric repetition of ‘This is the bread/food/nourishment that [...]’ calls forth the multiple symbolic connotations of the Eucharist for the gathered spectators. The admonishment to pay honor to the sacrament in the final line parallels the opening command by the rector processionis to genuflect before the host, so that the two scenes can be seen as framing endpoints in the play’s veneration of the Eucharist. Afterwards, two angels conclude the play with the traditional Latin blessing given at the close of the Mass.

Clerical Authority and Performance Innovation

Alongside the traditional focus on the Eucharistic body of Christ, the Künzelsau play also devotes particular attention to the authority of the priesthood in administering the sacrament.  

Auch sag ich euch furbaß  
Das ir den prister nit seyt gehaß  
Vnd die halt jn grossen eren,  
So wil euch got an dugent meren, […]  
Welcher prister stet jn seinem ampt  
Got vater, sun vnd hailigen gaist ersampt  
Mit worten so er den ist lesen  
Kain engel kon jn nit verwesen,  
Wan er von werden stet gefreytt,  
Den waren got er benedeyt  
Noch der ewigen weyssat ratt

84 The dative pronoun ‘jm’ can be both masculine and neuter, thus creating an elision between the host (das Sakrament) and Christ. My translation intentionally personifies the bread as Christ.
86 Cf. Schulze, Geistliche Spiele, p. 158.
87 Flanigan, ‘Liminality, Carnival, and Social Structure’, p. 49.
Mit worten bringt er in das bratt,
Da von maniger sunder wurtt gehailt. [...] 
Dar vmb, wer pristerschafft vnertt,
Von dem hat got sein antlitz kertt. [...] 
Got hat selber pristerschafft in eren,
Dar vmb sollen wir jr lob meren

I tell you as well that you should not be hateful towards priests and should hold them in great honor. Then God will increase your virtues. [...] A priest who invokes in his office God Father, Son, and Holy Ghost together, when he is consecrating to them no angel can do him harm, for he is unworthy and thus at his liberty. He blesses the true God according to eternal wisdom with his words; he transmits to the bread that which has healed many a sinner. [...] For this reason, God has turned his countenance from those who dishonor the priesthood. [...] God himself holds the priesthood in honor. We should thus increase priests’ praise for the sake of Him, who has unworthy them.

However, the play gives this theme structural emphasis as well, namely in the final first-station scenes concerning the Binding of Isaac and the Sacrifice of Melchizedek, which underscore the Old Testament basis both for God’s sacrifice of his son and for the establishment of the priesthood. As with numerous other scenes, the text treats each of these units as a figur, emphasizing their typological aspects as prefigurations of the new covenant under Christ. The close of the first-station sequence of scenes thus parallels the papal speech at the play’s third station in connecting the validity of the sacrament to its proper administration by an appointed member of the clergy:

*Rector Processionis dicat ad populum:* 
Accedat Melchisedech. 
Da nu her Abraham, der werd man, 
Allen seinen feinden gesigt an, 
Melchisedech der erst prister ist, 
Opffert jm zu der selben frist 
Zu grossen eren bratt vnd wein. 
Das solt ein recht figur sein 
Des lebendigen brats von himelreich, 
Das fur vns wurt geopfert degleich. 
Der priester vnd opfer hie gegenwertig ist, 
Dein warer leychnam her Ihesu Crist, 
Den wolstu vns zu speißen hy geben 
Vnd dar nach furn in das ewig leben.

*Tunc accedat Melchisedech,* 
et tradet Abrahe ad manus 
*panem et vinum et dicat:* 
Ich opfer dir bratt vnd wein,
Du solt ewiglichen gesegent sein.
Bey dem opfer soltu verstan,
Das das alt opfer ein end wurdt han.
Es kunnt ein prister, der wurtt ewig sein,
Dem wurtt man opfern brat vnd wein.
Das wurtt ein newung ordenung
Vmb aller welt erlosung. (ll. 664a–84)

The director of the procession shall say to the audience: Melchizedek shall come forward. When Abraham, the worthy man, was victorious over all his enemies, Melchizedek, the first priest of all, made him a sacrificial offering at this time of bread and wine to his great honor. This shall be a true figure of the living bread of heaven, which has similarly been sacrificed for us. Priest and sacrifice are both present here, your true body, Lord Jesus Christ, may you give us that as nourishment here and afterwards lead us into eternal life.

Now Melchizedek shall come forward and bring Abraham bread and wine and speak: I sacrifice bread and wine for you. You shall be blessed forever more. By this sacrifice, you shall understand that the old sacrifice shall come to an end. A priest shall come who shall be eternal, and to whom one shall sacrifice bread and wine. That shall be a new covenant for the salvation of the whole world.

In accordance with both Genesis 14.18, which records Melchizedek’s blessing of Abraham, and Psalm 110, which prophesizes that the Messiah will be a priest ‘after the order of Melchizedek’, the scene projects the founding of the ritual of communion upon Melchizedek as ‘der erst prister’ (l. 667). Here as well, the rector likely gestured towards the sacrament present on stage in his references to the ‘living bread of heaven’ (l. 671). It is even possible that the enacted sacrifice elided with an actual administration of the host, in which Melchizedek was portrayed by an ordained priest who placed a consecrated wafer into Abraham’s mouth. Given the likely presence of sacred objects from the St. John parish church during other portions of the performance, we must further consider the possibility that liturgical vessels belonging to the parish were used for the communion scene as well, further linking play with local liturgical practice.

Given the clear deference to the pope and clergy in scenes such as these, the Künzelsau Corpus Christi Play is widely considered one of the most reactionary plays of the late Middle Ages, at times arguably more preoccupied with the preservation of church authority than with pastoral concerns.88 Oddly, however, no one has pointed to the sponsorship of the play by a church institution, rather than by a lay organization, as the obvious explanation for such ecclesias-

88 Cf. Wainwright, Studien zum deutschen Prozessionsspiel, p. 142.
tical loyalty. As noted earlier, the documentary evidence for Corpus Christi performances in Künzelsau is found in the almoner expenditure records of Künzelsau’s St. John parish, and the parish registry housed the play manuscript until its nineteenth-century rediscovery. The manuscript clearly functioned as an internal guide for parish clergy charged with the play’s organization, and the various scribes who modified the original text from performance to performance were likely members of the local clergy themselves. Elizabeth Wainwright similarly speculates that the choir for the play may have been comprised of students from the Künzelsau school documented for 1457, likely a seminary for the local diocesan chapter. Clerical connections may also explain the intermediary role of the Rothenburger Rollenbuch in the influence of the Innsbrucker Fronleichnamsspiel on the Künzelsau play. Rothenburg ob der Tauber and Künzelsau both belonged to the Würzburg diocese in the late Middle Ages, and the Corpus Christi performance documented for Rothenburg in 1403 may have attracted the attention of Künzelsau ecclesiastics, perhaps providing the impetus for the development of the Künzelsau tradition. Although the play’s dogmatic support for ecclesiastical institutions is certainly excessive at times, it should not surprise us to find the local priesthood proselytizing in support of its own interests. In all cases, the Künzelsau Corpus Christi Play belies the assertion the all processional theater stands opposed to ‘theater of power’ (Machttheater). The Künzelsau play was founded on the theatrical display of church authority and power.

However, it is precisely the Künzelsau clergy’s uncontested control of the local Corpus Christi procession that fostered the innovative paraliturgical performance practices of the Künzelsauer Fronleichnamsspiel. Given the relative absence of local guilds and lay confraternities at the time, fewer community institutions clamored for representation in the procession in comparison to Corpus Christi traditions elsewhere. This left the parish freer to organize the procession according to representational principles, rather than social ones, via the introduction of sequential tableaux of Christ’s life and salvation history. The processional space nearest the sacrament was the undisputed domain of parish

89 Cf. Wainwright, _Studien zum deutschen Prozessionsspiel_, p. 43, who points in this context to the absence of lay confraternities in Künzelsau, but does not discuss the sponsorship of the play by the St. John parish.
91 On the Rothenburger Rollenbuch – an apparent part book for a single actor that contains the lines of Caspar, one of the three magi, which are nearly identical with the corresponding Caspar passages of the Innsbruck Corpus Christi Play cf. Wainwright, _Studien zum deutschen Prozessionsspiel_, pp. 52–54.
92 Cf. Ivanceanu and Hoflehner, _Prozessionstheater_, p. XII.
clergy, who sought to enhance the host’s Eucharistic presence by placing it in direct relation to other signs of Christ’s body, namely the living tableaux of Christ’s passion and the reliquary cross with its relics of the crucifixion. In choosing not to represent the crucifixion mimetically, the organizers had no concerns that the enactment of the Savior’s death would somehow compete with the sacramental presence of the consecrated host. Rather, in the auratic presence of the True Cross, parish clergy possessed a more authentic signifier of Christ’s act of salvation. Had the play’s organizers truly objected to the mimetic representation of Christ in the presence of the Eucharistic host, there would have likely been no play at all.

Nor was the Künzelsau procession an exclusive event open only to clergy and select guests, in contrast to the Corpus Christi processions of the Nuremberg Heilig-Geist-Spital. While we cannot say with certainty who acted in the play, the number of actors involved – not to mention the logistics for costumes, the construction of station platforms, and other performance preparations – doubtlessly required the participation of a significant portion of the town’s approximately 900 residents. The play text itself documents the participation of a laycus, a layman, for the adoratio crucis scene, and the combination of play and performance served to integrate the laity into the parish’s celebration of Corpus Christi and sanctify the space of the secular community as a whole. Given the revenue generated for the parish by the Corpus Christi celebration, documented in the parish’s almoner expenditure records, there was clearly widespread interest in the performance. The rector processionis promises the penitent in the audience ‘great indulgence’ (‘ablas [...] groß’; l. 53), and considering the indulgence of forty days that is documented for the 1499 St. John the Baptist procession, we can assume that a similar indulgence attracted attendees to the local Corpus Christi procession.

We know of other interactions between (semi-)mimetic play and sacred objects in the German middle ages: depositio crucis ceremonies began to deposit carved figures of the crucified savior in specially prepared holy sepulchres in the twelfth century, and play texts might be used as devotional scripts for private meditation before such a sepulchre. These interactions between play and object took place within a church or monastery, however. The Künzelsauer Fronleichnamsspiel represents the first known display of a sacred object in medieval German-speaking Europe that took place as part of a mimetic perform-

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94 Cf. Löther, Prozessionen in spätmittelalterlichen Städten, pp. 140–42.
95 Cf. Wainwright, Studien zum deutschen Prozessionsspiel, p. 257.
96 Cf. Tripps, Das handelnde Bildwerk, p. 147.
97 Cf. Dauven-van Knippenberg, ‘Ein Schauspiel für das innere Auge’.
ance in public space. More importantly, the past failure to recognize the display of relics in the Künzelsau adoratio crucis scene indicates that the theatrical exhibition of devotional objects has received inadequate attention in research on late medieval religious theater. Given the ubiquitous presence of relics in the Middle Ages, encountered in processions or as part of a Heiltumsweisung, it seems likely that other late medieval play texts contain references to seemingly inconspicuous props that, upon closer examination, reveal themselves to have been objects of local veneration.

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Fig. 1: Reliquary bust, St. John the Baptist, limewood, ca. 1425–50, Städtische Sammlung Künzelsau
Fig. 2: Reliquary bust, St. Mary Magdalene, limewood, ca. 1425–50, Städtische Sammlung Künzelsau
Fig. 3: Reliquary bust, St. Margaret, limewood, ca. 1425–50, Städtische Sammlung Künstelsau