

An abstract graphic consisting of numerous overlapping sine waves in various colors (blue, green, yellow, orange, red, pink, purple, and light blue). The waves are arranged in a way that they create a complex, layered pattern, with some waves peaking and others troughing at different points. The overall effect is a sense of movement and depth.

Viki Ranff

**Mill, Miller, and Grinding as Theological Comparisons and Metaphors in Cusanus' *Sermones***

***Metaphor Papers*** is a Working Paper Series by the Collaborative Research Center 1475 “Metaphors of Religion”. In the *Metaphor Papers*, the CRC documents preliminary findings, work-in-progress and ongoing debates and makes them available for discussion.

Please cite as:

Viki Ranff. “Mill, Miller, and Grinding as Theological Comparisons and Metaphors in Cusanus’ *Sermones*.” *Metaphor Papers* 17 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.46586/mp.389.461>.

© Viki Ranff.

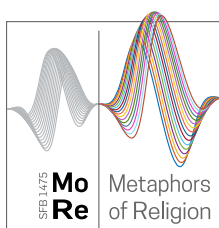
All *Metaphor Papers* are published under the Open Access CC-BY 4.0 International license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

ISSN 2942-0849

Ruhr-Universität Bochum / Karlsruher Institut für Technologie  
Collaborative Research Center 1475 “Metaphors of Religion”

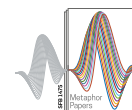
<https://sfb1475.ruhr-uni-bochum.de>  
<https://omp.ub.rub.de/index.php/metaphorpapers>

The CRC “Metaphors of Religion” is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG; German Research Foundation) – SFB 1475 – Project ID 441126958.



Funded by

**DFG** Deutsche  
Forschungsgemeinschaft  
German Research Foundation



# Mill, Miller, and Grinding as Theological Comparisons and Metaphors in Cusanus' *Sermones*

Viki Ranff   
*Cusanus Institute, Trier*

**ABSTRACT** Cusanus is known for often resorting to insights or theories from mathematical or scientific contexts to explain philosophical and theological thoughts, using them as comparisons or metaphors. Occasionally one also finds metaphors and examples from everyday life. Only in ten places in his complete works does Cusanus use the metaphor of mill, miller and grinding. All of these passages are found in six of his sermons. They describe human misconceptions, but also spiritual gifts from God.

**KEYWORDS** Everyday metaphors, Mystical mill, Theology

Cusanus is known for often resorting to insights or theories from mathematical or scientific contexts to explain philosophical and theological thoughts, using them as comparisons or metaphors.<sup>1</sup> Occasionally, however, one also finds metaphors and examples from everyday life. The latter is particularly evident in the almost 300 sermons that have come down to us, in which he attempts to make theological and spiritual thoughts clear in metaphorical language. Among the best-known metaphors of this kind are those from the area of nutrition and the processing of food, such as the baker's parable from *Sermo XLI*.<sup>2</sup> [1]

A small group of passages combines the use of the metaphors of the mill, the miller and grinding, which technically form the premise of the baker's metaphor. Even if mill and baker metaphors are directly linked in only one instance, it is nevertheless evident that Cusanus considers the artisanal prerequisites of the entire processing chain and uses them metaphorically. [2]

Only in ten places in his complete works does Cusanus use the metaphor of mill, miller and grinding. All of these passages are found in six of his sermons. Since the references do not show any direct connection in terms of content or a recognisable development of metaphor, they will be presented in chronological sequence in order to draw conclusions from Cusanus' use of metaphors. [3]

1 For a more detailed German version of this paper, see Ranff (2024).

2 See also the *Metaphor Paper* by Phoenix Savapakarn (2025) in this volume.

The first use of the mill metaphor is found in *Sermo IX* of 8th of September between the years 1432 and 1438; the exact year is unknown, probably in Koblenz:<sup>3</sup> [4]

Greed is like the sea, like death, and like Hell—which are insatiable. It is like a mole, which is blind and which produces many mounds of earth and is hidden amidst them all, etc. It is like a dungpit, like the wheel of a mill-house, like a pig, a box with holes, the trunk of a tree, a hen, an abscess near the heart, a bag with holes, a man with dropsy, and like a thorn in the foot. Look at the A Healthy Diet, etc. (Nicholas of Cusa 2003, 208) [5]

As is often the case with the young preacher Cusanus, this is also a paraphrase from another source. Here, Cusanus refers to a work by the Dominican Guilelmus de Lanicia from around 1310, who, in a writing on the way of life leading to salvation, presents the main vices at the beginning. Guilelmus interprets nine metaphorical comparisons to the “avaritia,” which Cusanus takes over without further explanation—neither those of the author nor his own—as a mere list without comment. The fact that he ends his reference to “Diaeta salutis” with “etc.” could mean that he added explanations in the oral presentation. Guilelmus, whose writing was long attributed to Bonaventure, says of the millwheel:<sup>4</sup> [6]

Fourthly, the greedy man is like a millwheel; for however much it is turned, however often it is turned, it is always found in the same place; so also the greedy man, who comes into the world naked, and however much he works, yet merely goes back naked. Hence it was said, ‘Naked I came forth from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither’ (Job 1:21). [7]

The mill wheel turning inexorably and yet not moving from its place represents the insatiability of the greedy man who can never grab enough possessions and yet ends up being what he was at the beginning: naked. This metaphor, however, does not take into account that the mill wheel moves the mill gear and thus, despite the lack of spatial locomotion, has achieved much in the end. The visual impression of high-speed idling shapes the metaphor of ultimately useless toil. However, Cusanus, who preaches at length against greed, neither interpreted the mill metaphor here nor reflected on its limited expressiveness, but he sticks to the outward appearance of the mere visual impression of the rotation of the wheel. [8]

At Pentecost 1444, Cusanus preaches in Koblenz about how one should prepare oneself for the reception of the Holy Spirit, which leads to the choice of good striving. Man should [9]

3 Nicolai de Cusa *Sermo IX*: h XVI, n. 23, p. 190, lin. 1–10: “Complevitque Deus, in die nativitatis Mariae 1432–1438: <Avaritia> ‘Comparatur mari, mortuo et inferno, quae sunt insatiabilia. Est similis talpae, quae caeca est et multos facit tumultos terrae et in omnibus ipsa in medio absconditur etc. Est similis sterquilino, rotae molendinae, porco, pyxidi perforatae, trunco arboris, gallinae, apostemati proximo cordi, sacco pertuso et hydropico et spinae in pede’ Vide in Diaeta salutis etc.”

4 Guilelmus de Lanicia (1866, 255), “De diaeta salutis, titulus I. De peccatis,” cap. 6: De avaritia: “Quarto, avarus similis est rotae molendini; quantumcumque enim, quotiescumque vertatur, semper tamen in eodem loco invenitur; sic avarus, qui nudus in mundum venit, quantumcumque laboret, nudus tamen de mundo recedit solum. Unde dicitur: ‘Nudus egressus sum de utero matris meae, et nudus revertar illuc’ (Ijob 1:21)” (my translation).

strive in the company of the saints to serve the Holy Spirit more than the world. John the Baptist, who became strong through the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 1:80), is mentioned as a model. Cusanus specifies:<sup>5</sup>

As regards John the Baptist: 'The child grew and was strengthened by the Holy Spirit ...' etc. Moreover, one must prepare a bed for Him, because He is not like a miller who sleeps amid the commotion [of the water-mill], etc. Isaias 11: [the Spirit of the Lord] will rest upon him who is humble and quiet. In addition, it is necessary that you receive His household also, for He is not a rustic lord..., etc. (Nicholas of Cusa 2008, 392) [10]

The bed—also a popular metaphor in the Middle Ages—is to be prepared for Christ, who should be able to rest quietly and undisturbed in man, since he is not like a miller who can also sleep in noise. The constantly working mill, which only allows the miller restless sleep so that he is immediately awake when needed to heap up new grain or to prevent damage to the mill, stands for the inner restlessness of a person in whom Christ cannot rest, because such a person serves worldly tasks more than Christ. For Christ, even in His indwelling in man, is not divided into two like a miller who can sleep but at the same time is always listening with one ear to the sounds of his mill in order to operate it. The uninterrupted work of the mill and the restless sleep of the miller therefore belong together. [11]

In *Sermo* XLI of November 22nd, 1444, the 24th Sunday after Trinity and commemoration day of St. Cecilia, in Mainz, Cusanus uses the comparison with a mill several times. With this sermo, he begins a cycle of sermons on Christological questions, which he continues in the following Christmas festival cycle. First, he deals with the meaning of the Annunciation and appropriate listening. He explains how Christ can be experienced as the living Word of God within the human soul and relates this to the divine virtues of faith, hope and love, in which the encounter with God culminates. The mill metaphor also appears in love. Just as Christ often speaks of spiritual food in his teachings, the preacher is a cook or baker who prepares a meal from the Word of God.<sup>6</sup> [12]

Cusanus does not speak explicitly of the miller here at first, since he has the baker prepare the flour so that it is nourishing. Probably, Cusanus is thinking of a hand mill, with which a baker grinds the grain himself when there is less need, in order to be able to make good bread:<sup>7</sup> "And they grind the grain well, to get to the marrow [...]." Bread is [13]

5 Nicolai de Cusa *Sermo* XXXVII: h XVII, n. 14, p. 85, lin. 30–37: "Paraclitus autem, in festo Pentecostes 1444: De Johanne Baptista: 'Puer autem crescebat et confortabatur' [Lk 1:80] Spiritu Sancto etc. Item oportet ei lectum parare, quia non est similis molendinario, qui in tumultu dormit etc. Isaiae [65]: Super humilem et quietum requiescet. Et oportet, ut eius familiam etiam recipias, quia non est dominus rusticus etc."

6 See Nicolai de Cusa *Sermo* XLI: h XVII, n. 1, p. 140, lin. 12–15: "Confide, filia! 22. November 1444: Sic arbitror praedicatorum esse quasi pistorem seu coquum refectionis, qui recipit de latitudine Scripturarum verbum Dei et pistat et decoquit pro refectione."

7 Nicolai de Cusa *Sermo* XLI: h XVII, n. 2, p. 140, lin. 4 sq.: "Et hii molant bene granum, ut possint pervenire ad medullam, [...]."

served in different qualities according to social status and spiritual rank. Not all bakers have the same skills.<sup>8</sup>

Others do not make such good and rich bread from the same grain, for although they also grind the wheat, they lack the ability to reach the marrow. And yet they make white and sweet and good bread, but it is coarser than the previous one. Still others make coarse bread from the same wheat, because they do not grind the wheat well and do not separate it after it has been broken, but let the outer bran parts mix with the others. [...] But those are good preachers who can grind well the ‘grain of wheat’ (John 12:24), which is Christ, so that they can get down to the fat marrow and then make different breads for the different groups, [...].

[14]

The fine flour, which no longer contains a whole grain but penetrates to the kernel, is considered the nobler flour because of the greater effort involved in its production, metaphorically representing noble persons and more substantial spiritual food. The miller as well as the baker, sometimes in one person, must adapt to the customer’s need. This is expressed with the degree of grinding of the grain. Metaphorically this is transferred to the preacher who has to find the edible and digestible form for the Word of God in preaching.

[15]

Man is portrayed in his nature as a deficient being, to whom, however, God gave physical and spiritual abilities with which man can inventively help himself or each other. Thus, nature also gave man “teeth to grind”<sup>9</sup> in order to process food. Here, Cusanus echoes the metaphor of the mill, since he does not speak of chewing as usual, but of grinding.

[16]

Cusanus also metaphorically describes nature as a storehouse and aid:<sup>10</sup>

[17]

Then nature gave him this earth as a storehouse, quasi from which he can take out everything that serves for nourishment: Wine, bread, meat, plants and that which contributes to the good life: Metals, stones, woods, medicinal plants, etc. She gave water for the fish, for the mills, for quenching thirst, for

[18]

8 Nicolai de Cusa *Sermo XLI*: h XVII, n. 2, p. 141, lin. 10–n. 3, p. 141, lin. 8: “Alii ex eodem grano faciunt panem non ita bonum et ‘pinguem’ [Gen 49:20], licet frangant triticum, quoniam deficit eis ars perveniendi usque ad medullam. Et tamen faciunt album ‘panem’ atque ‘dulcem’ [Eccl 23:24] et bonum, grossiorem tamen priori. Adhuc alii faciunt ex eodem tritico grossum panem, quia non bene molant triticum, et quando est confractum, non separant, sed furfureas extrinsecas partes dimittunt involventes cum aliis. [...] Sed illi sunt boni praedicatores, qui ‘granum frumenti’ [Joh 12:24], quod Christus est, sciunt bene molere, ut perveniatur ad medullam pinguedinis; et sciunt postea facere panes varios pro variis statibus: [...]” (my translation).

9 Nicolai de Cusa *Sermo XLI*: h XVII, n. 29, p. 163, lin. 24–31: “Et quoniam non reperit conformitatem in loco uno—‘ex hiis enim nutrimur, ex quibus sumus’—, fecit ‘animal gressibile’, ut pro nutrimento quaerat conformia: Dedit sibi manus, ut extrahat de alio loco; dedit oculos, ut videat, si est; aures, ut audiat, ubi quaerat; dentes, ut molat; stomachum, ut coquat; hepar, ut convertat; et ita de aliis.”

10 Nicolai de Cusa *Sermo XLI*: h XVII, n. 30, p. 163, lin. 1—12: “Deinde terram hanc dedit natura, ut sit quasi promptuarium, ex quo eliciat omnia, quae sunt pro nutritione: vinum, panem, carnes, herbas, et ea, quae conferunt ad bene esse, ut metalla, lapides, ligna, medicinales herbas etc. Dedit aquam pro piscibus, pro molendinis, pro siti exstinguenda, pro motu etc. Dedit aerem pro respiratione, pro pluviis, pro vento et molendinis de vento; solem pro illuminatore et, qui calefaciat aerem et digerat fructus etc; lunam pro medullis adaugendis et motu aquae maris etc.” (my translation).



locomotion, etc. She gave the air for breathing, for rain, for the wind and windmills, the sun for lighting and heating the air and for the distribution of fruits, etc., the moon for the greater fertility of plants and for the movement of the waters of the sea, etc.

Since man nevertheless remains mortal, nature gives procreation. It is striking that almost only cosmic, inorganic and organic gifts of nature and its elements are mentioned. The mills alone are *pars pro toto* for the technology invented by man and the mechanical power for which water and wind provide the driving energy. This is probably due to the fact that in pre-modern times the mill was the machine par excellence. The final application of this thought, however, is found in theological anthropology, when all of man's ability, including his urge to procreate, leads to the consideration:<sup>11</sup> "When you consider how everything is in the service of the preservation of life, your mind begins to see how good God is, and it begins to admire."

Similarly, Cusanus formulates the same thoughts in a different theological context. On the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1446, he also preaches in Mainz and eventually expands this *Sermo* LXII into an Eucharistic treatise. Similar to *Sermo* XLI, Cusanus first introduces the task of the preacher, emphasises the ascetic prerequisites for deeper understanding and highlights the central importance of faith, hope and love. External things lead to spiritual realities. The sacramental act signifies faith, the reception of the Bread of Life signifies hope in eternal life, the bestowal of natural and supernatural gifts signifies love. The greatest miracle is the Eucharist. Among the natural gifts as a prerequisite for the spiritual gifts, the four elements are again highlighted:<sup>12</sup>

Look at the water: how great services it brings you in fishes, birds, in mills, ship's voyages, baths, refreshments, drink, etc. Likewise consider: What is the air? In respect of breathing, in respect of refreshing the mind, likewise in respect of the wind, which purifies, passes through the seas, drives the windmills, in respect of the watery clouds and the evening rain, etc.

More human achievements are now included here than in the enumeration of *Sermo* XLI. Nevertheless, the gifts of nature are presented, as it were, as services for the needs of man. This becomes particularly clear in the natural power mills. They stand for the exponentiated power of the forces of nature, which man can make serviceable to himself. If this is considered a miracle, the miracle of the Eucharist is incomparably greater. Thus the mills here stand for the potentised and humanly refined abundance of natural gifts as a comparison and model of the supernatural gifts of grace. From *Sermo* XLI it could be gathered that the ground flour is also a metaphor for supernatural gifts. Here the ascent

11 Nicolai de Cusa *Sermo* XLI: h XVII, n. 31, p. 164, lin. 1–4: "Quando ista consideras, quo modo omnia ad hoc, ut vita conservetur, ministerium praebeant, incipit spiritus tuus videre, 'quam bonus Dominus' [Ps 34(33):9], et admirari incipit."

12 Nicolai de Cusa *Sermo* LXII: h XVII, n. 19, p. 350, lin. 1–7: "Memoriam fecit, in die Sacramenti 1446: Respice ad aquam: quanta affert tibi servitia in piscibus, volucris, in molendinis, vectionibus, lotionibus, refrigeriis, potu etc.! Item quid aër quoad respirationem, quoad refectionem spiritus. Item quoad ventum, qui purgat, ducit per maria, molendina ventosa; quoad nubes aquosas et pluviam serotinam etc." (my translation).

to the highest gifts is carried out in more detail through the various natural stages. In variation, however, the basic idea remains the same: if nature and the work of man with the powers of nature are already wonderful, then all the more so are the sacraments.

*Sermo* CLXXIV of the First Sunday of Lent, February 23rd, 1455 in Brixen emphasises [23] with Mt 4:4 that man does not live by bread alone. For according to his intellect he is fed with the Word of God.<sup>13</sup> Cusanus then describes this process in detail in both the physical and the spiritual sense:<sup>14</sup>

Let us consider, then, the man who is fed with bread and the man who is fed [24] with words. He who is fed with bread takes the bread and grinds it between his teeth. He sends it, once ground, into his stomach; and [the stomach] makes it moist and causes it to gurgle and to be parted, so that what is fine is separated from what is gross. And after the first parting is finished, another one subsequently occurs. And this [subsequent parting] casts off what is gross from that which is finely-textured, in order that the latter can become more finely-textured. Then a third time [the stomach] parts and separates. Fourthly, the food is prepared so that it turns into the nature of the one who is fed. In a similar way there occur the separatings of the things that are supposed to nourish the intellect. For the first refining of things is done by the senses; for the [sensible] species retain, once the gross materiality is detached, the immaterial aspect of the objects. A further refinement is done by the communal sense, or imagination. A third refinement is done by the faculty of reason, where the intellect finds is refined nourishment, viz., the intelligible form, or intelligible species, which it turns into the intellectual nature. Therefore, the word, or logos, is form that nourishes. (Nicholas of Cusa 2008, 225)

Here the whole process of nourishment is paralleled bodily and mentally. It is significant [25] for our metaphor that Cusanus here, parallel to *Sermo* XLI, also replaces the verb “to chew” with “to grind” and thus again represents the teeth as the body’s own mill, which grinds the food like the mill grinds the grain and like the Spirit grinds the Word of God until it makes the nutritious contents available to the body or spirit to be nourished. The finer the teeth grind, the higher the quality of the food—metaphorical for the spiritual life of the human being, which can expect coarser or finer quality from the spiritual grinding

13 See Nicolai de Cusa *Sermo* CLXXIV: h XVIII, n. 1, p. 261, lin. 1–4: “Non in solo pane vivit homo, dominica Invocavit 1455: ‘Non in solo pane vivit homo, sed et in omni verbo quod procedit de ore Dei’ [Mt 4:4] Considera, quo modo homo secundum intellectum dicitur pasci verbo.”

14 Nicolai de Cusa *Sermo* CLXXIV: h XVIII, n. 2, p. 262, lin. 1–19: “Consideremus igitur hominem qui pane pascitur et hominem qui verbo pascitur. Qui pane pascitur recipit ipsum panem et molat inter dentes, proicit molatum in stomachum, et apponit humidum, et facit ebullire et digeri, ut separetur subtile a grosso. Et facta prima digestionem, fit postea alia, et illa ex subtili illo eicit grossum, ut ad subtilius pervenire posset. Deinde tertio digerit et separat. Quarto est paratum alimentum, ut convertatur in naturam aliti. Sic fiunt separationes rerum quae pascere debent intellectum. Nam prima rerum subtiliatio fit in sensibus; nam species, dimissa grossa corporalitate, spiritualitatem tenent obiectorum. Alia fit in sensu communi seu imaginatione. Tertia fit in ratione, ubi intellectus nutrimentum depuratum reperit, scilicet formam seu speciem intelligibilem, quae convertitur in naturam intellectualem. Verbum igitur seu logos est ratio pascens.”



process. The immanent metaphor of the teeth as a grinder prepares a transcendent, spiritual metaphor by gradually and progressively paralleling the thoroughness of chewing with the fineness of spiritual benefit.

Finally, the metaphor appears again in *Sermo CCLXXV* for the Sunday “Laetare,” the fourth Sunday of Lent 1457 in Brixen, where again the mill of human teeth is mentioned. Cusanus preaches on the names of this Sunday and speaks in the third part about the rational bread.<sup>15</sup> [26]

Hence, since the word of God is intellectual bread, we ought to take note of the condition of the bread. The bread is Sacred Scripture. And he who is to draw nourishment from the bread must chew it and must moisten its dryness with his own moisture in order in this way to [be able to] swallow it and be nourished. Scripture ought to be greatly broken into smaller sections and greatly ground up as if by teeth. And [this breaking-and-grinding] is called searching; for the Savior says ‘Search [the Scriptures] ...,’ etc. (Nicholas of Cusa 2008, 184–85) [27]

The English translation is inaccurate in the first place, because it speaks here of chewing—instead of grinding, as the Latin text phrases. The Word of God must be chewed, as the monk fathers already knew. But when Cusanus speaks here of grinding and moistening, he emphasises the thoroughness of the process, for the rational bread must not only be chewed more or less well, but must be properly ground. Just as the mill produces either coarser or finer flour, so the grinding process of the teeth of the Spirit can grind the Word of God coarser or finer and spiritually evaluate it accordingly at different levels. Moistening by salivation serves in the biological as well as in the spiritual life to prepare for digestion. For in the spiritual life, too, the food must be adapted to the capacity of the human being. This refers not only to the assimilation of the nourishing forces, but according to Cusanus explicitly also to the taste. He evidently takes into account that bread becomes sweet when it is thoroughly processed by chewing and grinding it with the teeth as with a fine mill. Cusanus evidently knew from everyday experience the sweeter flavour of finely ground flour and more thoroughly chewed bread and used this parallel again metaphorically for the mill-like effect of chewing. The sensually perceptible sweetness of the chewed bread symbolises the spiritual sweetness of the Word of God when it is thoroughly assimilated. [28]

Cusanus emphasises grinding one more time when he uses the grinding of the bread as a metaphor for thorough examination. The smaller the units examined, the more thorough the result in the process of cognition—similar to the belief that the finer the flour is ground, the more nutritious it is. As is well known, this is true for thorough chewing, namely that the human being thereby unlocks the nutrients of the grain, but [29]

15 Nicolai de Cusa *Sermo CCLXXV*: h XIX, n. 27, p. 541, lin.–n. 28, p. 541, lin. 7: “Non sumus ancillae filii, dominica Laetare 1457: Unde cum verbum Dei sit panis intellectualis, attendere debemus ad condicionem panis. Scriptura sacra est panis, et qui de pane debet nutrimentum elicere, oportet ut comminuat, molet et humectet humido suo panis siccitatem, ut sic transglutiat et nutriatur. Scriptura multum debet frangi et quasi dentibus molari, et vocatur scrutatio; ait enim salvator: ‘Scrutamini’ [John 5:39] et cetera.”

not for the grain processed into fine flour in the mill, which no longer contains a whole grain. In metaphorical use, however, it is true that the Word of God, finely ground by the spiritual milling process, opens up its living nourishment. The “seeking” demanded by Christ becomes the investigation that opens up Christ as living bread.

## Conclusion

It can be seen that Cusanus uses the metaphors of the mill, the miller and grinding rarely, [30]  
but purposefully.

It is striking that Cusanus does not know or at least does not use the metaphor of the [31]  
“mystical mill.” Perhaps he did not want to emphasise the Eucharistic dimension in the sermons, in which he uses the metaphor of chewing and eating, as the metaphor of the “mystical mill” does, but rather to limit himself to the internalising appropriation of the Word of God. The motif has been familiar at least since Suger of St. Denis in the early twelfth century and the basilica of Vézelay in Burgundy, built at the same time, with its famous capital of the mill operated by Moses and Paul: Moses fills grain into the hopper of a hand mill, whose cross-shaped crank Paul operates to grind the grain into fine flour. It is a metaphor for the Old and New Testaments, for law and grace. Through Christ, symbolised by the cross, the kernel of grain of the Mosaic Law is exposed and transformed into the Eucharist in the New Covenant.<sup>16</sup>

In the fourth century, the Church Father Ambrose had already interpreted the motif [32]  
of the mill spiritually in his work “On Conversion”: For him, the mill stands for a new, gentle interpretation of Scripture that breaks open the hard letter and peels out the grain. Through the interpretation of love, the deep meaning of the mystery of grace emerges from the shell of the biblical letter (1971).<sup>17</sup>

The motif of the breaking open of the grain by the mill is also known to Cusanus, [33]  
but unlike Ambrose, he applies it to the deepening of the spiritual life according to the measure of the thoroughness of the grinding of the Word of God.

The twelfth-century church scholar Hildegard of Bingen also uses a multi-layered mill [34]  
metaphor a few years after Suger of St. Denis and the Vézelay capital. These examples show that Cusanus is here in a tradition of metaphor use, even if he may not have known it.

It can be assumed that Cusanus knew all these types of mills from his own experience. [35]  
Mills powered by animal or human muscle power existed on many farms. Water mills were already used by the Romans in antiquity and are also attested early in the Roman-

16 See Voderholzer (1999); see also Da Silva (2012) and Herzberg (1994) (both with literature).

17 Ambrosius, *De paenitentia* Book I, cap. XV (82), lin. 41–49: “Hoc ergo fermentum, hoc est doctrinam Pharisaeorum et disputationem Sadducaeorum abscondit Ecclesia in farina sua, cum litteram legis duriorem spiritali interpretatione mollivit et velut mola quadam suae disputationis infregit, proferens velut de folliculis litterarum mysteriorum interna secreta et resurrectionis fidem adstruens, qua Dei misericordia praedicatur, qua reparari uita creditur mortuorum.”

settled areas north of the Alps. The first windmill in Germany is documented for the year 1222 as a “molendinum ad ventum” in Cologne-South, Kolumba, on the castle wall.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, Cusanus does not seem to be making an expert judgment, but based on his everyday experience when, for example, he considers ground white flour to be more nutritious than coarse ground flour. The fact that it was considered more precious and noble was solely due to the higher degree of processing, which in natural power mills required several grinding processes that caused more work and thus higher costs. Therefore, Cusanus does not attribute the finer flour only to more distinguished persons who could pay for it, but uses this difference metaphorically for more differentiated spirituality of those for whom the fine flour is produced. This includes, for example, the baker’s parable from *Sermo XLI* with the preceding, detailed description of the grinding of the grain into various degrees of fineness. [36]

Three sermons interpret the human dentition as a mill. In them, the molars—also known in dentistry as grinders—are interpreted as models for the grinding of spiritual food. [37]

Finally, mill comparisons and examples with mills as applications of the workings of natural forces or the four natural elements are found in enumerations, most of whose examples come from nature itself. The technology devised by man in the collective term of mill, on the other hand, refers to the natural force tamed or at least used by him. This is done by distinguishing between water and wind mills in order to appreciate the elements of water and air separately and then to assign them to a spiritual metaphor. [38]

The fact that Cusanus uses the metaphors of mill, miller and grinding in his *Sermones* to describe spiritual and mental content in a manual and technical way shows once again his practical and nature-related interest as well as his ability to draw spiritual benefits from these processes—even if natural or technical processes on the one hand and metaphorical transmission on the other do not always mesh as precisely as the gears of a mill.<sup>19</sup> [39]

## References

- Ambrosius. 1971. *De paenitentia. La pénitence*. Translated by Roger Gryson. Sources chrétiennes 179. Paris: Cerf.
- Coutant, Yves. (2004) 2022. *Dictionary of Molinology English - German - French – Dutch*. Compiled by the Dictionary Working Group of TIMS. Second revised and illustrated edition. <https://www.molinology.org/pdf-files/TIMS%20Dictionary%20of%20Molinology%20-%202nd%20Illustrated%20Edition.pdf>.
- Da Silva, Gilberto. 2012. “Von wirtschaftlichen zu theologischen Mühlen – Theologie in Bildern.” In *Theologische Erkundungen in Oberursel – Festschrift für Hella Adam*, edited by Achim Behrens and Christoph Barnbrock, 31–48. Oberurseler Hefte 52.

18 See “9.6 Urkundliche Erwähnungen (diplomata)—Windmühlen, 9.6.4 Deutschland—Ostdeutschland—Osteuropa,” in Ney (2019).

19 Terminology about mills: Coutant ([2004] 2022).

- Oberursel: Lutherische Theologische Hochschule. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15496/publikation-36984>.
- Guilelmus de Lanicia (Ps.-Bonaventura). 1866. "De diaeta salutis." In *Opera omnia sancti Bonaventurae*, edited by A. C. Peltier. Vol. VIII. Paris: Vivès.
- Herzberg, Heinrich. 1994. *Die Mühle zwischen Religion und Aberglauben*. Berlin/München: Verlag für Bauwesen.
- Ney, Andreas. 2019. *Wasser- und Windmühlen in Europa in der Spätantike und dem Mittelalter nach archäologischen, bildlichen und schriftlichen Quellen*. Detmold: Verlag Moritz Schäfer.
- Nicholas of Cusa. 2003. *Early Sermons: 1430–1441*. Translated by Jasper Hopkins. Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press.
- . 2008. *Didactic Sermons: A Selection*. Translated by Jasper Hopkins. Loveland, CO: The Arthur J. Banning Press.
- Ranff, Viki. 2024. "Mühle, Müller und Mahlen als theologische Vergleiche und Metaphern in cusanischen Sermones." *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 133: 241–52.
- Savapakarn, Phoenix. 2025. "'Metabolism' as Metaphor of Appropriation in Nicholas of Cusa's Sermones." *Metaphor Papers* 17. <https://doi.org/10.46586/mp.389.463>.
- Voderholzer, Rudolf. 1999. "Geleitwort des Übersetzers." In *Typologie, Allegorie, geistiger Sinn. Studien zur Geschichte der christlichen Schriftauslegung*, by Henri de Lubac, translated by Rudolf Vorderholzer, VII–IX. Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag.