

Kirk Ambrose

THE NAVE SCULPTURE OF VÉZELAY: THE ART OF MONASTIC VIEWING

This important scholarly work will fundamentally change the way we think about the monastic church of Vézelay and its sculptures. Kirk Ambrose provides a new account of the celebrated sculptural ensemble at this important French Romanesque monastic church – whereas scholarly attention in the past has focused almost exclusively on the Pentecost portal, Ambrose devotes most of his analysis to the nave capitals. With a sensitive eye, he considers how these important works intersected with various aspects of monastic culture, from poetry to a sign language used during observed periods of silence. From this study it emerges how many of the sculptures resonated with communal practices and with interpretive modes in use at the site.

Deeming the attempt to uncover an underlying or unifying program to be an anachronistic project, Ambrose explores historically specific ways this ensemble cohered for medieval viewers. Covering a range of themes, including hagiography, ornament, and violence, he develops alternative approaches for the examination of serial imagery. As a result, this book has broad implications for the study of eleventh- and twelfth-century art in the West.

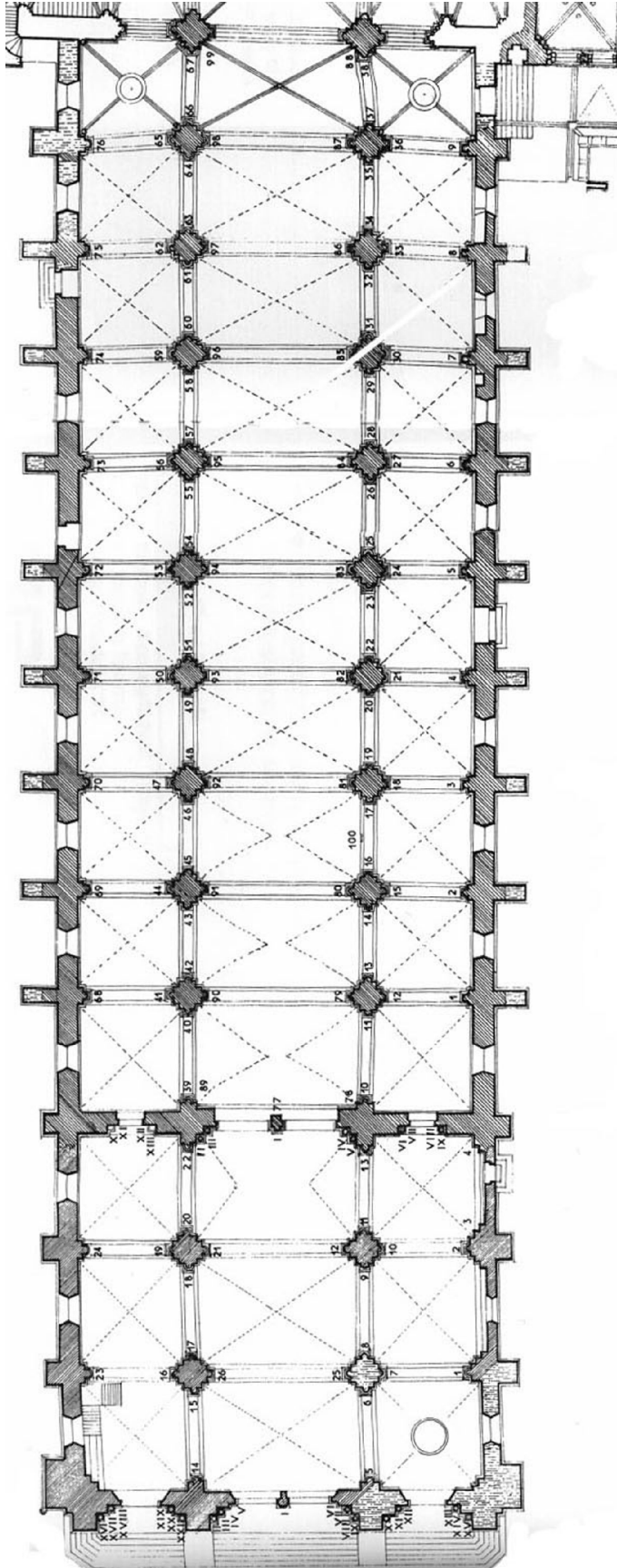
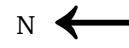


Figure 1. Vézelay Nave Plan  
[After Salet, *Cluny et Vézelay*]



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THE ART OF MONASTIC VIEWING

by

Kirk Ambrose



Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies

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## Abbreviations

Capitals referred to in the text are followed by numbers in parentheses that correspond to those used in the catalogue that appends this work. Works frequently cited in the notes have been identified by the following abbreviations:

AASS	<i>Acta sanctorum...</i> , n.s. Ed. J. Carnandet et al. 68 vols. Paris, 1863-1940.
BHL	<i>Bibliotheca hagiographica latina antiquae et mediae aetatis</i> . 2 vols. Brussels, 1898-1901.
CCM	Corpus Consuetudinum Monasticarum
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
GC	<i>Gallia christiana...</i> 16 vols. Ed. S. de Sainte-Marthe et al. Paris, 1716-1865.
Gesta	<i>Gesta pontificum Autissiodorensium</i> . Printed in the <i>Bibliothèque historique de l'Yonne</i> . Ed. L.M. Duru. Auxerre, 1850.
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
MGH	Monumenta Germanicae Historica
MH	Archives of the <i>Monuments Historiques</i> , Paris.
PG	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series graeca</i> . Ed. J.-P. Migne. 161 vols. Paris, 1857-66.
PL	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series latina</i> . Ed. J.-P. Migne. 221 vols. Paris, 1844-65.
RHF	<i>Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France</i> . Ed. M. Bouquet et al. Paris, 1738-1876.
RB 1980	RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes. Ed. T. Fry. Collegeville, MN., 1980
Sermons	Julian of Vézelay. <i>Sermons</i> . 2 vols. Ed. and trans. D. Vorreux. Paris, 1972.



## Introduction

Comprising one of the largest and most innovative ensembles of Romanesque sculpture, the 135 nave capitals of Vézelay defy modern notions of order in their disposition. Subjects from the Old Testament, classical poetry, saints' lives, and other sources stand in any number of inscrutable juxtapositions: a cross-dressing saint, Eugenia (59), removes her tunic across the aisle from a basilisk (74), David combats a lion (24) adjacent to four personifications of the winds (23), and so on. Regardless of the path followed through the church, the viewer encounters a disjunctive series of images that resists any attempt to adumbrate an overarching system. If one were to describe the sculptural corpus as a book of the illiterate, it must be admitted that the pages have been jumbled and subjected to numerous interpolations.

However aleatory their arrangement, much evidence suggests that tremendous effort went into the presentation and selection of individual themes. Capitals are prominently displayed under extremely favorable viewing conditions as large windows suffuse the nave with light (fig. 3), an effect that would have been even more pronounced before Viollet-le-Duc raised many of the sills during his renovations in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The two-story elevation ensures that most of the historiated capitals were placed at a low level in relation to the viewer. Whereas the hemicycle capitals of Cluny III, the only contemporary Burgundian church more sumptuously decorated, were originally situated over nine meters above the floor,<sup>2</sup> those at Vézelay are placed at less than half that height, approximately four meters from the pavement. Carefully carved details, from links of mail to strands of hair, are thus clearly visible.

Rather than rely on local labor, the monastic patrons imported a workshop active at sites such as Anzy-le-Duc and Montceaux-l'Étoile, roughly 100 miles to the south.<sup>3</sup> Presumably they had confidence in these artists, variously estimated between nine and seventeen in number,<sup>4</sup> to produce sculpture suited to their needs. The workshop created a remarkable series of historiated capitals, many featuring subjects rarely found in Christian art, much less Burgundian sculpture. Even ubiquitous themes manifest gestures, props, and other pictorial elements that are unprecedented when judged against artistic traditions: Adam touches his chest as Eve hands him the forbidden fruit (93), Moses wields a club before the idol of the Golden Calf (56), and Noah's son builds an ark out of wattle-and-daub construction (81). Various authors have briefly noted these and other innovations, but their significance remains little explored.

<sup>1</sup> F. Salet and J. Adhémar, *La Madeleine de Vézelay* (Melun, 1948), 57. On these restorations see K.D. Murphy, *Memory and Modernity: Viollet-le-Duc at Vézelay* (University Park, Penn., 2000).

<sup>2</sup> K.J. Conant, *Cluny. Les églises et la maison du chef d'ordre* (Mâcon, 1968), 85. See also C.E. Armi, *Masons and Sculptors in Romanesque Burgundy* (University Park, Penn., 1983), 1:167-67; B. Maurice et al., *Cluny III: La Maior Ecclesia* (Cluny, 1988), 57-108.

<sup>3</sup> For a review of scholarship on this point see Armi, *Masons and Sculptors*, 1:24-32, 177-90.

<sup>4</sup> Estimates range from 9 hands (Salet and Adhémar, *Madeleine*, 161; F. Salet, *Cluny et Vézelay: L'oeuvre de sculpteurs* [Paris, 1995], 110-23) to at least 17 (P. Diemer, "Stil und Ikonographie der Kapitelle von Ste.-Madeleine, Vézelay" [Ph.D. diss., Ruprecht-Karl-Universität, Heidelberg, 1975], 82-181). See also M. Schapiro, *Romanesque Art* (New York, 1977), 153-200.

In the past, scholarly practice imposed order on the capitals by cataloging them in serial fashion. While myriad interpretations, from political to theological, have been brought to bear on the celebrated Pentecost tympanum within the narthex (fig. 7), analyses of the capitals have focused almost exclusively on resolving questions of iconography, in the narrow sense of the term. Pierre Meunier compiled a list of historiated themes in an 1859 pamphlet, which, like most publications that followed, failed to provide rationales for identifications.<sup>5</sup> His occasional comments on the moral meaning of carvings endured as the interpretive framework in most subsequent scholarship, including the studies of Charles Porée and Charles Despigny.<sup>6</sup> In their 1948 monograph, Francis Salet and Jean Adhémar credited Peter the Venerable as author of what they loosely identified as the moral message of the nave sculpture.<sup>7</sup> This publication further offered the first critical assessment of previous identifications for the carved themes. Peter Diemer expanded this line of inquiry in his 1975 dissertation to include a meticulous analysis of pictorial traditions undergirding the capital imagery. Although the specific significance that themes held for their medieval audience received only occasional consideration, the study demonstrated iconographic idiosyncracies and called into question many widely accepted identifications. He concluded that no overriding principal guided the selection or placement of carved themes.<sup>8</sup>

Two recent studies posit the existence of an iconographic program at Vézelay. Viviane Huys-Clavel identifies a number of zones among the capitals that correspond to various tenets of Christian dogma.<sup>9</sup> As the medieval pilgrim proceeded along the aisles of the church, she argues, clusters of adjacent capitals offered moral lessons. Beyond the absence of archeological or liturgical evidence to support the linear path envisioned for the visitor, the author relies upon a large number of long-rejected identifications for the capital subjects and fails to ground her interpretations in medieval sources. Rejecting this study as an over-interpretation, Marcello Angeben, in an extremely informative survey of Burgundian capitals, briefly revisits the notion of zones at Vézelay.<sup>10</sup> He divides the space of the nave into four sections that roughly correspond to four basic themes: sins of the flesh, Old Testament stories, hagiography, and the celestial Jerusalem. How the juxtaposition of these thematic zones constitutes a program, which he defines as “iconographic coherence,” is not explained. The author notes that the scheme he proposes does not include the foliate capitals, the clerestory capitals, or any of

(1878): 143-47 [transcription of 1726 manuscript]; A. Crosnier, *Iconographie chrétienne* (Tours, 1848); A. Crosnier, “Iconographie de l’église de Vézelay,” *Congrès archéologique de France* 14 (1848): 219-30; P. Merimée, *Notes d’un voyage dans le midi de la France, 1835*, ed. P.M. Auzas (Paris, 1971); B. Morellet and E. Bussière, *Le Nivernois. Album historique et pittoresque*, 3 vols. (1838-41, Nevers); A. Turgot, *Histoire de la ville et abbaye de Vézelay* (Autun, 1997) [edition of an 1826 manuscript]. Only a few capitals are discussed by E.E. Viollet-le-Duc, *Monographie de l’ancienne église abbatiale de Vézelay* (Paris, 1873).

<sup>6</sup> C. Despigny, *Guide-Album de Vézelay* (Vézelay, 1930); C. Porée, “Vézelay,” *Congrès archéologique de France* 74 (1908): 24-44; idem, *L’abbaye de Vézelay* (Paris, 1909). Cf. K. Sazama, “The Assertion of Monastic Spiritual and Temporal Authority in the Romanesque Sculpture of Sainte-Madeleine at Vézelay” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1995), 96-198. In this analysis of a handful of capitals, as well as the Pentecost tympanum, a political moral supplants a Christian one.

<sup>7</sup> Salet and Adhémar, *Madeleine*, 132-34. On Peter as designer of the Pentecost Portal see A. Katzenellenbogen, “The Central Tympanum at Vézelay: Its Encyclopedic Meaning and Its Relation to the First Crusade,” *Art Bulletin* 26 (1944): 151. Salet does not address the question of program in his *Cluny et Vézelay*, which includes a slightly revised version of an iconographic catalogue offered in Salet and Adhémar, *Madeleine*. For a brief analysis of the sculpture as an expression of Benedictine thought and culture see J. Calmette and H. David, *Les grandes heures de Vézelay* (Paris, 1951), 256 and *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Diemer, “Stil und Ikonographie,” 9. For a similar approach to sculptures no longer *in situ*, including a few nave capitals, see L. Saulnier and N. Stratford, *La sculpture oubliée de Vézelay* (Geneva, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> V. Huys-Clavel, *La Madeleine de Vézelay: Cohérence du décor de la nef* (Éditions Comp’Act, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> M. Angeben, *Les chapiteaux romans de Bourgogne: Thèmes et programmes* (Turnhout, 2003), 13-18, 427-32.

<sup>5</sup> P. Meunier, *Iconographie de l’église de Vézelay* (Avallon, 1859). Unless otherwise indicated, citations reference the 1862 edition. Cf. the earlier piecemeal accounts of the Comte de Chastellux, “Une voyage de touristes dans l’Avallonis au XVIIIe siècle,” *Bulletin de la Société d’études d’Avallon* 19

the capitals that were re-employed from an earlier campaign. Even with these exclusions, it is not clear that the subjects of capitals correspond to the theme of the particular zone to which Angheben assigns them. For example, a single capital (67), which features Peter's escape from prison, comprises the final zone. Medieval authors, Angheben points out, sometimes cast this episode from the book of Acts as a metaphor for the soul's entry into the celestial Jerusalem, a notion that is appropriate for a capital located at the entry to the choir, the most sacred part of the church. Yet other historically informed interpretations of the theme, including an allusion to the ongoing investiture crisis and triumph over sin, have been offered.<sup>11</sup> In his efforts to locate an authoritative meaning, Angheben tends to restrict a priori the possibility that a given sculpture or sculptures could communicate on multiple levels.

Throughout this book I avoid the term "program," understood as the presence of a predetermined and unifying concept within an assemblage of art works, for a number of reasons.<sup>12</sup> First, a reexamination of the capitals' iconography, summarized in an appending catalogue, suggests that roughly twenty percent of the themes remain insecurely unidentified. With such a high degree of uncertainty, to posit the existence a program would be premature. The inscrutability of many of the carved subjects should not necessarily be considered a shortcoming of artists. Because medieval viewers would have been assisted by painted tituli, noted in a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources and traces of which can be observed today,<sup>13</sup> sculptors may not have felt obligated in every instance to specify themes by pictorial means. Instead, artists repeatedly experimented with a variety of narrative structures that exploit the three-sided basket of the capital. The many imaginative compositions throughout the nave suggest a concerted effort by the artists to engage viewers.

Second, the placement of individual capitals within the nave appears to have been guided by masons' working methods and not in accordance with a predetermined plan.<sup>14</sup> Changes in building techniques and alterations to the ground plan observable at various points in the nave evince that builders proceeded bay by bay, from west to east, in a rather ad hoc fashion.<sup>15</sup> Under these working conditions, arranging a large number of capitals in accordance with a pre-established scheme would require a highly detailed plan. The expedient incorporation of several capitals (32-38, 65), which were carved several decades before construction and which fail to match the dimensions of their respective engaged columns, speaks against this hypothesis. It further seems unlikely that the other capitals, carved before they were hoisted into position, *avant la pose*, were designed with a specific location in mind. Diemer and Salet both argued that the hands responsible for the capitals change down the length of the nave,

<sup>11</sup> See chapter 2 n.16 and the discussion in the catalogue entry of this sculpture.

<sup>12</sup> Two classic analyses of program are A. Katzenellenbogen, *Sculptural Programs of Chartres Cathedral: Christ, Mary, Ecclesia* (Baltimore, 1959); O. von Simpson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, rev. ed. (New York, 1962).

<sup>13</sup> Chastellux, "Voyage," 143-47. See also Diemer, "Stil und Ikonographie," 441; Saulnier and Stratford, *Sculpture oubliée*, 77; Salet and Adhémar, *Madeleine*, 135.

<sup>14</sup> For the lack of programs at other Burgundian sites see, for example, N. Stratford, "L'Église de Bussy-le-Grand," *Congrès Archéologique de France* 144 (1989): 33; idem, "La sculpture médiévale de Moutiers-Saint-Jean (Saint-Jean-de-Réome)," *Congrès archéologique de France* 144 (1989): 172; idem, "Romanesque Sculpture in Burgundy: Reflections on its Geography, on Patronage, and the Status of Sculpture and on the Working Methods of Sculptors," in *Artistes, artisans et production artistique au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1990), 3: 253-63.

<sup>15</sup> F. Salet, "La Madeleine de Vézelay et ses dates de construction," *Bulletin monumental* 95 (1936): 22.

roughly corresponding to the stages of construction.<sup>16</sup> This suggests an additive working method. Similarly loose workshop practices have been cited to explain why contemporary sculptural ensembles across Europe, from the cloister of Santo Domingo de Silos to the abbey church of Moutiers-St.-Jean, have consistently resisted attempts to identify a unifying theme or organizing principal.<sup>17</sup> Although systematic arrangements of capitals may be identified at a number of Romanesque sites, these typically exclude historiated subjects. The Burgundian church of Gourdon, for example, features foliate capitals of similar composition disposed on either side of the longitudinal axis of the nave. Such formal symmetries are a far cry from the thematic unity required in an iconographic program.

Lastly, Procrustean schemes of organization are rarely observed in many arenas of contemporary culture. In a classic study, Erich Auerbach characterized relations among verses in *chansons des gestes* as fundamentally paratactic, ungoverned by a unifying structure.<sup>18</sup> Extracts from texts collected by monks in so-called florilegia often have no discernible relation to one another.<sup>19</sup> Monastic sermons make breathless transitions between incredibly disparate, though vivid, images drawn from a variety of sources, both Christian and pagan. Indeed, monastic theologians, as a means of invigorating interpretations, often sought contradictions, paradoxes, and disruptions.<sup>20</sup> In short, we have reason to believe that medieval notions of order in the twelfth-century differed markedly from our own. The modern expectation that art have a higher, consistent meaning than what is readily visible likely has its roots in late medieval discussions of allegory.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than attempt to uncover a hidden thematic unity, exploring how the nave capitals of Vézelay cohered for medieval viewers, especially its monastic patrons, stands as the central concern of this book. With roots in the writings of Jean Mabillon and Charles Mantelembert, there is a long history of associating Romanesque sculpture and cenobitic culture. In the early twentieth century, Émile Male identified in very general terms what he considered to be a monastic imprint (*empreinte monastique*) in many carvings.<sup>22</sup> Other scholars, including Meyer Schapiro,<sup>23</sup> offered occasional comments on the monastic content of sculpture, but it was only with the publication of Pressouyre's 1973 article that the beliefs of a monastery's inhabitants were examined systematically in relation to monumental decoration.<sup>24</sup> He

around the year 1200, see P. Patton, *Pictorial Narrative in the Romanesque Cloister: Cloister Imagery and Religious Life in Medieval Spain* (New York, 2004), 1-21.

<sup>18</sup> E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. W.R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), 96-122.

<sup>19</sup> J. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. C. Misrahi (New York, 1961), 182-84; I. Moreira, "Augustine's Three Visions and Three Heavens in Some Early Medieval Florilegia," *Vivarium* 34 (1996): 14; H.-M. Rochais, "Florilèges spirituels," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* (Paris, 1964), 5:435-60; R.H. Rouse and M.A. Rouse, *Preachers, Florilegia and Sermons: Studies on the Manipulus florum of Thomas of Ireland* (Toronto, 1979), 3.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, C.W. Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York, 2001), 158-62; M. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge, 1999), 117; T. Dale, "Monsters, Corporeal Deformities, and Phantasms in the Cloister of St.-Michel-de-Cuxa," *Art Bulletin* 83 (2001): 430; I. Forsyth, "The Theme of Cockfighting in Burgundian Romanesque Sculpture," *Speculum* 53 (1978): 282.

<sup>21</sup> A classic articulation of this thesis is E. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renaissances in Western Art* (New York, 1969), 188-200.

<sup>22</sup> E. Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Twelfth Century*, trans. M. Mathews (Princeton, 1978), 364.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Schapiro, *Romanesque Art*, 28-101.

<sup>24</sup> L. Pressouyre, "St. Bernard to St. Francis: Monastic Ideals and Iconographic Programs in the Cloister," *Gesta* 12 (1973): 71-92. The 1973 issue of *Gesta*, which publishes papers from the "Cloister Symposium" in New York, includes many important studies on the monumental monastic arts. On the *vita apostolica* providing a degree of "professional coherence" to sculptures within the cloister, which seem to lack chronological or theological order, see I. Forsyth, "The 'Vita Apostolica' and Romanesque Sculpture: Some Preliminary Observations," *Gesta* 25 (1986): 80.

<sup>16</sup> See n. 4.

<sup>17</sup> See the overview of scholarship in I. Forsyth, "The Monumental Arts of the Romanesque Period: Recent Research. The Romanesque Cloister," in *The Cloisters: Studies in Honor of the Fiftieth Anniversary*, ed. E.C. Parker with M.B. Shepard (New York, 1992), 8-9. For arguments in favor of the presence of programs in three Spanish cloisters, produced decades later,

analyzed twelfth-century scenes of the apostles in terms of the *vita vere apostolica*, a contemporary belief that Christ's followers lead lives that provided exemplary models for monks. This prolegomenon offered a productive avenue to approach claustral sculpture.<sup>25</sup>

Recent studies on monasticism and the arts have been informed by the assumption that acts of perception and cognition, conditioned by culturally informed mental habits, have a history.<sup>26</sup> Representations of the body and of violent acts, to name only two examples, have been shown to intersect with specific claustral concerns.<sup>27</sup> How sculptural ensembles responded to the viewing needs of monks has been discussed at length in Leah Rutchick's dissertation on the cloister at Moissac.<sup>28</sup> Characterizing cenobitic culture as essentially oral, she interpreted the inchoate arrangement of themes in the cloister of Moissac as the deliberate attempt to prompt the viewer to fill in gaps. Rather than receive a predigested message, according to this model, the monk actively participates in the construction of meaning.

It remains to be demonstrated whether sculpture ensembles in cloisters differ in any essential way from their counterparts in churches and cathedrals. A pilgrimage church like St.-Lazare, Autun, contains a comparably diverse array of themes as the cloister of Moissac.<sup>29</sup> Although monasteries were the principal centers of literacy, their monumental decorative schemes cannot be characterized as relatively more erudite. For example, twelfth-century sculptures of Orpheus playing music to the animals, a theme that had currency in the Early Christian period, are found only within the public spaces of cathedrals.<sup>30</sup> The comments of Ilene Forsyth in a recent article on the portal of the abbey church at Moissac, which marked the threshold of the profane and sacred realms, are relevant here.<sup>31</sup> Through an engagement with the scholarship of Schapiro, she argues that various monastic beliefs and practices informed the syntax of this monument, rather than the specific choice of themes. The portal was viewed by various audiences, all of whom viewed it against the backdrop of their individual interpretive horizons, but its organizing principles were profoundly shaped by its patrons. It may one day prove possible to distinguish institutional "grammars" among various sculptural ensembles.

Both laypeople and monks frequented the nave at Vézelay. Recent scholarship has construed the building largely in terms of the pilgrimage associated with the relics of Mary Magdalen.<sup>32</sup> In focusing on monastic culture, I examine another important aspect of this celebrated site. In addition to being patrons of the building, monks, over the course of their lives, chanted, processed, and prayed in the church. As a result, monks developed a familiarity with the sculptures that would be virtually impossible for a one-time or occasional viewer.<sup>33</sup> Even so, as I will argue at various points of the book, cenobitic beliefs and practices

<sup>25</sup> K. Horste, *Cloister Design and Monastic Reform in Toulouse: The Romanesque Sculpture of La Daurade* (Oxford, 1992), 1-8 and *passim*; J. Wirth, *L'image à l'époque romane* (Paris, 1999), 259-327. See also J. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley, 1997), xix-xxii.

<sup>26</sup> The bibliography on this subject is immense. On the concept of a "period eye" see M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Art*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford, 1988), 29-108. Even perceptions of visual phenomena as seemingly self-evident, say, color have been shown to have changed markedly over time; J. Gage, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (Boston, 1993). For the twelfth century, see the recent discussion in S. Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York, 2002), 1-13.

<sup>27</sup> On the body see Dale, "Monsters"; idem, "The Individual, The Resurrected Body, and Romanesque Portraiture: The Tomb of Rudolf von Schwaben in Merseburg." *Speculum* 77 (2002): 707-43. On violence, see C. Rudolph, *Violence and Daily Life: Reading, Art, and Polemics in the Citeaux Moralia in Job* (Princeton, 1997), 42-62.

<sup>28</sup> L. Rutchick, "Sculpture Programs in the Moissac Cloister: Benedictine Culture, Memory Systems and Liturgical Performance" (Ph. D. diss., University of Chicago, 1991). See also J. Blaettler, "Through Emmaus' Eyes: Art, Liturgy, and Monastic Ideology at Santo Domingo de Silos" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> L. Seidel, *Legends in Limestone: Lazarus, Gislebertus, and the Cathedral of Autun* (Chicago, 1999), 111-62.

<sup>30</sup> Pressouyre, "Monastic Ideals," 82.

<sup>31</sup> I. Forsyth, "Narrative at Moissac: Schapiro's Legacy," *Gesta* 41 (2002): 71-94. See also eadem, "Permutations of Cluny Paradigms at Savigny: Problems of Historiation in Rhône Valley Sculpture," in *Studien zur Geschichte der europäischen Skulptur im 12./13. Jahrhundert*, ed. H. Beck and K. Hengevoss-Dürkop (Frankfurt, 1994), 335-49.

<sup>32</sup> See discussion in chapter 1.

<sup>33</sup> For an overview of the notion of

at Vézelay afford an occasional glimpse into how lay audiences would have understand specific sculptures.<sup>34</sup>

An exhaustive treatment of this question seems neither possible nor desirable. During the research stage of this project, my attention centered on identifiable innovations, whether formal or iconographic, among the capitals. Though this ran the risk of prizing originality for its own sake, a decidedly modernist expectation, I believed that novelties offered a viable avenue to explore how artists responded to the specific needs of the patrons. This hypothesis was repeatedly confirmed as I identified intersections between these innovations and the interpretive modes and communal practices of the monks, as recorded in a variety of texts. Examples range from sermons read during the liturgy to a description of a gestural sign language used by brothers to communicate during observed periods of silence. These and other sources do not provide exhaustive accounts of the sculpture, but offer some insight into the specific ways that carved images resonated for their medieval audiences, monastic and sometimes lay. While any study on Vézelay must bear in mind that virtually the entire contents of its library and archives were lost in a seventeenth-century fire, the care lavished on the sculptural works attests to their significance perhaps more than any text could.

In chapter one, I provide an overview of the circumstances surrounding construction of the church in order to argue that the nave bears a distinct monastic imprint. This serves to complement previous studies on the church, which have construed it primarily as a pilgrimage center for Mary Magdalen. In chapter two, I consider cases in which identifiable monastic gestures, described in contemporary sources as bearers of specific meaning, are employed in the nave sculpture. Instead of relying exclusively on exegetical texts, direct knowledge of which is often difficult to demonstrate, I identify a different level of viewer response, grounded in communal practices. In chapter three, I analyze the choice of scenes and the narrative structure of the idiosyncratic hagiographic capitals. Here I discuss the profound regional and institutional ties to these stories, reinforced by liturgical observances, that offer insight into how the community imagined the practice of the religious life.

In the final two chapters, I explore potential formal and thematic interrelations among the entire corpus of capitals, which, as integral members of the architecture, are necessarily brought into conjunction with one another. In chapter four, I examine the large corpus of imaginatively carved foliage. More than just frame or filler – the functions often associated with ornament – I argue that these elements encourage a discursive viewing that resembles the mechanics of exegesis. In the last chapter, I address the many images of decapitation and hair-pulling, which account for roughly fifteen percent of historiated themes. In

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the competency of readers see S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York, 1989), 117-29.

<sup>34</sup> On the various audiences of the Pentecost Portal at Vézelay see P. Low, "You Who Were Once Far Off: Enlivening Scripture in the Main Portal of Vézelay," *Art Bulletin* 85 (2003): 469-89.

addition to the possible cultural significance of these violent acts, especially in relation to medieval polemics that cast Jews as violent, I consider the types of interpretation that are possible with repeated motifs. Drawing on a number of monastic authors who discuss the aesthetic and epistemological aspects of repetition, I argue that these formally similar scenes have the potential to structure a viewing experience that yields insights of a very different order than is possible with the written word.