

## Christological Motives in Song Culture

### Abstract: Christ in the Flemish Lace Schools

Lace was the single most important employer of women workers in nineteenth century Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking half of Belgium. Lace skills were taught to Flemish girls from around the age of five or six in lace schools. Such schools were often run by lay sisters or female religious orders, or at least someone with a reputation for piety. Songs were used in lace schools both to regulate the rhythms of the work but also to foster devotion. Even after lacemakers had left the schools, they took these songs with them; hence religion was woven into their lively, collective work culture. Jesus and other members of the Holy Family were very familiar, and very present figures in this culture: it was not unknown for them to manifest directly in lacemakers' lives. In this paper, I will examine the sung narratives concerning Jesus that were used in the lace schools, and how these shaped lacemakers' religious outlook. Flemish lacemakers were profoundly Catholic, but their version of Biblical history could be quite heterodox. The mystic and feminine (if not feminist) elements of their songs mixed with a strong dose of social criticism, focussed on poverty, hunger and male brutality.

### short biography

David Hopkin is Professor of European Social History at the University of Oxford where his research focuses on oral traditions. He is author of *Soldier and Peasant in French Popular Culture* (2002) and *Voices of the People in Nineteenth Century France* (2012). He is co-editor of *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe during the Long Nineteenth Century* (2012) and *Rhythms of Revolt: European Traditions and Memories of Social Conflict in Oral Culture* (2017). He was editor of the journal *Cultural and Social History* and of the book series *Studies in Modern French and Francophone History*, and currently serve as the President of the Folklore Society. He is writing a book on 'Lacemakers – poverty, religion and gender in a transnational work culture'. Articles related to this project have appeared in the journals *French History*, *Fabula*, *Folk Music Journal*, *Textile* and *Datatèxtil*. He co-hosts a website dedicated to the history and anthropology of lacemakers: <https://laceincontext.com/>