

Representations of Eve and the Church at Autun

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of Eve on the lintel fragment from La Cathédral Saint-Lazare d'Autun, France. Eve is depicted naked, crawling on her belly through the Garden of Eden, with one hand reaching out for the fruit of the Tree of Life and the other shielding her face in a gesture of shame and guilt. Parishioners and pilgrims to the church mimic these movements as they crawl down the aisle of the church to ask for penance. Public displays of humility and shame were common practice in asking for penance in the medieval church. Lazarus of Bethany, the patron saint of the cathedral, is said to have been raised from the dead after four days by Jesus. Lazarus of Bethany was canonized as the patron saint of lepers in the Middle Ages, and Saint Lazare d'Autun became a common stop along the pilgrimage route where pilgrims asked for forgiveness and healing. This unusual use of Eve as a symbol of shame calls into question the views of women at the time that the lintel fragment was made in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Eve's undulating movements are subtly sexual in nature and reminiscent of the movements of a serpent. The suggestion that she is serpent-like aligns her with the devil and solidifies her connection to the fall of man.

The Cathedral Church of Saint-Lazare of Autun is located in the Burgundy region in France. Its construction was begun in 1120 under the direction of Bishop Etienne to accommodate the growing numbers of pilgrims visiting the Cathedral of Saint-Nazaire on their way to Vezelay and Santiago de Compostela. The new cathedral was Cluniac in style and the architectural sculptures throughout the cathedral were created by the workshop of Gislebertus. The construction of Saint-Lazare was rapid, allowing for the church to be consecrated in 1132 before it was mostly finished in 1146. In this year the relics of Lazarus were moved from Saint-Nazaire. From 1170-1180 the shrine for the relics of Lazarus was constructed in the choir of the cathedral.

The lintel fragment from Cathedral Church of Saint-Lazare at Autun was found in a home in 1856. In 1766, both of the reliefs from the portals were removed and the marble funerary monument for St. Lazarus was disassembled and repurposed. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century on, the sculptures of the church continued to deteriorate until they were removed and replaced with plaster casts of the originals (Seidel, 1). The west portal still stands and shows a scene of the last judgement from the New Testament.

Although the works from the transept portal are now lost, a written record was made in 1482 for a Royal Inquiry and included a description of the north portal that included the Eve lintel. The description says "...in the tympanum, there is a story of the resurrection of...Saint Lazarus sculptured in large stone images; and below this story there are images of Adam and Eve; and on the upper part of the pillar which divides the wings of said portal, there is a small image in the shape of a bishop with a mitre, representing Saint Lazarus, and below this there are some other images in the old style.<sup>1</sup>" These two reliefs – the sin of Eve and the resurrection of

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<sup>1</sup> 'Postmodum vero portalia dicte ecclesie visitavimus. Et primo portale quod est ad latus dicte ecclesie respiciens contra ecclesiam beati Nazarii, in quo quidem a parte superiori et in testudine est ystoria resuscitationis dictii beati

Lazarus – stood in stark contrast to each other. In addition to the description during the Royal Inquiry, there was another description made in 1646 by du Buisson-Aubenay (Terret, 25).<sup>2</sup>

Lazarus, raised from the dead, was conscious of his sin. When called on to “Come out,” he came forth out of the grave after four days in response to the call of Christ. This can be seen in Augustine’s *Commentary on John*, where he compares the question to Lazarus’ sisters about where they have entombed him to God’s call for Adam to show himself when he is hiding. Lazarus’ sisters directing Christ to his location allows him to see Lazarus, dead in sin, and to receive forgiveness and to be returned to life in his “confession.”

This visual comparison of the forgiveness of Lazarus and the hiding of Eve painted a picture for the pilgrims to the cathedral about the importance of their acceptance and admittance of their sins. This provided Eve as an example of sin, which could be interpreted through imagery in the lintel relief. Eve is shown crawling on her knees through the Garden of Eden, with her body curved and undulating in motion which is similar to that of a serpent. In Genesis iii.14, the serpent is cursed to crawl on his belly and breast, which is what is conveyed in the relief.<sup>3</sup> During this period, the belly and breast were associated with low qualities of the devil and sins of the flesh. The undulating movement of Eve here, in combination with the detail that is used for her torso, particularly her breasts, is subtly sexual in nature, which could be an allusion to pleasures of the flesh that were associated with sin and the significance of the breast in the curse placed on the serpent. Additionally, the careful covering of her sex with the branch is a nod to the acknowledgement of nakedness and Adam and Eve’s attempts to hide themselves.

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Lazari iin magni ymaginibus lapideis elevata, sub qua ystoria sunt imagines Adam et Eve, et in pallari, quof facit divisionem portarum dicti portalis, in superiori parte, est quedam parva imago in modeepiscopi mitrati formata, ymaginem beati Lazari representans, sub qua sunt quedam alii ymagines modo antiquo formate.’

<sup>2</sup> ‘Sur le portail de l’entrée latérale se veoit la résurrection de Lazare et la transgression d’Adam et Ève à bas-reliefs sur une pierre gris-noirâtre et de main fort gothique.’

<sup>3</sup> Et ait Dominus Deus ad serpentem, “Quia fecisiti hoc, maledictus es inter omnia animantia et bestias terrae: super pectus tuum gradieris, et terram comedes cunctis diebus vitae tuae.”

The branch seen in the relief not only is used as a way to cover Eve, but as a way to break her body and force her into a position of submission.

The positioning of both of her hands is also of interest. Her right hand is bent towards her face and the fingers rest on her cheek. In earlier examples of illustrations of Genesis, this gesture in combination with a reclining position was used to signify sleep. This can be seen in the Sao Paolo Bible. There is a shift in meaning in the Ælfric miniature, where similar positioning and gesturing are used to signify grief at receiving judgement from God and being cast out of the garden (Werckmeister, 5). Additionally, this gesture of guilt combined with the hiding of Eve's body with the branch signifies the shame in her nakedness that she had after eating the forbidden fruit.

The act of hiding behind branches and gestures denoting shame in depictions of the fall can additionally be seen on a historiated capital in the ambulatory at Vezelay, the abbey church of Cluny III, both dated to the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. Similar scenes appear on a capital from the nave of Vezelay and a tympanum from the priory wall of Anzy-le-Duc – both of which date to approximately the same time as the lintel from Autun. The second capital from Vezelay additionally shows Eve reaching back to pick the fruit while she looks forward to Adam (Werckmeister, 8-9).

While similar, these capitals and tympanum have similar iconography to the lintel from Autun, the lintel has the added gesture of Eve reaching back to pick the fruit with her left hand. This combination of the act of taking the fruit, the gesture of guilt, and the hiding of her body suggests that Eve is aware of the sin in which she is partaking and continues to act anyway. The gesture of grief renounces the sin, while the act and the hiding go against the word of god and show that Eve is hiding from her sin. Additionally, the left hand of Eve takes a similar shape as

that of the devil's claw seen bending the branch towards her. The left hand almost appears to be overlaid on top of another, with a form reminiscent to the mouth of a serpent.

Both the depictions of Lazarus and his coming forth from death and sin and Eve sinning would play a role in the act of penance at Autun. Lazarus showed them the promise of life after sin. Eve conveyed the message of sin and the shame of hiding. The act of asking for penance was public at Autun during the Lenten season, with the "sinners" displaying their shame in front of the members of the church. They were expected to present themselves in front of the church in sackcloth and barefoot, then to prostrate themselves and proclaim their guilt to the Bishop. Parish priests would determine the extent of their guilt and the Bishop would enact their punishment. The Bishop would conduct them into the church and give final blessings, after which they were told "that, as Adam was expelled from Paradise, so they, too, are ejected from the church because of their sins." Servants ritually expelled the penitents from the church, with members of the clergy following behind and chanting Genesis iii.19, "In the sweat of thy face shall thou eat bread." They were then to assume a position on their hands and knees – similar to how Eve is represented – while ash was sprinkled on their heads and another part of Genesis iii.19 was recited, stating, "for dust thou art and into dust thou shalt return." They were then ritually expelled from the church again while the remaining parts of Genesis iii.17-19 were recited (Werskmeister, 17-18).<sup>4</sup>

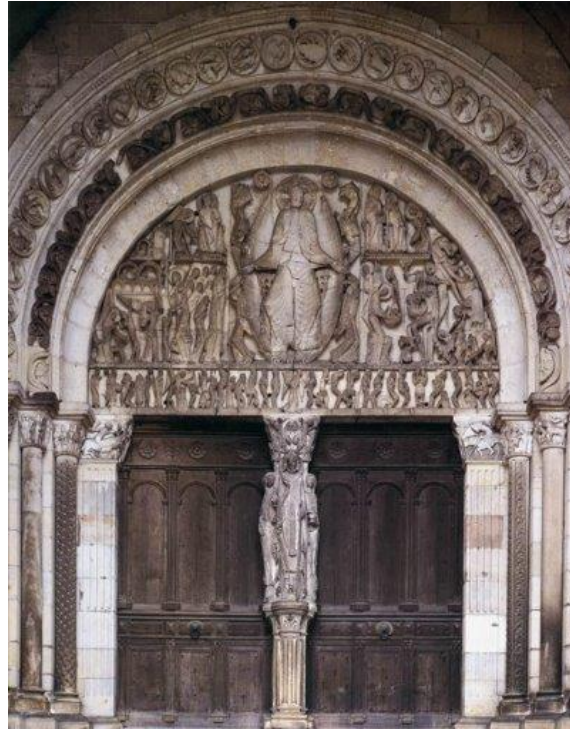
Because the lintel in its entirety is lost, the full meaning of the gestures used cannot be determined. We know that Adam was in the original piece, but his positioning and gestures could change the interpretation of how Eve is portrayed. Additionally, the portrayal of the devil could

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis iii.17-19: Ad Adam vero dixit, "Quia audisti vocem uxoris tuae et comedisti de ligno ex quo praeceperam tibi ne comederes, maledicta terra in opere tuo; in laboribus comedes ex ea cunctis diebus vitae tuae. Spinas et tribulos germinabit tibi, et comedes herbas terrae. In sudore vultus tui vesceris pane donec revertaris in terram de qua sumptus es, quia pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris."

change how the actions of Eve are interpreted in the piece. It can be assumed based on the gestures and shared iconography in the piece that Eve is being used as an example for life in sin. Additionally, the depiction of her acting on her own, rather than being tempted by the serpent, aligns her with the Devil and solidifies her association with the Fall. This portrayal vilifies her and sets the tone for depictions of Eve and her role in the Fall in future representations, as well as impacting the depiction of women in religious artworks throughout the Middle Ages.

## IMAGES & FIGURES



The Last Judgement. Tympanum of the West Portal of Saint-Lazare. Autun, France.



Historiated capital showing The Fall. Vezelay, France.

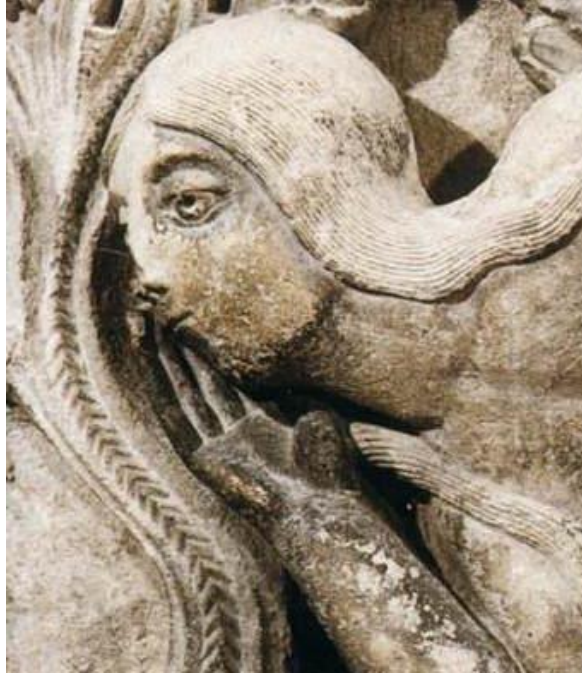




Tympanum showing The Fall. Anzy-le-Duc, France.



The Even Lintel fragment in its entirety.



Eve's face with the fingers of her right hand resting on her cheek.



The left hand of Eve reaching back to pick the fruit. On the right side, a Devil's claw can be seen bending the branch towards her hand.

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