
Pannoy: A Play for Power

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Few medieval paintings show children at play. Instead we see a multitude of newborn and idolized infants, usually, the infant Jesus. Some young princes are bundled against the cold in their palaces, and a lonely little princess far from home awaits a queenship that was not to be hers. The heirs of families kneel with their parents as they donate an altarpiece to a church. Some children are frivolously attired as cherubs, prancing or dancing in fantasy-land. Adults also are seldom shown at play. Life is too serious, especially if you are about to become a saint. George kills a dragon, Barbara is beheaded, Paul is converted. Misericords, on the other hand, seldom show the infant Jesus or adult saints but do show a number of children and adults at play.

Games on Medieval Misericords¹

Almost five hundred misericords show games, and games are common as well on the sides and ends of choir stalls. As with Bruegel's painting, *Children's Games* it is sometimes difficult to tell if the players are children or adults. But occasionally it is obvious that adults have taken over and are playing a child's game. While misericords do not give as vast a picture of games as the Bruegel painting, they complement the painting, since they picture mainly the leisure-time activities of adults, while children play in the Bruegel painting. Perhaps children were too far removed from the daily lives of the monks for their activities to be depicted under the seats. The adult games hint at corruption in society and the sin of *sloth*.

¹ A comprehensive list of misericord carvings of the game of *pannoy* appears at the end of this essay.

Pannoy

One of the games that seems to be a child's game but is portrayed with adult contestants is *pannoy*, or in Flemish, *tiegerspiel*. The closest modern equivalent to pannoy is Indian wrestling, the object being to displace a part of the opponent's body. The winner is the one who holds his ground.

Pannoy is a game for two players facing each other, the soles of their shoes touching, clutching a stick between them.² Each of the opponents attempts to remain seated while forcing the other to rise. Nineteen misericords and a few other choir stall carvings show this game. Nine are in France, two in Belgium, three in the Netherlands, and five in Spain, but there are none in Great Britain. Only Zamora (Spain) has more than a single image of pannoy on its choir stalls, and here we see not only humans but also apes and angels playing the game.



Figure 1 – Ivoy-le-Près (Cher)
Photo by Misericordia International

Three of the French misericords, at Montbenoît (Doubs), Ivoy-le-Pré (Cher) (Fig. 1) and Besse-en-Chandesse (Puy-de-Dome)

² We know very little about the game of *pannoy*. However, there is an illustration and brief commentary on the game in the 14th century in Walter Endri *Tarsasjáték es Szorakozás a Regi Europaban* (Budapest: A. Corvina, 1986) 83.

show a pair of nude players who do not appear particularly concerned about the outcome of the game. On other carvings the opponents are clothed men. At Bruges and Hoogstraten (Belgium), Concessault (Cher) and Paris (Musée national du Moyen Age, France), the players seem to be evenly matched, although they are attired differently. They strive energetically to win the game.

The men struggling for power at Zamora seem to be of different ages, (Fig. 2) probably to show conflict between the generations. At Negrepelisse (Tarn-et-Garonne) an elderly bearded man in a simple garment struggles with a clean-shaven young man in fitted tunic and tights, certainly indicating a struggle between the generations and classes of society. (Fig. 3) There also seems to be an age difference, or at least a difference in girth, between the well-dressed men at Blainville (Seine-Maritime). (Fig. 4) Another factor is involved here since one contestant has a cross on his tunic while the other may be wearing a jew's hat. On an end panel at Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges a monk struggles for power with his abbot. At Ciudad Rodrigo (Fig. 5) and Walcourt, (Fig. 6) pannoy is played by pairs of angry men on a back panel and a *jouée* panel of the stalls.

A more advanced stage of the game appears at the Ould Kerk (Amsterdam). (Fig. 7) Both opponents are already half-way into the air. The winner's buttocks are closer to the ground than the loser's, and the latter is also losing his pants. At the Cathedral of Rouen the game is obviously also well underway, since both opponents have risen from the ground.

Several variations of pannoy can be seen, mainly in Spain. The game need not be limited to humans, at least on misericords. At Astorga and Zamora, angels struggle for power. At Bolsward (Netherlands), as a satire, a pair of apes plays pannoy. (Fig. 8) On an end panel at Zamora two apes clutch, not a stick, but a wineskin, as they struggle for the contents. Also at Zamora, men struggle for a wineskin, (Fig. 9) but both are losing since the wine is pouring over their feet.

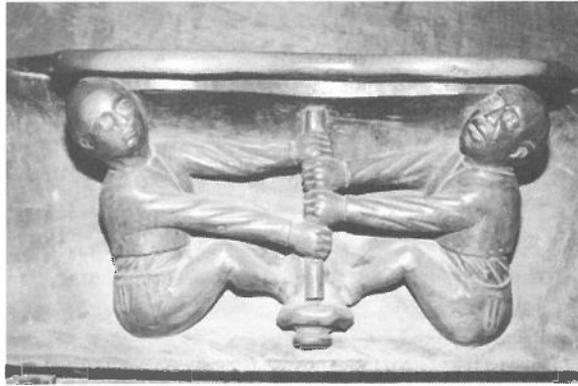


Figure 2 – Zamora (Spain)
Photo by Misericordia International



Figure 3 – Negrepelisse (Tarn-et-Garonne)
Photo by Misericordia International



Figure 4 – Blainville-Crévon (Seine-Maritime)
Photo by Misericordia International



Figure 5 – Ciudad Rodrigo (Spain)
Photo by Misericordia International



Figure 6 – Amsterdam, Old Church (Netherlands)
Photo by Misericordia International



Figure 7 – Walcourt (Belgium)

Photo by Misericordia International



Figure 8 – Bolsward (Netherlands)

Photo by Misericordia International



Figure 9 – Zamora (Spain)

Photo by Misericordia International

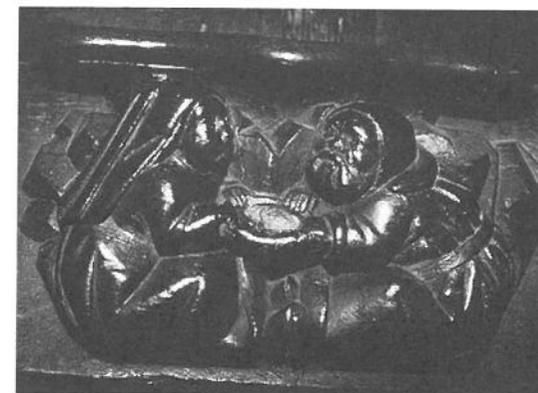


Figure 10 – Villefranche-en-Rouergue (Aveyron)

Photo by Misericordia International

Only once does a woman participate in the game, and then only in conjunction with another theme. At Villefranche-de-Rouergue, (Fig. 10) an elderly husband and wife are fighting, not for the stick of power, but for the pants in the family. Each holds onto a pair of underpants trying to wrest it from the other. A close look at this couple reveals that they are sitting in the “pannoy” position, soles of their shoes together. Both *pannoy* and the fight for the pants signify the struggle for power. In this case, it is a struggle within the family. The pants they are fighting for are not like others that are the object of struggle on misericords. At Hoogstraten, for example, the husband and wife fight for pants with a set of long legs. The design on each leg is different, signifying perhaps that one is more feminine and the other more masculine. At Rouen the young husband and wife struggle also for pants that have legs. The pants at Rouergue, however, have no legs at all. The elderly couple grab the waistband over a pair of holes. Perhaps this signifies that the couple, struggling for power, have no power left; they are impotent.

The game of *pannoy* as a struggle for power almost always occurs between two men, usually of unequal status, with variations in age, occupation, class or rank. (Fig. 11) Generally, the game is played forcefully and emotion is reflected in expressive faces and taut bodies. It was a popular symbol for power in all countries except England. It therefore represents far more than a game. It is a crucial aspect of life disguised as a

game and then hidden by the carvers under the seats of the choir stalls.



Figure 12 – Gassicourt (Yvelines): Hobby horse
Photo by Misericordia International

Surprisingly, another game, also confuses children and adults. The child's version of jousting is certainly play on hobby-horses. This toy was a favorite in the Middle Ages; Rabelais wrote that Gargantua got his first hobby-horse at the age of five. His toy horses, of different colors, were used on selected holidays.³ Hobby-horses appear in manuscript marginalia as one of the few scenes of childhood play. Nine misericords show children on hobby-horses made of sticks with a wooden horse-head attached. Generally, the child holds the reins. Usually the children, in pairs, face each other in imitation of a joust. Children, perched on their hobby-horses aim a newly invented toy, the "moulinet" or pin-wheel, which imitates the knights tilting weaponry. (Fig. 12) This toy had two small wings which twirled when they contacted another object.⁴ The children enter the fray determined to win and the losers' faces are often scowling or grimacing. (Fig. 13) Occasionally the child rides the hobby-horse alone and just hops around. (Fig. 14) Adults on hobby-horses represent a satirical attitude toward jousts. On a mutilated misericord at Breda (Netherlands), a man stands with his legs

³ M-M Rabecq-Maillard, *Histoire du Jouet* (Paris: Hachette, 1962) 26-28. See also Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Role of Games in Rabelais* Yale Studies 41 5New Haven: Eastern Press, 1968).

⁴ See the exhibition catalogue for *Jeux et Jouets d'autrefois*. Paris: Institut pédagogique national, 1961. See also a special issue on toys, *Jardin des arts* (January, 1961).

parted and his coat partly open. Evidently he was riding a hobby-horse, retained by a child who still stands by him holding the broken reins.

The strange thing about these hobby-horse riders, except for the Breda reveler, is that they are all nude. They are male, muscular, and certainly not child-like. Yet, they are riding hobby-horses rather than real horses, wielding moulinets instead of lances. Here too a child's game is played by adults, and we have no obvious explanation. There was, however, an expression at the time equating a prostitute with a hobby-horse. The hobby-horses in misericords, therefore, might also refer to a prostitute, and it is not surprising to find a nude male upon it.



Figure 13 – Musée national du moyen-âge (Paris): Hobby horse
Photo by Misericordia International

Children's games may also be transformed into sports or occupations that are rewarded. The most understandable transformation is gymnast to acrobat. We see hundreds of these on misericords, including monkey acrobats. This game or profession can be corrupted by becoming obscene. The acrobats then become merely posturers showing parts of their body to amuse or to shock.



Figure 14 – Ciudad Rodrigo (Spain)
Photo by Misericordia International

Children's games of chance, like odds-and-evens, are corrupted by adults into betting or dice games. Make-believe games, like playing with dolls and mimicking bridal processions, become the charivari and theater of adults. The hobby-horses become the grand jousts and tilts. Games of strength become wrestling matches and bear-baiting. Even the innocent May Day festival which we see in calendars is turned by Bosch into the Ship of Fools steered by Gluttony, Lust, and Sloth.

Games are presented with very little commentary. Only their position under the seats implies a comment on their role in society. Are these games a waste of time, an example of sloth? Are some of them expressions of anger? Or are they pastimes the monks can consider and enjoy even though they are not practiced in their community?

Misericords presenting the game of Pannoy (23)

Belgium (2)

Bruges: Saint-Sauveur NL-11 Men attired in simple armor; one loses.
Hoogstraten: Saint-Catherine NU-03 Two aged men.

France (10)

Concessault (Cher) N-07 Two men in brimmed hats and short jackets
Ivoy-le-Pré (Cher) N-07 Nude contestants look unconcerned.
Montbenoit (Doubs) NU-11 Nude cherubs play. ^{SU 5}
Bordeaux: Saint-Seurin (Gironde) ~~NU-09~~ Elderly couple, one with hat, both look starved.
Bordeaux: St. Seurin (Gironde) SU-05 Two thin people, soles of their feet touching, grab the stick of power.
Paris: Musée national du Moyen Age W-07 Each wears a knee-length tunic. One figure is old and bearded; the other is youthful and wears a fur hat.
Besse-en-Chandesse (Puy-de-Dome) NL-05 Two children stand and play the game.
Blainville (Seine-Maritime) SU-12 . One player wears a hat with wide brim and tunic with a cross.
Rouen (Seine-Maritime) SL-13 They appear to be of different ages.
Negrepelisse (Tarn-et-Garonne) N-06 Players are of different generations.
Villefranche-de-Rouergue (Aveyron) Fight for the Pants and Pannoy (W-) Elderly husband and wife sit in the pannoy position, legs extended and soles of shoes touching, clutching between them, not the stick of power but a pair of underpants.

Italy (1)

Aoste: Saint-Ours NL-01 The boys are nude; one has curly hair and the loser may be tonsured.

Netherlands (3)

Amsterdam: St. Nicholas N-02 . One player loses his pants. Both are losing the game.

Bolsward: St. Martin S-01. Two apes sit on their hind quarters and play the game.

Sittard SU-01 . Two boys, both partly risen from the ground, grab the stick.

Spain (7)

Astorga: Cathedral NL-04 Two standing, nude, winged angels struggle for power.

Barcelona: Cathedral N-16 Two nude men fight, each with one foot against the opponent's foot.

Belmonte Collegiate Church NL-02 Instead of a stick, two men tug at wineskin, a pigskin with head and feet removed.

Seville Cathedral NU-15 Two men with caps and short belted tunics grab the stick.

Toledo Cathedral NE-2 Wildman and human are contestants.

Zamora Cathedral SL 14 A young man struggles with an older man, the latter making an obvious effort.

SH-19 Men struggle for wineskin