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# Through Hanjimonō (判じ物) to Enlightenment: The Pictorial Heart-Sūtra (般若絵心経)<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Even considering Japan's high literacy rates during the early modern period, it is rather unlikely, that the majority of the Japanese population would have been able to read and understand an important Buddhist text like the Heart Sutra, 般若心経. This naturally posed a problem for the monastic schools, who competed with the rather easy to practice Pure Land and Amida schools, and needed to become more accessible to their lay-supporters. An answer to this problem presented itself in the form of Hanjimonō (判じ物), rebus-like allusions, using pictures to represent words or parts of words. Usually used for playfull riddles, artists would also use Hanjimonō to represent their names and sometimes even short subversive slogans. It were monks from the Tohoku area who adopted Hanjimonō to represent the Heart Sutra and thus helped to make it accessible to the illiterate lay people. The considerations behind that practice are topic of this paper.

## 概要

江戸時代に日本の高い識字率にもかかわらず、一般の日本人は般若心経の様な代表的な仏教の経文を読める事が不可能であっただろう。この問題を解決するために普段言葉遊びに使われた判じ物が利用される事になった。東北の寺で制作が始まった判じ物の絵般若心経は全国に広まった。この絵般若心経の意図するところを明らかにするのが、本論文のテーマである。

**Keywords:** Heart-Sutra, Hanjimonō, Edo-period-Buddhism

キーワード：判じ物、般若絵心経

After centuries of oral transmission, the memorized and chanted accounts of Buddha's teachings, were finally written down in the Pali tripitaka, thus making up Buddhism's doctrinal foundation. It contains a huge number of texts, which were later translated from various Indian languages into Chinese and Tibetan. Later also into Japanese, Korean and many other languages. The 'Sutta tripitaka' supposedly contains 84000<sup>2</sup> of Buddha's sermons and discourses, which are deemed to 'conform to the truth' (kaikyō 契経), as

"Sūtras are thought to penetrate into the truth and embrace all sentient beings."<sup>3</sup>

As Japans Buddhism was deeply influenced by the Chinese dharma tradition, I believe, that the observation, that in China "the sutra text performs a double religious function: on the one hand it is thought of as a vehicle which can be used to make a bodhisattva or buddha present; on the other hand, more radically, it stands in the place of, and (functionally speaking) *is*, a bodhisattva or buddha."<sup>4</sup> also holds true for Japan.

It was agreed among many Buddhist scholars, that Sūtras, even if not understood, but recited with faith, would eventually lead to enlightenment, since only the language of the Sūtras has the power to cut through illusions and enlighten the faithful.<sup>3</sup> Which means, that Sūtras had to be studied, read, recited, copied and spread as widely as possible.

Although differences in their respective interpretation eventually lead to the formation of separate schools, Sūtras are in principle trans-sectarian, as all schools agree on their truth.

Since Buddhism's transmission to Japan via China and Korea in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism was closely connected to the ideas of spiritual and physical healing, hence the great number of early Buddhist statuary depicting the Healing Buddha Yakushi Nyōrai, who is always depicted with a medicine jar in his left hand.

Sūtras were also often inserted into Buddha statues in order to bring them to life. Handling the scriptures was seen as a task of utmost importance within the monasteries. There existed a hierarchy of Sūtra scholars (goshu hōshi 五種法師) starting with Juji (受持), those who accept and keep it, second were Dokyō (読経) those who read it, then Jukyō (誦経), those who recite it, followed by Sekkyō (説教), those who explain it and Shakyō (写経) those who were able to copy Sūtras in writing.

Sūtras, too were seen as tools for healing and protection. As right speech has great influence on one's karma, reciting and chanting Sūtras was believed to be very beneficial, but since they were written in Chinese, initially that was possible only for the clergy and an elite minority of educated nobles.

“Chanting is central to most Buddhist practices and rituals. In addition to conveying religious sentiments and ideas, Buddhist chants are believed able to establish and renew moral discipline, produce enlightenment, ward off obstacles and exorcise demons, bring rain, make deities and bodhisattvas appear and/or transfer merit to other beings.”<sup>5</sup>

Many schools eventually developed specific recitation rituals ranging from anju (暗誦), reciting a sutra completely from memory to act-reading (shindoku 身讀), to a combination of reading and reciting from memory (dokuju 讀誦), or to choreographed group recitations (tendoku 天讀), in order to underline the importance of those Sūtras, seen as specially effective in guiding their followers to salvation. Public readings were held by the temples during religious events, but also commissioned by paying patrons in order to express gratitude, to make a wish or to assure the safety and health of their realms or their kin. Around the 8<sup>th</sup> century Japanese Buddhism started to move beyond the elite and started to permeate all levels of society. An important tool to this end were Setsuwa (説話), narrations with Buddhist related topics, often composed by Buddhist monks. The oldest Setsuwa collection, the Nihon Ryōiki (日本靈異記), compiled by Kyōkai (景戒) between 787 and 824, but also the 11<sup>th</sup> century Honchōhokkegenki (本朝法華験記) by Chigen or the anonymous late Heian-period Konjaku Monogatari-shū (今昔物語集), contain a great number of stories mentioning the miraculous power of Sūtras.

“Setsuwa on the topic of Sūtras reveal that Sūtra reading was (and remains) a visceral process, sensual and fantastic, involving an almost chemical reaction between body and Sūtra text in the course of which both are transformed in specific ways (the Sūtra may come alive, for instance, and the body may fill with light or be cured of illness.)”<sup>6</sup>

Although in most cases the Lotus-Sutra is mentioned as the cause of wondrous events, there are also a few

stories relating to the power of the Heart-Sūtra.<sup>7</sup>

The Lotus-Sūtra (妙法蓮華經 Myōhō Renge Kyō), Hokke-kyō or Hoke-kyō (法華經), favoured by the Tendai (天台宗) and Nichiren-related schools, has been popular since Shōtoku taishi's times (聖德太子) as it teaches that all people may eventually attain Buddhahood. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Nichiren (日蓮) even went so far as to claim, that

“chanting the name of the Lotus Sūtra - Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō - is the only way to practice Buddhism in the degenerate age of mappo.”<sup>8</sup>

The Lotus-Sūtra also inspired other monks of Tendai lineage, like Shinran (親鸞) and Hōnen (法然) who eventually developed their respective brands of Pure Land Buddhism, which both focus centrally on faith and the reliance on the mercy of the Amida Buddha (tariki 他力) encouraging their followers to recite the phrase Namu Amida Butsu (“I take refuge in Amitābha Buddha”).

Other than the 28 chapter long Lotus-Sūtra, which is usually only recited in excerpts, the Heart-Sūtra or ‘Essence of Wisdom Sutra’ is in its Chinese version with about 260 characters short enough to be memorized and recited as a whole. It contains the essence of the about 40 texts within the Great Sutra of the Perfection of Transcendental Wisdom, and reflects on the concept of the fundamental emptiness of all phenomena.

While it is respected and widely used in all Buddhist schools, the Zen branches, who rely on (jiriki, 自力), one's own strength to reach enlightenment, treasure it most.

Among the seven Chinese translations of the Sanskrit text, the one accredited to Genjō (玄奘, 600<sup>?</sup> - 664) is commonly used in Japan. Since its import to Japan in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, each Chinese character of the Sūtra is read in a special form of Japanese pronunciation for Buddhist texts, called goyomi (御読み), without any change to the texts' Chinese grammar structure. To make things more complicated, the Sūtra ends with the Chinese phonetic transscript of a Sanskrit mantra: ‘gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā’, which is basically unintelligible not only to Japanese readers. But specially the esoteric tradition maintains, that just the sound of the Sūtra alone, could eventually lead to enlightenment.<sup>9</sup>

While the long Lotus-Sūtra, was not really meant to be memorized, the brevity of the Heart-Sūtra would enable even lay persons to memorize it, once there was a way to make its text or rather its sound available to the illiterate, who were neither able to read the Chinese characters nor a Japanese transscription in Kana.

Although Japan generally enjoyed a higher literacy rate than Western countries, it has been pointed out<sup>10</sup>, that there existed a huge knowledge gap between social and economic strata, genders, as well as urban and rural areas. It has been also pointed out, that ‘literacy’ is hard to define, when it comes to Japanese, as there are 3 writing systems.

As a consequence, ‘literacy’, specially in rural areas refers to some basic knowledge of Kana at best, and that would definitely not suffice, when it comes to reading a Kanji only text like the Heart Sūtra.

However, the implementation of the Danka system (檀家制度), which during the Edo period elevated Buddhism to the rank of a state religion, brought the whole population closer to the temples<sup>11</sup> and increased demand for all types of Buddhist literary genres like sermon ballads (Sekkyō 説教), pious Jōruri or other plays, as well as popular fiction like Buddhist tales or ghost stories.<sup>12</sup> While the ta-riki (他力) schools' teaching was easy enough to follow, even for the layity, the ji-riki (自力) groups, namely the Zen schools had to make

some efforts to reach their believers, if they not, like the Ōbaku school, would want to go so far as to incorporate the 'Nembutsu' into their practice-system.

Another contributing factor to a greater demand on Heart-Sūtra related information was also the gradual development of the so called 'Funeral Buddhism' sōshiki bukkyō (葬式仏教), which further raised the need to teach the illiterate, as mourners attending services were expected to join the recitation of Sūtras, whenever possible or even chant or copy (suri kuyō 摺経) the Sūtra at home for the benefit of the deceased.

A solution to this dilemma were Hanjimonō, which literally means 'something to solve, decipher or guess' and refers to the game-character, that Hanjimonō possessed from the beginning. The origin of Hanjimonō is not known, but using the peculiarities of the Japanese language for games has been around since the late Heian period. The oldest text containing Hanjimonō is the diary of Nakamikado no Nobutane (1442-1525), Nobutanekyōki (宣胤卿記), written in 1481.

Wordgames, puns and puzzles reached the peak of their popularity in urban areas in Kansai and Kantō during the Edo period. Specially popular were Hanjimonō among merchants and artisans, who used them as a way to memorize the names of persons or places, or to playfully list up household items or merchandise.

Since the 1670's printed Hanjimonō circulated in the Kansai area. During the Bakumatsu period, some Hanjimonō even appeared in school books as a way to help children memorize things like geographical names. The Hanjimonō/Kisshō-pattern (吉祥文様) かまわぬ - 'Who cares?', represented by a sickle (kama), a circle (wa) and the Hiragana character 'nu', appeared as early as 1624. It became a fashion item in the late Edo period (and a way to express opposition to the Bakufu), when Kabuki actor Ichikawa Danjūrō VII. (七代目市川團十郎 1791-1859) used it to subversely protest the punishment he'd received for flaunting the shōgunates frugality laws.<sup>13</sup>

While in the game context, Hanjimonō were often used to conceal contents<sup>14</sup>, the opposite is true, when applied for the depiction of Sūtras.

From the early 18<sup>th</sup> century Hanjimonō were used to express Buddhist contents in the Tōhoku region, analogous to calendars, charts and other important information, that had been made public as Mekurareki (めくら暦), or "Yearbooks for the blind", meaning here the illiterate.

These yearbooks would use simple stickcharts to represent the names of the zodiacal months or years, they would have little illustrations hinting at Buddhist and other holidays, or would depict agricultural tools or household tools, in order to indicate certain seasonal expressions.

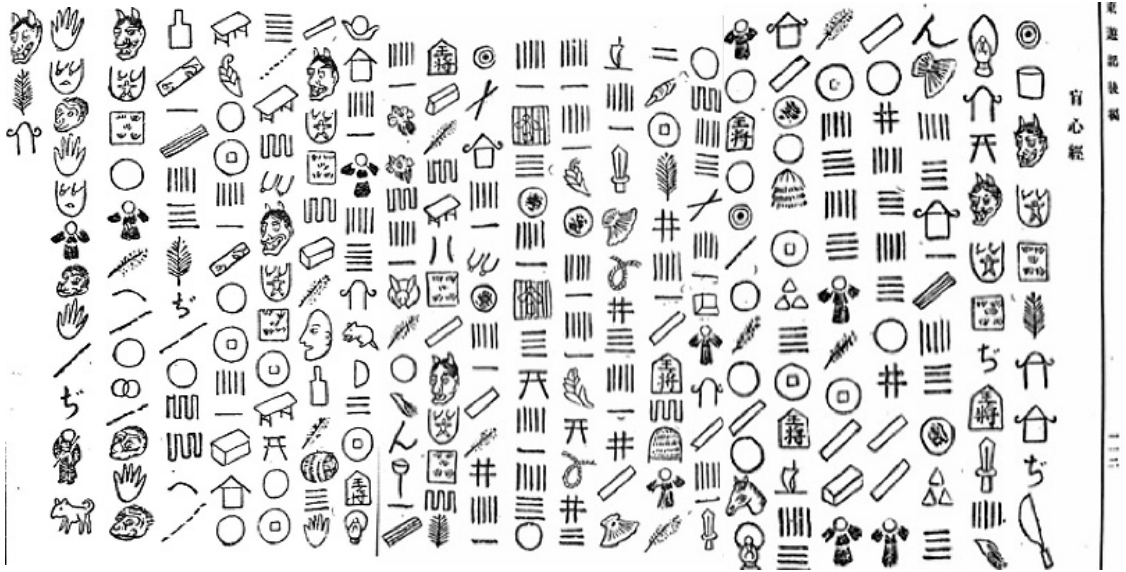
Since 1712 Mekurakyō or Nanbu ekyō and other Buddhist texts appeared<sup>15</sup>.

The Tendai-monk Zenpachi (善八) from Chūsonji in Hiraizumi is credited with the first picturized version of the Heart-Sūtra. This so called Tayama-version circulated around Hachimantai-Tayama in today's Iwate prefecture and dates back to 1783.

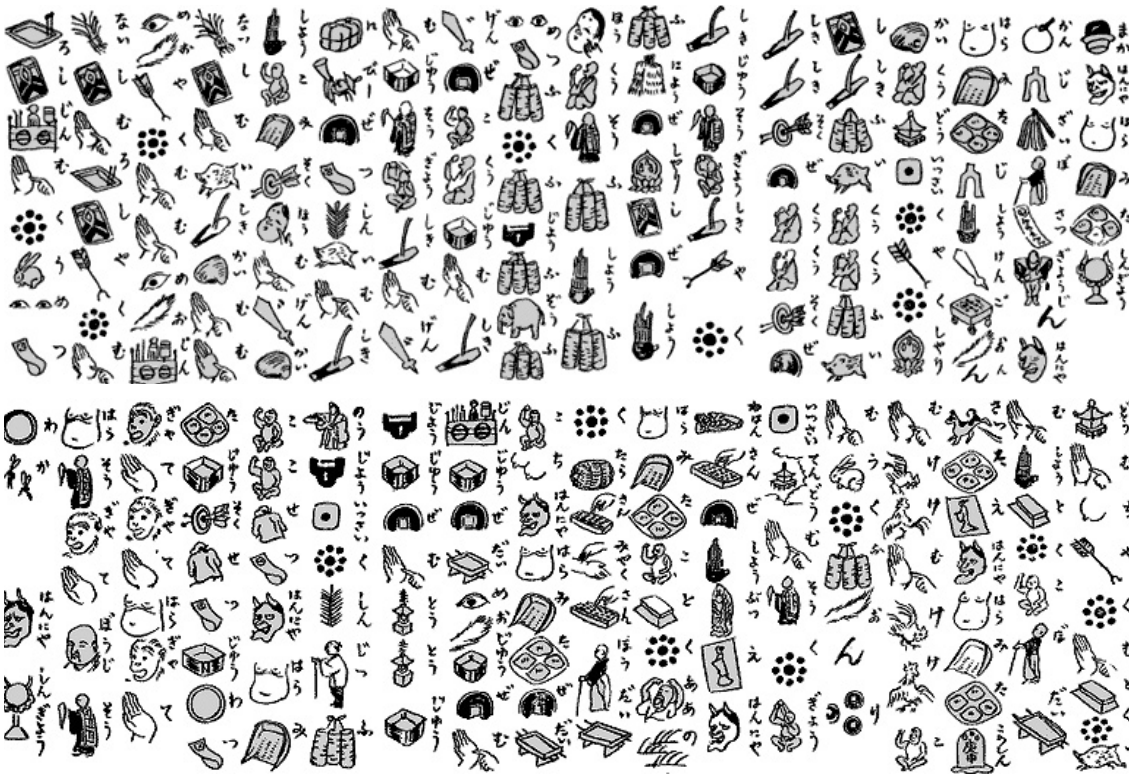
Rangakusha Tachibana Nankei's (橘南谿, 1753-1805) travel report from 1797, Tōyūki (東遊記), introduced it to a wider public.

As the pictural Heart-Sūtra was a commercial success for the printing houses, many reprints appeared on the market. Inspired by the lasting demand, a new version, the anonymous, more playful Morioka Version, which was first published by Maidaya (舞田屋) started to be circulated in 1863.





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©Anyouji Temple, Tokyo<sup>17</sup>

Both, the Tayama and the Morioka versions, also reflect some dialectal peculiarities in their respective pronunciation, hinting at the places where they circulated.<sup>18</sup>

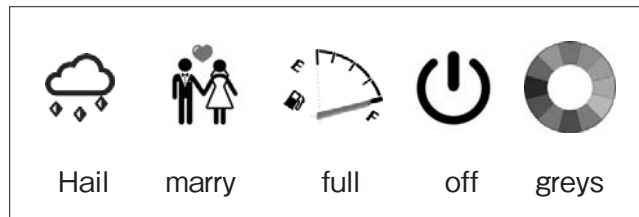
To indicate the right pronunciation of the Sūtra commonly known objects were used.

For example the title, Maka hannya hara mi ta shingyō, is represented by an inverted rice pot, usually pronounced 'kama', but inverted the reading would be 'maka'.

The well-known Nōh-mask named 'Hannya' was used to represent the sound of the second word.

A big belly, 'hara' comes next, followed by an agricultural tool, a kind of gathering basket, pronounced 'mi' and then the picture of a paddy-field, pronounced 'ta'.

A mirror like those, displayed in Shintō-Shrines indicates the reading 'shingyō'. In this way the whole Sūtra is picturized. To clarify the principle: if you were to write a Christian prayer in Hanjimonos, you might get something like...



...to represent the first line of the 'Hail, Mary'.

Hanjimonos are strictly chosen, to represent the sound of the Sūtra, they are in no way making fun or trying to explain or illustrate the Sūtra's contents.

Both versions of the pictorial Heart-Sūtra enjoyed and still enjoy great commercial success and were printed also outside the Tōhoku region.

As many folk religious customs indicate, Sūtras were believed to possess protective or healing properties, just owning a copy was supposed to be beneficial, which explains the high demand for cheap printed versions.

Carrying the Sūtra as amulet on the body or even better, writing the Sūtra directly on the body was supposed to protect or even heal the believer.

An example for this is the 1782 story "Biwa no hikyoku yūrei wo nakashimu" (琵琶秘曲泣幽霊) by Isseki Sanjin (一夕散人), published in the series Gayū kidan (臥遊奇談). It served eventually as model for Lafcadio Hearn's story "Hōichi the Earless" in his 1904 Kwaidan collection and tells the story of a blind Biwa player who is saved from ghosts because his body was covered with the text of the Heart-Sūtra. Unfortunately for poor Hōichi, his ears were forgotten in the writing process, and so he loses them to an angry ghost.

Keeping a holy scripture as a form of apotropaic magic close to one's body, or even incorporating it through eating or drinking, was and sometimes is still practiced also in Western culture. The readily available Japanese 'Hannya Shingyō Men', noodles with the printed Sūtra on them or German Schluckbildchen, cookies or edible papers with little pictures of Saints on them and sold at South-German pilgrimage sites show,<sup>19</sup> that the idea is still around even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

These folk religious beliefs in combination with the (mostly) esoteric teaching about the beneficial effects of a Sūtra's sound, help also explain the ongoing demand for Sūtra-related scriptures, all types of charms, merchandise and decorations.

## Conclusion

The custom to make pictorial Sūtras, mainly the Heart-Sūtra available to illiterate Buddhist believers, reflects a strong belief in the power of the Sūtras' sound. Rather than trying to explain the contents of the written text, it was seen as a viable first step towards enlightenment to be able to just pronounce the wording of the



Sūtra. In this respect the custom of Ekyō shows a strong relation to the esoteric tradition within the Tendai school, although Zen schools also used it in order to be more accessible to their followers.

- 1 This paper is based on a lecture, held September 24th 2016 at the Second EAJS Japan Conference at Kobe University
- 2 <http://read.84000.co/> (accessed 20.9.2016)
- 3 Japanese-English Buddhist Dictionary. Tokyo 1965, p.156
- 4 See Campany: Notes on the Devotional Uses and Symbolic Function of Sūtra Texts. In: The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies. Vol. 14, 1991, p. 35
- 5 Walters, J.S.: Chanting Practices. In: Keown, Prebish: Encyclopedia of Buddhism. London 2007, p.210
- 6 Eubanks, C.: Miracles of Book and Body. Berkeley 2011, p.11
- 7 [http://www.univie.ac.at/re\\_l\\_jap/ryowiki/Hannya\\_Shin-gy%C5%8D](http://www.univie.ac.at/re_l_jap/ryowiki/Hannya_Shin-gy%C5%8D), the Ryōiki contains four stories relating to the Heart-Sūtra: I-14, II-7, II-19 und III-34.
- 8 Williams, P.: Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations, Routledge 1989, p.142
- 9 See: Rambelli, F.: The Buddhist Theory of Semiotics. London 2013, p. 79 ff.
- 10 Kornicki, P.: The Book in Japan. Honolulu 2001 and also Rubinger, R.: Popular Literacy in Early Modern Japan. Honolulu 2007
- 11 Deal; Rupert: A Cultural History of Japanese Buddhism. Oxford 2015, p. 186 ff.
- 12 for details see: Keller Kimbrough, R.: Wondrous Brutal Fiction. New York 2013
- 13 See: Ono, Y.; Iwasaki, H. in : 練馬区立石神井公園出版 「なぞなぞ言葉遊び - 江戸の判じ絵と練馬の地口絵」 Tokyo 2016
- 14 Lent, J. A.: Asian Comics. Mississippi 2015
- 15 渡辺章悟：絵解き般若心経。Tokyo 2012, p. 241 f.
- 16 picture source : 三浦理：東西遊記。Tokyo 1914, p. 112 ff.
- 17 picture source: [http://www.anyouji.or.jp/Tate1\\_Hannya.html](http://www.anyouji.or.jp/Tate1_Hannya.html) Reprint with the kind permission of the copyright holder Anyouji Temple in Tokyo (宗教法人安養寺東京都八王子市犬目町1084, 担当：土岐秀淳様、[info@anyouji.or.jp](mailto:info@anyouji.or.jp))
- 18 サライ編集部：はじめての般若心経。Tokyo 2008, p. 91
- 19 See: Christoph Kürzeder: Geweyhte Sachen und anberührte Bildlein. Das Kloster der Ursulinen in Landshut als Zentrum barocker Sakramentalienfrömmigkeit, in: Niehoff, Franz (hrsg.) Schriften aus den Museen der Stadt Landshut 5, MARIA ALLERORTEN, Ausstellungskatalog, Landshut 2000, S.277 ff, S. 282 f) see also: [http://www.kulturraumtirol.at/index.php?id=114&no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=201](http://www.kulturraumtirol.at/index.php?id=114&no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=201)  
Heilige drey Konige/ Caspar, Melchior, Baltasar/ Bitte fir uns jetzt und in der Stund Unseres/ Todts/ Dis an die Haupder und Reliquie der HH drey Königen/ in Cöllen angestrichnes briefflen ist guet fir alle/ Reis gefahren Haupt weh fallente Kranckheit/ fieber Zauberey u. jöhen dodt durch einen veste glaube."  
"Die geistige Apotheke der Landshuter Ursulinen hielt ... für die frommen Verehrer ihrer Gottesmutter weitere Devotionalien bereit, so zum Beispiel die sogenannten Schluckbildchen... Diese briefmarkengroßen Bildchen mit aufgedrucktem Gnadenbild und der damit verbundene Heilbrauch sind in den beiden ersten Jahrzehnten der Wallfahrt nicht üblich gewesen und erst für die Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts belegt. Ähnlich den aufgelegten oder aufgebundenen Bildern sollte durch sie die heilende Kraft des abgebildeten Gnadenbildes, die *Gratia medicinalis*, wirksam werden, jedoch nicht äußerlich, sondern innerlich. Um dies zu erreichen, wurden die ebenfalls geweihten und anberührten Schluckbildchen, die einzeln oder auch bogenweise an die Wallfahrer verteilt wurden, im Krankheitsfall mit etwas Wasser eingenommen. Dieser Heilbrauch, der für viele Wallfahrtsorte belegt ist (zum Beispiel Mariazell, Altötting, Mariahilf in Passau, Genazzano/ Italien), war schon in der Antike bekannt. In den mittelmeeerischen Kulturen war es üblich gewesen, sogenannte Phylakterien, kleine Pergamentzettelchen, die mit Zaubersprüchen, religiösen Formeln und Zeichen beschrieben waren, als apotropäisches Amulett am Körper zu tragen oder in Gefahr und Krankheit einzunehmen. ... Besonders bei der gefürchteten *Fraiß* und in *Kinds-Nöthen* vertrauten die Gläubigen auf die heilkräftige Wirkung der Bildchen."

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