

Sylvain Piron/ Thomas de Cantimpré, and the collaboration of Armelle Le Huërou, *Christine l'Admirable. Vie, chants et merveilles*, éd. Vues de l'esprit, Bruxelles, 2021

The following text is an English review made by **Silvana Panciera** to popularise this very interesting book available for now in French and Italian(<https://ed.bibliotecafrancescana.it/prodotto/vita-di-cristina-lammirabile/?v=78533df0a516>).

All texts between brackets in italics are personally translated from Piron's French text.

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Vita Beate Cristine

In 1232 Thomas of Cantimpré wrote in Latin *Vita Beate Cristine*. Christina of Sint-Truiden, Belgium, (Saint-Trond in French) was an unusual beguine and a very astonishing human being, quoted also by Jacques de Vitry in the *Vita of Marie d'Oignies* for her prodigious work without naming her expressly. The same Thomas, who was used to the writings of beguines' *Vitae* (Marguerite of Ypres and other *mulieres religiosas*), added a *Supplementum* about Marie to Jacques' writings.

Before presenting this book, let us remember that Sylvain Piron is a professor of medieval times and director of studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris). His aim was to distinguish as best as possible what had actually happened in the *Vita Beate Cristine* from what was produced by popular imagination, gossip or anything non-historical. As a scholar he tried to find a link between the real experience of the Blessed One and the imaginative constructions that decorate every prodigious phenomenon. And there is so much that is prodigious in Christina's life, starting with her first return from

the dead, to her flying onto tree branches, putting herself in burning ovens or staying for days in the frozen water of a river. For a brief biography of Christina click on https://beguines.info/?page_id=2132&lang=en

For the translation into French of the *Vita Beate Cristine*, the text written by the Dominican Thomas de Cantimpré, Sylvain Piron compared the 17 existing complete manuscripts in Latin. We have also to remember that Thomas “*was not naive – later he was to become the pupil of Albert Le Grand in Cologne. He was a rationalist, either curious to understand nature’s laws or to observe the prodigious work that exceeded them*” (p.11). Because Thomas himself, like Sylvain Piron, wanted to check the reality beyond reveries, Thomas interviewed only the persons who had seen the facts they described or had heard the words from the mouth of Christina herself. A very experimental approach that is advantageous for Sylvain Piron’s research. After the translation from Latin of the 59 paragraphs of *Vita Beate Cristine*, the book presents five chapters and a conclusion referring to the analysis that Sylvain Piron made about the Blessed woman and her astonishing life. The book also includes the Latin text of Thomas de Cantimpré

I apologize for not providing a detailed description of Christina’s prodigious acts, but only some of her exceptional features. Those persons who are interested could read them in any English book about Christina’s life (ca 1160-1224). I would above all underline here some originalities of this book from my point of view.

Exceptional features and originalities of Christina

Conforming to the beguinal “*aspiration to sanctity within freedom*” (Bruges Beguinage Charta, 1245), following Christ’s example, Thomas stresses **Christina’s quality of freedom inspired by the Holy Spirit**. It was for the same freedom that a century later the Council of Vienne (in France, 1311-12) condemned the beguinal movement for being heretical.

The corporal inscription of her devotion has to be understood in the meaning of **atonement and repentance** for the sinners, in order to avoid or to shorten their after-death torments and also to prepare the body to become sacred through Christ's passion. She had the damned souls at heart. Having visited hell and purgatory during an apparent death, she made the salvation of those souls the meaning of her atonement. She was found on the scaffold of hanged men and among the graves in cemeteries. Depending on her jubilation or her loud cries of anguish, the inhabitants were able to know the supernatural destination of the dying persons. Here is an example. The noble Louis, Count of Looz, had a great devotion for Christina because he was convinced of her holiness. He always followed her suggestions and advice. He used to call her "mother". When close to death, he wanted her presence until his last moment and he confessed to her his sins. He begged for her prayers, because Christina was known for her special power of sharing the after-death sufferings of sinners. And so she did that for Count Louis.

Her experience resembles that of a fakir (resisting fire, boiling water, cold, crushing weights), **but also that of shamanism** for her ability to transform the body (into a bird, ball, snake-woman) and self-healing in the moments of great difficulty (milk from her breast, oil produced by her body ...). Sylvain Piron introduces a very original interpretation of the immeasurable penances that she inflicted on herself as "*a crisis of shamanic vocation which does not come to an end, for lack of receiving an adequate initiation into the techniques of ecstasy for which she demonstrates a predisposition*" (p.12)

Christina knew Latin and the scriptures and could answer many questions asked by her spiritual friends and probably she was a wandering preacher. But Thomas writes that she was convinced that "*the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures was the domain of clerics and that such things did not belong to her ministry.*" (p.31) She maintained a high respect for the clergy and especially for the priests, and she even endured several

injustices from them. “*However, she gently admonished sinful priests or clerics in great secrecy and with singular reverence, as if they were her own father, to avoid the good name of Christ being blasphemed among the people.*” (ibidem)

Thomas wrote that Christina used to **accompany dying people, also Jews** who had a sizable community in Sint-Truiden. Thanks to this simple assessment, Sylvain Piron refers to the research of the historian Elisheva Baumgarten, showing the presence of Christina in a Jewish text *Sefer Hssidim* (Pious book). In times of high antisemitism, this service given by Christina is impressive. Asked about that, Christina revealed that she knew that some bishops were in hell and some Jews in Eden. Beyond the social and cultural attributes, fair behavior is the heart of divine justice.

There was never a great universal devotion toward Christina. Nor was her holiness recognized. We know from Wikipedia that “*Veneration of Christina the Astonishing one has never been formally approved by the Catholic Church, but there remains a strong devotion to her in her native region of Limburg*” Perhaps it’s due to Christina “*keeping her troubling situation as an itinerant celibate woman*”? (p.43)

However, **her memory** is present in a vernacular version of Christina’s life written by brother Geraert following the request of the nun Femina van Hoye of the Saint-Catherina monastery in Sint-Truiden. And also in the great text, *Miroir des choses divines* by Henri Bate of Malines. This author, interested in spiritual beings on earth, included an abstract of Christina’s life in his collection of examples. The Henri Bate Latin text about Christina is also included in the Piron book. In more recent times, in particular since 1833, her relics have been conserved by the Redemptorists located in Sint-Truiden. Their devotion increased after her cult was approved by Pius IX in 1857. The novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans sometimes quoted Christina in his novels. “*Huysmans meditated a lot about Christina in the time he was experiencing his doctrine on atoning pain*” (p.56). Finally, the Orientalist Louis Massignon (1883-1962) was very impressed by this woman. He attributes to her his own later conversion. Massignon, just like James of Vitry, was struck by

Christina's reparative role. The perception that we are partly responsible for the mistakes of others and that it befalls us to expiate them. It is the mystical substitution, the universal and triumphant proof of Jesus' sacrifice. In the conference he gave in Sint-Truiden in 1924 for the 7th centenary of her death, he presented Christina as “*The first complete and exclusive case in Western Christianity of a victim vocation in order to counterbalance the growing weight of the inequities committed.*” (p.56)

Here is a final original point about the memories of our Blessed one. She is certainly the **only beguine to inspire a crooner post-punk singer**. In fact the Australian composer and singer Nick Cave dedicated to her a special song in the *Henry's Dream* (1992) album. The album with its dark and desperate mood was born from the experience of Nick in the Sao Paulo slums. “*Christina is no different from the stories of madmen and losers, who are flayed, and outsiders of all genres with which the album is filled*”(p.57). Listen to “*Christina the astonishing one*” on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oD39kCEmwY>

Was she a “pathological case”? That was the conclusion of Herbert Thurston, member of the Society for psychic research, who inquired about the holiness processes (1955). We found the same negative vision in Simone Roisin, author of an important work published in 1947 about saintly women in Liège. Among the many other authors who have spoken about Christina, most of them maintain a negative view of her singular nature. That is precisely what Sylvain Piron's study was intended to provide. Piron argues that “*the correct frame of mind to explain the meaning of Christina's actions is not the psychiatry, but the anthropology*” (p.83)

After a deeper anthropological research about Christina's context of life some specific features stand out. She was not born in the town of Sint-Truiden but rather in the rural village called Brusem in the county of Looz. Thus, she was not urban. We know very little about her parents: they were probably farmers owning some animals and land, owners of their house

located near the woods. Her parents probably died during military battles between nobles. "*Flight from the human world and extreme penances could thus be understood as a response to the violence of war.*"(p.87) From different facts that have been examined, she was probably eight to ten years old. It is possible that she suffered severe pain, which probably influenced her all her life. "*At the death of her parents, she was living with her elder sisters*" (p.85). The three sisters decided to live together in a religious way, as was quite common in those times, with household chores divided, Christina being in charge of the grazing animals. "*The lonely life in the fields certainly increased the development of her visionary capacities...Christ who first appears to her...in the intimacy with this "discreet lover", some distance from the human world, is already building*" (p.88) With many considerations that I cannot resume here, Sylvain Piron tries to give precise details of what really happened to this woman "*over whom no one has control*" (p.94) and why she was considered the closest to Francis of Assisi. And he concludes that the life of Christina was globally close to the information collected.

The last chapter of the book underlines "*the tornado represented by the presence of Christina in Hesbay*" (p.131). Thomas de Cantimpré was probably more excessive than the legendary collected information, and he even got carried away. However, Sylvain Piron finds a unifying element in her personality that is her "*intransigent and vindictive energy toward the rich and powerful*" (ibidem). Christina's preachings, which was usual in those times, were moreover focused on the rejection of goods earned unfairly. Even if Christina can be included in the beguinal movement due to her uncontrolled autonomy from male clergy, **she was considered an anomaly by her contemporaries**, some of whom had probably suspected her of being possessed. Because some "bizarreries" (for example staying on tree branches, her survival after unbelievable treatment that she inflicted on her body...) did not find any other examples, either in those times or in other religious movements, Sylvain Piron, as mentioned above,

searched for an introduction into the “shamanism”, particularly its expressions in the East Russian regions, as reported by ethnographers. A remarkable hypothesis that cannot be easily rejected or approved, but can be suggested given that “*the hypothesis that Christina had grown up in an environment still marked by shamanist survivals is perfectly plausible*” (p.141), showing traces of a rural pre-Christian culture in Hesbay. In this last chapter different weird behavior of Christina is compared to other analogous habits in the some shamanism cultures in addition to Russia (Siberia), Frioul in Italy (living goodness and metamorphoses in animals), in Sardinia in Italy and Mongolia (through songs) and Tibet (the lore of “*das-log*” young girls connected with death) “*Comparison fulfills its mission when it can provide a greater comprehension to the historical interpretation. However it must not erase an essential point. As her name indicates, Christina is perfectly Christian. ...To understand her we need to place her in a Christian ascetic line...the unusual exuberance of her corporal manifestations does not necessarily need to be given an unequivocal explanation*”. (p.143)

Conclusion

Sylvain qualifies her as a "*professional of the after-life*" and speaks about her “subtle body” that allowed her extraordinary capabilities such as raising herself onto roofs and trees. As an academic scholar, he claims the right to promote what he qualifies as a "*social science of the practices of the invisible*". Indeed, by what right should the invisible be qualified as unreal ? We cannot fail to be in complete harmony with this line of research and we hope that it will lead to many achievements.

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