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Judgment, Narrative & Redemption in the Tympanum at Conques-en-Rouergue

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The Assignment: Within the parameters of the course, students were asked to write an 8-10 page research paper on a topic of their own choosing.

"I am the door: by me if any man enter, he shall be saved" (John 10:9)

One cannot begin to study anything Romanesque without encountering a few sentences in Raoul Glaber's famous comment on the dramatic rise of the church in this period. Allow me to refresh the reader's memory: "[After the] year of the millennium…there occurred, throughout the world… a rebuilding of church basilicas… It was as if the whole earth, having cast off the old by shaking itself were clothing itself everywhere in the white robe of the church" (Gardner 342). Monastic power and influence was rising; the celebration of Mass was becoming "increasingly extravagant… [requiring] special rooms and spaces in order to create and maintain a proper feeling of reverence" (Toman 9). This, along with the vast numbers of pilgrims on the roads of Europe, led to new developments in architecture and sculpture, and particularly the sculpture of the church's façade. The influence of pilgrimage on exterior church sculpture cannot be underestimated; Rolf Toman writes in the introduction to his anthology, Romanesque, "in order to appeal to these pilgrims, Romanesque art developed its characteristic iconographic programs" (9). Romanesque sculpture also moved into an architectural area previously unexplored: the tympanum. Perhaps nowhere else is the aforementioned iconographic program expressed more completely than in tympanum sculpture; "many of them," writes Toman, "include scenes from the Last Judgment – with God the Father in His role as stern judge of the world and frightful representations of hell" (9).

The tympanum of the west portal of the abbey church of Ste-Foy in Conques-en-Rouergue is the one that, I think, illustrates this iconographic program most completely. However, to talk about Romanesque depictions of the Last Judgment solely in terms of, well, judgment is to only tell half the story. While the graphic depictions of hell in Romanesque Last Judgment portrayals certainly steal the show, there is much more to the message of these sculptures than just the threat of damnation. Within this sculptural program, a wealth of religious symbols can be found whose meanings were well known to the contemporary viewer. I believe this image of the Last Judgment at Conques can be interpreted as a narrative, readable by literate and illiterate, aristocrat and peasant alike, and that it incorporates elements into the narrative that expand the role of Christ to include both Judge and Redeemer.

There are many tympanum sculptures that depict the theme of the Last Judgment, and they share many compositional elements. Minne-Seve and Kergall examine, among other themes, some of the general conventions of Romanesque religious symbolism in Romanesque and Gothic France. This is a symbolism that intertwines everyday life inextricably with religious fundamentalism; "for those who lived in France in the first centuries of the millennium, day-to-day life came down to a duel between Good and Evil" (Minne-Seve and Kergall 85). The battle

between God and Devil or, on a more everyday and, perhaps, more personal level, Virtue and Vice "becomes a … fight within the soul" (85) that is expressed in almost all sculptural art of the period; it is expressed most graphically in tympanum sculptures of the Last Judgment. Within these images, Virtue is weighed against Vice, both literally, in representations of the weighing of souls, and symbolically. The faithful Virtuous are rewarded, the Evil damned, and in this way the "Romanesque church…propose[s] a totalitarian symbolism to the faithful that 'shows' the path of truth" (Minne-Seve and Kergall 85).

The central image is, of course, the most important, and I think that speaks for itself. In all early medieval church portal sculpture, and really, in most medieval art of any kind, Jesus Christ is always the obvious focal point. At Conques, He is surrounded by heavenly symbols that place Him in an unearthly setting; clouds, stars, and Sun and Moon surround His mandorla. This sets the stage for the Second Coming: surrounded by heavenly attributes, Christ is descending from Heaven to earth to judge the dead, who can be seen in the spandrel below His right foot, coming out of their graves to be judged as angels. His right hand is raised towards heaven, while His left motions downward towards the damned in Hell.

It is interesting to note that Minne-Seve and Kergall do not see this as a depiction of Christ as Judge, which is the role He plays most often in the Romanesque period. The most graphic expression of this widespread interpretation of Christ can be seen in the sculptural program of the west portal of the church of St-Lazare at Autun. Here, Christ looks, almost glares, imposingly down upon the viewer from the center; to His right is the glory of Heaven, and to His left is a vision of Hell so frightful that it has the power to horrify even today's viewers. This portal sports quite possibly the evilest demons in Romanesque sculpture, with contorted bodies, long, spindly legs and frightful grimaces, which serve to emphasize the finality and authority of Christ the Judge. At Conques, however, Minne-Seve and Kergall write that "in spite of the finality of the gesture of the right hand raised towards Heaven for the elect and the left lowered in the direction of infernal chaos, the Conques Christ in Majesty is not threatening. The immense cross raised behind Him signifies that He is above all the Redeemer…emphasized by the angels [in the uppermost register of the tympanum] bearing the instruments of His Passion" (138).

This interpretation seems to be up for debate. Uwe Geese notes in his "Romanesque sculpture" that *arma Christi* are "rather unusual in depictions of the Last Judgment, and should be interpreted as symbols of that triumph" (329), to emphasize Christ's power. He also writes that the Judge role is "confirmed by the angel above the right row of apostles who is arriving carrying the judge's crown" (329). Geese is not alone in this assessment; most seem to interpret the Conques Christ in Majesty as the strict, almighty Universal Judge rather than the Redeemer role that He would come to play in just a few decades.

The grotesque depiction of Hell at Conques certainly seems to emphasize Christ's role as Judge. Who but the sternest judge would condemn the hapless to a sentence such as this? Demons gnaw at the heads and feet of the damned; people are mangled, maimed, taunted and flogged by jeering demons. A knight and his horse are tumbling headfirst through the Maw of Hell at the door while a man of the church, standing to the Devil's right, awaits his cruel prescription. The personified Vices are also found in Hell; to the priest's right stands Lust, naked to the waist, and a Vain knight and a hanging Miser (also interpreted as Judas) are in the Devil's immediate vicinity. While the message of these frightful phantasms does not seem to require much explanation, given its context, the meaning of the monstrous in Romanesque sculpture is examined in Thomas Dale's "Monsters, corporeal deformities and phantasms in the cloister of St-Michel-de-Cuxa." He traces the origins of medieval images of the monstrous to a monastic

setting, where they were intended as a departure point for devotion and reflection. Granted, tympanum sculpture is public and therefore markedly different from cloister sculpture, which makes the application of his writing to this situation limited. But he makes an important liturgical connection between image and mass; he ties this imagery to the 'judgment and punishment of the damned in the offertory of the Requiem Mass… 'save the souls of all the faithful deceased from the infernal punishments and the deep pit, save them from the mouth of the lion' (Dale 413). The "mouth of the lion" refers, he writes, to the monstrous Maw of Hell so widely depicted in early medieval Last Judgments. Here it is shown as the actual doorway into hell; demons are shoving several people into it, including a knight along with his horse. "The sinner's body is assimilated to that of the monstrous behemoth." (Dale 413). Most of his article deals with the concept that images of monstrous and deformed bodies were seen by monks in a context that tied corporeal deformity and monstrousness to a corresponding "deformity", so to speak, of the mind; whether or not the broader audience of the Conques tympanum went so far is unclear. What is clear was that that audience was familiar with the symbolism of Hell; it was not just a picture of random ghastliness.

It is interesting that looking at one of these images, especially one like Conques, which depicts the tortures and denizens of hell in frighteningly graphic detail, one, gets a really good idea of what was going to happen to the *bad* folks. In contrast, the Kingdom of Heaven on Jesus' right side, while offering comforting relief from the torturous chaos of hell, doesn't seem to sport much action. One might even say that although Hell is frightening, it's much more exciting, even fun to look at, and the cavorting demons have an almost entertaining quality. Heaven, on the other hand, is ordered and serene, one might almost say boring, and, aside from standing around looking grateful, nobody appears to be up to much. It seems at first glance that the message of these images is to scare the viewer straight, rather than to show him the rewards of willingly walking the righteous path. A closer look at the iconography provided at http://www.conques.com reveals much more going on, albeit symbolically rather than graphically. It is important to recognize who these people are and what they represent. Directly to the right of Christ are the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Peter with his keys, and a procession of the obligatory contemporary noblemen, along with several important saints. Below the procession in the lower register is an arcade under which figures are standing and seated. The oil-lamps hanging from the ceiling of the arcade resemble the oil-lamps that were actually hanging inside the church at Conques at the time (http://ww.conques.com/indes1.htm#SOMMAIRE), which elevates the church itself into a heavenly context.

The figures in this lower register represent a marriage of Old Testament to New Testament. The Old Testament prophets are there with scrolls while the New Testament apostles carry a book; martyrs bearing palms appear alongside the holy women and good virgins (http://www.conques.com/index1.htm#SOMMAIRE). The most important figure is the figure at the center. While the Devil in Hell sits at the center of the lower left register, the man in the center of the arcade in the lower right register is Abraham, gathering two Blessed souls to his bosom. In his article "Medieval Abraham: between fleshly patriarch and divine father," Jerome Baschet examines the way that Abraham stood in medieval art for heaven and heavenly reward. He is most commonly understood as representing God the Father; the sacrifice of Isaac is used often in Christian art to symbolize God giving His only son Jesus Christ, as a sacrifice to the world. There is however, a more complex meaning behind the presence of Abraham at the Last Judgment.

This image would also have been well know to all through its liturgical ties; Baschet

writes that "the concept [of Abraham as a symbol of heavenly reward] is given great importance in the liturgy for the dead, in which prayers are said for the soul of the deceased to be received in the Bosom of Abraham" (739). He is the literal ancestor of Jesus Christ and the spiritual father of the Christian church, and is "often mentioned in a context concerning the fate of souls before the Last Judgment" (Baschet 739). Abraham, then, is not just an Old Testament character who appears here just to round out the Biblical pageant. He is the symbol of a real, tangible reward; "when the Bosom of Abraham is integrated into the Last Judgment, the uniformity of the elect at his breast contrasts strikingly with the marked different social groups amongst the elect when they are shown [in other depictions]. The organization of earthly society…disappears completely on entering the Kingdom of Heaven" (Baschet 741). Baschet goes on to quote Matthew 18:3: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." In fact, the elect gathered to Abraham's breast in the Conques tympanum look rather child-like compared to the other figures in their register, and perhaps have literally "become as little children." In this context, the presence of Abraham can be interpreted to symbolize "a real metamorphosis [that] takes place on entering the Gates of Heaven…the swing from an…earthly social order to a…more ideal order" (Baschet 741).

Geese writes that "life in the middle ages was always lived in a state of direct confrontation with death" (328). This confrontation certainly seems to be strongly addressed in the tympanum at Conques. In order to really grasp its meaning, though, one has to ask, who were these images intended for? Whose fears were played upon?

The answer is: pilgrims. The practice of pilgrimage to the shrines of Western Europe was in full swing for several hundred years by the beginning of the Romanesque period and reached its apogee in the twelfth century (Minne-Seve & Kergall 132). In fact, the Codex Calixtimus, produced around 1140, contained in its text what came to be called the Pilgrim's Guide (Webb 24). The book maps out many of the pilgrimages routes of the time, describes to pilgrims some of the shrines they should visit, and most importantly, "suggests that a host of shrines…many of them the foci of regional pilgrimages of some consequence, such as Conques…were being increasingly linked into an interconnected network" (Webb 126).

The cult of relics that surrounded many medieval churches drew quite a throng. By the twelfth century, churches like Ste-Foy, that had had their beginnings as small, secluded country monasteries, had spawned a veritable medieval urban sprawl. Markets sprang up around churches, and the monasteries' ownership and management of vast tracts of land led to a booming urban real estate market and the rise of a small urban community in the vicinity of Conques (Webb 33-34).

Webb gives us a sense of the universality of medieval pilgrimage: "no class of medieval society was entirely excluded from the practice of pilgrimage" (78). Everybody went, from people of means whose "wealth and high status facilitated the making of long journeys" (Webb 78) to "people who spent much of their lives in what was effectively a condition of vagrancy lightly colored as pilgrimage" (78). Minne-Seve and Kergall describe Conques as "the jewel of the journey" on the route from Limousin to Santiago de Compostela (134), partly due to the spectacular gold reliquary statue of Ste-Foy that it housed. All this shows us that the portal at Conques was created with a wide audience in mind. In short, this image and images like it were not only meant to be seen, but, especially in light of their placement over what was usually the only lay entrance into the church, they were meant to be seen by *all*. One can almost picture the pilgrimage routes as the interstates of a different era, and see "generations of the faithful experience[ing]… the visual shock of the impressive Last Judgment looming over them,

sparkling with fresh and lively colors" (Minne-Seve and Kergall 138).

There is one other function of the medieval church portal, and therefore the sculptural program of the portal, that I would like to note. In her article "Medieval church portals and their importance in the history of law," Barbara Deimling discusses some of the contemporary uses of the church door as a site for formal and informal legal proceedings. "The frequency with which…[the Last Judgment]…appear[s] has to be seen in the context of the most important events regularly to take place in front of the church portal: secular and ecclesiastical trials" (Deimling 324). The portal was at the same time a place to sign contracts, swear oaths, seek asylum, and formalize trade agreements. (Deimling 326). The practice spanned centuries, and the fact that numerous decrees had to be issued over the years forbidding or regulating it illustrates just how widespread a practice it was. (Deimling 324).

The portal was also incorporated into official judicial sentencing. Raymond VI, a duke doing penance for the murder of the papal legate, was sentenced to make a pilgrimage to the portal of the abbey church in Saint-Gilles-du-Gard; interestingly, he was required to make his penitential pilgrimage stark naked (Deimling 324). Walks such as this were "public rite[s] of repentance [which] took place by the church portal as… [they were] judicial act[s] that comprised the punishment and reconciliation of the sinner. According to the rules of the rite of repentance, sinners upon whom this punishment had been laid were driven out of the church on Ash Wednesday…[and] the public act of repentance culminated in a rite of reconciliation on Maundy Thursday…[when] the sinners had to come to the church portal, where the priest would take them by the right hand and lead them back into the church" (Deimling 326). This practice is depicted in the center of the lowest register of the tympanum at Conques, where the angel at the gate of Heaven is seen taking one of the Blessed by the right hand to lead him through the door of Paradise. "The medieval church portal should be interpreted… [as] the place of judgment, the gateway to Paradise which is open to the just" (Deimling 326).

This use of church doors for legal purposes would certainly seem to support the view of Romanesque Christ as Judge. If life in the early middle ages was, as Geese writes, lived in "a state of direct confrontation with death" (328), then everyday life would have been lived in direct confrontation with threats of all stripes, and "the threat which continued to make itself felt, and was sensed with even greater presence in the early Middle Ages, was the Old Testament threat of the God of Vengeance. This God was now enthroned as the new Testament Judge of the World over church portals, within the new tympanum" (Geese 328). Man's fear of death was a fact of life, to be sure, but it "was above all a deep-rooted religious fear" (Geese 328), an eschatological reality. At the beginning of the Romanesque period, it was the saints and their relics that were viewed as the intermediary between the poor sinners on earth and the Kingdom of God, but by the twelfth century, the idea of purgatory as an intermediary between heaven and hell was beginning to take shape. This could be one reason why, just a hundred years later, Christ was depicted in a much less threatening manner in Gothic tympanums that show many of the same compositional elements as those of the Romanesque period. The Judge role was undoubtedly the one played most often in Romanesque art, and despite its detractors, this view seems to be the best-supported, but there is no reason why this particular depiction at Conques cannot be viewed as showing transitional elements, or elements that suggest both a stern judge and a merciful redeemer.

The attributes of the Passion are symbols often connected with the idea of redemption through Christ, because they emphasize His suffering for mankind. The image of the dead being raised from their graves by angels also echoes the Resurrection of Christ, which is another

symbol associated more often with redemption than judgment.

When we think of who this image was intended for, we think of a group of people that, towards the close of the twelfth century, were becoming somewhat more plebeian in nature, a "pilgrim population…[that] undoubtedly overlapped with a half-world or vagabonds and displaced persons" (Webb 112). We are reminded that this was an age where very few people were literate and therefore, very few people could read the scriptures for themselves. Tympanums such as the one at Conques can be seen to represent not a frozen image, but a narrative image readable by literate and illiterate alike, noble and vagabond, clergy or layman. The origins of images such as these in monasteries, where they may have been intended, as Dale postulates, as departure points for contemplation, would certainly point in that direction. It is easy to imagine what would have been going through Raymond IV's mind as he stood, naked, before the image of Christ in Majesty at the Last Judgment, in penitence for his crime. It is also easy to imagine why the church portal became the most popular spot for signing contracts and swearing oaths. Who would want to break their word when it had been witnessed both by Christ and by the horrible denizens of Hell?

If there is one question in the Bible that is returned to again and again, and one message that carries the most weight, it is the question of the destination of the eternal soul. If the bulk of Christian art from this period could be seen as an educational picture-book of Christian doctrine, then the Last Judgment could almost be viewed as a sort of ultra-abridged version of the entire bible. Medieval faith was not based on the notion of fate or predestination; rather, the believer's own virtue was in his own hands. The summation of his deed would ultimately be judged by God, through His son Jesus Christ; "I am the door: by me if any man enter, he shall be saved" (John 10:9). Christ is the redemptive bond between Heaven and earth; to enter the church itself one must pass through His door, and to gain admittance to the Kingdom of Heaven, all a man has to do is ask.

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