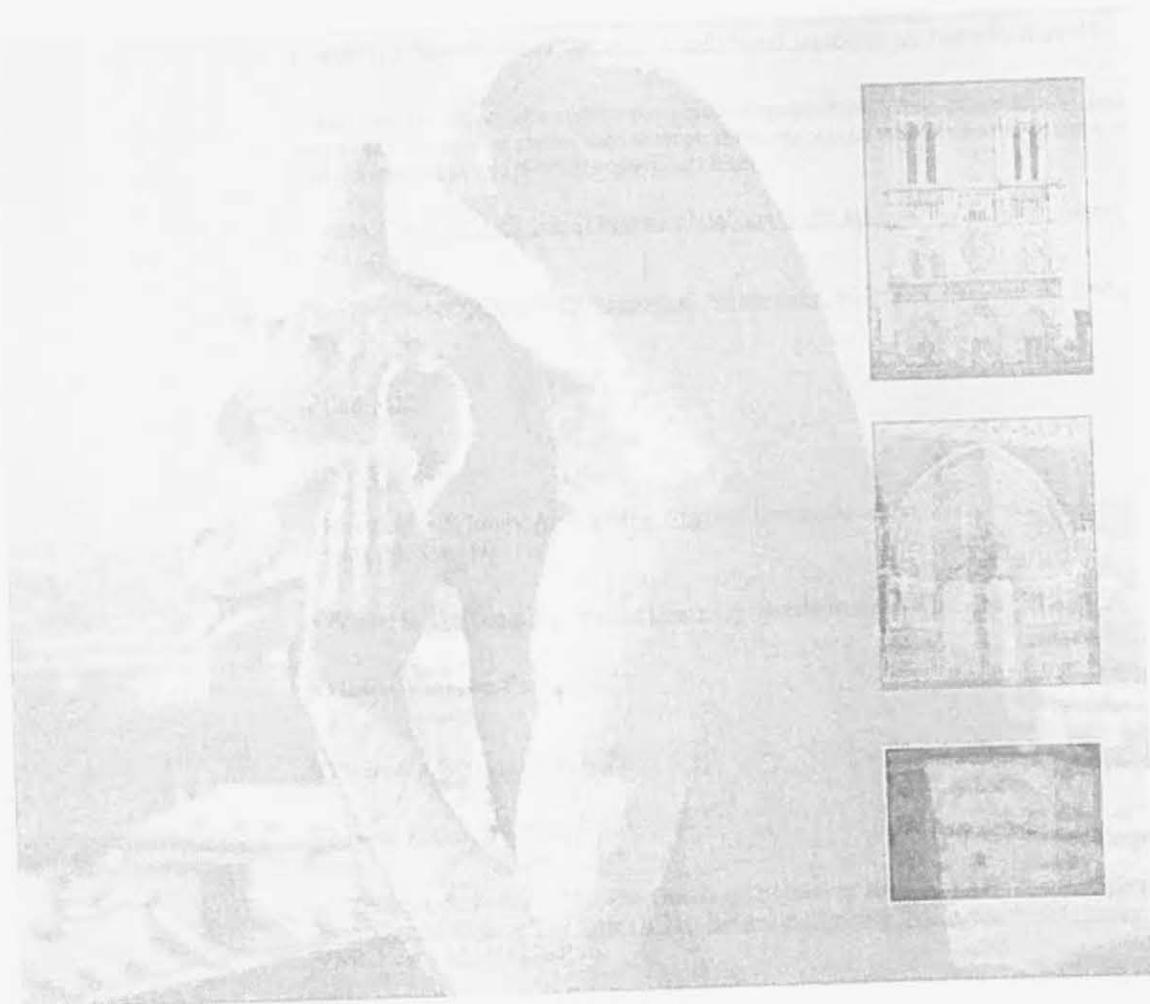


The Elite and the Masses

The visible and the invisible symbolism of
images engraved on the central portal of

Notre-Dame de Paris



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This article considers the possible multiple decoding of the significance and the role played by the images engraved on the medallions of the central portal of Notre-Dame de Paris. Intrigued by "The Mystery of the Cathedrals" by Fulcanelli, a study of medieval symbolism published in 1920s, we looked further for evidence supporting or disproving this quite cryptic and mystic interpretation, which queries art historians' assumption that lay masons followed exclusively the dogmatic requirements of their ecclesiastical patrons. Thus the article is an attempt to take an emic approach to the anthropology of hermetism, the anthropology of a closed community. We have the *memoria* in stone and glass of a ritual process and the contradictory opinions of some authors, but who are the members of this closed community: master masons or alchemists? As we shall see further, hermetic authors, such as Fulcanelli, offer truncated explanations eluding a dialectic approach, while art historians ignore an eventual twofold symbolism, although their straightforward Christian interpretations have hiatuses.



Figure 1. Notre-Dame de Paris, West facade.



Figure 2. Notre-Dame de Paris, Portal of the Last Judgement.

Hermetism: Esoteric messages and initiation ritual

For the purpose of this essay, we need to consider first the specific features of a closed community or secret society. The innermost part is set by the different symbolic models and *memoria* traditions of this subgroup emerged from the medieval urban society. This community, characterised by hermetism, has its own culture, which cannot be understood by others who are not members of the closed group or secret society. The secret society keeps hidden its ceremonies, which a profane person may not attend, and also the signs what allow mutual recognition within the group. Such enculturation is possible only through a ritual of initiation composed of three stages: the separation, the threshold, and the aggregation. The hermetic tradition is based on the group identity. This identity is built up by constructing a common past and by establishing specific ritual processes.¹

Psychologically, initiation is a process through which an individual passes from an inferior stage of self into a superior one, through transmission of spiritual influence by the organisation, marking transformation of the profane person into an initiated one. Nevertheless, a profane one should possess certain abilities in order to be considered for initiation. Through a series of symbolic acts, the individual is given the sensation that he is dying, in order to be reborn to a new life. The secret of initiation is incommunicable because each potential initiate perceives the traditional symbolism of the rituals in his own way. The central portal of Notre-Dame de Paris virtually provides evidence of such esoteric messages and initiation practices.

Urban culture: Crucible of secret societies

Secret societies are the result of a certain kind of culture. The hermetic tradition belongs to the Great Urban Tradition, within which the intellectual and the popular traditions are separated. Masonic² and Alchemical guilds emerged in medieval Paris, a city with a predominantly orthogenetic structure.

Gradually the flood of houses, constantly driven outwards from the heart of the town, overflowed his enclosure, eroded it, wore it down, erased it. Philip-Augustus built a new containing dyke. He imprisoned Paris within a circular chain of massive, solid, high towers. For more than one century the houses pressed and piled up one upon another, their level rising like the water in a reservoir. They began to grow deeper, put storey upon storey, climbed one upon another, spurted upwards like any sap under pressure, and each strove to lift its head higher than its neighbours for the sake of a little fresh air. The streets grew deeper and narrower; every open space was filled up and disappeared. At last the houses leaped over Philip-Augustus's wall, and joyfully scattered over the plain in ragged disorder, as though escaping from captivity. There they settled, hacked gardens out of the fields, took their ease.³

Thus the context of the emergence of secret societies is a city in the first stage of urbanisation by the transformation of rural society through a process of cultural concentration and nucleation.



Figure 3 Portal of the Last Judgement. Detail of the central pillar: Philosophy or Alchemy?



Figure 3 Portal of the Last Judgement. Detail of the socle left wing.



Figure 3 Portal of the Last Judgement. Detail of the socle right wing.

Masonry and Alchemy are both practiced by closed professional groups, both require specific skills and outstanding knowledge, both aim to achieve the Supreme Opus the first one in stone while the second one in human spirit. This elite, be it of alchemists or master masons, should have considered the *memoria* of the rituals more important than the *memoria* of persons of its members since the hermetic tradition is based on the group identity.

Masons, due to their special knowledge and their grouping in sacerdotal colleges, have since earliest times been a kind of aristocracy among the guilds. In the Middle Ages, the builders of cathedrals and palaces enjoyed several privileges bestowed on them by ecclesiastical and lay authorities.⁶ During the period when the great cathedrals were built, the masons were free and the master mason was not only free but also completely independent, working on a contractual basis. Architecture was considered a royal art and its secrets were revealed only to the chosen few.⁷ In this way was created the myth of the Supreme Opus, that of the construction through continuous effort of the Ideal Temple universal and endless, not rarely depicted in medieval illuminations as The Gothic Cathedral.

Western façade of Notre-Dame de Paris: The iconographic program

The construction of Notre-Dame de Paris began by Maurice de Sully in 1163 and finished in the reign of Philippe-Auguste. The west front is divided into three horizontal bands and at the same time the two great towers above the aisles, with solid buttresses, break the facade into three vertical sectors. The main themes are visual narratives portraying the lives of the saints. The gallery of the first level is decorated with statues of the twenty-eight kings of France, starting with Childebert and ending with Philippe-Auguste. The oldest of the portals is that of Saint Anne, the central portal carries the Last Judgment, and the right portal is dedicated to the Virgin and has on its socle cycles of the Signs of the Zodiac and Labours of the Months.⁸ A façade embodying the *summa* of medieval Paris,⁹ the total and ideal image of its society provides, thus, the visual context for the images under discussion.

We can conclude that the major iconographic themes on the west front are religious ones, with the exception of the gallery of kings a feature peculiar to French cathedrals, which nevertheless express a relationship between church and kingship.

Since this religious iconography has its own visual message, we assume that the images on the central portal of Notre-Dame (circa 1208) also have their symbolism, emphasised by their repetition on the portals of Chartres (circa 1220), Amiens (circa 1225), Auxerre (circa 1230), Reims (circa 1265), and Laon.¹⁰ Although it is generally accepted that the religious imagery had the role of educating the illiterate masses in Christian faith, the cathedral consequently being a great Bible in stone, the idea of a hidden intentional symbolism is ancient as well. The issue of who was responsible for the conception of the iconographical program has been discussed at least as early as the seventeenth century.¹¹

Visual message: Multiple symbolism

The central pilaster of the main portal offers a series of allegoric images of the medieval sciences, open to dual interpretation. According to Fulcanelli,¹² a woman whose forehead touches the sky represents Alchemy non-ecclesiastical philosophy seeking the refinement of the soul. Sitting on a throne, she has in her left hand a sceptre sign of the suzerainty, and in her right hand two books, one closed (esoterism), and one open (exoterism). Between her knees, and against her chest, she has a stair with nine steps *scala philosophorum* hieroglyph of the patience that the faithful should display during the nine successive stages of the hermetical work.¹³ In his opinion, this statue provides further evidence for the fact that the Cathedral can be seen as being based on the Alchemical science.

On the other hand, François Cali describes this same representation as Philosophy, made by Geoffrey Dechaume under the supervision of Viollet-le-Duc after a figure from Laon Cathedral. The nine steps are the grades of knowledge in the seven liberal arts leading to Philosophy, the queen of sciences, which was not distinguished from Theology in the Middle Ages.¹⁴ The Cathedral is not simply the product of building technology, but result of a conscious will, a manifestation of a certain way of thinking, and to encode it is necessary to resort to the only discipline in which the medieval thought was expressed: Theology. Only in this way can we see this architecture as other than a monumental sculpture for the use of naive and irrational common people.¹⁵

The hermetic scenes of the stylobate develop in two rows, on both wings of the portal. The upper row has twelve figures and the lower row twelve medallions. The first represents a series of static characters sitting on socles decorated with channels with concave and angular sections and alternating with the columns of the trilobate arcades. Every character holds a disc with a device on it. The latter row depicts in lower relief vivid scenes involving two personages, which are confined to smaller circular frames inside rectangular fields. Emile Mâle,¹⁶ Marcel Aubert,¹⁷ and Alain Erlande-Brandenburg¹⁸ identify the sitting figures with the Virtues, each one holding its device, while the medallions depict the Vices, each



Figure 7 Humilitas and Superbia by Villard de Honnecourt.



Figure 6 Portal of the Last Judgement Details of the socle.

corresponding to a Virtue on the upper row, although twelve instead of the seven established by Gregory the Great. One of the sketches in Villard de Honnecourt's treatise of masonry, dating from 1215-1235, supports this interpretation, as it labels as *Humilitas* a similar character holding a disc juxtaposed to *Superbia*, a falling horse raider.¹⁹

Still, previous cycles to be found elsewhere in France, as part of the Last Judgement imagery, show Virtues at war with Vices, as described by Prudentius.²⁰ Therefore, here, the upper figures dominate only symbolically the lower ones. One could suppose that this was intentional, as a result of a duality of their symbolism. Yet further representations influenced by the Notre-Dame cycle show slight alterations breaking this symbolical polarization.²¹ Moreover, the devices on discs are different in each representation, sometimes interchangeable or even repeated inside the same cycle.^{22,24}

Hence, they might have served for encryption of abstract and non-Christian concepts, in order to hide them over time and only transmit to the initiated ones.²⁵ François Icher argues that

*From the time of the second Nicean Council and the famous Quarrel of the images (end of the eighth and beginning of ninth centuries respectively) the faithful were reminded that the only images that could be exhibited in churches were those that were accepted by tradition and had been approved by the priest in charge of each church, in other words, by the patron commissioning the work.*²⁶

In spite of this, masons have placed a large number of lay and even lewd anthropomorphic consoles and gargoyles at great heights, were neither the patron nor the *vulgus* would be able actually to see them.²⁷ A secular subject, therefore, must be of great significance in order to find its place at the eye-level among religious images par excellence, and the masons were those able to conceal it.

According to Fulcanelli, however, the references are alchemical: each figure holds a disc decorated with an emblem depicting one of the phases of the alchemical opus.²⁸ The medallions that decorate the lower row of the base represent allegories of the stages of the alchemical practice, which pretends to have the knowledge to transform Lead into Gold with the aid of the Philosopher Stone, symbolising the transformation of human spirit to a superior stage. The decorative setting of the upper row medallions shows borrowings from goldsmith's work²⁹ placed over a classical triglyph-and-metop frieze. One could assume that someone acquainted with the goldsmiths' work, like an alchemist, provided the mason with the design for this cycle.

Those images are also reproduced in colour on the stained glass of the main rose window (circa 1220).³⁰ The stained glass completes in this way the stone, which lost its polychrome layer covering not only over the statues but also over the entire cathedral.³¹ The images on the western portals were painted in bright colours on a background of gold leaf, as visitors record as late as the fifteenth century.³² This reinforces the esoteric interpretation of these symbols by making use of colour symbolism.



Figure 8.1 Details of the buttresses framing the central portal.



Figure 8.2 Details of the buttresses framing the central portal.

Levels of interpretation: Dialectic problems

Curiously enough, none of these authors mentions the existence of different opinions at all, meaning that neither argues the validity of their explanation in contrast with others, nor shows awareness of the existence of several levels of interpretation. Moreover, disregarding their opinion on the two pairs of twelve medallions each, none of them was able to interpret the four images added on the buttresses at both ends.³³ Art historians' exposition did not touch the anomalies of the supposed cycle of Virtues and Vices, while hermetic authors' argument ignores completely the practical issue of how could alchemists interfere with the religious iconographic program.

For the Christian ritual of initiation the separation zone is represented by the exterior, the threshold by the walls and the space within the portals, and the aggregation zone by the interior space of the cathedral. Since these symbolic images are placed on the wings of the central portal and on the rose window of the west front, both of which belong to the threshold plan, we can suppose that their position is the result of an intentional act. Besides, since carved stone and stained glass were extremely expensive at that time, we can also deduce a strong desire to affirm the power of the secret society and to perpetuate its traditions. It is obvious that only a rich community could afford such a *memoria* carved in stone or depicted in stained glass, located in this very special place on the cathedral, the central portal, which was used only for great ceremonies.

From the above, we can see how the visual message of the central portal, indeed of the whole cathedral, could be decoded through two symbolic systems: one hermetic, that targets a cultural or professional elite represented by alchemists or master masons, and a straightforward Christian one that refers to groups belonging to the catholic religion. The message is then doubly discriminator: esoteric for the group of initiates, and exoteric for the majority group.

In an orthogenetic city as Paris, the Cathedral played an important role in the process of cultural nucleation, dominant from the very beginning. Whatever implications these different levels of interpretation of its visual message may have for our understanding of the cultural integration of sacred and lay communities, it nevertheless demonstrates the significance of such groups within their urban context. They exercised spiritual power over the urban society and influenced the very character of the cityscape itself.

NOTES

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¹ *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate* (Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike, Marvin Harris eds. Frontiers of Anthropology 7. Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1990).

² System of ideas based on teachings characterized by occultism or abstruseness.

³ Serge Hutin, *Les sociétés secrètes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987).



Figure 9. Think!

⁴ There is no clear historical evidence for a connection with the Freemasonry, although the later claims to be the guardian of the memory of the cathedral builders. See François Icher, *Building the Great Cathedrals* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1998), 160.

⁵ Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Translated by Alban Kralisheimer. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 156-7.

⁶ Pierre du Colombier, *Les chantiers des cathédrales* (Paris: Picard, 1973), 32-35.

⁷ Nicola Coldstream, *Masons and Sculptors* (Medieval Craftsmen. London: British Museum Press, 1991), 7-8.

⁸ *Les Cathédrales Françaises* (Encyclopédie par l'image. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1925), 67-9.

⁹ Allan Temko, *Notre-Dame of Paris* (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), 159.

¹⁰ Henry Focillon, *Art d'Occident: Le Moyen Age roman, Le Moyen Age gothique* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1938), 134-6.

¹¹ Le Sieur Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant, Explication très curieuse des énigmes et figures hiéroglyphiques, physiques, qui sont au grand portail de l'église cathédrale et métropolitaine de Notre-Dame de Paris, 1640 (reedited by Claude d'Ygé in *Nouvelle assemblée des philosophes chimiques. Aperçus sur le Grand-Œuvre des alchimistes*. Paris: 1954).

¹² Since he considers himself an initiate, would his pseudonym be a result of the prevalence of group identity over personal one?

¹³ Fulcanelli, *Les mystères des cathédrales* (Paris: Jean Schemit Librairie, 1926), 53-54.

¹⁴ François Cali, *L'Ordre Ogival: Essai sur l'architecture gothique* (Paris: Arthaud, 1964), 259.

¹⁵ Cali, 13-14.

¹⁶ Émile Mâle, *L'art religieux du XIII^e siècle en France* (7th ed. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1931), 143-5.

¹⁷ Marcel Aubert, *La sculpture française au Moyen Age* (Paris: Flammarion, 1946), 166-7 and 248-9.

¹⁸ Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Paris: Editions Nathan/CNMHS, 1991), 121-9.

¹⁹ François Bucher, *Architector: The Lodge Books and Sketchbooks of Medieval Architects* (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), vol. 1, 52-3.

²⁰ W. Sauerländer, *Gotische Skulpturen in Frankreich I 140-1270* (Munich: 1970), 31.

²¹ This interpretation is based on the representation of conflict between Virtues and Vices depicted in *Psychomachia* of Prudentius (5th century).

²² Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press in association with the Medieval Academy of America, 1989), 82-3.

²³ Katzenellenbogen, 77-8.

²⁴ Claude Paradin offers an image of the degree to which devices are open to more than one interpretation in his *Devises Héroïques* published in 1551.

²⁵ "L'argotique Art Gothique" in *Travaux d'esoterisme* (<http://www.artgauth.com/francais/artgoth.htm>, 2001)

²⁶ Icher, 107.

²⁷ Nurith Kenaaan-Kedar, *Marginal Sculpture in Medieval France: Towards deciphering of an enigmatic pictorial language* (Aldershot: Scolar press, 1995).

²⁸ Hans Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism* (New York and Oxford: Facts on File, 1992).

²⁹ Christopher Wilson, *The Gothic Cathedral: The Arch of the Great Church 1130-1530* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 130.

³⁰ *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi, France Volume I: Les vitraux de Notre-Dame et de la Sainte-Chapelle de Paris* (Paris: Caisse Nationale des Monuments Historiques et Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1959), 23-34.

³¹ Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, *Quand les cathédrales étaient peintes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 12-13.

³² Wim Swaan, *The Gothic Cathedral* (London: Ferndale Editions, 1981), 197.

³³ Only one of the images is interpreted as Job surrounded by his family. See Aubert, 248-9 and Pierre du Colombier, *Notre-Dame de Paris: Memorial de la France* (Paris: Plon, 1966), 48-9.