2 CAESAREAN BIRTH IN THE ARTISTIC IMAGINATION

What can pictures tell us about medieval life and society and about the attitudes and feelings of medieval men and women? What is their meaning and how is their meaning related to the conditions of their production? What kind of relationship do pictures have to the texts they illustrate? How do they reflect the tension between iconographic tradition and realistic observation? Many of these questions have been the subject of scholarly debate in recent years and are especially important in the context of medical iconography.¹

Illustrations of childbirth come from both medical and nonmedical manuscripts and thus represent a variety of approaches to the depiction of domestic and medical scenes. Pictures of Caesarean birth, many of them showing the birth of Julius Caesar, constitute a new and fecund source for the study of medieval iconographic development as well as for the recovery of women’s history. Although a few of these images have been reproduced before (mostly in summary histories of Caesarean section), their importance for the history of gender roles in the medical profession has not been recognized.

To observe medieval women at work is not an easy task. The documentation is fragmentary, and whole areas of women’s activities, such as domestic and farm labor, left few traces in medieval—and for that matter modern—historiography.² Women doctors and midwives left more traces than peasant women did, but it is difficult to evaluate the records that survived. A large number of these records are negative in the sense that many women healers appeared in records only when they were
brought to trial on charges of illegal practice or witchcraft; others, especially the very few female physicians, are little more than names in various registers. The situation is hardly better for midwives. Before the fourteenth century, few texts dealt with their tasks, and when midwives and their activities finally appear more frequently in historical documents it is in the context of the witch-hunts. In order to sort out the blurry and often conflicting images of medieval midwives, I will first analyze the pictorial evidence and then—in the next chapter—turn to the texts. Comparing and contrasting these two different types of sources should bring us a step closer to understanding how women functioned in one of the most important professions open to them in the Middle Ages: midwifery. The area of Caesarean birth crystallized many of the problems confronting medieval midwives. The representations of midwives and male surgeons at work at Caesarean sections reflect and evaluate their professional competence in a critical situation as well as their compassion toward mother and child.

An important feature of the iconographic evidence for Caesarean births is that it exists in a series of images ranging from the late thirteenth to the sixteenth century. Such a rich series of illustrations showing the same medical procedure is extremely rare in medical iconography. Obviously, it is much more valuable to trace the evolution of a given medical scene than to use one image as an illustration regardless of the specific work or period it comes from, as has been done in previous studies of Caesarean section. Second, images of Caesarean birth appear in non-medical texts and are thus situated at the crossroads of two iconographic traditions that I will consider in turn: birth scenes in medical and in nonmedical manuscripts. For each tradition, I will discuss the relationship of the pictures both to the texts they illustrate and to what we can know of the medical practice and the social reality of the time. One important focus of this discussion is of course the depiction of women—both as patients and healers—and of their relationship to male participants in the birth scenes.

**QUESTIONS OF PRODUCTION AND INTERPRETATION**

A case has been made recently for the division of sources into women’s, men’s, and common sources, especially with regard to medieval sources
on childbirth. What type of source is the iconography of Caesarean birth? Who conceived these images of suffering or dead mothers and their female or male attendants? Although we cannot hope for certainty in answering these questions we can nevertheless engage in some informed speculation as to the circumstances in which pictures of Caesarean births were produced.

Women participated in medieval book production and trade in a variety of ways. Most of the evidence for medieval women acting as painters or illuminators is iconographic and comes principally from manuscripts of Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus* and the reworking of it by Christine de Pizan in the *Livre de la cité des dames*. As Christine’s book is written in praise of women’s capabilities to do just about anything, it is hardly surprising to see them pursue all kinds of professions in the illuminations. Whether they were able to practice these professions in real life is a different question.

In the late thirteenth century a woman, Perronnelle d’Auteuil, appeared in the Paris tax rolls in connection with a workshop for books. Her title was *imagière*, a term that could refer “to a painter, sculptor, or even an architect.” Perronnelle was a widow and probably took over her husband’s workshop, which she managed to run at a profit. In this way medieval women often were able to enter professions ordinarily closed to them. Some even worked on the side as *libraires*, that is “one who acted as an agent for selling books left on deposit but who also might rent out master copies from which other copies might be made.” The daughter of the famous illuminator Jean le Noir worked together with her father in fourteenth-century Flanders and Paris. Christine de Pizan praised a contemporary illuminator named Anastasia. It is impossible to say, however, which parts of the illuminator’s work these women performed. Different specialists probably worked together on the more elaborate miniatures.

Anastasia, for example, was especially known for her skill in painting manuscript borders and miniature backgrounds, which suggests that women may have specialized in these techniques but did not often tackle full-fledged miniatures. In any case, women were present in and sometimes even owned workshops that illuminated books. How much they had to do with the conceptualization of a given manuscript cannot be determined. For the manuscripts discussed in this chapter, some of the artists’ names are known and all were men.

It must be assumed, therefore, that most of the illustrations considered here were painted by men. Since ordinary men were in general not
admitted at births, the illuminators must have received their information regarding Caesarean birth scenes from someone else, probably from midwives and, for the later centuries, from surgeons. It is unlikely that female illuminators could have given their male colleagues the medical details regarding the procedure—that is, the instruments used for a Caesarean and the location of the incision—that are reflected in the pictures. They could have filled them in on the atmosphere in the birth chamber and the circumstances of a normal birth, but probably a Caesarean was seldom witnessed by women not in a healing or serving profession.

It is certain that there must have been some female-male collaboration, and this collaboration could have created what Jacobsen would call a common source, a feature that greatly increases our chance of getting a more objective picture of the respective activities of female midwives and male surgeons.

One of the problems in interpreting ancient images is that their meaning is seldom univocal. For early Christian frescoes, for example, Margaret Miles has shown recently that the language of images does not allow for one "detachable conclusion." The images of the fourth-century Roman churches she discusses can be read either as inviting pagans to join the Christian faith or as a representation of the exclusiveness of the early church. The function of women in fourteenth-century Tuscan painting is similarly multivocal. Miles suggests that the idealized passive attitudes of women in many of these paintings contrasted quite sharply with the roles Italian women came to play in the urban society of the fourteenth century. The depiction of women as helpless diaphanous beings thus may have enabled men to ignore or suppress the increasing importance of women. But Miles also warns against forcing our modern points of view on medieval pictures. The idealization of a woman's virginal qualities, for instance, does not necessarily speak only of sexual repression. A spiritualization of the body may have given some comfort to medieval women who had to face the reality of sexual dependency and frequent childbearing. Similarly, Penny Schine Gold has found that changing representations of the relationship between Christ and the Virgin Mary do not reflect a shift in attitudes toward real medieval women but rather signal a variety of interpretive possibilities characterized by ambiguity and even contradictions.

These observations are meant to serve as a caveat against any ideologically biased interpretation of medieval images depicting women. In order
to present a clear view of the significance of the series of Caesarean birth scenes, I will trace the traditions of medical iconography and the place of medical and nonmedical illustrations of childbirth within these traditions.

**Traditions in Medical Illustration**

The earliest examples of medical illustrations probably date back to the fourth or third century B.C. They were not illustrations of medical practice but probably schematic figures used by Alexandrian anatomists. From the Hellenistic period dates the famous five-picture cycle, in which every element shows one organic system: muscles, nerves, organs, arteries and veins. A sixth picture showing a pregnant woman may also have belonged to this cycle.\(^4\) The five- (or six-) picture cycle made its way via Byzantium and Persia to medieval Europe. It forms part of a group of schematic illustrations that can be found in countless medical manuscripts. One of these schemata is the zodiac man (or woman) who has a zodiac sign assigned to every part of his or her body, indicating the dependency of a particular organ on one of the signs. Guided by this system, a physician would decide on the propitious and unpropitious periods for treating or operating on a given organ.\(^5\) This connection of astrology and medicine was one of the important characteristics of medieval medicine.

Other schematic human figures show the bloodletting man and the cautery man. Phlebotomy and cauterization were by far the most widespread forms of medical intervention in the Middle Ages. Medieval practitioners thus needed practical advice on where to make incisions for bloodletting and on the location of the points for cauterization. These two figures, as well as the spectacular wound man—transpierced by swords and arrows—belong to the practice-oriented area of medical illustrations.\(^6\) So do most of the illustrations in surgical treatises, such as the famous fourteenth-century manuscript of Roger Frugardi’s *Chirurgia* in the British Library (Sloane 1977). This often-reproduced manuscript shows a variety of surgical procedures in an interesting iconographic arrangement: the upper band of illuminations depicts the life of Christ, the lower compartments feature the surgeon at work.\(^7\)

A physician’s (not very successful) activities are chronicled in an extraordinary series of illuminations inserted in a late-thirteenth-century
This case history follows an unfortunate lady from her first fainting spell to her death. As her doctor tries to give her some medication, the lady's companions and (clerical?) attendants seem to counsel against his prescriptions. The rejection of treatment results in a relapse, and the urinalysis in picture number 5 spells disaster: the physician drops the vial in a hopeless gesture. The lady dies and the physician has nothing left to do but to preside over the autopsy of his patient, which is performed by a knife-wielding man in a short robe that identifies him as a "low surgeon." This illustration may well be the earliest surviving image of an anatomical dissection. The whole cycle possibly has a moralizing intent: it exhorts patients to follow their physicians' advice rather than that of their foolish companions and attendants.

This lively pictorial narrative leads us to the obvious question of how realistic medical illustrations were. Which influence was stronger: iconographic models or realistic observation? The strength of iconographic tradition as well as the interdependence of medical and nonmedical illustrations are discussed in Heide Grape-Albers's important work Spätantike Bilder aus der Welt des Arztes, on late antique medical illustration and its transmission to the Middle Ages. She makes a strong case for the iconographic dependence of most medieval medical illustrations on antique and late antique sources. A striking example of the analogies that can be found between the profane iconography of late antiquity and early Christian art is the schema of a physician standing next to a patient's bed. The same pattern serves to illustrate Aeneas's dream in a late antique Virgil manuscript as well as several healing scenes showing Jesus as a physician in fourteenth-century manuscripts of the Bible.

Karl Sudhoff, one of the greatest historians of medieval medicine, takes a different position. According to him, only the earlier surgical illustrations of the Middle Ages still show a strong dependency on antique (Hellenistic) models, which they often reproduce unchanged. Starting with the thirteenth century, however, new elements are introduced that are culled from observation rather than exclusively from an iconographic tradition. This type of illustration starts to replace the traditional images, and whole series of illustrations are created from scratch. The illustrators employ the dominant formal elements of their time, but in general the medical illustrator is less dependent on traditional schemata than the illuminator of hagiographic legends or historical texts. In the latter, there is a much stronger constraint with regard to the
iconographic tradition. The illustrations of surgical treatises, on the other hand, had to depict something never shown before. So far Sudhoff's thesis. The relevance of his observations to our study of representations of Caesarean birth—which is in the domain of surgery—can be described preliminarily as follows: since no iconographic patterns for this event were available, the illustrators had to find "something new," and they found it not in books but through the more or less reliable contemporary testimony of people who had observed such scenes. This crucial point is confirmed by the comparison of the Caesarean scenes with other scenes accompanying them in those manuscripts that show a compartmental arrangement: these other scenes (coronations, battles, and council scenes) follow established patterns and resemble each other closely in various manuscripts. By contrast, the Caesarean birth scenes show a great variety in detail and composition. Let us retain one further important consequence of Sudhoff's reflections: the tension between tradition and new direct observation, which was—one of the hallmarks of medieval medicine, was—at least in the domain of surgical illustration—resolved in favor of the latter.

**Obstetrical and Gynecological Illustrations**

Normal childbirth was, of course, not a surgical procedure. Consequently, its iconography follows a line of development different from that of surgery. The representations of births in the Middle Ages fall into two traditions: the antique medical one, reflecting ancient obstetrical practices, and the stylized Christian one, exemplified by the Nativity. One of the most famous examples of the first tradition is a birth scene on folio 102r of Codex 93 in the National Library in Vienna. This thirteenth-century illustration from the pseudo-Apuleian *Herbarium* is based on an antique model from about 550 A.D. and thus allows us to look back over many centuries into a birth chamber. The fully dressed pregnant woman is seated on a birth stool with her knees apart. Four female attendants are grouped around her. Three of them support her back and shoulders while the fourth kneels to her left and holds a coriander sprig near the expectant mother's thigh. We learn from the text that the *herba coriandrum* hastens the birth. It is interesting that even though the pseudo-Apuleian text offers no details on the birth itself, the
grouping of the attendants and their actions accurately reflect Soranus's instructions to midwives. Thus this birth scene independently illustrates a text that at this point is centuries old and does not even appear in this particular manuscript. The practices described and popularized in Soranus's *Gynecology* and its adaptations clearly had become an integral part of medieval medical and artistic thought.

This illustration, unlike many others, survived the Arabic transmission of antique medical texts, which was, as Sudhoff points out, incomplete because of religious proscriptions against representing the human body. It is difficult to evaluate how absolute these proscriptions were. According to Herrlinger, the Arabic hostility toward images has been much exaggerated. Apparently there were some realistic representations from the domains of surgery and obstetrics, but little research has been done in this field. In any case, a birth is shown in a fourteenth-century Latin manuscript of Abulcasís's *Chirurgie*, where the illustrator made a misguided attempt at realism: he wanted to show the birth of twins, and consequently he painted two tiny heads, emerging at the same time from the birth canal—clearly a physical impossibility. In the thirteenth-century Sarajevo *Haggadah*, Rebecca gives birth to her twins at the same time: a striking parallel between a medical and a nonmedical miniature. Clearly, for some illuminators the dramatic aspects of showing the birth of twins were more important than medical accuracy.

Realistic images of childbirth are rare in medical manuscripts. Schematic representations of the uterus (with or without fetuses) or of pregnant women are more common. A ninth-century manuscript of Moschion's sixth-century adaptation of Soranus's *Gynecology*, for example, belongs to a special group of late antique clinical illustrations of the uterus. A rather stunning group of "transparent" pregnant women adorns the margins and initials in a fourteenth-century manuscript of Albertus Magnus's *De animalibus*. The number of fetuses carried by these women ranges from one, in a relatively small female figure, to twenty-four, in a giantess awkwardly occupying the right margin. "Transparent women" also appear in nonmedical representations: a number of fourteenth-century illustrations of the Visitation show the holy infants in the chest cavities of both Saint Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary. In a wooden sculpture from 1320, the artist first cut holes into Mary's and Saint Elizabeth's chests, inserted the children and then closed the cavities with rock crystal. A variation on the "transparent woman" is the depiction of Ecclesia in the fourteenth-century work of Opicinus de Canistris.
iconography of the Virgin had influenced the representation of the church as a woman who would sometimes hold a child in her arms. Opicinus adds a medical element to this image: in addition to the child held by Ecclesia a naked infant is suspended upside down in front of her stomach, a design which seems to suggest pregnancy and imminent birth.

Fetal positions are also illustrated in many manuscripts, notably in texts of the Trotula tradition and in (later) manuals for midwives. These schematic images were probably thought to be more useful to midwives than representations of actual births. The few medieval medical illustrations showing a normal birth in progress depended almost entirely on antique models.

In the nonmedical iconographic tradition of childbirth the oldest birth scene is probably that of a funeral stele of approximately the eighth century B.C. This stele commemorated a mother’s death in childbirth, a sad testimony to an ancient woman’s fate. A more positive image can be found on a Corinthian vase that shows a successful birth in progress. Illuminated bibles are one of the best sources for nonmedical birth scenes; a stylized version of the birth of Christ developed early and became dominant for the depiction of most biblical births. More realistic scenes, such as the birth of Jacob and Esau in the seventh-century Ashburnham Pentateuch and a birth in the fourteenth-century Wenzelsbibel, are noteworthy exceptions. The representation of Rebecca in the Pentateuch, as she is being supported by female attendants, is in the same tradition as the scene in Vienna Codex 93 described above. The similarity between the two images, as well as between the images of the birth of twins and the “transparent women” mentioned above, illustrates the difficulty—or even the impossibility—of completely separating the medical from the nonmedical iconographic tradition. The birth of Alexander the Great, for example, in a fourteenth-century nonmedical manuscript (of the Roman d’Alexandre), contains details otherwise found in medical illustrations, especially the propping up of the mother by several attendants. This particular motif is one of the important links between ancient obstetrical traditions as they are known from texts and as they can be seen in pictorial representations.

An extremely rare depiction of the birth of Christ that shows the influence of profane art appears in a late-thirteenth-century Florentine manuscript. The Stützmotiv is used here even though the child is already born. The image thus combines the two important traditions for birth scenes: the antique medical tradition, which focuses on the birth as
process, and the Christian tradition, which focuses on the birth as a state, that is, on the moment after the actual birth.

The tradition of representing a birth as “the moment after” prevailed, as becomes clear in Müllerheim’s study of the birth chamber in art: his 138 illustrations show almost exclusively “religious” births (of Jesus, Mary, and John) and always as a scene after the birth itself. In most of these images the mother lies in bed; usually she is fully dressed, but occasionally she seems to be naked but covered up. A fire is kept going to warm the infant and its clothes; a bath is prepared and often the midwife or an attendant is bathing the newborn. Accessories, such as furniture, dishes, and bed clothes, vary, depending on the date of the illustration. This version of the Nativity lost some of its popularity after the fourteenth century. A new pattern emerged, focusing on the Virgin kneeling in front of the manger, her hands folded in prayer and adoration of the newborn Jesus. The idea of birth as such is nonexistent in these pictures, and consequently illustrations of the Nativity are not the best sources for the study of medieval birth. The older pattern of the mother lying in bed with the infant by her side was perpetuated in representations of the birth of the Virgin, but it too became schematic and removed from obstetrical reality. Given this development toward schematization and given the strength of the iconographic tradition of the Nativity, our representations of Caesarean births take on special importance: they are not dependent on an obvious model; they do not all follow the same pattern and can consequently give us a more differentiated view of medieval birth.

**Text and Image**

How did the illustrators of medieval medical texts know what to depict? Did they read the passages they illustrated or did they merely provide general illustrations? Let us look at some examples.

In a fifteenth-century manuscript of Bartholomeus Anglicus’s thirteenth-century encyclopedia *De proprietatibus rerum*, an extremely popular work, the illustration introducing a section on headache remedies shows not the herbs used in such remedies but rather what Imbault-Huart describes as a “raccourci complet de la médecine médiévale,” that is, a surgeon doing a uroscopy by his patient’s bedside and a pharmacy displaying shelves of various drugs; the pharmacist is weighing ingredients on a scale. The illustrator clearly reproduced general images of
what he knew of medieval medicine. An illustration in a late-thirteenth-century manuscript of Aldobrandina di Siena's *Li Livres dou santé* does not reflect the text either. As Jones points out, the young man dangling his feet in the water while waiting for leeches to attach themselves was a whimsy of the illustrator.\(^{48}\) The text indicates that leeches were collected by doctors, stored in jars, and applied to patients indoors. But in most manuscripts a logical relationship between text and image exists. This does not necessarily mean that the illuminator had to read the text; instructions written in the margins of manuscripts indicate that someone read the text and then decided on the type of illumination it required. This information was transmitted to the artist via the marginal notes.

Sometimes, however, the scribe, not a specialized illuminator, was responsible for the illustrations. A good example is a manuscript of John of Arderne's *Speculum flebotomiae* (fig. 1).\(^{49}\) On folio 94r the surgeon describes an emergency operation he performed on a three-day-old infant whose head had suffered through a protracted birth. When he explains exactly where he made the incision with a razor (in order to relieve pressure on the cranium), he refers to the illustration by saying "sicut hic depingitur" (as it is depicted here). The rather inept but charming image thus serves as an important visual aid to the text.

Henri de Mondeville supposedly used medical illustrations as well as practical demonstrations in his teaching. Thus, in manuscripts of his *Chirurgie*, there is a clear interdependency of text and image.\(^{50}\) One of the most famous surgical manuscripts, the above-mentioned Sloane 1977, also illustrates the text by using schematic, but nevertheless useful, pictures that sometimes show isolated surgical interventions and at other times a whole operation from beginning to end.\(^ {51}\)

The ambiguity of the relationship between text and image also extended to illustrations of surgical instruments. There was a rich tradition, especially in Arabic manuscripts, in the depiction of these instruments, some of which will appear in representations of Caesarean births. Unlike scenes involving the human body, the representation of surgical instruments continued in an unbroken line from antiquity through the Arabic tradition to medieval Europe. In some cases, the illustrators copied their predecessors so exactly that they also repeated their mistakes. A rather amusing example is the depiction of a vaginal speculum in a fourteenth-century manuscript of the Latin translation of Abulcasis where "the artist has missed the mechanical point altogether."\(^{52}\) The screw meant to open the two blades of the speculum has taken on a curious flowerlike ap-
pearance; a kite-shaped appendix on the right is supposed to be a separate scalpel. The textual corruption evident in so many medieval (medical and nonmedical) manuscripts thus finds its counterpart in the corruption of the iconographic transmission. Texts and images clearly encountered similar problems in their travels through the centuries.

The iconography of childbirth represents a special case, as it seems to have developed independently from any textual tradition of obstetrics. Most obstetric texts, if they have any illustrations at all, restrict themselves to schematic drawings of fetal positions. More explicit images of childbirth in medical manuscripts often have no direct relation to the text they accompany, as we saw for the pseudo-Apuleian *Herbarium*, which shows a splendid realistic birth scene in the section on the herb coriander. Nonmedical manuscripts, on the other hand, such as the Bible, the *Roman d’Alexandre*, and the *Faits des Romains*, contain medically accurate birth scenes even though the texts often give only the vaguest information on the birth as such. Illustrators seemed more inclined to show the birth of a specific hero or biblical character than childbirth per se (or perhaps were paid to do so). In almost every instance, the birth scenes can be situated in an iconographic tradition, often relying on antique models. The case is quite different for Caesarean births: unlike other birth scenes, scenes of Caesarean births do not follow an iconographic tradition, because none existed.

Another reason for the relatively infrequent illustration of childbirth in medical manuscripts may be the small role obstetrics played in the university curriculum and surgical education. The great medical and surgical handbooks concentrated on illustrating those procedures their readers were likely to perform themselves.

Thus the iconography of childbirth developed into a paradox: the most accurate obstetrical illustrations were those found outside of medical manuscripts. The readers of copies and translations of ancient historical texts or of the Bible were much more likely to encounter images of childbirth than those readers studying medical works.

**Women in Medical Illustrations**

Women were depicted in a variety of roles in medical illustrations. The best known among the women shown as healers was the (possibly legendary) Trotula of Salerno. In Wellcome manuscript 544 she “is hold-
ing an orb in her left hand signifying that she is an ‘empress’ among midwives.” Midwives are of course common in Nativity scenes, where their function is mostly to hold or bathe the infant. But women also have other healing functions. In a Flemish manuscript of 1470, we see a bearded patient in bed while a woman sits on a stool in front of the hearth; she is stirring something—most likely an herbal concoction—in a pot; she is probably following a recipe from the book that is lying open on her lap. Her headdress identifies her as a healer. In an illustration from a fifteenth-century psalter, a nurse is feeding a sick man; a fourteenth-century manuscript of the Tacuinum sanitatis shows a woman apothecary preparing medicine in a pharmacy. A woman can be seen performing one of the minor surgical functions, bloodletting by cupping, in a fifteenth-century English manuscript. Thus women were represented in a number of healing functions, especially as midwives, of course. Still, it is in the scenes of Caesarean birth that women’s capacities for quick, decisive action and surgical skills are evoked most vividly. Most other representations of women in medicine emphasize tranquil concern and care for patients or pupils.

The usefulness of the types of illustrations just described to the historian of medieval medicine has been debated. Eugen Holländer, in his Medizin in der Klassischen Malerei (Medicine in classical painting) claims that “representations of this kind [that is, scenes of births] are of only limited interest because painters and illustrators never had the opportunity to be present at such a scene.” Holländer has reservations particularly about images of Caesarean birth. But as he uses only one isolated sixteenth-century example, his remarks can hardly be accepted as a sound critical approach. Some of the birth scenes discussed above, such as the ones in Vienna Codex 93 or the Ashburnham Pentateuch, reflect ancient medical teaching of which more than a few traces were left in medieval Europe. Other, later, images, such as the woodcuts for Roesslin’s or Rueff’s treatises, directly illustrate the advice given in the text. The major nonmedical group of birth scenes, the Nativity and the births of Mary and Saint John, it is true, are of more interest to historians of the birth chamber than to the medical historian. Once again, therefore, the value of the series of images in this book becomes obvious: twenty-six representations of midwives and surgeons performing the same operation are a sufficient sample for an examination not only of the operation itself but also of its participants.
Midwives and Surgeons in Images of Caesarean Births

Midwives at Work

The series of birth scenes I will now consider in detail chronicles the beginning of one of the most important transformations for medieval and early modern medicine: the slow incursion of men into the fields of obstetrics and gynecology. The atmosphere in these scenes is quite different from that of the Nativity, since Caesarean birth allows for a depiction of birth as process; it does not require an illustrator to show the normal position of a woman during birth, a position that was considered immodest, and yet it gave artists the opportunity to depict nude bodies. Thus, for the art historian, the illustrations could prove useful as sources for the representation of the nude female body as well as of newborn babies in medieval art. I will concentrate on the actual operation and on the representation of gender roles, however.

The oldest illustration of the group (fig. 4) dates from the late thirteenth century. It is thus almost contemporaneous with the appearance of the first surgical text describing the operation, Bernard of Gordon's Lilium (1305), not as an illustration of this text but as a representation of Julius Caesar's birth in a vernacular manuscript of Roman history, the Faits des Romains.

On the left in figure 4 the adult Caesar is holding a council; on the right his birth takes place under dramatic circumstances. The mother's naked body, covered by a sheet from the waist down, reclines on a kind of couch. Her eyes are closed, her mouth is open, her right arm supports her upper body. Her left side is propped up by one of the attendants, while the operating midwife holds the mother's left arm by the wrist to move it out of the way. The two women involved in the actual operation are wearing a type of headdress different from that of the other three women; they are undoubtedly midwives, whereas the others may be friends, neighbors, or family members. The midwife on the right bends over so much that her back is horizontal, an attitude that conveys great urgency and concentration. She is making a left lateral incision with a curved razor above the mother's navel. The other midwife pulls out the disproportionately large child by both hands. The little Caesar has emerged just about halfway. He has lots of curly hair and a rather mature expression on his face—none of the crumpled-up wrinkles of a real newborn here. As for
4. Left: Julius Caesar and his council; right, the birth of Julius Caesar. (Les Faits des Romains, Paris, B.N. f. fr. 23085, fol. 1r)
the mother, it is not quite clear from her looks whether she is alive or dead, although the touching gestures of mourning and lamentation on the part of the attendants—the one in the center seems to be tearing out her hair—suggest that Caesar's mother has in fact died.

The six women form a solid group and yet dramatic energy is released through the diagonal line formed by the surgical razor and the child. We are clearly in the middle of a desperate situation where lives are at stake.

For the composition of this scene the artist could consult the text of the Faits, from which he could gather that "the cutting of the belly" was to be shown. The vagueness of the French term ventre undoubtedly accounts for the artist's error in placing the uterus above the navel. The only other bit of concrete information was that "Caesar had a lot of hair," a characteristic faithfully rendered in this picture.

Some illustrators had additional clues as to what to depict in the scene of Caesar's birth. It is extremely fortunate that one example of marginal instructions to the illustrator has survived. In manuscript Garrett 128 (fig. 3), which dates from the late fourteenth century, we read in the left margin on folio 144r: "Famez qui ouvre le ventre d'une fame a couteus et en traient un enfant qui a grans cheveus" (a woman who opens the belly of a woman with a knife and pulls out a child who has a lot of hair). These instructions are rather scanty, but they contain some details not found in the Faits: that the incision is to be made with a knife and that one "pulls out" the child. And indeed, the small image that forms the historiated initial "C" contains all the elements referred to in the marginal instructions. The large median incision differs from the one in figure 4, but the child is just as oversize and the mother's right arm is lifted up in a similar way. Here, however, she is not covered by a blanket and the same midwife who made the incision also pulls out the child. The author of the marginal instructions, possibly the "conceptualizer" of the manuscript, specified that a woman (midwife) was to be shown as performing the operation, undoubtedly a reflection of contemporary practice.

Let us now look at illustrations in a group of (probably Parisian) manuscripts from the mid-fourteenth century: figures 5, 6, and 7. In figures 5 and 6 the important events of Caesar's life are chronicled in groups of four illuminations: his birth, Caesar receiving petitioners, and his twofold coronation as "bishop" and emperor. The manuscript of figure 7 replaces the two scenes on the right with Caesar's divorce and a battle. Whereas architectural motifs divide the illuminations in figures 5 and 6, polylobes frame the image in figure 7. Despite these differences the
birth scenes themselves all show the same basic arrangement: the mother, obviously dead, is stretched out naked from left to right on a low couch. In figures 5 and 7, the abdominal opening is located in the center of the mother’s body and is clearly visible. The operation is already over and one of the midwives is pulling out a curly-haired infant. In figure 5 the illustrator included some realistic features: in the large, centrally placed incision some “organs” can be discerned, drawn in a manner reminiscent of the intestines in the first representations of autopsies. In a significant attempt at medical realism the artist shows one woman holding open the mouth of the mother, while another steadies the mother’s body with her
right hand; her left hand possibly holds open the entrance to the mother’s vagina. We recall that these two measures were supposed to prevent the suffocation of the fetus.

This group of illustrations falls into the period of the publication of Guy de Chauliac’s *Grande chirurgie*, where he mentions both the recommended place for the incision and the “habit of ignorant women” to hold open the mouth of a woman being delivered by Caesarean section. Like Guy’s text, the illustrator’s version of Caesarean birth thus reflects the medical lore of the time. Whether the artist obtained this information from a medical text or directly from medical practitioners is hard to determine. The logical division of labor among the women, the arrangement of the figures, the presence of such details as water being heated in the hearth, all suggest that the illuminators actually consulted midwives. They may have supplemented this information with medical texts, of course. For the earliest example (fig. 4), however, it is unlikely that the artist could have used any medical texts. Bernard of Gordon’s *Lilium*, the first-known treatise to mention Caesarean birth, was not available until 1305, and even then it was probably not widely diffused, certainly not outside of university circles. Consequently there must have been some contact between illustrators and medical practitioners. In any case, it is remarkable that the first—and only—image that shows the holding open of the mother’s mouth, should have been produced almost contemporaneously with Guy’s text.

The three illustrations we have been discussing resemble each other closely and yet some of the details are different: figure 7 shows one midwife and one helper, whereas in figure 5 four women are concentrating on the business of the operation and the subsequent care of the infant. But as in figure 6, only two of the women are wearing the headdress characteristic of midwives in this period. The others, undoubtedly instructed by the midwives, are helpers. Such helpers would be present at most births; in fact, if a birth promised to be normal, some women, especially in rural areas, never called in a midwife and relied instead on relatives and neighbors. It is remarkable, then, that in figures 5 and 6 a team of two midwives is at work. Since the workload of a midwife could reach up to three hundred births a year, the presence of two midwives at a single birth indicates the importance—and the anticipated difficulties—of Caesarean delivery.

In addition to physical assistance, a midwife also needed spiritual support in the critical situation of a pregnant woman’s impending death.
She not only had to make a decision on whether to perform the operation, she also had to act extremely quickly: she had to make the incision, pull out the child, and baptize the infant if it looked weak. The risks involved in this operation were manifold, and not the least was the danger for the midwife of being accused of bungling or, worse, of deliberately killing the newborn. Since in most Caesareans neither the mother nor the infant survived, midwives must have welcomed witnesses, and especially professional witnesses, in order to be able to clear their record in the case of accusations. Also, fifteenth-century regulations explicitly instructed midwives to call in another midwife for difficult or risky births.

The midwives in these three illustrations are obviously competent, as they carry out a well-orchestrated procedure that also involves the helpers in useful ways. The gestures of mourning and despair, so prevalent in figure 4, are limited in this group of images to a single woman in figure 6, who stands with folded hands in a contemplative stance. The other women are all actively engaged in attending to mother and child. The denigration of the midwives’ competence, of which we saw an example in Guy de Chauliac’s text, certainly did not find its way into these images.

There is a certain starkness to these scenes. The accessories are reduced to a minimum, the furniture is stylized: a covered couch, maybe some draperies. The absence of distracting details, of course, heightens the drama of the action and contrasts quite sharply with the elaborate interior scenes of the later (fifteenth-century) group of Caesarean births. Also, the later representations of Caesar’s birth often stand alone and thus emphasize the birth much more than those images where the birth scene forms part of a compartmentalized miniature illustrating the major events in Caesar’s life. Since men play a much more important role in these later images, we will have to ask ourselves what could have prompted this different iconographic schema. But let us first return to the group at hand.

The other scenes in figures 5, 6, and 7 show coronations (both secular and ecclesiastic) and councils. Figure 4, as well, features a council scene on the left. The manuscript of figure 8 provides the richest series of images: in addition to Caesar’s birth, it features the plotting followers of Catilina engaged in a conversation; Caesar’s coronation; two conquests of towns; and Caesar’s assassination. Another manuscript, Condé 726, adds two new elements on folio 175r: Caesar’s triumph and his contemplation of the statue of Alexander the Great. Most frequently, then, Caesar’s birth forms part of a whole series of images illustrating his life.
8. The birth of Julius Caesar (*Les Faits des Romains*, Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibliotek, MS Thott 431, fol. 224r)
His childhood and youth are neglected, undoubtedly because that part was missing from Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars*. Information on his birth came from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*. Although, traditionally, Caesarean birth was considered a miracle foretelling a hero's great destiny, the author of the *Faits des Romains* did not even devote a whole paragraph to Caesar's birth and did not attach any prophecies to this event. It is therefore all the more remarkable how frequently and in what great detail his entrance into the world was depicted. But it was by the manner of his birth, of course, that he—at least in the opinion of medieval scholars—gained his famous name. Whether the etymological derivation from *caesus* (cut) or from *caesaries* (hair) was favored, in either case his birth explained his name and was therefore a vital scene.

In the illustrations that show both his secular and ecclesiastical coronation we see two quite different Caesars, modeled on the "types" of the bishop and the emperor: as the former, Caesar is clean-shaven and has short hair; as the latter, he sports a full beard and an impressive mane of hair. If only the coronation as bishop is represented, it also conforms to the pattern of the beardless and shorthaired church dignitary. It is extremely important to notice the difference between these scenes and the birth scenes: the coronations and council scenes all follow a familiar schema; after all, these were scenes very frequently shown in historical and religious manuscripts. The birth scenes, on the other hand, show great variation even if they appear in the same compartmentalized miniature as a traditional coronation. The scenes around figure 8, for example, represent an ecclesiastical coronation identical to those in figures 5, 6, 7, and 9, and yet the Caesarean birth in figure 8 is completely different from the rest: the mother is draped in various cloths, and the woman who operates does not wear the characteristic headdress but rather the type of hairdo that can also be found in figure 10. Other resemblances between figures 8 and 10 include the position of the attendant(s) and of the (dead) mother, the attitude of the operating woman, and the location of the incision. Note, however, the oversized surgical knife in figure 10: a truly frightening sight. Did the illuminator aim for high drama or was he simply misinformed as to the size of such a knife?

It is possible that female surgeons rather than midwives are performing the operation in figures 8, 9, and 10. Figure 9 is especially suggestive of this possibility because a midwife is also present; the illustrator was aware of a midwife's appropriate costume and shows her ready to receive the
newborn in a large white sheet. The distinction in dress between the two women thus probably indicates their different professions: midwife and “surgeoness.”

So far we have seen mostly scenes in which the mother was dead or moribund. In figures 5, 6, and 7 the mother’s body looks corpse-like; stretched out lifelessly, her body is being manipulated by the midwives and attendants. In figures 4, 9, and 10 the mother’s eyes are closed and she seems to have fainted. Her body is in a semirecumbent position. However, in at least two of the illustrations the mother looks alive: in figure 2, her eyes are open even though she does not look at the child. In one manuscript (Condé 726, fol. 175r), the mother looks alive and content.
She supports her head with her right hand while with her left hand she cheerfully points to an enormous (adult-size) baby standing on her left knee. A figure whose gender cannot be determined, dressed in a lavender colored gown, lends some support to the “baby.”

Such an unlikely scene may have reflected the views of some medieval chroniclers who were well aware of the discrepancy between the legend of Caesar’s birth by abdominal delivery (known to be fatal to the mother) and Caesar’s mentioning his mother as still being alive during his conquest of Gaul. Thus some illustrators wanted to reconcile the story of the survival of Caesar’s mother with the depiction of a Caesarean birth and consequently ended up with a scene that did not quite correspond to the medieval medical experience. Each illustrator had to compose his own version of the “truth.” Most of them chose to be true to obstetrical reality, but others decided differently. The result was a wide variety of birth scenes, which is much more valuable to us than conformity to any one pattern could have been.

Of all the illustrations of the early group, figure 2 is the only one that does not show the actual operation. It is also the only one that contains
two successive moments in one image (a common medieval device); first, the naked curly-haired baby is being lifted from his mother's lap by two attendants (who, incidentally, look exactly like the mother), and then, on the right, the newborn is wrapped in swaddling clothes like a little mummy. The mother, who is reclining fully dressed on a draped low couch, shows no direct traces of a Caesarean birth—or a normal birth, for that matter. She may be weakened, however, for her attitude is listless and she does not watch her newborn son.

All the other early manuscripts show the performance of the operation and thus present us with a vivid picture of a medieval medical procedure. We have already mentioned the great variety of the birth scenes. Nevertheless, iconographic models for the depiction of the operation have been suggested. Fritz Weindler reproduced two illustrations from Josef Kirchner's book on the representation of Adam and Eve: Eve "born" from Adam's side is supposed to have supplied the iconographic scheme for a Caesarean birth.72 A careful examination of all these early illustrations, however, reveals only a single example that corresponds somewhat to the creation of Eve: figure 9; all the others do not really show a birth from the flank, nor do they follow a single pattern. They have only one thing in common: they make an attempt to show a realistic medical scene.

With the notable exception of figure 10, in most of the illustrations the instrument used for the operation is the correct one, a surgical razor; the incision is sometimes misplaced, but at other times it is in a logical place; the midwives, surgeons, and attendants all show a sense of purpose and a reasonable division of labor. Even though not one of the pictures shows the umbilical cord, they do not come out of the realm of fantasy. They show the domestic domain of giving birth, a dramatic birth, it is true, but clearly one that women could handle without male assistance or interference.

The entire earlier group of illustrations (up to about 1400) shows only midwives at work. In the later group a dramatic change takes place: women are relegated to the status of helpmates while male surgeons perform Caesarean sections. Only direct testimony from the participants in the operation can account for such a clear-cut transformation, especially as the gender of the personnel is one of the very few uniform features within each group. Except for this one extremely significant uniformity, the images show a great diversity in composition, that is, even though most illustrators use identical pictorial elements, they ar-
range them in a variety of different ways. In other words, the illustrators all knew what to depict in their images but were not bound by a common model or an iconographic schema.

**Male Surgeons at Work**

In the second group of images of Caesarean birth, those produced in the fifteenth century, everything changes—the nature of the birth, the decor, the attendants. We are now dealing with an official royal birth that has been taken over by male surgeons and has lost the intimate character of the earlier examples. Could it be that the idea of portraying a royal birth, not a change in the practice of Caesareans, was responsible for the new type of medical personnel? I do not believe so. Royal births were attended by male practitioners much earlier, as Edward J. Kealy has shown. Thus a male presence at such births was not a fifteenth-century innovation. The appearance of male surgeons in scenes of Caesarean birth therefore must be attributed to a change in the practice of that particular operation.

Of course, it was not only medical reality that brought about artistic changes. With the fifteenth century we enter an age of new splendor and new techniques in manuscript illumination. Most of the examples of the second group come from either Flemish or Burgundian workshops, the centers of fifteenth-century illumination. The text of the *Faits des Romains* saw a last great revival of its popularity in the Burgundy of Charles the Bold, and many of the late manuscripts of the *Faits* were copied during his lifetime and for some time afterward. But there are also new and different texts that are accompanied by illustrations of Caesar’s birth: Jean Mansel’s *Histoires romaines* (1454) and Jean du Chesnes’s translation of Caesar’s *Commentaries* (after 1474). Both texts used the *Faits* for the account of Caesar’s birth, so that the fifteenth-century illustrators had the same scanty textual base for the representation of Caesar’s birth as the artists of the preceding centuries. But they, too, seem to have had other sources of information about the operation: they uniformly depict male surgeons, a transformation from the fourteenth century of which they must have learned from contemporary witnesses. The medical details such as the location of the incision are, in most cases, rendered accurately. The atmosphere is that of an official birth; the surroundings have become more splendid. But the suffering of the dead or dying mother is as intense
The birth of Julius Caesar (Les Fait des Romains, Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, MS Marc. Fr. Zs, fo. 3r)
12. Left, Caesar as emperor. Upper right, the birth of Julius Caesar; lower right, Caesar's assassination (Les Faits des Romains, Paris, Arsenal, MS 586, fol. v)
as in the earlier pictures. In the fifteenth-century group, only two of the women can possibly be said to be alive: those in figures 13 and 14.

Of all the later birth scenes only two resemble each other: figures 15 and 16; the others show a striking variety—a renewed proof that the artists did not have a master model for the Caesarean operation. They had to create their own version of this obstetrical drama and must have done so by consulting medical practitioners.

One of the most violent representations of Caesar’s birth can be found in figure 12. This manuscript has no further illuminations after folio 1, a
sign that Caesar’s entire life was thought to be encompassed by this initial group of illustrations: his birth; a council over which he presides, clad as emperor; and his assassination. The birth is placed directly above the murder scene; in both images a knife (or dagger) occupies a central position, as if to suggest that he who was born by the sword must also die by it.

This illumination has several unusual features: it is the only one in
which the mother is wearing a crown and the only one in which the mother's body is nude from the waist down, rather than completely (corpselike) nude or covered up to the waist. The disarray of her clothes, more than anything else, indicates an emergency. The male surgeon, holding a slightly curved surgical razor in his right hand, has just made a long median incision along the *linea alba*. A haglike midwife pulls the newborn out of a gaping wound. The child, much smaller than those in the previous examples, has neither the perky looks nor the curly hair of
his fourteenth-century predecessors. A female onlooker on the left seems to be pronouncing a prayer. The room where the operation takes place is much better defined than the birth chambers in the fourteenth-century manuscripts. There is a good attempt at perspective in the arched structure above the bed and in the table holding various golden vessels and implements. The table is covered with a precious cloth, and in the
background we can see elegantly patterned curtains. These dignified surroundings contrast sharply with the bloody operation. Nothing is stylized here: the child is not pulled out ceremoniously through the mother’s nightgown as in figure 13—here we see the incision, the blood, and the awkward position of the half-naked woman. This is surely one of the most moving of all our images.

In figure 12 the group of scenes of Caesar’s life is still divided into compartments as in the fourteenth-century examples, but the division is not hermetic here: the upper part of Caesar’s throne protrudes into the lower part of the birth chamber. As the fifteenth century progresses, the compartmentalized miniature is abandoned more and more, and different scenes begin to exist side by side in complicated architectural and natural landscapes.

Splendid examples of this new technique are figures 17 and 18. Figure 17, produced about 1460, is packed with action: Caesar’s birth takes place on the left in a pillared structure that holds an elegant canopied bed. The lower right shows the cruel scene of the strangling of one of Catilina’s accomplices. A battle scene occupies the space above, and on the upper right Caesar seems to be contemplating the statue of Alexander the Great, a wonderful rendering of a contemplative stance. Sailboats float on the horizon while the street in the center is populated by a small dog and a crane. As in figure 12, the juxtaposition of two violent scenes—the bloody Caesarean operation and the strangling in the Tullianum—is most effective. In both pictures death is central, and yet the relative calm of the birth scene contrasts with while complementing the energetic movements of the strangling. The sense of urgency that could be felt in figure 12 is replaced here by a sad resignation, expressed in the mournful face of the surgeon and the praying gesture of the woman behind the bed. The mother, lying naked on a large bed, seems drained of all blood, which gushes forth from a long lateral incision on the right. The surgeon, recognizable as one of the higher class of surgeons by his long robe, carefully pulls a very large child out of the wound. As in all the other images, there is no trace of an umbilical cord. The woman on the right has prepared a sheet to receive the newborn. She is dressed rather elegantly in a red dress with a draped tunic slipped over it, a doughnutlike head ornament, and a necklace. This outfit suggests that she is not a midwife but rather one of the attendants of Caesar’s mother. The woman on the left has a slightly simpler look and could be a midwife assisting the surgeon. The surgeon himself advertises his wealth and status through
17. Left, the birth of Julius Caesar; in the background, a battle scene. Upper right, Caesar contemplating a statue of Alexander the Great. Lower right, a follower of Catalina being killed in the Tullianum (Les Faits des Romains, Paris, B.N. f. fr. 64, fol. 234r.)
the splendid blue cloak worn over his red robe and held together by a gold ornament: a subtle suggestion perhaps that at least the surgical part of obstetrics may have become lucrative enough to interest a surgeon of the class depicted here.27

A comparison of this illumination with the fourteenth-century examples reveals that the women have become marginal and passive. The energetic postures of the earlier midwives give way here to more static ones. In fact, the female figures provide the compositional frame for the central elements of the image: the mother and the male surgeon who are connected by the vertical line of the baby.

Whereas in figure 17 women play at least a marginal role, in figure 18 they are totally absent. The illustrator of this Flemish manuscript of Jean Mansel’s *Histoires romaines* chose a composition not unlike that of figure 17 for his frontispiece. The birth takes place on the left in a well-defined architectural structure. On the right, a bishop blesses the union of Caesar and his bride at the entrance (rather than inside as in modern times) of a beautiful Gothic church. A dog, possibly a symbol of fidelity, is among the onlookers at the center. On the top left, a murder takes place (again Catilina’s followers?), reaffirming the connection we had noted earlier between Caesar’s birth and violence.

In the birth scene, all three participants are men, dressed in long robes. Despite the brocaded splendor of the bedroom we feel that we are in an operating room: on a stool the surgeon has laid out several instruments, including, on the right, the curved razor recommended for the operation by Guy de Chauliac. The man in the foreground holds some kind of a container and on the floor stands a water basin with a large golden pitcher in it. The mother is covered by a dark robe, except for the center of her body, where the garment is thrown open to allow for a median incision. The mother’s face is unrecognizable: it was erased for some unknown reason. The surgeon, wearing a splendid headdress, tenderly and carefully removes the child from the wound. An impressed witness on the right observes the proceedings. The homely touches of the birth, such as a sheet held ready or a warm bath, are missing in this image. As in figure 17, the splendid robes, the magnificence of the birth chamber, and the male presence transform Caesar’s birth into a royal birth—more a matter of state perhaps than a domestic, feminine affair.

The same atmosphere reigns in our next two examples: an illustration in manuscript Conde 770 (about 1480) and figure 19, from a Flemish manuscript of the second half of the fifteenth century. In both illustra-
19. The birth of Julius Caesar (Les Faits des Romains, Paris, B.N. f. fr. 20312 bis, fol. 1r)
tions an ecclesiastic participates in the scene; seated at the lower left, he lends a certain solemnity to the occasion. In the manuscript Condé 770 picture, the dead mother is stretched out on a bed while the surgeon, still holding up his knife, removes the child from an incision on her lower right thigh area. Several bearded counselors look on, while two women lament and cry on the right. Again, dogs can be found near the birth. Women appear only marginally and as passive onlookers.

In figure 19, no women are present. The operation is in progress: A bearded surgeon in a blue robe decorated with fur holds a long curved knife with which he has just made an incision on the lower right part of the mother's body. Blood is flowing from the wound; the mother has clearly died. Another bearded surgeon carefully lifts up the child. His gestures are of a tenderness seldom found in the depiction of medieval men. A male attendant at the foot of the bed appears to hold ready a sheet. Except for the surgeons, all the men are clean-shaven, including the two ecclesiastics and the two men on the right, who seem to be discussing the operation. As in figure 14, where the operating table and the attitudes of the participants suggest a dissection, here the viewer's attention is drawn to the medical (possibly instructive) aspects of the operation rather than exclusively to the human drama. That is, the onlookers are not lamenting or praying but rather observing the procedure with a detached and professional eye.

Figure 19 has, with ten male participants, the largest personnel of any of the illustrations. Figure 13 comes close with two men and six women. Here, a burly-looking surgeon pulls a baby, for once tiny, from the folds of the mother's nightgown. A younger man, possibly a cleric, is reading from a book at the foot of the bed. One of the women holds up a sheet, others are bringing more. On the left, one of the attendants is offering a container (with drink?) that could be meant for the mother, who appears to be still alive. Consequently, we do not find here the detached medical interest evident in the previous example but rather a general air of solicitousness and concern, not only for the baby but for the mother as well.

This is also true for figures 15 and 16. The two illuminations resemble each other closely. In both of them the surgeons attend to the mother after the baby has been delivered, a new feature in these illustrations. While an attendant on the left is ready to hand the baby to a midwife, the surgeons seem to be suturing or at least closing the wound (along the
The curved surgical razor lies abandoned on a stool. The attention and special care that had been reserved for the newborn in our previous illustrations now also extend to the mother. For the first time the procedure of closing the wound is represented, an innovation that may have been prompted by medical developments, or at least by reports of such developments. For although, objectively speaking, nothing in the medical conditions of the operation had changed at that time to make truly successful Caesareans more likely, there had been reports of successful Caesarean operations in the fifteenth century; in 1411 a midwife was said to have delivered seven babies by Caesarean with both the mothers and the babies surviving. The fifteenth century also saw male surgeons performing Caesareans, as we know from the testimony of Piero d'Argellata who, in his *Chirurgia*, described an operation he himself had performed. These changes in medical thought and practice are reflected in the illustrations shown here.

Although in a few of the earlier illustrations the mother looked alive, it is only in the later fifteenth-century representations that the artists emphasized the medical side of the mother's survival, that is the necessity of suturing the incision. Thus the surgeon treats the mother as a patient; her death no longer seems to be a precondition for a Caesarean delivery. Again, it is most likely that the scene was drawn according to the reports of surgeons, which the illustrator may have requested. Direct observation is less probable. For one thing, the presence of a male artist at a birth was unacceptable. For another, exact observation would probably have resulted in the representation of the umbilical cord, which is lacking in all the illustrations. The operation itself, on the other hand—the instruments and the incision—corresponds to medical reality.

Not all later illustrators opted for medical realism, however. Our only sixteenth-century illumination of Caesar's birth (fig. 20), was modeled on a Nativity. In fact, it combines two different iconographic traditions of the Nativity. On the right side, it shows the mother, covered by a sheet up to her neck, in bed. This was the earlier schema of the Nativity. The left part of the illumination is taken up by a scene resembling the presentation of Jesus to the three Magi, a somewhat later iconographic development. The combination of the two schemata produces an image of Caesarean birth different from any we have considered so far. Unlike Mary in the various Nativities, the mother here may be dead; the women surrounding the bed seem sad and resigned. But there is no direct evi-
The birth of Julius Caesar (Jean Mansel, *Histoires romaines*, Paris, B.N. f. fr. 54, fol. 258r)

dence that a Caesarean birth took place. The long-haired child, wrapped in a sheet, is kept warm in front of a fire. Several men contemplate the child, even point to him.

Men and women are neatly separated in this picture. The women are in the background (except for the female attendant who serves as a support for the child); their attitudes are passive and mournful; in face of death, they can take no action. The men, on the other hand, focus on the new

life, the future ruler. Unlike in most other representations of Caesarean births, in this one there is no feeling of an emergency or even any special activity. The static quality of this picture distances the mother from the birth; she does not receive any medical attention as did the mothers in figures 15 and 16. The child occupies the central position; the mother and the attendants have become marginal.

We are now able to answer the questions asked at the beginning of this chapter. We have seen that the iconography of childbirth (especially of Caesarean birth) produced a tension between iconographic tradition and realistic observation different from that found in the iconography of surgery in general. Illustrations of childbirth were mostly independent of the texts they appeared in but often depended on ancient models. Pictures of Caesarean birth, on the other hand, while also independent of medical texts, developed along different and more diverse lines. Their great diversity is a reflection of a different mode of production. Where illustrators of normal births could rely on an iconographic tradition, those of Caesarean birth had to have recourse to other types of information. Since most of the images are surprisingly accurate from a medical point of view, illustrators must have gathered information from contem-
porary witnesses, that is, midwives and surgeons. Consequently, the images are more eloquent about medieval life and society than other, more conventional, medical scenes.

As far as gender roles are concerned, we observe an increasing marginality of women in the images. The fourteenth-century midwives, acting so competently and energetically, have no place in the fifteenth century. There is no doubt that male surgeons have taken over the Caesarean operation. Two other illustrations of Caesareans (but not of the birth of Julius Caesar) of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries confirm this hypothesis: figure 21 shows a male surgeon holding up a surgical knife, and a page from a model book of medical scenes shows a male surgeon performing the actual operation. Women appear only as attendants. The slow incursion of men into obstetrics via the Caesarean operation thus found its own pictorial history.