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Ph.D DISSERTATION

REVEALING AND CONCEALING: THE PERSISTENCE OF VAGINAL ICONOGRAPHY IN MEDIEVAL IMAGERY:

THE MANDORLA, THE *VESICA PISCIS*, THE ROSE, SHEELA-NA-GIGS AND THE DOUBLE-TAILED MERMAID.

submitted
by

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September 21, 2001

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the persistence of vaginal iconography in both religious and secular medieval imagery. In ancient times the vagina was a sacred sign of powerful creative forces associated with many different goddess figures. Archeologists have uncovered thousands of goddess artifacts indicating the vagina, some more literally with a genital orifice or a slit, some with the oldest abstraction of the female genitalia, the inverted triangle known as the pubic triangle. Although Christianity assimilated and transformed vaginal imagery to its own purposes, I contend that its continued use in abstracted forms (the *vesica piscis* or mandorla); in evocative forms from nature (shells and various types of flowers, notably the rose);or as a blatant anatomical display (Sheela-na-gigs and double-tailed mermaids); maintained a referent to female or goddess aspects of the divine in 11th to 15th century medieval iconography.

Visual hermeneutics is my primary methodology. I use it to argue that the vaginal referents in my chosen categories were evident to medieval viewers because of the persistence of awareness of pagan beliefs and practices as evidenced particularly in illuminated manuscripts of the period. My second argument is based on vaginal imagery in the highly erotic language and imagery of devotional practices which began in the 12th century. The resurgence of this referent is all the more surprising in an age which condemned *luxuria* or lust as one of its major sins.

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Chapter 1

Introductory Remarks

The Religious, Social and Historical Climate of the Middle and Late Medieval Period

The term *medieval* refers to the period between 500 CE and 1500 CE; my work, however, deals primarily with visual material from the middle and late medieval eras, mainly from France and dating roughly from the 11th to the 15th century. During the earlier part of this period, from the 11th to the 13th centuries, most of the major cathedrals of Europe were built. In the 12th century in particular, the majority of these were dedicated to Mary as Notre-Dame. It was also an age that saw an increased cultural mingling of populations, notably on pilgrimages, most especially to Santiago di Compostela. Pilgrims from all parts of Europe, starting from four different routes in France, came together to cross the Pyrenees (the three northern routes at Roncevalles) and assembled at the great gathering place of Puenta de la Reina before the final push across Spain to Compostela.. Along the way they visited numerous shrines dedicated to Mary, often styled the Black Virgin. These vast "migrations" helped in the spread of iconographical motifs and architectural styles

Another, less peaceful form of cultural co-mingling occurred as a consequence of the various Crusades between 1095 and 1204 that tried to recapture the Holy Lands from the Muslims and make them safe again for Christian pilgrims. Though failures in permanently reclaiming these lands for Christianity (by 1291 the Muslims were again in control) the mixing of European, Middle Eastern and North African cultures which resulted from those expeditions had profound socially and intellectual effects on medieval culture. Architecture, imagery, literature, all reveal the influence of eastern culture. So do the teachings of the Church, as the writings of Aristotle, recovered from Arab safe-keeping influenced theologians, most notably Thomas Aquinas. In addition, members of the oldest Christian communities of the Near East fled to Europe bringing their building skills, artifacts, and manuscripts. The influence they had on medieval architecture and imagery has been well documented.

Another movement that is relevant to this study is the growth of the ideals of courtly love, not unrelated to a parallel growth in the cult of the Virgin Mary. Both of these developments appear to indicate a resurgence of a female presence or principle that had to some degree been earlier suppressed. The Eastern element was also a factor in the growth of a lush language celebrating carnal love. The troubadours, the poets of courtly love, first emerged at the court of Elinor of Aquitaine, where they sang their vernacular songs of praise of the virtues of earthly love to an audience comprised largely of women. Though the troubadours were specifically commending a kind of higher adultery, the conventions of courtly love were equally susceptible of being used in the service of divine veneration.

The renewal of monasticism under Bernard of Clairvaux was to see a radical shift in spirituality. Yet Bernard, who was so suspicious of idols and the frivolous imagery of Church

decoration, was seemingly not exempt from the influence of the vocabulary of courtly love, albeit in the same spirit as that which views the *Song of Songs* as a description of the love between God and his Church, rather than as a celebration of carnal love. Bernard used the language of the troubadours, filled with barely sublimated lust and sexual longing, to speak mystically about his relationship to God, in particular Christ, as one of a lover to his beloved. Many texts and images from other authors reflect this eroticisation of the individual's relationship with Christ. An outstanding example is found in an illustration for the Rothschild Canticles which shows a nun who has pierced the side of an effeminised Christ with a lance. The phallic symbolism of the lance is unmistakable.

The twelfth century also to saw a change in the religious status of women, in their influence if not in formal positions of power. In the late Middle Ages, "positive female figures and feminine metaphors took a significant place in spirituality alongside both positive male figures and misogynist images of women."[1]

This tensional relation between a new carnality and a continued asceticism expresses itself throughout this period. The Albigensian or Cathar movements (late 12th, early 13th century), viewed as heresies by the Lateran Council because of their dependence on individual choice and interpretation in religion, involved a total rejection of the body as evil to the point that they denied the Incarnation of Christ. In spite of their rejection of the flesh they sometimes allowed themselves a variety of carnal pleasures before undergoing their

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[1]Caroline Walker Bynum, "'...And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 258.

sacramental rite, called the consolation, that would absolve them of all sin.[2] The Fourth Lateran Council 1215 transformed the general sense of self with its demands for individual confession of sins necessitating self examination, guilt, and therefore an increased awareness of the body as constant source of sin.

As well, the body became a site of danger as a consequence of the experience of the Black Death and other plagues, giving rise to the ubiquitous motif of *memento mori*. That same body which could be transported by the ecstasies of spiritual or physical passion was corruptible, subject to sickness, ageing and death. Thus the rejection of earthly flesh in favour of the spiritual incorruptible body of everlasting glory represents a response to the evident precariousness of human existence.

By the end of the period under consideration here, secular and theological altitudes toward the body were in deep conflict, a conflict that was not always overtly expressed. Whereas officially, the divine principle was unquestionably and almost exclusively male, reminders of the female persist, whether officially, in the burgeoning cults of Mary and of certain female saints, in imagery, where unacknowledged but unmistakable referents to female procreative organs abound, or vernacularly, in the preservation of sites or artifacts associated with earlier female deities. Much of this material has been either overlooked or misread; this study aims to provide a corrective lens to aid in the full appreciation of the layers of meaning present in late medieval religious imagery.

Vaginal imagery is not just a biological illustration but a sign pointing to women's power, not only in maternity, but for all that female sexuality and sexual energy contribute in

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[2] Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Medieval Christianity: Prophecy and Order* (New York : Thomas Y. C rowell Company, 1968), 146-47.

the creation of human culture. Only the Indian word *yoni*, referring to both the vaginal opening and the external female genitalia, has symbolic connotations as powerful as those bound up in the word phallus.. Nevertheless I agree with Germaine Greer, Shirley Ardener, Grace Jantzen, Judy Chicago and the authors of the recent *Vagina Monologues* that to use the word vagina is to reclaim it and affirm its legitimacy, both biologically and symbolically.

My exploration of female iconography in medieval imagery demonstrates that, in spite of the Christian Church's attempt to suppress goddess traditions and to control or suppress sexuality, vaginal imagery persisted in Christian iconography to signify sacred power. The most powerful example of vaginal imagery was concealed by its abstraction as the *mandorla* or *vesica piscis*, the oval shape which surrounds Christ or Mary in paintings and sculpture. It was widely used to surround Christ on the tympana over the main entrance of most cathedrals built in the 11th to 13th centuries in France and has rarely been discussed. My examination of the form suggests that it is a conflation of pagan goddess iconography and Christian symbolism.

Sculpted or painted images of Mary abound in Christian iconography but I am more interested in the alternative ways of representing women's sacred power, either in its concealed symbolic forms such as in the wide-spread use of the mandorla or with other natural symbols, especially the rose. Vaginal imagery also appears in the many negative depictions of women employed by the Church in its battle against sins of the flesh. My particular study also highlights the figurative images of double-tailed mermaids, found in Italy, France and Spain and the Sheela-na-gigs of Britain and Ireland. These figures made specific use of vaginal imagery to imply the sexual misconduct of the women depicted. Yet these images also appropriate or incorporate goddess referents that have ancient origins in

both Western and Eastern iconography.

Traditionally, discussions of figurative imagery as the didactic, spiritual, and moral expressions of a belief system have been religious and theological or confined to the canon of what was acceptable evidence in art history. Although this sort of approach remains dominant, there is a new openness in all three of these areas to the complex ideology at work in both the production of the imagery and viewer response.

Attempts to conceal women's importance in human history have denigrated her body and her sexuality. Women working in any academic discipline are very familiar with the patriarchal legacy which for centuries defined and characterized women and their bodies. Much of our history has been concealed or the evidence of our experience interpreted from that the male point of view. This work is part of the on-going work to reclaim female imagery which has been suppressed or reconfigured in medieval imagery.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss the methodological considerations bearing on the perceptions of imagery, both in the medieval period and at the present moment. Chapter 3 deals briefly with vaginal imagery from pre-history to the medieval period, investigating its use both as an object of veneration and a site of revulsion.. Chapter 4, the heart of this study, examines the types of medieval vaginal imagery, ranging from the "good" vagina, in its associations with the Incarnation, to the "bad" vagina, rejected by monastic asceticism, to pagan and popular survivals of earlier goddess representations. In the end, what emerges is the recognition that much medieval iconography that has been dismissed as either aberrant, irrelevant, or bizarre in fact is part of a persistent tradition of vaginal imagery that has its roots in pre-history and survives even to this day as a referent in the visual and performing arts and in the work of feminist philosophers. More specifically, my work advances the claim that

vaginal iconography persisted in medieval imagery where its multivalent quality allowed members from various belief systems to use or interpret it accordingly.

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Chapter 2

Methodological Considerations

2.1 The Importance of Images

"Perceiving achieves at the sensory level, what in the realm of reasoning is known as understanding." Rudolf Arnheim[3]

Margaret Miles is credited with being the first to use images as valid source material in the field of Religious Studies. In a discipline that had relied heavily on textual references she affirmed "the potential fruitfulness of trained attention to visual evidence." Miles pointed to the seriousness with which other disciplines, such as archaeology, anthropology, and classical studies, use artifacts as indicators of social and religious activities. Her work reflects a general movement in various disciplines toward working with images even when there are

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[3]Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 31 quoted in Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 31.

no direct textual referents to support an analysis of the discursive content or the work. Yet Miles affirms that visual texts or discursive representations,[2] as is the case with written texts, can only be interpreted within "the discourse which gives it significance, weight as a symbol and the intensity value as language—in other words, meaning."[3] Thus my contention that the *vesica piscis* or mandorla is a vaginal referent in medieval imagery is strengthened by both the discourse on the Incarnation and the use of symbolic representations of the vagina in religious and secular imagery inspired by the *Song of Songs* and *Le Roman de la Rose.*

The importance of images as documents or witnesses which present ideas current to their historical period is not new. Early exponents of their value include Erich Neumann, Jean Seznec, Joseph Campbell and, of course, numerous scholars in the field of art history. As Seznec says, the ability of visual imagery to sum up trends of thought makes "iconography serve as a constant auxiliary to the study of the history of ideas."[4] Strangely even the discipline of art history has recently given new authority to images without demanding written documentation, acknowledging that images and artifacts can provide information which has sometimes been erased from written records. The "New Art History," according to Sharon Dale, is more open to questioning the canons of the "master" narrative, "to recognize and learn to tolerate in our discipline a higher threshold of ambiguity and ... to espouse divergent

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[2]Janet Tulloch, in her thesis "Image as Artifact: A Social-historical Analysis of the Female Figures with Cups in the SS. Marcellino e Pietro Banquet Scenes," argues that the use of the word text is too "culturally charged" to apply to visual material. Nevertheless, the word discursive could be also perceived as evoking language rather than imagery.

[3]Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 29.

[4]Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art,* Trans. Barbara F. Sessions (New York:Pantheon, 1953), 7.

perhaps contradictory models."[5] That we need to turn to visual evidence seems an obvious conclusion to make when we consider the many times written records have been destroyed by acts of war or prejudice throughout history. We need only remember the loss of ancient texts in the burning of the great library in Alexandria in 272 CE. How different might the first response have been to the thousands of artifacts depicting various goddesses or women which were lumped into an amorphous category labeled fertility figures if we had written evidence from antiquity to reveal the complexities of ancient polytheism?

Scholarship of the last 25 -35 years has unearthed more information about the past through the use of images. Marija Gimbutas has worked extensively with Paleolithic and Neolithic artifacts, especially from what she has termed "Old Europe." Her findings have been rejected by many scholars in her own field of archaeology for making too many assumptions about symbology and language in the vast number of artifacts she has unearthed in her lifetime, but she has inspired countless others in disciplines as varied as Genetics, Lingusitics, Archaeomythology and Indo-European studies.[6] Gimbutas' systematic work with the iconography of prehistoric images broadened the connections made between figurative and abstract symbols and their connection with goddess worship. For example, her investigation of the ovoid fish sculptures of Lepenski Vir, 6000-5800, B.C.E., acknowledged their combination of egg and fish shapes as among the most ancient forms of goddess iconography. It was Gimbutas who suggested that the many chevron markings on ancient

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[5]Sharon Dale, "Contextural Art History: The Illusion of Precision" in *Source Notes in the History of Art* 8 (1989): 35, quoted in Pamela Sheingorn, review of *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland circa 1300. The Art Bulletin* 49: 679-681.

[6] In 1997, Joan Marler edited an anthology of writings to honour the work of Marija Gimbutas featuring the work of scholars from around the world, *From the realm of the Ancestors.*

sculptures are a kind of "shorthand" for the pubic triangle as they were found most particularly on ornithomorphic or bird -goddess artifacts. As Gimbutas says, "it took her years of detective work" to discover the association between design and symbol, to move the description of the markings away from being described simply as "geometric designs" to their symbolic connection with the bird-goddess.[7]

Mieke Bal uses the word *rhetoric* in describing what images do. She borrows this term from its literary or philosophical sources to describe the use of language that incorporates both decorative or beautiful aspects with argumentation. When analyzing visual work; she likens the literary concept of the decorative to the beauty of an image's representation, actually to any kind of imagery ranging from the grotesque to the beautiful. The argumentation aspect of her analogy refers to the ideology or value system reflected in a visual work and which is designed to persuade the viewing subject. Bal's theory is that works of art perform meaning and that rhetoric within representation, as with language, works to conceal some meanings while performing others.[8]

The examination of my four iconographical motifs in medieval imagery raises many questions, some based on medieval theories about seeing and its effects on the viewer. These views were largely inherited from the writings of Augustine that in turn were based on Plato's theories. The prevailing belief was that seeing is a two-fold movement, in which energy from the human internal fire came out of the eye along a beam of light which struck

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[7]Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 3-17; 260-262. See also her earlier work, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 6500-3500: Myths and Cult Images* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982).

[8]Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 14-15.

the object viewed. In turn the "image" from the object travelled back along that same pathway and was "bonded to the soul and retained in the memory."[9] The medieval Christian belief was that the internalization of positive images coming into the "soul" would inspire the faithful to prayer or to the imitation of virtue. This belief, however, also allowed for pollution from dangerous sources. Especially feared was the absorption of the powerful negative rays from the gaze of a person with the evil eye or from objects or images deemed to have the same powers. That power resided in the image itself was not in conformity with the Christian use of imagery, (see chapter 2.1.2) nevertheless it persisted in popular beliefs about the efficacy of certain religious statues or paintings to cure as well as in the belief that "looks could kill."

My primary methodology is what has been referred to as visual hermeneutics, working with four chosen iconographical motifs, the Mandorla or *Vesica Piscis*, the Rose, the Sheela-na-gig and the Double-tailed Mermaid. My methodology is inductive, assembling many different examples of my subject matter in order to support my general statement concerning the persistence of vaginal iconography in both religious and secular medieval imagery. As David Freedberg says, this way of working is accretive, suggesting "the resonance of the subjects in each chapter, in the hope that the possibilities for analysis become cumulatively apparent." [10] This method was most useful in working with the mandorla/*vesica piscis* as there is so little written about the use or meaning of this symbol. The symbolism of the Rose has also been neglected as a vaginal symbol in Christian iconography.

In addition I am inspired by the work of Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, who first

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[9]Miles, *Image As Insight*, 7.

[10] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), xxiii.

introduced the idea of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" in reviewing any material that deals with women.[11] Certainly in reading the literature of the Sheela-Na-Gigs it was clear that most texts were androcentric. Discussion of both the Sheelas and the Double-tailed Mermaids confines them within a one-dimensional Christian patriarchal view of female sexuality---a category which denigrates and marginalizes women.

Although my initial interest focused on sculptural imagery, my research quickly revealed that in examining the meaning and origin of any visual material in the medieval period, it is necessary to examine illuminated manuscripts, ivory carvings, and the like. The work of Michael Camille has been especially helpful in this regard. Camille questions the primacy of text over imagery. He disputes the notion that images are "text substitutes," although he acknowledges that much medieval sculpture draws its inspiration from the illustrations in illuminated manuscripts of the era. He draws our attention to the tension that exists between the high church teaching which appears in the writing and images that occupy the central position of the page as opposed to the marginalia drawings around the central text. They often mock or comment on the lessons in the text. Camille likens the fantastic forms on Romanesque capitals to these marginal figures which "cannot be read according to the official discourse of the Church.[12]

Camille's interest in alternative or secular imagery has proved most useful to my argument that vaginal images, both abstract and anatomically specific, were not foreign to the medieval symbol system. His analysis and examples from a broad range of manuscripts

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[11]Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 108-109.

[12]Camille, *Image on the Edge. The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 36.

provide material to support my contention that medieval viewers could have understand the significance of messages encoded in vaginal iconography which appeared in a sacred context. Camille's use of a "heteroclite combination of methodologies"[13] provided an avenue in seeking evidence to support my assertion of the persistence of vaginal imagery.

As Margaret Miles says, images can provide a "significant piece of the discourse in Christian communities that has not been systematically incorporated in the study of historical Christian ideas."[14] I believe that by demonstrating the persistence of vaginal imagery in both sacred and secular spheres of medieval life our understanding of Christian discourse will be modified. Vaginal images, however much they may have been transformed and manipulated, indicate surviving sites of female divine power.

2.1.2 The Christian Medieval Use of Images

David Freedberg, in his book on *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, points out classical roots for the Christian belief in the efficacy of images in the writings of Horace, c. 45 BCE, "What the mind takes in through the ears stimulates it less effectively than what is presented to it through the eyes and what the spectator can believe and see for himself."[15] Writing toward the end of the 6th century, Pope Gregory the Great

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[13]Camille, *Image on the Edge*, 9.

[14]Miles, *Image As Insight*, 28.

[15]The quotation is from Horace, *Ars Poetica*, lines 180-182. Before Horace, Aristotle had ranked vision as first among the five senses.

comments on the Christian use of imagery:

> It is one thing to adore a picture, and another by means of a picture to learn a story that should be adored. For what writing supplies to those who can read, a picture supplies to those who are uneducated and look at it. Since they who are uninstructed thus see what they ought to follow, they "read" by it even if they do not know letters.[16]

These words were cited over and over again in the medieval period as the justification for the extensive use of imagery in Christian churches, often conveyed in phrases like "the Bible in stone" or "cathedrals are the picture books of the faithful." Lawrence Duggan says that Gregory's words "may well be the most weighty ever penned by a churchman in the history of Western art," and that he would probably be amazed at the endless commentaries they provoked in the centuries that followed.[17]

Gregory's contribution to the debates between the iconodules (those who believed in the devotional use of images as merely representing the reality pictured in the image) and the iconoclasts (those who thought all images led to idolatry and ought to be destroyed) made the vital distinction between Christian and pagan use of images very clear.

> But we do not worship images, nor account them to be our gods, nor put any hope of salvation in them: for this would be idolatry. Yet we venerate them for the memory and remembrance of things done long ago. Thus the verse,
>
> Whenever you pass the image of Christ bow humbly,
> Adoring not the image but him whom it represents.
> It makes no sense to ascribe God's being

---

[16]As quoted by William Durandus, "On the Symbolism of Church Art" c. 1286 in *Medieval Popular Religion, 1000-1500*, in John Shinners, XXX ed., p.21. See also, Gregory the Great, *Lib. IX, Epistola IX Ad Serenum Episcopum Massiliensam*, in PL 77, cols.1128-1129. See also David Freedberg, 163, for a discussion of the same conception of images as books for the illiterate expressed by Gregory of Nyssa writing 200 years before Gregory the Great.(*Oratio laudatoria Sancti ac Magni Martyris Theodori*, PG 46, col. 757D.

[17] Lawrence G. Duggan, "Was art really the 'book of the illiterate'?" in *Word & Image* 5.3 (1989): 227.

To material stone shaped by human hand.
The image you see here is neither God nor man,
He is God and man which this holy image represents.[18]

In the 13th century, Bonaventure, Aquinas and William Durandus would all support Gregory's thesis about the value of images as instructional tools. Duggan says that Bonaventure was evidently the first to introduce distinctions between the instructional and affective functions of images and their value as *aides-mémoire* in his tripartite defence of religious art. First, Bonaventure echoes Gregory's word in saying that images are the "more open scriptures" for those who are illiterate. Then he makes the point that images arouse the affections because we are moved more by what we see than by what we hear. Finally, he speaks of images as aids to the memory, again saying that we remember more what we see than what is conveyed through words alone. Aquinas repeated much of what Bonaventure believed but he was more cautious about the degree to which the "simple people" could be left on their own to derive meaning from images without the instruction by the clergy.[19] Durandus believed that images have a greater impact than writing because what they depict seems to be actually happening and that therefore images remain engraved in our memories. In fact he says that "in churches we pay less attention to books than to images and pictures."[20]

To quote Gregory again, "we do no harm in wishing to show the invisible by means of the visible."[21] Here Gregory is only repeating the beliefs expressed by the 5th century Greek

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[18] John Shinners, 22.

[19] Duggan, 232.

[20] Durandus, quoted in John Shinners,23.

[21] Gregory the Great, *Lib. IX Epistola LII Ad Secundinum*, in PL 77, cols. 990-991, as quoted in Freedberg, 164.

writer Dionysius the Areopagite,. He in turn was probably influenced by neo-Platonic writers in his belief that we reach toward the divine only through the medium of material reality. Thus earthly beauty stands as a sign or signifier of an ideal beauty that is otherwise unknowable. "These images which reveal the unknowable are theophanies and their purpose is to raise man's spirit to the spiritual realm."[22]

Many 12th and 13th century writers relied heavily on the writings of Pseudo Dionysus, particularly in *The Celestial Hierarchies*, to provide the theoretical grounds for the Christian use of images. This work was only made available to the West in the 9th century through the Latin translation and commentary of John Scott Eriugena. Emile Mâle reports that a copy was given to Cluny (and in fact it still exists, preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris). The influence of this manuscript and a later commentary by Hugh of Saint-Victor in Paris c.1137, is evident in Abbot Suger's comments concerning the construction of Cluny's abbey church of Saint-Denis 1137-1144.[23] Suger was convinced that earthly beauty could lead a person to the contemplation of the divine. (Suger's writings also reveal just how much clerics were responsible for both the theological and aesthetic content of the sculpture on medieval church buildings.)[24]

Bernard of Clairvaux railed against the excesses of the Cluniac style. His objections were directed at the richness of church decoration that he felt was disproportionate to the

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[22]Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France, Twelfth Century: A Study of the Origins of Medieval Iconography*, Bollingen Series XC-1. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978 (1922), 187.

[23]Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France, Twelfth Century*, 187.

[24] Ibid., 211. See the further discussion of the influence of Cluny on religious art in France in Chapter 4.2.1 of this thesis.

monastic ideal of poverty. He also objected to the fantastic images of mythical beasts as too engaging and distracting for monks dedicated to the contemplative life of prayer.[25] "Indeed, there are so many things, and everywhere such an extraordinary variety of hybrid forms, that it is more diverting to read in marble than in the texts before you, and to spend the whole day gazing at such singularities in preference to meditating on God's laws."[26] His very objection revealed his belief in the power of this imagery for, as Camille comments, the equivalence of reading books and reading images is a powerful metaphor given the important place that reading held in the monastic day. Bernard's words suggest that he has invested "marginal imagery with the time and space of meaning."[27] Yet Bernard himself was devoted to depictions of Mary and Jesus. In fact his devotional practices and sermons set the tone for the new spirituality which emerged in the 13th century largely because of the exhortations of Bernard, Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure and others.

Gregory's views on the use of images in the Church came to be seen almost as dogma. Few questioned exactly what "reading" images might mean. Duggan explores this question at length in his article "Was art really the 'book of the illiterate'?" Do images actually impart new information or can they only remind us of what we already know? Augustine had been of the opinion that pictures were more likely to be misread than text and he was afraid that images would cause the faithful to neglect the Scriptures. Duggan says that Gregory might have got his ideas from fourth century Eastern Fathers such as Basil and Gregory of Nyssa but

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[25]Duggan, 232-33.

[26]Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia*, quoted in Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge*, 62.

[27]Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Imagemaking in Medieval Art*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 62.

their writings favour the mnemonic function of imagery rather than the idea that illiterates can actually read images. Whereas most medieval theologians accepted Gregory's statements without question some rejected the idea that images alone could convey complex issues to the illiterate population. Abbot Suger of Cluny did not believe that the uneducated would be able to read the lavish images and words in his new church of St. Denis, thus raising the question of whether "equivalences existed between different forms of visual art and the varying reading skills of their audiences."[28] As Duggan and others remind us, the medieval era was still primarily an oral culture; speech and writing were almost equivalents.[29] Most of the faithful could not read the sacred texts for themselves and thus listened to them as they were read aloud. Thus Durandus, Bede, and Bonaventure, each of whom supported the idea that images were books for the laity, all emphasized that images were important mnemonic aids for remembering biblical stories or aspects of church dogma.[30]

Contemporary theologians are still debating the validity of Gregory's statements. According to Duggan, Avril Henry has been among the most critical in maintaining that a prior knowledge of the story or its significance is essential to deriving an orthodox interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent. In the European Christian medieval world, however, it is impossible to imagine that anyone could grow up without knowing the story of Adam and Eve.

The on-going debate about reading imagery is generally concerned with biblical or

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[28]Camille, "Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy" in *Art History*:8.1 (1985): 26.

[29]Derrida makes this claim in *On Grammatology*; as noted by Camille, "Seeing and Reading," 31.

[30]Duggan, 229, 233, 242, 245

theological subject matter; when it comes, however, to the world of "non-meaning in the fantastic forms of the Romanesque capitals," as Camille says, this visual material was largely "free from textual tyranny," but as products of oral traditions, the meaning of these images is "less retrievable" than text might be."[31] In "Models and Anti-models in Medieval Culture," Maria Corti says that the playful and obscene images of medieval art are manifestations of anti-culture and exist outside the official order.[32] These images are akin to the world of the carnivalesque, drama, and feasts of fools. Conti quotes Bakhtin: "elles semblaient avoir édifié à côte du monde official un second monde et un second vie auxquels tous les hommes de Moyen Age étaint mêlés dans un mesure plus ou moins grande...."[33]

These words could be applied to the marginalia in stone which in the 12th century presented a dynamic world of unspecified meaning. Camille distinguishes between 12th century and later imagery in saying that before the spread of vernacular literacy "most viewers of art, unaided by the explanation of the *oratores*, the literate clerical group, were only really capable of reading between the lines, in the margins and at the edges of the images which were supposed to be their '*litteratura laicorum.*'"[34]

In spite of the questions about what information exactly can be imparted by images, contemporary scholars agree that "images can present in a *coup d'oeil* what words can only do at length... but that pictures as instruments of precise communication fall far short of

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[31]Camille, "Seeing and Reading," 36

[32]Maria Corti, "Models and Anti-models in Medieval Culture" in *New Literary History*; 1979, 351.

[33]Mikhail Bakhtin, *L'oeuvre de Francois Rabelaid et la culture populaire au Moyen Age et sous la Renaissance*, (Paris, 1970), 13 quoted in Maria Conti, "Models and Anti-Models,"351.

[34]Camille, "Seeing and Reading,"38.

words."[35] This multivalence, however, as I will show in the next section of this paper, is their strength as well as their weakness.

2.1.3. The Power of Images: affective, polysemic

Images were thought to be more susceptible to personal interpretation than a theological text would permit. The cognitive elements in a text were more subject to logic than the affective or emotive appeal of images. It is this affective quality which increases the multivalent and ambiguous possibilities for interpretation---even allowing for conflicts and contradictions between diverse communities of viewers. Margaret Miles sees the polysemic quality of visual imagery as a stimulating contribution to intellectual inquiry, complementary to the study of written texts which seem more fixed.[36]

The major difference between the visual and the written text is that the imagery can be taken in virtually all at once while the written requires a more incremental approach. In addition, images were thought to engage the emotions more than written texts. That quality was prized in the devotional practices of the medieval period whereas later, the emotive appeal of images would make their integrity suspect.

The experience of affect in the spiritual life became more interiorized and widespread

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[35]Maria Conti, 243-44.

[36]Miles, *Image As Insight*, 10.

with the growth of private devotional practices beginning in the late 12th century. The faithful, particularly members of religious communities, were invited to imitate the life of Christ, Mary, or the saints. In order to stimulate the kind of empathy that would lead to imitation, they were encouraged to visualize sacred figures and incidents from their lives as part of their daily meditations but material images were thought to be more effective than those in the imagination. As David Freedberg says, "the intimacy of affective relations between image and beholder are brought to the fore with an unparalled sensitivity to the behavioural symptoms of perception. Often it is clear that the more intense the meditation, the more dramatic the response." [37] In correspondence with a young novice, Aelred of Rievaulx (1109-67) assures him that he understands how the intensity of his feelings for Jesus would cause him to weep.[38]

During the medieval period, the aesthetic began to gain ascendency over the simple magical reference. Images began to have greater or lesser power not merely because of what they evoked but for how they looked. The aesthetic element displaced the magical, which does not depend on appearance.[39] The more realistic and detailed the image, the more effective it was thought to be in shaping appropriately constructed images and in restraining the imagination from indulging in irrelevant fantasies. Although the goal of this style of meditation was the pursuit of the spiritual, the method provided an astonishing training of the eye for medieval viewers, sharpening their powers of perception and their ability to empathize

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[37]Freedberg, 166.

[38]Ibid., 167.

[39]Ibid., 167.

with the subject and content of an image.[40]

Michael Camille's detailed analysis of imagery in all types of medieval art considers the theological, social, and political context that influenced the medieval choice of what was depicted and how it was interpreted. In his book on *The Medieval Art of Love,* Camille is especially interested in non-biblical imagery as he seeks to understand the role of desire in the production of images. Content in imagery can create "objects and subjects" by the interaction depicted between men and women, humans and gods, animals or objects. In particular, he states that the pictorial is more powerful than text in the manufacture of desire.[41]

The power of naked three-dimensional sculptures (considered more emotive than paintings or bas reliefs) was such that they could cause a man to have an erection. Medieval tales repeated the classical example of the boy who is so aroused by the statue of the naked Venus of Cnidos that he ejaculates on her thigh. This and other stories about young men and statues can be found as far back as Lucian and Pliny c.77 BCE. Freedberg says we should not dismiss such stories as cliches for their very repetition "emphasizes rather than impugns the cognitive relation between image and intentional beholder."[42]

Similar stories of young men betrothed to statues date from the 12th century. A young man places a marriage ring on the statue of Venus or the Virgin Mary, sometimes to ask her intervention with an earthly love. When it comes time to consummate the marriage with his bride, the sacred figure intervenes and prevents the union. In one version, the Virgin reminds

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[40]Freedberg, 169.

[41]Michael Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love: Objects and Subjects of Desire* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 1998), 7.

[42]Freedberg, 331.

the youth of his promise to love her alone. He is so impressed by the heavenly intervention that he renounces the world and retires to the monastery and swears everlasting fidelity to Mary. Freedberg suggests that the theological designation of Mary as both Virgin and Spouse of Christ contributed to her becoming the object of desire for human males.[43]

Since Mary was traditionally pictured as a beautiful young maiden, it raises the question as to whether depictions of Mary were sexually provocative for male viewers. Mikhail Gorky recalls how in his childhood innocence he kissed an icon of the Virgin passionately on the lips. Onlookers threw him aside for this desecration---kissing the Virgin in the "wrong way." There is also the story of a Florentine man who went to an artist and asked him to make a picture of the Virgin which would not be enticing. The artist painted a beard on Mary.[44] These stories remind us that images of the Virgin carry an inevitable duality of meaning. For theological reasons, she must be portrayed as beautiful, but when she is, the artist risks stimulating carnal desire in the male viewer, who has been conditioned to respond to female beauty in a sexual rather than an aesthetic way. To present Mary as the most beautiful of women is to ask men to deny what they have been conditioned to desire.

Rosemary Hale's thesis *Imitatio Mariae* is of particular interest concerning the consequences of the female gaze directed at Mary as mother. For certain nuns, the intensity of their devotional practices in imitating Mary, the nurturing mother, caused them literally to lactate. The baby Jesus would appear to them and actually ask to suckle at their breasts.[45]

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[43]Freedberg, 333.

[44]Ibid, 320 & 322.

[45]Rosemary Hale, *Imitatio Mariae, Maternal Motifs in Medieval Devotional Practice* (PhD. Diss. Harvard University, !991.).

Although modern readers would quickly detect erotic overtones in analyzing this experience, Caroline Walker Bynum points out that it is evident from reading medieval spiritual literature that the writers made no clear distinctions between the erotic and the spiritual in the mystical language they used to express their devotional experiences.[46] Indeed, that intermingling is characteristic of devotional practices of the 13th and 14th centuries. The interplay between erotic and spiritual love is well illustrated by Bernini's statue of Theresa of Avilla. The great mystical saint is depicted at the moment she is pierced with the arrows of God's love. The ecstatic look on her face is nothing short of orgasmic.[47]

The belief in the powerful ability of images to affect behaviour is problematic when applied to pagan idols, depictions of sin, or the grotesques[48] that are commonplace in Romanesque sculpture. It seems contradictory to maintain that depictions of sinful behaviour exist to illustrate the Church's moral teachings, given the belief that those same images will be "bonded to the soul." Yet paradoxically, as Camille says, the Church believed that by re-presenting images of "alien cultures within its own visual value-system, the Christian Church could control and ultimately negate them."[49]

Although Camille is referring primarily to the depiction of pagan gods and goddesses such as Jupiter, Mars, Mercury or Venus, his statement could easily apply to Sheela-na-gigs or Double-tailed Mermaids. The Church tried to use images of these pagan gods and goddesses

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[46]Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 25.

[47] Freedberg, 323.

[48]Grotesques refers to any fantasy depiction of humans, demons, animals or hybrid creatures especially when their so-called normal characteristics are distorted in some way.

[49]Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, xxvi.

entirely for its own purposes, but the vestiges of ancient associations inherent in them subverted the thrust of the Churche's moralistic intent. Obviously the Church hoped that the fear of the consequences of sinful behaviour, such as being attacked by snakes or biting animals or being dragged into hell by demons, would dissuade imitative behaviour.

Camille looks to Augustine to explain how seeing became equated with sin, especially the viewing of nakedness and more specifically the sexual parts of the body. Genesis 3:7, "And the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived themselves to be naked" is the textual ground which Augustines used for his interpretation. Before the fall, Adam and Eve were innocent, sexually unaware, and in command of their bodies, but after eating the fruit, their nakedness becomes shameful, their desires uncontrollable. Margaret Miles, in *Carnal Knowing*, points out that Augustine's reflections equate desire with the male erection[50] and Camille gives us an example of Augustinian influence in an illustration from a 13th century Psalter.[51] Adam and Eve are shown first with no genitals. After the disobedience, Adam then "pushes down to both hide and repress something that is beyond his control."[52] And finally, both Adam and Eve are shown covering their shame as they leave the Garden. Augustine was firm in his belief that sexuality did exist before the fall but that its nature changed after the sin. Whereas in the state of innocence (which the artist represented as the absence of genitalia), reason directed the passions, now lust (implied by Adam's erection) was the irrepressible motivation governing sexual behaviour. Only with God's grace could

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[50]Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (New York: Random House, 1989), 92.

[51]MS. Lat 10434, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

[52]Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 89.

prelapsarian order be reestablished.

For Tertullian, Ambrose, Augustine, and Luther, the fall radically changed human nature. Even Hildegaard of Bingen accepted this conclusion in spite of her alternative interpretation of the relationship between Adam and Eve in Eden. An illustration from the *Ebingen Scivias*, an account of some of her mystical visions, conflates the story of the creation and the fall. Adam is depicted floating horizontally in space with his head engulfed in a black shape containing the fires of hell. From his side emerges a white flower-shaped cloud filled with large stars. Hildegaard's commentary says these represent the "future human beings contained in Eve."[53] Her text suggests that Eve produced Adam: "And the Cloud threw the form of a man out of itself." Experientally, man comes from woman. Like Augustine, Hildegaard believed that sexuality did exist in the garden but she reflects on the experience from a woman's point of view. She comments on a mutual pleasure in love-making that was not driven by lust. Though love-making gets changed by the fall, she retains belief in some of that mutuality, affirming that women's pleasurable sexual response produces the male orgasm necessary for conception.[54] Hildegaard's views did not makc any significant impact in the theological world which suppressed her writings, preferring the patriarchal interpretation of events essentializing woman as the sexualized body which arouses lust in men.

Ultimately it was the fear of sexual arousal by images that began to limit their use as devices to aid contemplation. The idea that once our eyes are engaged, emotion and feeling are inevitable dates back to Plato; and once the senses are engaged, we may lose rational control over our bodies. "Each time this happens, we are endangered and threatened---all

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[53]Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 102.

[54]Ibid., 103-104.

because of the dominance of the senses, because we are labile, not strong enough to control their motions and impulses."[55] The recognition that imagery may be bad as well as good leads ultimately to censorship.

2.1.4. Reading as "the other" - alternative interpretations

In *The Gothic Idol*, Michael Camille illustrates how Christian iconography transformed pagan imagery by presenting it in a new context, i.e. the Christian value system. In his analysis, Camille shifts the discourse away from a focus on text versus image to concentrate on what is happening between the beholder and the image. He identifies various types of idolatries in medieval society associated with "the other": the Past Other (pagan), the Foreign Other (Muslims), the Domestic Other (Jews) and finally, the Internal Other in reference to the growing concept of self which emerges during this period.[56] Medieval embodiments of the Pagan Other highlighted nakedness and genitalia. Camille remarks on 12th century responses to a Roman statue known as Thorn-puller or *The Spinario*. (Fig. 2.1) As Adam and Eve represent fallen sexuality in the Christian tradition, the *Spinario*, or thorn-puller, denotes pagan sexuality. The open-legged pose with the left foot resting an the right knee exposes the genitals to the viewer, especially to a viewer who bends forward and looks upward. Although one traveller claimed the genitals were outsized, Camille says that in fact they are not. Nevertheless, "the *Spinario* becomes a standard sign of infamy," and

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[55]Freedberg, 358.

[56]Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, xxix. In this book Camille explores the many renditions of pagan idols in illuminated manuscripts and as part of church sculpture. They are almost always shown nude, many with prominent genitalia. Many idols in the manuscripts show signs of erasure in the genital area as a later generation of readers felt the need to censure what they considered offensive or dangerous imagery.

Camille sees this figure as a referent for what he euphemistically refers to as "strange fertility images found in Romanesque sculpture."[57] The thorn-puller, indeed, becomes "a type" among the figures carved on church corbels.

Camille gives an interesting example of an alternative reading of the *Spinario* image. A Spanish Jew visiting Rome in the 12th century saw the statue as David's son Absalom in Kings, Ch.14:25: "But in Israel there was not a man so comely, and so exceedingly beautiful as Absalom: from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." Absalom was associated with both treachery and vanity, as symbolized in his long hair. All this Jewish viewer needed was a curly-headed statue examining the sole of his foot and a biblical text to "recognize" Absalom.[58]

The "mental framework" of a viewer can interpret something apparently obvious as quite "other." In 1840 an accomplished artist, George R. Lewis, sketched in detail the extraordinary Romanesque church of St. Mary and St. David at Kilpeck in Hertfordshire, England. Among the corbel figures was one that he named "the Fool." In fact his fool is one of the best known examples of the genre of sculpture known as a Sheela-na-gig. (See Fig. 4.67) One of the defining features of this sculpture is the use of tiny arms and hands to hold open an outsized vagina. Lewis's sketch, (See Fig. 4.68) which turns the arms and hands away from the vagina, is a blatant misrepresentation of the genital display. He sees the vaginal opening as "the cut in his chest, the way to his heart, [denoting] it is always open and to all

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[57]Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 86.

[58]Ibid., 87.

alike."[59]

Margaret Miles distinguishes between the symbolic aspects of images and their semiotic quality, in short, "everything about the painting that is not part of its narrative content."[60] A viewer might concentrate on the style and texture of the garments, the colour and quality of the paint, the background setting, the body gestures, sense of movement in the image, etc. All of these signs affect response to the symbolic and figurative content of an image. Miles gives examples of alternative readings as a result of these semiotic aspects: a Byzantine Madonna and Child might be viewed as inaccessible or powerful; a Giotto Virgin might appear docile and passive "or as untouched by physical weakness, grinding labor, and the biological necessities so continuously and costly to most medieval women." Even though images of the Virgin throughout her life cycle indicate that she was exempt from the labours which marked their lives, medieval women could still identify themselves with her and begin "to conceive of themselves as constituted by a subjective consciousness."[61] These examples of "alternative readings" illustrate the polysemic quality of images for the message received can be very different from the original artistic intent (or in the context of medieval imagery, from the prescribed intent of Church imagery). Our contemporary world is filled with similar examples. Media studies recount numerous instances of the reactions of viewers in non-industrialized countries to the material wealth, comforts, and space available to characters in American television programs, independent of any story content in the programs they are

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[59]G.R. Lewis, *Illustrations of Kilpeck* (London, 1842), 15. This booklet is available on site in the Church of St. Mary and St. David at Kilpeck.

[60]Miles, *Image as Insight*, 91.

[61]Ibid.

watching.[62]

The iconography of medieval statues of Mary known as Sedes Sapientiae (Throne of Wisdom) and Black Virgins[63] allowed an ambiguous reading. These statues presented no problem as objects of veneration for after all, Mary is the *theotokos*, the mother of God; the prominent display of these statues, sometimes above the high altar in churches, and Mary's disproportionally large size compared to the diminutive Jesus as a man-child on her knees invited other readings. In addition to the many local legends about these statues and their curative powers, her enlarged head and hands and the fact that she is seated on a throne (like an Isis conferring her power on the Pharaoh), all are signs of her divine power. In theory, Jesus is the divine object of worship but medieval pilgrimages were primarily directed toward Mary, not to Jesus through Mary.

A later (15th century) version of Mary's commanding role in the sacred hierarchy was even more evident in statues known as the *Vierge Ouvrante*. When closed, the statue looks like a version of the *Sedes Sapientiae*. When the doors are open, a mythic reading of Mary's body as Mother Goddess reveals that she contains within her "all-sheltering body" not only God the Father holding his crucified son on his knees, but examples of her human children as well (here, members of the clergy and nobility).[64] As Baring and Cashford comment, "The

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[62]See the work of Marshal McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 1967 and Edmund Carpenter, *They Became What They Beheld*, 1970. A more contemporary work that examines such questions is, *Cultures of Vision: Images, Media and the* Imaginary by Ron Burnett, 1995.

[63]Some statues were given the title Black Virgins even when they were not dark-skinned or black. Various reasons have been advanced for this term but the most reliable say it indicates the Near Eastern origin of this motif, that it is actually a reference to the verse in the *Song of Songs*, *"negra sum sed puldra,"* or to the pagan origins of this motif, "mother earth."

[64]Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother. An Analysis of the Archetype* (Prineton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series XLVII, 1963), 331.

outward figure of human maternity reveals itself to be an illusion of Incarnation that the inward timeless drama comprehends."[65] (Fig 2.2)

[65]Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: Arkana/Penguin Books, 1991), 547.

Chapter 3

VAGINA IMAGERY

3.1 The Affinity between Female Reproductive Powers and Divine Creativity

Woman is the centre of the universe,
The universe is her form;
Woman is the foundation of the world,
She is the true form of the body.
Saktisangama Tantra[66]

In his book on the yoni, Rufus C. Camphausen refers to the many natural resemblances to the female genitalia as the "ten thousand yonis of Mother Earth."[67] The largest and most enduring are rock formations which have served as places of worship for both ancient and present-day tribal peoples. In the California desert, the Kemeyaay tribe still paint the lips of

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[66]Quoted in Ajit Mookerjee, *Kali: the Feminine Force* (New York: Destiny Books, 1988), 6.

[67]Rufus C. Camphausen, *The Yoni: Sacred Symbol of Female Creative Power* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1996), 19.

their vagina shrine red in preparation for female initiation rites.[68] In Thailand, a seaside stone formation in the cliffs of Koh Samui, known as Grandmother's Stone, has vagina-like openings which are bathed by tidal waters rushing in between the stone legs.[69] Numerous examples in India from both Paleolithic and Neolithic eras refer to both natural and constructed cave sanctuaries as *Garbha-grha,* or womb chamber.[70] Anthropological and ethnological studies around the world have indicated countless other cave openings and rock formations as openings into the womb of Mother Earth.

In addition to these natural formations, we find drawings or carvings of vulvas amid the cave art of the Paleolithic era, in France for example, at La Ferrassie, Lascaux and Moigny; in Spain, at El Castillo and Altimira, and in Russia at Kostenki.[71]

Whereas many see these primitive vulva images simply as invocations of fertility, there is one drawing from the Paleolithic era found at Tassili in the Sahara which indicates that yoni power was invoked for the hunt. (Fig. 3.1) A goddess or woman with her arms raised in the traditional *orant* gesture of invocation[72] is joined by a line from her vagina to the penis of a hunter about to kill his prey. Erich Neumann says this drawing is a clear indication of the magical power of the feminine:[73] Camphausen, however, thinks not and maintains it expresses

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[68]Camphausen, 20.

[69]Ibid., 22.

[70]Mookerjee, 12

[71]Camphausen, 11-14.

[72]Figures or illustrations exhibiting this gesture are known as *orants.*

[73]Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother*, 114-15.

the idea "that the taking of a life can be granted only by one who is able to create life."[74]

One of the oldest goddess sculptures is that found near the opening of the famous caves at Laussel in France, 30,000 and 18,000 BCE. (Fig. 3.2) We find all the usual features of the so-called Venus figures[75]—the pendulous breasts, the generous thighs and buttocks, and the pregnant belly. What is more truly remarkable are the hand gestures and what they indicate. The right hand holds the "bison's horn, crescent-shaped like the moon, notched with the thirteen days of the waxing moon and the thirteen months of the lunar year."[76] Both the crescent-shaped horn or moon and the carefully indicated thirteen marks indicate the kind of abstract thinking associated with the use of symbols. Connections are being made between women's earth-bound fecundity, her menstrual periods in particular, and the heavenly cycles which either regulate them or with which the female body is in harmony.

The gesture of the left hand is more literal, indicating the vulva as the site of female power. There are many examples of this gesture such as one on a figure found in the Maltese temple period, 4th millennium. BCE. (Fig. 3.3) in Gimbutas' book, The Language of the Goddess. Here, and in many other examples, we see one hand (though not consistently the right or the left hand) indicating the vulva while the other hand points to or rests on the head. No interpretation is offered for this double gesture by Marija Gimbutas in spite of her extensive work with pre-historic material.[77] Various speculations come to mind, specifically

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[74]Camphausen, 58.

[75]Baring and Cashford, 8. These authors, as others, point out that to name these figures after Venus, the goddess of love and only one amongst many goddesses, is to reduce their importance and status as synonymous with the primary creative force.

[76]Ibid., 6.

[77] In spite of a number of different illustrations showing this double gesture on various figures at various times and in various geographical locations, I have yet to find any discussion of

one that would presume, even at this early stage of human evolution, a consciousness about the creative link between mind and body.

The definition of the words describing the female generative organs are commonly limited to physiological functions. (See: vagina, vulva, pudenda, cunt, clitoris, labia majora, womb, ovaries.) All read as strictly anatomical descriptions, whereas the use of the word *phallus* for the male generative organ may transcend the merely physical to achieve the symbolic in many religious systems. No equivalent symbolic word exists in the English language for either the external or internal sexual organs of a female. Only the Sanskrit word "yoni" is defined as having symbolic content. Camphausen speaks of this linguistic problem in working with vaginal imagery. He chooses to use the word yoni because not only is it free from any pornographic or derogatory connotations, but it also conveys a "more cosmic meaning, becoming a symbol of the Universal Womb, the Matrix of Generation and Source of all."[78] I have decided, however, to use the word vagina in my work in keeping with the exhortation of Shirley Ardener that women must use the word to reclaim it as our own and to replace negative connotations with positive imagery.[79]

The following sections of this chapter take a brief look at the many ways that the vagina and its symbolism has been perceived both in Western and other cultural systems.

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it. The gesture is part of the iconography of at least two Sheela-na-gig sculptures in Ireland.

[78] Camphausen, 2.

[79] Shirley Ardener, "A Note on Gender Iconography" in *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*; ed. Pat Caplan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1987).

3.1.2 The Sacred Vagina: The Polytheistic Tradition

When it comes to recorded history, the stories and hymns about the Sumerian goddess Innana, c. 1750 BCE, contain some of the most ancient surviving references to the vulva or vagina. They also indicate that Innana "played a greater role in myth, epic and hymn than any other deity, male or female."[80] The texts reveal her passion and desire as well as the importance of (and sometimes the primacy of) the female principle. The potency of her vagina (the translator of the hymns prefers vulva) and her sexual activity brings the blessing of fertility to individuals, the land, the animals but its benefits extend to other realms of human culture. In the Sumerian pantheon of gods and goddesses, Innana was Queen of Heaven as well as the protectoress of the city of Uruk. One of the earliest hymns of Innana's encounter with Enki the God of Wisdom starts with Innana celebrating the beauty of her genitals. "When [Inanna] leaned against the apple tree, her vulva was wondrous to behold. Rejoicing at her wondrous vulva, the young woman applauded herself."[81] In this story, the young Innana is still a virgin but rejoicing in her sexuality.

Immediately following these passages, Innana announces her intention to visit Enki, the God of Wisdom. He treats Innana as an equal, toasting her with beer and offering her fourteen gifts. Enki gives her the sovereignty of the land, the powers of the high priesthood and priestess in charge of joy and sorrow, judgement and decision making, the art of lovemaking, the arts of culture, and the art of the hero as well as dominion over all crafts

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[80]Samuel Noah Kramer, *From the Poetry of Sumer* (Berkeley: University of Berkeley Press, 1979) 71 as quoted in Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Kramer; *Inanna Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), xv.

[81]Wolkstein and Kramer, 12.

(such as wood and leather working) and the arts of war. Innana brings them all back to her city, Uruk, but when Enki awakens and realizes what he has done, he tries to get them back. His messengers are defeated by another goddess, Innana's servant, Ninshubar.[82] The story of Innana's new-found powers and of how she outsmarted Enki presents a goddess of considerably broader scope than a simple fertility deity. In fact though Innana was "the exception that illuminates the rule,"[83] she did not follow the regular patterns of a woman's life and she retained her position as a sky god, as the morning and evening star.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky says that the absence of women from the divine world only mirrors the "absence of women from the power structure of the ancient Sumerian state." Generally goddesses could be in command of reproduction, fertility and sexuality because only a woman's body, particularly the vagina, performs these female functions. But Innana never marries (even though she is the goddess associated with the god Dummuzi in the *hieros gamus* rituals) so she is "the very embodiment of sexual attraction and lust, the one on whose presence all sexual desire and copulation depend." Innana's festivals were full of games, dances, and music for her sexuality is that of the joy of life and of play.[84] Nevertheless, it was this ritual of union with the goddess that confirmed the king's sovereignty and the fertility of the land.

It is sometimes difficult to separate the attributes of Innana, Ishtar, Anath, Astarte and

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[82]Wolkstein and Kramer, 13 - 27.

[83]Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddess: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: McMillan Free Press, 1992), 46.

[84]Frymer-Kensky, 47.

Asherah.[85] Anath and Astarte may in fact have been the two aspects of a creator-destroyer goddess whose cult was widespread in Canaan. Astarte's name means "womb" or "that which issues from the womb," but, like Innana, her powers ranged over all that "governed the generation of life."[86] Astarte is recognized as a prototype of the Virgin Mary. Mary's title "Queen of Heaven" recalls Astarte's title as "Queen of Stars." Her feast day, December 25th, commemorating the birth of her son, the solar god, was in time appropriated by Christianity.[87]

A 15th century BCE gold pennant from Ugarit in north Canaan shows Astarte standing on a lion, waist encircled with snakes and in the orant position but holding lotus flowers in her raised hands. Snakes were prominently associated with the goddess, signifying her association with fertility and regeneration. By the 4th century BCE, Astarte has become the goddess of Sidon near the sea. Her migration to the seaside may be responsible for her gaining the titles "Virgin of the Sea" and "Guardian of Ships." Later Mary too is addressed as "Virgin of the Sea, blessed Mother and Lady of the Waters." [88] In both cases, an association with fertility and child-bearing does not preclude the title of Virgin.

Astarte and Innana were frequently depicted wearing the horns of the crescent moon as are Ishtar and Isis-Hathor in Egypt. Ishtar of Babylon is the Great Goddess worshipped under many different names, such as Astarte, Cybele, Aphrodite, and so on.[89] Much later, Apuleius,

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[85]See Judith Oschorn, "Ishtar and Her Cult," in *The Book of the Goddess: Past and Present*, Carl Olsen, Ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1989) for a more detailed discussion of the overlap between Ishtar, Astarte, and Innana.

[86]Baring and Cashford, 458-460.

[87]Barbara G. Walker, *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*,.70.

[88]Baring and Cashford, 459.

[89]Walker, *Dictionary*; 452.

writing about Isis, the Giver of Life and "Mother of Egypt," acknowledges that, beneath her multi-named appearances, the goddess is really one. He has Isis answer his queries about what she is by stressing her singularity: "I am Nature, the parent of things, the sovereign of the elements, the primary progeny of time, the first of the Heavenly gods and goddesses, the queen of the dead, the uniform countenance, manifested alone and under one form."[90]

In these few examples we see how even in ancient societies (as in the Christian era) there was a tendency to separate the sexual and the reproductive powers of the vagina Yet the sacred vagina was still revered and praised in the ancient world. Only later in the Western tradition would the sexual powers of the vagina be condemned and feared by men as causing chaos in their ordered world. Frymer-Kensky's work, as we shall see in the next section, traces the disappearance of the women from the realm of the divine in the Hebrew monotheistic tradition. She concludes her chapter about the body of the goddess by saying, "When, as in the Bible, the divine has no vagina, how can the world be renewed?"[91]

3.1.3 The Suspect Vagina: The Misogynist Tradition

With the emergence of the patriarchal system and monotheism, the combination of woman and power, especially power associated with women's sexuality, became suspect. Tikva Frymer-Kensky's work *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Transformation of Pagan Myth* traces the disappearance of sexuality from the realm of the divine that accompanied the emergence of monotheism. Using Innana and other goddesses as examples, Frymer-Kensky illustrates how sexuality was "most specifically" associated with

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[90]Walker, *Dictionary*, 452.

[91]Frymer-Kensky, 157.

goddesses and was considered a beneficent activity. The sexual interaction amongst gods and goddesses was something to be celebrated and to be emulated by humans. With the development of Hebrew monotheism, sexuality became confined strictly to humans and a highly suspect activity to be regulated by laws, the transgression of which alienated humans from the divine.

Yet Frymer-Kensky claims that although early biblical texts clearly indicate male privilege, women's roles were considered complementary to those of men, especially in the nurturing of children and other family-oriented goals. "In their strengths and weaknesses, in their goals and strategies, the women of the Bible do not differ substantially from men."[92] She attributes any negative portrayal of women in the Old Testament to later texts which show the influence of Hellenistic misogyny. Only then do Judaic writings indicate an alienation from women that demonizes her body and all its parts. Frymer-Kensky identifies a passage from Ecclesiastes, written in the third century BCE, as "the first openly misogynistic statement in the Bible:"[93]

> Now I find woman more bitter than death; she is all traps, her hands are fetters and her heart is snares. He who is pleasing to God escapes her, and he who is displeasing is caught by her... I found only one human being in a thousand, and never found a woman among so many (Eccl.7:26-28).

The Wisdom of Ben Sira, although written to counteract Hellenistic influence, falls prey to its misogyny. The text maintains that "Better is the wickedness of a man than the goodness of a woman" (42:14), and reminds its audience of the fault of Eve: "...from a

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[92]Walker, *Dictionary*, 121.

[93]Frymer-Kensky, 205.

In this latter verse we read the antecedents of the hateful statements against women so prevalent in the writings of Tertullian and other Church Fathers who saw women as the devil's "gateway." Tertullian's reference is to the vaginal gateway and intercourse. Procreation is not questioned but sexual pleasure is suspect or, more precisely, male fears about loss of control because of ungovernable sexual passion outweigh the lure of sex. Frymer-Kensky gives numerous examples from Rabbinic literature of how the mere sight of a woman causes men to behave irrationally. Even the holiest of rabbis could suddenly be seized by sexual desire, the *yeser hara* (the evil impulse). Frymer-Kensky says that this extreme misogyny abated "rather early" and Judaism returned to the pre-Hellenic estimation of women and sexuality within marriage. The legacy of this period of misogyny remained, however, in laws of segregation and regulations enjoining modesty that are entrenched in some Jewish rituals[94] and in the tendency to blame human sexual transgressions on women. Women's sexual parts, previously considered a reflection of the sacred or honoured vulva of goddesses, were now suspect.

Frymer-Kensky does acknowledge that the creation myth of Judaism with its new conceptualization of nature, left the divine with no vagina through which the world can be renewed. "Finding a vision of sexuality commensurate with the significance of sexuality in people's lives remains monotheism's unfinished agenda,"[95] she concludes.

Christianity inherited both the Hebrew and the Greek view of women in spite of the many gospel reports of Christ's interactions with women. He broke many of the social taboos of the period and included women such as Mary Magdalene and Mary and Martha among his

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[94]Frymer-Kemsky, 206-209 & 214.

[95]Frymer-Kensky, 212.

of the period and included women such as Mary Magdalene and Mary and Martha among his disciples.[96] His followers would be quick to correct Christ's aberrant ideas concerning women. Paul or pseudo-Pauline texts especially, set the tone for later misogynist commentaries from the Church Fathers. Whereas Mary would be the great exception amongst women, it was only because she could be both the mother of God and a virgin. Naomi Goldenberg asserts that although Mary has been desexed in the Christian tradition, "she derives her power in the fact that she compels minds and hearts from the vestiges of the vibrant goddesses she is supposed to replace."[97] Goldenberg recounts an experience in Zurich when she saw genitals painted on a statue of the Virgin Mary. The graffiti artist, as she says, did not know what a political (and theological) statement she or he made.

3.1.4 The Dangerous Vagina

Drawing on a range of anthropological and psychological arguments, Jill Raitt, in her article on "The *Vagina Dentata* and the *Immaculatus Uterus Divini Fontis*," suggests an answer to what happened to the life-giving primordial image of the vagina/vulva. It became the "vagina-with-teeth," an image which made visual "for males, the fear of the entry into the unknown, of the dark dangers that must be controlled in the ambivalent mystery which is women."[98] Raitt cites examples of this fear in myths drawn from cultures as widely varied as

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[96]The work of feminist theologians such as Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza has restored the status of these women as disciples or even, for Mary Magdalene, as an apostle in the gospel tradition. See her book, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Construction of Christian Origins*, 1988.

[97]Naomi Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism & the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 75.

[98]Jill Raitt, "The *Vagina Dentata* and the *Immaculata Uterus Divini Fontis*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Sept.1980, 48.3: 416.

the Indian, Native American, and Maori. Erich Neumann also speaks of the fear of the "destructive side of the Feminine." He says it is very common in the mythology of the native peoples of North American where "the hero is the man who overcomes the Terrible Mother, breaks the teeth out of the vagina and so makes her into a woman."[99] This example and others reveal how women must be tamed in some way for men safely to have intercourse with them. The need to control women's sexual power would seem to be a strong element in the universal spread of patriarchy

Raitt also observes this fear of women's sexual powers in apocryphal biblical literature. The story of Sarah, the "poison maiden" in the Book of Tobit tells how none of her seven husbands survived a wedding night with her. Tobit lives thanks to special charms given him by the Archangel Raphael. Even though the actual killing of the husbands in the story is attributed to the demon Asmodeus, the "events" of the fatal wedding night are the expression of the same sort of fears as are embedded in the beliefs of non-Western cultures.[100]

Raitt's examination of the polarity between male and female symbols of divinity makes many of the same observations as are made by Frymer-Kensky's. As cultures elaborate their creation myths, male symbols become associated with positive attributes and powers such as law and order, the blue unchanging sky, the right side, and the like. Female symbols remain ambiguous or become dangerous and unpredictable. Woman becomes not only the life-bearer, but the one who also can bring death.[101]

Raitt comments on the complex and interior nature of the female sexual organs. The

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[99]Neumann, 168.

[100]Raitt, 416-418.

[101]Raitt, 418-419. In some myths, as with Inanna, the goddess triumphs over death and rises from the underworld, as does the man-god, Jesus Christ.

fact that they are more hidden than those of the male contributes to their mysteriousness. Male sexual readiness is immediately apparent but subject to baffling failures, whereas the female is imagined always to be accessible. Thus, as sexual symbolism develops, the negative potential of the masculine is downplayed or suppressed, while the negative aspect of the female is not only exaggerated, but appears as a threat to the masculine - responsible for male failures or even death.[102]

Raitt finds in both Erich Neumann and Wolfgang Lederer examples of the *vagina dentata* in the fantasies and dreams of men. This wide-spread myth is seen as the reason for the medieval custom of someone other than the husband deflowering the bride or for the gang rape of the bride by all the male wedding guests, so as "to disseminate her awful, concentrated power." Raitt also speaks of the practice of clitoridectomy as another means of rendering the woman harmless to men. "Women are then cut and shaped, quite literally, into a 'female character' as defined by men."[103] Rape, mutilation, and punishment are responses to the "universal fear of the 'castrating female'..[designed to] take away her power and change her from a witch to a woman, from powerful 'other' to a docile, tractable, domesticated property."[104]

As evidence that this fear of women is based on their anatomy and their sexual functioning, Raitt presents the views of the sixteenth century Borgarucci, who in turn drew upon Galen, the famous second century physician. Long before Freud, Galen claimed that woman was humbled and shamed by the lack of a penis. Since she was "as perfect" as man

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[102]Raitt, 418-419.

[103]Ibid., 420-21.

[104]Ibid., 421.

and had all that was necessary for procreation, lest she become confirmed in her "continual desire to dominate," nature hid all her equipment within.[105]

The fear of domination by women's sexual powers is never more evident than in the famous statement from the *Malleus Maleficarum*: "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women unsatiable." And as for biblical texts: "There are three things that are never satisfied, yea a fourth thing that says not, It is enough, that is, the *mouth* of the womb." (Proverbs 30:15-16) (Emphasis Raitt's).[106] In one of the more picturesque passages in the *Malleus*, witches were accused of such insatiable lust that they would capture men's penises and keep them in boxes in trees. The belief in this myth was so strong that a man who believed he had been bewitched would be unable to see his own penis even in broad daylight. Lederer reports that this motif occurs frequently in the dreams of many men and in other fantasies of penises mutilated by hostile vaginas.[107] With all this fear and hatred directed at the female anatomy and its supposed power, it is a wonder that any positive vaginal imagery has survived and it is hardly surprising that when it does exist it is often obscured.

There was, however, one way to render the vagina safe and that was to allow regeneration from a miraculous conception and a virgin birth. To be on the safe side, the theology of the Nativity maintained that Christ was not born through the vagina as other humans. This residual fear of the vagina is why I propose in chapter four that the mandorla is a non-threatening version of the *vesica piscis*. Church images could thus use a vaginal reference, the mandorla, in conjunction with the Incarnation and the Virgin Birth, without

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[105]Raitt, 422.

[106]Ibid., 422.

[107]Ibid., 423.

risking any encounter with the *vagina dentata* by transforming it into the *Immaculatus uterus divini fontis*[108]

3.1.5 The Persistent Vagina: Veneration Rituals

Few anatomically specific vaginal images survived the transition into Judaic and later Christian monotheism as indications of sacred power. Usually any Christian iconography that makes reference to the vaginal opening associates it with sinful behaviour. The phallus is also depicted in the pursuit of illicit sexual pleasures with female or males. Yet veneration of the male generative power persisted in the Christian era and is well documented into the 16th century. Vaginal images were also venerated but are less well documented and there are fewer surviving examples.

Beliefs and rituals revering the generative powers and persisting into the 18th and 19th century have been preserved in the observations of Richard Payne Knight, 1786, and Thomas Wright, 1866. Their work has been reprinted many times; the most recent edition (1974) combines the writing of these two men with a new introduction by O. V. Garrison. Both authors speak about the worship of the phallus but it is Thomas Wright who provides evidence of the veneration of the female generative organ, the vagina, in the Middle Ages.[109]

Wright first talks about how the practice of phallic worship was assimilated into devotional practices in the Catholic Church. If, he writes, "Antiquity had made Priapus a

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[108]Raitt, 424.

[109]Thomas Wright, "The Worship of the Generative Powers during the Middle Ages of Western Europe" (1866), with the *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus and Its Connection with the Mystic Theology of the Ancients*, R.P. Knight, (1786), (Syracuse: University Books, 1974), 28.

god, the middle ages raised him into a saint, and that under several names."[110] He gives many examples of phallic images or objects being presented for blessing in churches in connection with the rites associated with Sts. Cosmos and Damian. He describes in great detail various practices in association with St. Foutin. In a chapel dedicated to Foutin at Varaillles in Provence, waxen genitalia were offered to him and suspended from the ceiling of the chapel. In other places, wine was poured over a wooden phallus in his honour. The wine was left to sour and became the *sainte vinaigre* used by women "for a purpose only obscurely hinted at."[111] At La Chatelette in Berri and elsewhere, a wooden phallus protruded through a hole in the saint's statue. As the faithful diminished the size of the phallus by scraping bits off the end to make potions, it was "miraculously" replenished by being pushed forward a little. Other stories hint at the use of these holy phalluses by brides who offered their virginity to the saint or by married women seeking the blessings of his fertility.[112]

Wright draws upon Church documents from the 8th to the 14th centuries, citing tracts, councils and synods which prohibit the worship of the *fascinum* or stipulate the appropriate penances for such acts.[113] The ambiguity in the phrasing of some of these prohibitions is well illustrated by the earliest citation: "if any one has performed incantation to the *fascinum*, or any incantation whatever, except any one who chaunts the Creed or the Lord's Prayer, let him do penance on bread and water during three lents."[114]

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[110]Wright, 139.

[111]Ibid., 140.

[112]Ibid., 141-142.

[113]He quotes Horace as the source of this popular or vulgar Roman name for the male organ. Interestingly, Wright points out that it is the origin of our English word *fascination*.

[114]Wright, 128.

Wright sees the display of phallic images, especially disembodied ones, on medieval churches and cathedrals as a continuation of Roman practices. These talismans were "believed to be a protection against enchantments of all kinds...and this protection extended over the place and over those who frequented it, providing they cast a confiding look upon the image."[115]

Wright was well acquainted with the few Sheela-na-gigs that were known by 1866 and ready to acknowledge their significance: "It is a singular fact that in Ireland it was the female organ which was shown in this position of protector upon the churches, and the elaborate though rude manner in which these figures were sculpted, show that they were considered as objects of great importance."[116] In reference to the story of Baubo's display that cured Demèter of her depression at the loss of Persephone by making her laugh, he adds a tale from a fifteenth century book, *Le Moyen de Parvenir*, in which the display of a woman's genitals to her husband cures his illness.[117]

The most interesting indication that the female genitals were not forgotten in this worship of the generative powers is Wright's discussion of the imagery appearing on small leaden amulets found in the river Seine.(Fig. 3.5) Their date is uncertain but Wright estimates from the presence of bells and wings adorning the phallic images that they were in use roughly from the 14th to the 15th century. The amulets or "medalets" look like small coins and

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[115] Wright, 132. Jorgen Andersen, in his book *The Witch on the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles*, reports that brides were recommended to glance up at the Sheela figure before entering a church in Oxford to be married, but he does not say whether it was to protect her from the Evil Eye or to ensure her fertility. 142. Anthony Weir and J. A. Jerman mention phallic imagery on Hadrian's wall in England as being apotropaic. *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (London: Batsford, 1986).

[116] Wright, 132.

[117] Ibid., 134-135.

were probably designed to be carried on one's person.. There are ten in all—five examples of each sex. Their imagery combines Christian and sexual elements; that is, one side of the medalet shows a cross, the other, a phallus or a vagina. Wright discusses in detail the symbolism and variety of the phallic imagery, but offers no explanatory comments on the vaginal imagery which are equally varied.[118] He believes that the coins show a "curious intimation of the adoption of the worship of the generative powers among Christians," and that the carrying or wearing of such objects was the continuation of a Roman practice to ward off evil.[119]

Another fascinating custom indicating the continued adulation of the generative organs was the baking and eating of cakes in the form of the male or female genitals. This was an ancient tradition mentioned even in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, in which the Hebrews in exile tell Jeremiah that they will continue to bake cakes in honour of Astarte. "The children gather wood, the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough to make cakes to the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink offerings unto other gods." (Jer 7:18) Even more interesting is Jeremiah 44:17- 19 in which the Hebrews in Babylon say they are going to go right on doing these things, since they've had nothing but trouble since they quit. A stone mould of the goddess dating from c.1600 BCE suggests that the cakes were in the form of her body and that the eating of them was a ritual act, similar to the Christian communion.[120]

Medieval cook books provided recipes for these "obscene forms" and Dulaiure's

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[118]Wright, 146-147,

[119]Ibid., 145.

[120]Baring and Cashford, 460.

Histoirie Abregée des Differents Cultes, printed in 1825, reports that these cakes were still being made in various regions of France. Some places seemed to favour the phallic shape and other districts, such as Clermont in the Auverne, concentrated on images of the female organ which "were popularly called *miches*."[121] Wright quotes Martial's epigrams on the subject to show that the custom dates back to Roman times.[122]

Erich Neumann mentions that "cakes made of honey and sesame in the shape of the female sexual organ" were carried as part of the Greek rites of the Thesmophoria. These celebrations were part of the Eleusian mysteries, celebrating, among other things, the reunion of Demeter and Kore.[123] Neumann sees the uniquely female rites associated with this festival as "permeated by the self-contained transformative unity of mother and daughter." Kore's rape by the male principle in Hades disrupts the power of the female vagina and replaces it with the phallus. The true mystery, Neumann says, is that when Kore is reunited with Demeter, she becomes in turn the Mother, i.e. Demeter. Thus, "the mystery of the Feminine is susceptible of endless renewal."[124]

Wright's final observations on food point out that the traditional hot cross buns of Good Friday are a Christianization of the pagan custom of offering cakes to the goddess *Eostre* (Anglo-Saxon, *Ostara* in German) in celebration of *Easter-month*.[125] Although both Jorgen Andersen and Anthony Weir and Jerman use Wright as an important resource in their

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[121] Wright, 160.

[122] Wright, 159.

[123] Neumann, 266.

[124] Neumann, 307-309.

[125] Wright, 157-158.

works on the Sheela-na-gigs, they do not to comment on these citations concerning "non-Christian" practices of venerating either female or male genitalia.

An interesting reappearance of making edible organs happened in the 1970's in New York city when an up-town local patisserie decided to make chocolate phalluses and vaginas to the horror, or delight, of the local population and the press.

3.1.6 The Rude Vagina: The Power of the Female Genital Display

Shirley Ardener's work on the effect of culture on sexuality instances the use of vaginal display in some African societies. She is particularly interested in how occasions of female shame may be recast into their opposite and how sexual display and vulgarity are used in that transformation. As an example, she cites the West African Bakweri tribal concept of "*titi ikoli*." Ardener observes: "Titi is a childish word for vulva, *ikoli*, on its own, means *thousand*. The combination includes the following associations: a woman's underparts and insults to these; and women's secrets and the revealing of these."[126] The concept also incorporates the mandatory sanctions which follow certain insults to women, for example, that her sexual parts smell. If a Bakweri woman is so insulted in front of others, all the women of the village converge on the offender dressed in vines. They dance around him, making rude gestures and sing songs about *titi ikoli* being a beautiful thing. A pig is demanded as recompense for the insult and when the ransom is paid, the women cook and eat it together.

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[126] Shirley Ardener, "A Note on Gender Iconography: the Vagina" in *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, ed. Pat Caplan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1987), 117.

Ardener gives other examples from West African tribal peoples, where the women as a group use some sort of naked display and obscene words or gestures to defend their dignity. The insult is "to the corporate sexual identity of women, of which the symbol is the vaginal area." They reverse the norm by revealing what is usually hidden. "Reversing 'his' negative to their positive values, they proclaim their pride and make their hidden secrets a dominant and public emblem."[127] This practice of reversing normal practices, making rude gestures, especially those involving sexual and excretory functions, are the classic strategies of trickster figures known in folk tales around the world.

Ardener illustrates the transformative use of vulgarity in antiquity. In a re-enactment of the Demeter myth as part of the Thesmophoria rites, ritual obscenities or gestures recalled Iambe's genital display which made Demeter laugh, breaking her depression at the loss of Kore. As in the African traditions, the ritual obscenities may have more than one significance --- the revealing of religious secrets as well as recalling Iambe's ritual display. Ardener, like Neumann, remarks that cakes in the form of female genitalia were important to the Thesmaphoria celebrations.

There is an interesting association to be made between the Bakweri women feasting on their pig and the fact that the pig is an animal associated with many goddesses of the Near East as well as those of Germanic and Celtic origins---"the pig being a well known gloss for the vulva."[128] Piglets were also part of the Thesmaphoria rites. The decayed flesh from piglets thrown into a pit (symbolizing their return to the Mother Earth) was retrieved each year

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[127]Ardener, 118.

[128]Ibid., 128.

to use as fertilizer for the next planting. New piglets were sacrificed for the coming year.[129] Generally in these ancient traditions, the eating of pig was reserved for ceremonial occasions and rituals.[130] .

The Baubo statues found in Turkey with the face on the belly of a truncated figure mounted on legs, makes explicit a connection between the female face and her genitals. Ardener calls it the "genitalized head." The Gorgon, with its gaping mouth, is another example of a genitalized head. Her image was used apotropaically on war shields. The second application of the genital display is reflexive, directed away from an enemy and back to the female herself.[131] Ardener confirms this double intent, using her research on the Doukabors in Canada. Their practice of public nudity is an act that can be "shocking and hostile towards an enemy, and yet: proclaim the honour of that which is exposed."[132]

The female genital display is well known in Indian tantric sculpture as well as in Oceanic art from several regions. Most notable there are the "dulukai" figures, large wooden carvings of a woman, emphasizing the pubic triangle between her widely displayed legs. The sculpture is mounted over the entrance to male-only houses in Palua in Micronesia. The woman is flanked by much small incised male figures who direct their penises at her. Douglas Frazer believes the dulukai's function is apotropaic as well as embodying the fertility of the whole community. The image faces the rising sun "to express the fertilizing of the

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[129]Baring and Cashford, 374-75.

[130]Walker, *Dictionary*, 385-386. Walker also points out that the classical Greek term for female genitalia is choios, which also means pig and Greek playwrights liked to make puns on the double meaning.

[131]Margaret Murray, in the 1930s, described the sheela image as having this dual effect, and that women identified strongly with the reflexive aspect.

[132]Ardener, "A Note on Gender Iconography," 123.

earth by solar light and warmth." This same gesture of displaying the genitals to the rising sun is part of fertility rites for young Samoan girls.[133]

The practice of depicting women with exposed genitalia seems to have existed throughout time and to have occurred world-wide if the examples provided by Douglas Fraser in his famous article on "The Heraldic Woman" are any evidence. The connection of the Sheela-na-gigs to this tradition will be explored in section 4.3.1 of this paper.

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[133] Douglas Fraser, "The Heraldic Woman: A Study in Diffusion," in *The Many Faces of Primitive Art*, ed. Douglas Fraser (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1966), 60-61.

Chapter 4

Medieval Vaginal Imagery

4.1 Medieval attitudes toward the body: the good, the bad and the ugly

Like so many other historical eras, the medieval period lived with conflicting images of women. Two essentially unreconcilable notions of the nature of the female flowed from the two main females in the Christian drama, Eve and Mary. From Eve devolved the endless debates about women's responsibility for the effects of Original Sin and from Mary came another endless debate about what benefits accrued to humanity as a result of Mary's assent to become the vehicle of the Incarnation. In Latin, Eve is Eva and much comment was generated about the reversal of the name, resulting in the "Ave" with which the angel Gabriel greeted Mary at the Annunciation. All women suffered from being identified with Eve's moral weakness and sin but they could look to Mary as the exemplary woman who, by cooperating with God's plan, redeemed all womankind. Although women could not aspire to Mary's immaculate purity, they could imitate her virtues "with the help of God's grace" as mother and virgin.[134] Eve's disobedience was blamed for the punishments of suffering,

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[134]Mary also became the role model for those who wanted to live chastely within a marriage.

ageing, illness, and death that were inflicted on the human body. Although those corruptible bodies could only be redeemed through Christ's incarnation and death, according to Christian theology, Mary made redemption possible by providing human flesh for Christ's body.

Devotion to the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Crucifixion dominate medieval spirituality. Though neither of these was a novel object of contemplation, in the 12th century increasing attention began to be paid to the infancy of Christ. It was perhaps the proliferation at this time of scenes such as the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, the Flight into Egypt that appeared in Church sculpture, drama, manuscript paintings, and the like which allowed ordinary people to develop an emotional attachment to Christ and Mary as Mother and Child. A predominant figurative image during this period, based on the theology of the Incarnation, is the representation of Mary enthroned with Christ on her knee. These are called *Sedes Sapientiae* or Black Virgins and their iconography presents Mary as the dominant figure. I would contend that the elliptical shape known as the Mandorla or *Vesica Piscis* is another predominant reference to the Incarnation, especially during the same period, the 11th and 12th centuries. As we will see, both types of iconography, figurative and abstract, incorporate goddess referents. And so I see the vaginal referent in the mandorla/vesica piscis as "good" in its affirmation of the (female) body and women's creative powers, regardless of whether we see the iconography within the confines of Christian theology or as a persistence of an earlier pagan belief..

The medieval age was also preoccupied with sin and death. Since, as a result of Original Sin, humans lost their free will (according to Augustine) and thus their capacity to make rational judgments, the body thereafter was not to be trusted. Concerns about avarice, luxuria or lust, and idol worship came to dominate depictions of sin. In some ways the three

sins overlap but it is the iconography of lust, since it used naked bodies, that is most relevant to my work. To a lesser degree, visual warnings against idol worship are also relevant, since the idols were frequently naked. Although we tend to connect the revival of classical art to the Renaissance, certain classical gods were always well known in Western Europe and appear frequently as idols in medieval imagery. Mars, Mercury, Diana[135] and Venus or Aphrodite were among the most popular. They were depicted naked and with evident genitalia to emphasize their evilness and immorality. Perhaps their nakedness also made them vulnerable, for in the encounter between saints and idol worshippers, the Christian god is always more powerful, easily toppling idols off their pedestals or out of their niches.[136] There is an evident similarity between the depiction of idols and depictions of lust, perhaps because to choose sexual pleasure over obedience to the moral restrictions of the Church was a kind of worship of the body.

There is an inherent anomaly in the Church's use of these so-called "images of sin" for, if these images are truly about reprehensible behaviour, why did the Church present images of what it did *not* want people to do? This would have been especially true of images than of text, since visual images were considered "even more powerful exemplars and invitations to action for medieval people than they are in our own image-saturated culture."[137] Michael Camille says perverse sexual acts were commonly presented in public sculptures of the 11th and 12th centuries but that the succeeding two centuries represented sexual acts more

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[135]Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 107. Gregory of Tours describes Diana as a witch of the night.

[136]Ibid., 5, 23, 27.

[137]Camille, "Manuscript Illumination and the Art of Copulation," Illumination and the Art of Copulation." In *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*: Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Shultz, eds. (London, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis 1997), 77-78.

circumspectly. New directives went out to confessors warning them not to describe sexual sins too accurately for fear of inciting the very behaviour they were trying to prohibit.[138]

The 13th century was a time of prosperity. Members of the nobility and the rising middle class were avid to have books and precious objects of their own. There was a tremendous increase in the production of visual narratives in the form of illuminated manuscripts, panel and wall paintings.[139] The multiplicity of images found in secular literature or in the margins of religious manuscripts that depict copulation or other sexual acts indicates that this type of imagery was not an individual or even unusual predilection but a common taste.

Much of the splendour of Romanesque and Gothic art and architecture comes from the refinement of the monastic sense of order and beauty. Emile Mâle does, however, suggest that monasticism was also responsible for perpetuating and accentuating the negative view of women inherent in Lapsarian theology. He suggests that "for the monk, woman was almost as redoubtable as Satan himself."[140] There was such a fear of women, whose very presence was the occasion of sin, that extraordinary precautions were taken to prevent monks from ever seeing them, even those to whom they were closely related. The Cistercians were especially vigilant for, according to their founder, "To live with a woman free of danger is more difficult than to raise the dead."[141] And yet, as one of the many anomalies surrounding this issue,

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[138]Camille, "Manuscript Illuminations," 77-78.

[139]Brigitte Buettner, "Profane Illuminations, Secular Ilusions: Manuscripts in Late Medieval Courtly Society," *The Art Bulletin* 72.1 (1992): 79.

[140]Mâle, *Religious Art in France, the Twelfth Century*, 372.

[141]Bernard of Clairvaux as quoted in Mâle, *Religious Art in France, the Twelfth Century*, 372.

women's naked bodies were frequently depicted on church capitals, even in monastic churches and cloisters. (Fig 4.1) In the Cathedral of St. Lazare at Autun a young man is shown gazing at a woman's body. A demon snatches him up by the hair while gazing conspiratorially at the woman. The ambiguity is present even in the carving for as Mâle says, the artist has given the woman a kind of "sinuous grace."[142]

The sin of *luxuria* exhibited some of the most terrifying imagery. Not merely must these images condemn bad behaviour, they must also be repulsive or "ugly." Whereas earlier, naked bodies appearing on the major portals of churches and cathedrals usually were there as illustrations of the damned at the Last Judgement, in the early 12th century, the naked female form begins to appear as an illustration of specific sin and its punishment. The snake or serpent, which in pagan times had been seen as a symbol of regeneration due to its ability to shed its skin, with Christianity began to be transformed into a punishment for lust. Mâle traces the beginning of this development to a 4th century book entitled *The Vision of St. Paul*, which was very popular in the Middle Ages. Sculptures at Moissac and Saint Sernan juxtapose snake and woman. At Moissac, the female figure is unusually large and displayed beside the main entrance to the cathedral. She is naked and emaciated and under attack by serpents, while a toad bites her genitals. (See Fig 4.6) This appalling image, known as the Woman Devoured by Serpents, appears to have recommended itself either to the clerics or to the popular imagination, as it spread from Moissac and Saint Sernan to other regions of France.

If the naked female form in its entirety was irretrievably associated with sin and death, the same can not be said for its parts, especially when they were depicted not literally, but in coded allusion. In the next section, we will examine instances of these kinds of cloaked

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[142] Mâle, *Religious Art in France, the Twelfth Century*, 373.

references to the vagina, in the mandorla, the *vesica piscis,* and in certain vegetative or other natural forms. As they are not anatomically explicit, they are acceptable as they linger below the level of conscious awareness, but draw power from the recollection of ancient ideas that associated women's reproductive power with the creative power of the divine. Even without the pagan association, these covert vaginal images made room for a female presence in the sacred mysteries of redemption and resurrection, a presence embodied in Mary.

Of course, they did not erase the negative connection between the naked female body and sin and death. Whenever anatomically specific vaginal or genital imagery appears in sculpture or painting, the body is being presented as a locus of sin. When, however, the Church felt it desirable to transmute the iconography of sculptures like the Sheela-na-gig and the double-tailed mermaid for its own use, their pagan roots stubbornly survived.

4.1.2. The Good: Medieval Spirituality and the Incarnation

The 12th century was marked by a change in Christian devotional practices which placed new emphasis on the humanity of Christ. Probably no one event or person was responsible for this change but many count the first presentation of the Nativity scene by Francis of Assisi (d.1126) in the year 1125 as a catalyst in effecting the transformation. His creche was a life-sized representation of the gospel stories about the Nativity with live animals and human participants. From that moment, the birth of Christ ceased to be simply a theological event. The dramatization stirred people's imaginations and emotions by portraying Jesus and Mary as real people. Although Augustine of Hippo had written twenty-three Christmas sermons for the lay people of North Africa in the 5th century, his rhetoric was

designed more to encourage his listeners to reject pagan rituals and accept Church doctrine. Francis's performance, equally directed at the laity, was designed to encourage "a spirituality based on the affective love of the humanity of Christ."[143] It was to have a profound effect on medieval imagery.

Statues of mother and child in the 11th and early 12th century followed the convention that many claim was inherited from the Egyptian iconography of Isis and Horus. They are known as Black Virgins or *Sedes Sapientiae* and they conform largely to this pattern. An enlarged Mary is seated stiffly on a throne or, according to Jacques Bonvin, a special type of chair called a "cathèdre."[144] Her head and hands are often disproportionately large for her body and Christ is usually depicted as a diminutive man/child. Since conventionally size equalled importance, even though Jesus was the divinity being represented, Mary's dominance recalls pre-Christian Mother goddess traditions. Jacques Huynen says Mary's large hands symbolize her power and abundance or fecundity.[145] Certainly pilgrims flocked to shrines of the Black Virgin at Chartres, Rocamador, le Puy, Orcival and many others located along the pilgrimage routes to Compostela. Many of these shrines were built on ancient goddess sites such as the cathedrals at Le Puy and Chartres.[146]

By the 13th century, effigies of Mary and Jesus become more and more human but in

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[143] Rosemary Drage Hale, *"Imitatio Mariae: Maternal Motifs in Medieval Devotional Practice"* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1992), 43.

[144] Jacques Bonvin, *Vierges Noires: la repose vient de la terre* (Paris: Dervy-Livres, 1989), 124. The hieroglyph for Isis was a chair or throne and in the Isis with Horus images, Isis is always seated on a throne or cathèdre, as Bonvin claims. It is the cathèdre of Isis which conveys the Pharoah's right to reign over Egypt.

[145] Jacques Huynen, *L'Enigme des Vierges Noires*, (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1972), 124.

[146] Bonvin, 156.

the process Mary loses the sense of authority and dominance of the earlier style. The new fashion gets the bodily proportions right for mother and child, softens Mary's pose, often by using the classical contrapposta style,[147] and generally transforms her into a pretty young, nurturing mother and Jesus into an adorable baby or child. The hope was that in rendering sacred personages in ways closer to the human, they became both more approachable and more imitable.

The same kind of transformation appears in the portrayal of Christ's passion and the Crucifixion. Early depictions such as those carved on the wooden doors of Santa Sabrina in Rome (430, CE) ignored Christ's sufferings and concentrated on his triumph over death. With the increased attention paid to Christ's humanity and the growth in more personal and private practices of spirituality in the late Middle Ages, Christ's passion and death were more vividly represented.[148] His human sufferings were emphasized to invoke the devotee's sympathy and to inspire the believer to accept life's sufferings or to undertake penances in order to suffer like Christ.

As more attention was paid to Christ's humanity, Mary's roles as *theotokos* was emphasized. In fact, women, virgins in particular, were urged to imitate Mary, to become spiritual mothers. Rosemary Hale explores the extent of that imitation in the mystical practices of nuns whose ardour actually caused some of them to experience the symptoms of pregnancy or caused them to lactate. Thus they could experience giving birth to and suckling

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[147]The pose was first developed in classical Greece to imitate the natural positioning of the sculpted human body. The weight of the body is shifted from an equal distribution on both legs to a greater weight on one leg (traditionally the left leg). The result is a slight twist of the torso which contributes to the sensuousness of the pose.

[148]Georges Duby, *Adolescence de la Chrétienté Occidentale: 940-1140*, (Génève: Éditions d'art Albert Skira, 1967), 200.

the baby Jesus. Nevertheless, religious women were more likely to practice devotion to Christ rather than to Mary, according to Weinstein and Bell's quantitative study of 864 saints from the medieval period.[149] Perhaps the intermingling of the erotic with the spiritual in the bride of Christ metaphor and the evocation of heterosexual passion in the Song of Songs held more allure for women than maternity, regardless of how exalted.

The writings and sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 -1153), the founder of the Cistercian monastic communities, were even more influential than those of Francis in promoting the growth of a spirituality based on an "empathetic identification with the human Christ or with a human Mary." Bernard believed that intimacy with God could be achieved by moving from "flesh to spirit," from "carnal knowing to spiritual union."[150] Many think Bernard was largely responsible for the development of the cult of Mary in the 12th century. He wrote 230 sermons on the Song of Songs alone. His spirituality was so fixed on Mary as the vessel of the Incarnation that he was supposedly fed by milk from the Virgin's breast. Bernard was also painted receiving the embrace of the crucified Christ.

Jeffrey Hamburger claims that recent scholarship indicates the prominence of body images in the writings of female mystics. He says, "images formed the very constituents of a distinctive spirituality that ... made the body itself a vehicle of transcendence."[151] And Caroline Walker Bynum agrees, noting that the spirituality of nuns was "especially

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[149]Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, *Saints and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 137.

[150]Hale, 57. See also Étienne Gilson's *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard* (New York: Downers, 1939) and Jean Leclercq's *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit.* (Cistercian Studies Series, number 16, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976).

[151]Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland Circa 1300* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 4.

somatic."[152]

David Turner says that *The Song of Songs* and the commentaries on it "played a decisive role in the integration of erotic language into Christian discourse in the Latin West."[153] In fact, numerous authors speak of the popularity of *The Song of Songs* as evidenced in the writings and paintings of religious men and women. Christ is the Bridegroom, the *sponsus*, and the "I" is the voice of the Bride, the *Sponsa*. Michael Camille traces an interesting theological progression in commentaries on *The Song of Songs*. At first the Bride was the Church, then Mary and finally the soul, but all were female images. In the opening letter of Bede's commentary on the Song, c.1130, the letter "O" for Osculetur, to kiss, contains an illustration of Christ kissing his bride. (Fig.4.2): "O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth: for thy breasts are sweeter than wine." (Song of Songs, 1: 2) For Bede, the bride was the Church or Mary. Bernard of Clairvaux preferred to interpret this verse as the longing of the soul for God. Camille comments that the overlapping of the Bride's face and halo and the face and halo of Christ echoes Bernard's notion that the Bride is engulfed by the object of her desire. He also notes that this mystical goal of "loss of self" was very different from the goal of the courtly lover who never lost sight of himself as the active party in pursuit of his love.[154]

As the imagery in *The Song of Songs* presumes a heterosexual encounter, Bynum says that monks had to transform themselves into women for the metaphor to work. Nuns might identify with metaphors filled with images of penetration and entrance into the sealed garden

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[152]Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 129.

[153]David Turner, *Eros and Allegory* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 28.

[154]Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love*, 22-23.

of delights, whereas lines like the following might present certain imaginative difficulties to a male:

> A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up,
> a fountain sealed. (1, 2)
>
> I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself,
> and was gone: (5, 6)
>
> My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the beds of spices,
> to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies. (6, 2)

Consistent with the claim that women's spirituality was "especially somatic," women mystics employed body images and functions that were familiar to them. Christ's body was feminized in both devotional literature and drawings by and for nuns. (Fig. 4.3). His breasts are offered to suckle, the woman is birthed into the spiritual life through the wound in his side, the wound feeds the beloved, etc. Even the transformation of Christ's wound into a vagina was part of this process. (see further discussion in 4.2.2.) The analogy between Christ's wound and the vagina is made explicit in the use of the Gate of Paradise metaphor by James of Milan and in the *Stimulus Amore*.[155] The metaphor was usually reserved to describe the intact vagina of the feminine lover but now Christ's wound becomes the site of the garden enclosed. Karma Lochrie uses the word *polymorphous* to describe this double property of Christ's body in possessing a female genital wound while still retaining its masculine characteristics.[156]

Bynum says that women always knew the body of Christ was male regardless of

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[155]Karma Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*; Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Shultz, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997)187-89.

[156]Ibid., 194.

whatever female genital imagery it might attract, whereas monks had to become notional women to unite with Christ. This gender reversal was part of their renunciation of self, a way of imitating Christ's humility by transforming themselves into women as he had transformed himself into a human. In renouncing male status, monks could become the meek who inherit the earth and since their femaleness was chosen, it was superior to the natural femaleness of women which was not chosen.

Monks also got around the gender problem by using child/parent imagery. Jesus was frequently described as mother for he nurtures and feeds the soul, even with his own blood.. Bynum claims that there is a difference between male spiritual and female writings about Jesus as Mother. Whereas the men tend to assimilate this role for themselves, especially in the practice of their spiritual authority (Bernard assumes a motherly role towards his monks), when women speak of Jesus as mother, they simply become the child.[157]

The greatest metaphor for Jesus as Mother was the trope that Christ gave birth to his Church from the wound in his side. Julian of Norwich in the 14th century develops the theology of "motherhood as creation and redemption." For her, "God's motherhood expressed in Christ is not merely love and mercy, not merely redemption...., but a taking on of our physical humanity in the Incarnation, as a mother gives herself to the fetus she bears."[158]

For Hildegaard of Bingen, Catherine of Sienna, Julian of Norwich, Mechtild of Magdeberg, and other female mystics of the medieval period, woman was the emblem of humanity as man signified the divinity of God. Whereas some would wonder why these female theologians were willing to accept what women today would reject as secondary

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[157]Bynum, "...And Woman His Humanity," 268-269.

[158]Ibid., 264-66.

status, Bynum says that writers such as Hildegaard stressed complementarity of the genders. In what they said and how they lived, it is clear that these women did not see themselves as secondary or evil (as another prevailing medieval view of women maintained) but as "physical" and that this physicality linked them to the humanity of Christ.[159]

So, the legacy of the Incarnation was that the physical body was "good," that it could be the means through which spiritual intimacy with Christ could be achieved. With the help of the metaphorical and allegorical language of the *Song of Songs* and courtly love, medieval imagery from the late 11th century to the 15th century did not shy away from using erotic references to the vagina in text and image in connection with both theological and devotional aspects of Christ's Incarnation. The next two sections of this chapter explore the various ways the vagina was depicted in religious and secular imagery.

4.1.3 Lapsarian Theology : The Legacy of Sin

As much as the names of Francis of Assisi and Bernard of Clairvaux are associated with Incarnational theology, so the name of Augustine dominates the Lapsarian theology which defined our human condition as flawed. His major argument was that all subsequent human beings lost their capacity for free will with the sin of Adam and Eve and were thereafter ever prone to temptation and sin. Although saved by Christ, Christians are forever in need of outside intervention to maintain that salvation, i.e. the ministry of the clergy to administer God's grace through the sacraments and the authority of the Church to interpret God's will for us. Augustine's teachings date from the fifth century but as Elaine Pagels remarks, they were not fully accepted, even in the century following his death.

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[159]Bynum, "...And Woman His Humanity," 274.

The Pelagians and the Donatists and even Augustine's contemporary, John Chrysostom, fought against Augustine's teaching on the grounds that the view that human beings possessed free will was the older Christian tradition. The Donatists and the Pelagians also opposed what they termed the "unholy alliance" between the Roman Empire and Christianity. The Council of Orange in 529 sided with Augustine and eventually Augustine's views on the fallen nature of human beings dominated the Church's teachings for fifteen hundred years.[160]

Christian iconography of the first three centuries after Christ's death concentrated on illustrating the messages of salvation, Christ as the Good Shepherd, the resurrected Christ in glory, or depicted Mary, the apostles, martyrs, or Eucharistic celebrations and the like. In Emile Mâle's phrase, "All is light and nothing presages the darkened centuries to come."[161]

Imagery first turns to the depiction of sin in paintings of Christ's temptation by the devil, probably as early as the 6th century according to Mâle, though his description of the scene is based on a 9th century illumination. Although Church fathers wrote at length about being tempted by the devil (as in *Lives of the Desert Fathers*) there are few illustrations, probably because the devil appeared to them in so many different guises, none of which were terrifying. It was 11th century monks who formulated the iconography we now associate with the devil.[162]

Tertullian, Jerome, Ambrose, and finally Augustine emphasized the fallen nature of humanity and our predilection for sin. The dominant imagery which emerged in the 12th

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[160] Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988), 124 - 125 & 133.

[161] Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Twelfth Century*, 367.

[162] Ibid.

century and which gave expression to this negative theology appeared in the monumental sculptures of the Last Judgement. Yet one of the earliest sculpted versions appears on the 7th century sarcophagus of Agilbert (later Bishop of Paris) found in the crypt of the Abbey of Jouarre in France and seems rather joyful as the figures which surround Christ stand with arms raised in the orans position (the prayer gesture of raised arms, palms turned upward). The message of salvation has not yet given way to the fear of final judgement which dominates later renditions. Since Jouarre was a foundation from Ireland, probably by St. Columban, perhaps the monks were still under the influence of the more positive view of humanity characteristic of Celtic Christianity. Astoshenko and Collins cite Near Eastern origins for this motif because of the orans figures "found on Coptic *stelae* of the same date." Both the Coptic and the Jouarre renditions of this theme seem to have escaped the influence of Lapsarian theology and retained the joy of salvation found in early Christian art.

The Eastern connection for the Jouarre iconography is reinforced by the carvings on the end panel of the sarcophagus which shows Christ surrounded by a mandorla and the tetramorph but with the four symbols facing away from Christ rather than inward. Rosettes positioned within the mandolra further emphasize, appropriately, regeneration and resurrection. The unusual positioning of the tetramorph is also found on an early mosaic in Salonika in Greece and in paintings from Egypt and Cappadocia, late 6th, early 7th century.[163]

Although the use of the Last Judgement motif began in the 12th century, Mâle claims that it appeared on almost all 13th century cathedrals in one form or another. Its message now reflects the influence of Augustinian theology. Details in the iconography were inspired by New Testament writings. Matthew speaks of how the saved will be separated from the

[163] Astroshenko and Collins, 131.

damned, Paul in Corinthians 1 comments on how we will be resurrected from the dead, and passages from the Apocalypse speak of Christ as both sovereign and judge.[164] Nowhere is the drama of lost souls tortured by demons more evident than in the 12th century tympanum sculptures at Autun and Conques. Conques is one of the few cathedrals which retains vestiges of the bright colours used to animate medieval sculpture. We can only imagine how that must have enhanced the desired effect of terrifying people away from sin to avoid the dire consequences they could see before them. (Fig. 4.4 & 4.5) At Autun, the genius of Giselbertus's rendition of the Last Judgement was so powerful that the whole tympanum was hidden behind plaster in the 18th century only to be unveiled again in the 19th century.[165]

The Last Judgement, the story of Adam and Eve, the crucified Christ, and the occasional rendition of Christ's baptism were the only themes where nudity was officially permitted in early medieval Church art. Early depictions of the Crucifixion tended to show Christ, often clothed, sometimes crowned, with arms extended but standing erect, triumphant over death.

Augustine's youthful excesses influenced his later theology. It was his sexual experience that convinced him that human nature was fallen from its original state and therefore no longer possessed free will. Human helplessness is exemplified by the experience of infancy, sexuality, and mortality. For Augustine, the most profound sensation of helplessness is the male experience of spontaneous erection. "Behold the 'vital fire' which does not obey the soul's decision, but for the most part, rises up against the soul's desires in disorderly and ugly movements." In our sinful condition, sexual desires were no longer

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[164] Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Thirteenth Century*, 352 & 362.

[165] Denis Grivot and George Zarnecki, *Giselbertus: Sculptor of Autun*, (New York: Orion Press, 1961), 25-26.

subject to reason, as Augustine believed was true of Adam before he sinned; rather now they control us. The quotation comes from Augustine's twelve-year-long debate with Julian of Eclanum, a disciple of Pelagius, who refused to accept Augustine's redefinition of human nature. Julian was also a bishop and a theologian and, as Pagels says, he believed that since original sin was redeemed through Christ's death, "Human nature—moral, sexual, and vulnerable as it is—participates in the wholeness and goodness of the original creation."[166] Again, Augustine's view would prevail in spite of the fact that contemporary scholars now feel that Augustine found in Romans 7, "what others have not seen there, a sexualized interpretation of sin and revulsion from the flesh based on his own idiosyncratic belief that we contract the disease of sin through the process of conception."[167]

It is difficult to ascertain exactly when the depiction of individual naked bodies as sinners began other than as part of Last Judgement scenes. They appear on 11th and 12th century capitals inside cathedrals, abbeys, churches and cloisters, on roof bosses, sometimes around the portals of churches and most of all on the outside corbels. They are a feature of the early Romanesque style, particularly in certain regions of France and Spain, and they tend to disappear with the development of the Gothic style. The various types of human grotesques, as they are often called, reflect the Augustinian view of fallen humanity and art and church historians have judged them to be illustrations of the Church's moral teachings about the consequences of sinful behaviour. These figurative sculptures are often intermingled with fantastic creatures inspired by medieval bestiaries or from apocalyptic imagery. Other influences might have their source in the famed 10th and 11th century

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[166]Pagels, 130-31, 139-141.

[167]Peter Gorday, *Principles of Patristic Exegesis*, 135, quoted in Pagels, 143.

illuminations of the Beatus commentaries on the Apocalypse (written in the second half of the 8th century) which emerged from northern Spain[168] and the intermingling of Classical, Germanic, and Christian iconography in the Carolingian period from Charlemagne's attempts to revive Western culture.[169]

Three sins preoccupied the medieval church: lust, avarice and idolatry. Occasionally, a miser is shown naked but it is the idols and depictions of sexual sins that most often feature naked bodies. A sensational version of the sin of lust or *luxuria* shares a side-panel on the porch wall next to the main entrance of the cathedral at Moissac, c.1135, with the devil. Whereas most carvings of sinners are small so as to fit the tops of capitals or corbels, the Moissac carving is almost life-sized. A naked woman whose breasts are being attacked by serpents and with a toad at her genitals is unequivocal in its warning against sexual sin.[170] She is called *La Dame aux Serpents* and only one other example of similar size exists on a panel of the narthex in the cathedral at Charlieu, c.1140. (Figs. 4.6 & 4.7) The pose is similar but this time a large toad attacks a breast while snakes entwine various parts of the body. Even for this motif, we have as referent an image, well-known in medieval illustrations, of a goddess figure called *Terra Mater.* (Fig. 4.8) She is usually shown suckling a snake (a chthonic symbol associated with numerous goddesses because of its supposedly regenerative or curing powers) and a cow (associated with sacred nourishment from the breast of the goddess) as in this 11th century manuscript drawing from the Abbe of Monte Cassino. Having

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[168] Ehrenfreid Kluckert, "Romanesque Painting," in *Romanesque: Architecture, Sculpture, Painting*, ed. Rolf Toman (Germany: Könemann, 1997), 443-444.

[169] Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Twelfth Century*, 378.

[170] According to Margaret Miles, naked women and sexual sin were synonymous. See *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Knowing in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), chapter 4.

serpents and toads attack the genitals of sinners was a dramatic warning that sexual sin led to death. Images of corpses being eaten by toads, worms, and snakes appear with even more frequency after the famous sermon of Pope Innocent III *On the Misery of the Human Condition*, c. 1200.

However, it was the monastic fear of women that perpetuated the misogynist views of the Church Fathers and which account for the identification of images of women in particular with the bad and the ugly. The monastic fear of women was so great that the mere sight of a woman was the occasion of sin, even if the woman was a relative. If a woman entered the monastery, the whole place had to be reconsecrated and the monks were put on a diet of bread and water until the contamination was purged from their bodies.[171] Monastic misogyny continued to dominate church iconography well after new attitudes towards women emerged in the 12th century and in spite of the erotic imagery which dominated devotional practices in the cloister. Here too, Augustine is identified as a critical influence in defining how celibates should relate to women.

In her controversial book, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality and the Catholic Church*, Uta Ranke-Heinemann documents how, over the centuries, Christian moral theology denigrated sexuality as a part of human experience. Although she acknowledges the Classical roots of the values of self-control and ascetic practices, she exposes the multiple rules and proscriptions that emerged from the moral teachings of the Catholic Church as thoroughly ridiculous.

Ranke-Heinemann documents in particular the extreme misogyny enshrined in the

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[171]Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Twelfth Century*, 372. Mâle is paraphrasing regulations found in Cistercian documents.

church's moral theology. She says that at the root of the Church's defamation of women is the belief that "women are unclean and, as such, stand in opposition to the holy." She cites numerous examples of male regulations to control every aspect of women. Although many of these proscriptions existed before Christianity, they are renewed as the will of God beginning with the pronouncement of Paul concerning women's hair and women's voices.[172] Church authorities over the centuries would concern themselves with every aspect of women's personal clothing, hygiene and activities, imposing countless regulations not duplicated by similar regulations for men. Clement of Alexandria listed among appropriate physical exercise for women, baking bread and fetching things from the pantry. Whereas Chrysostom saw children as women's salvation, Ambrose was suspicious of motherhood. seeing many children as the mother's carnal pleasure made manifest.[173]

Much later, the Church would proclaim Alphonsus Maria Ligouri (d.1787) "the patron of all confessors and moralists." Although his strictures come well after the medieval period, he simply codified and set down attitudes towards the body, notably the sexual body, which are reflected in such medieval documents as the Maleus Maleficarum. Ligouri's fear of being corrupted by women was so great that he "once received a very old woman by having her sit on the end of a long bench, while he sat at the other end with his back turned."[174] This was not a practice peculiar to Ligouri, as many examiners of the Inquisition interviewed women with their backs towards them. Numerous monastic saints followed the same practice.

The 4th Lateran Council of 1215 brought about profound changes in the type of

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[172]Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality and the Catholic Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 130-31.

[173]Pagels, Adam, Eve, and the Serpent, 31.

[174]Ranke-Heineman, 326 .

control that the institutional Church had over the faithful. New regulations[175] requiring the use of the sacrament of Confession and personal penances made people more self-consciously aware of their sins than before this requirement. The effect was increased social control as people's behaviour became increasingly subject to regulations and restrictions. It was believed that ordinary people were not capable of making religious or moral choices without clerical guidance so they needed to be taught what was permissible. Ethicists classified different parts of the human body:

> Because of their influence on the excitement of sexual pleasure the parts of the body were divided into honourable [face, hands, feet], less honourable [chest, back, arms thighs], and dishonourable [sexual parts and parts very close to them].[176]

Early medieval penitentials (books which guided priests in how to question sinners so they would know how grave was the sin and how much penance to assign) had been quite forthright in their questions but later in the 12th century it began to be evident that asking leading questions about people's sexual practices might give people ideas.

In *The Gothic Idol*, Michael Camille examines the sin of idolatry, which, along with avarice and lust,[177] dominate the depictions of sin in medieval iconography. Referring to Foucault, he comments that what had previously been unrepresented is now visible since sin has now become "a discourse." The early medieval fear of the "Four Last Things," death,

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[175] See Canon 21 in *Medieval Popular Religion: 1000-1500*, ed. John Shinners (Peterborough ON: Broadview Press, 1997), 9, concerning these regulations and the instructions for priests to guide and "heal" the faithful with wise counsel through the confessional. Canon 21 ends with the threat of a severe punishment for breaking the seal of the confessional.

[176] H. Jone, *Katholische Moraltheologie* 1930, 189, as quoted in Ranke-Heinmann, 328. This particular codification followed centuries of "practice."

[177] Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 92. Among the specific sins condemned by the Council was sodomy.

judgement, Heaven and Hell, however, well preceded the sessions of the Lateran Council. The discourse simply shifted from external threats and sanctions to the internalization of guilt brought on by an endless examination of conscience.

These medieval Christian attitudes concerning the effects of sin and the preoccupation of the time with sexual sin that resulted from endless commentaries on the effects of Original Sin form the backdrop for the hundreds of church sculptures which have been referred to as obscene, indecent or provocative. There seems to be no other explanation of why these sculptures exist nor why they flourished at this particular moment in Church history, from the late 11th to the 12th century. One other possible explanation has to do with the need to break out of restrictions by reversing the norms, turning the world upside-down as illustrated by the many acrobatic figures in these sculptures—but that is a whole other investigation. Although some carvings have disappeared, a fact made obvious by missing corbels, and some (closer to ground level) have been damaged, by and large they resisted "frequent periods of puritanical iconoclastic destruction."[178] The next sections explore two types among the many different grotesques. The Sheela-na-gig, categorized as "ugly" as well as "bad" is one of the so-called female exhibitionist figures that engage in vaginal display. Double-tailed Mermaids as sirens are definitely "bad" for they share the same dubious reputation for being seducers as their more common single-tailed sisters. They are included in this study because, like the Sheela-na-gigs, their iconography is definitely polyvalent, encompassing both pagan and Christian ideology. The genital display of Double-tailed Mermaids is more insinuated than actual with some notable exceptions. In the study of iconography, however, as Camille says, "it is often

[178]Anthony Weir and J. Jerman, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (London: Batsford, 1986), 10.

not what is represented but what is left out, unvisualized or erased, that is important."[179]

4.2 Genital Iconography Concealed: the Good

One of the most ancient signs for the vagina or yoni was the vertical ovoid shape, pointed at each end, known as the *vesica piscis*---the vessel or bladder of the fish. The name comes from the notion that women's genitals smelled like fish. Joseph Campbell tells us that a Hindu title for the Great Goddess was "a virgin named Fishy Smell whose real name was Truth."[180] In our Western tradition, Aphrodite or Venus, the goddess of love, was born from the sea and many different forms of marine life have been associated with her.

The term *vesica piscis* was a synonym for the vagina but it was completely rejected by some scholars. The 19th century writer Adolphe Napoleon Didron, who wrote extensively on the nimbus or aureoles in Christian iconography, thought it, "A term so gross [that it] deserves to be expunged from every refined system of terminology."[181] Didron gives voice to a thought presumably shared by others since little is written by reputable art historians about this widely used shape in medieval iconography. If they refer to the shape at all, they use the term *mandorla* and describe it in more "Christian" religious terms as a window into sacred space or simply as the glory or aureole that surrounds god and his saints. Mandorla means almond (ovoid-shaped) and it is an equally ancient symbol associated with the virgin birth of

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[179]Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, xxvi

[180] Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*, 13.

[181] Adolphe Napoleon Didron, *Christian Iconography: The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages*, 108. The author, writing in 1843, claimed that the term was invented by English "antiquaries."

Attis.[182] The Christian preference for this terminology concealed the sexual specificity of the shape

The *vesica piscis* shape is also associated with what is referred to as the Sacred Geometry. Mathematically, two circles of the same size and circumference are drawn to overlap in such fashion that they share the same radius. The area of overlap creates the elliptical. shape. (Fig. 4.9) The mathematical precision of this figure has been taken to signify a variety of meanings based on the "common ground" shared by the circles. If the shape is considered horizontally, it resembles the human eye and so a shared vision or seeing "eye to eye" is implied.[183] Scholars who ascribe to the theories of Sacred Geometry claim that the pointed Gothic arch is based on the *vesica piscis* because the width of the arch equals the radius of two identical circles. The upper part of the ellipse thus produces the classic Gothic shape, the lower part of the window retaining the same width as the radius of the overlapping circles.[184] (Fig. 4.10)

Given the ancient goddess associations with fish symbolism and the conflation of the *vesica piscis* with the female womb[185] (See Chapter 4.3 & Fig. 4.59), it is all the more surprising that fish iconography appears in earliest Christian records as a symbol for Christ. The standard explanation is that the Greek word *ichthys* is an acronym for Jesus Christ, Son of God Saviour. Yet this transformation happened while many Romans still acknowledged

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[182]Walker, *Dictionary*: 10.

[183] Http://www.sckans.edu/~math/stacy.htm

[184] Ibid.

[185] Numerous authors refer to the fish-womb conflation in the painting of a Lady of he Beasts on a terra cotta amphora from Greece,, 7th century BCE. See, Neumann, *The Great Mother*, 275 & Pl.134, *Gimbutas, The Language of the Goddess, 259.*

Ichythus as the son of the sea-goddess Atargatis and when fish were eaten on Friday to honour the goddess Venus because they were considered an aphrodisiac.[186] Later, this custom was appropriated by the Church whose practice of assimilation effectively eliminated pagan references in this custom..

Although the use of the *vesica piscis* disappeared for many centuries from Christian iconography, it appears again as part of 20th century church logos. Both the United Church of Canada (Fig. 4.11) and the Continuing Episcopal Church (to name but two examples) comment on their choice of the *vesica piscis* as the fish (the bladder shape explains the lack of fins) as arising from the ichthys acronym. An explanation of the logo comments, "By convention, Church seals are enclosed in a *vesica*."[187] Though the first use of the bladder shape by Christians was in the horizontal position, the current use in the vertical position evokes the mandorla - and so the churches' explanations continue to conceal" the sexual connotation of this shape.

4.2.1 The Mandorla

The mandorla is the oval contour which often surrounds the figure of Christ on the tympana over the main portals of many medieval cathedrals, churches or monastery buildings. Even though there seems to be evidence that the ancient association of this ovoid shape with the female vagina and sexuality was not forgotten in the medieval era, Christian interpretations

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[186] Walker, *Dictionary*, 16.

[187] The United Church of Canada and The continuing Episcopal Church, http://www.the-episcopal-church.org/symbols.htm. May 2001.

favoured more theological references. Some authors say that the mandorla was used to indicate a vision or access into heavenly space; others see it as a kind of opening, a gateway between the spiritual and the physical world. Still others see it as referring to Christ's Incarnation, when his immaterial divine form took on human flesh in Mary's womb. More broadly interpreted, the shape becomes a somatic sign for entrance into the cosmic cycle of birth-death-rebirth, especially if the rebirth is a spiritual one. It was much more acceptable to Christian ideology to blunt the anatomical reference by using the neutral word *mandorla* for a "geometric shape." In my view, the anatomical specificity of the *vesica piscis* in Church art was surely evident to some medieval viewers for mandorla imagery existed concomitant with other covert forms of vaginal imagery in both religious and profane art of the 12th to the 15th centuries.

Adolphe Napoleon Didron provides us with an extensive examination of the different iconographical ornaments used to indicate divinity or sanctity. The nimbus or glory refers to an emanation of light which encircles the head of a god or a person. The head is considered the most noble and important part of the human body for it is the site of the spirit, four of the five senses, intelligence and reason.[188]

The nimbus appears in pre-Christian polytheistic religions and was used extensively in Hindu and Buddhist imagery to indicate the energy, power or intelligence of deities or of extraordinary people, heroes, rulers, and spiritual leaders. The nimbus is variously indicated as a triangle, a rectangle or as a series of rays, but the most common is as a circle either drawn as a single golden line or a solid golden circle surrounding a head. Didron prefers to use the word aureole to distinguish the nimbus which surrounds the whole body from that which surrounds

[188]Didron, 92.

only the head. None of these forms were used in early Christian art (before the 4th or 5th centuries) and the nimbus or aureole disappeared from Church art for a while after the a 13th century . The nimbus in particular was revived by Renaissance artists and is still used in the production of contemporary devotional images.[189]

Didron says the signification of the aureole around the entire body in Christian iconography is vague and undefined yet he associates it with the supreme power God alone ought to possess. He makes some exception for its use in association with the Virgin Mary. but rejects any interpretation which alludes to "natural forms" as illogical since there are illustrations in which the mandorla surrounds God the Father who was never born of woman.[190]

While Didron is one of the few authors who spends considerable time analysing various types of aureoles, he does not accept that the shape has any intrinsic meaning other than as a signifier of the sacred. For example he objects strenuously to the use of cruciform rays in the nimbus behind the head of saints when this form should be reserved for Christ alone because it refers to the cross on which he died.[191] Similarly, he does not imagine that the aureole or mandorla shape may incorporate a number of referents simultaneously. that the emanation of power could possibly also be this "natural form," the vagina. More contemporary authors such as Camille point out there is no single uniform significance to any object [shape] in medieval art.[192] Artists have always appropriated ideas, shapes and patterns from each other

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[189]Didron, 105-106 & 127.

[190]Ibid. 118.

[191]Ibid. 38-50. Didron does allow that the cruciform nimbus could also be used. by extension, for the other members of the trinity

[192]Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love*, 47.

and applied them variously, sometimes conforming to their established import, sometimes bending or extending their symbolism. Although we tend not to associate artistic license with the strictures of medieval art, especially Church art, there have always been artists who break the rules. Numerous authors comment that elements of pagan imagery are more likely to appear on churches and cathedrals in remoter areas. These syncretic forms are found in almost every European country. In France and Spain they are to be found most frequently in remote villages along the pilgrimage routes or in shrines whose origins are a mixture of pagan and Christian traditions (see Roc Amador in France, Kildare in Ireland).

In the discussion that follows, *aureole* will refer to round shapes which surround whole bodies and *mandorla* to indicate the ovoid surrounds in Church iconography. Sometimes the ovoid shape is composed of overlapping circles, usually a larger upper circle overlapping a slightly smaller lower circle. For the use of this vaginal shape in secular art, I will use the term *vesica piscis* and for Church mandorlas which emphasize the pointed elliptical shape, the clearer referent to the vagina, I will use the compounded term, *vesica piscis*/mandorla.

According to V. I. Atroshenko and Judith Collins, the mandorla first appears in Western Christian art in an Ascension miniature in the 6th century Rabbula Gospels, c. 586 .[193] (Fig. 4.12) A mandorla is drawn around the figure of Christ suspended in the sky. The shape is a rounded ovoid, more like Didron's delineation of an aureole. Astroshenko and Collins claim that this early pattern which includes surrounding angels and the creatures of the tetramorph influenced the later depictions of Christ on the tympana in Romanesque art. In analyzing the Rabbula image, they fail to mention two elements that show the conflation of

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[193]V.I. Atroshenko and Judith Collins, *The Origins of the Romanesque: Near Eastern Influences on European Art 4th-12th centuries* (London: Lund Humphries, 1985), 100.

early Christian with pre-Christian elements. In both upper corners of the page, a head appears within a segment of a circle which emits rays. The right-hand figure (with the crescent on the head) represents the moon. What is striking is that the moon is shown in the position of dominance, to the right of God[194] where we would normally expect the sun figure (shown stage left) to appear. It is difficult to determine the gender of these heads. Both appear to be female but the sun could be the head of a young man.

The winged figure under the mandorla is said to be inspired by the cherubim of Ezekiel's vision, (Ezek. 1:5-2:1) which also refers to a gleaming figure in the sky identified as "the Son of Man," a title Christ claimed for himself. There are, however, some significant differences between Ezekiel's text and this illumination. There is only one complex figure, perhaps a cherubim, under the mandorla. Unlike Ezekiel's cherubim, the Rabulla cherubim has no legs and the heads appear more separated from each other rather than as the four faces of one creature. We see a human head directly under Christ flanked by an eagle to the left and a lion to the right; all three peek out from behind a pair of many-eyed wings. The ox or bull is below the wings alongside a single hand which looks like the conventional hand of God, especially as it appears directly above Mary's head seemingly pointing to her. Two angels hold the edge of the mandorla and two more carry what appear to be crowns held on purple cloths to Christ. Why two? The answer could be that the second crown is for Mary who stands in the orans[195] position on the earthly plane directly below Christ. Mary dominates the lower half of

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[194] Right and left are read from "God's point of view." For example, in paintings of the Garden of Eden, Adam is always shown on God's right, even when God is not in the picture, and Eve appears on the left rather like stage right and stage left.

[195] According to Janet Tulloch's recent work on *Image as Artifact: A Social-historical Analysis of the Female Figures in the SS. Marcelino ePietro Banquet Scenes*, orante is the correct terminology for a female figure with arms raised in a gesture of prayer and orant indicates a male figure. Orans may be used for either female or male.

the image by being placed on the same vertical axis as Christ and she appears slightly larger than the apostles. Like Christ, she looks straight out at the viewer, not needing instructions from the angels who direct the apostles to look up. Mary's breasts are very noticeable and she is dressed in royal purple, the same colour as the cloths which support the crowns. Her head is surrounded with a nimbus like those around the heavenly beings.

Although the illustration celebrates the Ascension of Christ, there are significant iconographical elements that draw our attention to Mary, the nurturer and bearer of Christ.[196] A close reading of the imagery in this early mandorla suggests the double referent—to Mary's womb from which Christ took his humanity and the heavenly space to which Christ is ascending. Meanwhile the older sky god and goddess look on giving their blessing as indicated by the rays which emanate from them.

André Grabar says that historically Mary was not present at the Ascension; when she is included, therefore, she represents both herself and the Church. Although he says her prayerful gesture signifies the Incarnation and the Redemption, the other elements mentioned above contribute to his interpretation.[197] A hint of this same conflation of the two referents in the use of the mandorla is found in 5th and 6th century Coptic Church murals from Bawit, Egypt. In both examples, Christ is enclosed in a circular aureole but in at least one painting, Mary occupies the same spatial prominence and size under Christ as in the Rabulla manuscript.[198] (Fig. 4.13 & 4.14)

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[196] This image comes well after the declaration of Mary as theotokos by the council at Ephesus in 431 CE

[197] André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*, Bollingen Series 35.10. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 76.

[198] Grabar, 44.

André Grabar is of the opinion that aureoles were used to indicate theophanies or visionary experiences like those of the prophets, or to solve the problem of depicting God in Heaven. The disk or aureole of light isolates the supernatural from the rest of the image.[199] He cites the Bawit wall paintings as early examples of its use as well as a mosaic of Christ's Transfiguration in the monastery at Mt. Sinai, (Fig. 4.15) all from the 6th century.[200] At Mt. Sinai the aureole is already beginning to assume an ovoid shape. Note the hand of God the Father which pierces through the top of the mandorla. God's hand appearing out of a cloud is the convention for indicating that which cannot be represented. The use of this iconographical convention in this mosaic indicates the ambiguous or polysemic nature of the mandorla, for which Heavenly space does God the Father inhabit if the mandorla indicates the Heavenly space to which Christ has ascended?

This ambiguity is repeated in Grabar's example of what he presents as the first European examples of aureoles used in two mosaics in the Church of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome, c 430. (Fig. 4.16 & 4.17) The first mosaic shows Abraham receiving three heavenly visitors but curiously, only the central figure is enclosed in an aureole although all the heavenly figures in the scene possess a nimbus. Grabar says that Abraham's three visitors are the Trinity in disguise because the mandorla which surrounds the central figure "*can designate only Christ.*" (Emphasis mine) Thus the other two persons can only be God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Grabar's restriction of the use of the mandorla around Christ seems to contradict somewhat his earlier assertion about a window into the world beyond and suggest the Incarnational referent which dominates the later use of this shape. Certainly in numerous

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[199]Grabar, 116.

[200]Ibid., 116-117.

medieval examples the mandorla surrounds sacred figures other than Christ.

The second mosaic shows Aaron and his companions escaping a stoning with the protection of an aureole-shaped "cloud of dust," according to the caption beneath the illustration. These two scenes are less clear about the use of the mandorla to indicate heavenly space. Rather they seem to support Grabar's other claim that the aureole is simply an artistic device with no Biblical referent.[201]

Grabar discusses yet another type of aureole which is completely different from the previous examples, the circle or ovoid shape surrounding Jesus depicted as a baby inside Mary's body. His earliest example is a 9th century Byzantine image from Russia showing Jesus in a circle superimposed on Mary's breast. A later 12th century icon of the Annunciation, also from Russia, shows Jesus in an ovoid shape a little lower on Mary's body as if to indicate her womb; the transparency of the shape reveals the future Jesus incarnate, the result of Mary's assent at the Annunciation.[202] (Fig. 4.18 & 4.19)

At the other end of Europe in 12th century Catalonian art, Mary's image merges with the spinning goddess of antiquity. (Fig. 4.20) The miracle of the Incarnation is subtly indicated by the spun thread that passes by her womb. Her cloak hangs down in an inverted triangle shape over her genital region. Although certain male figures in Catalonian art of this period are similarly clad, we may speculate that a genital reference is intended here, as it is in other medieval representations of women's clothing. (See 4.2.2) A 14th century painting of Mary from Germany uses the same spinning trope. (Fig. 4.21) This time the thread passes over the infant Jesus growing within a mandorla which is both a window into Mary's womb or

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[201]Grabar, 118.

[202]Ibid., 128.

representative of the womb itself and a window into the heavenly space which surrounds the godhead. The syncretism seems evident. In referring to this image, Erich Neumann comments, "the Madonna is still the Great Goddess who spins destiny - though here destiny is the redemption of the world."[203] Neumann reminds us that the Valkyries, so important in German mythology, were also weavers of fate, thus the goddess referent would have been understood in this image of Mary. Jeffrey Hamburger, commenting on the same image, refers to the baby in Mary's womb as an *homunculus* and the thread passing through his body the garment that Mary is spinning from her flesh.[204]

Sculptural examples of a mandorla surrounding Christ superimposed on Mary's body are more difficult to find. In the first example on the tympanum sculpture of the right-hand portal of the west façade of Chartres, c.1140, the mandorla which surrounded Mary's body has been broken away. Mary's clothing vaguely suggests the mandorla shape around the man-child Christ on her knees. (Fig. 4.22) A stronger example of this motif appears on the West façade of the church of Corneilla-de Conflet in Pyrenees-Orientale, late 12th to early 13th century.[205] (Fig. 4.23)

As mentioned earlier, the vaginal referent of the mandorla is desexualized when it is described as the elliptical shape formed by the overlapping intersection of two identical circles. When this overlap is in the vertical position, the top circle represents spirit or the upper world of heaven and the bottom circle, matter or the lower world of earth The two worlds are united

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[203]Neumann, 233. See also Baring and Cashford, 560 & 561 for their discussion of Mary as the Birth-Giving Goddess.

[204]Jeffrey Hamburger, *Nuns As Artists*,.186.

[205]Mâle, *Religious Art in France, Twelfth Century*, 433.

in a zone of "intersection and interpenetration"[206]

Some medieval uses of the mandorla retain this relative position of the two overlapping circles. In a12th century manuscript illustration of Mary as *Sedes Sapientiae,* (Fig. 4.24), her throne seems to be at the junction of the two worlds. Her womb is in the elipse formed by the intersection of the upper and lower worlds. Note that the upper circle of the spirit overlaps the lower earthly or bodily sphere. Goddess symbols in this image include the lily at the top of the rod held delicately by Mary's right hand. The lily is repeated as the apex of Mary's crown and on the embroidery of her shoes. Two lion or cat-like beasts form the arms of her throne and a bird tops the lily of her sceptre. Although millennia separate this image of Mary and the sculpted goddess figure giving birth from Çatal Huyuk, both figures are enclosed between felines. The association between goddesses and cats persisted through Egyptian and Roman times. It travelled to Europe through the spread of North African cults particularly that of Cybele who is frequently depicted seated on a throne flanked by lions or leopards. Roman celebrations of the 3rd century had Cybele's chariot drawn through the street by lions in imitation of illustrations that showed her riding her lion-drawn chariot through the sky.[207]

There are numerous examples of the overlapping spheres in illuminated manuscripts but few in monumental sculpture.[208] When they do appear early in Romanesque stone sculptures, the carving is more incised than three-dimensional. There is speculation that the

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[206]J.E. Circlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols.*. Trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971), 203.

[207]Baring and Cashford, 391-92 & 609-11. The identification of women with cats continues in our own time if only as a legacy of witch lore from the medieval period when black cats in particular were thought to be the familiar of witches.

[208]The term monumental sculpture refers to three dimensional images even if attached at the back to a capital or some other part of church architecture, as opposed to the low-relief ivory carvings where most examples of the overlapping circles are found.

lintel carving above the entrance of abbey church of St. Genis-des-Fontaines in the Eastern Pyrenees, c.1020, may originally have been such as its rectangular shape does not conform to the usual semi-circular tympanum we associate with Romanesque sculpture.

There are two examples of Mary in a mandorla formed by the intertwining of tree branches. (Figs.4.24 & 4.25) The most interesting is a 15th century woodcut from Germany entitled, *Arbor virginis*. It shows the roots of a tree emerging from the breasts of Joachim and Anne to form a mandorla which surrounds Mary holding baby Jesus. Directly above her in the branches of the tree is the adult Christ crucified. This is an excellent illustration combining two popular medieval mysteries, the Incarnation and the Crucifixion for here the mandorla definitely refers to Mary's womb.[209] A second example, from 17th century Italy,[210] is an illustration of the miraculous image known as Madonna of the Oak. A painted image left among tree branches by a passing monk became embedded in the tree where it drew the devotions of passers by. In 1657, the first miraculous cure was recorded and this engraving was a result of the canonical process to investigate the validity of the claim. The Madonna went on performing cures and numerous *ex votos* were left at the shrine, each faithfully recording an image of the Madonna and Child in a mandorla along with the visual narrative of the "cure." It is an anomalous image appearing well after the use of this shape had disappeared from the canon of Christian iconography. Of course, the shape remained visible on numerous Romanesque and early Gothic Church buildings. Interestingly, a mandorla shaped

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[209] Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 23. Hamburger provides this example as a possible model for a similar illustration in the drawings from the St. Waldenburg convent c 1500. The Waldenburg drawing produced by and for nuns does not use the mandorla or the Christ child. Rather, Mary is shown standing in prayer at the foot of a small crucifix in the branches above her.

[210] Although this example is dated beyond the general limits of this study, i.e. the 15th century, it is so clearly a repetition of the same motif that I have included it.

aureole surrounds the image of Our Lady of Guadeloupe from 1531, supposedly miraculously imprinted on the cloak of Juan Diego. There seems little doubt that the iconography of the mandorla travelled to the New World as part of Spain's religious legacy.

4.2.2 The *Vesica Piscis*

When the mandorla is used in sculptures which frame Christ above the main portals of cathedrals and other ecclesiastical buildings, the sexually specific reference to the female vagina is heightened. One of Mary's titles in her litany is "Gate of Heaven." Just as the cave was the opening into the sanctuary, the womb of Mother Earth, so too was the central door on the West façade of a cathedral considered the opening into the spiritual world within. Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven made it possible for all believers to be reborn into the life of the spirit but all was made possible through Mary. Mary's attributes are always in opposition to Eve's transgressions. Because of Eve, Christ had to die, said Tertullian who labelled her the "Devil's gateway."[211] Mary would then be the gateway for our rebirth in Christ.

What is interesting is that the *vesica piscis* flourished at the same time as the growth of the cult of Mary. All the major cathedrals of France were dedicated to Mary as "Notre Dame" and although she was not always figuratively present in the carvings above the major portal, she is there symbolically as the *vesica piscis*/mandorla. In the Incarnation, the divine takes on human flesh and I believe that the theological event is indicated by the use of the mandorla or *vesica piscis* iconography. Even though Jesus supposedly was born not as other men but

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[211] See Rosemary Ruether's comments on Tertullian in *Sexism and God: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 78.

appeared miraculously at Mary's side, the ancient metaphor of birth from our Great Mother the Earth is evoked by this vaginal symbol.

Numerous authors state that the three-dimensional patterns and sculptures which grace medieval church buildings are based on two-dimensional images in illuminated manuscripts, carved ivories, and textiles. Many of these images traveled to Europe from the Near East as a result of trade routes, the Crusades, and other wars that motivated people to migrate from the earliest Christian settlements in North Africa and the Near East into Europe. Astroshenko and Collins affirm a continuous artistic link between the Near East and European countries.[212] As mentioned above, the use of the mandorla in Christian iconography dates from the 6th century Rabbula gospels from Syria or Palestine. Here we see the earliest use of the image of Christ in a mandorla held up by angels and surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists (called the tetramorph),[213] the eagle for St. John, the man for St. Matthew, the lion for St. Mark and the bull for St. Luke. This iconographical motif, which Emile Mâle terms the Ascension-Second Coming theme,[214] was used extensively on the tympana of the major cathedrals and on churches and monasteries constructed in France in the 12th century. The widespread dissemination of this motif in France is clearly associated with the enormous influence of the

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[212] Astroshenko and Collins, 11. See also Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Twelfth Century* and many others.

[213] The four symbols we now associate with the evangelists are pre-figured in the 7th century BCE Assyrian sculpture, in the monumental guardian creatures which were composed of the same four elements, the head of a man, wings of the eagle, and a body which is part lion, part bull. Two of these sculptures are in the collection of the British Museum in London. It would seem that Ezekiel, writing in 6th century Babylon, was influenced by this Assyrian iconography.

[214] Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Twelfth Century*, 172. Mâle uses Didron's word, aureole, in referring to the mandorla surrounding Christ. Although Mâle's work is known for his extensive analysis of figurative Church sculpture, he makes no comments about the significance of the mandorla shape.

Benedictine Abbey at Cluny in the Saone-et-Loire region in the 11th and 12th centuries. As the Cluniacs "were never welcomed in Italy," we rarely find this theme in that country.[215] It appears infrequently on portals in Spain,[216] and sparingly in England and Germany.

Cluny's libraries held treasures from the East and its monks were the first to translate the Koran and other Islamic texts into Latin. Its great abbots, such as Peter the Venerable and Abbot Suger, believed in the spiritual value of art and culture and thought much was to be learned from previous civilizations. Reading was the prescribed order of the day, "from the fourth to the sixth hour between Easter and October and after Sext...."[217] Cluniac manuscripts were noted for the beauty of their script and the excellence and richness of their illuminations. The Cluniac style spread throughout France because of the numerous foundations from this motherhouse. It is recognized for its distinctive architecture and the lavishness of ornamentation found both within and on the exterior of the buildings. Joan Evans remarks, "Cluniac sculpture is Cluniac painting turned into stone."[218] We have the evidence that manuscript illuminations provided the prototypes for that interesting mix of "primitive and sophisticated, archaic and accomplished, traditional and original" imagery which we associate with these monasteries.[219]

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[215] Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Twelfth Century*, 190.

[216] Numerous examples of the mandorla appear in Catalonian art, particularly in frescoes of Christ in glory above the main altar, or again, surrounding Christ or Mary on carved wooden altar fronts. Catalonian art also abounds with examples of Mary as *Sedes Sapientiae*, the large Virgin with the diminutive Christ/man associated with the Isis/Horus tradition.

[217] Joan Evans, *Cluniac Art of the Romanesque Period* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1950), 2-3.

[218] Ibid. 120.

[219] Ibid.

The great buildings of the Romanesque period (the mid-11th to mid-12th centuries), would not have been possible without the engineering mathematics which had been maintained in Arabic countries.. We know that Charlemagne brought in Armenian architects for his palace at Aachen and that craftsmen from these older Christian communities initiated many of the architectural features that we associate with the European Romanesque, such as cupolas, the twin-tower facade, lofty spires, cruciform vaults and the inter-laced decoration of the stone carvings.[220] These features were part of the great abbey church of Saint-Denis at Cluny which was destroyed in the early 19th century. A drawing of the reconstruction of the central portal reveals the use of the Rabulla configuration on the tympanum. (Fig. 4.27)

Although the Saint-Denis tympanum belongs to what Emile Mâle calls the Second Generation of the great Romanesque portals, other documents reveal Cluniac influences in his list of the First Generation portals of cathedrals and churches in Languedoc and Burgundy. With the exception of Moissac, where the *vesica piscis* is only subtly suggested, the other examples of the *vesica piscis* /mandorla can be clearly seen on the tympana of cathedrals at Arles, Saint Trophime, c.1166; Angoulême Cathedral, c.1125; Autun, Saint-Lazare, c.1130-45; Charente, Notre-Dame de Chartres, 1136: Charlieu, c.1150; Conques-en-Rouergue, the abbey Church of Saint Foy, c.1125-50; Le Mans, Saint Julien de-Jonzy, c.1150; Carrenac, c; Vezelay, Sainte-Madelaine,1125-1130; and many others. (For examples see Figs. 4.28a-d)

The most evocative example of a *vesica piscis*/mandorla is not on a tympanum but on the gable story of Notre-Dame-la-Grande in Poitiers, c.1150. (Fig. 4.29) Here Christ stands in a rectangular opening within a deeply incised *vesica piscis*. The tetramorph figures are three dimensional, affixed to a plane within the opening on the surface of the gable wall. The large

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[220]Evans, 21.

mandorla is emphasized by a border which projects beyond the gable wall. The effect when approaching the church is that of a great hole or entrance piercing the gable wall because of the shadows created by the raised border and the depth of the opening. The figures within the mandorla are only clearly seen with the morning sun or on cloudy days. The analogy of this *vesica piscis*/mandorla with the womb of the Mary, the "Christian goddess," or even with the entrance way to the caves of Mother Earth would seem to be obvious and yet no analysis of the mandorla on the church at Poitiers has come to my attention.

Didron's statement that the association of the mandorla with "natural forms" is just too awful to contemplate raises questions about the mechanism of repression at work in his refusal to acknowledge a biological referent for this shape. Hundreds of paintings in the 15th and 16th centuries showed the infant Christ's genitalia at the centre of the composition, or with significant attention focused on them. When Leo Steinberg pointed out this fact in his ground-breaking volume, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*, there were howls of protest.

Steinberg speculates that the emphasis on the genitalia was an intentional theological reference to the Incarnation by emphasizing Christ's humanity. Yet generations of art historians, religious scholars and everyday viewers had not commented on the fact that the genitalia of the baby Jesus were not only evident but had become the focus of attention in these paintings, either because they were actually touched or were pointed at as the object of the gaze of the other figures in the paintings. Previously the genitals had been concealed as inappropriate to the depiction of "God." The convention of not showing the adult Christ completely naked on the cross still applies for this same reason.

I believe Steinberg's observation of a previously unacknowledged fact supports my

assertion concerning the use of the *vesica piscis/mandorla* as the persistence of goddess imagery associated with sexuality, birth, death and rebirth, in the Medieval world. Was the *shape* used only symbolically to acknowledge Mary's role in the Christian mystery of the Incarnation or does the evidence encourage a polymorphous reading of this iconography? To explore this question, I must turn to secular examples and, as is commonly the case when attempting to read Medieval sculpture, the answers lie in two-dimensional art.

Certain gods and goddesses of antiquity appear frequently in medieval imagery. Venus was a favourite and one of the original referents for the *vesica piscis*. One of the most impressive illustrations of the vagina as her iconography may be seen on a birthing tray from Florence, c.1400. (Fig. 4.30) The painted tray shows the naked Venus in a *vesica piscis* floating in the sky above six kneeling figures who are identified as "famed lovers of fable and antiquity, identifiable from inscriptions on their clothing as Achilles, Tristan, Lancelot, Samson, Paris, and Troilus."[221] According to Kenneth Clark, the depiction of the naked female in art usually empowered the male gaze,[222] but in this painting golden sight lines emanate from Venus's pudenda to each of the men enraptured by the object of their desire. The image seems to represent women's power over men but as Camille reminds us, the image can be read in two ways. The first must consider the context. The tray is a gift from a man to his wife after the birth of "his" child: "... the image of the celestial and venereal Venus simultaneously ennobled his own lower appetites and celebrated his wife's productive capacities."[223] The wife, still recovering from childbirth, might have an alternative reading of

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[221]Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love*, 33.

[222]Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Art* (London: John Murray, 1956), 4.

[223]Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love* 33.

the naked Venus as vulnerable and pinned down by rays now interpreted as the male gaze sexually possessing her. Either way, the power of female sexuality enclosed in the vagina shape dominates the image. The fecundity of the goddess is reflected in the lushness of the vegetation and the abundant fruit which surrounds the kneeling men. Camille frequently acknowledges the female gaze especially in images that were painted specifically for women. The explication of the iconography in this image does not completely overrule Grabar's alternative reading that the ovoid opening indicates the heavenly or divine space inhabited by the goddess. Given the accumulation of sexual referents in the birthing tray images, it would be hard to deny the specificity of the vaginal referent.

Erich Neumann draws our attention to another element of meaning in the image: the bird claws on the winged creatures which flank Venus on this painted tray. He says the claws evoke harpies and sirens and that in this Renaissance image, they indicate the voracious sexual appetite of Venus which ensnares men who enter her earthly Paradise.[224]

For the Church any depiction of sexual activity was sinful, but as the literature of romantic love grew, the illuminators found ways to imply genital activity or genital imagery. A carved ivory mirror back from France (c. 1300) shows a man and a woman playing chess. (Fig. 4.31) The image is full of symbolism and allegory. The falcon held by the male servant signifies the pursuit of love and the female servant looks down and points to indicate the vaginal orifice, the alternate significance of the round chaplet she holds behind the lady's back. Other obvious sexual implications are the phallic intent of the pole grasped by the man and which penetrates the parted opening in the tent, and the folds of the woman's dress which

[224]Neumann, 145-46.

clearly indicate a "pubic triangle" with an exaggerated vaginal slit.[225]

Artists were permitted to portray couples in bed though they are usually discreetly shown under the covers. The first example (Fig. 4.32) comes from a medieval sex manual, c. 1285. The illustration indicates the only acceptable Christian position for love-making with the man on top. The author is careful to talk about sexual activity as necessary for maintaining one's health. The text is addressed to men, giving advice that proper diet and rest is the best preparation for engaging in sexual activity. The female vagina is symbolically represented by the parted bed curtains. Note the folded back edges that suggest the female labia and the fact that the curtain is connected to the woman's hair by line and colour. The penis is represented by the angle of the man's arm and its thrusting is indicated by the heavy black lines on the coverlet. The raised leg of the woman in conjunction with the symbolic representation of the vagina imply the penetration which was "the object of love's desire."[226]

A final example from a Spanish manuscript, *La Bible de Alba*, illustrates Numbers 25:7-8 which tells how Phineas the priest killed an Israelite man who had sexual relations with a Midianite woman.[227] (Fig.4.33) The couple is shown with the man lying on top of the woman, both fully clothed in front of an open tent. The image indicates that the use of the artistic convention of the parted tent-flap and the phallic supporting pole to indicate the vagina, the penis and sexual penetration was not limited to French usage.

In the illumination illustrating the *Historia Troiana*, c.1450 (Fig. 4.34), the male lover,

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[225]Michael Camille, *Gothic Art: Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World* (Everyman Art Library: London, 1996), 167 & 170.

[226]Camille, 142-143. See also Camille, "Manuscript Illumination and the Art of Copulation" in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, 68.

[227]Merry E. Weisner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1.

Achilles, is shown in bed but no woman is visible. The illustrator, Martinus Opifex, is notable for his fascination with human sexuality and here with the elaborate rendering of the flowing bed curtains in the parted tent flaps, he evokes labial imagery and the vaginal opening even more graphically than in the previous illustrations. The artist, remarks Camille, "makes his image perform desire."[228] The purse was another charged sign in medieval art. It was primarily used to signify avarice, after *luxuria* the sin most condemned in Church art. It also, however, alluded metaphorically to the vagina, the drawstrings controlling access to this precious site. Occasionally, the purse becomes a pun for the male " sack." In a daring illustration from *Le Roman de la Rose*, a lady is shown feeling the "contents" of the large purse held between herself and her lover.[229]

Devotional images, particularly those painted for women, could be equally erotic. In the 14th century, the wound of Christ gets rendered as a *vesica piscis*. The earliest representation is an illumination in a 1320 French manuscript by a Parisian artist, a contemporary of Jean Pucelle. Beneath a painting of the crucifixion, the wound of Christ is shown equal in size to the whole body of Christ, in vivid colours of orange and red surrounded by a white rim. In the lower part of the page, two praying figures glance up at the wound. The whole image was entitled "L'Image du Monde."[230] In another example, the wound appears without any figurative elements. It is surrounded by much smaller drawings of the instruments of the passion in a Psalter and Prayerbook painted by the famous illustrator Jean Pucelle for Bonne of

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[228]Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love*, 154-155. One wonders what the artist meant to convey by Achilles's broken sword lying on the floor.

[229]Ibid., 64-65.

[230]Lucy Freedman Sandler, "Jean Pucelle and the Lost Miniatures of the Belleville Breviary," *Art Bulletin* 64 (Mar. 84): 85-86.

Luxenburg c.1349. Again the referent is very clear in the use of flesh colours surrounding a dark central slit.[231] (Fig. 4.35) The theological reference is to the Church's teaching that Christ gave birth to his Church through this death wound, the moment his sacrifice was complete. The sexual analogy is made obvious because the birth follows the phallic thrust of the lance. The historical act now becomes a symbolic penetration.

The vaginal wound image figured large in mystical practices. In a final illustration from the 14th century called the Man of Sorrows, the wound stands within a large *vesica piscis* beside a diminutive Christ who seems to be half in or out of his tomb. (Fig. 4.36) The inscription around the edge of the wound claims that it is exactly the size of the real Christ's wound. Karma Lochrie says that the sexual nature of the mystical devotion to Christ's wound is very explicit and clearly acknowledged in the *Stimulus Amoris*, an important medieval Franciscan text by James of Milan. "Mystical union between soul and God is figured as a joining of wounds in a mystical act of copulation.[232] In a similar vein, Wolgang Riehle asserts that there is a conscious analogy being made by "a kind of punning on words, vulva and *vulnus*. The copulation of the mystical soul (the Sponsa) with Christ thus occurs at the site of his wound (*vulnus*), which is transformed into the female vulva when *vulnus vulneri copulator*, 'wound is joined to wound.'" [233]

Lochrie cites other sexual analogies from James of Milan's text. Most telling is his "metaphor of the wound as a 'gate of Paradise,' invoking that famous garden of delights, the paradise enclosed...in Song of Songs, 4:12". Whereas Christ is the active lover in the Song of

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[231]Sandler, 86.

[232]Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," 189.

[233]Wolfgang Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics*, 46.

Songs placing his hand in the hole in the wall to move the lover, in the *Stimulus Amoris* text "Christ invites penetration through the hole in his side and offers consolation and rest as well as inebriation and innumerable delights."[234]

A figurative image which eroticizes not only Christ's wound but his whole body appears in the famous Rothschild Canticles, c.1330. (See Fig. 4.3). Camille categorizes this manuscript as unique and crucial, "a literal revelation of the forms and practices of a particular moment in medieval spiritual life."[235] Jeffrey Hamburger, in his extensive examination of its text and images, contends that it was put together for an educated laywoman or a nun living in Flanders or the Rhineland around 1300. In the Sponsa's mystical vision of Christ's wound, the naked Christ is eroticized by the shapely legs and thighs and the twist of his body—which also serves to conceal his genitals. The woman/nun holds the lance that she used to penetrate the side wound of Christ.[236] This image is not about the birth of Christ's Church but about the mystical or spiritual relationship between the penetrating gaze of the Sponsa who points to her eye and the body of Christ, who points to his wound. As indicated in the *Stimulus Amoris* text, the union is effected through the wound in Christ's side.[237]

In describing the use of the mandorla in the lower half of the illuminated letter B from the Psalter of St. Louis, Paris, c.1260, Camille says King David's vision of Christ is

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[234]Lochrie, 189.

[235]Jeffrey Hamburger, review of *Image on the Edge* by Michael Camille, *The Journal of Religion* 72.3 (1992), 430.

[236] The feminization of Christ's body is common in the texts or illustrations of female mystics. See Lochrie, 187. Lochrie also questions the implications of the desire of a female for a female.

[237]Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love*, 38.

represented as a "disembodied and mystical mode of vision."[238] (Fig. 4.37) The upper half of the letter B contains an illustration of David looking out of a tower window at Bathsheba bathing in the garden below. Though her arm discretely hides her genitals, the opening in the open tower door beneath David (another medieval gloss for the vagina, see 4.2.3 on the rose) indicates the goal of David's desire. In the lower image, the mandorla is presented as a window into heaven where Christ sits in glory. Camille does not mention the crenellated edge surrounding the mandorla but Didron and other authors say this wavy line represents clouds in reference to the etymological roots of the word nimbus or aureole.[239] If the mandorla is recognizable as the *vesica piscis* in the preceding examples showing Christ's wound as a vagina, could not the wavy or crenellated edge also evoke the image of labia or pubic hair? Given that David in the upper half of the initial letter B, first looks at the naked Bathsheba and then at Christ in the *vesica piscis* in the lower half of the B, the images seem to proceed from an initial erotic gaze to a purified but still eroticized vision of the vagina.

. Carol Walker Bynum speaks of the concept in medieval thought of Jesus taking on motherhood just as he took on flesh in Mary's womb. Could the *vesica piscis* then also be a sign of the rebirth of the Christian soul in passing through Christ's wound, the entrance to his heart/womb, the site of the soul's rebirth? The association between heart and vagina is explored further in section 4.2.3 on the Rose.

Given the cumulative evidence of the various types of vaginal references in both devotional and secular illuminated manuscripts or objects, it is curious that so little has been written about the specificity of the vaginal referent in the *vesica piscis* shape. Although most

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[238]Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love*, 30.

[239]Didron, 106.

of the examples I have provided come from the 13th and 14th centuries, the multiplicity of ways to refer to the female genitalia without actually depicting it supports my contention that the vaginal symbolism of the *vesica piscis*/mandorla was understood by at least some medieval viewers. As to whether they understood it metaphorically as referring to the Incarnation, or as a conflation of pagan and Christian symbolism would depend on the viewer's ideological perspective. It would be easy to conclude that sculpture of an empty *vesica piscis*/mandorla flanked by two angels on the tympanum of Perrecy-les-Forges, 12th century (Fig. 4.38) indicates that the parish simply did not have the funds for a full version of the Ascension-Second Coming theme. Nevertheless, the narrowness of the space enclosed by the ellipse would seem to preclude the inclusion of any figure or perhaps the symbolism of the *vesica piscis* was so well known that the whole theme needed only to be indicated by the abstract shape. The absence of an enclosed figure, however, makes this rendition of the *vesica piscis* an evocative example of its polysemic potential.

Although I have confined my exploration of the Christian use of this motif to its tympanal sculptural form, there are numerous examples of wall and apse paintings of Christ in glory. This theme was particularly popular in Catalonian art. The shape frequently appears on Catalonian painted and carved altar fronts and around Christ in glory in ceiling paintings. (Fig. 4.39 & 4.40) The mandorla shape was used occasionally on Italian churches, but not the Cluniac motif. As mentioned earlier, it appears infrequently in sculptural form in England and Germany although German devotional literature made extensive use of the vaginal wound. (see below)

The *vesica piscis* disappears from monumental sculpture with the development of the Gothic style. A possible explanation is offered by Emile Mâle's analysis of the new sculptural

forms in his list of the Third Generation of portals which he dates from 1170. Human figures, including those representing divine beings, are presented more and more realistically, reflecting the growing humanism of the period.[240] Formality gives way to individuality and personality as the column-figures seem to move and interact. The difference is easily recognizable in the affectionate gesture of concern and recognition between Mary and Elizabeth as they greet each other on the left portal of the north transept of Chartres cathedral, c.1205.[241]

The philosophical writings of William Saint-Thierry of the University of Paris, *De natura corporis et animae*, 1130-38, set the tone for reviving beauty as an artistic criterion in rendering the human body. "As the body serves as the instrument of the soul so, in the representation of extraordinary beings, the bodies should reveal the beauty of their spirits." He goes on to give advice reminiscent of the Classical principles of harmony and proportion. Even though Saint-Thierry wrote early in the 12th century, the flowering of this philosophy around the turn of the 13th century perhaps contributed to the disappearance of this symbol in Church sculpture.[242]

4.2.3 The Rose and Other "Natural" Symbols

Shells, flowers, seeds, fruit—all traditionally have been thought to resemble the female generative organs and with this resemblance the sympathetic magic or the sacred power of the female generative forces is invoked. The use of the cowrie shell dates back to 20,000 BCE. It

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[240]Mâle, *Religious Art in France, Twelfth Century*, 215-16.

[241]Ibid., 218 & 220.

[242]Ibid., 220-221.

was considered sacred in places as widely separated as Polynesia (where later it was even used as money) and in many parts of the Mediterranean basin. In India, *Kauri* (phonetically similar to the English cowrie) is the name of a pre-Vedic goddess. Shells are still used in India "as magical jewelry for averting the evil eye."[243] The etymological roots of the name scallop (shell) in Norse, *skalpr*, means sheath or vagina. If we look to the Greek associations, "*kteis*...is also a term widely used for the outer and visible female genitals, an equivalent to the Latin *vulva*."[244] It is somewhat surprising that the scallop shell was the symbol for the great medieval pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostela (and even more interesting to see that certain pilgrims' badges were in the shape of "vagina people"). (Fig. 4.41) It becomes more understandable when we learn that the pilgrimage site of Compostela was originally dedicated to the goddess Brigit (formerly Brigantium), who incorporated aspects of the sea-born Aphrodite. The scallop shell was Aphrodite's yonic symbol.[245] It is not by accident that Botticelli chose the scallop shell as the vessel which transports Venus/Aphrodite over the waters in his famous painting, *The Birth of Venus*.[246]

When it comes to examining the vegetal sculptural forms in medieval sculpture, art history and religious studies scholars tend to neglect them in favour of figurative imagery, especially biblical. They often dismiss floral carvings as merely decorative, with no moral or symbolic content. Yet there is a long history behind each vegetal form dating back to the

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[243]Barbara Walker, *Dictionary*, 507.

[244]Ibid.

[245]Ibid., 522. See also Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Vol.1 (New York: Penguin Books, 1955), 296.

[246]See Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* on Boticelli's use of pagan mythology. Seznec believes the ultimate secrets of the paintings have "not yet been penetrated... for it is our belief that they hide several layers of meaning." 112.

earliest civilizations of Western antiquity, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and reaching far into the Eastern cultures of India and China. This chapter explores the use of the rose as the dominant floral symbol associated with the vagina in the European tradition although some mention must be made of the lily and the lotus, two other symbols pertaining to women's genitalia or generative functions.

In the ancient Near East, the lily was associated with Astarte, the Mother Creator and goddess of love and in Greece with Aphrodite, also the goddess of love and queen of heaven. Barbara Walker says that the lily took on the role of the lotus in Europe, becoming the cup which holds the divine essence of life. In the kind of reversal which often accompanies the transformation of pagan symbolism, the lily also becomes associated with purity or virginity in Christianity.[247] It becomes the symbol of Mary's virginity and of many saints, especially young virgin martyrs such as Agnes.

The oldest floral symbolism is found in the Hindu tradition where the lotus represents the yoni. The lotus is Mother, the womb of nature and the symbol of creation. Lakshmi, Radha, the death-rebirth goddess Kali (Lilith in the Near East tradition) are all connected with lotus imagery. In Egypt, the Great Goddess was the lotus from which the sun was born and it was also Hathor's flower. "Everywhere the Lotus Goddess was the yoni that devoured the sun god, to become his matrix and give him daily rebirth."[248] As a symbol, the lotus was seen to represent each of the four basic elements being rooted in the earth, surrounded by water, releasing its perfume into the air and drawing its fertility from the sun's fire. In a later application of this symbol it stands for the cosmic and individual consciousness associated

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[247]Walker, *Dictionary*, 28-29 and Camphaussen,.25.

[248]Ajit Mookerjee, *Kali: the Feminine Force* (New York: Destiny Books, 1988), 34-35.

with the Buddha.[249]

The Indian Lotus goddess was sometimes depicted as a woman lying on her back with legs drawn up in the birthing position, thus displaying her pubic area. (Fig. 4.42) During rituals known as yoni *puja* (worship), liquids such as yoghurt (for earth), water, honey (for fire), milk (for air), and an edible oil (for ether) were poured over the statue's yoni. The mixture was then fed to those present at the ritual.[250] Instead of a head, the neck is crowned with a lotus bud, a yoni symbol, to proclaim the goddess as generatrix of all things, of cosmic consciousness. Stella Kramrisch, writing about this image says that the lotus in place of the head indicates the "place of the Birth of the Universe."[251]

There is no doubt that "The symbol of the rose is to the Occident world what the lotus is to the cultures of the Asia and the Middle East - a foremost feminine, mystic and sacred symbol, open to diverse interpretations and usages."[252] The tradition comes to us from the Near East where as early as 3000 BCE, eight-petalled rosettes appear on a cylinder seal from Mesopotamia depicting the goddess Innana.[253] (Fig. 4.43) In ancient Egypt, the rose was the symbol for the uterine underworld and cyclic rebirth. In fact a five-petalled rose was sacred to various goddesses throughout the Orient, for example Aphrodite's red roses and Cybele's white. Later Arab poetry used the rose as a euphemism for the female genitalia.[254] "I think of

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[249]Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image*, 218-220.

[250]Camphausen, 38.

[251]Stella Kramrisch, *Artibus Asiae* 19 (1974): 259. See also Moorkerjee, 34-35. .

[252]Camphausen, 25.

[253]Wolkstein And Kramer, 27 & 184 and Ana Maria Quiñones, *Symboles végétaux: La flore sculptée dans l'art médiéval* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1995), 178.

[254]Walker, *Dictionary*, 433-34.

nothing but the Rose, I wish nothing but the ruby Rose."[255] As a result of the Crusades, many cultural exchanges took place between the Arab world and Europeans. One of results was the development of the medieval art of courtly love. Troubadours adopted the rose analogy in their ballads and the practice persists in folk songs to this day. Note the reference in this verse from the American folk song *The Water is Wide*, of medieval British and French origin.

> I plunged my hand into some soft bush
> Thinking the sweetest flower to find
> But I pricked my finger to the bone
> And left the sweetest flower alone.

As mentioned earlier, the study of the decorative forms on the capitals and corbels in Romanesque architecture as part of the symbolism in Romanesque art has been neglected for the study of the figurative work. In the past, art historians examined decorative themes mainly to trace motifs and assign them to a particular school of carvers, for example, to the Cluniac tradition. A recent work by Ana María Quiñones on *Symboles végétaux: La flore sculptée dans l'art médiéval* examines the symbolism of plant forms. She not only traces the origins of each type of vegetal image (I will adopt Quiñones choice of the word *vegetaux* to include both floral and other plant forms) but also provides the botanical and pharmacological information which contributed to each plant's symbolic signification. One of her primary resources was the *Matière Medicale* by Dioscoridus. This was one of the most widely read books after the Bible and was a source book for many of the Church Fathers and a standard text for monastic communities. Although this treatise was only written in the 1st century, it compiled "les

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[255]Idris Shah, *The Sufis* (London: Octagon Press, 1964), 108, quoted in Walker, *Dictionary*, 434.

connaisances de toute l'Antiquité."[256].

Quiñones says that there are differences in the artistic traditions of the Near East and Europe which have influenced our use and understanding of iconography. The Near East prefers abstraction when dealing with the holy, finding the concrete images of the European tradition "too shocking." She also notes that in spite of pressure for pagan converts in the West to accept the Christian redefinition of their old symbols, they never fully abandoned their old beliefs. Rather, these ancient symbols "permettaient une double lecture, païenne pour les uns, chrétienne pour les autres."[257] So even though bishops and abbots tried to maintain a vigorous control over what imagery was included on their churches and abbeys, they could not eradicate the polysemic quality inherent in all imagery. This is especially true for Romanesque and pre-Romanesque art which tends to be more abstract and less naturalistic than later styles and therefore closer to "older" pre-Christian symbology.[258]

Quiñones begins with a review of the ancient goddess affiliation between the rose or rosette[259] pattern in sculpture and paintings from Mesopotamian to Greek and Roman times. The rosette represented the fertility of the Mother goddess in all her various personifications and in all senses of the word fertility. It appears on countless cylinder seals c.3000 BCE, on the walls of the Kar-Tukulti-Niinurta's palace, c.1200 BCE, but it is most impressively represented for the modern viewer as a repeated motif on the Ishtar gate from Babylonia, 6th

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[256]Quiñones, 8.

[257]Ibid.,13.

[258]Ibid., 18.

[259]Rosette is a diminutive form of rose but it is also used to describe any flower composed of a central circular disk surrounded by a varying number of petals.

century BCE.[260] Anne Baring and Jules Cashford report that long before Christ, eight petaled roses, like the eight-petalled lotus of Kali, signified regeneration. Roses were thrown at the statue of Cybele as it was drawn through Roman streets and it is perhaps from the celebration of Cybele's mysteries that "the symbolism of the rose began to evolve as a symbol of resurrection, and the rose garden as the sacred world or hidden dimension of the goddess."[261]

Roman use of rosettes on their sarcophagi as symbols of regeneration were the direct inspiration for their early Christian use on Syrian sarcophagi. Abstracted forms of the rosette were used in imagery throughout the ancient and classical world and persisted in the succeeding cultures which preceded the medieval, such as Visigothic and the Lombardic. (Fig. 4.44 & 4.45) The rosette was also sometimes adopted to refer to male gods such as Apollo as a sun sign. In medieval Christianity, the rose would sometimes signify Jesus. Regardless of these various referents, Quiñones says that rosettes are always to be considered symbolic of life, fertility, and regeneration, originally associated with goddesses .

Miranda Green points out that several Celtic deities such as Epona and the Celtic "Venus"are associated with rosettes "either in reflection of a chthonic aspect to their cults or because of the sun-like shape of the rosette symbol."[262] They were also used by the Celtic peoples on tombstones to indicate both spring and rebirth.

Plants or vegetation in Church sculpture proved especially useful because of the ban on images during the recurring iconoclastic periods. "La rosette, abstract, géométrique,

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[260]Quiñones, 174 & 178. A reconstruction of the gate exists in the Pergamon museum in Berlin.

[261]Baring and Cashford, 403.

[262]Miranda Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 179.

particulièrement adaptée aux canons esthétiques germaniques, devient le thème préféré pour exposer des concepts religieux que sa grande variété typologique permettait de préciser."[263] For example, the rosettes on the lintel under the tympanum of Saint-Pierre de Moissac as symbols of regeneration complement the resurrection depicted more figuratively in the tympanum carvings above it.[264] (Fig. 4.46)

Quiñones suggests that the four rosettes which surround the "mystical mandorla" on the metope of the meridional (south) door of Sainte-Marie de Maubourguet en Gascogne symbolize Christ's humanity. The iconography of this tympanum permits a multivalent reading, the mandorla as the heavenly space of Christ in glory is also the sign of Christ's incarnation. The rosettes (six-petalled in this example) indicate Christ's humanity, but as Quiñones remarked above, ancient symbols permit a double reading "païenne pour les uns, chrétienne pour les autres." Are they goddess symbols, if only a referent to Mary, the Christian goddess implicated in all the Christian mysteries of birth and rebirth in Christ? Roses are frequently part of the sculpture on tympana, on capitals, archivolts, door posts and various other bits of church architecture.(Fig. 4.47 & 47a)

During the Middle Ages the rose was primarily the symbol for the Virgin Mary but also for romance and healing. Although the lily is most frequently associated with purity, roses too were considered to purify because of their fragrance. They were used to freshen the atmosphere and clothing and in times of plague were carried for protection.[265]

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[263] Quiñones, 197

[264] Ibid., 202.

[265] Http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/frear/rose_img.htm

Mary, the Mystical Rose, the thornless rose born from the thorn of Israel[266] appears in the centre of the great rose windows of France. Indeed, this window is known as the Rose of France.[267] Bynum says medieval churchmen understood that the rose was a reference to "Mary's physical gateway, source of the redeemer's life."[268] She was the gate of Heaven through which Jesus was born. As Caroline Walker Bynum says, medieval people seemed not to identify "as erotic or sexual" the ecstatic sensations of their mystical experiences.[269]

Once again we must look to secular imagery to confirm the medieval recognition of the vaginal referent in the rose. The most specific use of this symbolism is found in the *Roman de la Rose*, begun by Guillaume de Lorris about 1230 and completed by Jean de Meung about 1275. In the story, the rose is a metaphor for the vagina, the goal of male sexual desire. The romance is related to the traditions of courtly love, the origins of which are still disputed. Cited among the influencing elements are - medieval court and feudal life, Marian devotions and input from the Arab world.[270]

Towards the end of the romance when the lover is about to "pluck" the rose. A statue of the female body is under attack by Venus who aims her arrow at a narrow aperture in the castle wall. Illustrations make it clear that the arrow is aimed at a female statue that is integrated into the structure of the wall. (Fig. 4.48) The siege is successful and a final image depicts the lover

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[266]Hamburger, *Nuns As Artists*, 63.

[267]Campbell, 235.

[268]Caroline Walker Bynum "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality", in *Fragmentation and Redemption: essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, 27-51 (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 29.

[269] Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Late Middle Ages: A Reply to Joseph Steinberg," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39 (1986): 406.

[270]Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 308-309 & 317.

achieving an "allegorical orgasm" as he thrusts his staff into the aperture of the statue fallen from the ruined "castle of Jealousy."[271] (Fig.4.49)

Illustrations from *The Song of Songs* often use the metaphor of an opening in a wall for the vagina. This convention is part of the imagery in the Rothschild canticles, c.1400, where Christ is shown reaching through the window to touch the soul. (Fig. 4.50) The middle panel of the image shows the soul being led out from its dwelling to the garden of delights in the lower panel. Whereas this is a welcome intrusion, a detail from the Bayeux tapestry shows a cleric thrusting his arm through an opening and "chin-chucking" a woman. (Fig. 4.51) Camille says the detail of the naked man below the scene implies that this gesture indicates that the woman has been violated.[272]

As mentioned above, rose symbolism, though originally female, gets enlisted in the service of the male. So too in Christianity, where the rose is engaged to represent Christ's sufferings and death as expressing the greatest love. Jeffrey Hamburger says all contradictions and paradox came together in the image of the rose, sexuality and spirituality, pain and pleasure, suffering and love. Christ's sufferings made him beautiful in his ugliness, like the *negra sum, sed formosa* of the Song of Songs.[273]

The nuns of St.Walberg convent in Germany employed roses in creating some of their devotional images. The most interesting is the depiction of a single rose, in appearance very much like the Tudor rose of England. (Fig. 4.52) In the centre of the rose is a miniature

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[271]Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 322.

[272]Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love*,

[273]Hamburger, Nuns As Artists, 63-66.

painting of Christ's Agony in the Garden.[274] Roses were also used on New Year's cards in Germany as symbols of rebirth and renewal. (Fig.4.53) Some featured the infant Christ with his genitals displayed by his open garment. He stands on a rosebush whose bloom is a wooden cross, symblematic, according to Hamburger of Mary's conception.[275]

Mary may be the rose without a thorn, yet the bloom also represented "Christ's exquisite sorrow, of ecstasy and agony conjoined."[276] Spiritual authors referred to Christ's blood as rose-coloured. A pieta, with Mary in a posture very much like a *Sedes Sapientiae*, holds a child-sized dead Christ on her lap. The blood on Christ's chest is rendered as rosettes and just as the roses on the lintel at Moissac reinforce the message of resurrection in the tympanum above them, so the carved roses ringing the base of this statue emphasize Mary's participation in Christ's sufferings.[277] (Figs. 4.54 & 4.54a)

There is a unusual example of a flower-headed God the Father in a miniature of the *Throne of Mercy* from an English Psalter, c.1225. The seated figure holds the crucified Christ in front of him surmounted by the Holy Spirit as a dove. (Fig. 4.55) Jeffrey Hamburger describes the four-petalled flower head as a luminous quatrefoil but it could also be the simplest form of a rose. He says this use of this iconography rather than a human form "indicates (that) the unapproachable transcendence of God the Father is distinguished from the humanity of Christ."[278] Hamburger observes that this is a unique image which "perhaps"

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[274]Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 66-67.

[275]Ibid., 67-68.

[276]Ibid., 77.

[277]Ibid.

[278]Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canticles*, 134.

serves as a precedent for other renditions of God as both revealed and concealed. He draws our attention to an image from the Rothschild Canticles which depicts a highly abstracted human form standing on a seven-armed[279] radiating sun with crossed arms above its head holding two similar sun wheels. This image of the triune god appears in the Trinitarian section of the Canticles. The face is all but obliterated by the rays which emanate from it.[280] (Fig. 4.56) However the use of a flower or rose for God's head with no rays of light streaming forth seems less clearly about the ineffability of God.

What exactly is being revealed or concealed in this image entitled the *Throne of Mercy*? The iconography seems so complex that the use of a flower-head might also be multivalent On either side of god's head, there is an angel. The one on his right holds the sun and the angel on the left holds the crescent moon. Below the floor on which the throne of God sits, three figures look up. Two are Jews, identifiable from the coned hats they were obliged to wear in the middle ages, and the third is a crowned figure. One of the Jews holds two fingers up. Kneeling on either side of the throne are what seem to be women, yet on God's right, the more clearly female of the two seems to have a bishop's crozier lightly held between her folded hands. Perhaps the flower-head refers to both God the Father and as in the Indian example of the lotus-headed goddesses, to feminine aspects of the divine. As mentioned above, the four-petalled rose is sometimes a reference to Christ's humanity. If so, this image might incorporate the rather sophisticated insight that all three persons of the trinity partake in Christ's humanity.

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[279] The seven rays from the three suns would seem to invite speculation concerning their numerological significance, an important element in medieval imagery. However, Hamburger does not explore other than the iconographic significance of the concealed godhead in this image.

[280] Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canticles*, 133-34.

4.3 Genital Iconography Revealed

In reviewing the medieval depictions of Venus, we get a good idea of how Christianity both preserved and distorted female imagery to conform to its repudiation of all sexuality except for reproductive purposes. Long before the Renaissance, Venus was a popular deity who appeared in various guises and in different contexts. She was above all the goddess of love and the planet under whose sign many were born. Although sometimes favourably presented because of the necessity of her reproductive powers as part of "God's plan," Venus was for the most part associated with the sin of *luxuria,* often appearing as the courtesan, the prostitute and the mermaid. As mermaid, she is often depicted with various symbolic objects such as a mirror and comb, and from nature, doves, roses and seashells---all to indicate her vanity, her sensuality and her lewdness.[281] Except for the man-made objects, the mirror and the comb, her other symbols were often transformed into positive representations—the Holy Spirit (the dove), Mary or Jesus (the rose), while the shell became associated with that most important of medieval pilgrimages to Santiago di Compostelo.

The Double-tailed Mermaid inherited all the negative connotations of the single-tailed mermaid. It is the gesture of holding aloft the two parts of her bifurcated tail that draws our attention to a genital display that is sometimes indicated (as in the Gerona example, see below) and sometimes not. She teases our imagination with her inviting gesture and her designation as a siren implies seduction and illicit sex. It is this implied display that links her to the Sheela-na-gigs.[282]

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[281]Jacqueline Leclercq, "Sirens-poissons romans," *Revue belge d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art* (40, 1971), 7.

[282]Walker, *Dictionary*, 274.

If the mermaid was a bad woman in medieval iconography, Sheela-na-gigs were not only bad but ugly—according to most early writers about these figures. We have no specific references to this genre of exhibitionist figures in medieval texts. Documentation starts with their rediscovery by antiquarian writers in the late 18th century although most of these figures date from the 12th to the early 15th century.

Sheela-na-gigs have been categorized as another example of admonitory figure which is supposed to dissuade people from sexual sin. Freedberg raises the question of whether an ugly naked body is particularly arousing, since there are tales in which ugliness is decidedly anti-aphrodisiac. He tells the story of the man who was inflamed with passion for a statue of Shirin, the mistress of King Abarwiz in ancient Iran. The statue's nose was hacked off so as to break the amorous spell,[283] a tactic that evidently did the trick. Many of the Sheelas are not attractive as the Double-tailed Mermaids are. Rather they project power or dignity or even the comedic intent of Iambe's display to Demeter.

In *Image as Insight*, Miles speaks of the continuity in the use of a Christian imagery which centred on the life of Christ, the Virgin, the apostles and salvation. There is no such continuity for these two images of sin. They emerge in the medieval era as part of the legacy of Lapsarian theology which identifies the female body as the site of sin.[284]

Medieval imagery would change markedly after the edicts of the 23rd session of the Council of Trent which proclaimed:

> The Holy Council forbids any image to be exhibited in churches which represent false doctrines and might be the occasion of grave error to the uneducated; it earnestly desires that all lasciviousness be avoided and that images not be adorned with seductive

[283]Freedberg, 323-324.

[284]Miles, *Image As Insight*, 5.

charms. In order to assure respect for these decisions, the Holy Council forbids exhibiting in any place, even in churches not subject to visits by the Ordinary, any unusual image unless it had been approved by the bishop.[285]

We have records indicating how much influence clerics had over the work of artists as recorded in their contracts but fortunately many were less than scrupulous about allowing non-Biblical imagery in their churches. Even after the decrees of the Council of Trent, the ribald carvings on the *misericords* of choir stalls gives evidence of the tolerance of certain clerics, or perhaps their sense of humour.[286]

The church thought it could save art but control the excesses of the 12th and early 13th century. Such was the intent of Cardinal Paleotti as notes for his directives showed largesse and a love of beauty. Unfortunately he died before completing this work (finally published in 1582) and his open spirit is missing from the more influential writings by Jean Molanus, 1570. Although Molanus defended the church's claim for a Christian use of images, he had no understanding of the value of symbolism or allegory in medieval art. Many traditional stories were henceforth banned, such as depicting the story of the Apostle Thomas's voyage to India. Stories of the early life of the Virgin would not be destroyed but the faithful were to be instructed, "so that they would know in what spirit to look at these works."[287] He questioned the circumstances of the Virgin's death as poetic fantasies that had nothing to do with history and to show the virgin fainting at the foot of the Cross was to insult her. Numerous other images inspired by Franciscan devotional practices were equally rejected as was all nudity and

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[285]As quoted in Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France: the Late Middle Ages, A Study of Medieval Iconography and Its Sources*, Bollingen Series XC - 3 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). 443.

[286]Mâle, *Religious Art in France: the Late Middle Ages*, 444-446.

[287]Ibid. 449.

use of pagan gods whatever the interpretation. According to Mâle, Molanus' book marked "the end of an age of humanity." [288]

4.3.1 The Double-Tailed Mermaid

We must again turn our attention to the beginnings of Western culture in the Near East to find the birth of mermaid mythology. Babylonians, Syrians, Philistines, all worshipped sea-gods and goddesses. The Babylonian sea-god, Oannes, was said to have taught humans the arts and sciences. Poseidon or Neptune was also depicted as half-human and half-fish as were his male offspring, the tritons. As the sea has long been viewed as the universal womb, it would be more naturally the domain of sea-goddesses such as the Syrian Atargatis (the oldest recorded mermaid), the Philistine Derceto and Aphrodite herself.[289] These same goddesses were associated with the moon and the ocean tides. Representation of the relationship between women's menses and the cycles of the moon dates back to the cave sculpture at Lascaux where the woman holds the crescent moon/bull horn incised with 13 marks in her raised hand.[290]

In Germany, the Lorelei were river goddesses of the Rhine reputed to lure men to their deaths by drowning. The Cornish knew them as the Merrymaids and in the Shetland Islands the legends speak of mermaids as the Sea-trow who can swim as fish but then remove their animal skins to walk on land. Some see the Melusine of France as the first to be depicted as a

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[288]Mâle, *Religious Art in France: the Late Middle Ages*, 450-52.

[289]Walker, *Dictionary*; 263 and http://rubens.anu.edu/mermaids/folklores.html

[290]Baring and Cashford, 45.

Double-tailed Mermaid.[291]

Homer provides the first literary allusion to mermaids in the *Odyssey*. He calls them sirens although this name has been more traditionally ascribed to half-woman, half-bird creatures. Medieval bestiaries often confused sirens with mermaids whether single or double-tailed as sculpted on many Romanesque cathedrals and churches, especially in France, Italy, and Spain. The popularity of this figure is probably because of her mystical alchemical meaning and her affiliation with a fish-tailed Aphrodite who reveals what are referred to euphemistically as the "mysteries of nature."The double-tailed mermaid is usually shown holding apart her bifurcated tail. Barbara Walker likens her suggestive pose to the gestures of the Sheela-na-gig figures as both refer to female sexual mysteries.[292]

One of the oldest European referents for the Double-tailed Mermaid may be a carving of the goddess Freya-Nerthus from Gotland, in the Baltic, c. 600. She sits with her legs spread wide apart (like some Sheela-na-gigs) holding a large serpent in either hand .Walker claims that in later versions the legs become confused with the serpent tails, thus transforming her into a double-tailed mermaid.[293] Whatever the origin of the bifurcation, it contributes to the erotic specificity of this mermaid as the temptress who exhibits herself in spite of the absence of genitals.

Pamela Berger sees a similarity between what happened to the Terra Mater figure and mermaids within the Christian context. Both become associated with sin, Terra Mater with the sin of Eve and the mermaids (single and double-tailed) with the sin of *luxuria* because of

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[291]http://rubens.anu.edu/mermaids/folklores.html

[292]Walker, *Dictionary*, 274.

[293]Ibid. Etienne Rynne made a similar claim in referring to the Cernunous figure as a possible precursor of Sheela imagery. See 4.3.2.

their reputation as seducers. Berger reminds us of the paradox which pervades the mermaid legend: her watery element is the primary substance of human life but in responding to her call, men die.[294] In pagan mythology she embodies the duality of a goddess of both birth and death. In time, the Church Fathers would "make her a symbol for mortal passions which must be resisted by good Christians."[295] Whereas the Church suppressed other pagan deities and lesser supernatural beings, the mermaids were not perceived as a threat. Rather they became the convenient moral emblem of sin. Perhaps the Church believed all the evidence that was being presented to authenticate their existence. It was, after all, an age of belief—the world was alive with spirits.

The traditional mermaid was often seen sitting in the moonlight, combing her hair and gazing into a mirror. These objects, the mirror and the comb "first appeared in Roman times when mermaids began to be thought of as 'real' creatures, almost human, but with a strong aura of the magic of animals."[296] Although the comb and the mirror were later associated with the vanity of women, they may have developed from earlier objects used by proto-mermaids; a stringed harp might be the precursor of the comb and Nereids often held fish whose spiny fins could have been taken for the teeth of a comb. Additionally, the mirror may have evolved from the depictions of Aphrodite holding a scallop shell - as she appeared on coins from the classical era. Later this rounded fertility symbol "next to Aphrodite's face may have been seen as a mirror, and the tentacles of the spiny anemone she grasped in her other hand as a the teeth

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[294]Pamela Berger, *The Goddess Obscured: Transformation of the Grain Protectoress from Goddess to Saint* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 42.

[295]Leclercq, 5.

[296]Gachot, Theodore. *Mermaids: Nymphs of the Sea.* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 1996), 55.

of a comb."[297] The Greek word, *kteis*, is both scallop shell and comb but it can also mean *vulva*.[298]

In the Middle Ages, the comb and the mirror represented a female beauty which was destructive of men. "The mermaid became the focus for misogynists but instead of causing fear in the laity, the mermaid became even more fascinating."[299] Some authors suggest that the comb is an intentional reference to the mermaid's sexuality. In any case, the mermaid comes to stand for "the corporeal nature of sexuality."[300] Christianity simply appropriated the ancestral fear of seductive sirens luring men to their deaths as a perfect illustration of the fate awaiting those who gave in to the sin of lust or *luxuria*.

Certain elements in the iconography of double-tailed mermaids are reminiscent of her goddess origins. The association of women with fish iconography can be traced back to prehistorical times. Marija Gimbutas states that "the fish was homologized with the Goddess's uterus, possibly because of life giving uterine moisture."[301] Illustrations of this analogy are quite evident in the fish goddess sculptures from Lepenski Vir, about 6000 BCE. (Fig. 4.57) and from the mixture of fish and uterine forms on a Cretan vase from about 2000 BCE. (Fig. 4.58) Much later in Hellenic culture, circa 7th century BCE, the fish is placed within the womb of the goddess Artemis. (Fig. 4.59) Associative imagery of net-patterning, wave-lines of water, and snakes undulating around Artemis (which look remarkably like sperm) emphasize

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[297]Gachot, 55.

[298]Ibid.

[299]Rubens, Internet site.

[300]Gimbutas, 145.

[301]Ibid., 145.

the life-giving aspects of water. In Egypt, the fish that swallowed the penis of Osiris was sometimes taken as a symbol of the vulva of Isis.[302]

The ancient world thought that women's sexual secretions smelled fishy, a reminder perhaps of the sea as the universal womb. From these waters rose the Aphrodite/Venus, the goddess of love. The practice of eating fish on Friday long pre-dates the Christian practice in commemoration of Christ's death on that day. Eating fish was considered an aphrodisiac to be consumed in anticipation of goddess rites on Friday, the *dies veneris*. In fact the word "veneration" comes from the worship of Venus.[303]

Nowhere is the goddess connection with the mermaid image more evident than in the carving of the double-tailed mermaid which graces a 12th century capital in the cloister at San Pedro de Galligans in Gerona, Spain. (Fig. 4.60) This figure appears on four sides of the capital but only on the outer face towards the courtyard do we find two lozenge shapes where the genitals would appear.[304] From as far back as Neolithic times, the lozenge is "a schematized glyph for the vulva and the pubic triangle," according to Gimbutas.[305] It is similar to the vulva on the fish sculptures at Lepenski Vir and on countless small goddess sculptures from Anatolia, Old Europe and elsewhere. The skeletal rib-cage of the Gerona figures is refers to the alternate death aspect of the birth-goddess.

The fish tails on the Gerona carving and other examples of double-tailed mermaids are more like the stalks of vegetation. (Figs. 4.61, 4.62, 4.63) They are reminiscent of the same

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[302]Gimbutas, 374.

[303]Walker, *Dictionary*, 225.

[304]Information gathered from personal observation.

[305]Gimbutas, 145.

gesture in depictions of ancient fertility goddesses holding up stalks of wheat or other plants. An early example from Ugarit, c.1300 BCE, "shows a goddess or priestess holding sheaves of wheat, red barley or corn."[306] (Fig. 4.64) There are many other examples of ancient goddesses holding some type of vegetation with both arms raised in the *orans* position . Some early cylinder seals show goddesses or women using a similar pose holding up their skirts for what looks like a genital display. From the classical period, Demeter as Goddess of the Harvest is frequently depicted holding wheat stalks, sometimes entwined with serpents as in this example, 3rd century BCE. (Fig. 4.65) The sacred palm trees which decorate the top border of this terra cotta relief reinforce her role as goddess of renewal and fertility.[307] Images of Demeter or Ceres were accessible to medieval people. When we consider the combination of iconographical elements, the vulvic lozenge, the vegetal-like tails held aloft , and the skeletal ribs (indicative of death-renewal goddesses—see 4.3.1) in the Gerona double-tailed mermaid, it would be hard to overlook them as goddess referents.

An illustration in Seznec (Fig. 4.66), titled Venus-Luxuria shows a woman wih mirror in hand which we might take for Venus, but Seznec says she is "Ouiseuse" from the *Roman de la Rose*. Ouiseuse represents leisure, the necessary precondition to allow time for romantic dalliances[308]. Seznec makes no mention of the vaginal shaped pool in which the woman swims, nor the floral headdress, probably composed of roses. The pool could also be described as fish-shaped, a *vesica piscis* emphasized by the two fishes swimming alongside the woman. The artist seems to have loaded this one image with a conflation of signifiers for the

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[306]Baring and Cashford, 455 and Neumann, 272.

[307]Quinines, 118.

[308]Seznec, 113.

vagina, the shape of the pool, woman/fish/mermaid in her watery element and even the rose.

4.3.2 Sheela-na-gigs: the "Ugly"

Sheela-na-gigs are small, sexually explicit stone female effigies found on churches, castles, and walls in Ireland and Britain. They present an historical mystery that has been puzzled over, examined, and researched from every apparent angle. Like women themselves, the Sheelas (as they are familiarly called) have both resisted being categorized and have suffered from the limitations that certain categorizations have placed on them.

The patriarchal bias clearly evident in much of the writing or research about these figures is one of the major factors that perpetuates the Sheela mystery. Additionally, problems of dating, provenance, nomenclature, and intention further complicate our understanding of these figures. Nevertheless, certain characteristics are peculiar to the Sheela carvings. A detailed description using the most widely published illustration of a Sheela-na-gig from a corbel on the Church of St. Mary and St. David at Kilpeck, in Hertfordshire, England (Fig. 4.67) will be helpful. The emphasis in size or rendering in these sculptures is usually given to the head or pudenda, the hand gestures and leg postures. The exaggeration of these elements, disproportionately large in the case of the head and genitalia and small for the limbs and body identify Sheela imagery. The overall height of the Sheelas ranges from approximately 20 cm. to 70 cm. The name comes from a chance encounter between a 19th century Irish antiquarian and a local inhabitant who, in answer to his query about what this figure was called, answered "Sheela-na-gig." Since then, there have been endless discussions as to what exactly the name means. The only point of agreement is that "Sheela-na-gig" is a folk nomenclature and that this name does not provide us with any real information about the origins or purpose of these

figures. Nevertheless, the title Sheela-na-gig or Sile-na-gcioch, adopted in 1861 by the Royal Society of Antiquarians in Ireland,[309] is commonly accepted.

As the Sheelas have been labelled erotic, if not pornographic or obscene, this makes their placement on Christian churches somewhat problematic. Some scholars say they are simply a form of medieval grotesque similar to those found in considerable numbers in northern France and Spain. They classify the Sheelas as "female exhibitionists," one type among the many explicit and bawdy carvings on Romanesque churches, cathedrals and monasteries. Exhibitionist figures were designed to support the church's moral teaching and used as warnings against the sins of the flesh.[310] We might therefore expect them to have been completely eradicated during puritanical purges and, indeed, some Sheelas do show signs of mutilation and it appears that many more were destroyed. The survival of the Sheelas, especially in Ireland, has been taken as evidence that there were other mythologies or systems of belief that found expression in these carvings. There are approximately 101 examples of Sheela-na-gigs in Ireland and 45 in Britain.[311] In Ireland in particular, they continue to be unearthed, rescued from their banishment beneath the ground and behind masonry, or released from the covering obscurity of vines.

When Sheelas were first rediscovered by antiquarians in the 18th and 19th century, the

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[309]Edith Guest, "Irish Sheela-na-gigs in 1935," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, series 7, 6 (1936), 127.

[310]A. Weir and J.A. Jerman, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (London: Batsford, 1986), 10.

[311]Joanne McMahon and Jack Roberts, *The Sheela-na-gigs of Ireland and Britain: The Divine Hag of the Ancient Celts—An Illustrated Guide* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 2000). This book incorporated the latest finds which represents an increase over the figures provided by a bulletin issued by the National Museum in Dublin, based on the list of Sheelas provided by Weir and Jerman.), 116-117.

Sheelas were thought to be ancient fertility figures from Celtic or pre-Celtic times. The majority, however, that can be accurately dated *in situ*, are from the 12th to the 15th centuries. A few predate this time frame and they display features which mark them as more primitive than others. At least one Sheela may be from as late as the 17th century. Researchers have looked for precursors in Celtic, Nordic and Roman artifacts on the British Isles and on the Continent, in antiquity and prehistorical periods, in India and related imagery in the iconography of cultures less immediately connected with the Indo-European heritage. Attempts have also been made to find Sheela imagery in folklore or mythology, both written and oral.

Sheela-na-gigs - contemporary literature

The most extensive discussion of the Sheela-na-gig was published in 1977 by a Danish graduate student in art history, Jorgen Andersen. It was through his excellent book, *The Witch on the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles*,[312] that I first discovered these figures.

Between1984 and 1990, I visited Britain and Ireland on several occasions to see the Sheelas for myself and to review some of Andersen's research in the library of the British Museum and the National Library in Ireland. What I read further convinced me of the need to bring a feminist, goddess-oriented approach to bear on the study of many of the questions raised by these sculptures. The most interesting concern the possible precursors of the Sheela imagery and the speculations concerning the religious nature and purpose of these sculptures. A close examination of the scholarship relating to the Sheelas reveals that some of the same

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[312]Jorgen Andersen, *The Witch on the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1977).

embarrassment suffered by earlier commentators when faced with implicit or explicit genital imagery persists even into the twentieth century. Andersen, for example, seems compelled to use pejoratives to describe the carvings, even when some of them are clearly benign or even comic in nature. As well, other commentators, notably Weir and Jerman, deprecate attempts to situate these figures in any but a Christian context as mini-sermons against *luxuria*, feeling that such explorations "are best left to folklorists and historians of comparative religion."[313]

First Response to the Carvings - the Masculine-Sheela

The Sheela-na-gigs have periodically been subjected to intense scrutiny and then the public interest fades away as lack of sufficient data frustrates attempts to solve the enigma. Texts concerning the display of the vulva differ markedly from the discourse that deals with phallic displays. I will only remark here that whereas the phallus can, and often is, viewed as metaphor, vulva images are always taken quite literally.

The first public awareness of the Sheelas came from the published notes and sketches of 18th and 19th century antiquarians in both Ireland and England. They usually described them as disgusting, offensive, hideous or evil. The reader was often left to guess why the figure was so evil, as specific mention of the exaggerated genital area, a distinguishing characteristic of the Sheelas, was glossed over. The usual euphemism was to call the carvings "fertility figures." Confronted with these naked, "rude" bodies, the antiquarians could only think of them as a pagan "idols." In 1783, Arthur Cooper described a "pagan idol" he found at Lusk, Co. Dublin, as "hideous, ... the face being seven inches broad, and the head without neck or

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[313]Weir and Jerman,10.

body, being attached to a pair of kneeling thighs or legs."[314] It is believed to be the same carved stone which the Rev. Mr. Tyrell buried at Lusk sometime between 1840 and 1844.[315] We will never know whether Mr. Tyrell felt he had to protect his parishioners from its sexual offensiveness or from its pagan power. This Sheela has yet to be rediscovered.

Two publications, dated 1781 and 1795, indicate that elsewhere the local populace had other reactions to these figures. Both historical accounts from the Isle of Wight describe a figure on a church gate at Binstead that was commonly called "the Idol." It sits on an animal head, now much eroded, but judging from illustrations, it appears to be a horned beast such as a cow, bull, or ram. No comment is offered about the significance of this resemblance.[316] The earlier notation by R. Worsley is especially interesting because it states that a "rude and very ancient" figure had been removed for repairs some years previously, but that it had to be replaced "on its [removal] being productive of displeasure to the inhabitants."[317] Our curiosity about why the villagers were so attached to this sculpture cannot be satisfied by its contemporary appearance. Two hundred years of erosion have blurred any details which might indicate an answer. We must rely on J. Albin's report in 1791 which emphasized the figure's uncouth nature[318] and on the fact that it was later identified as a Sheela-na-gig.

That the subject matter of the Sheelas was a problem for many Victorian antiquarians is

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[314]Arthur Cooper's notes quoted in Guest, *JRSAI*, series 7, 6, (1936): 111.

[315] Ibid.

[316]In contemporary Celtic studies, these animals are frequent companion figures for gods or goddesses. See Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (London: Hamlyn, 1970).

[317]R. Worsley, *The History of the Isle of Wight* (London: 1781), 216.

[318]J. Albin, *A New and Much-Improved History of the Isle of Wight* (Newport: 1795). 521.

nowhere better illustrated than in the 1840 work of George R. Lewis. This accomplished artist sketched in detail the extraordinary Romanesque church of St. Mary and St. David at Kilpeck in Hertfordshire, England. Amongst the corbel figures was one that he named "the Fool." This Sheela is the best known and most widely discussed example of the type. (see Fig. 4.67) As remarked on earlier, Lewis's sketch (Fig. 4.68), which turns the arms and hands away from the vagina, is a blatant misrepresentation of the genital display. He comments on the vaginal opening (unequivocally recognizable to the modern viewer) as, "the cut in his chest, the way to his heart."[319] One is tempted to speculate on the mechanisms of repression which caused this artist's abilities suddenly to desert him while recording the Sheela image though he was perfectly able to render all other carvings on this church. Lewis's misrepresentation certainly gives us a clear example of the kind of "editing" practised by antiquarians when confronted with sexually specific imagery.

Initial discussions of the term Sheela-na-gig often tried to link the name with some sort of condemnation of immodest or lewd behaviour in women. "Sheelas," the shortened term and now widely used, carries no particularly negative connotations. The debate about the name started as early as 1840. A member of the Society of Antiquaries in Dublin reported to the Royal Irish Academy that his sketch of a figure from the east gable of a ruined church at Rochestown, Co. Tipperary, was "called a 'Shela-na-gig' by the country people." There was no further comment as to what the term meant in Irish Gaelic except to say that it was a "translation from popular into polite usage."[320] We are left to imagine a sexual reference as the realistic drawing clearly showed the left hand of the figure touching her genitals. (Fig. 4.69)

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[319]G.R. Lewis, *Illustrations of Kilpeck* (London :1842), 15.

[320]*PRIA* Dublin, 1840-44, 575 and Andersen, 11.

The Rochestown figure has disappeared, but the published report about it served to arouse the curiosity and interest of numerous antiquarian societies and it launched the first serious debate in Ireland about the name in the hope of revealing something about how the figure itself was to be read. In the same year, John O'Donovan referred to a figure at Kiltinane Church in Co. Tipperary, as a "Sheela-ny-Gigg." He quoted local reports that it was reputed to be a figure "set up to annoy the descendants of a person of bad character bearing that name."[321]

A German traveller of the same period included references to "Shila-na-Gigh" figures which he was told were displayed females placed on churches to prevent ill luck. More interesting in its implications is the additional comment that "a man afflicted by that might turn for help to a *certain class of females* (emphasis mine), who would display themselves, in order to avert evil and bring about good luck."[322]

Thomas Wright in 1865 says he was informed that, "Shelah-na-gig...means in Irish, Julian the Giddy, and is simply a term for an immodest woman."[323] Julia, not Julian, is one translation for *Sile* but it can also be a term of derision for an effeminate man or for a boy or girl with too marked a fondness for sex.[324]

Attempts to gain insight from the original Irish Gaelic proved no more helpful. A literal translation of one rendering, "sighle (or sile)-na-gcioch," comes out as Celia or Julia of the

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[321]Ordnace Survey Letters, Tipperary, II, 1840, 152 quoted in Guest, *JRSAI*, series 7, (1936): 127.

[322]Johann Georg Kohl, "Reisen in Irland," 1-2. Dresden (1843) 2, 207, as quoted in Andersen, 23. For an additional mention of this belief in the curative properties of female genital display, see chapter three.

[323]Wright, 133.

[324]Andersen, 15.

breasts. Most of the Sheelas, however, either have little in the way of breasts or none at all.[325] Another rendition of the Gaelic could be "Sile i n-a giob," meaning "Sheela on her hunkers."[326] Again, this description would apply to only a few of these figures. Andersen claims that as a popular term in the 19th century, Sheela-na-gig did in fact mean Sheela-of-the-paps, and simply referred to females and not these carved figures. Unfortunately, he does not provide a reference for this information.[327]

Of particular interest, is the designation of the Sheela-na-gig as a hag. The term first appears in this 1856 Irish Academy manuscript entry:

> ...these Old Fetish figures often found in Ireland on the fronts of churches as well as castles...are called "Hags of the Castles," and when placed above the keystone of the door arch were supposed to have a tutelary or protective power, so that the enemy passing by would be disarmed of evil intent against the building on seeing it.[328]

In spite of the general dissatisfaction with the term Sheela-na-gig, it has persisted as the name used to describe carvings of female figures in Ireland and the British Isles that include some form of genital display. Subsequent researchers are left to agree with their earlier colleagues that: "regrettable though it is that those who first used the title in question did not make enquiry into its origin, yet it would appear that they accepted a word, not of chance invention, but well known by the people and in common use."[329]

Immodest woman, of ill repute, a hag, uncouth in nature, identified with breasts, or

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[325]Andersen, 22.

[326]Ibid., 23.

[327]Ibid.

[328]Windele manuscipt quoted in Andersen, 14.

[329] Edith Guest, "Irish Sheela-na-gigs in 1935," *JRSAI.*, series 7, 6 (1936): 107.

their function, squatting, having a bad character or associated with paganism as "the Idol," this is the descriptive language inherited from 18th and 19th century antiquarians and the folk-lore they quoted. Their choice of words certainly incorporates the misogynist bias against women's sexuality and the imputation of female moral weakness. These same accusations implied that Sheela figures indicated women's inclination toward "pagan" heresy or Satanic seduction. The sculptures and the type of woman they represent are often spoken about interchangeably, making the sculptures the personification of female evil. The antiquarians were clearly both fascinated and repulsed by the Sheelas. Pages of antiquarian journals deal with these carvings, but the comments about them are repetitive and reflect the social and religious conventions of their male authors. All the reports from this early period are by men and it is clear that they provide us only with what post-modern terminology would call the "masculine-Sheela".[330]

We have very little information about the attitude of the Christian churches toward the Sheelas in this early period. A few notations mention individual Protestant clergymen as part of the anitiquarian circle, but until recently, there was thought to be no record of institutional concern about Sheela-na-gigs. Weir and Jerman made an important discovery that reveals the Catholic Church's attitude in 17th century Ireland. The provincial statutes for Tuam in 1631 "order parish priests to hide away, what are described in the veiled obscurity of Latin as *imagines obesae et aspectui ingratae.*"[331] These "obese representations having a disagreeable expression" very likely referred to Sheela-na-gigs.

Another diocesan regulation of 1676 ordered "Sheela-na-gigs" to be burned. This is an

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[330] I adopted this terminology from the work of Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985, (1977). who speaks of the "masculine-feminine" when referring to women as man sees her.

[331] P.J. Corish, *The Catholic Community in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Dublin: Helicon, 1981) quoted in Weir and Jerman, 15.

extremely important notation as it indicates that not all Sheelas were stone carvings. Wooden ones would have been more portable and may have been in common use by the population.[332] Weir and Jerman claim that other documents in this collection give "further evidence that many Sheelas were destroyed or buried."[333]

A final recording of a 17th century diocesan synod in Kilmore directs that *gieradors*, are to be excluded from the sacraments. No further details are provided except that they could be described as "living Sheela-na-gigs." No information is provided about why they merited this title. Weir and Jerman take this remark as support for the use of the term to describe women of loose morals or "simply old hags"[334] but fail to explain why the two categories are synonymous and why women who were "simply old hags" would be denied the sacraments. This belittling reference to hags indicates how knowledge about the Celtic tradition of the hag's role in choosing Irish kings has been lost, even among Irish scholars.

Aside from attempts to list Sheela figures, little serious scholarship emerges from the later nineteenth century. Articles began to appear about Sheelas in England but the next stage of active speculation and another attempt to make a comprehensive list of these sculptures had to wait for the decades following the first World War of the 1920s and 30s.

The Response from Women - the Feminine-Sheela

It is not until the early part of the 20th century that we finally begin to have women's published reactions to the Sheela-na-gigs. This period is distinguished by the scholarship of

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[332]See references to St. Gobnet in chapter 2.2.

[333]Weir and Jerman, 14-15.

[334]Ibid.

Dr. Edith Guest in Ireland and Dr. Margaret A. Murray in England.[335] Murray (along with D. Passmore) was the first to call attention to the Sheelas in English academic circles with the publication of the figure at Oaksey, Wiltshire, in 1923.[336] Guest and Murray travelled together to visit the ancient sites on Malta and the writings of both indicate they were aware of goddess imagery and ancient rites involving women. The extent of Murray's bequest of Irish antiquities to the Cambridge museum indicates that this interest extended to the Sheelas. Both wrote important articles in the mid nineteen-thirties that are still key references concerning the Sheelas.

Dr. Edith Guest made two invaluable contributions to the Sheela debate. In 1935, she updated and expanded the list of Irish Sheela-na-gigs for the *JRSAI.* Additionally she classified the figures on the basis of their postures and, most importantly, she settled the question about dates for these sculptures.

With the advent of the work of these two women, a new tone appears in the Sheela-na-gig discussion. If, as the post-modernists say, women have to work with "male" language and concepts, we nonetheless use it in a different way, particularly when we refuse to separate ourselves from the object under consideration, but allow ourselves to interact with it, as subject to subject. The absence of pejorative language in Murray and Guest's description of the Sheelas makes us immediately aware of their different approach. Neither woman labels the sculptures as evil or hideous or discusses their "behaviour" in moralistic terms. While discretion prevented Guest from describing specific details relating to the genital areas of the

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[335]Notice that both of these women were academically trained and therefore brought a new professionalism to the study of the Sheelas.

[336]M.A. Murray and D. Passmore, "The Sheela-na-gig at Oaksey," *Man* 23 (1923): 86 and figs. 1,2.

Sheelas, no such reticence marks the contributions of Margaret Murray who seems to have thoroughly engaged with the subject matter.

In 1934, Murray, advanced various woman-centred interpretations of the Sheelas in an extensive article on "Female Fertility Figures."[337] Her comments indicate her feminist consciousness for she notes that the serious study of female erotic imagery has been neglected as compared to corresponding investigations of the male priapic figure. She brought to the task of rectifying this neglect her considerable knowledge as an archaeologist, specializing in Egyptology. Under the broad classification of mother-goddesses, she distinguishes what she called, "the Personified Yoni or Baubo." In this type of imagery, "beauty of form or features is disregarded, [and] the secondary sexual characters, such as breasts, are minimized: the whole emphasis is laid on the pudenda."[338] Murray explains that the legend of Baubo, though known primarily from Greek accounts, is accepted by classical scholars to be of Egyptian origin. The legend says that when Isis was mourning for Osiris, Baubo assumed the attitude represented in the figures, that is she exposed her genitals (Fig. 4.70) and thereby made Isis laugh and stop her mourning. The Greek version says Iambe (Baubo) did the same for Demeter to cheer her in her loss of Persephone. Murray describes Baubo figures as seated on the ground, with legs spread to display the pudenda which are exaggerated or clearly indicated. The Baubo-Phryne variation has the figure squatting or with the knees bent "frog-like."[339] The position of the arms varies but some repeat the Sheela gesture of resting the hands on the thighs near the genitalia.

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[337]M.A. Murray, "Female Fertility Figures," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 64 (1934): 93-100 and plates VIII-XII.

[338]Murray, 94.

[339]Marija Gimbutas also refers to these frog-goddesses in her book, *The Language of the Goddess*, 252-256.

The breasts are of ordinary size or hardly indicated. The body is usually nude except for an occasional veiling of the upper part and the figure often displayed an elaborate headdress.[340] As many of these features are characteristic of the Sheela sculptures, it is easy to see why Murray postulated similarity in function from the similarity of form.

Murray found it significant that the Baubo figures are associated with the Ptolemaic and Roman periods in Egypt when the deities of the common people became important. She postulates that the Greek name Baubo could be derived from that of the Goddess Bebt, best known in the VIIth dynasty. The few records which we have concerning the discovery of these small statues place them in female graves or in women's quarters.[341] Murray notes that, like the Sheelas, the Baubo figures appear suddenly and in number, but seemingly without any precursors. She speculates that the more ancient statues of goddesses or women which emphasize the pubic triangle are such predecessors. For those who did not see any similarity between the two images, she explains that the "inactivity" in these earlier figures as compared to the Baubo statues simply reflects the conventions of primitive art which generally do not show action of any kind.[342] For Murray, the Sheela-na-gig was a modern version of the Baubo. She claims that Baubo "belonged to that group of goddesses, such as Bona Dea, from whose rites men were rigorously excluded." She was for women only, "as essentially divine as Isis or Ishtar."[343]

In her conclusions, Murray notes the importance of what women have to say or how

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[340]Murray, 95.

[341]Ibid., 95-97.

[342]Murray, 96. Her argument is suspect as Freedberg notes abstract shapes in cult objects postdate more anthropomorphic imagery, 66.

[343]Ibid., 97-99.

they respond to the Sheelas as opposed to what men say about how a woman should feel or be. When she comments that, as the rites for the Baubo goddesses were exclusive to women, anything men recorded about them was only hearsay, she anticipates the contemporary feminist critique of "patriarchal" scholarship. Convinced that the appeal of the Baubo and the Sheela-na-gig was to the sexual side of women's nature, she reminds us that in the legend of Baubo the attitude is definitely connected with pleasure and laughter. Murray daringly suggests that these figures might even indicate some form of women pleasuring each other or, as the Whittlesford Sheela (which has a half animal, half human male figure with an erect phallus crouched by her side) suggests, "the woman is shown as ready for her mate, affirming that the sexual act is pleasurable to her."[344]

Murray was not afraid to deal with the specifically sexual nature of the Sheelas. She and a colleague conducted "a few experiments" as she calls them, by showing photographs and statues to other women. They reported that the images had a stimulating effect on women, whereas "on many of these subjects the sight of the priapic figures produced no effect except of disgust or curiosity."[345] Murray also noted the tradition that brides were made to look at the Sheela figure on the tower of St. Michael's Church at Oxford on the way in to be wed. She takes this as another confirmation that the figures were intended to stimulate the sexual desires of women and that the "process by which the stimulation is effected appears to be that the woman identifies herself with the figure; she sees herself as in a mirror."[346].

Margaret Murray was a controversial academic figure. Her reputation as an

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[344]Murray 99.

[345]Ibid.

[346]Ibid.

Egyptologist during the early part of this century was unquestioned but her theories about the Sheela-na-gig were considered too speculative and insufficiently supported.[347] Yet each of the researchers who subsequently has worked on the mystery of the Sheela-na-gigs has felt it necessary to mention Murray's theory about the Sheela in relation to the Baubo or Personified-Yoni figures. (Fig. 4.70) Murray concludes her 1934 article with yet another strong woman-centred claim:

> Whatever may be the right explanation it appears certain that the figures made, and still make, an appeal to women's nature. This then is the reason for their original use and long survival; and their importance in the life of women is seen in the fact that the Christian Church was forced to allow them to be placed in conspicuous position in and on the sacred edifices.[348]

One of the most important considerations in correctly assessing the Sheela-na-gigs is to date them accurately. Guest's work in her 1935 article is still considered definitive for the dates of most Sheela figures.[349] She visited each of the sites mentioned in the antiquarian journals to ascertain the condition and correctness of the sculpture's classification as a Sheela-na-gig. She also saw to it that they were photographed *in situ.*

Because of the difficulty of dating stone, dates can only be ascribed to those Sheelas whose placement or ornamentation make it reasonable to presume them to be contemporary to the buildings in or on which they are found. Since many Sheelas have turned up, literally, in fields, or were retrieved from having been buried under churches, or have been incorporated

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[347]This was also the case with Murray's study of witchcraft, *The God of the Witches*, yet this book continues to be used as a necessary reference for this study.

[348]Murray, 99.

[349]With one or two exceptions, the dates Guest quotes for each of the figures and her assessment as to which carvings are truly Sheelas has stood the test of time.

into 19th century structures, only a few can be accurately dated. The earliest date is ascribed to the Sheela that appears amongst the carvings on White Island off the Irish west coast. Its designation as a Sheela-na-gig has been debated because the treatment of the genital area is less specific than is usual for these figures. (Fig. 4.71) However it is seen as a related figure or a precursor to the Sheela carvings. It is also one of the few found in conjunction with a series of other carvings of similar style. These date from the 7th or 8th century. Now found upright, the Sheela was first placed horizontally amid the stonework on an entranceway of a later construction. All of the White Island figures are presumed to be from the ruins of an old church found nearby. It is significant that the Sheela figure was used apotropaically in this secondary placement as part of entranceway, in other words, in a protective fashion.[350]

Two very different examples *in situ* are rather small carvings accepted as part of the 11th or 12th century buildings where they are found: a horizontal Sheela atop the beading on the impost of the monastery chapel at Liathmor, Co. Tipperary, and a standing Sheela, flanked by two animal figures, well integrated in the scroll and serpent ornamentation on a lintel at Rath, Co. Clare. Guest lists only four others on the quoins of churches or "Norman" castles as *in situ*: those at Ballyfinboy Castle, Co. Tipperary, 12th century; on the Tullavin Castle, Co. Limerick, 15th century; on the Kiltinane Church, Co. Tipperrary, 14th century; and on Malahide Abbey, Co. Dublin, 15th or 16th century.[351]

Guest and Murray both agree that the late[352] dates for the Sheelas did not disallow "the

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[350]We may conclude that the image still had the power to disturb as the Sheela was deliberately attacked by one of the workmen during the renovations in the 1940s. Andersen, 28.

[351]All of the information concerning dates for the Sheelas in the preceding paragraphs has been taken from Guest, "Some Notes on the Dating of Sheela-na-gigs," *JRSAI*, 67 176-180.

[352]The use of the term "late" is in contrast to the earlier speculations that the Sheela-na-gigs were of much more ancient origin.

early origin and practice of the relative cult [or] the probability of earlier symbols."[353] She gives several examples of what she calls pagan practices associated with certain Sheelas: that they were called "Evil Eye Stones," or that they were venerated as seen by the rubbings on certain figures such as at the Castlemagner well and on the Sheela found above a window of the medieval church at Kilsarkin (Fig. 4.72 & 4.73) or that certain Sheelas were still referred to as witches in the later half of the 19th century.[354]

A second key article by Guest explores the intermingling of pre-Christian with Christian practices or the confusion of Sheelas and saints. In her 1935 article, she noted that Sheelas have been found in association with female monasteries. She names Athlone, Killinaboy, Clonmacnoise in Ireland, Romsey in England, Iona in Scotland and Poitiers in France. In *Folklore*, in 1937,[355] she comments at length on the cult of St. Gobonet around the ruins of her Abbey, at Ballyvourney. The figure of the "saint" which appears above a window in the south wall of the church has long been classified as a Sheela-na-gig. Guest describes the practice of making "Rounds" on abbey grounds, where pilgrims stopped at various locations to perform some devotional or ritual action. Again her discretion leaves us with unanswered questions about the details of these devotions. For example, the pilgrims reach up to touch the statue of "St. Gobonet" with a handkerchief which, "is made *with appropriate gestures* to touch the votary"[356] (emphasis mine). Deep within a hole in the wall, the pilgrims reach in to touch a round object known as St. Gobonet's bowl three times. "Once this object was loose

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[353]Guest, "Some Notes on the Dating of Sheela-na-gigs," 180.

[354]Ibid., 122.

[355]Guest, "*Ballyvourney and its Sheela-na-gig*" *in Folklore* 48 (1937), 374-384.

[356]Ibid., 375.

and handed about for its virtues, but the priests thought it led to *undesirable practices*, [emphasis mine], and imprisoned it where it now is."[357] There is also a well named for the saint whose water, and then the well itself, were considered sacred. Numerous other spots or objects on this site show signs of veneration or rituals performed as part of doing the "Rounds of St. Gobonet".

The legend of Gobonet's powers and cures are complex and obviously intermingled with early Irish legends about women's powers, such as their cultivation and use of herbs to work cures, and their mastery over animals, such as the ability to rescue cattle. The persistence of legends concerning this woman from the 7th century is remarkable in itself. Anne Ross claims that Gobnait (an alternative spelling) is a member of one of the many trios of Holy Women found in Ireland. They would seem to be survivals into the Christian era of local goddesses.[358] This kind of blending of traditions might explain how Gobnait and the Sheela crossed paths.

It is clear from the writings of both Guest and Murray that their response to the Sheelas was of an entirely different nature from that of earlier researchers. They are clearly not offended by the Sheela-na-gigs. Murray in particular acknowledges the comic aspect of this female display. In addition she acknowledges the idea of sexual pleasure as separate from the procreative function usually associated with genital imagery, even though she entitles her article, "Female Fertility Figures." Both of these women examine images from the past to help them understand their own response to the Sheelas. Neither of them imagined that these figures had no implications for women. They were convinced that the mystery about their

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[357] Guest, "Ballyvourney and its Sheela-na-gig," 375-76.

[358] Anne Ross, "The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts," *The Witch Figure: Folklore Essays*, ed. Venetia Newall (London, 1973).

function and origins was connected in some way to goddess images of women, familiar to them through their own travel and studies. Their views were noted but superseded by the opinions of the next wave of scholarly research.

Current Interpretations

A Romanesque origin for the Sheela-na-gig sculptures is favoured by Jorgen Andersen, Anthony Wier, James Jerman, Helen Hickey and, to a lesser degree, by Etienne Rynne, each of whom indicates at least some awareness of scholarship that affirms the connection of the Sheela to goddess imagery, particularly in the pre-Celtic or Celtic tradition; they reject however, any such speculations in favour of the Romanesque and continental origins of the Sheela imagery.

A great part of Jorgen Andersen's field work for his book, *The Witch on the Wall*, repeated the explorations of Edith Guest and expanded her catalogue of Sheelas, including more figures from the Continent, notably France, and added photographic illustrations of many Sheelas that had not been previously documented in this fashion. His most important contribution is the use of material from a number of different disciplines that might provide background information for the interpretation of Sheela-na-gigs. Yet Andersen ultimately rejects strong evidence from his multi-disciplinary approach in favour of the established opinions of Western European art history. He ultimately agrees that the Sheelas are a type of exhibitionist figure from the medieval period, that these figures were used by the Church to warn against sins of the flesh, i.e. *luxuria*, and that in Ireland, this genre simply took on its own peculiar vernacular.

As mentioned earlier, it is Andersen's constant use of pejorative terms that signals his

bias about his subject matter. The title of his book, *The Witch on the Wall*, indicates his belief that the Sheelas are figures of evil. At times he sounds as if the Sheela carving is personally offensive to him. Of the Sheela at Killanaboy he says:

> The bald head and the drastic facial expression bear witness to the deliberately distorting intention of the carver, who has gone out of his way to achieve an effect of repellence.[359] (Fig.4.74)

> The obscene gesture, the open vulva, the lean ribs, the horrible mouth, the lines across the forehead .... even though the Cavan figure is medieval there is still an air of paganism about it....[360] (Fig. 4.75)

Concerning the Sheela on the outside wall and overlooking the graveyard of the Church at Oaksey, Wilts, (England)Andersen asks :

> Why exhibit a woman like that? Was she the foolish woman relying on her earthy instincts, or did people...believe in the evil-averting influence of the vulva.[361] (Fig. 4.76)

Note that many of the features which Andersen finds repellent are linked to masculine descriptions of "unattractive" women: unsmiling, bald, old, wrinkled, and large-fisted. Why the crouching posture is exceedingly horrific is unclear unless it implies an aggressive pounce.

Another remark, which comments on how the Sheela-na-gig is the same yet different from Norman exhibitionist sculptures, indicates a bias against both women and pagans. His remarks may well be applied to the Clonmel Sheela in the collection of the National Museum, Dublin. (Fig. 4.77)

> an Irish colouring of the Norman motif may account for many of its ugly

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[359]Andersen, 98.

[360]Ibid., 77 & 122.

[361]Ibid., 121.

> features; a repellent image drawing upon features associated with heathendom, a dark image made powerful by ominous associations with pagan imagery, never lost sight of in Ireland.[362]

Although Andersen makes passing references to more symbolic interpretations of the genital display, Andersen's scornful descriptions make it difficult to believe that he could ever accept the vulva or vagina as a symbol of creativity, life, death, and rebirth. Yet he does present evidence for other than Christian origins for certain of the Sheelas, for example the figure in the village of Fethard known as "The Witch on the Wall." (Fig. 4.78) The wall has been clearly dated as medieval but the Sheela sculpture, of a different type of stone, could have come from elsewhere and been inserted into the wall, as may be the case for many Sheela carvings. There are chevron tattoo markings on the face at Fethard reminiscent of the same patterns on the Boa Island sculptures identified as 4th century.[363] (Figs. 4.79). Andersen appears divided about pagan features in the Fethard figure. On the one hand he says: "One cannot help feeling that veiled references to the Irish past may have strengthened certain Sheelas in their purpose, whatever it may have been...." Yet in the next sentence, he says: "On second thoughts of course, there is no real relationship between pagan Irish carving of the Boa Island type and the usual seated Sheelas."[364]

Andersen constantly entices us with a display of "other" evidence which he then cancels out. Even at the end of his powerful chapter entitled, "Pagan or Medieval,"[365]

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[362]Andersen, 76. No writings about this Sheela mention the fact that the genital area is coloured with what seems to be red ochre, traditionally used to honour sacred sites.

[363]Andersen, 85.

[364]Ibid., 86.

[365]Ibid.,84-95.

Andersen, while opting for the medieval origin of Sheelas, explains away the use of older devices such as the tattooing as a "recrudescence, a pagan throw-back," in the service of creating "as powerfully ugly and menacing a figure as possible."[366]

Andersen's research is impressive, yet in reviewing his sources, I found references or clues which he either ignored or considered of little importance. The primary problem of his work is its gender blindness which in turn leads to a lack of clarity about his criteria for accepting or rejecting speculations or theories about the origins of the Sheela imagery.

In an article published in 1987, Etienne Rynne acknowledged the admixture of a "Pagan Celtic background for Sheela-na-gigs."[367] While acknowledging the common belief that the Sheelas were of Romanesque or Norman origin, he says such an origin need not preclude more ancient prototypes. He proposes two Celtic images of Germanic origin. A Sheela-like figure was found on a block of limestone in a Roman fort at Hofheim "in circumstances which indicated a date between AD 83 and 121." The archaeologist Schoppa suggested that it was a mother-goddess figure and Celtic. The physiognomies are almost identical with the Sheela at Clenagh, Co. Clare, although there are no details visible in the genital area.[368]

The second image is of a female figure "on the terminals of a fine gold armlet from the fifth or fourth century, BC" which seems to be holding or touching an opening which has been interpreted as her vulva. The figure has an elaborate headdress incorporating an owl-like bird's

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[366]Andersen, 95. In opting for the medieval, Andersen admits he was influenced by his friend Anthony Weir, an Irish art historian acknowledged as an expert on Sheela-na-gigs.

[367]Etienne Rynne, *Figures from the Past: Studies on Figurative Art in Christian Ireland in Honour of Helen M. Roe*, (Dublin: 1987), 189-202.

[368] Rynne, 192.

head and beak. Rynne cites Megaw's work on European Iron Age Art which proposes that the headdress indicates a Celtic Artemis or mistress of the wild animals but that the figure probably incorporates Artemis' other roles as a goddess of childbirth and fertility.[369] He postulates that this "fusion of different concepts" in the one artifact could be operative in the Sheela figures as well.

Rynne's main thesis is that Sheela-na-gigs incorporate iconographic references to the Celtic god Cernunnos, the horned one, or Lord of the animals. One of the earliest representations of the Cernunnos is found in Denmark, on the Gunderstrup Cauldron, from the second century BCE. (Fig. 4.80) The Cernunnos holds a snake in his left hand which Rynne describes as a Freudian phallic symbol although he cautions in a footnote against the appeal to symbolism to solve problems of interpretation. More importantly, he fails to note that many Celtic scholars associate the snake or serpent with the healing powers of this hunter god.[370] Nor does he comment that this is a ram-headed snake, a peculiarly Celtic iconographic hybrid which "combines the imagery of the ram (a fertility motif) with the chthonic emblem of the snake."[371] A second panel from the Gunderstrup Cauldron shows the ram-headed serpent frolicking among other animals, an even clearer indication of symbolism that goes beyond a simple phallic reference. Rynne seems unaware of the frequency with which serpents accompany Celtic goddess iconography, particularly in north-east Gaul.

Rynne says the fusion of Romanesque erotic female imagery with the pagan Celtic Lord of the animals could explain why there is often no indication of breasts on the Sheelas.

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[369]Rynne, 192.

[370]Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religous Art* (London: Routledge ,1989). 23.

[371]Ibid., 25.

Although he concludes his article with references to the persistence of pagan gods in the Christian era, he makes no attempt to uncover goddess references in Sheela iconography but affirms that the true Sheela-na-gig element was only introduced into Ireland with Romanesque art forms that accompanied the advent of the monastic orders, and that the Curnunnos god is the link with a more ancient tradition.[372]

While contributing two possible precursors to the Sheela imagery, Rynne's work reveals a type of patriarchal bias which too easily finds a masculine interpretation for a female figure. An alternative interpretation of female horned figures is easily found in the work of the Celtic scholar, Miranda Green. There are two sculptures in France clearly identified as, "bronze antlered goddesses [who] sit cross legged with cornucopiae." In these examples, the goddess "[transcends] human form to adopt the powerful fertility image of the stag or bull."[373]

The work of Anthony Weir and Jim Jerman explores many varieties of medieval sexual carvings, of which they see the Sheelas as a type. In their view, these represent a migratory form of carving dealing with the sin of *luxuria.* In some ways their arguments are quite convincing as they produce numerous examples of both male and female figures displaying their genitals on churches and abbeys in France and Spain. This type of carving was particularly frequent along the pilgrimage routes to Santiago di Compostela travelled by many English and Irish pilgrims.

Weir's argument is that wealthy travellers or craftsmen imported designs and ideas they

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[372]Rynne,. 198.

[373]Green, 27. Examples may also be found in ancient Egypt of female figures being depicted as male, e.g. Queen Hatshepsut shown as a male Pharaoh, performing certain kingly functions.

had seen to be copied on their own local churches. For example, the Church of St. Mary and St. David at Kilpeck, mentioned earlier and perhaps the most famous Sheela site in Britain, is stylistically linked to a church at Shobden which incorporates designs noted by Oliver de Merlimont, steward to the Lord of Wigmore, on his Compostela pilgrimage around 1138.[374] The Sheela at St. Mary and St. David is clearly in situ; thus it establishes a 12th century date for this carving. Almost all the carvings on this church are intact and reflect both Celtic and Norman influence. Because of the documents concerning Oliver de Merlimont, it would be difficult to deny the continental influence. In one very important way, however, the Kilpeck church differs from most Sheela sites in that the Sheela-na-gig exists as one among many figures on the corbels of the church. Almost all other Sheelas appear as isolated single carvings, some clearly not original to the building on which they are found.

Weir and Jerman are so wed to the notion that the dominance of the Christian church in the Middle Ages precluded any alternative religious observance that they discount the possibility that in Ireland, the images might have been influenced by the heteroglossia of that period. No accommodation is made for the recognition that earlier ideas and the beliefs of counter cultures persist amid the dominant ideologies of our era or even in the face of scientific evidence. It is highly probable, given the Celtic tradition of double purpose and double meaning, that the Sheela image incorporated several belief systems simultaneously. Even if we accept another of Weir and Jerman's claims, that the appearance of Sheela sculptures is coincidental with the Norman influence brought to Ireland by the Benedictine Cluniac monasteries of the 10th to 14th centuries, the local population would still have been quite free to interpret the figures according to local legends with which they were more

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[374]Weir and Jerman, 138.

familiar.

Weir and Jerman admit that whatever the first intention behind the imagery, some Sheelas were clearly used apotropaically. In discussing this talismanic or protective role, they tie it exclusively to phallic imagery. They provide English examples of Roman influence with phalloi carved in three sites along Hadrian's Wall. At least two of these sites include the vulva shown on the obverse side of the stone. If the phallus was apotropaic, why not the vulva? The classical roots and therefore a kind of precedent for use of the phallus in this manner is commented on as follows:

> No doubt the use of the phalli as protective devices stems from the life-giving function of the phallus, from which follows the idea that phalli could be used symbolically to combat the forces of death and destruction... The important thing to note, however, is that the female emblem, the vulva, is very rare indeed in this role, perhaps because it plays a receptive, passive part in comparison with the male organ.[375]

Weir and Jerman make little attempt to explain why Sheela-na-gigs are in almost all cases the lone sculpture to be found on churches or Norman castles. Their only observation is that they were reinstated after a period of suppression. They do not suggest why only this particular type of Romanesque exhibitionist iconography from the many different continental variations travelled to Ireland. Nor do they comment on why there are few male exhibitionists. To date, only a few phallic images in Ireland have been documented as compared to at least 101 Sheela-na-gigs.

After presenting their evidence concerning exhibitionist figures, Weir and Jerman, almost as an afterthought, mention that the majority of exhibitionist figures tend to be on small

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[375] Weir and Jerman, 146.

rural churches.[376] I found that remark intriguing because as previously noted in 4.2.1, other Romanesque studies acknowledge that alternative religious or folkloric practices were more likely to influence church imagery in remote communities.

In the pre-Celtic and Celtic Tradition

We come now to the examination of female figures in Irish mythology. I use the term "Irish mythology" to distinguish the admixture of Indo-European characteristics of the Celts with the Neolithic and perhaps Semitic and North African influences on the culture of pre-Celtic Ireland. The prevailing female imagery from both legacies is in the form of the "Triple Goddess." In the Celtic triad form found in Britain and the Continent, all three goddesses were usually mother figures, "the triple *matres*, known from both the Gallo-Roman and Romano-British world."[377] In Ireland the triple goddess often appears in the more ancient division of maiden, mother and crone. The Triple Spiral symbols on the famous Neolithic monument at Newgrange have been interpreted as "the cycle of birth, life, and death: the Maiden, Mother and Crone; the never-ending cycle of infinitude."[378] A number of scholars, women in particular, see in the legends of various triads of goddesses, queens and/or warrior women, precursor images for the power and energy manifest in the Sheela-na-gig display.

Marie Condren, in the introduction to her book, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women,*

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[376]Weir and Jerman, 137.

[377]Anne Ross, *The Pagan Celts* (London: Batsford , 1986), 128. See also Green.

[378]Marie Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland.* San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989, 25. Condren gives numerous references in her footnotes for this interpretation.

Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland,[379] sums up the difficulties working with images of women in Irish history or mythology. There is no agreement among Irish scholars about the exact nature of pre-Christian Irish beliefs. In addition, it is difficult completely to disentangle Celtic from pre-Celtic history. Condren refers to pre-Christian historical texts (based on oral traditions) as "charter documents...myths, sagas, genealogies, law codes and pseudo-historical accounts of the origins of the Irish or Celtic race."[380] By the time these charter documents were written down, they had already been subject to what she refers to as the "patriarchal reversal." Woman poets, well known in ancient Ireland, having virtually disappeared, the female perspective on the sagas was lost. The texts underwent further modification to conform to the emerging Christian morality. The Franciscan monks known as the Four Masters and other scribes "...simply omitted from their vast collection events that reflected badly on their predecessors."[381] Yet neither patriarchal nor anti-pagan value systems were completely able to eliminate what Condren refers to as a "subtext" of women. Decoding this subtext is crucial for a feminist revision of the charter documents. Condren and others have been reexamining the significance of the various roles played by female figures in these documents.

Ancient Ireland was both matrilineal and patrilineal. The primacy of the mother may be inferred from the tribal name for one of the earliest pre-Celtic peoples, the "*Tuathe De Danaan*," children of the Goddess Danu. Every aspect of the land reflected the goddess in some way. Rivers were referred to as the "womb openings of the Great Mother, the symbol of

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[379]Condren, 25.

[380]Condren argues for the importance of these texts for a complete understanding of Western civilization, xix.

[381]Ibid., xx.

life....”[382] Many of names of Ireland’s important rivers are derived from goddesses: Boyne from Boand, Liffey from Life, Shannon from Sinnann, Brigit from the goddess Brigit. The very name of Ireland or Eire is derived from Eriu, the maiden of the triple goddesses of maid, mother and crone. Legend has it that Eriu met the Celtic invaders and when she saw they could not be stopped, she said they might stay, prosper, and be fruitful if they would respect the resident (triple) goddesses by taking her name for the land.[383]

The noted Celtic scholar, Dr. Anne Ross, is a strong advocate of the belief that imagery of the Sheela-na-gigs is consistent with Irish Celtic traditions. In an extensive article entitled “The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts,” she reminds us of those classical writers who described Celtic women as powerful warriors who also excelled at bearing and rearing children. Ross sees their dual achievement as a reflection of the Celtic war goddesses who served as role models for their earthly sisters.[384] Many tales are told about the ability of these goddesses to shape shift from “ugly old hags” into fabulous beauties in their interaction with mortals. Frequently the acceptance of a sexual advance from the hag was a test of character for the man who would be king. He who embraced the repellent hag without flinching was rewarded not only with a beautiful bed partner, but with the kingship which could only be acquired through mating with the goddess.[385]

Ross draws our attention to another passage that speaks of a Sheela-like figure and the “Cailleach” or hag form in this quotation from the tale of “The Destruction of Da Derga’s

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[382]Condren, 26.

[383]Ibid., 26-27.

[384]Ross, 141.

[385]Ross, 140 and 146. Chaucer’s Wife of Bath tells such a tale, drawn from Irish sources.

Hostel":

> "... and a woman, big mouthed, huge, ugly, hideous, was behind him. Though her snout were flung on a branch, the branch would support it. Her pudenda reached down to her knees.[386]

The hag can appear as benevolent or malevolent, echoing the basic dualism of Celtic thought. "Many of their [Celtic] artistic forms are meant to be seen in two different ways; and also to possess a duality of significance - naturalistic and symbolic."[252] It is clear from Ross's text that the Celtic duality does not mean either/or but that all is doubled; both aspects exist in whatever the manifestation. The ugly hag *is* the beautiful young woman and vice versa. Medb is the goddess/queen/warrior most frequently mentioned as the one who "shape shifts" from hag to the beautiful lover who can confer sovereignty over the land.

Miriam Robins Dexter says the great Queen Medb (or Maeve), who figures prominently in the Ulster cycle, functions as "a transfunctional goddess-turned-heroine."[253] Like the goddess Macha, Medb is a multiple character appearing under many different names, but she retains the same personality in her different personifications. As Medb of Connaught she was the wife of King Ailill, but this did not prevent her from taking many lovers. She insisted that her husband not be jealous, "for I was never before without a man [waiting] close by as the shadow of another."[254] Medb's sexual appetite could only be satisfied by the legendary virility of Fergus, son of Great Horse. It is said he needed seven women to satisfy

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[386]Tom Peete Cross and Clarke Harris Slover, eds., *Ancient Irish Tales* (1936) (Dublin 1969), 18 quoted in Ross, "The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts," 147.

[252]Ross, 146.

[253]Miriam Robbins Dexter, *Whence the Goddesses: A Source Book*, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990), 91.

[254]This quotation is from the *Tain Bo Cuailgne* quoted in Dexter, 92.

him "unless he was sleeping with the Goddess, Medb."[255] Though married, Medb remained autonomous. This ability of a female to retain her power rather than being subservient to her husband is a good example of the persistence of pre-Indo-European characteristics in a character heavily entangled in patriarchal Indo-European Celtic traditions.[256]

Ross shares the opinion of Margaret Murray about the Sheela images incorporating in their iconography the strongly sexual nature of the "Irish" goddesses. Though both women use the term "fertility figure," neither limits her definition of fertility purely to reproduction. They both affirm the broader sexual energy which they see embodied in the Sheelas. Commenting on the different renderings of the images, Ross believes that the more primitive Sheelas

> do in fact portray the territorial or war-goddesses in her hag-like aspect, with all the strongly sexual characteristics which accompany this guise in the tales; and that they are not "pornographic" or "erotic" monuments but have both a fertility and an evil-averting significance.[257]

In attempting to explain the placement of Sheelas on Christian churches, Anne Ross follows Edith Guest who reported that certain sheelas were used to avert the "Evil Eye." Ross takes this interpretation further when she refers to the "well known and widespread belief that to expose the genitalia of either sex acts is a powerful apotropaic gesture."[258] She believes that in allowing the presence of these figures, the Church was simply appropriating whatever evil-

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[255]Ross, 142 and Condren, 39.

[256]Dexter, 88 and 92.

[257]Ross, 148. The Sheela found at Seir Kieran (Fig. 4.81) is presumed to be one of the oldest although the holes drilled on her abdomen around the genital region are thought to be not original. Two holes on the top of her head are older and Anne Ross suggests that they might have been used to apply antlers. Seir Kieran is not only the site of an early monastery but is thought to have been a pagan sanctuary as well according to Andersen, 88-89.

[258]Ross,163.

averting powers the sheelas possessed. Especially if the figure had been found on the site of a church built over an earlier pagan shrine, its powers could be " purified as it were by Christian rites; and any latent paganism in the area would find a double satisfaction both in the continuing homage offered to this once powerful deity and in her inclusion in the wider Christian pantheon as a still-vital protectress of the ground over which she was once sovereign.[259]

Dexter provides evidence of the potency of the female sexual display in Irish sagas. She refers us to a scene in the *Tain Bo Cuailnge*, where the boy-hero Cu Chulainn is about to attack his own countrymen. King Conchobor stops him by sending:

> ...a company of women out toward the boy,
> that is, three times fifty women,
> that is, ten women and seven times twenty,
> utterly naked,
> all at the same time,
> and the leader of the women before them,
> Scandlach,
> to expose their nakedness and their boldness to him.[260]

The combined energies of the naked females was greater than even the legendary powers of Cu Chulainn.

· As we have seen, Sheela-na-gigs have been likened to the hag manifestation of the Irish goddesses. Older women are supposedly devoid of sexual energy for having lost the ability to produce children, she is of no further use to the male. The hag was either revered as the nurturing grandmother, respected for her wisdom, or feared as the old crone, the witch who

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[259]Ross, 149.

[260]The *Tain Bo Cuailgne* as quoted in Dexter, 160.

actually dissipates or steals men's energy.[261] As Dexter reminds us, the Greek goddess Demeter though old, retains sexual power and both "gods and men treated her with respect and awe."[262]

The placement of many Sheela-na-gigs overlooking burial sites raises the question of whether there is any significance to this location. Ross comments that even if this placement is a "later" one, it reflects the ancient practice of placing Irish seasonal goddesses to preside over cemeteries.[263] Brian Branston in his book, *The Lost Gods of England*, likens the Sheela-na-gigs to the earth mother goddess, Freya, who, "rides to battle and takes one half of the corpses and Odinn the other half."[264] Branston is quite convinced that the sheela figures are the vestiges of the veneration of the Earth Mother-Nerthus-Freya of Anglo-Saxon and Norse ancestry, but with much more ancient roots in the Stone Age and perhaps in the Mediterranean.[265] Freya like many of her Indo-European ancestors images, is both the creator and the destroyer.

The link between fertility and its power over death is well explored by Vivian Mercier in his book *The Irish Comedic Tradition*.[266] He speaks of the "Games of Lamentation" practiced at some Irish wakes as recently as the beginning of this century. He attests to their ancient origins by saying that they resemble ancient funeral games described by Homer.

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[261]Ross, 149.

[262]Ibid., 77.

[263]Ibid., 149.

[264]Brian Branston, *The Lost Gods of England* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984)..100.

[265]Ibid., 152-156.

[266]Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comedic Tradition* (Oxford, 1962),56.

Complete details about the Irish games are glossed over in surviving records, but there are enough suggestions in the stories about "The Bull and the Cow" or "Making the Ship", to indicate that the funeral games were sexual in nature, with both men and women, sometimes naked, making "obscene gestures" more related to procreation than death.[267] Mercier notes that James Joyce made use of this idea in Finnegan's Wake, and that Joyce "felt that the word 'wake' implied rebirth as well as death."[268]

Thus we can see the complexity of forms combined in the sheela. Most of the Celtic scholars here mentioned would agree that these sculptures and the traditions surrounding them evoke legends about the powers of many different Celtic goddesses and that their vaginal display combines the sexual energies of both virile maid and still potent hag.

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[267]Mercier, 50-51, quotes at length from the what he describes as the reticent accounts of John G.A. Prim, "Olden Popular Pastimes in Kilkenny" in JRSAI, 1853.

[268]Ibid., 52.

Chapter 5

5.1 Vaginal Imagery in Contemporary Art and Discourse

No visual artist has been more successful in using vaginal imagery than Judy Chicago. She is quite articulate and specific about her intentions. In her book *Through the Flower*, she used the word "cunt" deliberately in describing her work, as it embodies society's contempt for women. Chicago, like many other women artists, had a political agenda: "In turning the word around, I hope to turn society's definition of the female around and make it positive."[269]

"Power to the pubis" was art critic Barbara Rose's phrase for the attempts of many artists to arouse women, not sexually but politically or socially.[270] Chicago's "Dinner Party" exhibit was a spectacular effort to take that which was despised and by "asserting it [the vagina] as the hallmark of her [woman's] iconography, establish a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity."[271]

The danger has always been that any display of vaginal imagery is likely to be co-opted by male culture. While the artist's intention is to attack the idea that women's genitals are hideous, ugly, or threatening and something to be ashamed of, the male gaze may just continue

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[269]Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1982), 55.

[270]Ibid.

[271]Ardener, "A Note on Gender Iconography," 144.

to view the imagery as pornographic.[272] Genital images may have to be deconstructed before they can be reconstructed, and even then, they may feed into the system they are trying to challenge.

Feminist theologians have tackled a number of different tasks in reclaiming women's bodies, their experiences, their "selves." They have deconstructed the Christian legacy of woman as evil (e.g. John Philips, Elaine Pagels); they have looked at syncretism in Christian traditions and practices which incorporate goddess rituals or assimilate goddess attributes to the Virgin Mary and other saints (e.g. Pamela Berger, Marie Condren); they have reclaimed the words and deeds of women who had been silenced or diminished, both in religious and secular life. Christian theologians such as Rosemary Ruether and Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza have worked to validate the lives of those women who found inspiration, reward, and fulfilling commitment within the confines of patriarchal religion in spite of the restrictions placed on them. In fact, Ruether claims that women's experience of oppression provides them (along with other oppressed peoples) with criteria for judging the authenticity of Biblical and other Christian teachings. Thus texts that support or condone injustice or repression are judged to be corruptions of the primal Christian message of love of neighbour. This assertion, however, ignores the fundamental question of how women's experience can be used as an hermeneutic tool if women's subjectivity is experienced totally inside the masculine order.

Mary Daly was the first to proclaim that Christianity was hopelessly patriarchal and that women must rediscover or create a religion in their own image to be free of oppression. Though Daly's later assertions about women's superiority alienated many of the theologians who accepted her first premise to go "beyond God the father," her claim in *Gyn/ecology* about

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[272]This has been the reaction of some men to my photographic slides of the Sheela-na-gigs.

the "necrophilia" of male culture is used by Grace Jantzen in, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion.* Using the work of continental philosophers, Jantzen proposes that women must use their experience not to define criteria for a universal truth (as males have claimed for their experience), but to forge a female imaginary, a female semiotic. In this way we counteract the male symbolic that defines women as "other" and incapable of even knowing our own experience. As Judith Butler says, "If the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiple contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing."[273]

Jantzen relies heavily on the responses of Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva to the post-modernist theories of Jacques Lacan and on the deconstructionist views of Jacques Derrida. Jantzen is interested in modern French philosophy's acceptance of "carnal knowing," to borrow a phrase from Margaret Miles. Women's diverse experience of *jouissance* overcomes essentialist claims and offers creative possibilities of resistance to or subversion of the male symbolic. The task remains a difficult one for as Paula M. Cooey says, "...the body as a sign, when representing or figuring 'woman' as symbol or concept, tends to work against the attribution of subjectivity to women as a class, as well as to particular individual women, by denying agency as characteristic to human females." [274] The difficulty is particularly evident in working with body imagery that seems only to confirm the view of woman as sexed object.

Are women's genitalia then the site of her entrapment, limiting her to biological

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[273]Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 32.

[274]Paula M. Cooey, *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 110.

functions, or, as claimed by the post-modern feminist philosophers, are they also the site of resistance? If the male forging of the symbolic rests on a separation from the mother, why cannot a women's symbolic be based on her feelings of connectedness in the experience of *jouissance* and of giving birth? And if the phallus is claimed as the dominant if not the universal signifier of desire, why cannot the vagina be reclaimed as a signifier of desire?

5.2 CONCLUSIONS

It was a chance encounter with Jorgen Andersen's book that first interested me in the study of vaginal iconography. During subsequent trips to Ireland, England, France and Spain, my interest in Romanesque art grew and became the focus of my inquiry. My attention in Religious Studies has always been drawn to questions concerning women and religion . In studying the Sheela-na-gigs, I uncovered what I perceived as a bias in scholarship against female imagery, especially if sexually specific. Thealogy [275] offered a completly different view of women's sexuality and the symbolism inherent in vaginal references. Thus my interest in this topic expanded as I noticed other female sexual imagery in Romanesque art contemporaneous with the Sheelas. It quickly became evident that not much had been written specifically about my chosen subjects, the mandorla, *vesica piscis*, vegetal or floral imagery, and double-tailed mermaids. Nevertheless, the consideration of their iconography revealed that they were intimately embedded in the major religious and secular themes in the middle ages.

I believe that I have demonstrated that the vaginal iconography of the mandorla/ *vesica*

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[275] The term thealogy was first proposed by Naomi Goldenberg for religios studies which are goddess centered.

piscis is multivalent, referring to both Mary's womb in which Christ took on his humanity and the more complex theological notion that the human Christ embodies a passage to the spiritual world for human beings by assuming mortal flesh. The ideas were present from the first Western use of the mandorla, the Rabulla manuscript illustration of the Ascension with Mary visually implicated in the "action." All of these interpretations are reinforced in the sculptural mandorla by its position over the main portals of cathedrals and other religious buildings. The entrance into the church was considered a passage from the profane into the divine world. There were enough goddess images around, particularly of Venus, like the birth tray from Italy, featuring vaginal shapes to support my contention that medieval viewers were well versed in understanding the symbolism of the mandorla.

My claim for the recognition of the *vesica piscis* as a vaginal referent is further supported in reviewing the devotional practices associated with mystical spirituality using highly charged erotic metaphors and images inspired by *The Song of Songs* and the traditions of courtly love as set out in writings such as *Le Roman de la Rose*. Illustrations in secular literature confirmed the allegorical use of objects such as drapery, purses, enclosed gardens, apertures in walls, and chaplets to refer to female genitalia, the vagina in particular.

Although the original impetus for the eroticization of spiritual imagery came from the writings of male mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, and Bonaventure, female religious developed a particular devotion to Christ's side wound. The vagina/wound becomes the passageway for the soul of the Sponsa to be united with Christ. She or he is birthed through this vaginal entrance into the spiritual life. The body of Christ thus became feminized emphasizing his role as Mother. The allegory is taken further in the view that Christ gave birth to his Church from the opening produced by a phallic thrust of the lance which

penetrates his body. The rose which traditionally had been strongly associated with ancient goddesses and women's genitalia becomes polymorphous in the Christian application, as it refers both to Mary and Christ. However, the rose retains its metaphorical symbolism in the secular literature where to "pluck the rose" was understood as the lover attaining his goal in having intercourse with the object of his obsession. The use of numerous rosette shapes and patterns in medieval sculptural art conflates pagan and Christian, Mary (goddess) and Christ (God) referents.

The persistence of vaginal iconography in the Sheela-na-gig is obvious. My claim here is that the Christian appropriation of this imagery would erase all but negative references to the vagina and that there is sufficient evidence, particularly in the Irish context, to indicate a persistence of pre-Christian homage to goddesses and their sexual vigour. The same may be said of the figure of the double-tailed mermaid although its vaginal display is more covert.

In reading for the detail, or "in the margins" of medieval imagery, as Michael Camille advises, I trust that I have made visible what was hidden and have reclaimed as positive what has been dismissed as either aberrant, irrelevant, or bizarre. This work is part of the on-going work to reclaim female vaginal imagery. To repeat my introduction---in spite of the Christian Church's attempt to suppress goddess traditions and to control or suppress sexuality, vaginal imagery persisted in Christian iconography as a sign of divine female power and as tribute to a consciousness of that force..

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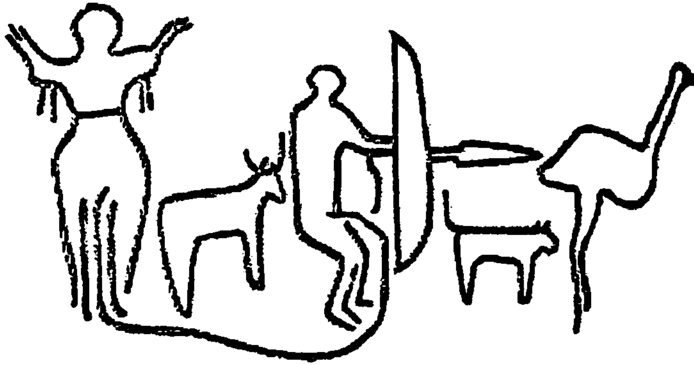

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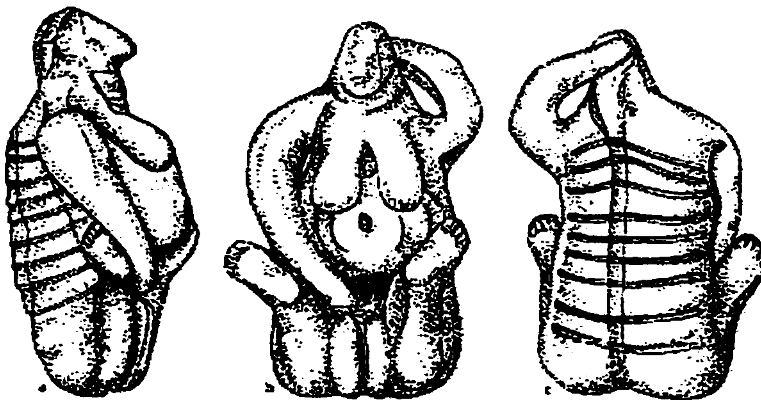

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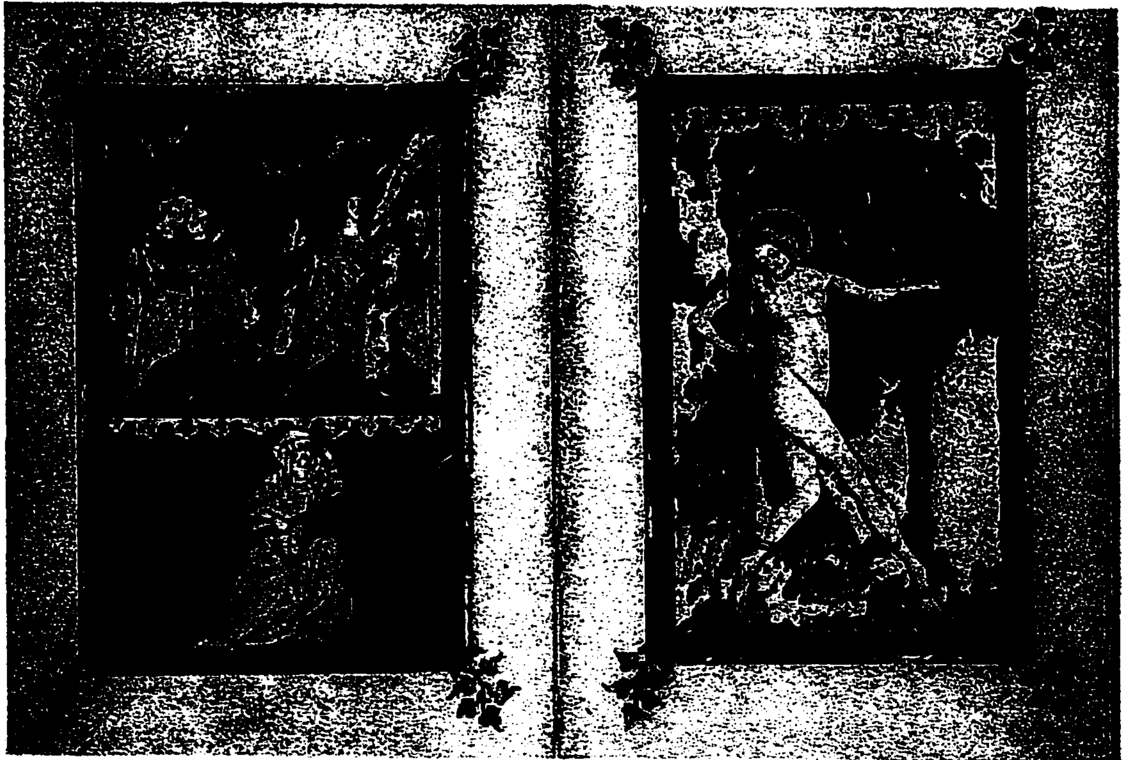

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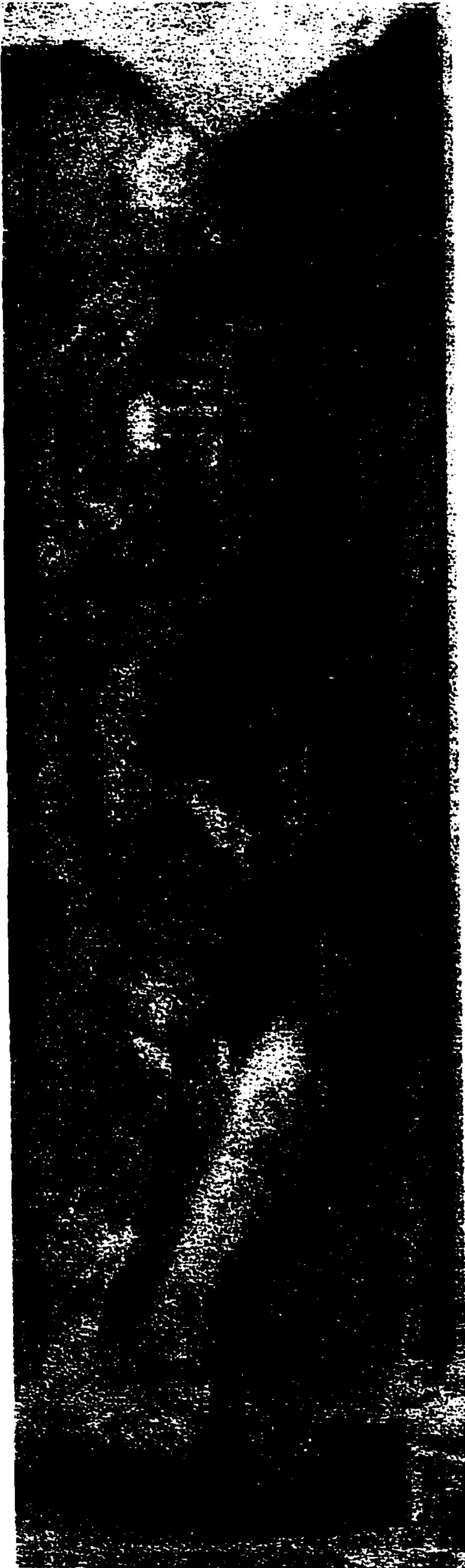

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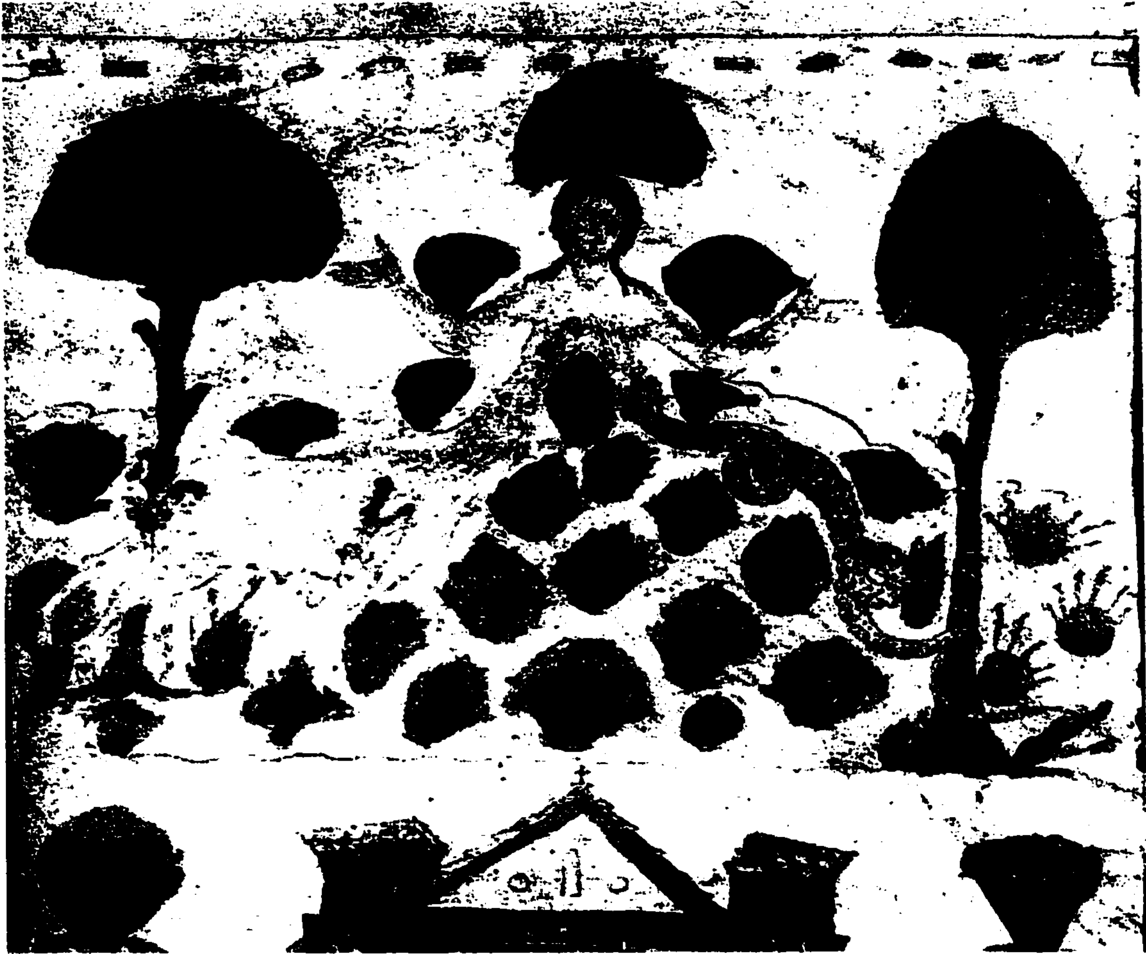

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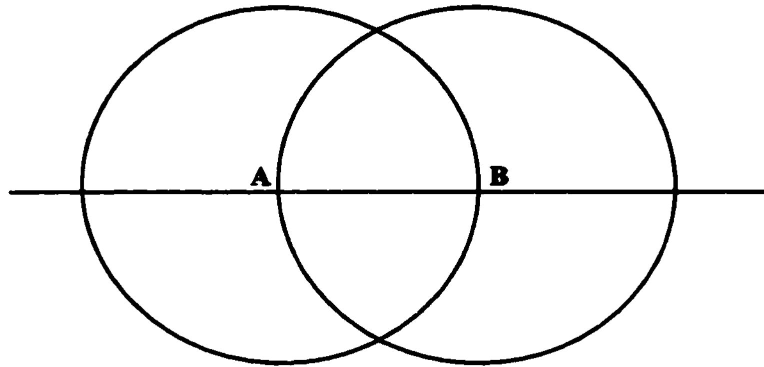

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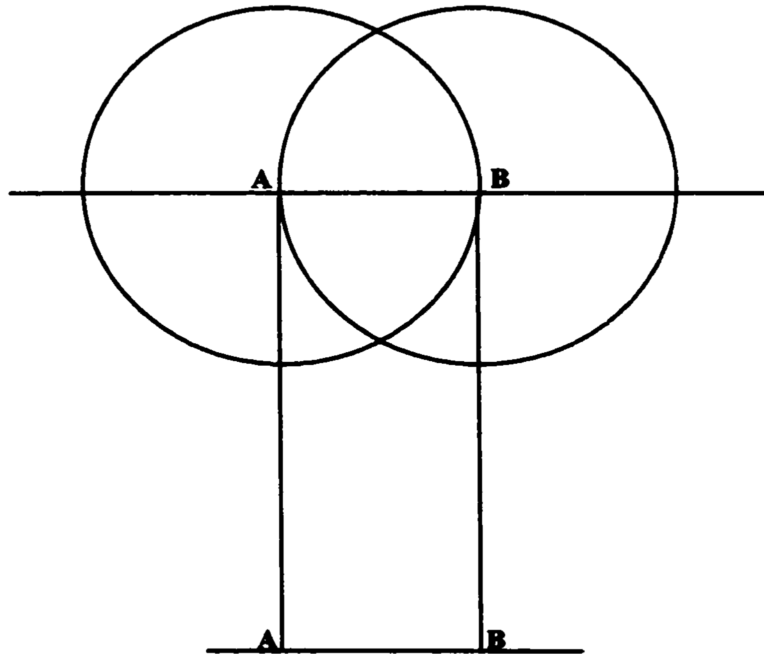

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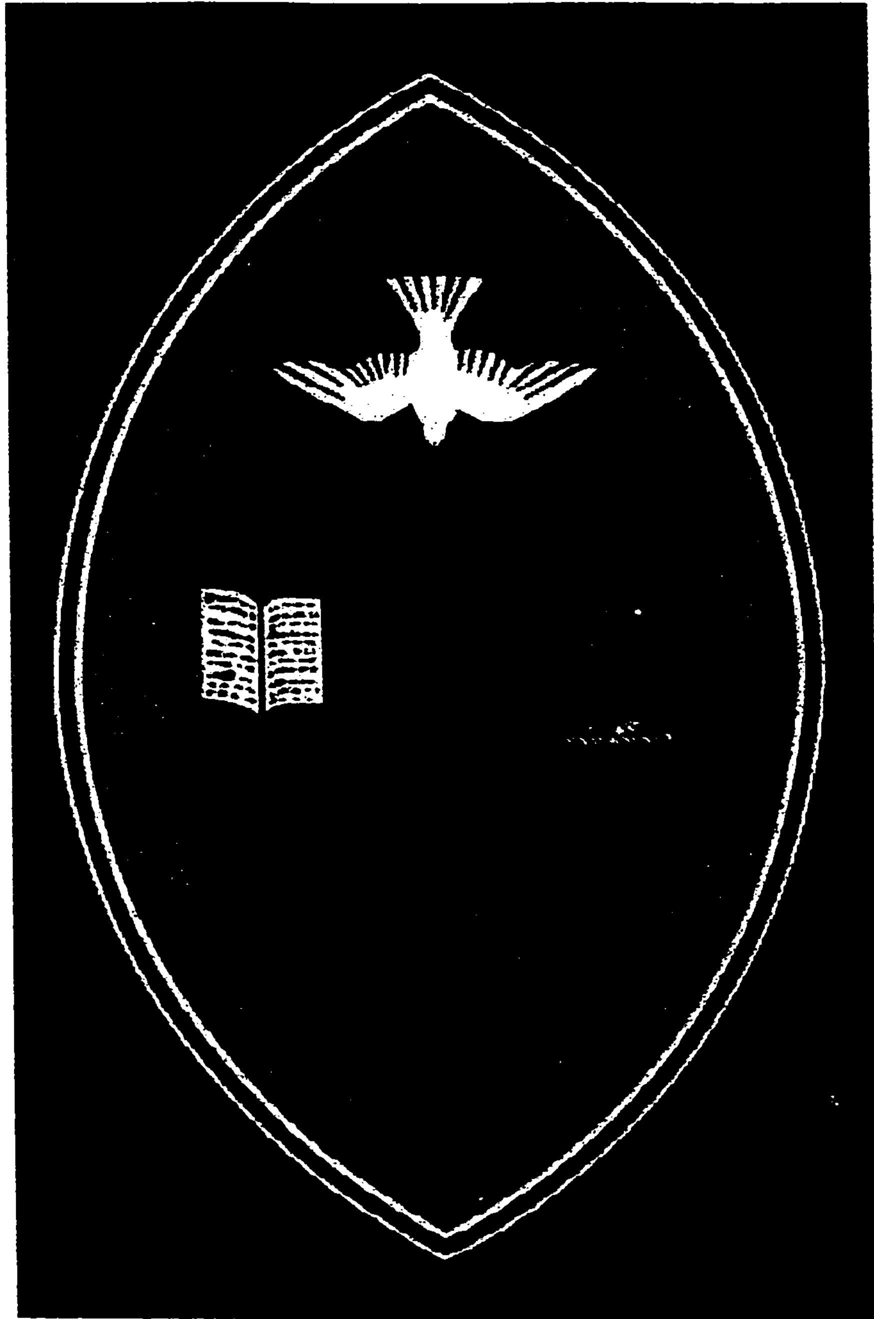

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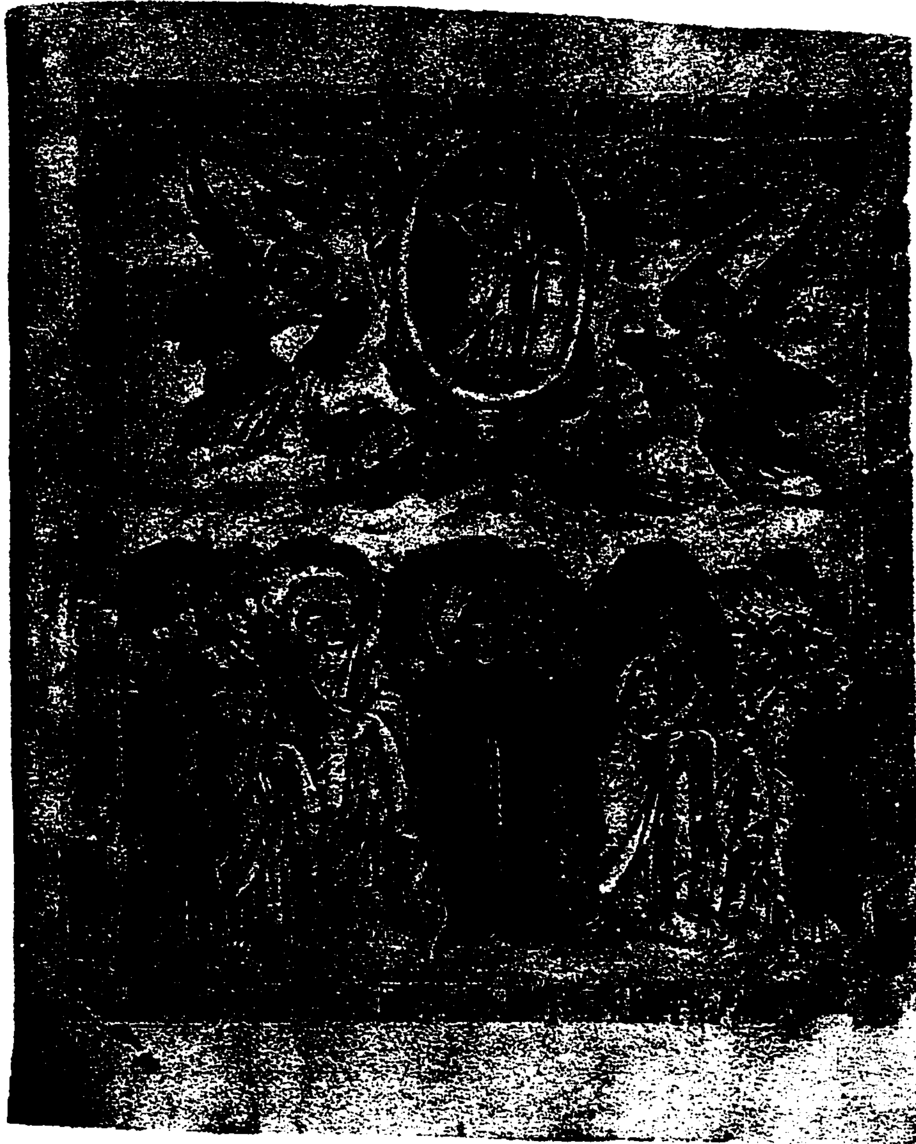

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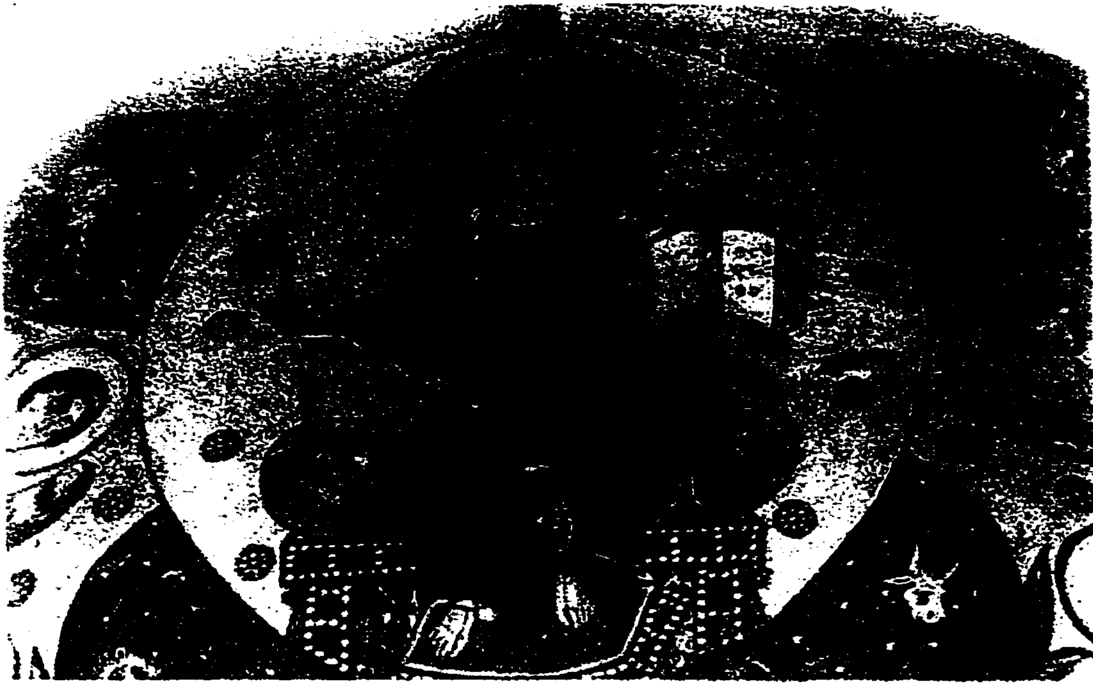

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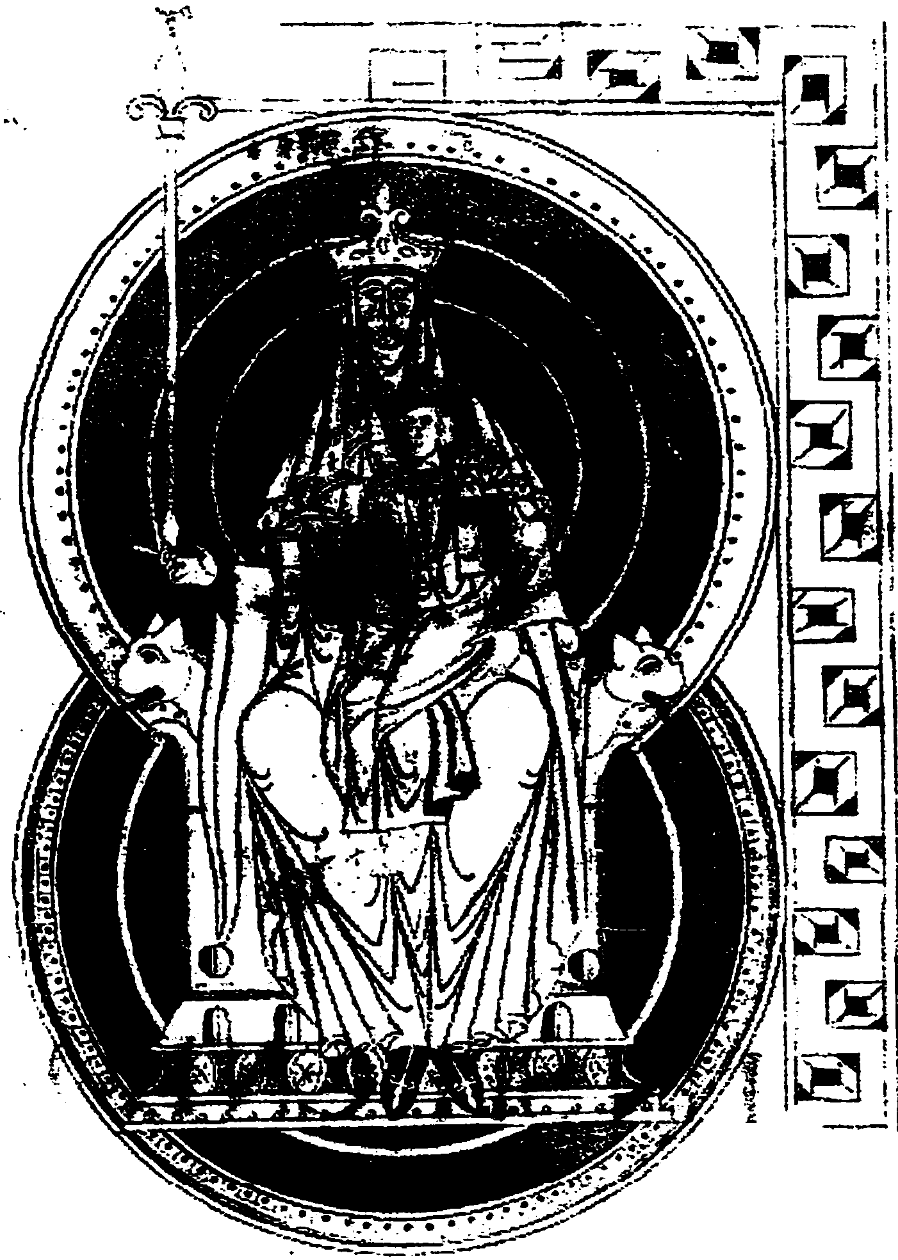

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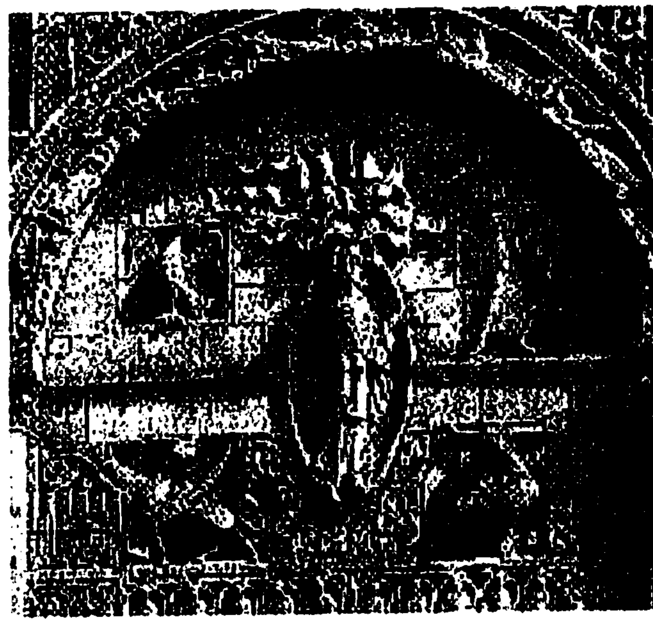

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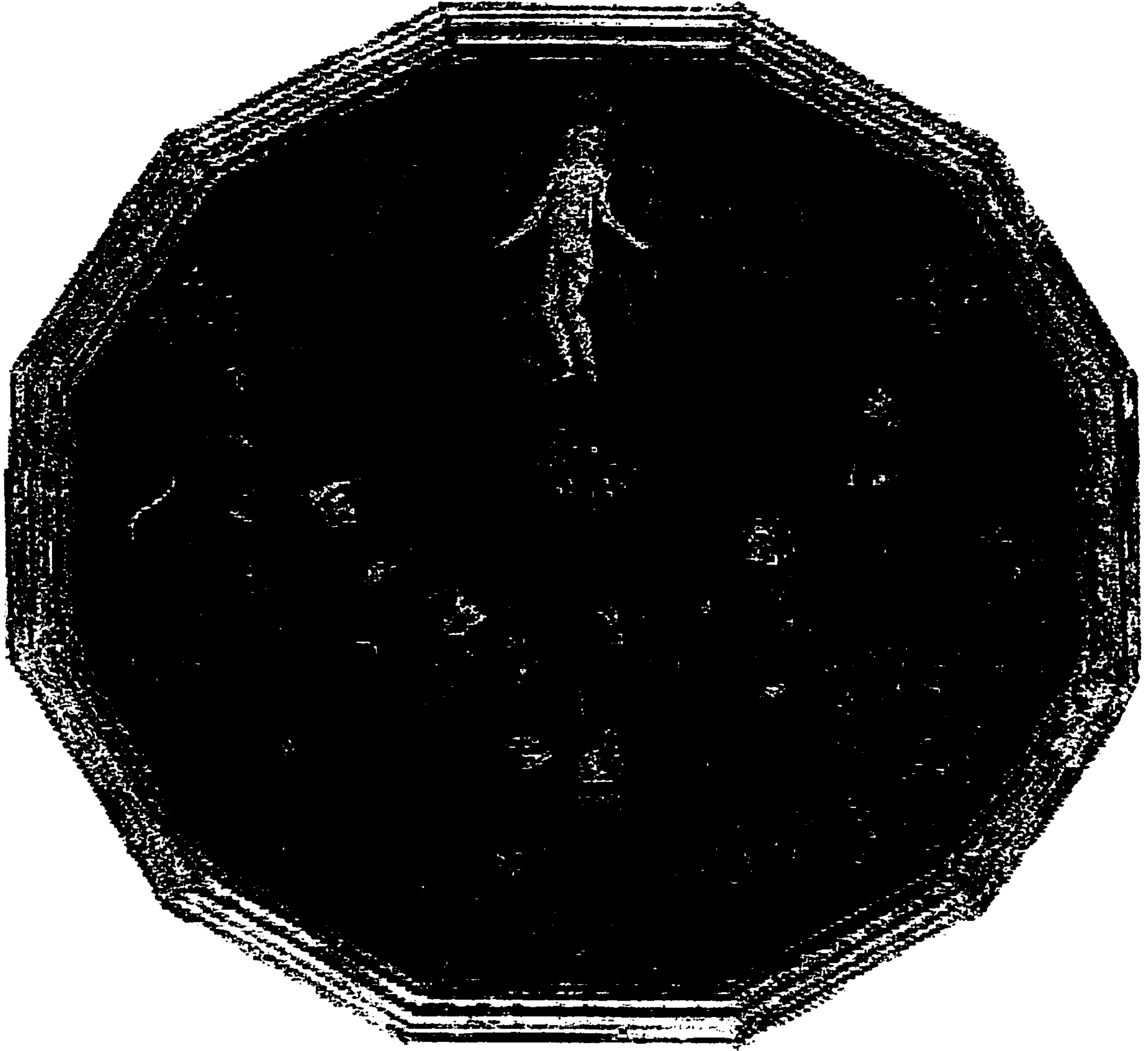

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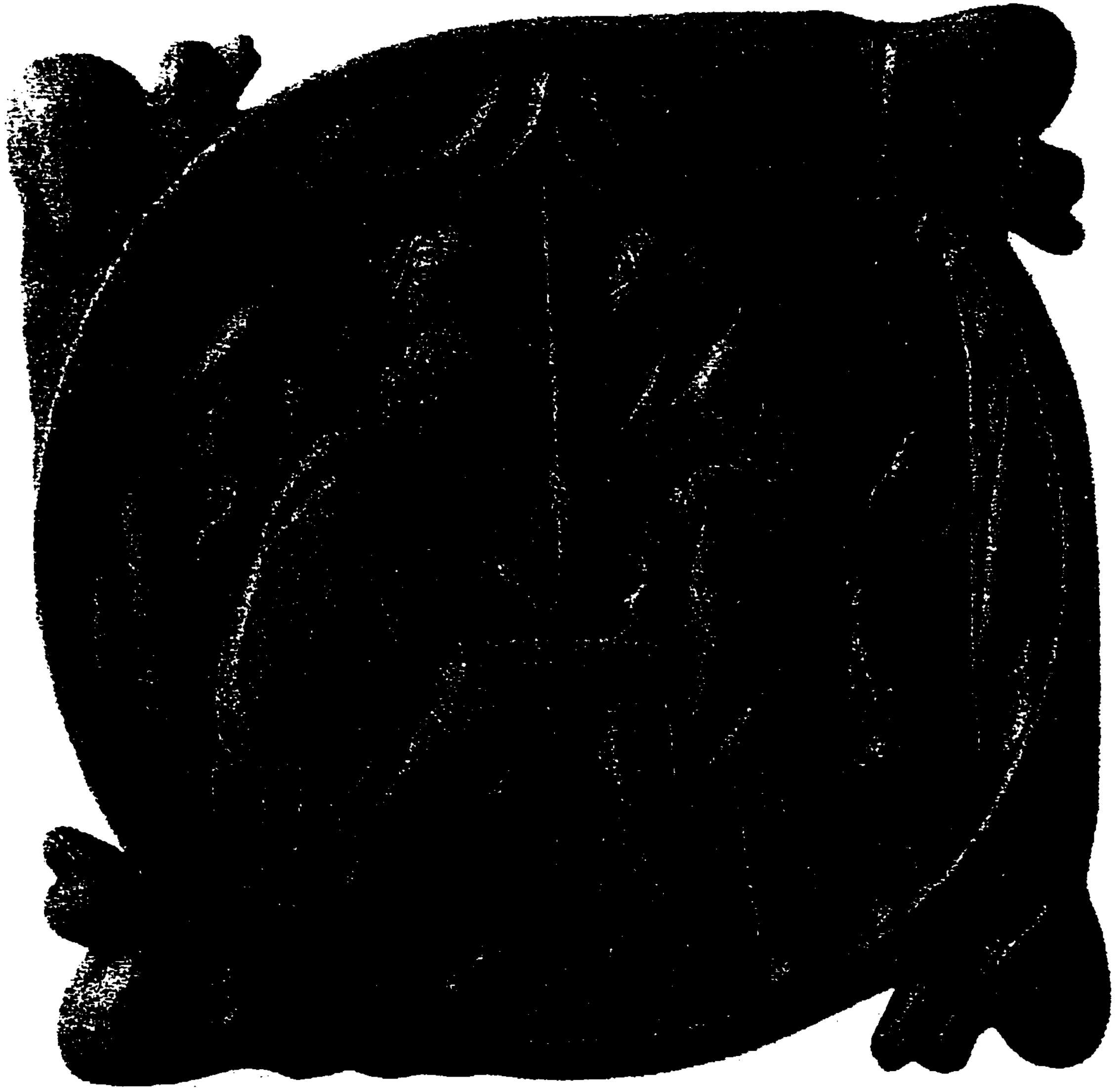

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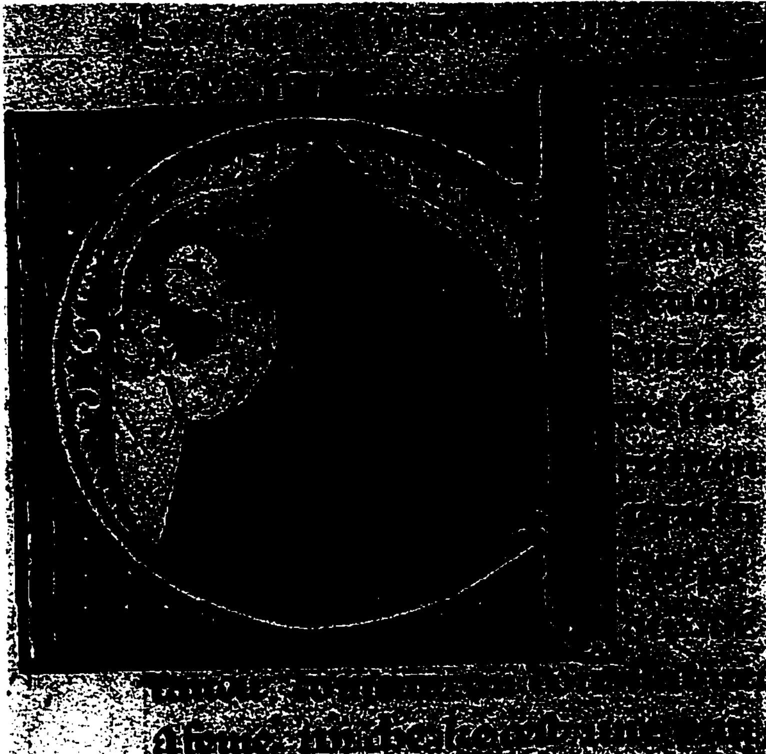

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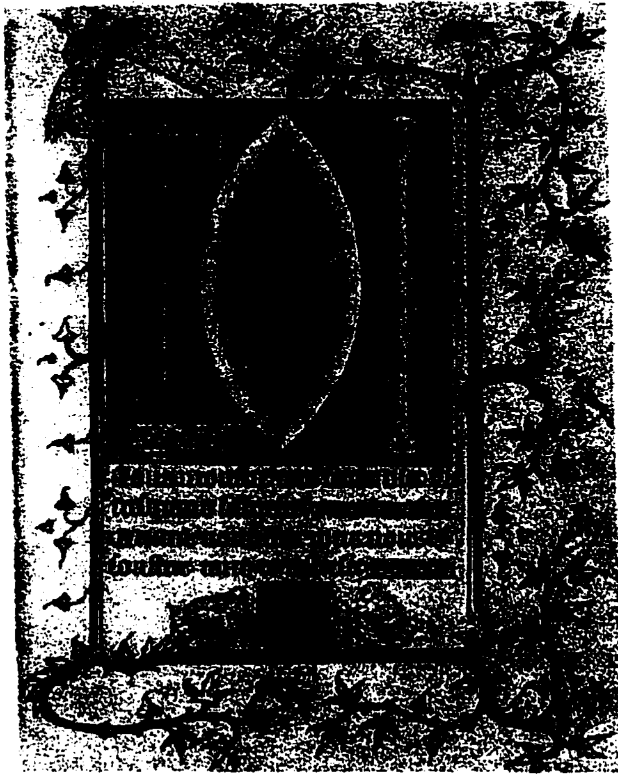

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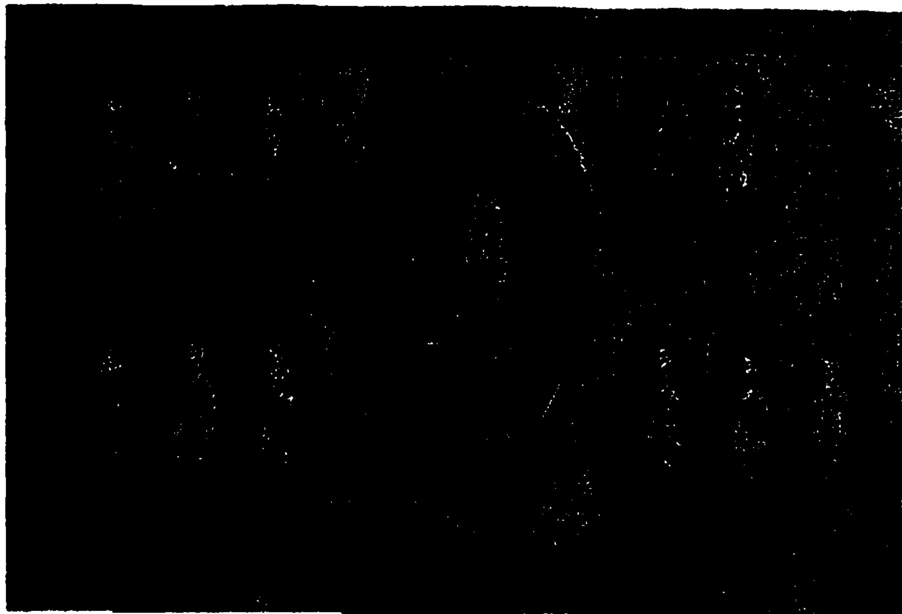

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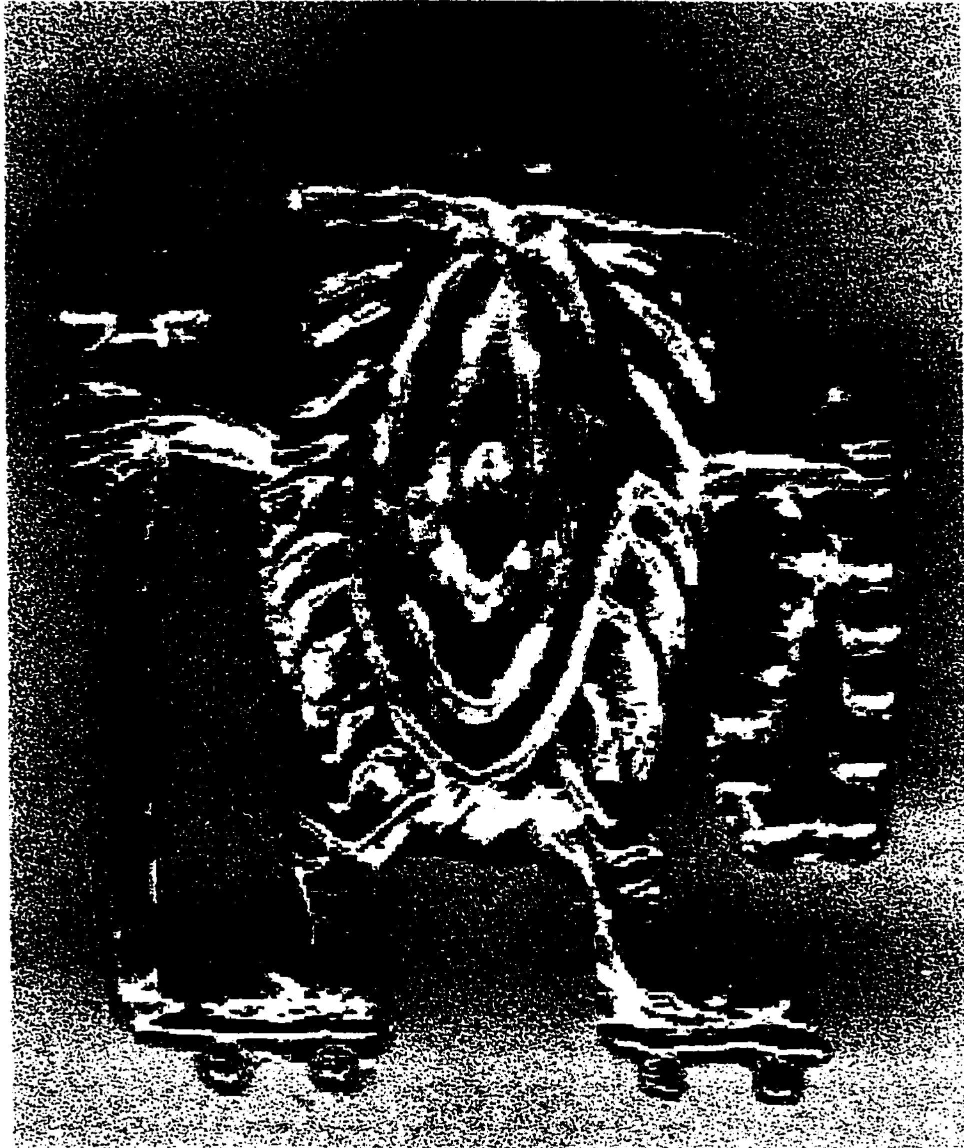

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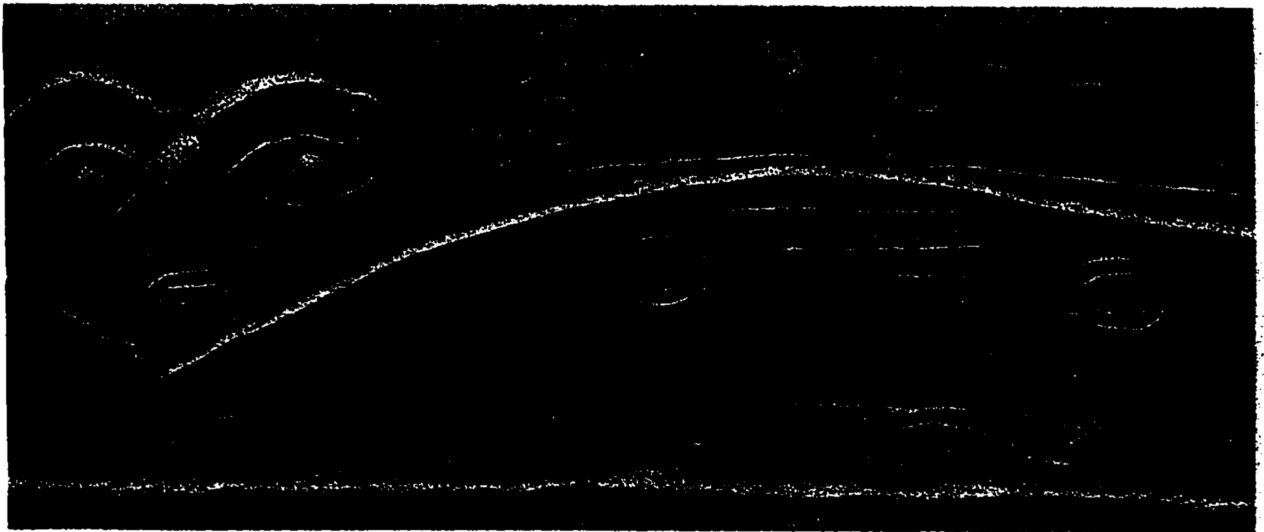

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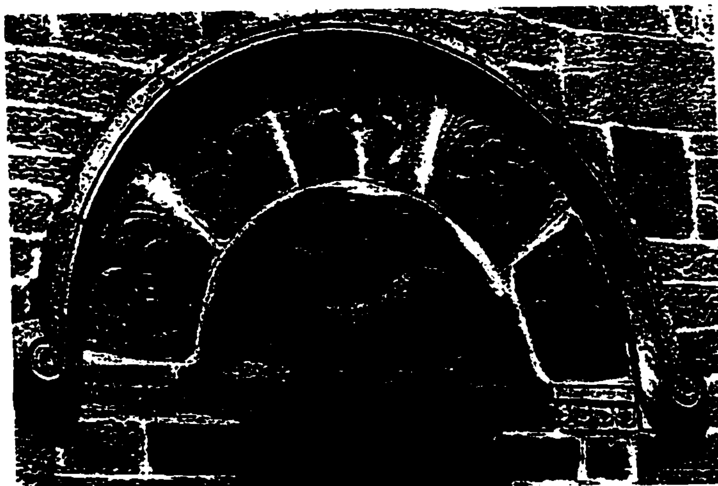

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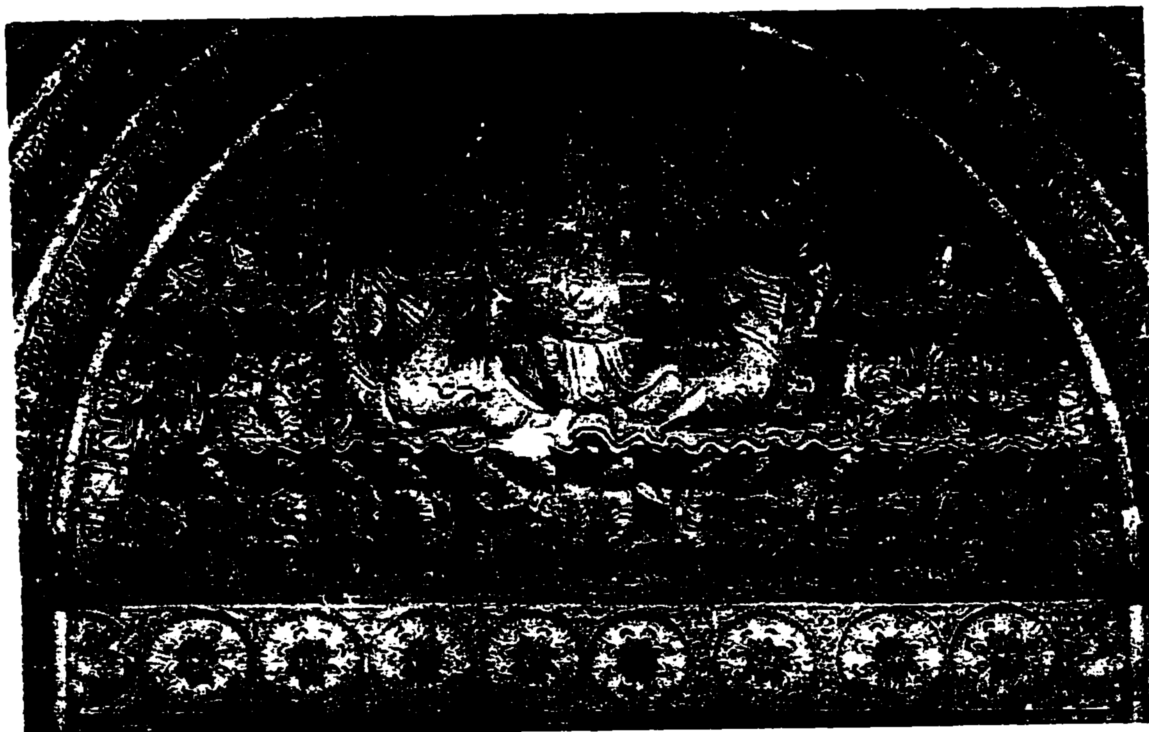

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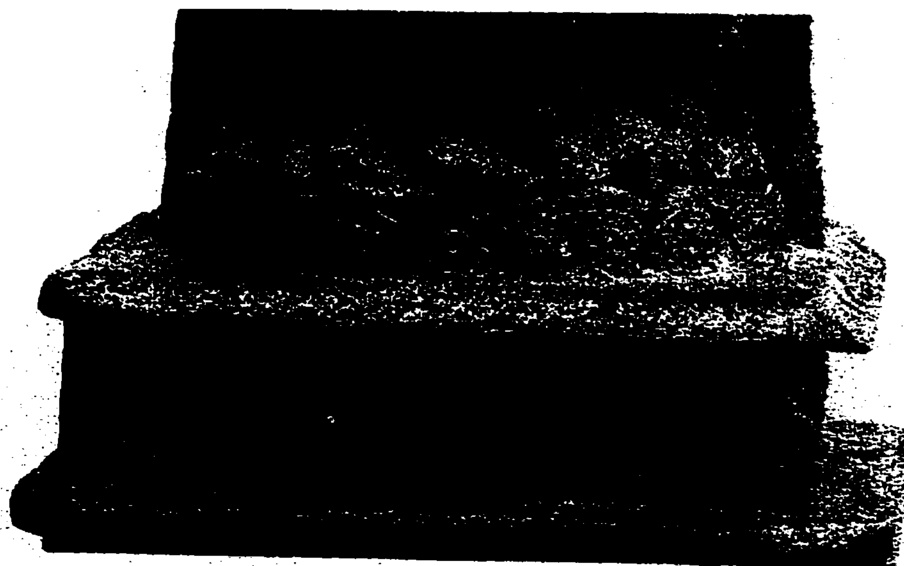

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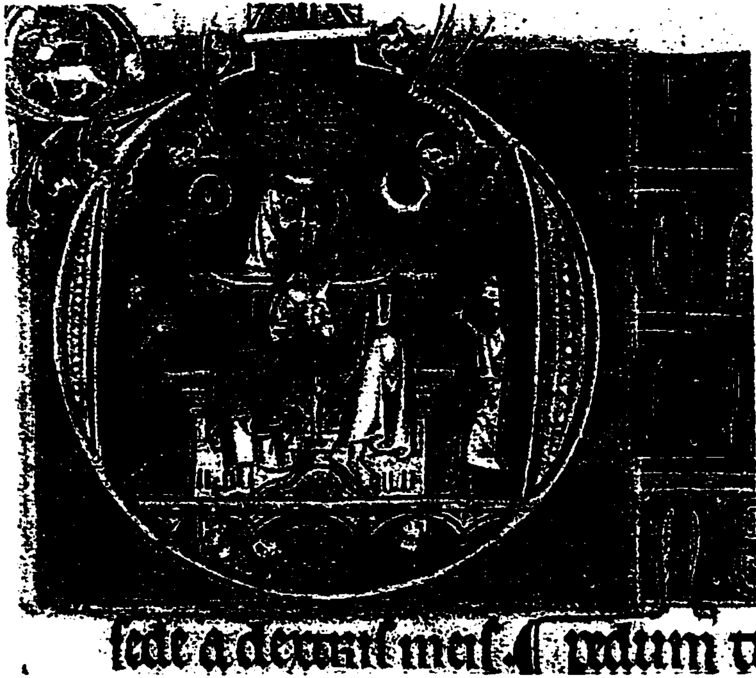

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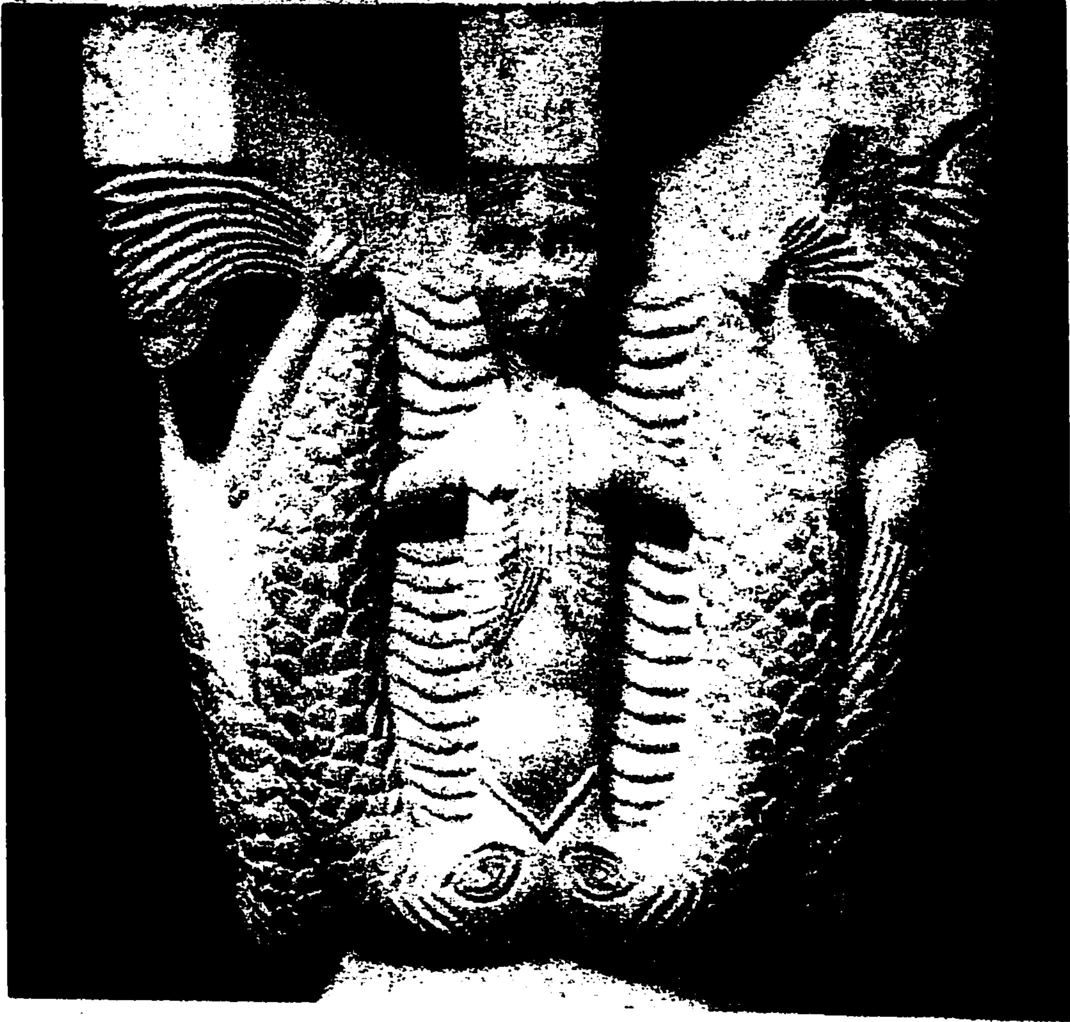

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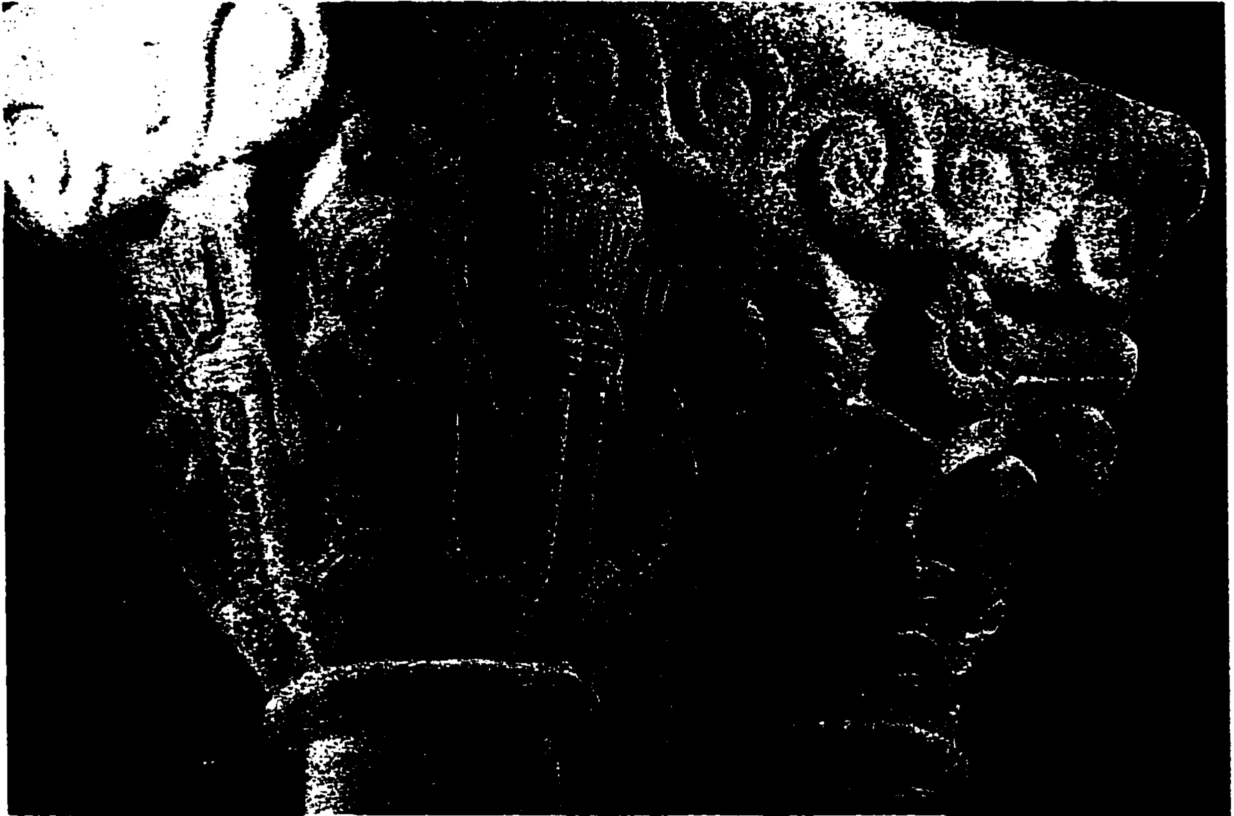

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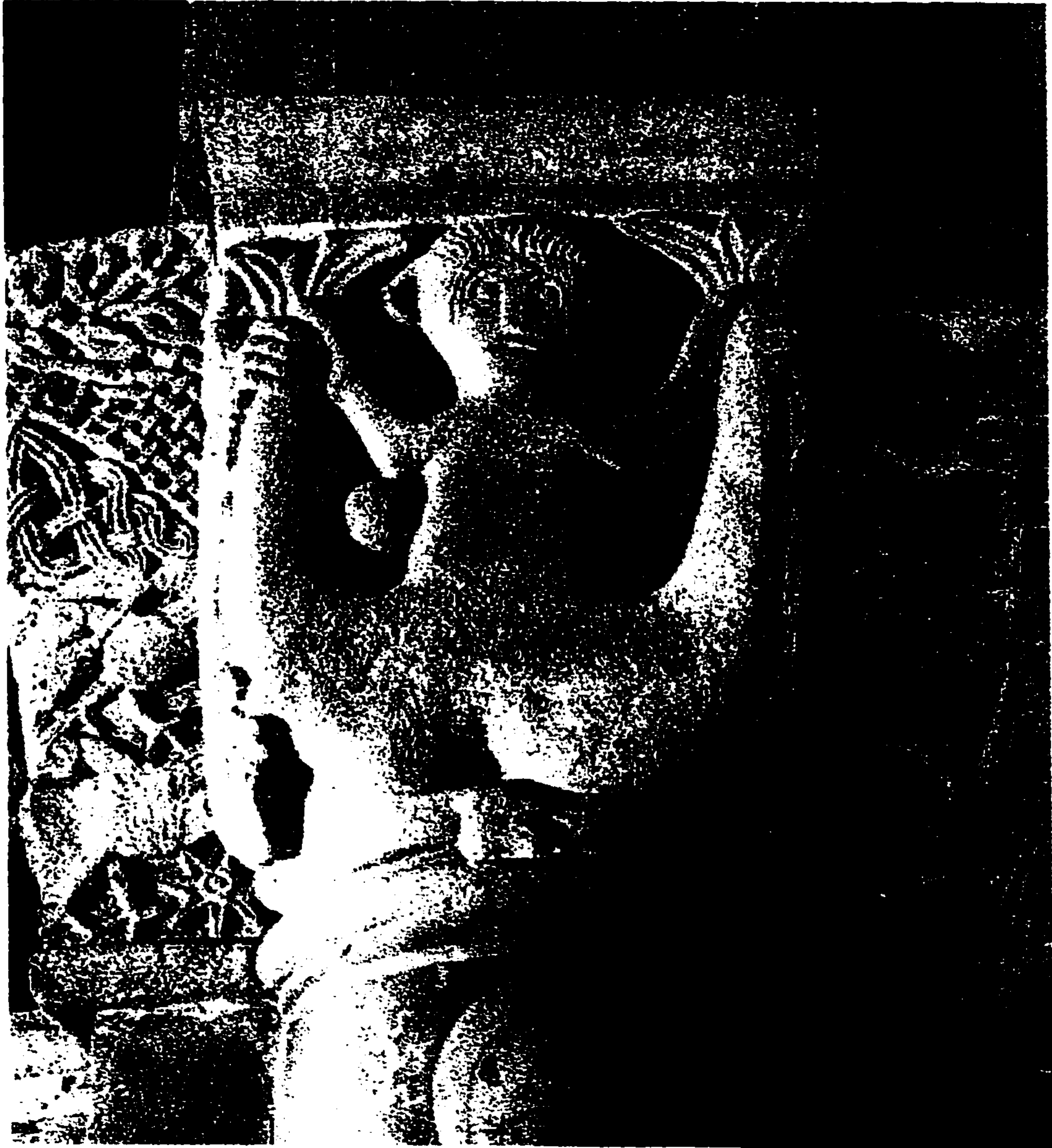

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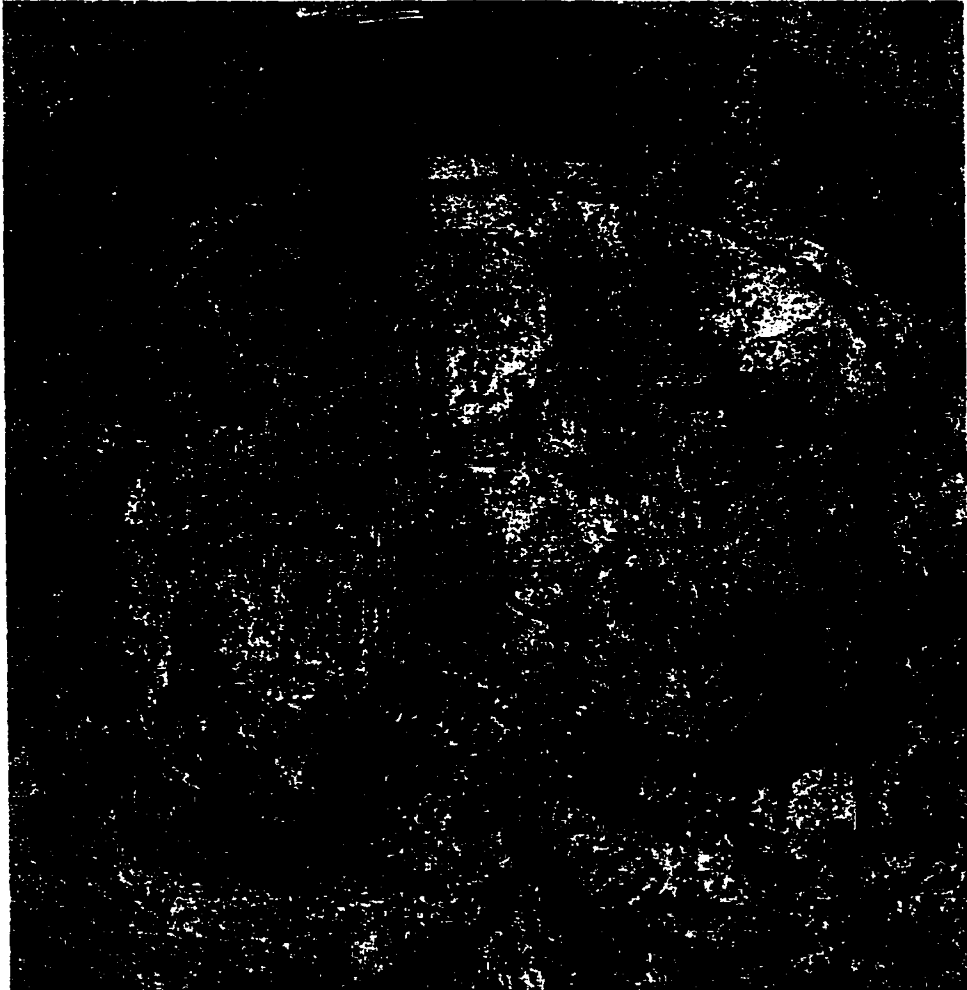

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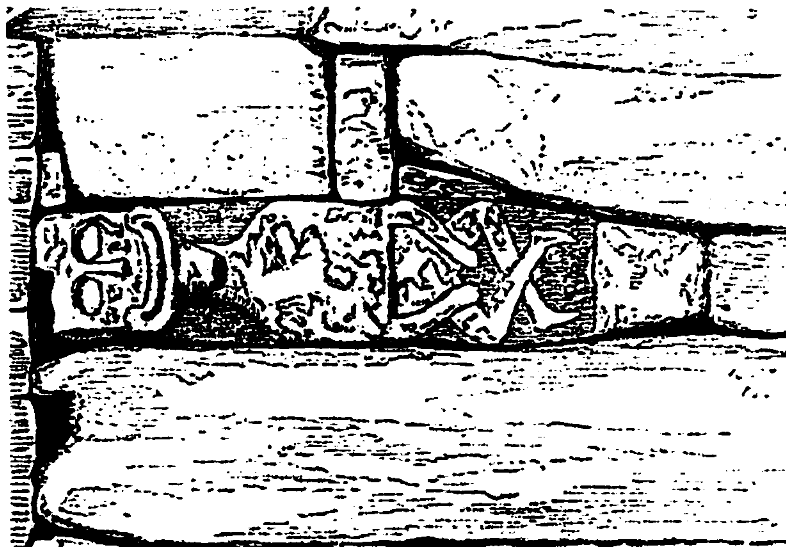

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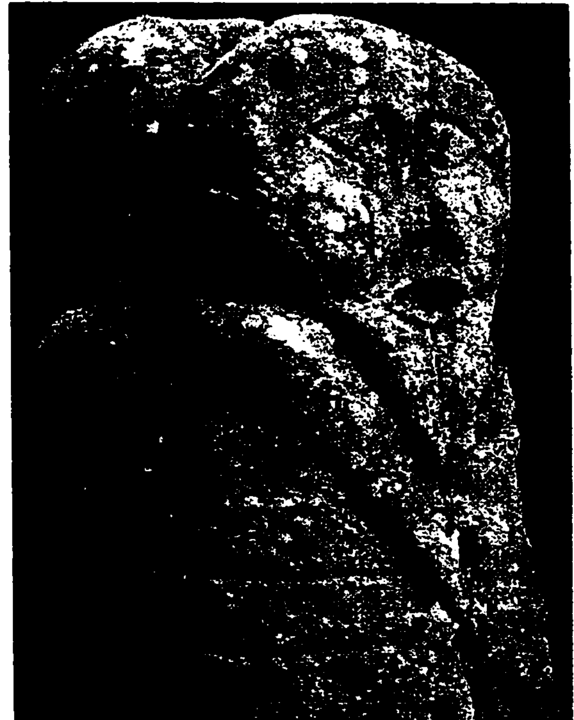

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ILLUSTRATIONS LIST OF CREDITS

Jorgen Andersen. *The Witch on the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles.* Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1977.

Fig. 4.67 Sheela-na-gig from St. Mary and St. David Church, Kilpeck, England, illustration (originally published in *Celtic Mysteries: the Ancient Religion*, J. Sharkey, 1975), 36.

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