

Wooden Christs on Wooden Donkeys (Frequently on Wheels):
A Short History of the Palmesel in Germany, Italy, and Bolivia

Max Harris

One of the more popular features of the processional theater of Palm Sunday in medieval Germany and its neighbors was a life-size image of Christ on a donkey, made of wood, and usually mounted on wheels. First recorded in Augsburg in the late tenth century, the *palmesel* (palm donkey) was at the height of its urban ecclesiastical presence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Although the Protestant Reformation ended the use of the palmesel in much of northern Europe, it remained popular, albeit as an increasingly folk tradition, in southern Germany, Austria, and Switzerland until it was suppressed there, too, during the late eighteenth-century Catholic Enlightenment. The palmesel remains in use in a few communities in the Tyrol, Bavaria, Alsace, and lowland Bolivia. Most surviving palmesels, however, are now housed in museums, or displayed in churches where they were once used. Scholarship on the palmesel has largely come from German-speaking folklorists and, more recently, international art historians. Here I assess the palmesel less as an art object than as a dramatic participant in the processional theater of Palm Sunday.

I could not, even in a paper several times this length, do justice to the full history of the palmesel. As a practical alternative, I have limited myself to brief accounts of six representative examples. I begin in tenth-century Augsburg, move from there to thirteenth-century Zurich and Essen, and complete my German-language tour in Biberach on the verge of the Reformation. I

then consider an Italian *muletta* from seventeenth-century Verona, and a Bolivian *borriquito* from present day San José de Chiquitos.

Augsburg (ca. 970)

Gerhard of Augsburg wrote his *Vita Sancti Uodalrici* within two decades of the death of Saint Ulrich in 973.¹ Ulrich had served as bishop of Augsburg for fifty years, and his biography contains, among other liturgical details, an account of Palm Sunday celebrations in Augsburg during his episcopate: “On that day at dawn, [Ulrich] used to come to the church of St. Afra,² if he had not already spent the night there. He would sing the mass of the Holy Trinity and bless the palm branches and various other foliage. Then with the gospel book and crosses and banners, and with an image of the Lord seated on an ass (*cum effigie sedentis domini super asinum*), with the clergy and a multitude of people carrying palm branches in their hands, and with chants composed in honor of that same day, he proceeded with great splendor to the hill called Perlach.³ There, with everything beautifully done, the choir of canons came to meet him, as well as the citizens who had remained in the city, and those from surrounding towns who wanted to join them there in imitating the humility of the children and the rest of the people who [long ago] strewed the way of the Lord with palm branches and their own clothes. After this, the holy man preached to everyone a most suitable sermon about the Lord’s Passion, often weeping himself and by his tears causing many others to weep. When his sermon was finished, everyone came to the cathedral church (*ad ecclesiam matricolam*)⁴ praising God, and there celebrated mass with

¹ Berschin and Häse, “Einleitung,” in Gerhard, *Vita*, 7-8; Berschin, “Realistic,” 377-78.

² The church of St. Afra, in the south of the old city of Augsburg, was then a collegiate church.

³ Half a mile north of the church of St. Afra, and now absorbed by the city of Augsburg, Perlach is best known for its 230-foot-high tower (*Perlachtum*). Heinrich Vogtherr the Younger’s 1550 painting of Perlach Market Place, now in Augsburg’s Maximiliansmuseum, shows open countryside still rising behind the tower.

⁴ The cathedral was (and still is) two hundred yards north of the foot of the “hill of Perlach.” The procession was thus a relatively short one.

him. Afterward they all went home.”⁵

Much of this is characteristic of the mimetic Palm Sunday processions of the period. The downhill route of the procession from “the hill called Perlach” to “the mother church” was modeled on the liturgy in Jerusalem, where for nearly six hundred years Palm Sunday processions had descended from the Mount of Olives to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, reenacting as closely as possible Christ’s own route into the city. Palm branches and other foliage had been carried by Palm Sunday worshipers since the late fourth century,⁶ and had been blessed since at least the eighth century.⁷ The processional use of the gospel book, crosses, and banners is well attested by the middle of the tenth century.⁸ Augsburg’s processional “image of the Lord seated on an ass,” however, is generally understood to be something of an innovation and the first surviving record of a palmesel.⁹

Zurich (ca. 1261-1281)

An ordinal from Zurich’s Grossmünster, compiled between 1260 and 1281, includes two versions of the city’s Palm Sunday rite. One, in the main body of the text, assumes a processional route across the Limmat River to the Lindenhof, then as now a public park on a hill overlooking the city, and back again. The other, added in cramped letters across the wide bottom margins, sets out an abbreviated route in the immediate vicinity of the church, possibly to be used in case

⁵ Gerhard, *Vita*, 7-8; translation adapted from Mayr-Harting, *Ottonian*, 1:121-22.

⁶ Egeria, *Itinerarium*, 77; trans. Gringas, 105.

⁷ A “fifth to eighth century” Georgian lectionary from Jerusalem contains what may be the earliest record of the blessing of the palms: see Tarnischvili, *Grand*, 1:100-05 (Georgian), 2:81-85 (Latin translation).

⁸ The Romano-German Pontifical, compiled in Mainz from multiple earlier sources ca. 950-964, requires that “a cross and banners” (*crucem et vexilla*) or “a gospel book, by which Christ is signified” (*sanctum evangelium, quod intelligitur Christus*) be carried in Palm Sunday processions: see Vogel and Elze, *Pontifical*, 2:49, 51, and for the date and subsequent diffusion of the pontifical, Andrieu, *Ordines*, 1:494-525; Vogel and Elze, *Pontifical* 1:xvi-xvii.

⁹ For the argument that Ulrich’s processional *effigie* was not a statue, but a carved wooden or painted panel, see Adelman, “Christus,” 183-87. For a refutation of Adelman’s hypothesis on linguistic and art historical grounds, see Tripps, *Handelnde*, 89-102. Gerhard of Augsburg’s latest editor is satisfied that the effigie was “a life-size wooden figure of the Lord sitting on an ass”: see Berschin, “Realistic,” 378.

of bad weather. It also includes details taken for granted in the standard version.¹⁰ By combining data from both sets of rubrics, it is possible to reconstruct a more complete account of the customary Palm Sunday ceremony in thirteenth-century Zurich.¹¹

The rite began in the Grossmünster, which was then still a monastic church, after the brief morning office of terce. Palm branches were blessed, the day's gospel read, and prayers sung in the chancel. The palms were then distributed to the waiting crowd in the nave. Alternatively, "to avoid din and tumult" (*pro vitando strepitu et tumultu*), the palms were distributed at the beginning of the ceremony and blessed while already in the hands of the crowd. A procession "with banners" (*cum vexillis*) then made its way west across the river and up to the Hof, a distance of about half a mile. Choir and laity alternated antiphons, versicles, and responses along the way.¹²

Meanwhile, an "image of the Lord on an ass" (*imago domini super asino*)¹³ had spent the night with the nuns of the Fraumünster abbey, on the same side of the river as the Lindenhof.¹⁴ In the morning, the palmesel was taken from the abbey to the Lindenhof to await the arrival of the procession from the Grossmünster. A series of mimetic correspondences was thus being set up, in which the Hof represented the Mount of Olives, Zurich stood for Jerusalem, the palmesel and its company took the part of Christ and his disciples approaching the city, and those coming from the Grossmünster represented the crowd coming out of Jerusalem to meet him.

When the two groups met at the Hof, the nuns and canons alternated chants, after which

¹⁰ Leuppi, *Liber*, 238-40.

¹¹ Lipsmeyer, "Liber," 142-43.

¹² Leuppi, *Liber*, 238.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁴ We know this was the case in the fifteenth century, and there is no reason to believe it was not by then a long-established tradition: see Lipsmeyer, "Liber," 143; Zeller-Werdmüller, "Nächtliche"; Wyss, *Geschichte*, 450. Barraud Wiener and Jezler, "Liturgie," 139, 146, suggest that the Fraumünster (by 1425) and the butcher's guild of the parish church of St Peter (by the early eighteenth century) each had a palmesel of its own, but the evidence they cite could just as easily refer to the Grossmünster's palmesel.

“small branches were thrown here and there over the image by the faithful” (*ramusculi sparsim super ymaginem a fidelibus iaciuntur*).¹⁵ German speakers used a lively metaphor to describe the action: “the palms were shot” (*der balme geschossen wirt*) at the image.¹⁶ After the singing of further antiphons, the procession joyously led the image of Christ and the donkey downhill into the city, where “amidst a crowd of laity and clergy” it entered the Grossmünster.¹⁷

Essen (13th cent.)

The Palm Sunday procession in Essen was both more opulent and more restrained than its counterpart in Zurich. Its climax was a choral veneration of the *palmesel* inside the collegiate church (*Stiftskirche*) of Essen Abbey. The abbey, one of the wealthiest in the German empire, was headed by an abbess with remarkable secular and ecclesiastical authority, a “princess of the empire” (*Reichsfürstin*) who exercised all the powers of a prince-bishop but that of ordination. The ladies of the abbey, all of aristocratic birth, were not cloistered nuns but canonesses. By at least 1224, the abbey church had a separate chapter of priests, serving under a dean who was himself subject to the abbess.¹⁸ A surviving ordinal, written in the second half of the fourteenth century but reflecting “thirteenth-century liturgical usage” in the *Stiftskirche*,¹⁹ includes directions for the observance of Palm Sunday.

After compline on the eve of the feast, “the image of Christ sitting on an ass” (*ymaginem Christi sedentem in asino*) was led in an elaborate candlelight procession from the *Stiftskirche*

¹⁵ Leuppi, *Liber*, 239.

¹⁶ Wyss, *Geschichte*, 449, citing a document from 1474. In 1524, Gerold Edlibach wrote that “to praise God one shot palms” (*got zu lob den balmenn schoß*) at the image: see Jezler, “Beschachend,” 51.

¹⁷ Leuppi, *Liber*, 240. Barraud Wiener and Jezler, “Liturgie,” 144, suggest that the congregations of the Fraumünster and St. Peter’s each returned to its own church for separate closing ceremonies. Leuppi, *Liber*, 500-01, includes diagrams of Barraud Wiener and Jezler’s proposed route. I find the reconstruction of events in Lipsmeyer, “Liber,” more persuasive.

¹⁸ Kahsnitz, “Gospel,” 123-27; Bärsch, “Raum,” 165.

¹⁹ Lipsmeyer, “Devotion,” 22. Arens, *Liber*, viii-ix, makes the case for the ordinal’s dependence on thirteenth-century sources.

through the city and central marketplace to “the church of Saint Gertrude,” also known as the Market Church.²⁰ Carried at the head of the procession were “four gold crosses decorated with precious stones, gems, and enamels,”²¹ other images including the celebrated Golden Madonna of Essen,²² and various “banners” (*vexilla*).²³ Then came the scholars of the choir school, the canons, the processional candles, the palmesel, the canonesses (who went only as far as the abbey churchyard), and “finally the people.” As the procession entered Saint Gertrude’s, it was censed by the *plebanus* (rector) of the church. The palmesel was left to spend the night “in the middle of the church in front of the choir.”²⁴

The next morning, after palm branches were blessed and distributed at the abbey church, an almost identical procession made its way to Saint Gertrude’s to recover “the image of Christ with the donkey that had been left there yesterday.” On arrival, the clergy remained outside while “the people” (*populus*) went inside to retrieve the palmesel. The *plebanus*, carrying an ornate gospel book (*pleonarius*), joined the procession for the return journey.²⁵ Meanwhile, the canonesses, who had again remained at the abbey church, accompanied this time by the officiant and acolytes, gathered before the huge, late tenth-century, seven-branch, gilded bronze candelstick that stood in the nave before the altar of the Holy Cross.²⁶ There they awaited the return of the palmesel.

²⁰ The distance between the *Stiftskirche* and the *Marktkirche* was about a quarter of a mile. Before the Reformation, when it became the first Protestant church in Essen, the *Marktkirche* had been dedicated to St Gertrude. The present Catholic church of St Gertrude was consecrated in 1877 and rebuilt in 1955.

²¹ Kahsnitz, “Gospel,” 130; for images, see Pothmann, “Essener,” 142-48.

²² Kahsnitz, “Gospel,” 129; Pothmann, “Essener,” 137-40.

²³ For the argument that in Essen the processional *vexilla* were not literal “banners,” but “the golden crosses and the reliquary containing the Holy Nail,” see Kahsnitz, “Gospel,” 157. For the reliquary, see Pothmann, “Essener,” 150-51.

²⁴ Arens, *Liber*, 41 (Latin), 148-49 (German translation).

²⁵ Kahsnitz, “Gospel,” 156, defines a *pleonarius* as “a manuscript which contains the complete text of the Gospels, as opposed to a Gospel lectionary or book of pericopes, which contains only the extracts from the Gospels read at mass.” Essen Abbey owned two exceptionally fine *pleonarii*.

²⁶ Arens, *Liber*, 42-44, 149, For floor plan of the abbey, see Arens, *Liber*, following page 280; Bärsch, “Raum,” 186. For the candelabrum, see Pothmann, “Essener,” 140-43; it now stands at the west end of the nave.

Entering the abbey church in joyous procession, “the image of the triumphant Christ”²⁷ was placed in a prominent position at the west end of the nave, facing east toward the high altar. Three carpets or tapestries (*tapeta*) had been laid across the nave between the candelabrum and the image. The canonesses entered the choirstalls to the north of the nave, while the canons and scholars filled those to the south. When all were in place, the *plebanus* and a subdeacon, each with a sacristan, approached the image and stood, one pair on either side, “near the neck of the ass.” Six canonesses also approached. Standing behind the palmesel, facing east, they led the convent in the Palm Sunday hymn “Glory, laud and honor to thee, Redeemer, King.”²⁸ When all had returned to their seats, the clergy sang the antiphon, “The Hebrew children spread their garments,”²⁹ and eight scholars genuflected on the carpet in front of the image. Then the canonesses sang while the canons, “kneeling, similarly prostrate[d] themselves;” the clergy sang while the canonesses venerated the image; the canonesses sang once without accompanying action; and the clergy sang again while the officiant and acolytes prostrated themselves. Finally, while the clergy chanted “As the Lord entered the Holy City,”³⁰ “the image with the ass” was moved to the tomb of Saint Alfrid, the founder of the abbey, located at the foot of the steps leading up to the choir. The image remained there during high mass.³¹

Essen’s flat terrain was not suited to a convincing reenactment of Christ’s descent from the Mount of Olives. Perhaps because of this, the city’s Palm Sunday ceremony depended less on imagined spatial correspondences between Essen and Jerusalem than on the traditional belief that Christ’s entry into the earthly Jerusalem prefigured both his ascension, forty days later, from the

²⁷ Lipsmeyer, “Devotion,” 24.

²⁸ “Gloria, laus et honor tibi sit, rex Christe redemptor.”

²⁹ “Pueri Hebraeorum vestimenta prosternebant.”

³⁰ “Ingrediente Domino in sanctam civitatem.”

³¹ Arens, *Liber*, 44-47, 149-51.

Mount of Olives to the heavenly Jerusalem,³² and his final triumphant entry into the heavenly city with all the saved after the Last Judgment.³³ The antiphons sung in the abbey church recalled both his passion and his continuing exaltation: “To thee, before thy passion, they sang their hymns of praise; to thee, now high exalted, our melody we raise.”³⁴ To genuflect before the palmesel was to look beyond the visible image of Christ on a donkey to the invisible image of Christ the King enthroned in heaven.

Biberach (ca. 1530-1535)

A first-hand account of religious practices in Biberach an der Riss (Baden-Württemberg), as they were “immediately before the Reformation,” includes the town’s Palm Sunday ceremony.³⁵ Before vespers on the eve of the feast, the image of “our Lord God on the ass” (*Unnsern Herrgott uff dem Essel*) was placed in the churchyard, where “many children and common people” came to greet it. After vespers, the palmesel was taken in “pious procession” to the chapel of Saint Leonard near the town’s upper gate (*oberthor*). Choirboys carrying “guild poles” (*Zünfften Stangen*)³⁶ and a cross led the way, followed by the priest. The palmesel, lacking wheels of its own, stood on a small cart, which was pulled by members of the butchers’ guild. Other members of the guild, bearing poles and candles, walked alongside and behind the cart, reflecting the fact that “the [image of the] Lord God belongs to the butchers” (*Der Herrgott ist der Mezger gesein*). Christ, astride the donkey, was dressed in a blue choir robe. Behind the butchers came the town’s mayors, burghers, “common men,” and finally women of all classes.

³² Durand, *Rationale*, 1.3.14, 6.67.7-9 (1:40, 2:323-24); Kipling, *Enter*, 24.

³³ Bernard of Clairvaux, “In Ramis Palmarum, Sermo Primus,” 2-3, in *Opera*, 5:43-44; Bernard, *Sermons*, 2:113-15. For a useful study of this sermon, see Bruun, “Procession.”

³⁴ “Hi tibi passuro solvebant munia laudis, nos tibi regnanti panginus ecce melos” (Arens, *Liber*, 44-45); Theodulph of Orleans, “Gloria, laus et honor,” fifth stanza, trans. J. M. Neale.

³⁵ Schilling, “Religiösen,” 117-120; Scribner, *Popular*, 25-27.

³⁶ The “guild poles” likely bore banners or other guild emblems.

Church bells rang along the route. Thus, we are assured, “our Lord God was followed with devotion and prayers.” The palmesel was left overnight in the chapel.

The next morning, after early mass and the blessing of the palms, the congregation carried palm or savin juniper branches (*Sefich*) to the upper gate, where “our Lord God” (the palmesel) was already outside waiting for them. Several of the choirboys carried “a sea cane or gladiolus [lit: sword lily]” (*Meerrohr oder schwerttelen*). Clergy and people knelt before the image. Then, in the same processional order as the previous evening, the worshipers led the palmesel down into the town. Arriving in the churchyard, many knelt or prostrated themselves. The choirboys sang with their arms raised to the Christ figure, spread their surplices before the palmesel, and struck one another with “sea canes.” The priest and acolytes also sang. The people “shot” (*haben . . . geschossen*) their palms and juniper branches at the image. Women carried little lights in lanterns; some, their heads modestly covered in rain scarfs, sang. When everyone went into the church for the main mass of the day, the palmesel stayed outside in the churchyard. People took blessed palm and savin branches home; if summer proved stormy, the branches would be put on the fire to improve the weather. After lunch, many children returned to play near the image. Adults, especially women, came to pray in front of it. In Biberach, Palm Sunday was known as “the day of the humble king” (*den tag des demüettigen Königs*).

The basic structure of Biberach’s Palm Sunday ceremony was akin to those in Zurich and Essen. On the eve of the feast, the palmesel was led in procession away from the main church to its overnight resting place, so that the next day’s reenactment of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem would be a dramatically distinct event. A local high point, the town’s upper gate, was chosen so that the palmesel’s return procession could more convincingly represent Christ’s downhill approach from the Mount of Olives. On Sunday morning, one group of worshipers met in the

church for the blessing of the palms before going in procession to the upper gate: they represented those who went out from Jerusalem with palm branches to meet Christ. A second group, led by the members of the butchers' guild, retrieved the *palmesel* from Saint Leonard's chapel, before waiting with it beneath the upper gate: they represented the disciples approaching Jerusalem with Christ. In the churchyard, where the procession ended, people knelt or prostrated themselves before the image. Prayers were offered, and hymns were sung, albeit in a rather less organized fashion than in Essen Abbey. Clothes were cast on the ground, and the people "shot" palms and other foliage at the *palmesel*.

But much was different, too, in Biberach. The clergy played a smaller part and the laity a larger part than either had in Essen or Zurich. Biberach's *palmesel* was owned not by the church but by the butchers' guild, whose members walked in the privileged positions next to the image. The secular elite—mayors and burghers—outnumbered the clergy. At the close of the procession, rather than continuing into the church, the *palmesel* stayed in the churchyard; during the afternoon children played in its presence, and the women of the town approached it with personal devotions. Biberach's Christ was a humble rather than a triumphant king. Unlike the Palmchristus of Essen Abbey, he was close to the people rather than exalted to a distant throne. He wore a simple choir robe, his donkey was pulled in a butcher's cart, and he was acclaimed with local juniper as well as exotic palms. As for the choirboys striking one another with canes, this may have recalled the scourging that Christ would face on Good Friday, but it must also have been a favorite part of the action for energetic young boys.³⁷ Where the theology of Essen's aristocratic canonesses was hierarchical and transcendent, the folk theology of Biberach was immanent and practical. Taking the blessed palms home to protect, if need be, against inclement

³⁷ On Palm Sunday in Catalonia, "boys used to stage battles with blows of olive and laurel branches" (Artís-Gener and Moya, *Festes*, 80). In Poland and Ukraine, "the faithful tap each other with pussy-willow palms in commemoration of the scourging of Christ" (Monti, *Week*, 49.)

summer weather was consistent with this folk theology: the Christ who rode a donkey into Biberach cared less about ecclesiastical status than about potential damage to the crops.

Biberach's palmesel did not survive the Reformation. The account's repeated insistence that everything had been done "piously" and "with moderation" was perhaps intended to counter the objections of Protestant iconoclasts. Or it may have been a retrospective protest against the burning of Biberach's palmesel in 1534. The report of the burning notes laconically that the town's barber-surgeon, who carried out the execution, "died soon afterward."³⁸

Verona (1690)

The Verona *muletta*, as the city's image of Christ on a donkey is known, survives. It can be seen in the Church of Santa Maria in Organo, formerly part of the Olivetan monastery that owned the image. Although a date "around the middle of the thirteenth century"³⁹ has been claimed for the *muletta*, the first verifiable testimony to its existence comes from 1607. Adriano Banchieri, a monk and composer of sacred music, visited the monastery of Santa Maria in Organo that year, and described the city's Palm Sunday procession as "an old and devout custom. . . . Every year on Palm Sunday, after the distribution of the blessed olive branch, there occurs a most notable procession, with a grand assembly of nobility and other people. The ass (*polledretta*), adorned with palms and olive branches, is carried in procession through the city with universal joy of bells and various fireworks. When it is returned to the church, a most festive (*solennissima*) Pontifical Mass is sung by the Reverend Father, abbot *pro tem* of that most honored monastery. This devout custom, observed throughout the city, is called by longstanding

³⁸ Strele, "Palmesel," 142-43.

³⁹ Francovich, "Contributi," 134; c.f. Maffei and Francovich, *Mostra*, 42-43.

use the Feast of the Muletta.”⁴⁰

Banchieri composed for the occasion “a concerted Mass for four choirs which makes the effect of eight choirs. In the first choir there are three violins (*Violini da braccio*) and a tenor voice. In the second choir there are four viols with corresponding voices. In the third choir there are four viole de gamba with other voices, and in the fourth there are three trombones and a contralto voice.” Additional instrumental accompaniment was provided by “the large, beautiful organ, . . . two double basses (*Violini continoi in contrabasso*), two harpsichords, three lutes, and two large lutes (*chittarroni*).”⁴¹ Palm Sunday in seventeenth-century Verona was clearly a lively affair of mixed style, enjoyed alike by the monks, the nobility, and the common people. The procession, accompanied by bursts of church bells and fireworks, was followed by a Baroque mass with multiple voices and both string and wind instruments. The muletta was not wheeled, but “carried on the shoulders of the monks by means of litter poles; the iron loops through which the poles were inserted survive.”⁴²

Secondo Lancellotti provided a similar account in his history of the Olivetan Order (1623). Palms were distributed, the nobility assembled, and “a multitudinous, most illustrious procession” took place. Palms were strewn before “the ass (*asella*) with Christ,” which was also honored with olive branches. “It is carried most religiously around the whole city,” he wrote, “with bells sounding publicly, most brilliant fireworks flashing on all sides (*artificiosis ignibus undique coruscantibus*), . . . , giving cause for great rejoicing. This feast day is therefore called the feast of the mule (*de Mulula*).”⁴³

Neither account suggests a particularly strong mimetic component to the procession. The

⁴⁰ Banchieri, *Conclusioni*, 49-50; translation adapted from Banchieri, *Conclusions*, 45.

⁴¹ Banchieri, *Conclusioni*, 50-51; translation adapted from Banchieri, *Conclusions*, 45-46.

⁴² Horlbeck, “Gloria,” 29.

⁴³ Lancellotti, *Historiae*, 216.

muletta itself represented the Christ of Palm Sunday, and palms were strewn in front of it, but there is no indication that Jerusalem was mapped on the city of Verona as it had been in Augsburg, Zurich, and Biberach, or that the muletta was stationed elsewhere overnight so as to make its entry on Palm Sunday a dramatically distinct event. The most straightforward reading of the accounts suggests a Palm Sunday procession that began and ended at the same church. It is possible, of course, that the accounts are incomplete, but it seems to me more likely that narrative drama had given way to spectacle, candles and crosses to bells and fireworks, and unaccompanied chant to multiple Baroque choirs and musical instruments. Tastes, both liturgical and theatrical, had changed.

They were to change again. Within a hundred years, the muletta had lost its place in the city's Palm Sunday and Corpus Christi processions, and had been confined to a niche above the altar in a small chapel in the north transept of the church. In 1718 the niche was covered with a painting of Christ's entry into Jerusalem, which was itself replaced two years later by a painting of Saint Benedict, whose rule the Olivetans followed.⁴⁴ The painting, however, was hung on hinges, allowing it to be swung open on Palm Sunday to reveal the muletta,⁴⁵ which was spectacularly raised into view by means of a set of cogs and pulleys in a tiny storage room behind the altar.⁴⁶ After 1965, the annual showing of the image was discontinued. The muletta is now displayed year round on a pedestal beside the altar in the chapel of St. Benedict.

⁴⁴ Marchi, "Cristo," 145-47. Both paintings remain in the church: Andrea Voltolini's "L'Ingresso de Gesù in Gerusalemme" hangs in the left transept, while Simone Brentana's "S. Benedetto" is still above the altar in the chapel of St. Benedict.

⁴⁵ Biancolini, *Notizie*, 1:316. The muletta's concealment during the rest of the year was due at least in part to the persistence of Protestant slanders, beginning in the late seventeenth century, which claimed that the people of Verona not only worshiped the image of a donkey, but believed the muletta to contain the relics of the donkey ridden by Christ himself into Jerusalem: see Misson, *New*, 1:198-99; Wright, *Observations*, 2:489-90. For contemporary refutations of the slander, see Ottavio Alecci (1710), cited in Marchi, *Luoghi*, 129; Maffei, *Verona*, 3:288-92. The libel surfaced again at the beginning of the twentieth century: see Marchi, "Cristo," 151-55; Marchi, *Luoghi*, 133-37.

⁴⁶ Umberto Calafà, personal conversation, February 19, 2013. Sig. Calafà recalled seeing the annual appearance of the *muletta* when he was a boy, and kindly showed me the storage room from which the *muletta* was raised into its niche; the mechanism by which it was raised no longer exists.

San José de Chiquitos (2011)

The palmesel likely traveled to the Americas with German-speaking Jesuit missionaries in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The first Jesuits had arrived in South America in 1550. By 1609, their successors had begun to establish a network of “reductions” (*reducciones*), communities of Christianized Indians, that eventually spread across territory in what is now Paraguay, northeastern Argentina, southern Brazil, and lowland Bolivia. Surviving church buildings, religious sculptures, and musical scores bear testimony to the remarkable artistic development of the Jesuit reductions.⁴⁷ Between 1690 and the suppression of the Jesuits in 1767, most new missionaries arriving in the reductions were from the Austrian Empire, southern Germany, and Switzerland,⁴⁸ an influx that demonstrably shaped the Baroque musical tastes of the Jesuit reductions.⁴⁹ Surviving wood carvings and other architectural features of the Jesuit churches also reflect this regional influence. So, in all likelihood, does the lasting popularity of processional wooden palm donkeys.

The Museo de Santa María, in the Paraguayan village of Santa María de Fe, a former Jesuit reduction some hundred miles southeast of the capital city of Asunción, houses a remarkable collection of wooden statues of Christ, the Virgin Mary, various saints, and (as part of the nativity scene) animals. These indigenous works of Baroque art belonged to the Jesuit mission church, built sometime around 1670 but destroyed by fire in 1889.⁵⁰ Included in the collection is perhaps the oldest surviving palmesel in the Americas.⁵¹ Along with the other

⁴⁷ See, for example, Caraman, *Lost*; McNaspy and Blanch, *Lost*; Querejazu, *Misiones*; Buelow, *History*, 405-06.

⁴⁸ Caraman, *Lost*, 98.

⁴⁹ Buelow, *History*, 406; Huseby, Ruiz, and Waisman, “Panorama.”

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 48-60.

⁵¹ For a photograph, see *ibid.*, 54.

statues in the museum, it likely dates to the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century.

Such processional palm donkeys remain especially popular among the descendants of the Chiquitos Indians who settled in the Jesuit reductions of lowland Bolivia. Pedro Querejazu writes, “In all the mission villages there has been found a little donkey (*borriquito*) on a wheeled platform, on which is seated a processional [image of] Christ, which can be dressed for the purpose of staging the Palm Sunday procession.”⁵² In San José de Chiquitos, palms are blessed during both the six and nine o’clock Palm Sunday masses, “with the intention of driving the devil from the village.” At midday, “the image of Jesus of Nazareth mounted on a donkey” is “stolen” from the church, and taken to a temporary chapel, designated “Bethany,” on the far edge of the village. “In the late afternoon, carrying the blessed palms,” clergy and people escort two images, “the Child of the Palms (*Niño de Ramos*) and the Nazarene Mounted on his Donkey (*Nazareno Montado en su burro*) from Bethany to the church,” recalling Christ’s “triumphal entry . . . into Jerusalem. On their first entry into the church, both images are received with a shower of yellow flowers, the fluttering of palms, the chiming of bells, songs acclaiming Christ the son of David, king of Israel, and the sound of bass drums and violins.” A complete processional circuit of the town follows. Returning to the church, the worshipers find the doors closed, signifying “the denial of Jesus of Nazareth by the Jewish people.” The head of the indigenous town council strikes the doors three times with his staff of office (*báculo*), and the procession is admitted to the playing of violins within.⁵³

⁵² Querejazu, “Equipamiento,” 654.

⁵³ A description of Palm Sunday in San José de Chiquitos in 2011, with photographs, can be found at <http://totito64.blogspot.com/2011/04/semana-santa-en-san-jose-de-chiquitos.html>, accessed March 26, 2013. See also Kühne, “Semana,” 558. Similar Palm Sunday processional rituals take place in other former Jesuit reductions in the area, such as San Ignacio de Velasco (see Aguilar Apolo, “Fortalecimiento,” 258) and Trinidad (see Paredes-Candia, *Fiestas*, 2:113-14). In the latter case, the door is struck not with a staff of office, but with the feet of the wooden she-ass (*las patas de la pollina*).

Conclusion

The Palm Sunday procession may be thought of as a kind of history play, dramatizing Christ's first-century entry into Jerusalem. Like other history plays, it depends in part on its source texts—in this case the biblical accounts—and in part on the cultural contexts in which it is staged. Since Palm Sunday has had a much longer run and been performed in many more locations than most history plays, it has had ample opportunity to develop (and discard) a wide variety of staging methods and interpretations. The palmesel is perhaps the most enduring of the props used to that end, but by no means the only one. Priests on foot, two-dimensional painted images, crosses, gospel books, the consecrated host, and, in two cases, recently deceased kings,⁵⁴ have also been used to represent Christ in Palm Sunday processions. Surprisingly, I know of no definitive record of a rider on a live donkey doing so before the fifteenth century.⁵⁵

But all that is part of a much larger story. Here I simply note that the palmesel lends itself to a variety of interpretive practices. It can represent an exalted Christ entering the heavenly Jerusalem, a humble Christ happy to dwell among his people and take part in their seasonal games, a festive Christ who enjoys fireworks and Baroque choirs, and a Christ who may be worshiped in San José de Chiquitos no less than in Augsburg or Jerusalem. Canonesses may venerate the palmesel, and children be given rides on it. Like a great Shakespearean actor—but

⁵⁴ The corpse of Otto III, king of Germany and Holy Roman Emperor, was acclaimed “as if it were Christ entering Jerusalem,” when it arrived in Cologne on Palm Sunday, 1002: see Thietmar, *Chronik*, 4, 49-53 (188-93), trans. Warner, 187-90; Mayr-Harting, *Ottomanian*, 1:119. The corpse of Baldwin I, king of the crusader state of Jerusalem, arriving in the holy city in the midst of the Palm Sunday procession in 1118, immediately assumed the role of Christ: see Albert, *Historia*, 868-71; Fulcher, *Historia*, 2, 64 (609-13), trans. Ryan, 221-22.

⁵⁵ The chapter accounts of Udine cathedral record payment of “twelve soldi [pence],” on Palm Sunday, 1424, “to the boy who went on the ass in place of Christ” (*puero qui fuit super asellum loco Christi*). A similar payment of “fourteen soldi” was made in 1461 “to the young boy who rides the ass with the bell-ringer who leads the colt” (*al puto chel chavalca l’aseno col campanaro che mena l’asenello*). According to Guiseppe Vale, subsequent payments were recorded “almost every year”: see Vale, “Liturgia,” 29, citing the “libri dei Dapiferi del Capitolo di Aquileia (Udine, Archivio Capitolare). Despite the common assumption that Egeria, *Itinerarium*, 77, trans. Gringas, 104-05, describes the bishop of Jerusalem riding a live donkey in the city’s late fourth-century Palm Sunday procession, Egeria is at best unclear. I am inclined to agree with De Santi, Santi, “Domenica,” 7-8: “Such is the character of the author, that without any doubt she could have noted this particularity, if there had actually been” a donkey.

without even a speaking part—the palmesel is versatile enough to offer widely divergent interpretations of its occasional starring role in the processional theater of Palm Sunday. It deserves to be studied by theater historians no less than art historians.

Works Cited

- Adelmann, Josef Anselm von. "Christus auf dem Palmesel." *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 63 (1967): 182-200.
- Aguilar Apolo, Cristina. "Fortalcimiento de las bases para el desarrollo del cittes de turismo en la Universidad Católica Boliviana Chiquitos." Diss., Universided Católica de Loja, 2009.
- Albert of Aachen. *Historia Ierosolimitana: History of the Journey to Jerusalem*. Ed. and trans. Susan B. Edington. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.
- Andrieu, Michel. *Les Ordines romani du haut moyen âge*. 5 vols. Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1931-1961.
- Arens, Franz. *Der Liber ordinarius der Essener Stiftskirche*. Paderborn: A. Pape, 1908.
- Artís-Gener, Avel·lí, and Bienve Moya. *Festes populars a Catalunya*. Barcelona: Editorial HMB, 1980.
- Banchieri, Adriano. *Conclusioni nel suono dell'organo*. 1609. Reprint, New York: Broude Brothers, 1975.
- . *Conclusions for Playing the Organ*. Trans. Lee R. Garrett. Colorado Springs: Colorado College Music Press, 1982.
- Barraud Wiener, Christine, and Peter Jezler. "Liturgie, Stadtopographie und Herrschaft nach den Prozessionen des Zürcher Liber Ordinarius." In *Der Liber Ordinarius des Konrad von Mure: die Gottesdienstordnung am Grossmünster in Zürich*, ed. Leuppi, Heidi, 127-56. Fribourg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 1995.

- Bärsch, Jürgen. "Raum und Bewegung im mittelaltlicher Gottesdienst: Anmerkungen zur Prozessionsliturgie in der Essener Stiftskirche nach dem Zeugnis des Liber Ordinarius vom Ende des 14. Jahrhunderts." In *Heiliger Raum: Architektur, Kunst und Lituegie in mittelalterlichen Kathedralen und Stiftskirchen*, ed. Franz Kohlschein and Peter Wünsche, 163-186. Münster: Aschendorff, 1998.
- Bernard of Clairvaux. *Sancti Bernardi Opera*. Ed. J. Leclercq, H. Rochais, and C. H. Talbot. 8 vols. Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957-77.
- . *St. Bernard's Sermons for the Seasons and Principal Festivals of the Year*. Trans. Ailbe J. Liddy. 3 vols. Westminster, Md.: Carroll Press, 1950.
- Berschin, Walter. "Realistic Writing in the Tenth Century: Gerhard of Augsburg's *Vita S. Uodalrici*." In *Aspects of the Language of Latin Prose*, ed. Tobias Reinhardt, Michael Lapidge, and J. N. Adams, 377-82. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Biancolini, Giambatista. *Notizie storiche delle chiese di Verona*. 4 vols. Verona: Alessandro Scolari, 1749-1752.
- Bruun, Mette Birkedal. "Procession and Contemplation in Bernard of Clairvaux's First Sermon for Palm Sunday." In *The Appearances of Medieval Rituals: The Play of Construction and Modification*, ed. Nils Holger Petersen et al., 67-82. Turnhout: Brepols, 2004.
- Buelow, George J. *A History of Baroque Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.
- Caraman, Philip. *The Lost Paradise: The Jesuit Republic in South America*. New York: Seabury Press, 1976.
- [De Santi, Angelo]. "La domenica delle palme nella storia liturgica." *La Civiltà Cattolica* 57, 2 (1906): 3-18, 159-77.
- Durand, Guillaume. *Rationale divinatorum officiorum*. Ed. A. Davril and T. M. Thibodeau. 3 vols.

- Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 140-140B. Turnholt: Brepols, 1995-2000.
- Egeria. *Diary of a Pilgrimage*. Trans. George E. Gingras. Ancient Christian Writers 38. New York: Newman Press, 1970.
- . *Itinerarium Egeriae*. Ed. E. Franceschini and R. Weber. In *Itineraria et alia geographica*, ed. P. Geyer et al, 1:27-103. 2 vols. Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 175-176. Turnholt: Brepols, 1965.
- Francovich, Géza de. “Contributi alla scultura romanica veronese.” *Rivista del R. Istituto d’archeologia e storia dell’arte* 9 (1942): 103-47.
- Fulcher of Chartres. *Historia Hierosolymitana (1095-1127)*. Ed. Heinrich Hagenmeyer. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1913.
- . *A History of the Expedition to Jerusalem (1095-1127)*. Trans. Frances Rita Ryan. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1969.
- Gerhard of Augsburg. *Vita Sancti Uodalrici: Die älteste Lebensbeschreibung des heiligen Ulrich*. Ed. and trans. Walter Berschin and Angelika Häse. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1993.
- Horlbeck, Frank R. “Gloria, Laud and Honor: The Palmesel and Palm Sunday.” *Elvehjem Museum of Art Bulletin* (1977-78): 26-37.
- Huseby, Gerardo, Irma Ruiz, and Leonardo J. Waisman. “Un Panorama de la Música en Chiquitos.” In *Las Misiones Jesuíticas de Chiquitos*, ed. Pedro Querejazu, 659-70. La Paz: Fundación BHN, 1995.
- Jezler, Peter. “‘Da beschachend vil grosser endrungen’: Gerold Edlibachs Aufzeichnungen über die Zürcher Reformation 1520-1526.” In Hans-Dietrich Altendorf and Peter Jezler,

- Bilderstreit: Kulturwandel in Zwinglis Reformation*, 41-74. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984.
- Kahsnitz, Rainer. "The Gospel Book of Abbess Svanhild of Essen in the John Rylands Library." Trans. F. Taylor. *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 53 (1970): 122-66.
- Kipling, Gordon. *Enter the King: Theatre, Liturgy, and Ritual in the Medieval Civic Triumph*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
- Kühne, Eckhart. "Semana Santa y fiesta patronal en San José de Chiquitos: Topografía de ritos, con notas explicatorias del esquema urbanístico." In *Las Misiones Jesuíticas de Chiquitos*, ed. Pedro Querejazu, 557-63. La Paz: Fundación BHN, 1995.
- Lancellotti, Secondo. *Historiae Olivetanae*. Venice: Typographia Gueriliana, 1623.
- Leuppi, Heidi, ed. *Der Liber Ordinarius des Konrad von Mure: die Gottesdienstordnung am Grossmünster in Zürich*. Fribourg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 1995.
- Lipsmeyer, Elizabeth. "Devotion and Decorum: Intention and Quality in Medieval German Sculpture." *Gesta* 34 (1995): 20-27.
- . "The *Liber Ordinarius* by Konrad von Mure and Palm Sunday Observance in Thirteenth-Century Zürich." *Manuscripta* 32 (1988): 139-45.
- Maffei, Fernanda de', and Géza de Francovich, *Mostra di sculture lignee medioevali: Museo Poldo Pezzoli*. Milan: Edizioni dell'Ente manifestazioni milanesi, 1957.
- Maffei, Scipione. *Verona illustrata*. 4 vols. in 2. Verona: J. Vallarsi and P. Berio, 1731-1732.
- Marchi, Gian Paolo. "Il Cristo delle Palme di S. Maria in Organo a Verona." *Nove historia* 14 (1962): 140-57.
- . *Luoghi letterari*. Verona: Edizioni Fiorini, 2001.

- Mayr-Harting, Henry. *Ottonian Book Illumination*. 2 vols. London: Harvey Miller, 1991.
- McNaspy, C. J., and J. M. Blanch. *Lost Cities of Paraguay: Art and Architecture of the Jesuit Reductions 1607-1767*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1982.
- Misson, Maximilien. *A New Voyage to Italy*. 1695. 4th ed. 4 vols. London: R. Bonwicke, 1714.
- Monti, James. *The Week of Salvation: History and Traditions of Holy Week*. Huntington, Ind: Our Sunday Visitor, 1993.
- Paredes-Candia, Antonio. *Fiestas populares de Bolivia*. 2 vols. La Paz: Ediciones Isla, 1976.
- Pothmann, Alfred. "Der Essener Kirchenschatz aus der Frühzeit der Stiftsgeschichte." In *Herrschaft, Bildung und Gebet: Gründung und Anfänge des Frauenstifts Essen*, ed. Günter Berghaus, Thomas Schilp, and Michael Schlagheck, 135-153. Essen: Klartext, 2000.
- Querejazu, Pedro. "El equipamiento artístico en las misiones de Chiquitos." In *Las Misiones Jesuíticas de Chiquitos*, ed. Pedro Querejazu, 651-58. La Paz: Fundación BHN, 1995.
- , ed. *Las Misiones Jesuíticas de Chiquitos*. La Paz: Fundación BHN, 1995.
- Schilling, A., ed. "Die religiösen und kirchlichen Zustände der ehemaligen Reichstadt Biberach unmittelbar vor Einführung der Reformation. Geschildert von einem Zeitgenossen." *Freiburger Diöcesan Archiv* 19 (1887): 1-191.
- Scribner, R. W. *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany*. London: Hambledon Press, 1987.
- Strele, Richard von. "Der Palmesel: Eine culturhistorische Skizze." *Zeitschrift des Deutschen und Österreichischen Alpenvereins* 28 (1897): 135-54.

- Tarchnischvili, Michel. *Le grand lectionnaire de l'Eglise de Jérusalem (V^e-VIII^e siècle)*. 2 vols. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 188-89. Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1959.
- Thietmar of Merseburg. *Die Chronik des Bischofs Thietmar von Merseburg*. Ed. Robert Holzmann. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorum Rerum Germanicarum, Nova Series 9. Munich: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1996.
- . *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*. Trans. David A. Warner. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.
- Tripps, Johannes. *Das handelnde Bildwerk in der Gotik*. Berlin: Gebrüder Mann Verlag, 1998.
- Vale, Guiseppe. "La liturgia nella chiesa patriarcale di Aquileia." In *Mostra di codici liturgici aquileiesi*, 13-32. Udine: Arte Grafiche Friulane, 1968.
- Vogel, Cyrille, and Reinhard Elze, *Le Pontifical romano-germanique du dixième siècle*. 3 vols. Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1963-1972.
- Wright, Edward. *Some Observations Made in Travelling through France, Italy, &c. in the Years 1720, 1721, and 1722*. 2 vols. London: Ward and Wicksteed, 1730.
- Wyss, Georg von. *Geschichte der Abtei Zürich*. Zurich: Meyer und Zeller, 1853.
- Zeller-Werdmüller, H. "Nächtliche Spazierfahrt eines Palmesel." *Anzeiger für schweizerische Altertumskunde*, n.s. 2 (1900): 67.