

Between sermon and meditation: A late medieval Hungarian Passion text

Ágnes Korondi*

HUN-REN – National Széchényi Library Fragmenta et Codices Research Group, Budapest, Hungary

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Texts discussing the passion of Christ were a significant segment of late medieval Hungarian-language literature prepared for the edification of nuns and a few devout laypersons. These devotional texts were compiled partly from Latin meditations and treatises, partly from the sermons of popular Observant preachers of the age. The combination of the different genres resulted in vernacular texts ideally suited for the spiritual needs of a not quite thoroughly educated audience. The paper will illustrate how such texts functioned by analyzing a passion text preserved in a manuscript copied in 1508 by Bertalan of Halábor and preserved in the Batthyaneum Library in Alba Iulia (Ms III 76, fol. 1r–7r). Although it might have been used as a meditation aid later, originally it must have been intended to serve as a sermon. Following a close reading of this passion text, the article argues that the sermon is closer to the world of live preaching than to scholastic model sermons that often served as sources to other Hungarian passion texts. The origin of the passion sermon copied by Bertalan of Halábor, as that of the entire codex, seems to be related to pastoral duties among laypersons.

KEYWORDS

sermon, passion of Christ, late Middle Ages, Hungarian-language literature, *Döbrentei Codex*

The passion of Christ was one of the central devotional topics of the late Middle Ages with countless sermons, treatises, meditations, prayers, and even dramatic texts presenting and

* Corresponding author. E-mail: korondi.agnes@oszk.hu

commenting on the events of the Holy Week and especially of Good Friday.¹ They described the episodes known from the Gospels and even provided minute details about aspects left unmentioned by the canonical texts. In the latter case alternative sources were used. Devotees, required to get acquainted with and feel compassion for Christ's salvific suffering, were informed about the exact number of the wounds inflicted upon the Saviour, the history of the thirty silver coins received by Judas, or the origin of the Cross. Many of the most popular scholarly and devotional texts written on the passion, especially during the late Middle Ages, found their way into vernacular literatures as well.

The nascent Hungarian-language literature, trying its wings in the second half of the 15th and the first three decades of the 16th century, was no different in this respect. Devotional works were translated and copied mainly for the edification of nuns who lived in prestigious religious houses that came under the influence of the Observant reform, and to a lesser degree for devout laypersons who strived to emulate the devotional practices of those living under a religious rule.² Many of these texts centred on the suffering of Christ.³ Some of them were translations or compilations from Latin passion treatises or sermons popular in the age. A dialogue attributed to Anselm of Canterbury, the *Dialogus Beatae Mariae et Anselmi de passione Domini* was at least partially translated into Hungarian.⁴ Six and a half chapters of this translation were copied into the early 16th-century Premonstratensian part of the *Apor Codex* (pp. 199–228).⁵ The text, which is the last unit of the manuscript in its present form, ends suddenly in the middle of a sentence. A shortened and passion-centred version of Henry Suso's *Horologium sapientiae* was translated for Poor Clares—probably the community living in the prestigious convent of Óbuda founded by Queen Elisabeth of Poland (Elżbieta Łokietkówna), wife of King Charles I of Hungary.⁶ Both a Franciscan manuscript from 1525 preserved in two parts (*Vitkovics Codex*,⁷ fol. 2^r–11^v, 47^r–52^r; *Miskolci Fragment*,⁸ fol. 1^r–6^v) and the Dominican *Érsekújvári Codex*⁹ (fol. 13^r–32^v) contain compilations with great evocative and affective power based on Pseudo-Bede's *De meditatione passionis Christi per septem diei horas*. The *Érsekújvári Codex*, prepared between 1529 and 1531 for the community of nuns of royal foundation living on the Island of Hares (today: Margaret Island, Budapest), also encompasses an illustrated passion narrative clearly devised as an aid to meditation. Chapters of *Meditationes vitae Christi* often attributed to Saint Bonaventure served or may have served as a source from which additional narrative material about the passion was borrowed, e.g. scenes and dialogues between Christ and the Virgin Mary (Haader, 2012, 22; Korondi, 2025). Narrative passages from the *Meditationes vitae Christi*

¹To mention only a few important works from the extensive secondary literature on passion devotions: Marrow (1979); Bestul (1996); Macdonald et al. (1998); Fulton (2002); Kemper (2006); McNamer (2010).

²On the late medieval Hungarian-language literature in general see: Lázcs (2016); Horváth (1944, 94–290).

³On the Hungarian passion texts see: Pusch (1910, 7–40); Lázcs (2016, 350–367); Korondi (2016, 205–213, 238–250).

⁴On this see: Korondi (2023).

⁵The manuscript was published by Haader et al. (2014).

⁶*Nagyszombati Codex*, pp. 1–158. Ed.: T. Szabó (2000). On the selection method of the Hungarian translation see: Balogh (1994).

⁷Ed.: Papp and Pusztai (1991).

⁸Ed.: Kovács (1991).

⁹Ed.: Haader (2012).

were also incorporated into the more theoretical chapter on meditation on the passion in the partial translation of Bonaventure's *De perfectione vitae ad sorores* in the Franciscan *Debreceeni Codex* (pp. 308–315) from 1519.¹⁰ An extensive compilation (*Weszprémi Codex*,¹¹ fol. 1^r–56^v), probably copied for the Poor Clare community in Óbuda in the first quarter of the 16th century, was adapted from Good Friday sermons published in popular Observant model sermon collections of the age. Most of it was based on a Good Friday sermon by Iohannes Herolt, but a sermon by the Hungarian Franciscan author, Pelbartus of Temesvár may also have influenced parts of this vernacular text (Pusch, 1910, 12–26). Another similarly long passion narrative was preserved in two somewhat different redactions¹² in a 1508 Franciscan (*Nádor Codex*,¹³ fol. 72^r–154^r) and a 1506 Dominican (*Winkler Codex*,¹⁴ fol. 69^r–117^v) manuscript; both contain versions of a Marian lament as well (*Nádor Codex*, fol. 171^v–194^v; *Winkler Codex*, 37^v–59^r). These Hungarian texts without a precisely identifiable Latin original seem to be either the translations of locally compiled Latin passions, or even more probably devotional readings put together already in the vernacular.

In addition to these lengthy narratives, there are also shorter passion compilations with so far unidentified sources. These may well be original Hungarian compilations – as far as the word *original* can be applied at all to such devotional texts relying heavily not only on the Gospels but also on a long tradition of biblical commentaries, glosses, and various devotional materials. On account of its literary qualities the sermon or meditation preserved in the *Döbrentei Codex* (fol. 1^r–7^r)¹⁵ is especially noteworthy among these. Its ensuing analysis in the context of other Hungarian passion narratives, and especially in comparison to the sermon on the suffering of Christ copied into the already mentioned *Debreceeni Codex* (pp. 607–624), is going to point out the merits of the scrutinized text and may also shed some light on its intended use.

The passion text to be discussed has been preserved in a manuscript now kept in the Batthyaneum Library in Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár). The paper codex of 262 folios measuring 158 × 105 mm was compiled in the early 16th century. It begins with the passion text, which is followed by a complete psalter with canticles and hymns, biblical pericopes for the entire year –among these the passion according to the Gospel of Matthew for Palm Sunday, the passion according to Marc for Good Tuesday, the passion according to Luke for Good Wednesday, and the passion according to John for Good Friday–, two Marian sermons originating probably from the breviary and the translation of two small biblical books, the Song of Songs and the Book of Job. The first leaf of the first quire with the beginning of the passion text is missing from the codex. This quire must have been kept separately from the rest of the material for some time before the two parts were bound together, as its outer leaves (fols. 1 and 7) show the signs of wear and tear. Moreover, this quire consists of a different type of paper than the later parts of the book, and its leaves are not rubricated as the rest of the codex.¹⁶ The entire manuscript is the work of a

¹⁰Ed.: Abaffy et al. (1997). On the insertion of passages from the *Meditationes* see: Korondi (2016), 159–160.

¹¹Ed.: Pusztai (1988a).

¹²For a detailed comparison of the two versions see: Lázcs (2023), 376–411.

¹³Ed.: Pusztai and Madas (1994).

¹⁴Ed.: Pusztai (1988b).

¹⁵Ed.: Abaffy et al. (1995).

¹⁶The codicological description of the codex see in the introduction of the edition: Abaffy et al. (1995), 7–9.

single hand, that of Bertalan Dobos of Halábor. He was a priest, as the colophon closing the Book of Psalms states: “Glory be to the Father, honour to the Son and joy to the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen. Priest Bertalan originating from the village of Halábor in Bereg county wrote this psalter in the year 1508 after the birth [of Christ]”¹⁷ (*Döbrentei Codex*, fol. 115^v). Some stages of Father Bertalan’s career are attested by historical documents. He studied at the university of Cracow in 1495 and carried out notarial tasks in the diocese of Eger in 1512 (Abaffy et al. 1995, 10).

Despite the known scribe, there is no direct information in the codex about its intended users and first owners. The route by which the manuscript arrived at the Batthyaneum Library is also unknown. It was discovered in the 19th century, when literary historian Ferenc Toldy named it *Döbrentei Codex* after the literary scholar, philologist, editor, and writer Gábor Döbrentei. The origin of this manuscript and its possible connection to religious orders has been much debated in Hungarian scholarly literature. Kálmán Szily (1912) connected its biblical pericopes to the Gospels of the so-called Hungarian Hussite Bible preserved in the *Münchener Codex*¹⁸ copied in 1466. Gedeon Mészöly (1913, 1914, 1915, 1917) continued the research on the connections between the *Döbrentei Codex* on the one hand, and the *Apor*, *Münchener Codexes* on the other. He argued that the writer of the *Döbrentei Codex* corrected the pericope and psalm translations of the Hussite Bible, respectively of a psalter compiled by the same Hussite translators, based on the Latin texts.

Kálmán Timár (1924, 1928, 57–72, 1929, 147–149) believed the *Döbrentei Codex* to be of Premonstratensian origin. Following his attribution, Sándor Lázcs (2016, 113, 146, 223) also discussed the manuscript among the vernacular books of the reformed Premonstratensian community of Szeged and its daughter community in Somlóvásárhely in his seminal monograph on the book culture of late medieval Hungarian nuns. The Premonstratensian nuns owned several vernacular manuscripts, among them a Hungarian-language ordinary and the *Apor Codex* partially preserving the already mentioned psalter of the Hussite Bible.¹⁹ Lázcs (2016, 199, 211, 224, 236–238, 351) pointed out in his analysis how the various texts in the *Döbrentei Codex* served the needs of the Premonstratensian community of nuns. Nevertheless, he conceded that the manuscript’s passion text may originally have been compiled for a lay audience (Lázcs, 2016, 358).

The connection of the *Döbrentei Codex* to the Order of Saint Norbert is not universally accepted. The introduction of the critical edition pointed out its possible link with the Pauline order suggested by the presence of the *Spinea corona* feast, observed by the Dominicans and Paulines in medieval Hungary (Abaffy et al., 1995, 13). Judit Lauf (2019, 26–29), who discovered extensive Old Hungarian glosses written between the lines of Latin pericopes in a printed Pauline missal from 1514,²⁰ indicated a potential relation between the partial biblical translations in these handwritten additions and the pericopes of the *Döbrentei Codex*. The future detailed comparison of the newly discovered glosses with the biblical translation copied by Bertalan of Halábor may reinforce the Pauline origin of the codex.

¹⁷All quotations from Old Hungarian texts were translated by me (Á. K.). The Hungarian originals can be checked in the digital copies of the manuscripts or of the editions on the website: <https://nyelvemlekek.oszk.hu> (accessed: 31.05.2024.).

¹⁸Ed.: Décsy and von Farkas (1958), Décsy (1966), Nyíri (1971).

¹⁹According to Lázcs (2016, 191), all three manuscripts containing the text of the so-called Hussite Bible were in the possession of the Premonstratensian nuns in the early sixteenth century.

²⁰The printed missal is preserved in the National Széchényi Library under the shelfmark RMK III. 196/2.

Lea Haader (2019, 141–157), following up some earlier suggestions by Damján Vargha (1919), raised a most convincing theory in a paper which outlines the scribal profile of Bertalan of Halábor and analyzes the vocabulary and function of some of his numerous glosses. According to Haader’s argumentation, the manuscript may have been intended and used as an aid for secular clergymen—perhaps for Bertalan of Halábor—in carrying out their pastoral duties, rather than as reading material in a community of nuns. She pointed out in subsequent studies (Haader, 2020, 2021) that the pericopes in the *Döbrentei Codex* and those copied into a Franciscan miscellany, the *Székelyudvarhelyi Codex*²¹ from 1526 to 1528, go back to the same source, arguing that they are the copies of a very ancient set of Hungarian pericopes transcribed several times over according to the testimony of the archaic linguistic characteristics of the copies and the scribal errors to be found especially in the *Székelyudvarhelyi Codex*.

The passion text of the *Döbrentei Codex* is worth investigating with reference to the above presented debate on the intended functions and users of the manuscript. Sándor Láz in his short analysis of this text emphasizes the meditational character of the compilation, implying that it was used by the Premonstratensian nuns as a meditation aid. He labelled it a “sermonic passion meditation” (Láz, 2016, 358). The lack of any reference to a female religious audience in the text is not unparalleled; other passion narratives in Hungarian-language manuscripts used by nuns were also addressed to a more general readership. These were—according to him—probably translated or compiled for a secular audience, coming into the possession of nuns only later (Láz, 2016, 358–360). Although there is no conclusive proof to this later use of the *Döbrentei Codex* and its passion by Premonstratensian nuns, some of Láz’s remarks about this text are worth considering. He points out the compiler’s good sense of style, the rhetorical figures abundant in the text, as well as the fact that it is quite different from the other passion texts; for example, it does not discuss the Virgin’s sorrows.

I observed the absence of an even more significant element usually present in the passion texts hovering on the borderline between sermons, treatises, and meditative texts,²² that of the specific terminology and structural devices adopted from Latin model sermons in the Hungarian texts.²³ The passion texts in the *Nádor*, *Winkler*, *Weszprémi Codexes* (the latter gives a *thema* as well) begin with the division of the material, even if these divisions later become less important as the storytelling tends to take over. The much shorter *Writing about the Passion of Our Saviour* in the *Debreceni Codex* (pp. 607–624), of more or less the same length as the analyzed text in the *Döbrentei Codex*, is an excellent example of this. It starts directly with a division: “The passion of our Lord Jesus was of a double origin. Firstly, the envy of the Jews...” (*Debreceni Codex*, p. 607.) I included a structural plan of this text in Appendix 2. In this, one can observe that this first division is followed by a second one, which, in its turn, has subdivisions and sub-subdivisions marked in red ink in the manuscript. Irrespective of this seemingly complicated structure, the text in fact narrates the beginning of the passion, mainly the events occurring during the night after Maundy Thursday. (The rest of the events from Lauds to Compline, from

²¹Ed.: N. Abaffy (1993).

²²There is no marked difference between these types of texts regarding this Hungarian corpus. Sermons and treatises are similarly structured, both having divisions. Both text types must often have served as meditation aid during private or communal reading. On the concept and practice of meditation see Korondi (2016), 91–113.

²³On the Hungarian-language *ars praedicandi* of the age see: Tarnai (1984), 257–266.

II.2. to VII. are missing.) On the other hand, the passion of the *Döbrentei Codex* has no visible divisions, no listings with *firstly*,... *secondly*,... Nevertheless, it is quite well structured as one can see in its outline included in [Appendix 1](#). As the beginning of the text is lost, one cannot exclude the possibility that a division of some kind existed in the missing part. This compilation also starts with a passion narrative. The still extant parts extend from the *Ecce homo* scene to the miracles occurring at the moment of Christ's death. The linear storytelling, however, is interrupted by the affective addresses²⁴ that are common in other Hungarian passion texts too, and, less commonly, by highly poetical passages that interpret the holy events by means of metaphors.

...fixed to the gibbet of the cross, you were raised from the ground together with the tree to the sky as the victorious standard of those fighting against the enemy, a banner frightening the enemy, making them easy to defeat. Thus, raised to the sky, my Lord Jesus, you shed all your holy blood without regret. And as of old, you opened the veins of heaven and burst forth the springs of the earth and thus you brought a flood on the world, and you washed the sin away from the earth by this. Thus, you, my sweet Jesus, at the time of your holy passion and death, opened the veins of your holy body, and burst forth the springs of this holy earth, and unlocked the storehouses of heaven, unbolted the holy pharmacy, opened the heavenly gates, and from there, you poured the flood of grace unto this world. Thus, you liberated the souls choked by the rope of sin. And thus, my sweet Jesus, you paid back the debt of this world (*Döbrentei Codex*, fol. 2^{r-v}).

The metaphors of the standard, and even more those of the heavenly storehouse and the "holy pharmacy" are well known from the theological and devotional literature of the Late Middle Ages. They must have carried meanings for the audience of the vernacular text as well. These metaphors are combined with the more extended parallel between the Old Testament flood physically washing away earthly sins and Christ's salvific blood cleansing humankind spiritually.

The narrative section is followed by a didactic discussion about the benefits of passion meditation: "getting sweet, delighting in", meditating affectively on, and reading about Christ's passion brings devotion to the soul, light to the mind, increases grace, confers plentiful merits, etc.

The next structural unit is a highly rhetorized section, contrasting the transgressions of humankind against Christ with Christ's beneficence to humankind in a series of rhetorical questions built on antitheses and organized in anaphoric parallel structures. The anaphora consists in the repetition of the beginning of verse 8, chapter 66 from the Book of Isaiah: *quis audivit umquam tale et quis vidit huic simile?* (Weber and Gryson, 2007, 1164) *Who hath heard such a thing? who hath seen such things?* (Caroll and Prickett, 2008, 826)

Woe, woe, my Lord Jesus, who has ever heard such a miraculous thing that the liberator of prisoners be imprisoned, the glory of angels be ridiculed, the God of the universe be flagellated, the son of the Virgin be beaten? Who has ever heard this that the crown of the saints be crowned with thorns, the saviour of the World be wounded, [...] the great power become powerless, sweetness turn sour, perfect joy turn to sorrow? [...] Who has ever seen that the spotless mirror be spat on the face, certainty be hated, truth be laughed at? Who has ever heard that [...] the beautiful snow blacken, stars dissolve, [...] the holy of holies be cursed and called evil, the Almighty be crippled, and finally, the life-giver of the dead be killed? (*Döbrentei Codex*, fol. 5^r–6^r)

²⁴E.g.: "But they [the Jews], my sweet Lord Jesus, having no pity on you and being unsatisfied with this [the flagellation], would be content only with your head and death." (*Döbrentei Codex*, fol. 1^r).

One may observe that these exclamatory questions depart from the narrative episodes of the passion story; the name of Jesus and his fate are substituted in some of them with highly poetical metaphors (“the beautiful snow blacken, stars dissolve”²⁵), in others with frequently used, literarily and theologically charged images (“the spotless mirror”²⁶) or abstract notions pertaining to the field of moral theology (“certainty”, meaning also “faith”; “truth”²⁷). There are antithetical structures alluding more closely to the events of the passion, but even in these there is a certain level of abstraction. The elements of Jesus’ physical ordeal are transposed to a spiritual level by resorting to the allegorical and tropological sense of the expressions describing Christ’s deeds.

...his strengthlessness gave us strength, his poverty enriched us, his nudity clothed us, his hunger fed us, his thirst gave us drink, his sadness comforted us, his crying gave us joy, his captivity freed us, his tiredness gave us rest, his being bound unbound us, his being accused saved us, his being beaten gave us pleasure, his wounds healed us, [...] his holy humility exalted us, and his holy death gave us life. And in all this way he who grew dimmed enlightened us more, and the fire gone out warmed us more (*Döbrentei Codex*, fol. 6^{r-v}).

For example, Christ’s thirst, on a basic level, alludes to one of his last words on the cross. However, even the Hungarian passion texts often contain the allegorical explanation of this thirst as his desire for the salvation of humankind. On a moral level, one can easily discover behind several of these syntagms the seven works of mercy: “his hunger fed us” = to feed the hungry; “his thirst gave us drink” = to give drink to the thirsty; “his nudity clothed us” = to clothe the naked; “his tiredness gave us rest” = to give shelter to travellers; “his wounds healed us” = to visit the sick; “his captivity freed us” = to visit the imprisoned; “his holy death gave us life” = to bury the dead.²⁸ In this way, this rhetorical figure did not only recapitulate the main episodes of the passion with allusions to their salvific power but also helped to reinforce the moral teachings of the Church in the audience.

The penultimate part of the passion text consists of some quotes about God’s love for humankind, two by Saint Augustine and one by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. They are similar both in content and function to other citations from authorities given in other passion texts. The compilation of the *Döbrentei Codex* concludes with a biblical passage (*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* Jn 3,16²⁹) that sums up the previous three quotes as the ultimate authoritative text to which only a short closing formula is appended: “May this be permitted to us by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Mary, Mother of God”³⁰ (*Döbrentei Codex*, fol. 7^r).

As compared to other Hungarian sermons, meditations, and treatises on the passion, the peculiarities of this text in the *Döbrentei Codex* are conspicuous. Though structurally

²⁵“a zep hoo meg feketvlon es a cillagoc el ozlattassanac” (*Döbrentei Codex*, fol. 6^r).

²⁶“a zeplotelen tikor” (*Döbrentei Codex*, fol. 5^v).

²⁷“a bizonsag” (*Döbrentei Codex*, fol. 5^v).

²⁸“ehözese itete”, “zomehsaga itata”, “mezeitelensege ruhaza”, “farratsaga meg nvgota”, “Sebei meg vigasztanac”, “fogsaga meg zabadeita”, “az v zent halala minket meg elevenite” (*Döbrentei Codex*, 6^{r-v}).

²⁹Caroll and Prickett (2008), 117.

³⁰“Engege nekön att’a fiu zent lilek amen maria istennec zileie”.

well-constructed and rhetorically polished, it lacks the *thema* or at least the divisions often present in other Hungarian compilations. These features distance it from the rather bookish atmosphere of Latin model sermons. Nevertheless, its didactic character, its focus on theological and moral teaching, its almost rhythmical constructions, the variation of the addressees (first Christ, then the audience), the alternation of the narration with theologically denser passages, the reiteration of the major messages point, in my opinion, to the world of live preaching and the care of the souls in a secular milieu. Naturally, such a text could have been used for meditation or communal reading in a cloister later, however, at least the origin of the text as of the entire codex seems to be related to pastoral duties among laypersons.

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Appendix 1

Structural schema of the passion in the *Döbrentei Codex* (fol. 1^r–7^r)

- I. a. passion narrative beginning with the *Ecce homo* scene (addressed to Christ)
- b. aftermath of Christ's death: compassion of the natural world: miracles after Christ's death (addressed to Christ)
- II. the benefits of passion meditation (addressed to the reader/listener)
- III. humankind's transgression against Christ ↔ Christ's beneficence towards humankind (addressed to the reader/listener)
 - a. rhetorical questions: Who has ever heard...? Who has ever seen...?
 - b. antitheses
 - c. quotes from authorities about God's love for humankind
- IV. **conclusion:** John 3,16 + short prayer (addressed to the reader/listener)

Appendix 2

Structural schema of the “Writing about the passion of the Saviour” in the *Debreceni Codex* (pp. 607–624)

I. the passion of Christ had two causes:

I.1. the envy of Jews because of Lazarus’ resuscitation; three councils against him:

I.1.a. on Passion Sunday

I.1.b. on Saturday before Palm Sunday

I.1.c. on Holy or Spy Wednesday

I.2. Judas’ greed (Judas would have liked to steal the price of the ointment used by Mary Magdalen to anoint Jesus’s head)

II. the Church remembers Christ’s passion seven times during the holy office:

II.1. during Matins: the three places where Christ suffered during Matins (in each location he underwent three sufferings):

II.1.a. in the Garden of Gethsemane

II.1.a.i. repudiating his disciples’ rash courage (warns his incredulous disciples about his imminent arrest and their abandoning him; predicts his death and resurrection)

II.1.a.ii. taking fear upon himself (Agony in the Garden)

Excursus: the Virgin Mary’s prayer during this time, being comforted by the Archangel Gabriel

II.1.a.iii. arrest

II.1.b. at Annas’ house

II.1.b.i. Peter’s denial

II.1.b.ii. Annas’ arrogant questioning

II.1.b.iii. slaps on his holy cheeks

II.1.c. at Caiaphas’ house

II.1.c.i. the accusations of false witnesses

II.1.c.ii. threat of death

II.1.c.iii. unrest during the whole night

Excursus: the Virgin Mary’s nightly prayers in Bethany

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