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Evaluation of the central narthex portal at Sainte-Madeleine de Vèzelay

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**EVALUATION OF THE CENTRAL NARTHEX PORTAL
AT SAINTE-MADELEINE DE VÉZELAY**

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts**

in

The School of Art

**by
Christine Ann Zeringue
B.S., Louisiana State University, 2000
May 2005**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines possible interpretations for the central portal sculpture found in the narthex of the church of Sainte-Madeleine de Vézelay in France. I will discuss and support alternative interpretations of the biblical, monastic, and artistic origins of this unusual and puzzling sculpture. Studies on the narthex sculpture debate the program's subject matter, suggesting that it may refer to the Pentecost, the Mission of the Apostles, the Ascension, or excerpts of biblical text, specifically, Ephesians 2: 11-22. The thesis will also discuss the sculpture's meaning to the lay and monastic communities living in Vézelay. It will be proposed that the sculpture was intended to show support for reforms occurring in the monastic community at Vézelay during the time of the program's creation.

The thesis will begin with an introduction and will follow with a chapter on the history of Vézelay from the creation of a small community for Benedictine nuns in the ninth century to the events of the nineteenth century that influenced the sculpture seen in the church today. Much of the sculpture has been damaged or altered since its creation in the twelfth century. The third chapter will describe in detail the sculpture found within the narthex of the church in preparation for my discussion in chapter four on the alternative interpretations for the program proposed by Émile Mâle, Abel Fabre, Adolf Katzenellenbogen, Michael Taylor, and Peter Low. Each theory provides a viable explanation for the central narthex tympanum's unusual design; however, as the individual elements surrounding the portal are analyzed, I will discuss the possibility that one overall interpretation for the program, despite thorough research by those who have studied the sculptures, may never be determined.

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

The numerous pilgrims who traveled to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain and the rise in monasticism throughout Europe were two powerful influences on twelfth-century art and were directly responsible for the construction boom that occurred during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a time known as the Romanesque period.¹ Churches began to increase in scale and complexity and showed an extraordinary diversity in styles, as demonstrated in Sainte-Madeleine de Vézelay. Pilgrimage churches were constructed to house the relics of saints, many of which were brought back from the Holy Land by Crusaders. Thriving towns sprang up around the churches, and the taxation of local merchants combined with the offerings of pilgrims helped to pay for the construction costs of pilgrimage churches.

In churches constructed during the Romanesque period, the tympanum, a semi-circular area above the doorway or entrance to a sacred space, became a site for monumental sculpture. Images were used as a means of conveying the church's messages to the largely illiterate congregation of pilgrims. During the Romanesque period elaborate portals were created at Sainte-Madeleine de Vézelay, the nearby monastery church of Saint-Lazare in Autun, and at the churches in Soulliac, Moissac, and Beaulieu. Many of these Romanesque portals, such as the one at Autun built between 1130 and 1135, displayed scenes of the Last Judgment.

¹ Romanesque is a term meaning "in the Roman manner." The widespread use of round arches in construction and the revival of the basilica structure in church architecture led to this term being applied to the period between 1050 and 1200 A.D.

The well-traveled yet perilous pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, the church where, according to legend, the remains of the apostle Saint James are housed, was the second most popular destination of pilgrims, next to Rome. During the Romanesque period, pilgrimage travel was arduous. The weather, rough countryside, and the possibility of being robbed were all dangers travelers following one of the four main routes to Santiago de Compostela faced on their path through France and northern Spain. The pilgrims traveled long distances in the hopes of receiving healing miracles or indulgences, time off from purgatory, for their journey.

The Romanesque church of Sainte-Madeleine de Vézelay, the beginning of one of the four main pilgrimage routes to Santiago, is located in the countryside of the region of Burgundy. The abbey church, which claims to contain in its crypt the relics of Saint Mary Magdalene, sits atop a hill surrounded by a small town and miles of farmland. The enclosed narthex of the church, a gathering space between the western exterior of the church and the nave or main body of the structure, contains three arched doorways with decorated tympana that lead visitors into the nave.

The central portal's sculpture, completed in 1132, is the main focus of this study (Fig. 1). Over the course of the twentieth century, several scholars have endeavored to discover a single, prevailing meaning for the elaborate sculpture surrounding the central portal. A review of the sculpture in the context of twelfth-century pilgrimage and the monastic life that influenced their creation will be conducted in this thesis.



While a common representation of the Last Judgment appears on the western exterior façade of the abbey church, the narthex sculpture in Sainte-Madeleine has a unique subject matter. As previously mentioned, tympana on Romanesque pilgrimage churches commonly contained representations of the Last Judgment, showing Christ enthroned and surrounded by saved and damned souls. In contrast, the meaning of the narthex's central portal sculpture at Vézelay is still a matter of debate. The sculpture seen today has been mutilated since the twelfth century. Although most of the damage occurred to the easily accessible trumeau and jambs, many principle figures placed higher on the tympanum were also vandalized, making their precise identification difficult. The central focus of the tympanum is described by most art historians as a representation of Pentecost: a large Christ figure sits enthroned, with lines of fire extending from his fingertips to the heads of his twelve surrounding apostles.² It is the inclusion of the Christ figure that has led to the variety of debates surrounding the portal's meaning. In most representations of Pentecost, rays extend outward from a dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit rather than Christ.

The unique nature of the iconography of the central portal tympanum has puzzled art historians. It is impossible to know the exact reasons behind the selection of sculpture found in the narthex of the church or their meaning for the monastic and lay communities in the twelfth century, for documents detailing the portal's construction no longer exist. However, there are several essential areas that this thesis will explore to discover the role of the

²Abel Fabre, "L'iconographie de la Pentecôte: le portail de Vézelay, les fresques de Saint-Gilles de Montoire et la miniature du 'Lectionnaire de Cluny,'" *Gazette des beaux-arts* 2 (1923): 33-42; Adolf Katzenellenbogen, "The Central Tympanum at Vézelay," *Art Bulletin* 26, 3 (1944): 141-151; Émile Mâle, *Religious Art in France, the Twelfth Century: A Study of the Origins of Medieval Iconography*, trans. Marthiel Mathews and ed. Harry Bober, (Princeton, 1978); Veronique Roughen Mouilleron, *Vézelay: The Great Romanesque Church* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999); Michael Taylor, "The Pentecost at Vézelay," *Gesta* 19 (1980): 9-15.

sculpture in twelfth-century life at Vézelay. The social, economic, political and monastic factors will be outlined briefly in the following chapter on the history of Sainte-Madeleine. Chapter three will follow with a detailed description of each sculptural element found on the central narthex portal and the two small side portals of the narthex. Possible Byzantine and medieval influences for the sculpture and alternative interpretations for the program proposed by art historians Émile Mâle, Abel Fabre, Adolf Katzenellenbogen, Michael Taylor, and Peter Low will be considered in chapter four. Chapter four will also conclude the discussion of the sculpture by taking a closer look at the function of the narthex as related to twelfth-century lay pilgrimage at Sainte-Madeleine de Vézelay, and the monastic reforms that shaped the cenobitic community of that time.

CHAPTER II HISTORY OF VÉZELAY

The abbey church of Sainte-Madeleine de Vézelay has a varied history dating back to 858 or 859 A.D., when Count Girart de Roussillon and his wife, Bertha, originally established a Benedictine nunnery.³ The abbey was originally located approximately 222 kilometers southeast of Paris in the French region of Burgundy.⁴ Set in the Burgundian valley of present-day Saint-Père-sous-Vézelay, a community for women was created out of love and honor for God, Christ, and the Virgin Mary.⁵ Girart de Roussillon placed the settlement under the protection of Saints Peter and Paul and the sole authority of the pope, thus allowing the community to be independent from local lay and episcopal control; this right was formally granted in 863 by Pope Nicolas I.⁶ As this chapter will reveal, the religious settlement experienced several periods of growth and prosperity, profiting from its prominent site on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. However, the abbey church at Vézelay also spent an extended period of time in decay and obscurity.

The small convent, located near the banks of the Cure River, was attacked by Normans who ransacked the settlement around the year 873.⁷ Due to the treacherous nature of the area, the community of women was replaced with a group of Benedictine monks from Autun. The brothers chose to build their monastery, constructed between the years 881 and

³ The date for the founding of the settlement is recorded as 858 or 859 A.D. in J. F. Scott, "The Narthex Portal at Vézelay: Art and Monastic Self-Image" (University of Texas, Austin: Ph.D. Diss., 1986), 5, and Peter Low, "Envisioning Faith and Structuring Lay Experience: The Narthex Portal Sculptures of Sainte-Madeleine de Vézelay" (Johns Hopkins University: Ph.D. Diss., 2000), 2. Most sources simply list the date as 858 A.D.

⁴ J. Scott and J. O. Ward, *The Vézelay Chronicle* (Binghamton, 1992), 1.

⁵ For documents relating to the founding of the convent, translated into English, see Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 27.

⁶ Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 27, 97-106; Mouilleron, *Vézelay*, 2; J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 5, 105-106. All sources list the abbey as becoming a dependency of the Holy See in 863 A.D., under the direct control of the pope alone and with the ability to elect its own abbot or abbess.

⁷ J. S. Feldman, "Narthex," 5. See also Francis Salet, *Le Madeleine de Vézelay* (Melun, 1948), 175 and Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 4; Low, "Envisioning," 3, lists the date as the 870s or 880s.

889, on top of a nearby hill where it could be easily fortified; this is the site where the church of Sainte-Madeleine stands today.⁸ It was on this elevated location that Pope John VIII dedicated the first church of the monastery in 878, only to have it be damaged by fire in 907 and fall into decline until repairs began in 926.⁹

The operations of the monastery were established according to the Rule of St. Benedict (c.480-547). A regulated daily pattern of work and prayer was followed by each monk in the community, which itself was meant to be completely self-sufficient and self-contained both economically and constitutionally.¹⁰ St. Benedict believed that the chief work of the monks was *opus Dei*, the work of God: a series of formal, communal worship services that punctuated the monastic day and night with periods of prayer.¹¹ The monk's time was divided into prayer, spiritual reading, and manual labor.¹² His ultimate goal was to gain union with God through religious contemplation.

The monastery gained popularity in the eleventh century, owing its success to the cult of Mary Magdalene, whose relics were originally believed to have appeared miraculously in a statue of the Virgin Mary housed within the church.¹³ The devotion to the relics of saints became customary in the fourth century, and the "discovery" of martyrs' bodies occurred throughout the Middle Ages, causing the pilgrimage trade to grow. The history of the discovery of the relics of Mary Magdalene was altered in the twelfth century

⁸ Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 107. Low, "Envisioning," 4 references MS. lat. 12602, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, edited and reproduced in A. Pissier, *Le culte de sainte Marie-Madeleine à Vézelay* (Saint-Père-sous-Vézelay, 1923), 201-207, as his source.

⁹ Low, "Envisioning," 4.

¹⁰ A.C. Meisel and M.L. del Mastro, trans., *The Rule of St. Benedict* (New York: Image Books, 1975), 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹² Noreen Hunt, *Cluny Under Saint Hugh: 1049-1109* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 31.

¹³ Accounts regarding the discovery of the relics are discussed by E. L. Cox in his essay "Cluny, Vézelay, and the Magdalene: Cult in the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries," found on pp. 341-347 in Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*. See also discussion in Low, "Envisioning," 5-9, and K. T. Ambrose, "Romanesque Vézelay: The Art of Monastic Contemplation" (University of Michigan: Ph.D. Diss., 1999), 31.

when an account, written by the monks at Vézelay, stated that Count Gerard and Abbot Odo of Vézelay sent a monk named Badilo to Aix-en-Provence with a vow that if he could, with the Lord's help, find the remains of Mary Magdalene, he was to return with them.¹⁴

Badilo's mission was apparently successful and Abbot Geoffroy (1037-1050) first displayed the repentant sinner's relics on her newly established feast day on June 22, 1037. A large crowd gathered to view her remains, and miracles were recorded. Abbot Geoffroy wrote a hagiography of Mary Magdalene in order to explain further the presence of her relics in Burgundy. In 1050 she was added to the list of patrons of the church, which included the Virgin, Christ, and the Saints Peter and Paul.¹⁵

The first challenge to Vézelay's independence occurred in 1058, when the monastery became a daughterhouse of the great Order of Cluny, following an official order from Pope Stephen X. In most cases, a church was originally allowed to elect its own abbot but lost that privilege once it was incorporated into Cluny; the abbey at Vézelay, however, still maintained the right to elect its own abbot.¹⁶ This became a matter of debate between the

¹⁴ Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 338. A twelfth-century account of Magdalene's flight from the Holy Land to Aix-en-Provence where she is believed to have died and been buried by St. Maximin is found in *The Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela: Critical Edition, Volume II: The Text*, Latin text translated by Paula Gerson, Annie Shaver-Crandell, and Alison Stones, and collated, edited, and annotated by Jeanne Krochalis and A. Stones (London, 1998), Chapter 8, 44-46 as referenced in Low, "Envisioning," 6. See also Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 51-55, and Ambrose, "Romanesque," 30.

¹⁵R.B.C. Huygens, *Monumenta Vizeliacensia: Textes relatifs à l'histoire de l'abbaye de Vézelay*, CCCM, 42 (Turnhout, 1976) as quoted in J.F. Scott, "Narthex," 8. The earliest reference to the cult of Mary Magdalene occurs in a privilege from Pope Leo IX dated April 27, 1050 as listed in Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 54, 108, 245; Low, "Envisioning," 5-6; Ambrose, "Romanesque," 28-40. Ambrose discusses the prominence of the cult of Mary Magdalene in his dissertation.

¹⁶Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 17. A letter from Pope Paschal II in 1100 lists Vézelay as a dependent of Cluny. For more information on the prominence of Cluny in the Romanesque period, see J. Evans, *Monastic Life at Cluny, 910-1157* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), 4; N. Hunt, *Cluny*, 71. Concerning the date of Vézelay's incorporation into the house of Cluny, see J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 6; Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 17 and 108; Low, "Envisioning," 4-5. Scott believes the ties between Vézelay and Cluny were closest between 1095 and 1138. This is supported by Vézelay's decision to elect Cluniac abbots, beginning with Artaud (1095-1106) and Renaud de Semur (1106-1128), who was nephew to St. Hugh, Abbot of Cluny (1049-1109). Cluny had a hand in the election of Alberic (1131-1138), a former sub-prior of Cluny. Abbot Pons de Montboissier

two houses. The monastery of Cluny, also located in Burgundy, was established by William, Duke of Aquitaine, in an original charter dating to September 11, 910. Similar to the independence of the monastery at Vézelay, the Benedictine monastery at Cluny was declared in its founding charter to be autonomous of all local secular and ecclesiastical power. It was placed under the protection of the Holy See and listed as the property of Saints Peter and Paul. Cluny grew to be the most powerful and influential abbey in Romanesque France, affecting monastic and artistic reform at Vézelay. Cluny focused monastic efforts on liturgical and theological studies and housed a productive and influential scriptorium. The exact nature of the relationship between the two monasteries is unknown because documents relating to events during the years of Vézelay's inclusion in the house of Cluny were removed from the chronicle in which the history of Vézelay was recorded.¹⁷ Vézelay was certainly one of the more distant members in the collection of churches under Cluniac control, due to its independent wealth from pilgrimages and the monastery's right to choose its own abbot.

In the early twelfth century Vézelay began to flourish; in fact, the popularity of the cult of Mary Magdalene grew so rapidly that the monastery became the starting point for the *Via Lemovicense*, one of the four pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela. The town surrounding the monastery also grew with the constant increase of pilgrims coming into Vézelay. Charges imposed on merchants and traders who set up stalls along the roads near Vézelay became a great source of income for the abbot. The need to accommodate the large number of pilgrims traveling through Sainte-Madeleine led to the replacement of the

(1138-1161), the brother of the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable (1122-1156), however, was anti-Cluniac and worked to release Vézelay from Cluniac control.

¹⁷ Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 18.

original Carolingian church with a larger basilica, which was begun around the year 1096 by Abbot Artaud (1095-1106), the first former Cluniac monk to serve as abbot of the monastery. This new construction of Sainte-Madeleine was formally dedicated on April 24, 1104.¹⁸

The success of the cult of Mary Magdalene, which brought great wealth to the church through taxation and offerings from pilgrims, also spurred the jealousy of nearby neighbors: the bishops of Autun, the counts of Nevers, and the abbot of Cluny. A battle began over the extent of the abbey's independence and its exemption from taxation by its neighbors.¹⁹ In 1106, citizens revolted due to over taxation for Artaud's building efforts. Supported by the Bishop of Autun, this attack led to the assassination of Abbot Artaud.²⁰ The monastery came under further attack in 1119 by Count William II of Nevers, who tried to enforce his right to tax the abbey.²¹ Later, on July 21, 1120, the eve of the feast of Mary Magdalene when the church and town were overflowing with pilgrims, a fire destroyed the nave of the church, causing the deaths of hundreds of worshipers.²²

¹⁸ Discussion of the final dedication of the new construction is found in Low, "Envisioning," 8. For further information see Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 48, 224; Mouilleron, *Vézelay*, 9; and J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 13.

¹⁹ For an expanded account of events, see the Vézelay Chronicle written by Hugh of Pointers found in MS Auxerre 277, fols. 64-187, and translated into English by Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 130-315. Discussion can also be found in Taylor, "Pentecost," 9-15; J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 7-8.

²⁰ Taylor, "Pentecost," 9-15; Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 18; J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 7.

²¹ J.F. Scott, "Narthex," 7. See Taylor, "Pentecost," 12, for a further account of the problems between Vézelay and the counts of Nevers.

²² The extent of damage is a matter of considerable debate. See Low, "Envisioning," 160-162, where he discusses Kirk Berlow, "Social and Economic Aspects of Early History of Vézelay" (The City University of New York: Ph.D. Diss., 1971) as the source for his information. Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, cover the damage in the introduction to their book. J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 8, lists the deaths at over a thousand, citing Salet, *La Madeleine*, 24 as her source. It is generally agreed upon that at the least the nave of the abbey church was completely destroyed.

Shortly following the fire, Abbot Renaud de Semur (1106-1128), also a former Cluniac monk²³, began the construction of a new triple-aisled basilica and enlarged the original church by adding a two-storied enclosed narthex to the west end. The nave and the narthex were constructed to be eighty-six feet wide and sixty feet high.²⁴ By making the narthex a two-storied structure, the ground floor, where an elaborate trio of portals was constructed, did not have a height matching that of the interior nave. This reduced height allowed for sculptures in the narthex to be easily viewed. Since the nave of the church was primarily accessible to the lay community only during mass and the laity was restricted from the monastic grounds, the narthex served as a shelter for pilgrims passing through Vézelay and as a transition zone between the church and the outside world. The central portal within the narthex also served to announce the entrance to the nave, the body of the church. Unlike sculptures inside the nave, which could only be seen for great lengths of time by the inhabitants of the monastery and were possibly created for monastic contemplation, sculptures in the narthex could be seen daily by both the lay and monastic communities, so both pilgrim and monastic audiences were likely considered during their creation. The narthex also served as a shelter for certain religious ceremonies, housing the “catechumens,” candidates for baptism, and “penitents,” individuals not yet reconciled with God through the Church and therefore not allowed in the nave.

²³ Renaud spent the years between his profession in 1088 and his promotion to Vézelay in the monastery at Cluny. Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 44.

²⁴ Kevin D. Murphy, *Memory and Modernity: Viollet-le-Duc at Vézelay* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); James Fergusson, *A History of Architecture in All Countries, From the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, vol. 2, ed. R. Phené Spiers (London: John Murray, 1893), 101. Fergusson notes that he believes Vézelay’s narthex to resemble that of Cluny, due to the fact that Vézelay’s narthex was more modern in its construction than the interior nave.

The prosperity of Sainte-Madeleine de Vézelay allowed the monastic community to create elaborate sculptures to adorn the portals on both the interior and exterior of the church. Since a representation of the Last Judgment, a common theme for exterior tympanum sculptures during the Romanesque period, was planned for the western façade of the church, the monastery was free to develop new iconography for the main tympanum above the narthex. Exactly what the sculpture represents is the main subject of this study and will be thoroughly discussed in chapter four. The imagery of the portal is not solely assessed in terms of the daily use of the narthex, as shelter for visitors and religious activities, but for what the doorway was created to announce: the entrance into a sacred space.²⁵

The creation dates for the narthex portals are frequently disputed since no exact documents exist that refer to their construction. Peter Low suggests that the conception and installation of the central narthex portal dates between 1104 and 1132.²⁶ In his 1944 article, Adolf Katzenellenbogen dated the creation of the central portal to the years between 1120 and 1132.²⁷ The concurring date of completion is based on the 1132 dedication of the new construction at Vézelay, conducted by the bishop of Autun and attended by Pope Innocent II.

²⁵ Peter Low, "You who once were far off: Enlivening Scripture in the Main Portal at Vézelay," *Art Bulletin* 85 (2003): 486. This claim is supported by Low, who offers archeological and documentary evidence that the structure of the narthex was built between 1140-1155, so the portals were conceived in conjunction with the sacred space of the nave.

²⁶ Low, "Enlivening," 469. For written, archeological and stylistic evidence, see Low, "Envisioning," 9-11, where he discusses the construction of the nave, beginning in 1120 and completed by 1135 or 1140, and pp. 314-319, where he discusses the dating of the portals in the narthex. Discussion of the construction dates can also be found in J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 13-17. M. Taylor, "Pentecost," 9 dates the tympanum to 1130.

²⁷ Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 141. Most art historians choose this shortened period of time for dating the portal. Peter Diemer, "Stil und Ikonographie der Kapitelle von Ste.-Madeleine, Vézelay" (University of Heidelberg: Ph.D. Diss., 1975) and J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 14, agree that all three portals were conceived after 1120.

During construction, Renaud de Semur left the monastery and a battle arose between the abbot of Cluny and the monks at Vézelay over the election of the next abbot. Clear accounts do not exist in the recorded history of Vézelay concerning who was in control of the abbey immediately after the departure of Renaud de Semur. It is known that after several years and with help from the pope, the abbot of Cluny succeeded in placing his candidate Alberic, a former sub-prior of Cluny and friend to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, as abbot in 1131.²⁸ This was done without the approval of the monks from Vézelay. In 1138, Alberic was promoted and Pons, brother to Peter the Venerable, the Abbot of Cluny, was elected.

Vézelay's popularity as a pilgrimage site peaked when St. Bernard of Clairvaux preached the launch of the second crusade from the monastery's hill on March 31, 1146. However, this success was halted when Vézelay's lands were ravaged in 1149 by Count William III of Nevers, who followed his father's earlier example. Vézelay received its independence from Cluny in 1162 through an official order by Pope Alexander III, just after the death of Abbot Pons in 1161. Under the control of William of Mello (1161-1171), the number of pilgrims visiting Vézelay's abbey decreased when disagreements with the Count of Nevers came to a head in 1165 and 1166. At that time, the Count's men invaded the monastery, forcing the expulsion of the monks from the church.²⁹ The monastery tried to find peace with the house of Nevers after 1167, when the Count took up the cross on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In 1171, Gerard d'Arcy, whose family were vassals of the counts

²⁸ Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 18.

²⁹ Regarding Abbot William of Mello, see Book Four of Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 234-235; Huygens, *Monumenta*, 518-519; Low, "Envisioning," 4. For a timeline of Vézelay's history, see Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 87-90, from folios 1-17 of the Auxerre manuscript. For accounts of the actions of the counts of Nevers, see Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 3, 9, 130-315. Although the worst period of feuding was between 1150-1155, when the king was forced to intercede, troubles continued to be documented through 1167.

of Nevers, was elected abbot of the monastery. This time of peace led Vézelay into a short period of prosperity, and, in 1190, Philip Augustus, King of France, and Richard the Lion-Hearted met at Vézelay to start the third crusade.

In the late thirteenth century, the success of the cult of Mary Magdalene suffered when the authenticity of her relics was questioned.³⁰ On April 24, 1267, the supposed relics of Mary Magdalene housed within the abbey church were proclaimed authentic by King Louis IX, a visiting crusader.³¹ However, in 1279 another claim arose that the body of Mary Magdalene was said to have been found in the crypt of Saint-Maximin in Aix-en-Provence.³² Pope Boniface VIII eventually approved this claim in 1295, but Vézelay could not recover from the decreasing number of pilgrims.

The monastery continued to face hardships over the following centuries. The church was damaged by a fire during the early sixteenth century and, in 1569, the abbey came under siege during the Wars of Religion, leading to the pillage of many monuments at the monastery and in the city of Vézelay. Years of mismanagement forced the abbey to become incorporated into the diocese of Autun during the seventeenth century, and on December 6, 1790, the church at Vézelay was asked to stop its ministry, leading to further mutilation of sculptures on the interior and exterior of the church. In 1793, revolutionaries destroyed the exterior western portal and further damaged the narthex tympana, while also removing

³⁰J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 5; Low, "Envisioning," 12, gives the date the relics came into question as occurring in the 1260s-70s, using an account of the "re-discovery" of the Magdalene's relics from 1265.

³¹ Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 13.

³² This claim gained support, since Vézelay had acknowledged earlier, in its account of the theft of the body, that the Magdalene's final resting place was in Provence. For discussion, see Low, "Envisioning," 12-13; Murphy, *Memory*, 4, gives 1280 as the date the "true relics" appear in Aix-en-Provence. A record of a grand ceremony occurring on May 5, 1280, is found in Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 369.

portable objects from within the church.³³ In the few years following the Revolution, several monastic buildings were bought as national property or sold to private citizens. Many parts of the monastery were razed, with only the narthex, crypt, and nave surviving in their entirety.

The church of Sainte-Madeleine de Vézelay underwent improvements in the nineteenth century. Lightning caused a fire in 1819 that badly damaged the tower and roof of the narthex. The town, lacking resources because of its isolation and the massive size of the church, sought help to repair the structure from the national Ministry of the Interior, and in August 1834 Prosper Merimée, Inspector of Historical Monuments for the French Government, visited Vézelay to survey the site. Restoration on the long forgotten and ruined basilica began in 1840 after Merimée alerted authorities that it might soon collapse.³⁴ Merimée found Vézelay aesthetically important as a monument to French architecture.³⁵ Saint-Madeleine was to function primarily as an icon of French cultural achievement and as a representation of the Romanesque movement in the history of architecture.³⁶ A twenty-six-year-old architect, Viollet-le-Duc, was entrusted with the renovation, restoring the basilica from 1840 to 1856. The exterior western façade sculpture was reconstructed at this time, but the interior narthex sculpture was not repaired. They remain today in a vandalized state.

Although it is necessary to know the complete history of Vézelay to understand the condition of the sculptures today, this paper is primarily concerned with the period of

³³ Low, "Envisioning," 12.

³⁴ Prosper Merimée, *Notes d'un voyage dans le midi de la France* (Paris, 1835), as quoted in Low, "Envisioning," 55-63, 243-244.

³⁵ Murphy, *Memory*, 137.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

construction from the early to the mid-twelfth century. Though their history is filled with conflicts, the monks of Vézelay did not devote all their energies to power struggles with nearby rivals. They continued the traditional monastic love of learning. Important evidence of their cultural concerns is provided by the sculptural remains in the church. These works offer proof that the creators of the sculptures were abreast of sculptural trends that have left a lasting testimony of grandeur and speak of the twelfth-century monastery's conception of man and his relationship to God.³⁷

³⁷ Scott and Ward, *Chronicle*, 43.

CHAPTER III PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF NARTHEX PORTAL SCULPTURES

In this chapter, the sculpture found around the doorways in the narthex of Saint-Madeleine de Vézelay will be described in detail and a brief introduction to the building that surrounds them will be provided. On arriving before the church, its size is impressive, but its external decoration does not give a hint as to the beauty of the sculpture found within. The western façade of Sainte-Madeleine has a common representation of the Last Judgment on its central tympanum. The sculpture is not original to the site, but a nineteenth-century copy by Viollet-le-Duc. The original exterior tympanum was destroyed during the French Revolution. In the interior of the church, the nave was constructed following a Roman basilica plan in which its rectangular space was divided lengthwise by rows of columns. The preceding narthex was also constructed to mirror the Roman basilica plan found in the nave. The three-aisled, two-storied narthex underwent structural repairs by Viollet-le-Duc in the nineteenth century, but the decoration on its portals was left untouched.³⁸

This chapter will discuss each of the three portals found in the narthex individually; it is important to understand that the portals in the narthex belong to a single sculptural series. Upon entering the narthex of Sainte-Madeleine one is instantly confronted with the elaborate central portal that leads visitors to the nave of the abbey church. The height of the narthex makes viewing the sculpture effortless, and every possible area of the doorway is incorporated into the design. The central narthex doorway is flanked on both sides by two smaller, decorated portals that guide visitors to the side aisles of the basilica.

³⁸ Jean-Rémy Palanque, *The Dawn of the Middle Ages*, trans. by Dom Finbarr Murphy and ed. by Henri Daniel-Rops (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1960), 82.

Though significantly smaller in size, the side portals flanking the central doorway also contain unique images. The tympanum above the door to the north contains images from the Infancy of Christ (Fig. 2). The north tympanum is divided

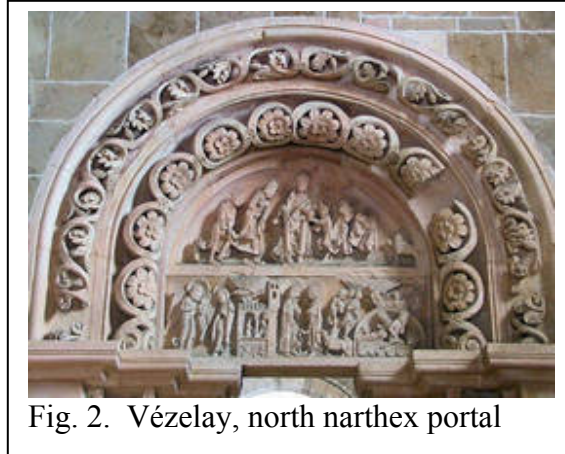


Fig. 2. Vézelay, north narthex portal

into two sections. At the bottom, from left to right, scenes of an angel announcing the birth of Jesus to Mary, Mary speaking with her cousin Elizabeth, angels announcing the birth of Jesus to three shepherds, and an image of Mary, Joseph and child in a cave are sculpted in a continuous sequence. A single scene in the space above shows the Epiphany or Adoration of the Magi. Most of the figures have been defaced. The portal is completed with a double arch of leaf work and rosettes. The tympanum above the portal to the south contains sculpture representing the events after the Resurrection of Christ, just before his Ascension (Fig. 3).³⁹ The south tympanum is also

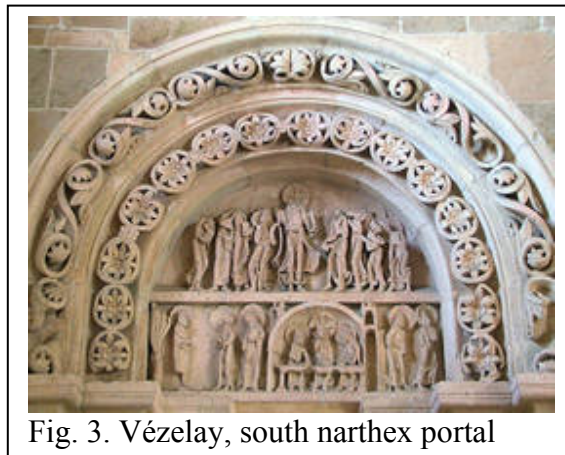


Fig. 3. Vézelay, south narthex portal

divided into two sections with the lower scenes showing, from left to right, Christ meeting two disciples who do not recognize him on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a representation of the Supper at Emmaus

where they recognize Christ as he breaks bread, and the disciples heading joyously to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples of the risen Christ. The upper register contains an image of the final appearance of the resurrected Christ to his apostles, just before his Ascension.

³⁹ Low, "Envisioning," 16-19. Images appear in Mouilleron, *Vézelay*, 88-99.

Most historians agree that these side portals were created after construction began on the central doorway and that their themes were chosen to complement its message.⁴⁰

Supporting the central tympanum, the sculpture closest to the viewer is found on the damaged jambs and trumeau. On the upper portion of the trumeau is a sculpture of St. John the Baptist (Fig.4).⁴¹ In its present state, the body of John remains intact, but his face and the sculpture on a large roundel he holds in his hands has been destroyed. Two engaged columns placed on each side of the trumeau show figures of apostles carved at the top of each partially destroyed column (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). Their plain dress and bare feet identify them as apostles, and St. Peter can be specifically identified by his keys (Fig. 5). Apostles are also carved on columns to the left and right of the central doorway, in the same manner as those that flank the trumeau.



Fig. 4. Vézelay, trumeau: St. John the Baptist



Fig. 5. Vézelay, right engaged column: St. Peter and apostle



Fig. 6. Vézelay, left engaged column: apostles

⁴⁰ Low, "Envisioning," 15.

⁴¹ Mouilleron, *Vézelay*, 12; Low, "Envisioning," 26-27, 29-30; Low, "Enlivening," 473; J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 15; Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 147.

A lintel below the tympanum contains two processions of small, detailed figures representing the unconverted people of the earth in the form of pagan worshippers, Jews, and the monstrous races (Fig. 7).⁴² The figures progress in two lines towards the center of the lintel. The lines are divided in the middle by two larger, decapitated figures and small portions



Fig. 7. Vézelay, lintel

of the sculpture from the tympanum above and the trumeau below. The figures that split the procession in half are representations of the apostles Peter and Paul.⁴³ They are located to the right side of Christ's mandorla, which extends down from the tympanum, and to the right of John the Baptist's halo, which protrudes from the trumeau. On each side of the lintel, the processional figures are arranged in a clear hierarchy.⁴⁴ On the right, soldiers dressed in suits of armor are positioned at the front of the line, nearest to the apostles. The leading soldier hands his sword to the apostles, the blade pointing downward in a gesture of peace (Fig. 8).⁴⁵ Following the soldiers, the monstrous races are represented. An African Pygmy, believed in western culture to be a dwarf, is shown climbing a

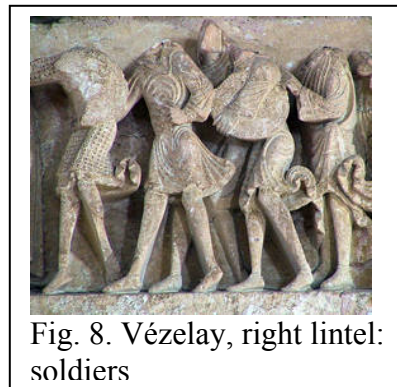


Fig. 8. Vézelay, right lintel: soldiers

⁴² Mouilleron, *Vézelay*, 14; J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 16; Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 141-143. In the Middle Ages, it was a common belief that monstrous races inhabited the "far corners of the world." The monstrous races were strange and deformed beings believed to inhabit the extreme eastern or southern countries. Sources with accounts of the monstrous races include an encyclopedia by St. Isidore of Seville and Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*. Medieval bestiaries gave descriptions and detailed drawings of the different races that one could encounter while traveling through the uncivilized and pagan lands.

⁴³ Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 143; J.F. Scott, "Narthex," 54; Fergusson, *Signs*, 34.

⁴⁴ For descriptions of the figures found on the lintel, see Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 143-144; Low, "Enlivening," 475-476; J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 48-55. Different interpretations of the figures on the lintel have been offered over the years.

⁴⁵ Low, "Enlivening," 470. Low identifies these figures as knights, representatives of the contemporary world in the twelfth century.

ladder onto his horse (Fig. 9). He is followed by another small figure who talks with what appear to be two giants (Fig 10).⁴⁶ Concluding the procession to the right is a group of Pantoii, a race believed to be from India; these figures can be identified by their enormous ears (Fig. 10).⁴⁷



Fig. 9. Vézelay, right lintel: African Pygmy

On the left side of the lintel, beginning at the far left, a group of barefoot men clad in short tunics holds bows and arrows and walks toward the apostles (Fig. 11 and Fig. 12).⁴⁸



Fig. 10. Vézelay, right lintel: Pantoii

The next group brings offerings: a bowl of fruit, a round loaf or cake, fish, a bowl probably filled with grain, and a bucket likely filled with wine (Fig. 12 and Fig. 13). At the front of the procession, closest to the Apostles, a priest leads a

sacrificial bull, holding its head while a nearby man yields an axe (Fig. 14).⁴⁹

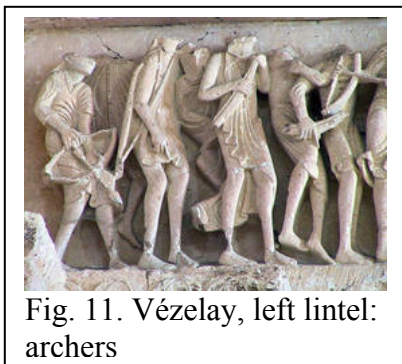


Fig. 11. Vézelay, left lintel: archers

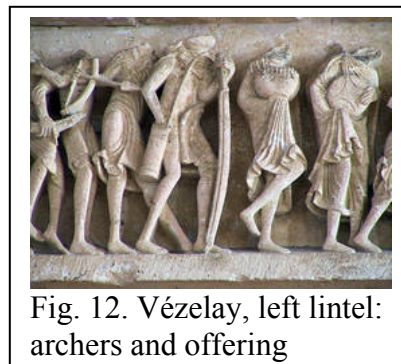


Fig. 12. Vézelay, left lintel: archers and offering

⁴⁶ J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 49, claims that the figures are customarily identified as giants and pygmies, but she notes that giants and pygmies were traditionally portrayed with multiple deformities other than just their abnormal physiques, which is not the case in this example.

⁴⁷ As mentioned in Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 143, classical and medieval writers reported that the Panotii lived in India or on an island in the North.

⁴⁸ These figures are sometimes identified as Scythians or Parthians, but no textual evidence exists to prove these claims.

⁴⁹ In early studies of the portal, these figures were identified as Roman because of the presence of a sacrificial bull. J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 50, notes that the offering procession also includes men carrying fish and fruit items that are not customarily associated with ancient sacrifice but with the Jewish festival of first fruits that occurs on the day of Pentecost.



Fig. 13. Vézelay, left lintel: offering



Fig. 14. Vézelay, left lintel: offering

The tympanum has at its center a large figure of Christ (Fig. 15). Seated on a throne and partially enclosed within an almond-shaped mandorla, Christ faces forward, his great eyes badly damaged by revolutionaries of the eighteenth century. His arms extend outward on both sides of his body, his hands being the only parts of his body to go beyond the mandorla. His knees are bent to his left to portray his seated position upon his throne, but he is clearly



Fig. 15. Vézelay, central tympanum: Christ figure

portrayed in some sort of action, as he is draped in a swirling robe of sculptured pleats, soft angles, and folds.⁵⁰ He is at least twice the size of the twelve figures to his sides, and from his fingertips extend rays of fire that form straight lines in stone to the heads of each of the apostles, who are turned in several different directions.

⁵⁰ Descriptions of the expressive quality of the sculptures are found in several works dealing with the tympanum. Among the most expressive are Jane Dillenberger, *Style and Content in Christian Art* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co., 1986), 44: “The drapery does not always follow the movement of the body but has itself an exciting whirllike movement and vigorous linear pattern which is often independent of, or even contradictory to, the body beneath the garment”; Schapiro, *Romanesque*, 277, refers to “the relation of the contours of the bodies to the arbitrary eddying lines of the draperies.”



Fig. 16. Vézelay, central tympanum: apostles



Fig. 17. Vézelay, central tympanum: apostles

The apostles flanking Christ, six on each side, are sculpted in varying heights in order to fit into the semi-circular shape of the tympanum (Figs. 16 and 17). The sculpture reflects a sense of dynamic tension, and appears to react to the precisely defined architectural limits in which it is carved.⁵¹ Each apostle holds a gospel book in his hand from which he will spread the word of God upon receiving the Holy Spirit.⁵² Directly to Christ's right, one apostle holds a key along with his gospel book and can be identified as St. Peter. To the left of Peter, two apostles hold open gospel books. Although not specifically identified in most studies conducted on the sculpture at Vézelay, I believe that these two apostles are holding open gospel books in order to identify them as evangelists and authors of the gospels which bear their name, specifically St. John and St. Matthew.⁵³ It is likely that St. John is the larger of the two apostles because of his importance as a witness at the

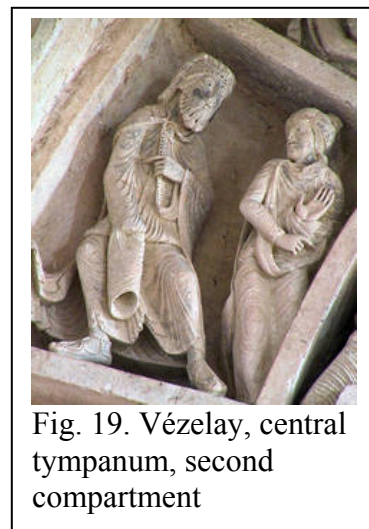
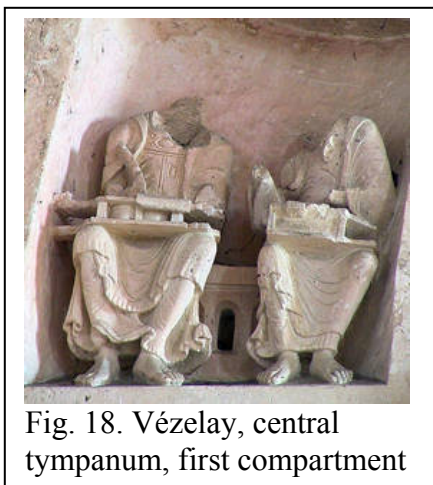
⁵¹ Charles M. Radding and William W. Clark, *Medieval Architecture, Medieval Learning: Builders and Masters in the Age of Romanesque and Gothic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 48.

⁵² Mouilleron, *Vézelay*, 21; Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 141-142; Taylor, "Pentecost," 12. Many historians believe that the gospel books symbolize the apostles' power, received through the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to save or condemn individuals' souls.

⁵³ Christian iconography frequently depicts evangelists writing in open parchment or in books.

Crucifixion.⁵⁴ Each of the apostles has bare feet and wears a robe of swirling drapery with numerous folds and pleats comparable to that worn by the figure of Christ. As noted above, all of the sculpture has suffered severe damage to their faces or have been decapitated. Just to the left and right of Christ's shoulders, the space above the heads of the apostles is filled with what most historians agree to be representations of clouds.⁵⁵ To his left, soft waves are carved to resemble calm or serene clouds, and jagged lines to his right symbolize storm or thunder clouds.

The central tympanum is enclosed by a sculpted, semi-circular arch with eight scenes. Separated in the middle by the figure of Christ, the deep carvings in the voussours also show a hierarchy in their placement. In the bottom left compartment there are two apostles or evangelists (Fig. 18). They are identified by their bare feet, frontal poses, and the rolls of parchment that are open on their laps, as if they are writing. The compartment just above contains the figures of two men who face each other but point their fingers out in separate directions, one towards Christ and the other away (Fig. 19).



⁵⁴ Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 142, believes it is probable that the apostle is St. John holding his gospel book close to his heart.

⁵⁵ Mouilleron, *Vézelay*, 12; Low, "Envisioning," 35, 256-259; Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 142.

The remaining two compartments on the left side of the tympanum and the upper two scenes on the right show figures suffering from afflictions and physical ailments, which include demonic possession, sexual impulses, loss of senses, a hunched back, and a pig nose.⁵⁶

Three figures appear on the left side in the third compartment. The first is a man with fiery hair representing someone under demonic possession and the two remaining figures are connected to each other by their backs (Fig. 20). The top compartment on the left side contains a blind man led by another individual, two figures representing deafness, and two figures with dog heads known as Cynocephali, a monstrous race (Fig. 21).



Fig. 20. Vézelay, central tympanum, third compartment



Fig. 21. Vézelay, central tympanum, fourth compartment

Cynocephali represented muteness in the Middle Ages because they were believed not to be able to speak, only to bark. The top compartment on the right side shows four individuals with permanent disfigurement: two with hunched backs and two with pig noses (Fig. 22). The following compartment has three figures with less severe physical ailments. The first has a weak hand, the second a weak foot, and the third a weak knee (Fig. 23). The two lower compartments on the right illustrate scenes of moral or immoral behavior. The top scene contains two figures: one attempting to bribe the other, who refuses the offer (Fig.

⁵⁶ Low, “Enlivening,” 470, identifies the figures with pig noses as “snub-nosed Sciritae,” a monstrous race.

24).⁵⁷ The final compartment on the lower right side contains four figures, one of which faces the others with a gesture as if to sway them. Two of the figures maintain a stance facing away from Christ, while one leans forward toward the central image of Christ (Fig. 25).



Fig. 22. Vézelay, central tympanum, fifth compartment



Fig. 23. Vézelay, central tympanum, sixth compartment



Fig. 24. Vézelay, central tympanum, seventh compartment



Fig. 25. Vézelay, central tympanum, eighth compartment

The central tympanum is surrounded by decorated archivolt. The inner archivolt contains representations of the Labors of the Months alternating with the Signs of the Zodiac, a common theme on Burgundian Romanesque portals.⁵⁸ The cycle begins to the left with a representation of the month of January: a warmly dressed peasant, seated on a stool,

⁵⁷ Katzenellenbogen, “Central,” 144-145; Mouilleron, *Vézelay*, 44-61.

⁵⁸ For clear images, see Mouilleron, *Vézelay*, 30-32. For the most detailed descriptions of the labor and zodiac medallions see Low, “Envisioning,” 24; Marjorie Jean Hall Panadero, “The Labors of the Months and the Signs of the Zodiac in Twelfth Century French Facades” (The University of Michigan: Ph.D. Diss., 1984), 25-33.

cuts a round loaf with a knife (Fig. 26). It is followed by the sign of Aquarius: a nude figure with a cape supports an upside-down amphora from which water pours (Fig. 26). February shows a scene of two men presumably warming themselves by a fire (Fig. 27).⁵⁹ This representation is followed by the sign of Pisces: two fish lined up head to tail (Fig. 27). The medallion representing March shows a man pruning a grapevine with his hooked knife clearly visible (Fig. 28). It is followed by the sign of Aries, where the traditional ram has been given a fish tail (Fig. 28). April's image shows a man feeding his goats, and is followed by the sign of Taurus (Fig. 29). Like the ram that represents the sign of Aries, here the bull has been given a fish tail. Owing to the number of roundels needed to complete the archivolt, certain months have been given two representations, as is the case with May. May's first image is of a warrior resting with his head in his hand and his elbow supported by his shield (Fig. 30). The second image is a representation of Spring: a dancing

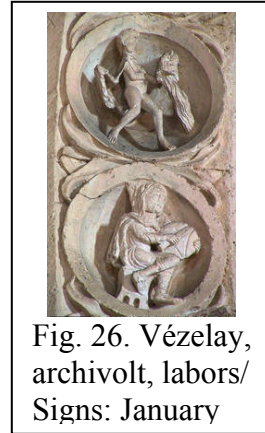


Fig. 26. Vézelay, archivolt, labors/signs: January

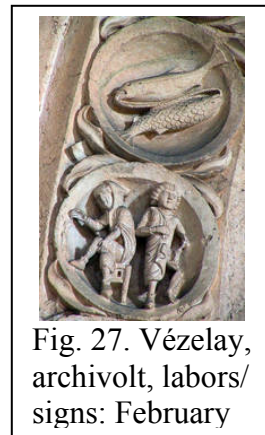


Fig. 27. Vézelay, archivolt, labors/signs: February



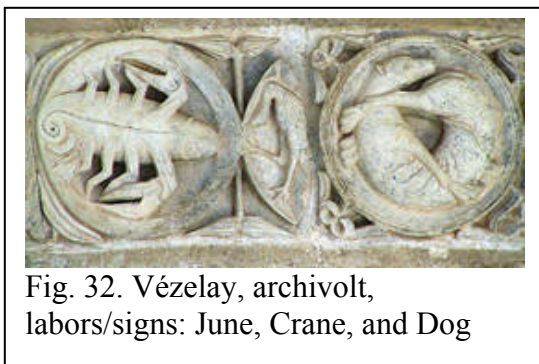
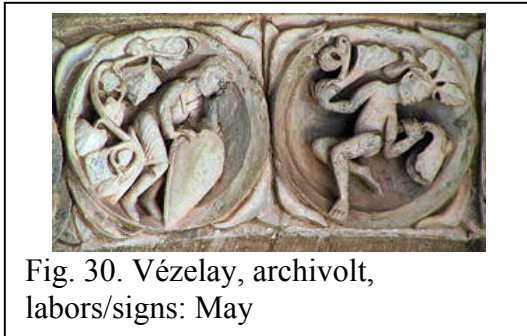
Fig. 28. Vézelay, archivolt, labors/signs: March



Fig. 29. Vézelay, archivolt, labors/signs: April

⁵⁹ Panadero, "Labors," 26, notes that traditionally a fire is carved into this depiction of February, but here it is missing.

figure wearing a crown of leaves (Fig. 30). The sign of Gemini follows, showing two nude figures with their arms around each other and with a star behind each of their heads to represent the constellation Castor and Pollux, for which they were named (Fig. 31). June's medallion contains a reaper, followed by the sign of Cancer, a crab (Fig. 31 and 32).



Here an unusual set of sculptures enters into the cycle, placed in the center of the archivolt above the head of Christ. These sculptures occur on the calendar during the summer solstice and are not common in Labors of the Months and Zodiac cycles from the Romanesque period. The first image shows in a half medallion the sculpture of a crane on one foot (Fig. 32). The image of a crane in the twelfth century symbolized vigilance in prayer, good works, and the good order of the monastic life.⁶⁰ Following the half medallion of the crane, images of a dog (Fig. 32), an acrobat (Fig. 33), and a mermaid (Fig. 33) bend their bodies

⁶⁰ Fergusson, *Signs*, 14.

into the circle in which they are enclosed. The creatures are clearly understood to represent a single, unified sequence within the cycle by the way in which their bodies fill the medallions.⁶¹ The figures of the mermaid and acrobat have mainly gone unexplained in Christian art, but the dog, because of his watchfulness and fidelity, was seen as a symbol of those virtues.⁶²

Completing the right side of the archivolt, the zodiac signs precede the representations of the months. The sign of Leo, shown here as a lion with a demonic creature in his claws, is followed by the symbol for July: a harvester binding wheat (Fig. 34). Virgo's image shows a nude figure with a hooded cape draped around her shoulders; this figure holds a flowering branch in each hand (Fig. 35). August, like May, is represented by two images. The first shows a peasant beating wheat (Fig. 35) followed by a representation of a peasant emptying the harvest into a bin (Fig. 36). The sign of Libra



Fig. 34. Vézelay, archivolt, labors/signs: July



Fig. 35. Vézelay, archivolt, labors/signs: August



Fig. 36. Vézelay, archivolt, labors/signs: August and September

⁶¹ Low, "Envisioning," 96.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 15.

is represented by a dancing figure with wild hair holding a pair of scales in her hand (Fig. 36). September's medallion contains an image of a wine harvest (Fig. 37). A very unusual creature represents the sign of Scorpio: a bearded creature with a hump on its back, a twisted tail, two hind legs, and six front legs (Fig. 37). October's figure shows a peasant killing his pig, and is followed by the sign of Sagittarius, a centaur with flaming hair who turns his torso backwards to aim his bow and arrow (Fig. 38). November is represented by an image

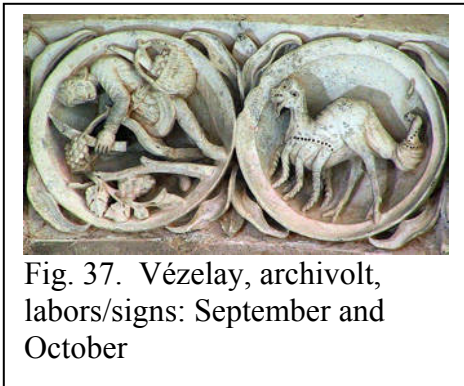


Fig. 37. Vézelay, archivolt, labors/signs: September and October



Fig. 38. Vézelay, archivolt, labors/signs: October and November



Fig. 39. Vézelay, archivolt, labors/signs: November and December

of a man carrying an old woman on his shoulders, traditionally a symbol of the year finishing (Fig. 39).⁶³ Capricorn follows, his figure also given a fish tail (Fig. 39). The final medallion symbolizing the month of December contains an image of a seated man wearing a cap and holding a cup of wine (Fig. 40). A second archivolt, above the Labors of the Months and Zodiac cycle, portrays a pattern of decorative rosettes.



Fig. 40. Vézelay, archivolt, labors/signs: December

⁶³ Panadero, "Labors," 30.

It is important to see all the elements of the central portal together as constituting a single sculptural program, not just as a collection of sculptures of varied meaning. As Schapiro puts it, “On the portal at Vézelay the figure on the trumeau projects upward beyond the trumeau. The figure above him on the lintel projects beyond the lintel. And the great figure of Christ not only ‘violates’ the axis of the portal, but breaks through the outlines of the tympanum frame and commands it to detour around his projecting head.”⁶⁴ Clearly the portal’s sculptures were meant to be viewed and understood as a whole. The use of roundels of uniform size in the zodiac/labors archivolt clearly shows the figures to be seen as a cycle, a calendar rather than individual scenes or decorative elements.⁶⁵ The collaboration of the zodiac/labors cycle, the predominant Christ figure surrounded by possible Pentecost imagery, and the multiple sculptures containing the races of the world could be perceived by the viewer as a statement of the spiritual as well as the temporal authority of the abbey.⁶⁶ Their meaning will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

⁶⁴ Meyer Schapiro, *Romanesque Art: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller Inc., 1977), 269-270.

⁶⁵ Panadero, “Labors,” 44.

⁶⁶ J.F. Scott, “Narthex,” 4.

CHAPTER IV MEANING AND FUNCTION

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the sculpture on the central portal at Saint-Madeleine de Vézelay are not a disordered work, but a meaningful, deeply ordered, and decoratively coherent program.⁶⁷ The desire of the creator of the program seems to have been for the portal to have intellectual and symbolic content as well as spiritual and aesthetic appeal.⁶⁸ The dominant Christ figure on the central tympanum in the narthex at Vézelay is a puzzling characteristic of the portal's image and the source of much of the debate on the program's overall meaning.

Emile Mâle was the first art historian to produce a complete iconographical survey of the central narthex portal of Vézelay.⁶⁹ He came to the conclusion that the tympanum scene was a portrayal of the events on the day of Pentecost. He explained the central tympanum as a representation of the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as found in the Acts of the Apostles 2:1-4, but with Christ himself granting the Holy Spirit.⁷⁰ In traditional representations of Pentecost, "cloven tongues like as of fire" extend from a dove with outstretched wings to the heads of twelve surrounding apostles. Occasionally the apostles would be represented with a small flame above their heads, showing the blessing of the Holy Spirit that had come upon them.⁷¹ The inclusion of Christ at Pentecost, as seen in the tympanum at Vézelay, is not specifically found in the Acts of the Apostles. In the biblical

⁶⁷ Schapiro, *Romaesque*, 269-270.

⁶⁸ Hunt, *Chuny*, 110.

⁶⁹ Emile Mâle, *Art religieux de XIIIe siècle en France* (Paris, 1922): 326-332; Mâle, *Religious*, 82.

⁷⁰ Mâle, *Religious*, 326-332. Acts 2:1-4 reads, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of the mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1966), 108.

⁷¹ Fergusson, *Signs*, 41.

text, Christ's Ascension occurs approximately ten days prior to the day of Pentecost. Mâle's explanation for the presence of Christ in the portal sculpture was dependent on a surviving eleventh-century lectionary from Cluny (Fig. 41).⁷² Contained in the writings for the Feast of Pentecost was a miniature portraying Christ at Pentecost, with rays of fire dispensing the Holy Spirit extending from behind his figure to the surrounding apostles and Mary.⁷³ As stated in the history of the abbey at Vézelay, the monastery was a daughterhouse of Cluny at the time of the portal's creation, allowing access to their artistic reforms. Mâle further defended his identification of the central tympanum as a

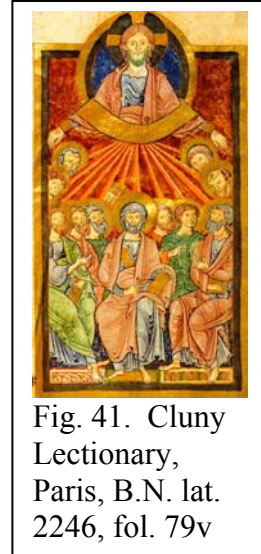


Fig. 41. Cluny Lectionary, Paris, B.N. lat. 2246, fol. 79v

representation of Pentecost as taken from Acts, by discussing the folds and swirling lines of the garments worn by Christ and the apostles. He suggested that the garments were sculpted to match the biblical description of the event, as if they were being blown by “the rush of mighty wind” that came down from heaven and filled the home of the apostles on the day of Pentecost.⁷⁴

The procession along the lintel and the group of figures surrounding the central tympanum in the eight scenes above the heads of the Apostles, were believed by Mâle to serve as a complement to the Pentecost iconography.⁷⁵ He referred to these figures as representing the pagan nations of the world, including the monstrous races, to whom the word would be preached after the Apostles received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.⁷⁶

⁷² Paris, B.N. lat. 2246, fol. 79v.

⁷³ Mâle, *Religious Art*, 326-332.

⁷⁴ Acts 2:2.

⁷⁵ Mâle, *Religious Art*, 330-332.

⁷⁶ J. F. Scott, “Narthex,” 48.

Although it is not uncommon to find representations of the monstrous races in Last Judgment scenes from the Romanesque period, no examples of their association with Pentecost iconography previously existed. Mâle believed that the sculptural roots of the lintel, to be used in a Pentecost scene, derived from Byzantine art.⁷⁷

The First Crusade to the Holy Land, occurring between the years 1095 and 1099, opened routes of trade and travel between the west and the east. Mâle justified his belief in the influence of Byzantine art by citing the mosaics in the Church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople as a likely source for the monstrous races on the lintel. He presumed that the figures were a general reference to the eventual evangelization of the peoples of the earth after the apostles' empowerment on the day of Pentecost.⁷⁸ The figure of John the Baptist on the lintel had a separate meaning; he was there to recall his prophecy of the day of Pentecost.⁷⁹ Mâle believed that the Labors of the Months and the Signs of the Zodiac signified the time in which the Church would perform its evangelical work; the Labors also served as a depiction of manual labor as an appropriate means to salvation.⁸⁰

Traditionally, images of the Labors of the Months in combination with the Signs of the Zodiac are believed to form a visual calendar that evokes the passage of time, the movements of celestial bodies and the change of seasons on earth.⁸¹ Scenes drawn from the

⁷⁷ Mâle, *Religious Art*, 328-332. Also discussed in J.F. Scott, "Narthex," 18.

⁷⁸ Mâle, *Religious Art*, 328-332, also listed San Marco in Venice and a miniature from the homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus in Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. gr. 510, fol. 301) as possible sources for the lintel figures. For further discussion see Low, "Envisioning," 31.

⁷⁹ See Matthew 3:11 where St. John states, "I baptize you with water for repentance... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." See also accounts from Mark 1:7-8 and John 3:16.

⁸⁰ Panadero, "Labors," 39. Panadero also discusses the belief that representations of the Labors of the Months express the idea that work should be performed willingly as a part of man's struggle against vice and as a payment that man must give for his original sin. However, Panadero brings up the fact that not all the months are represented by images of labor. The winter months are depicted by indoor scenes, usually of feasting or sitting by a fire.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

everyday lives of peasants and aristocracy, such as hunting, harvesting, gathering the vintage, and feasting, were used to show activities completed throughout the year. The elaborate sculpture of the calendar cycles in the Romanesque period was not considered to be mere decoration, but was included because they enriched the meaning of the façade as a whole.

Abel Fabre presented a conflicting interpretation to Emile Mâle's main explanation of the central narthex portal at Sainte-Madeleine de Vézelay one year later.⁸² Fabre questioned Mâle's use of the Cluny miniature as a basis for the tympanum and focused on the surrounding sculptural elements of the portal. He suggested that the theme was a representation of the Mission of the Apostles, Christ's promise on the day of his Ascension to send forth the Holy Spirit to the Apostles that they might go forth to preach his gospel to the world.⁸³ Due to Christ's presence in the tympanum along with the depiction of the peoples of the world on the lintel, the reference to the Mission of the Apostles could serve as a possible explanation for the sculpture because the event occurs in the Bible before the Ascension of Christ.⁸⁴ Fabre's hypothesis, however, left no solid explanation why clear Pentecost iconography, the rays extending from Christ's hands to the heads of the apostles, was given such emphasis.

A third interpretation was offered in 1944 in an influential article by Adolf Katzenellenbogen published in the *Art Bulletin*.⁸⁵ Katzenellenbogen supported many of Fabre's arguments, also rejecting the Pentecost as an outright interpretation of the central

⁸² Fabre, "L'iconographie," 33-42.

⁸³ Ibid., 38-42.

⁸⁴ Fabre's interpretation was also supported in 1944 by Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 141-147. Biblical reference can be found in Matthew 28:18 and Mark 26:15, 26:19 as well. A discussion of Fabre's theory is found in J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 18-19.

⁸⁵ Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 141-151.

portal's sculpture due to Christ's presence.⁸⁶ Katzenellenbogen, though, proposed an alternative interpretation. He offered a combination of events instead of trying to locate one single literary and pictorial influence.⁸⁷ Katzenellenbogen proposed that the sculpture on the tympanum represented a combination of events including the Ascension and the Mission of the Apostles. He concluded that the figure of Christ breaking through the clouds and surrounded by his mandorla corresponded with an Ascension scene. In support of his theory Katzenellenbogen recounts Acts 1:4-9 where Christ makes a proclamation to his apostles just before his Ascension that they would soon receive the Holy Spirit and be his missionaries on earth. The rays that extend from Christ's hands reinforce this promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.⁸⁸ The Mission of the Apostles, including the set of powers and responsibilities promised by Christ, was further referenced in the lintel sculpture and the eight compartments surrounding the central tympanum.⁸⁹

Katzenellenbogen believed the combination of sculpture on the central portal gave an encyclopedic representation of the Mission of the Apostles.⁹⁰ Biblical text in the Acts of the Apostles could support this theory, for Acts makes reference to all three of the events early in the text with no clear separation among them by calendar days. Also, Katzenellenbogen offered evidence that, until the fourth century, the Ascension of Christ was celebrated on the

⁸⁶ Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 141-151.

⁸⁷ See Katzenellenbogen, "Central," 141 for his discussion on the "two-fold" meaning of the western portal of the Church at Anzy-le Duc which he uses in defense of his theory.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 143. Here Katzenellenbogen uses Old Testament readings from Isaiah in which Isaiah predicted the nations from a far would come together that they might be saved. Katzenellenbogen believes that the figures on the lintel and the eight compartments surrounding the apostles represent the apostles' tasks that were given to them on the day of Pentecost: to save or condemn, to heal and drive out devils, and to preach.

afternoon of the day of Pentecost, and that medieval texts represented the two events on the same page of some manuscripts.⁹¹

In his article, Katzenellenbogen offered insight into the sculpture surrounding the central figure of Christ. He believed that the wavy lines to the sides of the upper portion of the Christ figure, located above the heads of the apostles, were representations of clouds. The clouds to the right of Christ are examples of those found in a calm sky. He believed that they represented the upcoming power of the apostles to save the souls of mankind. He also identified the lines to Christ's left to be clouds from a stormy sky, representing the apostles' future power to condemn souls. This is a theory supported by some art historians, including myself.⁹² Katzenellenbogen believed that the Labors of the Months and Signs of the Zodiac found in the archivolt portrayed that Christ is not only the ruler over space and the races of the world, but over time as well.⁹³ Katzenellenbogen offered substantial textual sources to support Mâle's theory that the different figures found on the lintel, especially those of the monstrous races, were influenced by Byzantine art.⁹⁴

I feel the problem with Katzenellenbogen's and Fabre's proposed interpretations occurs with their use of biblical text, which is always open to multiple interpretations, as a primary source of support. Mâle offered far more substantial support of his interpretation of the portal as an image of Pentecost by referencing existing works, mainly the Cluniac miniature. Katzenellenbogen lacked substantial previous sculptural and pictorial evidence; furthermore, he also believed the portal commemorated the crusades, but lacked any art

⁹¹ Ibid., 142.

⁹² Taylor, "Pentecost," 9-15; Low, "Enivisioning," 96-97; Mouilleron, *Vézelay*, 90-91.

⁹³ Ibid., 146.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 147.

historical evidence. The construction of the portal fell well between the dates of the first and second crusade.

Over more recent years, published works have supported one or a combination of the previously discussed interpretations.⁹⁵ In 1980, Michael Taylor introduced his theory that the Pentecost scene, which he believed the tympanum to represent, was designed solely for the monastic community at Vézelay. He believed the program was created to emphasize to the viewer the divine and apostolic origins of monastic life, to serve as a model for reformation, and to visualize Vézelay's claim of independence from local secular powers.⁹⁶ Taylor focused on the central tympanum scene as that of Pentecost, recalling that the windswept draperies and tongues of fire are consistent with traditional Pentecost iconography and biblical text. Taylor further supported his identification of the scene by referring to Vézelay's connection with the great order of Cluny. Located in the same region of France, monks from Vézelay would have had access to the Cluny lectionary first introduced by Mâle, in which Christ is present at the Pentecost with tongues of fire extending from behind his mandorla. In his article Taylor explored the companion readings for the Feast of Pentecost that accompanied the lectionary miniature, Augustine's seventy-fourth homily on the Gospel of John, to introduce a plausible explanation for Christ's

⁹⁵ Peter Diemer, "Stil und Ikonographie der Kapitelle van Ste.-Madeleine, Vézelay," (University of Heidelberg: Ph.D.Diss., 1975), this study mainly focuses on a series of decorated capitals found within the nave of the church; Taylor, *Pentecost*, 1980; J. F. Scott, "Narthex," 1986; Kristin M. Sazama, "The Assertion of Monastic Spiritual and Temporal Authority in the Romanesque Sculpture of Sainte-Madeleine at Vézelay," (Northwestern University: Ph.D. Diss., 1995); Low, "Envisioning," 2000; Low, "Enlivening," 2003.

⁹⁶ Taylor, "Pentecost," 9-15. At the time of the portal's creation, the monastery at Vézelay was undergoing a series of monastic reforms. Due to the growing corruption of political and lay influence on monastic life in the Middle Ages, an attempt was made to return to the pure, apostolic beginnings of the church. To support this belief Taylor quotes K. Hallinger, taken from his discussions on the monastic life of the monks at Vézelay, "To be a monk is to make present the Pentecostal church." See in Taylor's text or K. Hallinger, "Zur geistgen Welt der Anfänge Klunys," *Deutsches Archiv für Geschichte (Erforschung) des Mittelalters* 10 (1954) 422-23; transl. from N. Hunt, ed., *Cluniac Monasticism*, 33-34.

presence at Pentecost.⁹⁷ Taylor discussed the eleventh-century addition of the *filioque* clause to the Nicene Creed. The *filioque* clause was added to the Nicene Creed in 1098 by the Council of Bari. It stated that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were indeed one entity. The Holy Spirit proceeds simultaneously from the Father and the Son. The clause caused much debate in the Christian community and further split relations with the Eastern Greek Church, which refused to accept the clause. Taylor believed that Christ was specifically sculpted into the scene, as supported by the change in iconography found in the Cluniac miniature. This imagery acted as a defense of the recent addition of the *filioque* clause to the Nicene Creed.

Taylor offered further support of his theory that the sculpture was created “to emphasize the divine and apostolic origins of monastic life” begun on the day of Pentecost, with a reference from the companion readings for the Feast of Pentecost in which Pentecost was said to be “the essential form of the church” and a model for reformation.⁹⁸ Taylor concluded that the representation of the peoples of the earth on the lintel supported an emphasis on the apostolic foundations of the Church and is consistent with Pentecost passages from Acts. Taylor also offered an explanation for the varying surrounding sculpture that appears on the portal. He rejected Katzenellenbogen’s theory that the apostles in the central tympanum hold books showing their power to save or condemn souls, suggesting instead that they hold books to represent essential activities of Benedictine monastic life, *opus Dei*.⁹⁹ Taylor believed the open books portray the apostles reading while the closed books represent them in prayer. He also concluded that the figure of John the

⁹⁷ In the readings Augustine locates the Holy Spirit within Christ. For further discussion see Low, “Envisioning,” 104; Low, “Enlivening,” 473.

⁹⁸ Taylor, “Pentecost,” 9.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12. Low discusses this theory in “Envisioning,” 146.

Baptist is found on the trumeau to “remind us” that John’s baptisms with water preceded the founding of the Church, which was a baptism with fire.¹⁰⁰ Taylor further included the portals to the north and south of the central tympanum in his discussion. He believed that specifically the southern door, where Christ meets his apostles on the road to Emmaus in the lower register and the Ascension scene occurs in the upper register, shows the events foretelling the Pentecost, thereby supporting the interpretation of central portal sculpture as a Pentecost scene. Taylor cites biblical text from Luke 24:36-49, John 20:19-23, and Mark 16:14 in which Christ instructs his apostles just before his Ascension to wait “until you are clothed with power from on high.”¹⁰¹ Taylor provides the most convincing argument for supporting the sculpture as an interpretation of the events on the day of Pentecost, but I feel he falls short in defending his theory by failing to discuss the scenes in the eight compartments above the heads of the apostles or the Labors of the Months and Signs of the Zodiac.

In 2000, Peter Low offered a new and convincing interpretation of the portal sculpture. He proposed that the Christ figure can be understood as a personification of the Trinity.¹⁰² Due to the new revision to the Nicene Creed, Christ could now serve in place of a dove at the Pentecost, the founding moment of the Church. Low discussed the significance of the Labors of the Months and the Signs of Zodiac archivolt in his article, suggesting that the interruption in the cycle by the three figures of the dog, mermaid, and acrobat support the Trinitarian significance of the Christ figure, as they appear in the cycle

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, “Pentecost”, 9.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰² Low, “Envisioning,” 2000; Low, “Enlivening,” 2003.

directly above the head of Christ.¹⁰³ Low points out that these three figures all come to an end where they begin, with their bodies curved to fit into the medallions. This is significant because the calendar year ends where it begins. Low also believes that the figures serve as symbols of the everlasting life of the resurrected Christian soul, prefigured and enabled by Pentecost, and of the eternal unity of the triune God.¹⁰⁴

In his very well supported dissertation and his recent article in the *Art Bulletin*, Low centered his discussion around a convincing textural source for the central tympanum, Ephesians 2:11-22.¹⁰⁵ He believed that the creators of the central narthex portal reinterpreted Ephesians in combination with the textual narrative of the Pentecost, at the point of access to a sacred space.¹⁰⁶ Ephesians 2: 11-22 states:

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called ‘the circumcision’ – a physical circumcision made the flesh by human hands - remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Jesus Christ you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace: in his flesh he has made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the keystone/ cornerstone. In him the whole structure is

¹⁰³ Low, “Envisoning,” 96-97, 99-100.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* Low agreed the sculpture on the portal at Vézelay transformed the words from Ephesians in combination with the textual narrative of the Pentecost, but the main influence for the overall work is the Ephesians text.

¹⁰⁶ Low, “Enlivening,” 469.

joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place of God.¹⁰⁷

As seen in the passage, Ephesians focuses its message for reform around the apostolic mission of the church, in order to bring salvation to the Jews and the Gentiles, with an emphasis on Christ. Based on the previously discussed evidence presented by Taylor and Low, it is possible that through the narthex sculpture, no matter what the original influence, the monks at Vézelay sought to encourage a return to the pure foundations of the Church, an ideal image of a community of love and learning.¹⁰⁸ It is also possible that the creators of the program sought to portray a representation of the church at Pentecost, the moment of its greatest purity and autonomy, as a message of resistance against problems corrupting monastic life at Vézelay during the Romanesque period, as mentioned in the history of Vézelay found in chapter three. In his article, Low attempts to show that the sculptural images on the central tympanum attempt to bring together into a compositional whole a representation of Pentecost, as pictured in the Cluny lectionary and described in the Book of Acts (2:1-12) with a visualization of the passage from Ephesians.¹⁰⁹

In his discussion of the tympanum as a representation of the Universal Church and of the public Mass, Low claimed that the portal visualized the Ephesians' claims that the Church came into being through the reconciliation of the two communities of the Jews and the Gentiles through Christ's sacrifice.¹¹⁰ Low saw the sculpture on the left side of the central tympanum, in the procession on the lintel, and in the four compartments above the heads of the apostles, as a representation the Jews. He believed that the sculpture on the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 473-474.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 470.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 469.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 474.

right side of the tympanum represented the Gentiles, mainly due to the presence of the monstrous races. Low noticed the special emphasis placed on Peter, the largest apostle just to the left of Christ, and on Paul, the apostle that he identified as one seated directly to the right of Christ.¹¹¹ As I have previously mentioned in chapter three, a representation of Peter also appears on the pilaster to the right of the trumeau, and sculptures of Peter and Paul appear on the lintel. The procession on the lintel of figures bringing offerings of grain, fish, and an ox were interpreted by Low as representations of the ancient Jewish festival of first fruits, where the first products of the herd and land were offered to God. This Jewish festival was originally given the name Pentecost, the term later adopted by Christians when the descent of the Holy Spirit occurred on the same day.¹¹² In his article for the *Art Bulletin*, this is one of Low's most convincing arguments.¹¹³

Low found representations of the Universal Church, as described in Ephesians, in multiple areas of the narthex portal. He believed that the passage's mention of Christ as the "keystone/cornerstone" of the household of God provides an explanation for the wide range of nonstructural architectural motifs found on the tympanum.¹¹⁴ The lintel and eight scenes surrounding the tympanum are clearly sectioned off, and the head of Christ is rendered within a trapezoidal space perhaps shaped like a keystone. All seven figures on the lower part of the portal, the six apostles and St. John the Baptist are merged with architectural supports; John is embedded in the trumeau and apostles emerge out of pilasters. Low found

¹¹¹ Ibid., 474-475. It is a long standing tradition that Peter was the missionary for Christianity among the Jewish settlements; therefore, he stands as a personification of the Church of the Jews. Paul was the prophet of the non-Jewish peoples, a personification of the Church of the Gentiles.

¹¹² Ibid., 476.

¹¹³ Ibid., 469-475.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 473.

this imagery to be a representation of the Universal Church being built “upon the foundations of the Apostles and Prophets,” as found in 2:20 of Ephesians:

... the Apostles and Prophets, through their missionary work and their pronouncements of divine revelation, function simultaneously as supports for and doorways into not just this particular abbey sanctuary, which they do literally, but also the church as a whole.¹¹⁵

Low ties these elements together in great detail in a convincing argument that the monks at Vézelay, by way of Ephesians 2:11-22, conceived the portal as a portrait of the monastery and its lay visitors, a vision of the Universal Church.

Low believed that the placement of the sculpture inside the narthex was intended to serve two basic functions: to announce and construct a sacred space within the church, by bringing the biblical text to life, and to speak of the individual visitor’s place, responsibilities, and rewards within that space and the Church as a whole.¹¹⁶

That is, the composition, through this conjunction of subject (Pentecost) and location (portal), sets up a play between temporal and physical beginnings, and thus between movement in space and passage through time, that was designed to announce to the lay visitors not only that the boundary delineated by this wall marks the true ‘beginning’ of the Church for them, but also that the Church itself, with all of its salvific benefits, will only *come into existence* for them at the moment they cross this portal’s threshold. As such, the sculptures were able to proclaim the presence of, and even help call into being, the sacred space stretching eastward on the other side of the doorway¹¹⁷

Low believed that the central narthex sculpture aimed to bridge the gap that existed between the contents of the bible, the devotional activities of the twelfth-century monastic and lay faithful, and the buildings in which their activities took place.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 472.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 470.

Since many of the pilgrims visiting the shrine of Mary Magdalene were from foreign lands speaking different languages, some of the figures on the lintel who serve as witnesses and future beneficiaries of the act of the Pentecost, would have been seen by the visiting laity as a reflection of themselves. According to Low, the depiction of the Pentecost would also have been understood by its medieval viewers as an image of the founding moments of the Church, a Church that survived in the monastic community at Vézelay.¹¹⁹ I believe all this would help the viewer to imagine himself or herself as a participant in the events represented. Low also believed that the creators of the narthex portal at Saint-Madeleine tried to enhance the parallels between the sculpture and their lay viewer. To accomplish this, the figures in the semi-circular arch surrounding the main tympanum appear to be suffering from ailments that visiting pilgrims believed to be curable at the shrine of Mary Magdalene.

In his article, Low, more than any art historian before him, discusses the sculpture on the central portal as one deeply ordered, and decoratively coherent program. The array of evidence offered by Low compels me to agree with him that Ephesians 2:11-22 could have served as one of the main influences of the portal's decoration. However, the program is clearly a collaboration of influences; the imagery found in the Cluniac lectionary, supported by Mâle, cannot be excluded from any discussion on the inspiration of the portal's sculpture.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 472.

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION

Through a review of the sculpture in the context of the twelfth-century pilgrimage and monastic life that influenced its creation we can come closer to understanding the complex meaning behind the main narthex portal in Saint-Madeleine de Vézelay. As displayed in this thesis, a complete and thorough understanding of the time and space in which the portals were constructed is essential to any attempt to discover the inspiration for the sculpture. A look at the theological changes of the Romanesque period, the sculpture's location and its function within the narthex of the twelfth-century church, as well as the social, economic, political, and monastic influences of the time must be conducted. More than any art historian before him, Peter Low has offered the most powerful support in his dissertation and recent article published in the *Art Bulletin* that an excerpt from Ephesians, in combination with traditional Pentecost iconography, could serve as one specific source for the sculpture. However, though I am convinced that Ephesians may have influenced the arrangement of some of the sculpture, I believe that it is simply impossible to select a single source to explain the narthex sculpture. Due to the lack of documents referring to the portal's creation, art historians will never know the exact reasons behind Vézelay's choice of sculpture. Low certainly offers the most concise explanation and Michael Taylor's studies into the monastic reforms at Vézelay give further insight into this puzzling work. Overall, the sculpture found in the narthex of Sainte-Madeleine de Vézelay is truly an enigmatic treasure of twelfth-century Romanesque architecture.

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