

Romanesque Pilgrimage Terror

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Last Judgment, West Tympanum, Saint-Lazare, Autun, France, c. 1120-1135

The Christians of this period were consumed with the Second Coming and assuring their place and being aptly judged for Life Eternal on the Day of Judgment. And the purpose of the pilgrimages was to seek salvation, so coming to this church made total sense to them. The theme was pretty powerfully illustrated in the tympanum by the entrance to the church. The terrifying nature of the images – the contorted faces and bodies of the souls of the dead lining up to learn their fate, the monstrous figures weighing the souls of the dead, the damned being dragged into the hands of hell - how much more terrifying could it be to the largely illiterate pilgrims who depended on imagery for their understanding of what lied ahead of them. They were unable to read the terrifying inscription at the bottom of the piece, but they understood the images. And what about the benefactors and artists who produced these images – they were spot on in their ability to make their point very vividly.

But what is most interesting about this piece of art – it's a reminder of the Mesopotamian/Egyptian art.

Some examples:

- Registers – the souls lining up on the bottom lintel, separated by a horizontal border (with the inscription in it) and other scenes taking place above in more registers and borders, all of it telling the story from the bottom up.
- Hierarchy of Scale - Christ shown much larger than all the other figures.
- Chaos - The souls of the dead jumping out of their sarcophagi, lined up waiting for their fate, almost look like the lined up dead bodies of dead Egyptian enemies, and in other “registers” some bodies bound for hell look like they are strewn and piled up all over the place.
- Rigidity and angular shape of the figures throughout the piece
- Relief Style of sculpture
- Creatures, part human and part animal in the weighing of souls register
- Orderly processions and groupings of people

Although commonly attributed to Gislebertus as the sculptor - because the name is inscribed on the lintel. A couple of interesting website sources (Project Gutenberg and Khan Academy) both claim that recent scholarship suggests that Gislebertus was really the name of the local duke who was responsible for bringing the bones of Lazarus to Autun and for commissioning the piece. The church furthermore was built specifically to hold those bones. They further claim that sculptors and their workshops of that period were considered “craftsmen” more than “artists” and would be working in the name of God, rather than as artists taking credit for their work. Furthermore, they say this would have been the first instant of a sculptor in the Romanesque period signing a piece such as this.

But in response to the aspect of terror, really, even though one may think he has lived his life in perfect harmony with the expectations of avoiding hell, there may always be an element of doubt, extremely small as it may be, that maybe some very minor imperfection could be enough to tilt the scales the wrong way. So that element of terror may exist for any believer, and the imagery on the tympanum is very compelling to instill that element of doubt – and terror.