FACE VALUE: AN ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE CORBELS OF CHARTRES CATHEDRAL

A Thesis
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF ARTS

by
Larissa C. Pluta
August 2013

Thesis Approvals:

Dr. Elizabeth S. Bolman, Thesis Advisor, Art History
Dr. Marcia B. Hall, Art History
ABSTRACT

The numerous figurated corbels of Chartres Cathedral were inscribed with semiotic content. Works in this genre were formerly disregarded by researchers because of their perceived lack of meaning. Trends in modern scholarship have challenged this misconception, and recent technological innovations have facilitated the study of these objects. The category would be more appropriately termed “secondary” rather than “marginal,” as the former offers a semantically unencumbered assessment of the role of these sculptures.

Originally designed for the cathedral’s twelfth-century western complex, the corbels were likely members of a series that encircled the entire perimeter of the building. The use of human and animal head motifs for their decoration exemplifies a pervasive historical practice in architectural sculpture. The preservation of the corbels in the Gothic reconstruction of the cathedral substantiates their significance to medieval viewers.

Study of the surviving pieces is complicated by the loss of the contextual framework provided by the remainder of the series. The examination of material evidence indicates a record of artistic engagement with these works. Iconographic analysis of individual corbel images reveals both correspondences with the thematic context of the primary sculptural program and independent signification.

This project is intended as a useful starting point for additional inquiry, as investigations of secondary sculpture at other sites may bring new insight to its manifestations at Chartres.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT** .................................................................................................................. ii
**LIST OF FIGURES** .......................................................................................................... iv
**INTRODUCTION** ............................................................................................................. v

**CHAPTER 1: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND PROBLEMS OF SECONDARY SCULPTURE** ................................................................................................................................. 1
  - Historiography .................................................................................................................. 1
  - Discussion of Problems .................................................................................................... 9

**CHAPTER 2: THE CATHEDRAL AND ITS CORBELS: CONTEXT AND CATALOG** ................................................................................................................................. 13
  - Construction of the Western Complex ............................................................................. 13
  - Head Motifs in Architectural Sculpture ........................................................................... 16
  - Corbel Catalog .................................................................................................................. 18
    - Royal Portal Series ......................................................................................................... 18
    - North Tower Series ....................................................................................................... 21
    - South Tower Series ....................................................................................................... 22

**CHAPTER 3: IMAGE AND INTERPRETATION** ................................................................ 25
  - Examination of Material Evidence ................................................................................... 25
  - Iconographic Analysis ..................................................................................................... 29
    - Human Figures ............................................................................................................... 29
    - Animal Motifs ................................................................................................................. 35
    - Monstrous Faces ............................................................................................................. 39

**CONCLUSION** ................................................................................................................ 44
**FIGURES** .......................................................................................................................... 46
**CORBEL CATALOG AND IMAGES** ............................................................................... 48
**BIBLIOGRAPHY** .............................................................................................................. 57
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1, Haut-relief miniature from south portal pier (Sara Lutan-Hassner).........46
Figure 2, Sculptural group over north transept rose window (L. Pluta)..............46
Figure 3, Hidden demon, royal portal, south archivolt (L. Pluta).....................47
Figure 4, Atlante, south tower base (L. Pluta)..............................................47
INTRODUCTION

In spite of the enormous corpus of scholarly work devoted to the art and architecture of Chartres Cathedral, the numerous figurated corbels that inhabit its western façade have been consistently overlooked. These secondary sculptures represent an unexplored “final frontier” in the study of an iconic monument. In this paper, I argue that the corbels were inscribed with meaning and performed deliberate communicative functions.

In my initial chapter, I review the scholarship pertaining to secondary sculpture that has formed the foundation of my own investigation at Chartres, evaluating both the historical literature of the field and the contributions of new media. I also discuss some of the problems of modern marginal theory and offer a possible resolution to these issues.

I begin the following chapter with an account of the evolution of the cathedral’s western complex and its implications for the evaluation of the corbels. Next, I examine the application of human and animal head motifs in architectural sculpture, examining the history and diffusion of the practice. I then provide a comprehensive catalog of the corbels, indexing the location of each member of the series, its state of preservation, and salient features of its iconography.

My final chapter offers an analysis of the corbels. I first assess the material evidence, noting sites of apparent modern intervention and considering their significance. My subsequent iconographic analysis investigates individual figures in the series. I interrogate the origins of a selection of human, animal, and monster motifs and propose interpretations, taking into account aspects of their architectural and cultural contexts, as well as their correspondence with the themes of the primary sculptural program. The
fragmentary nature of the series and the uncertain provenance of some its members complicate this work; underlying patterns in the arrangement of the images may have supplied the key to their decryption, and these have been irrecoverably lost.

Nevertheless, my analysis of the corbels as discrete elements reveals some of the long-neglected semiotic potential of these marginalized forms.

This project is the product of my abiding personal interest in Chartres and attraction to its enigmatic secondary sculpture. It is my hope that it will provide a meaningful contribution to an evolving field, as well as a useful addition to the extant scholarship on the cathedral.
CHAPTER 1
HISTORIOGRAPHY AND PROBLEMS OF SECONDARY SCULPTURE

The founding fathers of medieval art history took little interest in secondary sculpture, concerning themselves primarily with the monumental porches and tympana of the great cathedrals of the pilgrimage roads. However, it would be incorrect to presume that minor works were simply overlooked in favor of the cathedrals’ more ostentatious charms. Figurated corbels, capitals, and grotesques were generally regarded as simple decoration, wholly irrelevant to the greater communicative project of the façades they occupied.

Emile Mâle explicitly deemed these architecturally peripheral objects no more than nonsensical adornment. He approached sculpture as a form of sacred writing, orderly, hierarchical, and exclusively ecclesiastical; profane subjects had no place within this framework. Mâle disdained the efforts of earlier researchers such as Charles Auguste Auber and Félicie d’Ayzac to decipher the meanings of secondary sculptures as characteristic of a faddish and misguided “mania for symbolism,” archly observing that “artists of old were never as subtle as their modern interpreters.”¹ The unequivocally dismissive attitude of this patriarch of the discipline prevailed for much of the twentieth century.

Arthur Kingsley Porter offered a slightly more positive perspective. Although his best known work, the ten-volume *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads*, published in 1923, did not include any discussion of secondary sculpture, he briefly

---
addressed the topic in an earlier book, *Medieval Architecture* (1909). Porter was quite charmed by “these fascinating grotesques, these lovable monsters” and appreciated their aesthetic value, declaring that “these carvings, monstrous though they be, rise to a high plane of art.” Nevertheless, like his French forerunner, he viewed these objects as ornament, and refrained from ascribing any further significance to them.

Henri Focillon was Mâle’s successor as the chair of Medieval Archaeology at the University of Paris, but did not share Mâle’s enthusiasm for iconography and religious symbolism. He focused instead on the formal aspects of Romanesque sculpture, with a particular interest in the structural and developmental principles that informed its expression. Focillon analyzed the metamorphosis of some secondary motifs in his 1943 book *Moyen-Âge: Survivances et réveils*, but did not broach the question of meaning.

Meyer Schapiro voiced dissent early on, pioneering a holistic approach that allowed for the integration of both sacred and secular elements. He addressed secondary sculptures as contextually specific art objects, each in possession of “a special, pronounced physiognomy and completeness, its own axis and expression.” In his 1924 dissertation on the sculpture of the abbey of St. Pierre at Moissac, he regarded the corbels and other minor pieces as independent elements that nevertheless contributed to the creation of the “sense of the character of the whole.” Schapiro emphasized the idiosyncratic nature of secondary sculptures, noting that “they invite no systematic

---

intellectual apprehension, but are grasped as individual, often irrational fantasies, as single thoughts and sensations.”

The emergence of the so-called “new” art history in the waning decades of the twentieth century definitively transformed critical methodology. In a 1998 article, Paul Freedman and Gabrielle Spiegel traced this theoretical reconceptualization “from a Middle Ages represented as being in tune with modernity- indeed, the very seed-bed and parent civilization of the modern West- to a more vivid and disturbing image of medieval civilization as the West’s quintessential “other,” in which the salient traits of the Middle Ages derive from its marginal and unsettling character.” This paradigm shift was the product of the confluence of three broad trends in scholarship: the linguistic turn, the rejection of foundationalist historicism in favor of cultural history, and the advent of feminist and gender studies. As a result of these developments, issues and objects formerly relegated to the periphery or ignored entirely were brought to light and reexamined.

This newly inclusive and exploratory climate proved hospitable for the investigation of secondary sculpture. Anthony Weir and James Jerman’s book Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches, published in 1986, provided a broad survey of the explicit themes that proliferated within the still relatively obscure genre. The authors asserted that these objects “dealt with matters of great moment- the sexual mores and salvation of medieval folk.” and concluded that their signifying functions

---

were principally didactic. The quality of their scholarship and the subsequent validity of their conclusions justifiably have been criticized; as Holly Silvers noted, they supported their arguments with sporadic references to sources of dubious merit, and failed to entertain possible alternative interpretations of their subjects. To their credit, Weir and Jerman presented for the first time an arresting collection of visual evidence in the form of numerous photographs and illustrations. The authors also included several useful maps charting the distribution of the different motifs they investigated. Its spite of its shortcomings, *Images of Lust* undoubtedly inspired a new generation of scholars and remains a perennial entry in the field’s bibliographies.

Michael Camille’s innovative studies of marginal art as a comprehensive category in the 1990s significantly raised the profile of the genre. His very popular book *Image on the Edge* (1992) examined the functions of marginal imagery in medieval society’s “sites of power,” the monastery, cathedral, court and city. Camille’s primary interests were in the means by which these images constructed and transmitted meaning, and their connections to the society that both produced and consumed them. His theoretical approach did not account for the obvious differences in the media in which they were rendered; illuminated manuscripts and secondary sculpture were treated as essentially equivalent representative modes regardless of their contradictory locations and audiences. In one of his chapters on sculpture, Camille perceptively noted that “our modern notion of the separateness of sacred and profane experience has blinded us to seeing the

---


worldliness of the medieval cathedral.”¹² His scholarship emphasized the material and semiotic intersection of these spheres.

Nurith Kenaan-Kedar was the first scholar to focus exclusively on corbels, discovering within the stones “an autonomous artistic language with its own vocabulary and syntax.”¹³ She proposed that these works constituted a polysemous system of public art that could support both the respective literal and metaphorical interpretations of its spectators and its patrons, concluding that corbels’ profane imagery served as a subversive antimodel to “official” sculptural programs.

Kenaan-Kedar’s work culminated in the first book-length treatment of its eponymous subject, *Marginal Sculpture in Medieval France*, published in 1995. Her analysis centered on various shared motifs found in geographically diverse groups of churches. However, Kenaan-Kedar’s expressed ambition for this project somewhat exceeded its execution, as she did not actually advance a practicable model for decrypting corbels. Her suggestion that “the corbel series serve the same function and have the same meaning in all the churches”¹⁴ disregarded important differences in the respective contexts in which the sculptures would have appeared. The book would have benefitted from a more narrowly focused approach, as the objects considered span a period of four hundred years. In addition to publishing photographs of many of the corbels for the first time, Kenaan-Kedar included an unillustrated catalogue of the corbel series of thirteen Romanesque and Gothic churches. A prolific contributor to the field, she also produced numerous articles exploring aspects of the visual language of corbels. Kenaan-Kedar’s

---

work remains essential to the student of secondary sculpture; her foundational ideas already have been revisited and refined by subsequent scholars.

Holly Silvers’ 2010 dissertation represents a significant advancement in the study of corbels. She analyzed the series of six minor churches in the Saintonge region of France. By carefully cataloging the location and iconography of each sculpture, she identified distinct patterns of usage among particular motifs. Silvers connected these patterns to practices for building syntactical and grammatical structures in written texts, and also evaluated their possible application as mnemonic devices. She stressed the importance of historical and cultural context to the interpretation of these works, taking into account the local history and village structure of Saintonge. Finally, Silvers traced the roots of certain profane motifs within the “visual vernacular” to the edicts of canon law and themes in popular literature. Silvers’ study ably demonstrated that the corbels were communicative participants in a contextually specific visual culture, and has served as an aspirational model for my own project.

New media have also begun to aid scholars in the study of secondary sculpture, and will likely assume an ever greater role as these technological resources are further developed and improved. Traditional amateur websites such as Adrian Fletcher’s Paradoxplace and Anthony Weir’s Beyond the Pale provide immediate access to voluminous collections of high-resolution photographs of sculptures that previously could have been encountered only in the specialized literature of the field. Intended for the lay medieval enthusiast, Paradoxplace is extremely broad in its scope. It nevertheless supplies a staggering compilation of more than eight thousand photographs of the architecture and sculpture of cathedrals across Europe, many of which demonstrate
Fletcher’s personal interest in corbel imagery. Beyond the Pale consists of sections of a former work in progress that Weir intended as a companion volume to his previous book. The website similarly aggregates an impressive collection of images of secondary sculptures with sexual themes. As in Images of Lust, the accompanying essays lack the necessary documentation to bolster the author’s assertions. It is particularly regrettable that Weir presents his visual evidence in a dauntingly convoluted format, as many fascinating images, including two corbels from Chartres, can only be viewed by doggedly clicking through a bewildering maze of interconnected pages and pop-up windows. While the textual contents of these unreviewed independent projects should be taken with a judicious grain of salt, both offer an accessible point of entry for the uninitiated and curious, as well as helpful visual references for scholars.

Several academic institutions have established important virtual centers for the research of medieval sculpture. The University of Pittsburgh’s Digital Research Library maintains among its collections a website devoted to Chartres that supports a searchable database of more than three thousand images of the cathedral, including several of its secondary works. The entries are cross-referenced by criteria such as location, date, and type of work. It also supplies interactive diagrams of the cathedral’s architectural plans and sculptural programs. Although the DRL website admittedly appears somewhat outmoded, having been last updated in 2010, it remains a very worthwhile resource for the remote investigation of specific topics at Chartres.

Mapping Gothic France most fully realizes the potential of new media. Developed by Andrew Tallon of Vassar College and Stephen Murray of Columbia University, the goal of this open-source project is “to establish linkages between the architectural space
of individual buildings, geo-political space, and the social space resulting from the interaction (collaboration and conflict) between multiple agents -- builders and users.”

It gives visitors the ability to explore the interior and exterior of numerous cathedrals in three dimensions, using cutting-edge technologies such as stereoscopic and laserscan imaging. Stunning gigapixel images eclipse even the best quality digital photographs, capturing minute details that otherwise would have been lost in the translation from object to image. In the case of Chartres, the maneuverable 360° panoramas taken from several different locations allow the viewer to enter parts of the cathedral that are generally inaccessible even to those who travel to the monument itself. Currently, the interactions of these technologies with secondary sculpture are largely incidental rather than direct; as in “old” media, some parts of the corbel series can be glimpsed in several images of the cathedral’s royal portal, but is not yet itself the subject of such thorough documentation. Given the steadily increasing number of scholars interested in secondary sculpture, this situation will almost certainly be corrected in the near future as these technologies become more widespread and available to consumers.

Just as the invention of the telephoto lens enhanced the study of architectural sculpture in the twentieth century, the inevitable application of new media technologies to minor works will advance the progress of the field. No website can truly replace or replicate the experience of personally encountering artworks in situ. However, democratized access to secondary sculpture can only serve to augment our understanding of it.

---

Discussion of Problems

As a comparatively young field, the study of secondary sculpture still faces challenges in the development of its specialized language. Its subjects are more typically referred to as “marginal” sculptures. However, this term is inherently problematic. I posit that the persistent application of this word to these sculptures has been largely automatic, engendered by tradition and by the perceived dearth of suitable synonyms. I contend that the term “secondary” is a more appropriate descriptor for the objects of my project than “marginal,” as I will explain below.

One of the problems of “marginal” sculpture is the ambiguity of its definition. For example, at Chartres one encounters two extremely incongruous sculptural groups that could both be deemed marginal under the current deployment of the term. The first group consists of the ninety-six haut-relief miniatures found on the four piers of the cathedral’s south porch (figure 1). The subjects of these sculptures are themes well represented throughout Gothic art, such as the legendary lives of miscellaneous martyrs and the battles of the Virtues and Vices. These works were recently the subject of a book by Sara Lutan-Hassner that dissected the historical and social circumstances of their patronage, production and reception.  

While the miniatures do occupy a physically peripheral location, they display standard ecclesiastical iconography and are fully integrated into the broader sculptural program of the south porch.

The second group that I will consider is formed by the eight large figures that symmetrically flank the rose window of the north transept (figure 2). Each of its constituents occupies a recessed niche topped by an architectural canopy. Grotesque

demonic heads protrude from the base of each niche. The figures are uniformly young, beardless men with serene facial expressions. The central couple, depicted at half-length, inclines forward, while the next pair is seated with open books on their laps, and the outermost four stand erect. One brandishes a scroll, and remains suggestive of similar objects are detectable in the hands of his fellows. No additional identifying attributes survive.

In spite of their substantial size, conspicuous location, and intriguing but orthodox iconography, these works remain resolutely encrypted. They are all but absent from the copious catalogs of the cathedral’s sculptures; the very few and fleeting references to this enigmatic ensemble amount to no more than a collective puzzled shrug.\textsuperscript{17} These monumental and prominently positioned figures are marginal only in their lack of legibility.

One would be hard pressed to make the case that these very disparate examples of so-called marginal sculpture either functioned or should be interpreted in the same fashion. This is not to suggest that all members of a category should be exactly alike, but rather that some reasonable similarity should exist between them. As demonstrated by this example, the term “marginal” is simultaneously too narrow and overly broad, as it can serve both as a description of physical location and as an index of modern legibility.

I suggest that the term “secondary” is better suited to the discussion of corbel sculpture. The latter is a relatively recent inheritance from the study of illuminated manuscripts and unsurprisingly, it has retained some of the connotations of its original

\textsuperscript{17} Marcel Joseph Bulteau, \textit{Description de la cathédrale de Chartres, suivie d'une courte notice sur les églises de Saint-Pierre, de Saint-André et de Saint-Aignan de la même ville}, vol. 2 (Chartres: Garnier, 1850), 99.
use in its adaptation to the discussion of a different artistic medium. Instructive parallels can certainly be drawn between the lavishly illustrated edge of the manuscript page and the inhabited lithic border of the cathedral, but given the fundamental disparities between their respective creators and intended audiences, connections between these liminal spaces should not be overstated. The word’s utility as a descriptor is diminished in the transition to three dimensions as it imposes a rigid construction of the cultural concepts of center and periphery that lacks a demonstrable historical basis. As Barry Magrill observed, “it has still to be proven that a marginal status of sculpture occurring at the extremities of the church fabric has been bestowed by any other than the modern observer.”

“Marginal” implies exclusion, and unintentionally confers an undeserved “outsider” status on objects so designated.

The term “secondary” offers an accurate and semantically unencumbered assessment of the role of these minor works. It transmits a realistic and appropriate sense of their position within the overall visual hierarchy of the cathedral façade. It is inclusive rather than divisive; secondary sculptures are not tacitly bound to a historically uncertain center shaped by modern projection, and can be interpreted as independent communicative participants.

In the course of my research, I first encountered the use of the descriptor “secondary” in the work of Holly Silvers. I was immediately impressed by its refreshing simplicity and directness. Interestingly, Silvers does not explain the rationale behind her selection of this adjective over the universally implemented “marginal” at any point in

---

her dissertation; it appears to have been an idiosyncratic, intuitive decision rather than a calculated rhetorical strategy. This unintentionally provocative lacuna in her account drove me to scrutinize the etymological practices of the field, as I had never before contemplated the construction of the traditional terminology, nor even considered possible alternatives to its use. I submit that scholars will continue to expand and refine the vocabulary of secondary sculpture as the field continues to evolve and define itself.
CHAPTER 2

THE CATHEDRAL AND ITS CORBELS: CONTEXT AND CATALOG

Familiarity with the construction of the western complex at Chartres is necessary in order to establish the architectural context of the cathedral’s corbels. I will also provide a brief overview of the use of human and animal head motifs in architectural sculpture. Finally, I will catalogue the corbels, noting the location, iconography, and state of preservation of each item, to prepare for their interpretation in the following chapter.

Construction of the Western Complex

The present form of the cathedral has been wrought over centuries by fire and regeneration. Chartres burned for the first time in its recorded history in 743 during the siege of Hunald, the duke of Aquitaine. Little more than a century later, Viking invaders ravaged the town and razed its rebuilt cathedral in 858. The church was reconstructed, and Chartres acquired its iconic relic, the Sancta Camisia, in 876 as a donation from Charles the Bald celebrating the consecration of the new edifice. The gift proved timely, as the display of the relic on the city ramparts successfully repelled a second Viking incursion in 911.

The Carolingian cathedral succumbed to the flames on September 7, 1020 during the episcopate of the famous bishop and scholar Fulbert. He commissioned a much larger and more elaborate replacement. To subsidize his architectural ambitions, Fulbert

---

22 Miller, *Chartres*, 9.
began an aggressive fundraising campaign soliciting contributions from the nobility, including King Robert II, Canute, king of England and Denmark, and the dukes of Aquitaine and Normandy; the bishop also devoted his personal income to the construction efforts.²⁴

Fulbert’s cathedral was consecrated in 1037, and burned in its turn only ninety-seven years later.²⁵ Margot Fassler commented that circumstances of the fire of 1134 echoed those of its immediate predecessor, as both occurred “just before the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, when the town and the cathedral would have swarmed with people and blazed with lamps and candles in readiness for the fair and festive celebrations.”²⁶ This fire was far less devastating than the previous conflagrations, as the damage seems to have been confined to the west end of the church; however, the majority of the town itself did not fare as fortunately.²⁷

Geoffrey de Lèves, the reigning bishop and a friend of Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, seized the opportunity to fulfill his own sophisticated artistic visions for the cathedral.²⁸ A precise chronology of the ensuing construction has proven very difficult to establish.²⁹ Archaeological evidence gathered from excavations of the cathedral’s foundations conducted in the early twentieth century indicated that the west complex was initially intended to be a sprawling arrangement, with a freestanding tower to the

²⁴ Ball, *Universe of Stone*, 17.
²⁵ Miller, *Chartres*, 11.
northwest fronting a portico that led to the entrance of the church. Work began promptly on the north tower. However, Geoffrey’s original design was drastically modified shortly thereafter. The portico scheme was abandoned in favor of the extension of the nave westward to meet the two towers, both of which were documented in progress in 1145. The portals and their sculpture were installed around 1150.

Most modern popular histories of Chartres begin with its next disaster, the infamous fire of 1194. Phillip Ball suggested that contemporary accounts may have exaggerated the actual extent of the destruction, “for they would hardly have been content to impute to the Virgin some half-hearted gesture.” However that may be, the crypt, west façade, and both flanking towers survived the fire, and were reincorporated in the design of the subsequent Gothic cathedral. Jan van der Meulen cautioned against the misinterpretation of this recycling:

> [It would be] incorrect to interpret the reuse of medieval sculptures in successive programs purely in terms of economic exigencies, which would reflect a lack of spiritual vigor, scarcely compatible with the medieval intellect. In an equivalent sense of piety toward the achievements of a venerated past, the medieval reassertion of earlier sculptures by incorporation in later structures may be seen as a parallel to that reinterpretation of the authorities which formed the basis of medieval philosophy.

It must be noted that the cathedral’s corbels are located exclusively on these spoliated sections of the building. Therefore, in light of the available architectural and

---

30 Whitney S. Stoddard, *Sculptors of the west portals of Chartres Cathedral: their origins in Romanesque and their role in Chartrain sculpture including the west portals of Saint-Denis and Chartres* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1952), 14-17.
33 Miller, *Chartres*, 12.
material evidence, one can reasonably conclude that the majority of the corbels date to approximately the same period, circa 1134 to 1150. The patterned corbels that form the upper registers of the north tower series are much later additions, part of Jehan de Beauce’s flamboyant sixteenth-century spire. Given the arrangement of the corbels around the bases of the flanking towers, it seems quite likely that Geoffrey’s twelfth-century church bore figurated corbels around the length of its perimeter in the typical Romanesque composition. The preservation of the corbels in the Gothic resurrection of the cathedral indicates that these objects had a meaning to medieval viewers that was deemed worthy of perpetuation.

Head Motifs in Architectural Sculpture

Head motifs were widely used in medieval secondary sculpture across a broad geographic range. Though most heavily concentrated in England and France, numerous examples also have been catalogued in Ireland, Italy, and Spain. The human, animal, and monster heads inhabited a variety of structural elements, such as “the archivolts of portals, of chancel arches, of windows, of blank arcadings, or even the frame of an oculus”37 in addition to horizontal rows of corbels, and appeared in correspondingly diverse monuments, from small village churches to the third Cluny monastery church.

In a 1957 article, Françoise Henry and George Zarnecki surveyed regional applications and styles of these forms, which span the gamut of representational modes from naturalistic to nearly abstract. They compiled a general chronology of the motif’s

---

transmission. Based on visual parallels to mosaics at Parenzo, Ravenna, and Rome, the authors proposed that the theme was known to Byzantine sculptors, and likely made its initial appearance in the tenth century in southern Italy. The practice of including sculpted heads in architecture travelled with the artists summoned to the reconstruction of the abbey of Monte Cassino in the latter half of the eleventh century. From this point, it spread to France, where it proliferated and was subsequently disseminated along the pilgrimage roads. Although their primary interest was in formal matters, Henry and Zarnecki asserted that the sculpted heads “were not mere ornament and played their part in the carefully planned iconography”\(^{38}\) of the monuments they populated.

The origins of the head motif in architectural sculpture can be traced to multiple cultural sources. Henry and Zarnecki noted its Egyptian and Mesopotamian antecedents, and Fernand Benoit investigated its use on Etruscan funerary sculpture. These scholars connected the motif’s particular popularity in France to its visual analogy to aspects of Celtic practices; as the former commented, “the custom of hanging or nailing the head of an enemy on one’s house was certainly a common one in Celtic lands.”\(^{39}\) However, such displays were not only indicators of martial prowess. The human head was also “a profoundly religious symbol, sometimes evidently representative of a deity and generally suggestive of supernatural wisdom and power. It was a source of prosperity, fertility, and healing as well as an apotropaic agent to ward off evil from the individual and from the community as a whole.”\(^{40}\)


\(^{39}\) Henry and Zarnecki, “Romanesque Arches,” 29.

The persistent use of head motifs in corbel sculpture may be attributed in part to the natural suitability of the shape of this architectural member for such decoration. Nevertheless, the long history and cultural resonances of these works suggest that they were imbued with significance.

Corbel Catalog

In this section, I will provide a catalog of the corbels of Chartres. I will briefly describe each corbel, observing its salient iconographic features and noting its state of preservation where warranted. Further analysis will be reserved for the next chapter of this paper.

Following the model used by Holly Silvers, I have assigned each corbel a unique identification number composed of a prefix corresponding to its general location on the cathedral, a letter indicating the zone within that location, and a numerical value corresponding to the position of the corbel within its series, moving from the left (north) side to the right (south) side. For example, the code RPC14 indicates royal portal, central zone, the fourteenth corbel from the left. This system offers an efficient shorthand method of identification that enables me to cross-reference similar motifs easily, and which will facilitate my discussion in the subsequent chapter.

Royal Portal Series

The royal portal series contains a total of twenty-four corbels, with seven corbels over each of the north and south doorways, and ten over the central portal. The first in the series (RPN1) is a monster with a furrowed brow, protruding close-set eyes and a bulbous
nose. It clutches what appear to be stalks of greenery in its mouth, and wears leaves on its right cheek. Erosion on the right side of the corbel makes additional details difficult to discern. Another monster follows, its eyes and nose quite similar to those of its predecessor, with an oval mouth opened just wide enough to expose long pointed teeth whose shape echoes the triangular bits of hair that frame the creature’s face and form his beard (RPN2). The next (RPN3) is not figured, featuring two battered rolls at the top and bottom of the corbel. RPN4 is the series’ first human figure, a man wearing a short, neat beard, who is succeeded by a second blank rolled corbel (RPN5). A horned monster (RPN6) follows, with huge fangs and a broad nose similar to RPN1 and RPN2. The final corbel (RPN7) over the north doorway is another blank, considerably more weathered than the others.

Another bearded man (RPC8) leads the central segment. His features are much like those of RPN4, though the shape of the face is slightly rounder. The next corbel (RPC9) is too damaged to classify. It is followed by a toothy bearded monster (RPC10) that is nearly identical to RPN2, except that the ends of its beard are gently curved rather than pointed. Excessive wear in the area around the nose and mouth obscures some of the details of RPC11; fragments around the monster’s chin area may be the remnants of a beard or perhaps an object protruding from the corner of its mouth. Its bulging eyes have drilled pupils. The next corbel (RPC12) is a third bearded man, with the close set eyes and triangular nose of his fellows. He sports a long, thin moustache and a beard, both of which terminate in tight curls. A wide-eyed monster (RPC13) follows, with an unidentifiable item that is possibly a human appendage emerging from between jaws full of small sharp teeth. RPC14 is a monster with wavy hair, a prominent brow and deeply
incised pupils. Although the lower half of the head is destroyed, the figure’s expression retains an air of unsettling intensity. Next is a horned humanoid monster (RPC15) featuring a round drilled mouth whose moustache appears to sprout from its nostrils. It is succeeded by a vaguely feline creature (RPC16) that opens its mouth to reveal its split tongue. The last corbel of the central group (RPC17) is a leonine monster with a streaming mane, about to bite into the object gripped between its paws, each with three attenuated fingers.

The southern subgroup begins with a monstrous head (RPS18) whose jaws stretch wide to grip four fronds of leafy foliage. The next figure (RPS19) recalls RPC17 in the shapes of its eyes and brow; here again the creature’s face below the nose has been destroyed. RPS20 is a curious animal, possibly a bear or a fox, with a long snout, pointed ears and clawed forepaws holding a smaller animal in its mouth. The following corbel (RPS21) is in a poor state, but suggests an ox; its surviving foreleg is hooved, and curved horns are visible at the top of its head. Next is a man with enormous bulging eyes, drilled pupils, and a moustache, gripping his forked beard with both hands (RPS22). RPS23, a monster in the style of RPN6, appears to have been heavily restored, given its suspiciously pristine condition. The figure retains all of its fragile facial details, and the patterned band at the top of the corbel shows barely any evidence of weathering. In contrast, the royal portal series’ final element is extremely eroded (RPS24). One can discern a pair of eyes peering out from its mangled remains, but the motif is otherwise illegible.

I will next catalog the corbels on the towers flanking the western façade. These series each wrap around the entire base of their respective tower; thus, each has a
presence on multiple faces of the cathedral. In an effort to present their positions as clearly as possible, I have indexed these separately from the royal portal group. Each tower has two registers of corbels. However, for the purposes of this project I will individually catalog only the members of the lower registers.

**North Tower Series**

The corbel series of the north tower begins on the north side of the tower’s base. Its lower register contains eight corbels, divided into two sets of four. This series begins with the well-worn head of an animal of indeterminate species, perhaps a cat or a dog (NTN1). It is followed by a friendly-looking ox (NTN2) and a largely deteriorated monster (NTN3). Next is a bearded man with thick curly hair, elegantly molded features, and an intense expression (NTN4). He is succeeded by a horned monster (NTN5) that holds an unrecognizable object in its mouth. NTN6 is a nonfigural corbel bearing a geometric pattern of four pairs of petal-like curves, each with a rounded end containing a small raised circle. The subsequent corbel is very damaged, showing a man with an oversized oval head and large eyes, possibly in a crouching position (NTN7). The figure’s right arm and half of his torso are missing. A second geometric corbel follows (NTN8). The upper register consists of ten corbels split into two sets of five. These corbels are identical, each bearing the geometric pattern found on NTN6 and NTN8.

The series continues with eight additional corbels on the cathedral’s western façade, again divided into two groups of four. A canine head (NTW9) leads, followed by a wide-eyed woman wearing head covering, her mouth slightly open and downturned in an expression of surprise or displeasure (NTW10). The next corbel (NTW11) is a
monster with two pointed horns, a jaunty moustache, and a neat row of square teeth. NTW12 appears to be a man wearing a fool’s cap and a decidedly menacing leer. A catlike monster similar to RPC16 follows, with a widely opened mouth from which a long tongue protrudes (NTW13). The next has been entirely effaced, precluding any possible identification (NTW14). A human face with a drilled mouth and a charmingly mischievous expression comes next (NTW15). The figure may be wearing a crown or headpiece, though damage to the top of the corbel makes this uncertain. The north tower series concludes with a final feline monster (NTW16), again noticeably akin to RPC16 and NTW13. The upper register is once more composed of identical patterned elements, but on this side, there are twelve corbels rather than ten in total.

South Tower Series

The south tower corbel series depicts a particularly vivid collection of characters, beginning on the west façade with STW1, a grotesque humanoid figure, possibly wearing a hood or a belled cap, with an upturned nose and a distorted grimacing mouth. The next is an exhibitionist atlante, which fortunately retains several interesting details in spite of its partially intact condition (STW2). Barefoot, he cocks his head to the right as if listening, his penis visible between his crouching legs. An acrobatic tail-biting monster follows, folding its ankles up to its ears as its tail stretches up between its legs to its mouth (STW3). It is succeeded by the well-preserved head of a cow (STW4). Next is a substantially damaged monster missing the entire lower portion of its face (STW5). Its eyes bulge from their sockets in opposite directions, and the curved shapes at the top of the corbel may indicate tufts of hair. STW6 is an endearingly cartoonish monster with
deeply carved eyes. Its snub nose and wide mouth are similar to those of STW1; a thick fringe hangs around its neck like a ruff, and the remains of a few pointed teeth are visible inside its mouth. A frightening figure follows, featuring an enormous mouth from which a pair of human legs emerges (STW7). Wreathed by curled forms of varying size, this monstrous head has small eyes, huge teeth, and striated cheeks. STW8 exhibits similar ridges or wrinkles on its face and brow. The bearded monster has two large curls of hair between its horns, and wears a pensive expression. The upper register of this group was composed of ten corbels, of which only seven survive.

The series resumes on the tower’s south side, led by a bearded man with finely textured hair and a distinctively protruding right eye (STS9). Next is a horned demon exuding malevolence, with long clawed fingers and rows of teeth visible in its slightly opened jaws (STS10). A man with a round face, broad nose and a bushy mustache follows (STS11). The succeeding corbel is an animal of indeterminate species; the shape of the head is bovine, but its pointed ears more closely resemble those of a horse (STS12). Its moderately eroded state prevents definitive identification. STS13 is worn beyond recognition. The next corbel is a carefully detailed ram, displaying large curling horns, delicate nostrils and forelegs with cloven hooves (STS14). A mouth-pulling monster with rounded ears, thick lips, and a split beard follows (STS15). Its eyes are oddly lacking in detail, without any delineation of the lids or pupils. The last corbel on the tower’s south side is a humanoid head with a curled, protruding tongue and what appears to be a pair of horns poking out from a nest of curly hair (STS16). Ten more corbels formed the upper register. The majority of the nine that remain have deteriorated severely.
It should be noted that the south tower series continues on the eastern face of the tower with two additional abbreviated registers. However, given the uniformly poor condition of these corbels, I have omitted them from my study.
CHAPTER 3

IMAGE AND INTERPRETATION

The corbels of Chartres Cathedral have proven particularly challenging to analyze due to the daunting combination of their fragmentary nature, the dearth of available historical information, and the hermetic nature of their motifs. As I have previously asserted, it is highly probable that the extant corbels were formerly constituents of a series that encircled the perimeter of the cathedral. The lost members of this series would have supplied an essential contextual framework within which to regard the few survivors, as it is possible that discernible patterns would have emerged. For example, Holly Silvers was able to identify patterns in the arrangement of images in the churches she studied that indicated “the use of pictorial punctuation, mnemonic devices, and isomorphic correspondence to form visual phrases or concepts.”

In the absence of the remainder of the series, such a comprehensive study is regrettably not possible. Consequently, I will analyze the corbels primarily as discrete works rather than as the components of a greater communicative structure. This chapter begins with an evaluation of the material evidence that reveals a record of artistic engagement with the series. I will then investigate the iconography of individual figures and offer contextually specific interpretations that demonstrate the semiotic potential of these sculptures.

Examination of Material Evidence

Unsurprisingly, the corbels are not mentioned in historical accounts of the cathedral’s various transformations. One cannot determine with any certainty whether

\[41\] Silvers, “Repulsive Rhetoric,” 7.
their original arrangement has been preserved, or to what degree they may have been modified since their initial installation. In spite of the absence of such documentation, some information can be gleaned from the material evidence, as examination of the corbels does yield evocative clues about their history. For example, two non-figurated corbels on the lower register of the north side of the north tower, NTN6 and NTN8, can be dated to the sixteenth century. The distinctive pattern on these corbels, four paired curves punctuated by a raised dot, matches that of the corbels of the tower’s uppermost register, which was rebuilt in the course of the construction of a new stone spire by Jehan de Beauce between 1507 and 1513. This pattern’s occurrence only on the corbels of the north tower, taken with the relatively good condition of NTN6 and NTN8, supports the assignment of the later date to these elements.

Similarly, the blank members of the northern segment of the royal portal series, RPN3, RPN5, and RPN7, are almost certainly later supplements to the foundational group. Ironically, the blankness of the corbels is in itself informative. The fact that they were installed in this undecorated form might indicate an extended interval between the loss of the original works and their eventual replacement, during which the motifs of the originals were forgotten. It is also possible that these corbels were eliminated deliberately if their iconographic content was perceived as ideologically problematic at some point. Though the cathedral suffered comparatively minor damage in the Revolution, some of its sculpture, including secondary works, did not escape the anti-Christian destructive impulse. In either case, the insertion of the blank corbels demonstrates that the corbel

---

43 Peter Kidson, *Sculpture at Chartres*, 55-56.
series was considered sufficiently significant to the overall aesthetic environment of the royal portal to warrant an attempt at refurbishment.

Finally, a few of the corbels exhibit unequivocal evidence of modern intervention. As noted in the catalog, RPS23 is extraordinarily well-preserved. Its surface is smooth and even, in sharp contrast to the weathered textures of its neighbors. Most telling is the improbable survival of delicate detailing in the delineation of the creature’s features, and in the crisp lines of the triangular pattern at the top of the corbel. NTN4 is likewise notable for its remarkably good condition and idiosyncratic style. It is by far the most naturalistic of the survivors; the man’s face is sensitively fashioned, with refined features. The curls of his hair seem to recall the curves of the pattern on the non-figurated corbels. The singular appearance of NTN4 suggests that it is either an extensively resorted twelfth-century work, or a later replacement. These reparative efforts may signify that the corbels possessed an acknowledged aesthetic value. However, the converse explanation is equally plausible; as they were divorced from their meanings, these objects may have been deemed appropriate sites for experimentation in the application of restorative techniques.

The high level of artistic skill required for the production of corbels and their resultant expense further contradict the notion of the insignificance of these works. Ball noted that the sculptors of minor works occupied a prestigious position in the hierarchy of the cathedral’s craftsmen, subordinate only to the imagiers or master sculptors of the statuary. They were expected to be proficient practitioners of their trade, as the cost of spoiled stones was subtracted from their wages. Though the rates of pay for building

---

44 Ball, *Universe of Stone*, 176.
workers varied considerably, all were paid by the piece.\textsuperscript{46} Little can be determined about the specific economic circumstances of the construction of the twelfth-century cathedral. Nevertheless, the corbels were undoubtedly purposeful and costly additions to its façade.

The overwhelming majority of the corbels at Chartres are bust-length representations rather than full-length figures. This abbreviated portrayal complicates analysis somewhat, as it offers correspondingly less visual information. Full-length images include details of bodily form, gesture, attire, and additional attributes that busts do not provide. The choice of the latter figural mode makes the extraction of meaning more challenging. Additionally, the current arrangement of the corbels reveals no discernible pattern in the distribution of motifs, resulting in a mix of human, animal and monstrous figures. Most gaze out frontally from their perches; they do not appear to interact with each other across the exterior space of the cathedral. The products of several different hands, the corbels exhibit wide variance in style. This can be demonstrated by the comparison of two formally and thematically similar animal sculptures. An ox on the north tower (NTN2) is modeled nearly in the round, protruding from the exterior wall in such a manner that its whole head is visible. In contrast, a cow from the south tower series (STW4) is much more a part of its respective wall. Its rigidly vertical position conceals the details of the lower parts of its head, such as the cheeks and jowls. The eyes of this figure are carved and further defined by concentric curves, rather than the simple drilled holes of its counterpart. Conversely, the corbels of the royal portal exhibit a generally consistent treatment of form. Some demonstrate a clear stylistic correspondence to other elements within the primary sculptural program of the portals. For example, RPC17 and RPS19 both look very similar to the well-concealed leonine monster peering

\textsuperscript{46} Magrill, “Figurated Corbels,” 47.
out from under the base of the right archivolt of the royal portal (figure 3). This correlation suggests that the same workshops produced both principal and secondary components. Other corbels may have iconographic connections to the primary sculptural program, as I will explore in the forthcoming discussion.

Iconographic Analysis

I will begin my iconographic analysis of individual corbel motifs at Chartres by considering some of the series’ human figures. In the subsequent section, I will address selected animal images. Finally, I will study the cathedral’s monstrous faces.

*Human Figures*

The corbel table is frequently the site of the expression of extreme emotional states, demonstrating mirth, terror, pain, and despair “through representations of female and male heads bent far forwards or backwards, screaming through wide open mouths. The heads are often depicted together with hands engaged in dramatic activity, such as tearing the head or supporting the face or cheeks.”47 The Chartrain heads subvert this expectation; in contrast to the uninhibited shrieks and sobs captured at other sites, their visages are generally modulated and self-possessed. Only STW1, a figure with a belled cap, bulging eyes and an unnaturally contorted grimace, could be said to approximate an extreme emotional condition. This impression of shared stoicim may be false, engendered by the limited selection of surviving elements; one cannot conclude that such vivid images were never present. Within the extant collection, the monstrous figures prove more emotive than their human equivalents.

Several of the human figures may serve a specific profane representational function. Kenaan-Kedar proposed that the sculptors of the corbel series signed their works with pictorial self-representations.48 This signature appears in two formulas. Some sculptors depicted themselves at full length, carrying the professional tools of their trade, such as hammers and drills. Kenaan-Kedar interpreted the juxtaposition of this form with images of jongleurs playing musical instruments as “the sculptors’ way of declaring their autonomy via the depiction of their fellow artists.”49 She argued that this portrayal developed from images of craftsmen in the margins of Carolingian and Ottonian manuscripts, the lay figures shown working at their trades above and around the sacred text. The sculptors alternatively employed stereotyped self-portraits denoted by the distinctive “artistic gaze.” These works share a facial expression characterized as “a penetrating yet aloof look, totally lacking in grimaces or attributes of evil.”50 Among the corbels at Chartres, RPN4, RPC8, and RPC12 seem to fit this mold. One of Kenaan-Kedar’s illustrated examples of the occurrence of this particular expression, from the church of Saint-Hilaire in Foussais, is remarkably similar to RPC12. Both corbels are located on the western facades of their respective sites, and depict a bearded man with his head slightly turned to the left. She noted that the pupils of the former figure are positioned in the right corner of the eye; his Chartrain counterpart is pupil-less, as these details would have been added later during the painting of the sculpture.51

In the corbel series at Saint Pierre in Chauvigny, Kenaan-Kedar observed another iconographic situation that is echoed at Chartres by items RPN4 and RPN8: “two very

50 Kenaan-Kedar, *Marginal Sculpture*, 44.
similar male heads with the same characteristics, and obviously carved by the same master”

appear in the corbel program. She concluded that both of the Chauvigny corbels were portraits of the same master mason, and that its repetition could be taken to indicate “the sculptor’s insistent preoccupation with his own image.”

This explanation is rather less satisfactory for the example at Chartres, given the very close proximity of the nearly identical heads. One might speculate that one or both of the heads were installed in locations other than those for which they were designed. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that two of the three self-representative heads, RPN4 and RPC12, occupy the central position in their respective segments of the corbel series.

Other motifs are conspicuous in their absence. For example, there is only a single identifiably female figure (NTW10) among the fifty-six corbels cataloged in my study. Holly Silvers observed that “misogyny, antifeminism, and gynophobia were rife in textual sources of the Middle Ages, from canon law to popular literature and this phenomenon is reflected in the language of the corbel tables.” In spite of this hostile cultural environment, the depiction of this lone woman is not overtly negative. As with her male cohorts, her facial expression is fairly subdued, albeit decidedly negative. The sole indicators of her sex are her long, curled hairstyle and her head covering. The woman is located near a sinister-looking fool (NTW12), who is similarly one of the only representatives of his type; with the exception of this figure and possibly STW1, images of jongleurs are surprisingly nowhere to be found in the corbels of Chartres. These musicians, acrobats, and fools are otherwise ubiquitous. Kenaan-Kedar commented that

---

52 Kenaan-Kedar, Marginal Sculpture, 46.
53 Kenaan-Kedar, Marginal Sculpture, 46.
54 Silvers, “Repulsive Rhetoric,” 220.
jongleur figures recurred in every the series she studied.\textsuperscript{55} The fool’s traditional cap communicates his identity. His malignant appearance may be connected to the depiction of fools in psalters as deniers of Christ and demonic disputants. In his study of these portrayals, D.J. Gifford noted that images of “the fool as an evil prince superintending rapine and carnage”\textsuperscript{56} were in circulation as early as the ninth century.

The battered atlante (STW2) is a particularly interesting figure. One of the very few full-length figures, the atlante is also the only exhibitionist in the corbel series, if not within the entire cathedral. His penis is proportionate and flaccid, in contrast to the immense ithyphallic members often wielded by such figures. His genitals seem to have been revealed accidentally by the movement of his garment during his physical exertion, rather than as the subject of a deliberate display. Kenaan-Kedar,\textsuperscript{57} and Anthony Weir and James Jerman\textsuperscript{58} considered atlante figures as architectural metaphors for sin and its subsequent punishment. Thus, this image could be interpreted as a representation of the spiritual dangers of even unintentional sin. Its location next to an acrobatic tail-biting monster was unlikely to have been accidental, given its likewise phallic connotations. Additionally, this corbel shows a clear visual affinity to another atlante that forms part of the group supporting the famous sculpture of the ass playing the lyre at the base of the south tower (figure 4). Both assume similar postures, crouching low with their elbows over their knees, and share a short, curly hairstyle. In spite of his widely splayed knees, the lower atlante maintains his modesty, as the sculptor has taken pains to show the folds of the garment concealing his nudity. The monstrous atlante above this figure may not

\textsuperscript{55} Kenaan-Kedar, Marginal Sculpture, 25.
\textsuperscript{57} Kenaan-Kedar, Marginal Sculpture, 71-73.
\textsuperscript{58} Weir and Jerman, Images of Lust, 91-96.
have been so restrained, but the area between its legs is too marred to confirm the presence of demonic genitals.

The beard puller (RPS22) is unusual among the repertory of corbel motifs for its lack of classical antecedents and for the intriguing incongruity between the image’s widespread popularity and actual practices in medieval coiffure. As Zehava Jacoby observed, “In the West, shaving beards became the dominant fashion among laymen in the middle of the eleventh century. This fashion presumably spread from southern France to the north and from west to east. It prevailed throughout the twelfth century.” In contrast, beards were valued markers of masculine identity in the Muslim world. Jacoby examined the origins of the theme in Islamic art, and traced its transmission from Al-Andalus to France and beyond via manuscripts and portable objects. The beard puller motif appears in two configurations in Romanesque art, either as a pair of confronted men each gripping his opponent’s beard, or as a single man pulling his own beard. The former variant frequently occurs on capitals, where the fighting twins are identified as symbols of the vice Discordia, or occasionally, as the zodiacal sign Gemini. The individual beard puller is more often located on corbels. Weir proposed that the suggestive gestures of these figures were visual metaphors for masturbation. He observed that the forked beard frequently found on these figures was a style favored by the Cathars, an ascetic heretical sect centered in Languedoc. The dualist Cathars believed

59 Weir and Jerman, Images of Lust, 108.
in the evil of all earthly matter, although aspects of this essential creed varied somewhat between the moderate and absolutist factions. Moderates maintained that the rebellious angel Lucifer had created the material world, including the first man. Absolutists held that two opposing gods, one good and one evil, ruled their respective spiritual and material realms. Regardless of their internal divisions, Cathars collectively founded their spiritual traditions on the New Testament. Their rejection of the material world denied the humanity of Christ and subsequently deprived the Virgin of her essential part in the Incarnation. As Sarah Hamilton pointed out, this dangerous docetism directly contradicted two concurrent trends in the expression of Catholic spirituality, the proliferation of the cult of the Virgin, and the new liturgical and artistic emphasis of Christ’s humanity. The Cathars became the target of the Church’s violent opprobrium, which culminated in the Albigensian Crusades from 1208 to 1229.

The position of the Chartrain beard puller above the southern portal of the west façade lends credence to Weir’s reading of the motif as a specifically anti-Cathar slur. The sculptural program of this portal underscores the vital role of the Virgin in Christian theology and her particular veneration at Chartres. Its two lintels portray the events of the Incarnation cycle, crowned by the monumental sedes sapientiae in the tympanum. Fassler observed that “the major theme emerges from consideration of the central vertical axis, dominated as it is by the positioning of the sedes at the top, the point to which all

---

68 Hamilton, “The Virgin Mary,” 27.
meanings tend.” At the center of the lower lintel, the Virgin reclines on her birthing bed, with the swaddled newborn Christ lying above. Notably, she wears the sancta camisia, the cathedral’s trademark relic. The upper lintel depicts the Presentation in the temple; flanked by his parents, the Christ child stands on the altar in a prefiguration of the crucifixion. In the tympanum, the enthroned Virgin holds her son on her lap. As Fassler commented, the sedes sapientiae “proclaims the mingling of the human and the divine within the Virgin’s womb and provides a vehicle for pondering the mysteries of incarnation and nativity.” Cathars notoriously rejected the tenets asserted by this iconography. In addition to their heretical beliefs, Cathars were infamous for their “unnatural” (non-reproductive) sexual practices. The masturbatory beard-pulling gesture of the corbel figure reinforces this connection between heresy and sodomy, as both were considered acts against God. The animal images on the neighboring corbels also support this anti-heretical interpretation, as I will discuss in the next section.

Animal Motifs

E.P. Evans wrote that “the sacred edifice as a whole was regarded as an emblem of the human soul, of which the creatures carved on pillars and portals were the desirable or undesirable attributes and affections.” Investigation of the allegorical meanings of these animals and their iconographic context can sometimes explain their inclusion in the corbel series. While the sculpted menagerie at Chartres is mostly composed of the

---

71 Fassler, *The Virgin of Chartres*, 224.
74 Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 132.
familiar domestic animals of the farm, some of the bestiary’s more fantastic creatures may also lurk among its stones.

One of the best preserved and most detailed animal figures in the group is the ram on the south tower (STS14). Its depiction on this corbel is peculiar, as the sculptor included its slender forelegs and cloven hooves to render the ram in an awkward pose that it could not achieve in nature. The few other animals in the series that are portrayed with visible forelegs, such as RPC17 and RPS20, incorporate them much more organically. The ram’s meaning in primary sculpture is well established. A symbol of Christ, it is the quintessential sacrificial animal, taking the place of Isaac upon Abraham’s altar. “The ram’s horns, which held him fast in the briars, became a symbol of the two arms of the cross, and the briars in which his head stuck fast were considered to be an allusion to the crown of thorns.” However, its significance in this secondary context remains unclear. I propose that the figure instead could be a bonnacon, a composite creature with the body of a horse and the head of a bull first described in Pliny’s Naturalis Historia. The bonnacon’s horns were useless as weapons, as they curled in on themselves. Fortunately, the animal had a memorable defense mechanism at the ready: “‘When it flees, the excrement from the stomach of the beast produces such a stench over an area of two acres that its heat singes everything it touches. By this poisonous dung it keeps all pursuers at bay.’” The ram-like appearance of the horns on this figure could be attributed to the constraints of the corbel’s shape. I suggest that the otherwise inexplicable assertion of the animal’s legs could be read as an act of display; if the

76 Mâle, Religious Art in France, 161.
appendages represent the hind legs rather than the forelegs, it performs an acrobatic
gesture analogous to that of the tail-biter at STW3 that could serve as a signifier of its
malodorous flight. The bonnacon was one of the few animals of the bestiary without a
moralization, and was often portrayed as a humorous figure. As foul smell was a trait
popularly attached to “undesirables” of all stripes, including Jews and Muslims; thus,
the motif might be taken as a symbol of heresy. Whatever creature it may portray, the
corbel’s relative isolation on the austere south side of its tower offers no further clue to its
intended identity; its predecessor, STS13, has been completely effaced.

Identification of the ambiguous beast on corbel RPS20 proves difficult, as two
species seem possible. The animal is clearly a carnivore, with pointed teeth and visible
claws. It could be a fox clasping its prey in its mouth; this motif appears on a corbel at the
church of St. Trojan in Rétaud. As Debra Hassig wrote, the fox embodied several
negative traits that “figuratively defined him not only as an undesirable member of
secular society but also as an enemy of the Church. The fox’s natural habit of deceiving
birds became the focus of theological interpretation, as deceitfulness was the primary
characteristic of all those who sought to undermine the faith from Old Testament
times.” Consequently, the animal was frequently associated with Herod, who Christ
referred to in the gospel of Luke as “that fox.” This identification would be particularly
appropriate to the specific context of the south portal, where the image could be taken as
an ominous foreshadowing of the Massacre of the Innocents. However, the shape of the

80 Alexandra Cuffel, Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 78-79.
81 Kenaan-Kedar, Marginal Sculpture, 29.
83 Evans, Animal Symbolism, 206-212.
animal’s snout, which terminates in a broad, flat nose, seems to contradict a vulpine classification. It could be identified alternatively as a female bear carrying her cub. “Bear cubs were believed to be born shapeless, their form being given to them by the mother bear. This legendary act became a symbol of Christianity, which reforms and regenerates heathen people.”\textsuperscript{84} This reading would also be suitable for the salvific message of the lintel sculptures. In either case, the image of the creature holding the smaller animal could perhaps also be a subtle parody of the sedes sapientiae.

The analysis of iconographical context proves essential to the identification of some of the corbels. For example, the mutilated horned ungulate on corbel RPS21 can be recognized as an ox in light of the sculptural themes of the west façade’s south portal; the lower register of the lintel shows the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, and the Annunciation to the Shepherds, and the upper register depicts the Presentation in the Temple.\textsuperscript{85} This creature was the emblem of the evangelist Luke, whose gospel recounts the holy events portrayed in the lintels; because this book begins with the offering of Zachariah in the temple, the ox symbolized both the sacrificial and sacerdotal dimensions of Christ.\textsuperscript{86} The animal also acquired a negative connotation as an unfavorable representation of Jews. Alexandra Cuffel observed that “starting in the twelfth century, Christians appealed to reason as proof of Christianity’s validity over Judaism.”\textsuperscript{87} The comparison of Jews to animals became a recurrent theme in the resultant anti-Jewish polemic, as “their inability to perceive the perfect rationality of Christianity demonstrated

\textsuperscript{84} George W. Ferguson, \textit{Signs and Symbols in Christian Art} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 12.
\textsuperscript{85} Margaret and Ernest Marriage, \textit{The Sculptures of Chartres Cathedral} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), 70.
\textsuperscript{86} Mâle, \textit{Religious Art in France}, 39-41.
\textsuperscript{87} Cuffel, \textit{Gendering Disgust}, 200.
that they, like animals, lacked the capacity to reason."  

Peter the Venerable (ca. 1092-1156) proved an enthusiastic proponent of these imagined intellectual deficiencies, favoring analogies “between Jews and asses, cows, and horses, because these creatures, in his view, were especially stupid.”

This scurrilous connection also emphasized the allegedly appropriate servile status of the Jews, and cast doubt on their very humanity.

The association of Jews and the beasts of the farm may provide some rationale for the selection of some of the animal images employed for the corbels, such as the ox at NTN2, the cow at STW4, and the uncertain cow or horse at STS12. It should be noted that the ox at RPS21 occupies a prominent position at the center of the south portal group, flanked by figures with their own heretical connotations, the possible fox at RPS20 and the beard puller at RPS22. The location above this Mariological portal may have been chosen to evoke the inflammatory Jewish rhetoric that viewed the Virgin’s womb as a wholly unacceptable vessel for God because of both its uncomfortable proximity to her bowels and excrement, and the ritually impure nature of the female genital fluids. This issue was “the most vulnerable area of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christian sensibilities;” the existence of Christian sects such as the Cathars who agreed with the Jews exacerbated the vitriolic interfaith debate on the humanity and physical purity of the Virgin.

Monstrous Faces

In contrast to the stoic expressions of their human counterparts, the monsters of the Chartrain corbels are demonstrative, employing all of their features to contort their

---

89 Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 201.
faces into a variety of expressions. The series offers examples of several different monster motifs that recur throughout secondary sculpture.

One of the most common components of these forms is the deliberate distortion of the mouth, accomplished by putting out the tongue or pulling the corners of the lips. Christa Sütterlin emphasized the universality of these gestures as instinctive expressions of derisive aggression. “When angry or wanting to provoke others, children will stick out their tongue at their adversary or pull apart their mouth to reinforce its disgusting expression. Children around the world make these gestures, and in some cultures even adults do so too when involved in aggressive interaction.”  

These gestures appear among the corbels of Chartres in in several forms. For example, corbels RPC16 and NTW16, both quasi-feline creatures, open their jaws only enough to reveal the tips of their tongues, which remain in their mouths. Conversely, NTW13, also a catlike figure, opens its mouth broadly so that the entire organ can be exposed; its extended tongue reaches past its chin. The contrast between the monster’s feline appearance and its decidedly uncatlike behavior injects a humorous note into its depiction. It is also interesting to note that the most explicit display of the tongue occurs farthest from the point of entry into the church. Weir and Jerman advocate a phallic significance for the exposure of the tongue.  

Their reading appears quite apt for those examples in which the gesture is modified to incorporate the pulling of the tongue or conducted by an exhibitionistic figure. However, this is not the case at Chartres, nor does the simply apotropaic role traditionally ascribed

---


95 Weir and Jerman, *Images of Lust*, 102-105.
to such images\textsuperscript{96} seem entirely adequate. As the majority of its figures are disembodied heads without the appendages necessary to execute the gesture, the series at Chartres contains only one true mouth puller, STS15. This creature is similarly something of an anomaly within its genre, as it does not reveal its teeth or tongue through its disfigurement.

The androphagus monster supplies a menacing inversion of the tongue-protruding motif. As seen on the lintel of the center portal of the cathedral’s south porch, the entrance to hell was frequently portrayed in medieval art as a monstrous devouring mouth, consuming the sinners herded into its jaws. The striking monstrous head at corbel STW7 gleefully fulfills this role, the lifeless legs of its luckless victim dangling from its hideously grinning maw. The deeply incised striations on the figure’s face may allude to an additional dimension of meaning. Holly Silvers noticed similar markings on the faces of a few corbels in the churches of Givrezac and St.-Quantin-de-Rançannes, and interpreted them as indications of leprosy. “Christian polemic had, in the twelfth century, already long associated skin diseases, especially leprosy, with Jews, pigs, and other groups deemed unfit or unwanted within the Christian community […] Leprosy was viewed as a punishment for sexual sins, ‘sins of the tongue,’ and deliberate depravity in which the soul ‘willfully rejects what it knows to be right.’”\textsuperscript{97} While no record of systematic persecution survives, it is extremely unlikely that Jews were regarded any more highly at Chartres than elsewhere. In 1172, Thibaut V, the count of Chartres and


\textsuperscript{97} Silvers, “Repulsive Rhetoric,” 245
Blois, burned a group of Jews in the latter town. Jane Welch Williams suspected that “he probably conducted similar pogroms in Chartres, since the synagogue at Chartres was converted into a hospital attached to the parish of Saint-Hilaire in 1179.” Similar striations line the face of the monster on the neighboring corbel (STW8), but do not appear anywhere else in the series.

The foliate head or “green man” was one of the most pervasive and malleable monstrous motifs, represented at Chartres by the corbels RPN1 and RPS18. It appeared initially in Roman art during the latter half of the first century in diverse contexts ranging from triumphal arches to funerary sculpture. Kathleen Basford attributed the theme’s eventual popularity in medieval art to its presence on four spoliated second-century capitals erected in the cathedral of Trier during the sixth century. The green man’s inclusion at this venerable site, “one of the earliest and most important strongholds of Christianity in the West,” sanctioned its application in ecclesiastical design. Basford asserted that in Romanesque art, the leafy heads were representations of demons, and pointed to the writings of Rabanus Maurus to support this interpretation: “According to him, the leaves represented the sins of the flesh or lustful and wicked men doomed to eternal damnation.” The Chartrain corbels demonstrate the “foliage spewer” variation of this form, with thick leafy fronds bursting forth from the monsters’ mouths. Weir and Jerman suggested that this version symbolized the sins of blasphemy or heresy, a

99 Williams, Bread, Wine, and Money, 108.
101 Basford, Green Man, 11.
102 Basford, Green Man, 12.
103 Weir and Jerman, Images of Lust, 106-107.
reading that I find especially compelling for its resonance with some of the previously mentioned motifs in the series.

My examination of the iconography of the corbels shows that they performed communicative functions frequently related to the thematic context of their locations. For example, the fox or bear (RPS20), ox (RPS21), and beard puller (RPS22) corbels above the south doorway of the royal portal can be connected to the Mariological themes of its tympanum and lintels. Figures further removed from the major sculptural works, such as the exhibitionist atlante (STW2) and the androphagus monster (STW7) also exhibit a correlation to the rhetoric of the Church. Other motifs may have had a specific profane significance, such as self-representations of the sculptors. Finally, some of the corbels remain resolutely encoded.
CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have demonstrated that the figurated corbels of Chartres Cathedral were inscribed with semiotic content. As shown by my review of the literature pertaining to secondary sculpture, works in this genre previously were disregarded by researchers because they were perceived to be devoid of meaning. However, trends in modern scholarship have challenged this misconception, and recent technological innovations have facilitated the study of these objects. I propose that the category would be more appropriately termed “secondary” rather than “marginal,” as the former offers a semantically unencumbered assessment of the role of these sculptures.

Originally designed for the cathedral’s twelfth-century western complex, the corbels were likely members of a series that encircled the entire perimeter of the building. The use of human and animal head motifs for their decoration exemplifies a pervasive historical practice in architectural sculpture. The preservation of the corbels in the Gothic reconstruction of the cathedral substantiates their significance to medieval viewers.

Study of the surviving pieces is complicated by the loss of the contextual framework provided by the remainder of the series. The examination of material evidence indicates a record of artistic engagement with these works. My iconographic analysis of individual corbel images reveals both correspondences with the thematic context of the primary sculptural program and independent signification.

My project brings to light an unexpected lacuna in the vast corpus of scholarship on Chartres. It is intended as a useful starting point for additional inquiry, as there remains still more work to be done before the corbels are fully explicated. Investigations of this unduly overlooked genre at other sites may bring new insight to its manifestations.
at Chartres. Moreover, most of the cathedral’s other secondary sculptures have yet to be explored.
FIGURES

Figure 1
Haut-relief miniature
South porch pier

Figure 2
North transept
Sculptures over rose window
Figure 3
Hidden demon
Royal portal, right archvolt

Figure 4
Atlante
South tower base
CORBEL CATALOG AND IMAGES

Royal Portal Series

1. RPN1- Foliage-spewing monster
2. RPN2- Monster with pointed beard
3. RPN3- Blank
4. RPN4- Man with short beard
5. RPN5- Blank
6. RPN6- Monster with horns and fangs
7. RPN7- Blank
8. RPC8- Man with short beard
9. RPC9- Damaged, unidentifiable
10. RPC10- Monster with wavy beard
11. RPC11- Monster (damaged)
12. RPC12- Man with long beard and moustache
13. RPC13- Monster with large eyes, possible human appendage in mouth
14. RPC14- Monster with wavy hair, prominent brow (damaged)
15. RPC15- Humanoid monster, drilled mouth and moustache
16. RPC16- Feline monster showing tongue
17. RPC17- Leonine monster, about to bite
18. RPS18- Foliage-spewing monster
19. RPS19- Leonine monster (damaged)
20. RPS20- Fox or bear
21. RPS21- Ox (damaged)
22. RPS22- Beard pulling man
23. RPS23- Horned monster, excellent condition
24. RPS24- Damaged, unidentifiable

North Tower Series

1. NTN1- Animal head, cat or dog
2. NTN2- Ox
3. NTN3- Monster (damaged)
4. NTN4- Man with beard and curly hair
5. NTN5- Monster with object in mouth
6. NTN6- Pattern
7. NTN7- Man with oval head, possibly in crouching pose
8. NTN8- Pattern
9. NTW9- Canine monster
10. NTW10- Woman wearing head covering
11. NTW11- Horned monster with moustache
12. NTW12- Fool
13. NTW13- Feline monster, tongue protruding
14. NTW14- Damaged, unidentifiable
15. NTW15- Mischievous face
16. NTW16- Feline monster

South Tower Series

1. STW1- Grotesque face
2. STW2- Exhibitionist atlante
3. STW3- Tail-biter monster
4. STW4- Cow
5. STW5- Monster (damaged)
6. STW6- Monster with snub nose and fringe
7. STW7- Androphagus monster
8. STW8- Monster with horns and wrinkles
9. STS9- Bearded man, protruding right eye
10. STS10- Horned monster with long fingers
11. STS11- Round-faced man with moustache
12. STS12- Cow or horse
13. STS13- Damaged, unidentifiable
14. STS14- Ram or bonnacon
15. STS15- Mouth-puller monster
16. STS16- Human head with horns and protruding tongue
Royal Portal - north door

RPN1

RPN2

RPN3

RNP4

RPN5

RPN6

RPN7
Royal Portal - center door

RPC8  RPC9  RPC10  RPC11  RPC12

RPC13  RPC14  RPC15  RPC16  RPC17
Royal Portal- south door
North Tower - north side

NTN1
NTN2
NTN3
NTN4
NTN5
NTN6
NTN7
NTN8
North Tower - west side

NTW9

NTW10

NTW11

NTW12

NTW13

NTW14

NTW15

NTW16
South Tower- west side

STW1

STW2

STW3

STW4

STW5

STW6

STW7

STW8
South Tower - south side

STS9

STS10

STS11

STS12

STS13

STS14

STS15

STS16
BIBLIOGRAPHY


———. “Description de la cathédrale de Chartres, suivie d’une courte notice sur les églises de Saint-Pierre, de Saint-André et de Saint-Aignan de la même ville.” Chartres: Garnier, 1850.


Stoddard, Whitney S. *Sculptors of the west portals of Chartres Cathedral: their origins in Romanesque and their role in Chartres sculpture including the west portals of Saint-Denis and Chartres*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1952.


