

BATHSHEBA'S BATH

- **Theme:** Bathsheba's bath. The iconography of Bathsheba's bath appears frequently next to the iconography of King David sending Uriah the Hittite to his death
- **Keywords:** Bathsheba, David, Bath, Old Testament, Christian iconography, Late Middle Ages
- **Summary:** This episode appears in II Samuel 11:2-4 and it is part of the cycle of the life of King David. One evening a restless David walked around on the roof of his palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. This story from the Old Testament does not end here for David's adultery with Bathsheba had begotten a child. In order to cover the scandal, David sent Bathsheba's husband to his premature death in the heat of a battle, and after her mourning period had passed he married her. These actions were not agreeable to God, who sent the prophet Nathan to confront King David. As his due punishment, David's son would die after the seventh day of his birth has passed (II Samuel 12:1-19).
- **Attributes and types of representation:** Bathsheba appears either nude or in underwear inside a fountain or a river that appears in a garden. King David observes her from a balcony of his palace in the background. Sometimes, Bathsheba and King David are accompanied by servants, and in some examples, King David's emissary appears giving Bathsheba a letter.¹ The iconography of Bathsheba's bath can appear in an iconographical cycle of the Life of King David or independently.
- **Primary sources:** The story of Bathsheba's bath appears in the Old Testament and it is narrated as follows:
 - 2 Samuel 11:2-4: "One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (She had purified herself from her uncleanness.) Then she went back home." (From Bible Gateway, <http://www.biblegateway.com>, last accessed 4th of March, 2010).
 - Psalm 51: For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. (From Bible Gateway, <http://www.biblegateway.com>, last accessed 4th of March, 2010).
- **Other sources, non-written sources:** It is very difficult to find any type of non-written sources that could have influenced the creation of this iconography. This episode is not related to any liturgical event that could have had an impact on its development. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that most of the iconography of Bathsheba's Bath could have been created by the artists that incorporated their own vision of the short and

¹ For a more detailed description of the iconographical variants of Bathsheba's bath see Mónica Ann Walker Vaddillo (2008), *Bathsheba in Late Medieval French Manuscript Illumination: Innocent Object of Desire or Agent of Sin?* The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston.

uninformative description that the Bible gives of the place where Bathsheba was taking a bath or how much clothes she was wearing.

- **Geographical and chronological framework:** There are examples of the iconography of Bathsheba's bath in works of art from the 9th to the 16th century, from Syria to Great Britain.² The first example of this iconography appeared in the 9th century in the *Sacra Parallela* in Syria. From the 9th to the 13th century, there are no examples of this iconography. This does not mean that they did not exist, only that they have not survived until our time. The next example appeared in Paris in the 13th century in the Morgan Bible. In addition, this iconography was also present in the Moralizing Bibles created in France during the 13th and the 15th centuries for the royal family.³ It is in this geographical area, in France, where most of the iconographical examples are going to concentrate after the privatization of the devotional practices of the laity during the Late Middle Ages. This privatization led to the creation of a small format codex called the Book of Hours.⁴ According to Harthan, the iconography of Bathsheba's bath was not introduced into the Book of Hours until the second half of the 15th century, and then it appeared next to the Penitential Psalms.⁵ The Book of Hours was one of the most popular manuscripts from the Late Middle Ages and it was considered to be a bestseller. This would explain the great amount of manuscripts that have survived until today that contain this iconography. From France, the iconographical model of Bathsheba's Bath spread to Spain, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and England.
- **Artistic media and techniques:** Bathsheba's bath has been represented in a wide variety of artistic manifestations: sculpture, manuscript illumination, sumptuary arts, textiles, and liturgical objects.
- **Precedents, transformations, and projection:** The closer iconographical precedent of Bathsheba's bath was probably the bath of Venus.⁶ From the beginning this iconography did not change much in its most basic format, which was already established in the 9th century. In all the examples David gazes at Bathsheba bathing. Nevertheless, the details of the image could be very different from one example to another if we take into consideration the fact that it was the artists (following the requests of their patrons?) who supplied all the details that were missing in the bible, such as the place where Bathsheba was bathing or how nude she was.⁷ In the first examples that we have from France from the 13th century, Bathsheba appears taking a bath inside of her house. She appears partially submerged in a wooden bathtub assisted by a servant. David usually watches her from his palace-castle. Afterwards, towards the 15th century, the artists started to represent Bathsheba standing up or seated next to a fountain or a spring in an exterior garden. The fountain could be very simple or very sculptural and elaborate. King David's palace was also a differentiating factor, since sometimes it was done in a medieval (Gothic) way, and other times it was done in a more classical (Renaissance) way. In a similar way, Bathsheba's degree of nudity could also be a differentiating factor since sometimes she

² Walker Vadillo (2008), *Bathsheba in Late Medieval Manuscript Illumination*, pp. 32-43.

³ John Lowden (2000), *The Making of the Bibles Moralisées: I. The Manuscripts*, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, 2000, pp.1-2.

⁴ George Duby (1991), *France in the Middle Ages, 987-1460: From Hugh Capet to Joan of Arc*. Blackwell, Oxford, p. 280.

⁵ John Harthan (1977), *The Book of Hours*, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Nueva York, p. 29.

⁶ This is but an educated guess taking into consideration that the iconography of Bathsheba originated in early Christian iconographical cycles based on models from Antiquity.

⁷ Walker Vadillo (2008), *Bathsheba in Late Medieval Manuscript Illumination*, pp. 32-43.

appears completely nude or covered by a veil or in her underwear. All these examples are coexisting at the same time and in the same place, France, and they were later on exported to other countries. The iconography of Bathsheba's bath was very popular during the Late Middle Ages, but this popularity did not diminish in later periods such as the Renaissance and the Baroque. It still continues to be an iconographical choice for many artists.

- **Typology and related themes:** Ambrose of Milan (340-397) mentions in his *De Apologia Prophetarum David* (390) that Bathsheba's union with David was a figurative union where she represents the Church of all Nations and he represents Christ.⁸ Furthermore, this union was not a legal union but a union of faith. Following Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo wrote: "He who was wished for by all the gentiles loved the Church that was washing herself over the roof, that is to say, that she was purifying herself of the worldly stains, and she transcended and stomped over the mud house through spiritual contemplation, and, having learned about it after their first encounter, he removed the Devil from her side and killed him, and then he wedded her in perpetual matrimony."⁹ Therefore Bathsheba should be interpreted as *Maria-Ecclesia*, the most desirable object for Christ in the Song of Songs. David sinned because he wanted Bathsheba; nevertheless, his desire should be seen more as the type of Christ' love for all the nations that culminates with his union with the Church after vanquishing the Devil-Uriah the Hittite. There are other related themes to Bathsheba's bath such as Adam and Eve and Susannah and the Elders. In addition, in some instances Bathsheba appears with the attributes of Vanity and prostitutes.
- **Images:**
 - Bathsheba's bath. Morgan Bible. ca. 1250. Paris, France. Nueva York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. M. 638, fol. 41v.
 - Bathsheba's bath. Historiated initial. Saint Louis Psalter, Paris, France. 1258-1270. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Latin 10525, fol. 85v.
 - Bathsheba's bath. *Fleur des Histoires* of Jean Mansel. 14th century. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Français 55, fol. 62.
 - Bathsheba's bath. Book of Hours of Louis of Laval. 1470-1475. Tours or Bourges, France. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Latin 920, fol. 158.
 - Bathsheba's bath. Book of Hours. 1480-1485. Paris, France. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Latin 1382, fol. 59.
 - Bathsheba's bath. Siglo XV. Fragment of the Reliquary of Saint Genevieve. France. Bibliothèque National de France.
 - Bathsheba's bath. Book of Hours of Marguerite of Coëtivy. 15th century. France. Chantilly, Musée condé, Ms. 74, fol. 61.

⁸ Ambrosio de Milán (390), *De Apologia Prophetarum David* [Consulted the edition of Pierre Hadot, (ed.), (1977) M. Cordier, París, pp. 73-74].

⁹ Agustín de Hipona (404-405), *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, I, XXII, c. 87, [Consulted the edition of Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos (1993), Madrid, p. 629].

- Bathsheba's bath. Book of Hours. C. 1500. Tours, France. Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. M.12, fol. 41.
- Bathsheba's bath. Book of Hours. 1500-1510. Bruges, Belgium. Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. M. 52, fol. 329r.
- Bathsheba's bath. Book of Hours. Thielman Kerver. 16th century. Paris, France. Paris, Musée national du Moyen Âge - Thermes de Cluny, CL23841, fol. G. 1.
- Bathsheba's bath. Book of Hours. 16th century. Paris, France. Paris, Musée du Louvre, RF4243.
- Bathsheba's bath. Ivory comb. 16th century. North of France. Paris, Musée du Louvre, OA144.
- Bathsheba's bath. Ivory comb. 16th century. Normandy, France. Paris, Musée du Louvre, OA143.
- Bathsheba's bath. Backside of an ivory mirror. 16th century. Germany. Ecoenen, Musée national de la Renaissance, ECL15318.
- Bathsheba's bath. Book of Hours. 1531. France. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Latin 10563, fol. 78v.
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