Gislebertus's Eve: An Alternative Interpretation of the Eve Lintel Relief from the Church of Saint-Lazare, Autun

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It is only by seeing from within the present context that institutional forces within art history have worked generally to silence the whole question of the roles played by gender and sexuality in the field of vision, that art historians are able now to begin to see the ellipses and silences within the archive.

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For a smallish piece of Romanesque stone relief sculpture, the Eve lintel fragment of the north portal of the Cathedral of Saint-Lazare in Autun has attracted singularly vehement responses (Figure 1). Since its rediscovery in 1856, its subject, Eve, has been both glorified as the most beautiful Eve of the Romanesque period and vilified as the most demonic.[1]

T.S.R. Boase's introduction to Denis Grivot and George Zarnecki's authoritative monograph on the Romanesque sculpture at Autun, *Gislebertus: Sculptor of Autun*, is characteristic of the praise for this Eve's beauty.

> ...[The figure of Eve] still remains one of the most sensuous of all Romanesque sculptures. Nowhere else is the female body treated with such realism of curves or such disturbing beauty...the haunting face...has a seductive quality that no other 12th-century artist has equalled.[2]

Unfortunately, admiration for the figure's beauty has been tempered often by a strong element of misogyny. Throughout this century, she has been characterized as "demonic,"[3] "the most insidious,"[4] "furtive,"[5] "woman-serpent,"[6] and as having two "perverse natures, that of the woman and that of the animal."[7] These emphatic observations have been remarked upon by scholars, including Karl Werckmeister and Barbara Abou-el-Haj.[8]

If these interpretations remained in the distant past, they would perhaps be less disquieting. However, these sentiments are echoed unto the present day in such survey texts as James Snyder's 1989 *Medieval Art*:

> While a number of interpretations have been suggested for Eve's act and personality, there can be little doubt that she is the embodiment of lust and greed, and an erotic sensuousness seems to transform her body into that of the evil serpent who betrayed man.[9]

Why has this work of art produced such overheated responses?

A feminist response to this question would follow Norma Broude and Mary Garrard's thesis that the female body has been objectified, "converted into a signifier for a host of ideas pro-

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1 Denis Grivot and George Zarnecki, *Gislebertus: Sculptor of Autun* (London: Trianon, 1961) 149.

2 T.S.R. Boase, introduction, Grivot 8.

3 François Salet, "La sculpture romane en Bourgogne," *Bulletin monumental* 119 (1961): 334; my translation.

4 Henri Focillon, *L'art d'Occident* (Paris, 1938) 102; quoted in O. K. Werckmeister, "The lintel fragment representing Eve from Saint-Lazare, Autun," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 35 (1972): 28, n. 147; my translation.

5 J. Streignart, "L'Eve," *Les études classiques* 18 (1950): 453; quoted in Werckmeister, "The lintel fragment" 28, n. 147; my translation.

6 L. Reau, *L'art religieux du moyen-âge* (Paris, 1946) 178; quoted in Werckmeister, "The lintel fragment" 11, n. 53.

7 Georges Duby, *Adolescence de la chrétienté occidentale* (Geneva, 1967) 64.

8 Werckmeister, "The lintel fragment" 28-29, nn. 143-49.

9 James Snyder, *Medieval Art* (Englewood Hills, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989) 288.

jected on it...a vessel of conceptual meaning."[10] Thus, most art-historical interpretations of the Eve lintel sculpture tell us more about the predominant attitude towards woman in the art-historical literature than about the object under study.

I intend to show that it is possible to interpret the Eve lintel sculpture without misogyny and sexual objectification. I will place my alternative interpretation within the context of Werckmeister's masterful analysis of the liturgical, social and artistic milieu of the church of Saint-Lazare at Autun in the early twelfth century.[11]

The church of Saint-Lazare was built in Autun, in the Duchy of Burgundy, under the patronage of the bishop of Autun, Étienne de Bagé. The church of Saint-Lazare was built to house the relics of Lazarus, in addition to, not as a replacement of, the cathedral. Building began in 1119. By 1132, when the new church was first consecrated, the exterior sculpture was largely complete. Beyond its visionary style, the sculpture at Saint-Lazare is distinctive because it bears a signature: *Gislebertus hoc fecit*, or Gislebertus made this, seen below Christ's feet on the west portal (Figure 2). Gislebertus is believed to have completed all of the sculpture in the church, including the Eve lintel relief.[12]

The new church was built to attract the attention of pilgrims to the relics at Autun, in hope of making it a regular stop along the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. The pilgrimage would have resulted in increased revenues for both the bishop, in donations to the saint, and for Hugh II, Duke of Burgundy, in tolls, among other economic benefits.[13]

The configuration of the lot available for the construction of Saint-Lazare meant that the main entrance of the church could not be the west portal, as was customary, but would rather have to be the north transept portal, which faced the town square and the cathedral.[14]

The Eve lintel relief would have been part of the church's north transept portal. The portal itself was dismantled in 1766, and Eve is the only sizable fragment that remains.[15] From documentary sources, historians have determined that the portal's tympanum was devoted to the raising of Lazarus and related themes, such as the parable of Dives and Lazarus.[16]

The portal's imagery had two functions. The first was to identify the church as one devoted to the cult of Saint-Lazare. Saint-Lazare was a medieval conflation of the Lazarus resurrected by Jesus, brother of Mary Magdalen and Martha, and the Lazarus of the parable of Lazarus and Dives. His cult developed in Burgundy along with the cult of his purported sister, Mary Magdalen (herself a conflation of several biblical women).[17]

The portal's second function was to remind the local population of the liturgy of the sacrament of penance, according to Werckmeister. He posits that the iconography of the church of Saint-Lazare is based on the Office of the Dead, which incorporates the themes of penance and confession, as represented by allusions to Lazarus and the theme of Last Judgement. The Office of the Dead would have been another revenue source for the diocese, since people often paid for prayers to be said for the dead and for other burial rituals. Werckmeister contends that Bishop Étienne deliberately selected this iconography to reinforce the power of his office as the agent for absolution and intercession between sinner and Christ as well as to fill his purse.[18]

According to Werckmeister, a penance ritual took place in front of the main (north) portal of the church of Saint-Lazare, as it did in many other contemporary churches throughout Western Christendom. The ritual involved the public confession of penitents, who were then thrown out of the church and ashes were cast upon them. Upon completion of their appointed penance, the bishop absolved the penitents of sin, and they were welcomed again into the church and into the community of the virtuous. The sculpture of the north portal, according to Werckmeister, was designed to reflect this ritual. Lazarus was perceived to be both the embodiment of the notion of spiritual resurrection and an allegory of confession. This view is reiterated throughout medieval exegeses.[19]

Werckmeister believes that the north portal's lintel showed Adam and Eve crawling and hiding in shame after having committed their sin, reflecting the posture of the real-life penitents. By hiding rather than confessing, Adam and Eve compound their disgrace, since God must see the sinner and the sinner must confess his sin before absolution can be granted. He supports this argument by citations from medieval exegetical literature, in which Adam and Eve are the Old Testament antitypes of the New Testament Lazarus. However, Werckmeister ac-

10 Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, introduction, *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992) 1.

11 Werckmeister, "The lintel fragment" 1-30.

12 Grivot 17-20.

13 Barbara Abou-el-Haj, "The Audiences for the Medieval Cult of Saints," *Gesta* 30 (1991): 3-15.

14 Grivot 19, 146.

15 Grivot 146.

16 Grivot 146-152.

17 Helene Setlak-Garrison, "The Capitals of St. Lazare at Autun: Their Relationship to the Last Judgment Portal," diss., UCLA, 1984, 126-130. For the parable of Dives and Lazarus, see Luke 16: 19-31; for Lazarus's resurrection, John 11; also, "Dives and Lazarus" and "Lazarus," J.C.J. Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983); "The Three Marys," Donald Attwater, *Dictionary of Saints*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1983).

18 Werckmeister, "The lintel fragment" 1-30; O. K. Werckmeister, "Die Auferschung der Toten am Westportal von St. Lazare inn Autun," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien. Jahrbuch des Instituts für Frühmittelalterforschung der Universität Münster* 16 (1982): 207-36.

19 Werckmeister, "The lintel fragment" 15-23.

knowledges contradictions in his argument. First, the stories of Lazarus and Adam and Eve are supposed to correspond, but he identifies Lazarus as an allegory of confession and Adam and Eve as an allegory of non-confession. Second, he concludes that Eve's depiction in the lintel relief is a conflation of two narrative moments: the top half of her body, which regrets her sin, and the bottom half of her body, which is about to commit it.[20]

However, an interpretation of the Eve lintel sculpture of Saint-Lazare is possible which fits in with Werckmeister's overall iconographic analysis and even avoids some of his contradictions. Prior scholars have assumed Eve's sinful state and have chosen to interpret Eve's posture and act as representative of the first fallen woman.

However, the elements that support this argument can also be interpreted differently in relation to the other iconography at Saint-Lazare. I suggest that the reason the Gislebertus Eve is depicted in a style atypical for Eve in Romanesque sculpture is because this particular Eve is intended to be emblematic of Eve before the Fall, not Eve after the Fall.

Werckmeister attributes Eve's prone posture to her crawling in shame after she has eaten the forbidden fruit.[21] However, the fruit is still firmly attached to the tree of knowledge by a sturdy and clearly visible stem. Her face does not express horror or shame, but rather calm thoughtfulness. Unlike other Romanesque, post-lapsarian Eves, she is not clutching a fig leaf to her body, covering her genitals with her hands or hiding behind Adam (Figure 3).[22]

Rather, Eve seems to be floating in some paradisiacal state of grace in the Garden of Eden. Her prone posture can not be due to shame, as she exists here before sin, but rather to a perfect humility. (Or perhaps Gislebertus simply adopted the posture to accommodate the horizontal shape of the lintel.) Eve's position in the lintel itself marks ambiguity. Eve is positioned as a transitional figure—between the profane world and the sacred space of the church. And this transitional location emphasizes her action: Eve is locked in the moment of decision, choosing between virtue and sin.

How does a consideration of Gislebertus's style elucidate the question of Eve's transitional state? Eve's lifted head, meditative expression and the graceful curves of her limbs contrast dramatically with the images of the damned in Saint-Lazare's west portal sculpture of the Last Judgement (Figure 4). The figures of the resurrected who are about to be judged are angular and frantic. They scowl or scream in horror. Their bodies are agitated and emaciated.

The gesture of the hand to the cheek, which Werckmeister interprets as a traditional gesture of grief, is inconclusive because it is represented both among the saved and the damned.[23] The gesture does not seem to signify only the grief that Werckmeister theorized. Otherwise, what would account for Saint Anne using the same gesture in hearing of the imminent birth of Mary (in a nave capital, Figure 5)? One of the elders in heaven at Christ's right in the Last Judgement tympanum shares the gesture (Figure 6), as well as one of the elect in the west portal's lintel. Perhaps the gesture expresses thoughtfulness, or even is simply an indicator that the figure is listening.

Eve's facial expression does not seem particularly remorseful (Figure 7). In fact, it resembles that of Mary in the Flight into Egypt nave capital more closely than it resembles the face of any of the damned (Figure 8).[24]

Further, the bent-kneed pose Werckmeister identifies with Eve's reptilian nature is typical of Gislebertus's figures, male and female, standing and lying down, good and evil. Many positive figures at Saint-Lazare are depicted thus, including Saint Vincent, the preeminent martyr of Spain (nave capital, Figure 9), and a woman among the elect in the Last Judgement portal.[25] The women awaiting judgement in the west portal lintel share Eve's nudity and sexual differentiation, but so do the elect. Most importantly, none of the damned share Eve's grace and restful expression (Figure 10).

Thus, on analyzing the actual sculpture, I suggest that Gislebertus's Eve is Eve prior to the Fall. What we see is Eve in Paradise, contemplating sin, exercising her divinely granted free will. This reading would fit in with the overall program of sin and penance in the north portal suggested by Werckmeister. Lazarus represents the resurrection of the righteous in Paradise. Dives represents the damnation of the unrepentant. Eve represents the free choice of man between sin and virtue. By sinning, man loses salvation. But by choosing to confess and repent his sin, he can regain it—like Lazarus, he is spiritually resurrected. The Adam and Eve lintel emphasizes man's moral freedom and its potential rewards, Paradise and salvation.

Proving this hypothesis is, of course, impossible, especially since most of the portal sculpture is now lost. Nonetheless, this new, alternative interpretation is important because it grants

20 Werckmeister, "The lintel fragment" 8-12.

21 Werckmeister, "The lintel fragment" 8-12.

22 The most convenient way to view a series of representations of Eve in Romanesque sculpture is to refer to the extensive illustrations found in Arthur Kingsley Porter, *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1923). I regret that space constraints prevent me from showing more comparative material here.

23 Werckmeister, "The lintel fragment" 6.

24 Denise Jalabert notes the stylistic similarities between Eve's and Mary's faces in her 1949 article, "L'Ève de la cathédrale d'Autun: sa place dans l'histoire de la sculpture Romane," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 986 (April 1949): 262-63. However, she does not derive any conclusions regarding the interpretation of Eve from this observation.

25 As in note 24, Jalabert points out these similarities but does not explore them further, 264-65.

Eve the right to signify something other than eternal damnation. In the accepted reconstructions and interpretations of the portal sculpture to date, this possibility has been deliberately ignored.

Can I be accused of viewing Gislebertus's Eve ahistorically, with glasses tinted post-modern? I acknowledge that in twelfth-century depictions of women, misogyny and objectification were often intended by their authors. Romanesque Burgundy can be described fairly as a misogynistic culture. It is inarguable that during the twelfth century Eve was perceived to be the primary agent of the Fall and cause for man's suffering on earth. Geoffroy of Vendôme, an aristocratic Benedictine abbot, summarized one Romanesque view of woman:

> The [female] sex poisoned our first ancestor, who was also husband and father [to the first woman]; it strangled John the Baptist and delivered brave Samson to his death. In a manner of speaking it also killed Our Savior: for had [woman's] sin not required it, Our Savior would not have had to die.[26]

Nonetheless, this was also the period that saw the cult of Mary flourish and expand. The clerical gaze of the twelfth century saw woman as twofold: as Eve and as Mary. Woman could choose grace by remaining a virgin, like Mary, or choose damnation by sinning, like Eve. However, the popularity of the cult of Mary Magdalen is evidence of the fluidity of those two roles. Like Eve, Mary Magdalen sinned. Like Mary she attained salvation. To the Burgundian mind, Mary Magdalen was inextricably linked with Lazarus, as she was perceived to have been his sister and to have come to France to proselytize with him and sister Martha. Indeed, the church of Saint-Lazare dedicated the chapels on either side of the altar to Mary Magdalen and Martha, and many churches throughout southern France were devoted to her cult.[27]

It is important to recall that the story of Adam and Eve introduced values into Christian culture beyond the notion of original sin. As religious historian Elaine Pagels has pointed out, for the first 300 years of the Christian era the story was interpreted, not as a story of sin, but as representing free will—the moral freedom and responsibility of man. It was only in St. Augustine's hands in the fourth century that the story was sexualized, and that the notion of bondage to original sin was introduced.[28] But Augustine's interpretation coexisted with others throughout the Middle Ages. Such eminent theologians as John Chrysostom, Clement of Rome, Methodius and St. Ambrose invoked Genesis 1 through 3 (and Paul's interpretation thereof in Romans 7) as vehicles to preach the gospel of *libero arbitrio*.[29] Methodius writes:

> I, being fleshly, and being placed in the middle between good and evil, as a person with free choice, am one who has the power to choose what I will....For it is not in our power to think or not to think what is evil, but to act or not to act, upon those things.[30]

In his homily on Paradise, Ambrose addresses the problem of choosing between good and evil and affirms the presence of the Devil in Paradise as a test of man's fidelity and obedience. Despite Eve's failure to obey God's command, Ambrose writes, sympathetically:

> And the woman said: "The serpent deceived me and I ate." That fault is pardonable which is followed by an admission of guilt. The woman is therefore not to be despaired of, who did not keep silent before God, but who preferred to admit her sin...Although she incurred the sin of disobedience, she still possessed in the tree of Paradise food for virtue. And so she admitted her sin and was considered worthy of pardon.[31]

This exegetical tradition remains vigorous throughout the Middle Ages. There are dozens of commentaries on free will and Genesis, including some by St. Odo of Cluny and by such noted eleventh and twelfth century theologians as Hugh of St. Victor, Anselm of Canterbury and Peter Lombard. Through Anselm of Canterbury, Ambrose's interpretation of Genesis 1 through 3 influenced an entire generation of scholars preoccu-

26 Geoffroy of Vendôme, in Jacques Paul Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1844-1864), vol. 157, col. 168; quoted in Jacques Dalarun, "The Clerical Gaze," *A History of Women in the West, Vol. II Silences of the Middle Ages*, Christiane Klapisch-Zubler, Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992) 19.

27 Dalarun 18-21; Marina Warner discusses the relationships between Eve, Mary and Mary Magdalen in *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage, 1976), especially 50-67, 224-35.

28 Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (New York: Vintage, 1988) 99, 109-10, 114, 130-134, 143-144, 149, 150.

29 Elizabeth A. Clark, "Heresy, Asceticism, Adam, and Eve: Interpretations of Genesis 1-3 in the Later Latin Fathers," 99-134, and Elaine H. Pagels, "'Freedom from Necessity' Philosophic and Personal Dimensions of Christian Conversion," 67-98, both from *Genesis 1-3 in the History of Exegesis: Intrigue in the Garden*, Gregory Allen Robbins, ed., Studies in Women and Religion 27, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988). John Chrysostom rejects the notion of blaming any personal propensity for sin on Adam and Eve:

> "What then," one says, "am I to do? Must I die because of [Adam]?" I answer, it is not because of him; for you yourself have not remained without sin, and even if it is not the same sin, you have at any rate committed another. (Pagels 89.)

30 Methodius on Pauline exegesis of Genesis, "Discourse on the Resurrection" 2.1, *Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius, Methodius, Arnobius and minor writers*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); quoted in Pagels, "'Freedom from Necessity'" 86. In the Coxe anthology, see also Methodius "Concerning Free Will."

31 Saint Ambrose, *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage, The Fathers of the Church 42 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1961) 327, 349.

pied with the notions of grace and free will.

Anselm devotes several treatises to the discussion of the problem of human freedom. In *On Freedom of Choice* he concludes that Adam (and by extension, Eve) enjoys freedom of choice both before and after the decision to disobey God.[32] Like Ambrose, he emphasizes hope over damnation: "A man is free even when he does not have uprightness because it could not be taken away from him by anyone else if he had it."[33]

While the revival of Augustinian theology in the thirteenth century gave new force to Augustine's negative interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve, until then their story was cited to explain the doctrine of free will as often as it was cited to illustrate the doctrine of original sin.[34]

To our secular age, the message of Adam and Eve has been reduced to that of the Fall of Man, but to a medieval mind alternative messages were possible. To conclude, therefore, I continue the long medieval tradition of quoting St. Ambrose on this subject:

> And so take Eve, not now covered with the leaves of the fig tree, but clad in the Holy Spirit and glorious with new grace. Now she does not hide as one who is naked, but she comes to meet you arrayed in a garment of shining splendor, because grace is her clothing. But neither was Adam naked at first, when he was clothed with innocence.[35]

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32 Anselm of Canterbury, "On Freedom of Choice," *Truth, Freedom and Evil: Three Philosophical Dialogues*, trans. by Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967) 121-144.

33 Anselm of Canterbury 141.

34 Pagels, "Freedom from Necessity" 68-97; Brown, 101-105; Justo L. González, *From Augustine to the Eve of the Reformation*, vol. 2 of *A History of Christian Thought*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971) 42-46, 209, 243, 272.

35 Saint Ambrose, "De Isaac vel anima," *Seven Exegetical Works*, trans. by Michael P. McHugh, Fathers of the Church 65, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic U of America P, 1971) 35.

Figure 1. Gislebertus, *Eve*, lintel fragment from the north portal of Saint-Lazare, Autun, 130cm x 72cm, 1119-1132, Musée Rolin, Autun. Credit: Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.

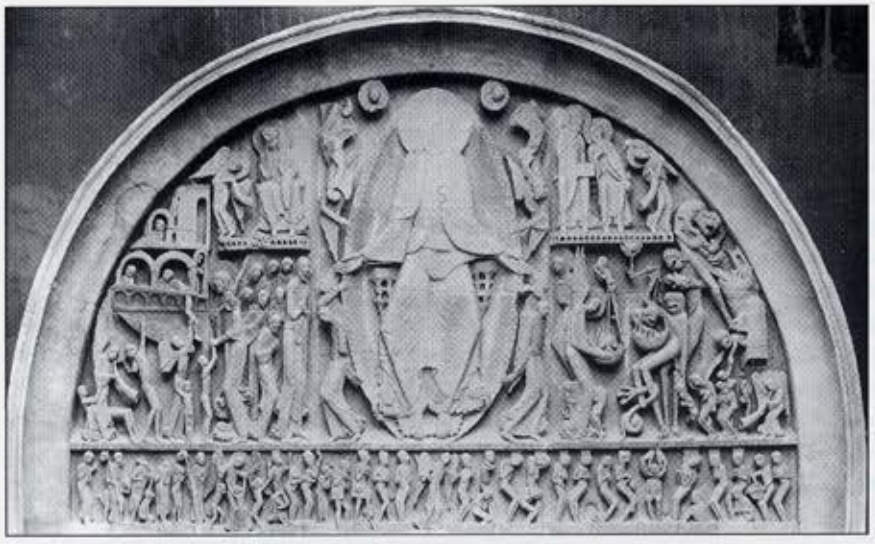

Figure 2. Gislebertus, *Last Judgement*, tympanum and lintel, west portal, 1119-1132, Saint-Lazare, Autun. Credit: Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.

Figure 5. Gislebertus, *Annunciation to Saint Anne*, nave capital, 1119-1132, Saint-Lazare, Autun.

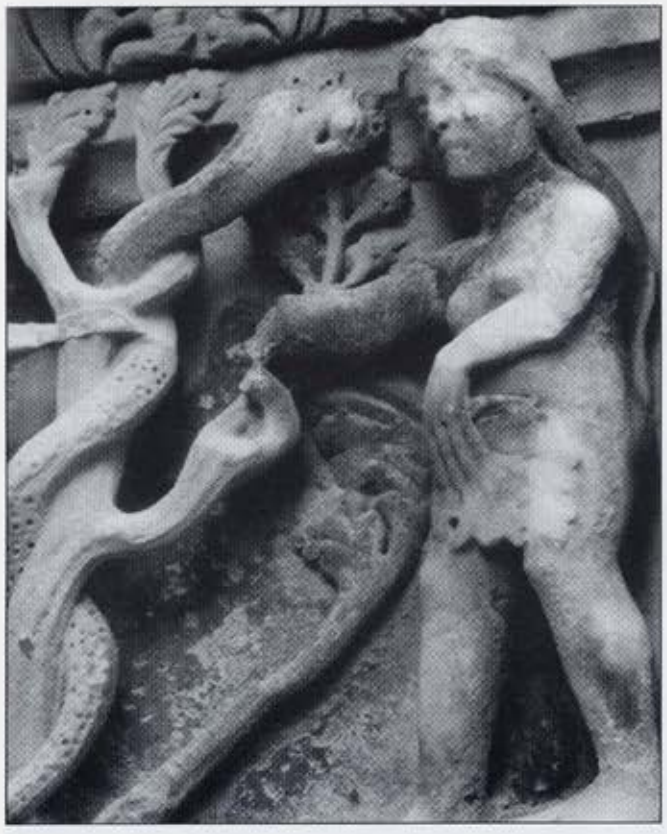

Figure 3. *Eve scowling and covering her genitals*, northern end of frieze, west facade, *c.* 1150, Saint-Trophime, Arles. Credit: Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY.

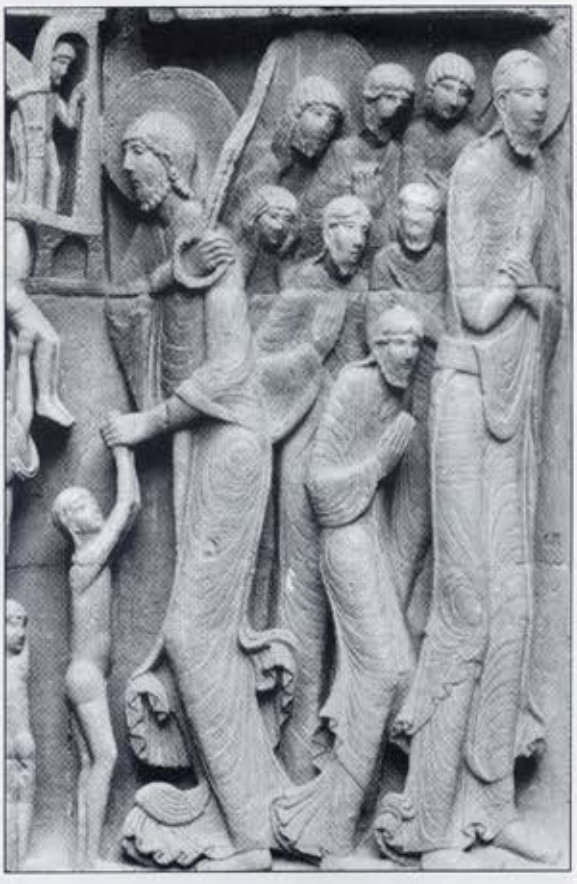

Figure 6. Gislebertus, Detail, *Last Judgement*, tympanum, west portal, 1119-1132, Saint-Lazare, Autun. Credit: Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.

Figure 4. Gislebertus, Detail, *Last Judgement*, tympanum and lintel, west portal, 1119-1132, Saint-Lazare Autun. Credit: Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.

Figure 7. Gislebertus, Detail, *Eve*, lintel fragment from the north portal of Saint-Lazare, Autun, 1119-1132, Musée Rolin, Autun. Credit: Giraudon/ Art Resource, NY.

Figure 8. Gislebertus, *Flight into Egypt*, nave capital, 1119-1132, Saint-Lazare, Autun. Credit: Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.

Figure 10. Gislebertus, Detail, *Last Judgement*, tympanum and lintel, west portal, 1119-1132, Saint-Lazare, Autun. Credit: Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.

Figure 9. Gislebertus, *Saint Vincent*, nave capital, 1119-1132, Saint-Lazare, Autun. Credit: Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY.