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Social influences on sculpted Romanesque corbels in the eleventh and twelfth centuries

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SOCIAL INFLUENCES ON SCULPTED ROMANESQUE CORBELS IN THE ELEVENTH AND TWELFTH CENTURIES

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
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ABSTRACT

Sculpted corbels of the Romanesque period are often categorized as obscene or grotesque, and frequently dismissed as medieval humor or an individual artist’s imagination. Common themes on corbels include images of debauchery and obscenity, as well as depictions of the effects of sin. These themes are usually communicated through the image of entertainers (acrobats, musicians, and dancers), acts of excess such as overindulgence in alcohol or sexual vice, threatening gestures, monstrous animals, or the human visage transformed by idiocy. As titillating and lowbrow as the images on corbels may seem, they should not be relegated to categories of absurdity or pure entertainment. Sculpted Romanesque corbels reveal a specific medieval visual concept of physical and spiritual degradation resulting from mortal sin. Furthermore, depictions of people and activities on sculpted corbels created between the eleventh and twelfth century in France and Northern Spain provide insight into medieval society. In analyzing the evidence, an interdisciplinary approach is essential to provide insight into the visual and social functions of sculpted corbels. An evaluation of shifts in power and economics during the eleventh and twelfth centuries establishes historical contexts, while a review of medieval written sources provides insights into medieval philosophies and perceptions. When such source materials are reviewed in conjunction with visual images, many aspects of medieval societal concerns that are embedded within Romanesque corbels become identifiable. Finally, when corbels are considered contextually with other images in their immediate vicinity on building facades, themes and even narratives are revealed.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society the word “marginalized” is usually associated with marginalized groups of people. When the word “marginalized” is used in reference to art, specifically art made during the Middle Ages, it implies art works which are not part of the main art program within a building or manuscript, for example illuminations in the margins of manuscripts, sculpted column capitals, or sculpted corbels. Marginalized spaces on buildings and in manuscripts have been used for various visual representations, but often marginalized spaces are used to show marginalized groups of people. Original sources that describe the origins and purposes of marginalized sculpture located on Romanesque corbels are scarce at best. Perhaps this lack of available evidence explains why most modern scholars have neglected investigating these obscure carvings. Monumental art programs that adorn main entrances to Romanesque churches are visually arresting and demand observation. Images on corbels tend to be a motley collection of depictions of vagabond entertainers and obscene activities, which at first glance appear to add little to the larger messages of church façade imagery. Images placed on corbels of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries appear to be in direct contrast with images placed around main entrances. However, imagery found on corbels provides valuable insight into medieval society and daily life.

James Jerman was among the first scholars to examine the role of Romanesque corbels. Indeed, his 1986 publication co-authored with photographer Anthony Weir, Images of Lust, was essential in demonstrating how corbels conveyed a moralizing message formed through ecclesiastic guidance.¹ Prior to the research of Jerman and Weir, corbels were often passed over

as decorative or possibly pagan symbols. Although Jerman and Weir focused on lustful images portrayed by corbels and ignored other potential interpretations, they successfully demonstrated that corbel imagery viewed together with written ecclesiastic sources, such as the writings of St. Augustine, provides evidence that corbels supported the Church’s doctrines and teachings. Additionally, *Images of Lust* reveals the corbel’s potential to provide insight into medieval social complexities specifically concerning gender and sex.

Nearly a decade later, Nurith Kenaan-Kedar published an article titled “The Margins of Society in Marginal Romanesque Sculpture,” and a book, *Marginal Sculpture in Medieval France*. Kenaan-Kedar’s book provides a lexicon of corbel imagery in Europe produced during the Romanesque and Gothic periods. Although Kenaan-Kedar agrees with Jerman and Weir’s assessment that corbels represent the Church’s perception of unacceptable behaviors, she attempts to broaden the interpretation of the corbel’s messages. Kenaan-Kedar emphasizes corbels as representations of marginalized, or lower, classes and anti-models to official programs of art located on and around church tympanums. Kenaan-Kedar attempts to demonstrate that corbels would have been interpreted as vice by clergy and monks, but as suspicious and ambiguous societal groups by laity. Nevertheless, she does not explain why there would be a distinction in interpretations between ecclesiastic and lay viewers. Although she discusses popular culture, she does not tie popular culture to corbel imagery. As with Jerman and Weir, the inventory of corbels Kenaan-Kedar selects to illustrate her argument is numerous and dispersed among churches and across European regions. Although this method is helpful in identifying common themes and imagery among corbels, it does not help identify meaning among sets of

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4 Ibid., 18.
corbels. At no point do either Kenaan-Kedar or Jerman and Weir attempt to examine one specific group of corbels located in one individual Romanesque church. Additionally, neither Kenaan-Kedar nor Jerman and Weir review historical events which might have affected the selection of specific motifs.

In light of the dearth of scholarly investigation into Romanesque corbels, other kinds of examinations of Romanesque marginalized art must be considered. Kirk Ambrose’s novel approach to the nave sculpture of Vézelay provides an innovative methodology for assessing seemingly disordered sculpted capitals. Thomas Dale’s similar approach in examining the column capitals in the cloister of St. Michel-de-Cuxa is also useful. Both Ambrose and Dale are aware of the dangers of being overly interpretive or specific when dealing with marginalized art. In his introduction, Ambrose specifically underscores the necessity of avoiding the term “artistic program” when discussing the nave capitals of Vézelay. Ambrose emphasizes that the capitals need not be “governed by a unifying structure,” and that gaps within the messages of Vézelay’s nave sculpture are filled in through the viewer’s active participation. I believe a similar approach is applicable when attempting to interpret Romanesque sculpted corbels. Additionally, I believe that, in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the purpose and importance of corbels, attention must be given to the historical setting during which sculpted Romanesque corbels were produced.

In Chapter One I provide a brief history of events leading up to the definition of social orders and ecclesiastic reform which coincided with the construction of Romanesque churches in

8 Ibid., xi-xii.
the eleventh and early twelfth centuries. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how reformation in the tenth and eleventh centuries affected the marginal art of Romanesque corbels. The Chapter Two identifies common themes of vice and their various representations within marginalized art. This chapter also attempts to identify an appropriate model to apply to the interpretation of groups of corbels located on individual churches of the Romanesque period. The final chapter identifies specific locations where this model is applicable and demonstrates how the model can be applied in general terms. An essential component of the model’s application requires the modern scholar to abandon the desire to identify a traditional narrative among corbels, and to embrace the necessity of the medieval viewer’s active participation in completing the moralizing tale offered by Romanesque corbels.
CHAPTER TWO: A HISTORY OF FRANCE FROM NINTH TO MID-TENTH CENTURY

In the centuries following the death of Charles the Great in 814, the Church’s reaction to societal transformation was manifested in new architecture and art programs. The following historical review of events leading up to the flurry of church construction and renovation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries offers insight into the art produced during the Romanesque period. The years following Charles the Great’s death were filled with war and violence while significant political changes took place and feudal lords grew strong. However, the shift from centralized authority to regional power altered more than the political make-up. Indeed, the shift in power and authority affected the economic and social order, which in turn were reflected in the art of the Romanesque period. This chapter reviews the reasons for the growth in power of the feudal lord and the abuses of the clergy and peasant classes, as well as the eventual development of ecclesiastic reform and defined social orders.

As Charles the Great’s descendants fought for power, his once extensive empire dissolved into regions. With the signing of the Treaty of Verdun in 843, Charles the Great’s empire was divided among his three grandsons, Lothaire, Louis the German, and Charles the Bald.\(^9\) The treaty did not prevent the three kings from attempting to increase their territories and power through acts of aggression. Charles the Bald inherited West Francia, the kingdom which would eventually become the country of France, while Lothaire inherited regions to the east, including the imperial city of Aachen.\(^10\) Charles the Bald’s concentration of resources in territorial wars with Lothaire weakened an already politically fragmented West Francia, potentially leading to the end of the Carolingian line and giving rise to feudalism. During the

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\(^10\) Ibid., 1-3.
tenth century the King of West Francia became more a title than actual authority over feudal lords. Counts and lesser lords living in principalities of West Francia began claiming their right to land and authority by heredity and not by appointment of the King.¹¹

Notably, the social groups hardest hit during this violent period were the Church and the peasantry. Feudal lords not only pillaged lands owned by other lords, but also pillaged neighboring lands owned by the Church.¹² Petty turf wars mixed with Saracen and other invasions began to destroy the economy which was largely based on agriculture.¹³ Land owned by peasants was either forcibly seized or peasants were forced into servitude when they were unable to pay taxes due to the disrupted economy.¹⁴ Less violent, but equally invasive and disruptive, was the laity’s interference within the workings of the Church. By the end of the tenth century, bishops were elected by princes or other powerful lords of principalities without documented agreement from the king, suggesting that the influence of the local laity within the Church was growing while imperial power was on the decline.¹⁵ Additionally, the emerging noble class began to elect members of their family as lay abbots.¹⁶ Conflicts of interests quickly developed as the installation of lay abbots became a way to increase family wealth. Moreover, lay abbots were allowed to marry and have children, creating issues of inheritance of the Church’s wealth.¹⁷

Sufficiently fed up with a declining economy and the threat to the Church’s stability, key ecclesiastical figures began to work together to create positive social changes. A call for peace

¹² J. Dunbabin, France in the Making, 119-120.
¹³ Ibid., 37-39.
¹⁴ J. Poly and E. Bournazel, Feudal Transformation, 30-34.
¹⁵ J. Dunbabin, France in the Making, 16.
¹⁶ Ibid., 156-157.
¹⁷ Ibid.
coincided with ecclesiastic reform, which arguably resulted in a revival in the cult of relics, new church construction, and an explosion of new art. Whether the trend of pilgrimaging to sites where relics were kept was serendipitous or due to strategic maneuvers on the part of the Church is debatable. Relics were sometimes transported to conferences for ecclesiastic reform and for the Peace of God movement, and relic processions became popular for certain celebrations.\textsuperscript{18} Stories of miracles usually followed relics.\textsuperscript{19} Whether the increase in pilgrimage was due to increased accessibility and the increased ability to travel, or due to an improving economy and a decrease in civil conflicts, is difficult to determine; however, the sheer volume of pilgrims visiting churches and abbeys demanded accommodations, resulting in new construction and renovations. New building initiatives offered the opportunity to augment existing architecture and art programs with widened naves and aisles, new chapels, and sculptural and painted programs put within the church and on the church’s façade. The visual impact of the church became almost as important as the relics housed in the church. Elaborate and imaginative imagery filled tympanums, lintels, and column capitals. Common themes of repentance and resurrection, using iconography such as depictions of the Ascension or Last Judgment, emerged as the primary iconography around main portals of churches. The tradition of using narrative stories from the Life of Christ or the Old Testament to augment main programs of images continued, and additional spaces located on church façades, such as corbels, were identified as suitable for sculptures.

The Church’s economic and social concerns, which led to the Peace of God movement and ecclesiastic reform, are reflected in the sculpted corbels of the late eleventh and early twelfth


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 42-50.
century. The first Peace of God council, the Council of Charroux in 989, called for the cessation of three major offenses under penalty of excommunication. The first offense was that of the violent invasion of churches and the theft of church property. This canon was eventually extended to include property surrounding churches, such as storehouses, resources, and so forth. The second offense to be halted was the theft of cattle from the peasantry. This canon was eventually extended to include the theft of other farm animals, and to forbid the pillaging of granaries, mills, and for all intent the general disruption of agricultural production. The third canon resulting from the Council of Charroux prohibited the assault of unarmed clergymen. This canon was also extended by the mid-eleventh century to include assault of nuns, pilgrims, and virtually any unarmed person. The Council’s aims were clearly a cessation of violence which threatened the Church either directly or indirectly via the economy or by preventing free movement of visiting pilgrims. Change remained slow because centralized authority lacked the necessary resources to enforce peace across principalities.

During the same period in which the Church held councils for the Peace of God, they also began ecclesiastic reform. The years following the turn of the eleventh century saw reformation of the clergy. Leaders within the Church felt the clergy had become corrupt and they associated this corruption with the cardinal sins of Avarice and Luxuria.
was prevalent in the clergy due to bribes in return for appointment to higher office, or in exchange for ceremonies such as baptism. Luxuria was an issue because rules of celibacy were not uniformly enforced. Lay clergy were allowed to marry and have children, and familial rights to inheritance were a threat to the Church’s prosperity. Ecclesiastic reformers believed strict separation of clergy and laity would provide a solution. Over the course of the next century clergy would be required to take a vow of celibacy or leave the order.\(^{30}\) Additionally, acts of simony became punishable by fines or even excommunication.\(^{31}\) Benedict of Nursia’s Monastic Rule became the standard for monks and clerics alike, in hope that a reflective and self-sustainable lifestyle would purge temptations.

A life of celibacy had been stressed by the Church in early Christianity. Origen, a third-century theologian, believed virginity was the key to liberating the soul.\(^{32}\) He stressed that spiritual transformation was only possible through virginity.\(^{33}\) St. Augustine of Hippo, after an early life of sexual indulgence, committed himself to celibacy.\(^{34}\) His writings also stressed the importance of abstinence and sexual intercourse as a means for reproduction only.\(^{35}\) In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Church returned to these writings, emphasizing their importance the clergy and laity alike. Sexual vice and depravity are also common themes among corbels. Although representation of Luxuria will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper, excessive indulgence in venereal pleasure and its degenerative qualities are identified in most sets of sculpted corbels from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Corbels located at the Collegiate Church of San Pedro in Cervatos provide examples which would make most modern viewers

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\(^{30}\) Ibid., 289  
\(^{31}\) Ibid.  
\(^{33}\) Ibid.  
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 111-113.  
\(^{35}\) Ibid.
blush. One set of three corbels (Fig. 1) displays a man exhibiting a grossly enlarged penis while nearby a couple, potentially jongleurs, contort in sexually suggestive, somersaults. Between the two corbels is a corbel that appears to be two beasts mimicking the movements of the jongleurs, suggesting the bestial nature of their activities.

Figure 1: Exhibitionist corbels, 12th century, San Pedro, Cervatos, Spain (photograph by Jeffrey Bender)

The eleventh and twelfth centuries were a time of transformation during which clergy sought to establish order in what they perceived to be a disorderly society. Moreover, because ecclesiastic reform was so significant, emphasis on separation between social orders was stressed by the clergy. The *Liber Apologeticus*, written in 994 by the Abbot of Fleury, divided the laity into two groups: 1) those who bear arms and 2) those who labor.\(^{36}\) In the early eleventh century, Aelfric, Abbot of Eynsham, further demarcated society into three distinct orders: 1) those who bear arms (*ballatores*), 2) those who labor (*labaratores*), and those who pray (*oratores*).\(^{37}\) Individuals within the three orders were expected to remain within their assigned order. These


\(^{37}\) Ibid.
social orders were believed to be God’s will and formed the spiritual body of Christ, the *Corpus Christianorum* (i.e., the body of Christ is a metaphor for the Church and congregation). The heads of the *Corpus Christianorum* were the *oratores*, the arms the *ballatores*, and the legs the *labaratores*. Anyone crossing between orders or doing anything that would be similar to acting, dressing, or living an inappropriate lifestyle was seen as polluting the body of Christ. The emphasis on social boundaries assisted the Church in further removing itself from interference by laity. Additionally, the idea of the *Corpus Christianorum* emphasized the importance of peasant labor and a stable agricultural economy. Through stressing the need to protect the body of Christ, the Church was also able to address slovenly and gluttonous behaviors that slowed down agricultural progress and that ultimately was detrimental to society. Again the Church turned to early Christian writers such as St. Augustine, who admonished Christians to eat and drink with dignity and not to the point of drunkenness. These ecclesiastic concerns are also reflected in sculpted corbels. For example, in addition to sexually charged corbels, at the Collegiate Church of San Pedro corbels also show people drinking from barrels (Fig. 2) and eating to excess (Fig. 3).

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39 Ibid.
Ecclesiastic reform and the defining of social orders in the eleventh and twelfth centuries must be considered an influencing force on Church sculpture of the Romanesque period, particularly in the case of sculpted corbels. Romanesque corbels often display images of vice, excess, and violence. The following chapter will review three of the most popular images found on Romanesque corbels: jongleurs, beasts, and distorted faces. By identifying the origins and common themes among these three categories, meaning can be extracted from corbels, as well as their significance to the social orders of medieval society.
CHAPTER THREE: ORIGINS AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF CORBEL IMAGERY

The jongleur is one of the most common images depicted on Romanesque corbels. The jongleur was usually a member of a group of entertainers who traveled from place to place. Jongleurs entertained all social orders, from small gatherings of peasants to nobility. Jongleurs even performed at the King’s court. Their performances included acrobatics, the playing of music, and the telling of amusing tales. Although jongleurs broke the monotony of everyday life, they also carried a stigma of trouble. During a time when the free peasant class was shrinking and the average peasant was, in some capacity, tied to the land of a feudal lord, the freedom of the jongleur became questionable. The jongleur was free to cross physical as well as social borders. Their nomadic lifestyle aroused suspicion in the minds of authority, particularly the Church, since petty crimes and general disorderliness seemed to follow this group wherever they went. The Church perceived the jokes and songs of jongleurs as offensive. Due to their nomadic lifestyle, jongleurs did not fit easily into any particular social order. They certainly were not laborers, nor did they come anywhere close to being nobility. In fact, since they did not fit in well at all with the philosophy of the Corpus Christianorum, their existence could only create pollution. Thomas Dale, in his exploration of the use of the jongleur on cloister capitals at St. Michel-de-Cuxa, compares an example of a “bad” monk as described in the Benedictine Rule to the jongleur: “those who spend their lives wandering around different provinces, staying in different cells for three or four days at a time, ever roaming with no stability, given up to their own pleasures and to the snares of gluttony.”

The vagrant lifestyle of the jongleur was in direct opposition to Benedictine monastic rule, which placed the highest praise on a chaste life of prayer and meditation. More often than not, the Church likened the jongleur to Satan’s disciples.

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The musician, in fact, was specifically singled out as a sort of siren, or pied piper of destructive temptation. The image of the jongleur playing a musical instrument was frequently contrasted with the image of King David and sacred music in Romanesque art.\(^{42}\)

The juxtaposition of music played by jongleurs seen side by side with music played by saints and prophets offers a clear divide between the medieval perception of sacred and profane music. The St. Remigius Psalter provides an example of sacred music contrasted with profane. At the bottom of an illuminated page a rowdy scene portrays a drum-playing bear surrounded by jongleurs; the top half of the illumination is dedicated to King David (Fig. 4). King David is


\(^{42}\) Ibid.
enthroned and shown playing a small harp. He is accompanied by saintly musicians playing musical instruments. Multiple images portraying sacred music can be found within Church sculpture of the Romanesque period. Some of the imagery uses the image of Christ, such as the tympanum of Moissac Abbey which depicts Christ enthroned and surrounded by saintly kings carrying musical instruments (Fig. 5). Other iconography is devoted entirely to the image of

![The Last Judgment, tympanum, 12th century. Abbaye St-Pierre de Moissac, France. (photograph by Jeffrey Bender July 2011)](image)

King David and frequently placed by main entrances to Romanesque churches. A few examples include the image of King David located just to the left of the doorway at the Porte Miègeville at St-Sernin, Toulouse (Fig. 6), or that of King David’s image occupying a column capital near the main entrance to the Cathedral of Saint Peter and the Apostles in Jaca (Fig. 7). The use of the
The image of King David playing sacred music is significant on multiple levels. King David wrote the most “musical” book of the Bible, the Book of Psalms, for the glorification and worship of God. Additionally, the divine rites which dominated the lives of monks were based on recitations of the Psalms. Moreover, the Messiah was prophesied in the Old Testament to come from the House of David. Christ’s image, so frequently found upon tympanums and placed so closely to the image of King David, reminds the viewer of the Old Testament prophecy’s fulfillment in the life of Christ.

Music played by jongleurs, on the other hand, was separated from the body of Christ, and was therefore unholy, even obscene. The medieval Church believed the jongleur’s music was directed toward physical sensations instead of the spiritual glorification of the Lord. The physical
sensations resulting from the jongleur’s entertainments would lead to other sins of excess.\textsuperscript{43}

Often sins of excess and depravity were described as animalistic in nature. In fact, medieval theologians likened those who indulged in gluttonous behavior to beasts. In 1142, theologian Aelred of Rievaulx described physical the effects of gluttony in the \textit{Mirror of Charity}:

\begin{quote}
They do not enjoy themselves in wisdom, nor in him who is the strength of God and the wisdom of God. Others, although not worse, are certainly more vile. In them there is almost nothing human. Obscene depravity has transformed them into beasts who find enjoyment in self-indulgent banqueting and impure desires. Since they do not enjoy themselves in sanctification which consists of the gentleness of chastity, they do not of course, enjoy the Lord who has made our sanctification by God.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

Aelred of Rievaulx specifically uses terms such as “obscene” and “depravity,” and he connects obscene and depraved activities to the transformation of humans into beasts. The medieval Church began to cast the image of the jongleur as an individual who seduces others to take part in excesses of physical pleasures, ranging from gluttonous drinking to fornication. Jongleurs and particularly musicians on corbels are often accompanied by beasts or beast-like people. A similar combination of image pairings can be found on column capitals as well as in manuscripts throughout the Middle Ages.

As previously mentioned, the bottom half of the twelfth-century illumination depicting \textit{Sacred and Profane Music} is a representation of profane music embodied by a beast resembling a bear. The bear stands on its hind legs, like a man, and plays a drum which it wears around its neck. The bear is surrounded by jongleurs, including musicians, dancers, and acrobats. The carnality of the drum is emphasized by its creation from the flesh of a dead animal turned into a taut hide. The bear may stand for the animal qualities which result from profane music, or it may

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
very well represent Satan. The scene creates a noisy milieu from the imagined sound of the drum and the accompaniment of the abrasive horn and stringed instruments played by jongleurs. Notably the instruments played by the jongleurs are often associated with lust and genitalia. The horn in particular develops into lustful and obscene imagery in the latter part of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Emma Dillon, in her article “Representing Obscene Sound,” cites marginalized images in illuminated manuscripts from the thirteenth century that sometimes depict horns in the place of genitalia, or horn blowers simultaneously defecating. Moreover, if the bear is truly a representative of Satan, then the manuscript page places jongleurs in direct contact with him, thereby defining their corruptive essence.

The image of lust and obscenity associated with the jongleur was certainly not limited to the pages of manuscripts in the eleventh or twelfth century. The cloister capitals at St. Michel de Cuxa also offer examples of jongleurs engaged in obscene activities. The jongleurs are portrayed playing horns while naked or dancing naked. The jongleurs are flanked by devouring mouths, created by large, monstrous heads with legs dangling from their jowls (Fig. 8). In his examination of cloister capitals of St. Michel de Cuxa, Thomas Dale points out that the Church viewed the body contortions associated with acrobats and dancers as “incitements to lust.” Indeed, Dale relates Bernard of Clairvaux’s comparison of acrobats and dancers to the intellectual acrobatics of monks “In the manner of acrobats and dancers, who with their heads down and feet up, stand or walk on their hands, and thus draw all eyes to themselves. But this is not a game for children or the theater, where lust is incited by effeminate or indecent contortions

46 E. Dillon, “Obscene Sound,” in Medieval Obscenities, 75.
of the actors, it is a joyous game, decent, grave, and admirable, delighting the gaze of heavenly onlookers. Bernard rejoices in the contemplation and meditation of monks while contrasting his ideas to secular activities of jongleurs. Bernard’s choice of words to describe the jongleur’s movement is most interesting. He clearly disapproves of jongleurs due to their tricks and acrobatics, which draw attention to themselves instead of to the Lord. Moreover, he chooses adjectives such as “effeminate” and “indecent” to describe their lust-provoking bodily contortions. Dale goes on to describe how the column capitals transition from naked horn blower, to naked dancer, to a naked crouching man, and finally to a crouching ape. Images of lust and beast-like features can also be identified on corbels. For example the corbels over the main portal of San Pedro in Cervatos depict a musician and acrobat accompanied by ape-men with enlarged genitalia and friezes of a woman attacked by serpents.

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Ibid., 414.
Depictions of humans with animalistic features placed near the image of a jongleur are quite common in Romanesque art. Another common beastly symbol of obscene music was a donkey holding a lyre. The donkey and lyre frequently play the same role as the jongleur in Romanesque art. For example, in the church of St-Pierre in Aulnay, an archivolt portrays an array of vices and obscene creatures seeming to dance around the doorway of the church. In this conga line of sinful dancers is a donkey standing on its hind feet playing the lyre (Fig. 9). Further south, across the Pyrenees at San Martín in Frómista on the southern side of the church is a corbel depicting a donkey holding a lyre (Fig. 10).

![Figure 9: Donkey and Lyre, 12th century, St. Pierre, Aulnay, France.](http://www.sacred-destinations.com/france/aulnay-church-photos/slides/xti_3448)

![Figure 10: Donkey and Lyre, 12th century, San Martín, Frómista, Spain](photograph Jeffrey Bender July 2011)

The iconography of the donkey and lyre has multiple potential origins. The donkey is traditionally a stubborn animal dregated to laboring in the fields. Frequently the donkey is compared to those who refuse to accept the word of God. As early as the sixth century, the philosopher Boethius wrote, “Do you hearken to my words or are you as an ass before the lyre?”

The imagery comes from an ancient fable of a donkey, or ass, finding a lyre and

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49A. Weir and J. Jerman, Images of Lust, 54.
attempting to play it with its hooves. A second and equally popular story comes from the moralized tales of the *Physiologus*. The *Physiologus* compares the wild ass, in the chapter Onager, to Satan, because “the ass brays on the spring equinox, when day becomes as long as night, just like the devil screams in rage when he sees that the people of light (those who are saved) become as numerous as the people of the dark (the sinners).”  

If the wild ass is a stand-in for Satan, his representation with a musical instrument further clarifies the role of the jongleur as tempter, or one who leads others to sin. Indeed, the donkeys with the lyre at Frómista and Aulnay are accompanied by jongleurs, hybrid beasts, and obscene activities. Additionally, the image of a donkey with a lyre is in direct contrast to standard iconography of sacred music, usually embodied by King David with a lyre.

Medieval society’s fascination with and repulsion by marginalized groups extends beyond jongleurs. Medieval society was equally captivated by the idea of foreigners from distant lands. Medieval artists delighted in creating images of foreign races with giant ears, snakes for legs, or other distorted body parts. Often, foreign races were imagined to have animalistic qualities, such as Indians represented as Cynocephali with dog heads. The extent of a race’s monstrous appearance was in direct correlation to the race’s distance from the center of mainstream, medieval society. The further away a race was from the perceived center of society the more monstrous in appearance it became. Moreover, mainstream society was based upon the concept of *Corpus Christianorum*, but foreign races had no place in the body of Christ. Medieval theologians often described the unsaved as being physical deformed or as irrational animals. This concept is well illustrated in the Vézelay tympanum at the Basilica of Sainte-Madeleine (Fig. 11). The tympanum depicts the Pentecost, and the Apostle’s mission to spread the word of God

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to the furthest regions of the world. Among the foreign races depicted around the tympanum are the dog-headed Cynocephali, tiny Pygmies, and big-eared Panotii. Kirk Ambrose has ascribed meaning to the appearance and gestures of the monstrous races at Sainte-Madeleine. The Cynocephali’s gesturing to his ears indicates that “he hears as a dog or as a pagan,” implying that, like a dog, the Cynocephali do not have the capacity to understand God’s word (Fig. 12).

Ambrose also observes the gesture of the Cynocephali to their throats, which references the Cynocephali’s dog-speak, or inability to communicate in any form but barks and growls. Ambrose points out that according to St. Augustine, in the City of God, the Cynocephali’s language “proclaims them beasts rather than men.” The implication of the foreigner’s beast-like or deformed nature calls into question their soul’s condition as well as the foreigner’s societal position relevant to accepted groups of medieval society.

53 Ibid.
The idea that monstrous races were monstrous because they were separated from the body of Christ is underscored by a thirteenth-century illustration of the world (Fig. 13).

Christ is placed at the top of the map, presiding over the world. The monstrous races are squeezed together and pushed to the far right side of the illuminated page. The physical distance from Christ indicates a spiritual distance, resulting in deformity. Similar deformities are represented on Romanesque corbels. Above the main portal of St. Peter’s Abbey in Moissac are human faces that appear to be distorted by absurd facial expressions or physical disfigurements (Fig. 14). The faces twist in grimaces or melt, creating lopsided asymmetry. Other churches have corbels in the shape of animal heads or bodies. St. Peter the Apostle church in Jaca contains
numerous depictions of animals on the eastern apse. Among the many animals portrayed are harnessed mules and squatting apes (Fig. 15). Although the monstrous races are not necessarily

Figure 14: Distorted faces corbels, 12th century, St.-Peter, Moissac, France (photograph by Jeffrey Bender July 2011)

Figure 15: Animal corbels, 12th century, St.-Peter and the Apostles, Jaca, Spain (photograph Jeffrey Bender July 2011)
represented in Romanesque corbels, the corbels share animalistic and deformed characteristics with the monstrous races, denoting spiritual corruption. The outward appearance in medieval times was of great importance because medieval society believed physical appearance was indicative of spiritual character.

As previously mentioned, Christian arguments used the description of a dumb animal to illustrate the inability to hear God’s word due to the lack of a rational soul. Polemical arguments among Christians, Jews, and Muslims of the Middle Ages frequently resorted to using animal characteristics when describing the stupidity or uncleanness of the opposing side.\(^\text{54}\) Additionally, Jews and Muslims were referred to as violent, and often compared to animals stripped of humanity and given to extreme violence. Peter the Venerable frequently referred to Jews as having the sense of an ass, a cow, or a horse, and he compared the Jews, presence at the crucifixion of Christ to rabid, bloodthirsty dogs.\(^\text{55}\) Indeed, the rabid dog appears in medieval art quite regularly. In the twelfth-century illuminated manuscript *Moralia in Job* from the scriptorium of Cîteaux, a hunter and his dogs are portrayed confused and lost while one dog, located in the middle of the illuminated letter “P,” turns and violently attacks itself (Fig. 16). A similar image of a dog-like animal is found on a sculpted corbel of the Porte Miègeville at St. Sernin in Toulouse (Fig. 17).


\(^{55}\) Ibid.
Animal imagery was not strictly limited to the description of Jews, Muslims, and the monstrous races. Many animal descriptions were also used as metaphors for a lack of faith or mortal sin, and were most likely inspired by scripture. Matthew 7:6 refers to dogs as unholy, and pigs as violent and treacherous: “Do not give what is holy to the dogs, nor cast your pearls before swine lest they trample them and turn to rend you.”56 Proverbs 11:22 compares women indulging in Luxuria to pigs: “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout, so is a woman without discretion.”57 While the image of the pig occurs more frequently in medieval churches of England than on corbels of churches in France and Spain, the pig is clearly utilized in the Bible to denote sin. In addition to using dogs and pigs as metaphors, Matthew uses the image of the goat to represent sinners

56 Mt. 7:6 NAB.
57 Pr. 11:22 NAB.
during the Last Judgment. The scripture of Matthew states that, “All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And he will set the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left.”\(^{58}\) The Scripture goes on to explain the damnation which will be experienced by the goats.

The same sort of animal imagery was also used to describe Christians who had fallen out of faith, led sinful lives, or simply chose to turn a deaf ear toward God. Among the three social orders, those who pray, those who fight, and those who labor, a derogatory attitude was most often taken toward “those who labor,” the peasantry. The relationship between medieval peasantry and clergy was complicated. Most medieval documentation about peasants was recorded by the clergy. There are no documents where the peasantry speaks for themselves. The clergy used the image of the peasant to describe positive and negative examples. The simple lifestyle of the peasant, devoted to labor, was admired by monks and clerics alike. In eleventh-century discussions of the *Corpus Christianorum*, Honorius Augustodunensis wrote about peasants with appreciation, because through the peasant’s labors, the clergy and nobility were provided with sustenance.\(^{59}\)

As previously mentioned, St. Augustine’s writings were extremely influential on later medieval theologians. St. Augustine’s writings not only acted as a basis for the formation of the three social orders, but also affected the clergy’s perception of the peasant. Augustine refers to servitude, or slavery, as a necessary “evil” resulting from sin.\(^{60}\) Augustine felt that slavery existed because the individual placed in slavery was simply misfortunate or a descendant of Ham, the son of Noah. In the Old Testament story, one day Ham found Noah drunk and naked,

\(^{58}\) Mt. 25:32-33 NAB.
\(^{59}\) P. Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, 31-32.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 75.
and mocked his father. The following day, when Noah became sober, he cursed Ham and Ham’s descendants to a life of servitude. Augustine believed that those in a servile class were descendants of Ham, and that their unfortunate existence was due to inherited moral guilt. Like other medieval writers, Honorius Augustodunensis found this logic appealing when he asserted that the laborious life of the peasant was penitential and that the peasant would receive spiritual blessings in eternity. Peasants, as descendants of Ham, were characterized by degenerate characteristics.

Various complaints of the dimwittedness of peasants or a lack of reverence were recorded throughout the Middle Ages. Bernard of Angers recorded some of his grievances concerning peasant behavior in the Liber Miraculorum Sanctae Fidis. A story in Bernard’s portion of the book of miracles recalls peasants arriving on pilgrimage to Ste.-Foy in Conques. While the monks and clergy attempted to sing Psalms, the sacred music of the Church, the peasants caused distraction by loudly singing profane songs and telling obscene jokes. The mental attributes of a peasant were also considered base by members of other social orders. Bernard of Angers described a man who had mocked Bernard’s recitation of a miracle as “a peasant, stranger to all wisdom, completely unfamiliar with every divine virtue, and what is worse, a liar with a depraved and perverse mind.” Generally speaking, the peasant could be as easily mocked and looked down upon as other marginalized members of medieval society. Even some fabliaux treated peasants in a disparaging manner. An old French tale of a peasant recalls St. Peter’s refusal to allow the peasant entry into Heaven. St. Peter tells the peasant, “There is no room for those who have not been judged fit. What’s more, by St. Alan, we don’t want any peasants, for

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61 Ibid., 33
62 B. Topfer, Peace of God, 47.
63 P. Freedman, Image of the Peasant, 138.
wretches do not come into this place.” 64 Although the tale is humorous in style, the treatment of
the peasant underscores upper-class medieval attitudes toward peasantry.

The tendency of peasants to be superstitious was equally frustrating to the Church. During the ninth century, Agobard, the Bishop of Lyon, recorded his efforts to convince peasants
that weather could not be controlled by people.65 The story included his advice against payments
to those claiming they could stop destructive hailstorms which were frequent in the area.
Burchard of Worms’ Decretum supports the Church’s opinion of rustic superstitions. Completed
in the early eleventh century, the Decretum lists numerous superstitions tied to agricultural life.66
Additionally, by the thirteenth century, the simple-minded nature of the peasant developed into
more abusive and direct imagery linked with animals and obscenity. Peasants were associated
with a coarse, ugly appearance as well as being physically dirty due to their daily work. Both the
Luttrell Psalter and the Très Riches Heures of the Duke of Berry show images that contain an air
of contempt for peasantry.67 The Luttrell Psalter contains marginalized images of peasants
working side-by-side with baboons, while the Très Riches Heures depicts peasant activities
contrasted with aristocratic activities. The Très Riches Heures shows peasants exhibiting their
genitals or posteriors. Corbels created a century earlier display similar exhibitionist behaviors.
San Padro in Cervatos provides an example of a man exhibiting his penis, while the adjacent
corbel shows a woman in acrobatic contortions exhibiting her vagina. San Mártin in Frómista, as
well as some churches in Aquitaine France, displays similar images. The peasant’s “irreverence”
for God can be visually related to the face-pullers found on the corbels of Moissac. Some of the

64 “The Peasant Who Argued His Way into Paradise,” in Medieval Cautionary Tales, ed. by P. Speed, New York:
65 P. E. Dutton, “Thunder and Hail over the Carolingian Countryside,” in Agriculture in the Middle Ages, ed. by D.
66 P. Freedman, Image of the Peasant, 138.
67 Ibid., 140-145.
stubborn and irrational qualities attributed to peasants could also be seen in the beasts of burden, such as bridled donkeys or oxen, located on corbels of churches throughout France and northern Spain.

The foregoing discussion demonstrated similarities in disparaging remarks in literary sources concerning marginalized groups in society with depictions of the same groups in art imagery. For example, the donkey’s comparison to a person with an irrational soul is not an isolated representation dedicated to the portrayal of Jewish refusal to accept Christ as the Messiah. The donkey’s representation as an irrational beast of burden can be applied to anyone, regardless of race or religion, who refuses the word of God. The metaphors using animal imagery and jongleurs illustrate general derogatory assumptions about another class or race. Additionally, the metaphors and traits they portray are interchangeable among marginalized classes as well as classes of sinners. The same irrational connotations associated with an ox can be applied to an ape. Although the ape looks similar to a human and has the ability to mime a human, the ape remains an animal without a soul and incapable of understanding the word of God. Equally ridiculous as a baboon plowing the fields would be a donkey with a lyre, who, like the ignorant baboon, imitates the activities of man. Ultimately, representations of animals and physical deformities in the context of most marginalized art, including corbels, is indicative of spiritual corruption resulting from sinful behavior and attitudes.

As discussed in the first chapter, standard images around the portals of Romanesque churches reference biblical scriptures or events. Standard images were easy to “read” and understand visually. Images on corbels do not contain biblical narratives. In fact, many corbels depict contemporary people and activities pulled from everyday medieval life that are distorted to the point of surreal obscenity. The surreal element in Romanesque corbel imagery is created
through the depiction of activities that medieval viewers would have experienced or have knowledge about. This surreal quality gives corbels a strong visually impact. In an article exploring obscene sound in Dante’s *Inferno*, Emma Dillon forms a connection between obscene sound in images and remembered sound. Dillon’s astute observations explore “the free exchange between reality and unreality.” Dillon points out that “the shocking power of marginalized sound images” is the relocation of real sound in shocking and unreal locations. Like the obscene sound described by Dillon, corbels represent real activities distorted to the point of being unreal and placed in a shocking and tangible area of the church. Unlike sound, described in a text or illuminated in a manuscript, corbels exist in real locations due to their nature as sculptures. To some degree, corbels physically as well as mentally invade the viewer’s existence. The unanticipated context and appearance of corbels produce the power to shock and surprise. The Church’s use of contemporary activities to express degradation related to vice and excess would be appropriate, particularly at a time calling for reform and order.

Corbels do not display comprehensive narratives as does sculpture around main portals. For example the Porte Miègeville of St.-Sernin in Toulouse shows the standard imagery of Christ’s Ascension (Fig. 18). Christ is accompanied by angels who herald his arrival. The lintel

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68 E. Dillon, “Representing Obscene Sound,” in *Medieval Obscenities*, 75.
69 Ibid.
below Christ’s feet depicts the earthly realm. The Twelve Apostles witness Christ’s ascension from their location on the lintel. The column capitals below the tympanum portray narrative stories from the Bible, including the expulsion of Adam and Eve (Fig. 19), the Massacre of the Innocents (Fig. 20), the Annunciation (Fig. 21), and the Visitation (Fig. 22). Each story depicted on a capital foreshadows the narrative of the Ascension located on the tympanum and lintel. Christ’s self-sacrifice in return for mankind’s salvation was predestined by Adam and Eve’s original sin. Herod’s massacre of the innocents foreshadows the coming of Christ and his eventual crucifixion, while the scenes of the Annunciation and Visitation are from the life of Christ and fulfillment of prophecy. The imagery of the column capitals combined with the tympanum and lintel work together to form a message of Christ’s sacrifice and mankind’s salvation. The message is clearly communicated, and each work of art was carefully chosen with a planned purpose.
Understanding corbels, however, cannot be accomplished by attempting to identify a traditional narrative. Instead, the modern-day viewer of Romanesque corbels would be better served by breaking away from the idea that corbels need to narrate a specific story, or portray specific characters for that matter. Allowing the possibility for corbels to represent a nontraditional narrative opens up the opportunity to explore a shift in paradigms. Instead of looking at individual carvings as potential or identifiable characters or “actors” within a story, corbels are more easily understood if they are seen as character types or even character traits.
Ron Baxter applies a similar model to his analysis of medieval bestiaries. He bases his model on that used by A.J. Greimas in an examination of Russian folktales. The model employs actants, which differ from actors because actants function as a general category. Actants are defined by the function they perform, not personal traits which create an individual. Actants are basically the function that the actors within a story fulfill. Whereas the actors in a story may be numerous, the actants are few.

The model is easily understood in the application of fairytales. For instance, a prince is sent on a quest for a sword by a king. During the course of the quest he falls in love with a princess, faces an evil dragon, and ends up using the sword to save the princess. Using Greimas’s model the characters within the story can be placed into categories or actants. The king would be in the category of sender, the prince would be the subject, both princess and sword would be objects, and the dragon would be the opponent. Notably, the sword within the story falls into two categories as the story progresses, object and helper. At the beginning of the story the sword is the object sought by the prince, but once he falls in love the sword becomes a helper and the princess becomes the object. The model can be applied to many different stories. In the story of Jack and the Beanstalk, for instance, Jack is a little peasant boy and is also the subject, while a giant replaces the evil dragon as the opponent, and a golden harp becomes the object instead of a princess.

Ron Baxter successfully applies Greimas’s model to moralizing tales of medieval bestiaries in his book Bestiaries and their Users. Although Greimas used up to six categories of actants, Baxter focuses primarily on three: sender, object, receiver. He provides a multitude of

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70 R. Baxter, Bestiaries and their Users, 75-82.
71 Ibid.
examples to prove his argument. I will only supply a few here to illustrate his process. In the chapter *Formica*, the ant has the ability to distinguish between barley and wheat (holy and unholy foods) based upon the odors they emit. The ant’s ability is parallel to a Christian’s ability to tell the difference between heresy and the true word of God. The *sender* is God, the object is *salvation*, and the *receiver* is mankind. In the chapter *Amos*, Christ is described as a herder of goats. The goats who receive his word become sheep, and those who do not, remain goats lost to graze in the desert. The *sender* is God the father, the *receiver* is mankind, and the *object* is salvation through Christ. Baxter was able to accomplish his task by identifying common messages or morals across all tales found within bestiaries. Like the moralizing tales of bestiaries, a common theme can be identified among sculpted corbels of the Romanesque period. Corbels generally represent temptation, vices, excessive behaviors, and the spiritual degradation caused by involvement with sinful activities. Ultimately corbels represent *obstacles* to receiving salvation. The images used to represent obstacles vary depending upon the church and the region of the church’s location. However, groups of *actants* identified by Baxter also exist in the moralizing tales narrated through corbels. Moreover, when dealing with corbels the viewer plays an active role. God remains the *sender* and salvation remains the *object*, but corbels take on the role of *obstacles*, or *opponents*, which the viewer must rise above in order to receive salvation. Ultimately, the viewer assumes the role of *receiver*. The following chapter attempts to use corbels located on various churches within France and northern Spain to demonstrate this concept.
Choosing an appropriate site to apply Baxter’s model proves difficult due to renovations and restorations that have happened to many Romanesque churches over the course of the last several centuries. For instance, San Martín in Frómista offers a multitude of corbels for consideration; unfortunately the church was overly restored in the late nineteenth century. Efforts were made to restore the church to its original state, but very little documentation exists regarding the original placement of corbels. Considerable controversy has arisen as to whether sculptures were removed during the nineteenth century. Moreover, without adequate documentation, it is impossible to be sure of the original placement of corbels. If the original placement of corbels no longer can be determined, it becomes all but impossible to determine the exact message which may have been intended by the twelfth-century designers. If the placement of Romanesque corbels held any significance regarding their context to location on the building and to one another, the significance would be lost in their reordering and replacement. Other sites which have not been restored can be problematic as well, due to the effects of time and exposure to the elements. St. Peter’s Abbey in Moissac contains twenty-five sculpted corbels above the main entry; however, almost half of the corbels are broken or damaged beyond recognition. San Pedro of Cervatos presents a similar predicament. The church is known for the erotic images on its corbels, and some of the most interesting are found directly above the main portal. In fact, the twelfth-century individual who designed the main portal placed relief sculptures between the corbels (Fig. 23), indicating that significant thought was put into selecting images to be placed around the portal. The tympanum and lintel are covered in an elaborate design of vines and leaves, and accompanied by a frieze of lions (Fig. 24). However, the corbels and relief sculptures above the main portal are the primary place of figurative artwork. The
corbels show a mixture of images of exhibitionists and jongleurs. Some corbels have images of ape-like people showing their genitalia, while the reliefs between them depict standard images of Luxuria (such as a woman attacked by serpents), or sexual acts performed by various animals. Unfortunately, as at Moissac, many of the corbels and reliefs have been damaged, making them difficult to interpret.

Figure 23: Scultped corbels and reliefs, 12th century, main entrance, San Pedro, Cervatos, Spain
(http://www.geolocation.ws/v/P/12382212/canecillos-y-otras-figuras-colegiata/en)

Figure 24: Tympanum and lintel, 12th century, main entrance, San Pedro, Cervatos, Spain
(http://www.flickrriver.com/photos/paulayjesus/tags/cervatos/)

The Porte Miègeville of St.-Sernin in Toulouse provides some of the best preserved sculpture from the Romanesque period. The Porte Miègeville was constructed in the early twelfth century and also underwent several restorations. The first restoration was by Viollet-le-Duc in 1873, and the second restoration occurred after 2005 in an effort to reverse some of the changes that happened during Violet-le-Duc’s restoration. Photographs were taken of the portal in 1851, prior to Viollet-le-Duc’s restoration (Fig. 25). Although the photograph is grainy, the
general shapes of the corbels can be determined, providing evidence that the corbels of the Porte Miègeville were not rearranged during either restoration. The images on the eight corbels from right to left include: an animal-faced man squatting on top of a monstrous head (Fig. 26), a fruit bearing vine (Fig. 27), a dog-like creature attacking its hind leg (Fig. 28), a monstrous mouth devouring two legs (Fig. 29), a screaming woman with wild hair (Fig. 30), a veiled woman with a fearful expression (Fig. 31), a horned mountain goat (Fig. 32), and another dog-like animal attacking its hind leg (Fig. 33).

Figure 25: Photograph of Porte Miègeville 1851, informational panel, St.-Sernin, Toulouse, France (photograph by Jeffrey Bender July 2011)
Figure 26: Man squatting over monster, Porte Miègeville, St.-Sernin, 12th century, Toulouse, France (photograph by Jeffrey Bender July 2011)

Figure 27: Fruit bearing vine, Porte Miègeville, St.-Sernin, 12th century, Toulouse, France (photograph by Jeffrey Bender July 2011)

Figure 28: Dog-like animal, Porte Miègeville, St.-Sernin, 12th century, Toulouse, France (photograph by Jeffrey Bender July 2011)

Figure 29: Monstrous mouth, Porte Miègeville, St.-Sernin, 12th century, Toulouse, France (photograph by Jeffrey Bender July 2011)

Figure 30: Woman with wild hair, Porte Miègeville, St.-Sernin, 12th century, Toulouse, France (photograph by Jeffrey Bender July 2011)

Figure 31: Veiled woman, Porte Miègeville, St.-Sernin, 12th century, Toulouse, France (photograph by Jeffrey Bender July 2011)
The sculpted figures represent a confused and hellish realm which seems to have nothing in common with the artwork on the tympanum below. The corbels obviously depict unpleasantness, and the easiest solution would be to categorize the corbels of St.-Sernin as depictions of hell. Indeed, when the corbels are viewed in light of Last Judgment tympanums, like the one found at Ste.-Foy in Conques (Fig. 34), a hell-like realm seems plausible.

Figure 32: Mountain goat, Porte Miègeistille, St.-Sernin, 12th century, Toulouse, France (photograph by Jeffrey Bender July 2011)

Figure 33: Dog-like animal, Porte Miègeistille, St.-Sernin, 12th century, Toulouse, France (photograph by Jeffrey Bender July 2011)

Figure 34: Last Judgment, tympanum, 12th century, Ste- Foy, Conques, France (photo ©Adrian Fletcher www.paradoxplace.com)
The tympanum at the Abbey Church of Ste.-Foy depicts Christ enthroned. Under Christ’s feet the devil shoves people into the mouth of hell, which is represented by a behemoth-like beast, most likely derived from various passages in the Bible. For example, the Book of Numbers contains literary imagery in the story of Moses: “and the earth opened its mouth, and swallowed them up, and their houses and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods.” 72

Furthermore, several passages in Revelation refer to the harlot of Babylon, representative of a nation of people, being devoured by beasts and burned in eternal flames. 73 Both Psalms 104:26 and Job 40:15 refer to giant monsters with insatiable appetites referred to as the Leviathan and Behemoth, respectively. Other medieval literary sources, such as the Physiologus, provide popular medieval imagery and descriptions of the Aspidoceleon, or great whale. The moralized tale of the Aspidoceleon is compared to Satan, gathering a multitude of fish, or those of little faith, into his mouth and then swallowing them whole. 74 Depictions of such monstrous mouths can be found in art and literature throughout the Romanesque period.

The tympanum at Ste.-Foy places the damned and the realm of hell on Christ’s left. Close observation of the left side of the tympanum shows that it reveals all manner of torture. Demons with sharp teeth and gaping mouths feast on the souls of the damned, while other individuals are hanged by their necks or various body parts (Fig. 35). The left side of the tympanum also portrays individuals tortured by having their tongues pulled or by being burned in flames. Additionally, there is an image of battle between heaven and hell depicting the demons carrying barbaric weapons (Fig. 36). The mayhem and violence embodied on the Ste.-Foy tympanum parallels the havoc and ferocity of the images on the corbels at St.-Sernin. Admittedly, the St.-

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72 Num. 16:32 NAB.
73 Rev. 17:14-18 NAB.
Sernin corbels do not show the detail of the Ste.-Foy tympanum, but they do share abbreviated references to the tympanum’s behemoth beast and tortured souls.

Figure 35: Hell, detail of Ste.-Foy tympanum, Conques, France

Figure 36: Battle, detail of Ste.-Foy tympanum, Conques, France
(http://drc.kenyon.edu/handle/2374.KENY/1608)
The fourth corbel from the right at the roofline of the Porte Miègeville, showing the monstrous mouth with two legs dangling from its jowls, appears to reference the behemoth. As previously observed, the monstrous mouth at St.-Sernin is very similar to the devouring mouth on the column capitals at St.-Michel-de-Cuxa. At St.-Michel-de-Cuxa, the devouring mouth is in the context of the jongleur, creating an association between spiritual destruction and indulgence in excessive behavior. A similar visual association is identifiable on the corbels at San Martín in Frómista. A monstrous mouth appears to be swallowing a man, buttocks first (Fig. 37), while on nearby corbels there are naked acrobats (Fig. 38). No jongleurs or exhibitionists are displayed on the St.-Sernin corbels but the reference to spiritual degradation and destruction due to a sinful lifestyle is implied in a similar manner in the Ste.-Foy tympanum. Pilgrims would have seen similar images at other churches, and would have understood references to the mouth of hell.

To the left of the devouring mouth at St. Sernin are corbels showing women whose faces appear to be twisted by fear, much like the damned represented on the Ste.-Foy tympanum. During the Middle Ages, women were the primary vehicles for communicating the message of
Luxuria. The famous relief located to the right of the main entrance at Moissac displays the well-known iconography of Luxuria (Fig. 39). A woman stands screaming as her breasts and vagina are attacked by snakes and frogs. At the same time, a demon with a knife approaches her. Similar iconography can be found on an archivolt at St.-Pierre in Aulnay, where a man gives a woman an unchaste kiss while serpents attack her breasts. A relief over the entrance to San Pedro at Cervatos simply shows a woman being attacked by serpents.

During the Middle Ages women were a marginalized group. While men represented righteousness and qualities of the mind, women were signs of the flesh and temptation. St.
Ambrose wrote in the fourth century in regard to the story of Adam and Eve: “We can discern the sex which was liable first to do wrong…. The woman is responsible for the man’s error and not vice versa.” A century later St. Augustine wrote: “Whether it is within a wife or a mother, it is still Eve that we must beware of in any woman.” Within every woman was the treacherous quality of Eve. A woman’s best chance for redemption was to lead a life of chastity, like the Virgin. However, even in the case of the Mother of God, her best qualities were couched in terms of maleness. In the Odes of Solomon, the Virgin is described heroically as having “brought forth Jesus like a strong man with desire.” Furthermore, examples of men committing sin were often described in feminine terms. For instance, in his twelfth-century bestiary, when describing a hyena, Philippe de Thaun compares a man who is covetous and greedy to a woman.

The two corbels depicting females are most likely representations of those people guilty of Luxuria and worldliness. The two women do not signify the damnation of all woman; they remind the viewer that anyone guilty of Luxuria or treacherous behavior, male or female, will suffer the consequences in eternity. The representation of a male figure is not entirely necessary because the traits associated with the sin the women are depicting are female in nature, even when a man is committing the sin. The difference in appearance of the women is also significant. One woman’s character is indicated by her wild and unruly hair, while the other woman is veiled, suggesting a pious quality. The women are from different classes, yet both are subject to damnation for their sins.

The two corbels to the right of the women, depicting a mountain goat and dog-like creature, could also be interpreted as representing certain classes of sin. As mentioned in Chapter

76 Ibid., 112.
77 Ibid., 90.
78 A. Cuffle, Gendering Disgust, 236.
Two, the Gospel of Matthew uses the image of the goat to represent sinners during the Last Judgment. As Matthew states, “All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And he will set the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left.”

The Amos chapter in medieval bestiaries also compared goats to those who could not hear the word of God and would be lost for eternity. The corbel next to the goat appears to represent a rabid dog. The imagery of a dog attacking itself was also discussed in Chapter Two. The artist who illuminated *Moralia in Job* at the Cîteaux scriptorium used rabid canines to communicate confusion and the inability to find salvation.

This imagery accompanies Gregory the Great’s commentary regarding the withdrawal of Christian preachers and the resulting spiritual blindness of the Jewish people. Although Peter the Venerable compared the Jews at the crucifixion of Christ to bloodthirsty dogs, an image of a rabid dog was not restricted to a symbol related to Jews. The rabid dog conveys general connotations of spiritual blindness and self-destruction.

The three corbels to the right of the monstrous mouth appear to be similar in message to the corbel of the goat and rabid dog. In fact, the corbel immediately to the right of the devouring mouth, although damaged, appears to be a repetition of the rabid dog. The next corbel contains the image of a fruit-bearing vine. The purpose of the fruit-bearing vine corbel is elusive. It may be purely decorative, or it may be meant to create a visual break between the images of the rabid dog and the corbel of the animal-like man holding a monster’s head. The same pattern of fruit-bearing vines is located on the tympanum below, which depicts the Ascension of Christ. The fruit-bearing vine separates Christ’s heavenly realm from the earthly realm occupied by the

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79 Mt. 25:32-33 NAB.
81 Ibid.
Apostles. The vine could reference multiple symbols. It may represent a grapevine, which would indicate resurrection and the Eucharist. However, the vine may also represent an earthly and material world from which Christ has departed. The vine’s representation of worldly concerns would be appropriate among the corbel’s theme of hell and spiritual degradation. Additionally, the vine’s inference to the Eucharist, or body of Christ, would also be appropriate among corbels addressing the Last Judgment. The squatting man with animal-like features appears to be a cousin of the demons at Ste.-Foy, and his animal-like appearance represents his spiritual immorality. In addition to his bestial appearance referring to the effects of sin, he may well perform the same role as the demons at Ste.-Foy, casting lost souls through the mouth of hell and to assist in torture.

Referring to the Last Judgment in the corbel imagery at St.-Sernin would be a resourceful use of available space, particularly in light of the tympanum’s theme. The Ascension of Christ not only reminds the viewer of Christ’s ultimate sacrifice for mankind and his miraculous resurrection, but also reminds the viewer of Christ’s promised Second Coming. This is not to say that all corbels at other churches strictly make reference to the Last Judgment or even relate to the theme of nearby artwork. Iconographic programs at monumental churches such as St.-Sernin were most likely given substantial consideration, while those at smaller churches were most likely restricted by financial considerations. The tympanum at San Pedro in Cervatos is not figurative, with the exception of the lions located just above the lintel. However, the corbels directly above the tympanum and at the roofline above the main entrance appear to have been well thought out and strategically placed. At the roofline, musicians (Fig. 40) are located alongside men drinking in excess from barrels (Fig. 41) and ape-like men making faces (Fig. 42). Admittedly, some of the corbels are too damaged to determine their activities, but an overall
message of indulging in vice and the spiritual destruction it causes is apparent through the animal-like features and movements of individuals depicted on the corbels.

Spiritual depravity and violence are represented at St.-Sernin and Cervatos, although the visual signs employed differ. Indeed, references to distortion and violence are identifiable among many corbels across French and Spanish regions, even though they are embodied in seemingly dissimilar forms. The representation of temptation within corbels may come in a multitude of forms, whether as a musical jongleur or musical animal. Degradation as a result of sin can also be found in an assortment of different representations: Moissac shows decaying faces, Cervatos
displays apelike people, and St.-Sernin references rabid dogs and goats. Baxter’s examination of medieval bestiaries demonstrated that different animals played the same role in moralizing tales. Additionally, some animals in bestiaries played conflicting roles within various chapters. For example the goat in the chapter of *Amos* represented sinners who refused to hear and receive salvation in the form of Christ, while in the chapter *Caper* the goat’s excellent eyesight is compared to Christ’s “recognition of good and evil”; thus the goat plays both positive and negative roles depending on the context.\(^83\)

In some cases, corbels appear to have meaning within the context of the main art program of imagery. For example, the corbels of the Porte Miègeville and their Last Judgment overtones appear to reference the scene of the Ascension on the tympanum below. In a case such as St.-Sernin, Baxter’s model appears easily applicable. The viewer is placed in the role of an individual on a quest for salvation. The salvation the viewer seeks is represented in the form of Christ on the tympanum. The sender of salvation is God, and obstacles to salvation are represented within the corbels. At St.-Sernin and many other churches, Christ is clearly represented in the tympanum, but his visual representation on the tympanum is not mandatory for the application of Baxter’s model. The portal of the church itself represents a transitional space, regardless of whether Christ’s image is represented. Entering a church represents separating oneself from worldly desires and receiving salvation from the damnation represented in the corbels overhead. By crossing the threshold of the church one is nearing the end of his journey or quest for Christ and eternal salvation. By entering the church and receiving the Eucharist, the viewer rises above the obstacles represented on the corbels he has just passed under.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Sculpted corbels from the Romanesque period present a fascinating puzzle for modern scholars. Many facets of medieval society can be found layered within images chosen for corbels. Through studying the texts of early Christian writers such as St. Ambrose, Justin Martyr, and St. Augustine an understanding of medieval society can be gleaned. Influences on later writings by authors such as Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Aelfric of Eynsham can be traced back to early Christian theologians. Christian writers of the Middle Ages addressed acceptable and unacceptable lifestyles which provided information about societal perceptions of sexuality, slavery, and prejudices against foreign races and religions. Emphasis placed on celibacy and purity is clearly stressed in these writings, as well as abstinence from gluttonous consumption of food and drink. Attitudes toward women and other marginalized groups as weaker and representative of sin are also clear in these writings. Images on Romanesque corbels illustrate social issues facing medieval society. The corbels not only reveal a way in which the Church chose to communicate a message, but show important medieval social concerns. The Church chose these images to motivate the viewer away from vice, but the corbels also reveal emphasis placed on remaining within socially acceptable norms. Sculpted images on corbels do not function as a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. Instead, the designers of sculpted corbels relied on the active participation of the viewer’s memories and experiences. The study of sculpted Romanesque corbels helps to augment modern scholars’ understanding of the reality experienced by medieval people.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Chelsea Buras is from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She graduated from Louisiana State University in May 2000 with a Bachelor in Economics and French Studies. Upon graduating, Chelsea was hired by International Paper for whom she worked for six years in Internal Audit and outside sales. The position with International Paper afforded her the opportunity to travel extensively around North America. After her six year tenure with International Paper she returned home to Baton Rouge to be near family, and continued working as an internal auditor for the following three years. Art history had always been a passion for Chelsea, and the return home presented her with an opportunity to pursue a master’s degree. Chelsea is a candidate for Master of Arts in art history for the spring semester of 2012. Chelsea would like to pursue a career at a museum or gallery which will allow her to combine her business experience with her degree in art history.