
The Theophilus Relief at Souillac and the Eleventh-Century Reforms of the Church

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Résumé

Le relief de Théophile situé sur le mur occidental de la nef de l'église de Souillac (vers 1120–1140) est plus qu'une simple illustration de la légende théophilienne : il communique un message aux moines instruits. Puisant parmi certains thèmes moins connus de la légende, ce relief met en garde contre les desseins diaboliques sous-jacents à la nomination des dignitaires haut placés de l'Église. Soutenue par une analyse d'ensembles sculptés provenant des environs de Souillac, notre interprétation replace le relief de Théophile dans le contexte historique de la période de la réforme de l'Église qui venait de s'achever – réforme qui toucha principalement des questions relatives à la nomination du haut clergé alors que la vente par les simonistes de dignités ecclésiastiques fut éradiquée et la papauté prit en charge la sélection des métropolitains et évêques.

The sculptures now set in the west wall of the nave of the abbey church of Sainte-Marie at Souillac constitute an important group of Romanesque reliefs (fig. 1). The largest, directly above the main entrance door, affords us new insights into the climate of papal reform in Western Europe in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries (fig. 2). Its central field presents the major elements of the Eastern legend of Theophilus, a high-ranking church official who acquired his office through a pact with the devil but ultimately repented his conduct and, with the aid of the Virgin, was fully restored. This narrative is flanked by the large seated figures of an unidentified monastic saint (left) and St. Peter (right). As we shall see, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a textual version of the Theophilus legend circulated widely in France for use in sermons intended to magnify the Virgin and to promote penitence. The faithful visitor to the abbey church would have recognized the basic components of the legend and would have recalled the important messages of these sermons. Yet the Theophilus relief differs significantly from what we might expect to find based on the known uses of the text. It emphasizes the transactions between Theophilus and the devil, not his contact with the Virgin or his act of penitence. My contention is that in the context of the major ecclesiological issues of its day, this relief would have gradually revealed itself to the literate monks of the abbey to be a suggestion of the devil's involvement in appointments to high office in the Church.

The Theophilus relief has been of interest to art historians since the late nineteenth century.¹ This paper differs from earlier efforts to understand the relief in that it addresses solely its reception by the literate monks of the abbey. It assumes that the many departures from the expected design of the relief, both formal and substantive, are deliberate and are intended to convey meaning. The fundamental changes to the Roman Church under debate in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries would have been as worthy of the attention of the monks as the more traditional subjects of the great twelfth-century portals of France.² Here I offer a thematically unified reading of the Theophilus relief, suggesting through a detailed visual analysis how each part of the relief contributes to its overall meaning. I begin by touching briefly on Souillac and on the original placement of

the relief in the abbey church. I then discuss the primary sources for the legend and consider the relief against both those sources and regional artistic conventions. Lastly, I place these results in the context of contemporary issues in Church reform.

Souillac, in south central France, was, in the early twelfth century, located in the county of Quercy, which was outside the lands controlled by either the French king or the German emperor. Little is known about the abbey's early history.³ Although the monks at Souillac functioned as a dependency of the abbey of St. Pierre at Aurillac, papal notes from the years 1155 to 1158 refer to the existence of a longstanding dispute between the monks at Souillac and the abbot at Aurillac.⁴ These notes give no hint of the substance of the dispute nor of when it may have arisen.⁵ Based on the sparse historical record, little can be said about the monks at Souillac and their original reception of the relief, beyond the obvious inferences to be drawn from the very presence of the sculptures on the abbey church.

The original setting of the sculptures now on the west wall of the nave, including the Theophilus relief, is not known with certainty. Scholarship has long connected the sculptures at Souillac—temporally, regionally, and stylistically—to that first generation of great Languedocian portals on the abbey churches at Moissac (ca. 1115–ca. 1135) and Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne (ca. 1120–ca. 1140).⁶ The tympana of those great portals introduced unprecedented abstract theological complexity into their subject matter, usually related to particular aspects of the Ascension or the Second Coming; related themes were placed in adjacent locations in the portal;⁷ their design was governed by certain conventions of scale and hierarchy. Historians have long assumed that the sculptures now set within the nave at Souillac are the fragmentary remains of a larger, now-unknowable, exterior portal program akin to those at Beaulieu and Moissac.⁸ The scale of the Theophilus relief suggests that it might have functioned as the tympanum of such a program. However, recent archaeological discoveries beneath the abbey church at Souillac make it highly unlikely that the church could ever have supported such a portal program.⁹ Current archaeological opinion is that the Theophilus relief never functioned as a tympanum:



Figure 1. Inner-west wall of the nave of the abbey church of Sainte-Marie at Souillac (Photo: J. Bugslag, 2012).

it was most likely set originally within an old Carolingian tower porch over what was then the main entrance door to the nave.¹⁰ The relief and the other sculptures now on the west wall of the nave are thought to have been moved into the nave in the course of seventeenth-century restorations to the west end of the church, during which the west wall of the nave is believed to have been constructed. Other than the fact that the relief was probably originally above eye-level, we cannot ascertain anything more definitive about the original setting of the relief that might assist in determining its meaning.

Textual versions of the Theophilus legend as it was understood in France at the time of the relief's design have survived, and a brief recounting of this information can serve as a starting point for a reconsideration of the relief's written and visual sources.¹¹ According to legend, Theophilus was the *vice-dominus* to the bishop of Adana in Cilicia. When the bishop died, Theophilus was the choice of all to fill the office but, out

of humility, he declined. Shortly thereafter, the new bishop dismissed Theophilus. Theophilus became bitter and sought out the services of a Jew who offered to arrange a meeting with the devil. The following evening, at midnight, in the open space of the forum, Theophilus and the devil met and settled on an agreement pursuant to which the devil would see Theophilus returned to his former position, and Theophilus, for his part, would renounce Christ and the Virgin. The agreement was immediately put into writing and Theophilus affixed his seal to the pact. Within days, Theophilus was again *vice-dominus* and he went on to experience greater power than he had ever known. After a time, however, he began to regret what he had done and to fear for his soul. He went to a church in which the presence of the Virgin was reputed to be strong and lay prostrate before that church for (depending on the version of the legend) three or thirty days, repenting and begging the Virgin for her help and forgiveness. In due course the Virgin appeared

to him but was initially disinclined to come to his aid because of the seriousness of his sin. Once the Virgin was satisfied that Theophilus was sincere, she mercifully agreed to intercede with her son. She returned to tell Theophilus he had been forgiven. But Theophilus continued to be concerned that the agreement was still in the hands of the devil, and to allay those fears, the Virgin miraculously recovered the agreement from the devil and returned it to Theophilus, placing it on his chest as he slept. Theophilus died shortly thereafter, and his soul was delivered up to God.¹²

The spread of the legend in France is attributed to a well-circulated *exemplum* prepared by Fulbert of Chartres (d. 1028) for delivery on the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin.¹³ Fulbert's

version of the legend is much abridged. He emphasizes the Virgin's mercy, her miraculous powers, and the efficacy of penitence within the Church; he concludes by telling the congregation that if they too sincerely repent and place their trust in the Virgin, they, like Theophilus, will be forgiven. It is likely that, by the time of the design of the relief at Souillac, the legend was quite well known in France. The Souillac relief and a decorated initial in an eleventh-century Latin anthology of the lives of saints and homilies are the only known artistic representations of the Theophilus legend to predate the thirteenth century.¹⁴ In the decorated initial, consistent with Fulbert's version of the legend, the figure of Theophilus, in an orant pose, stands before a crowned, enthroned Virgin. The devil is not present.¹⁵

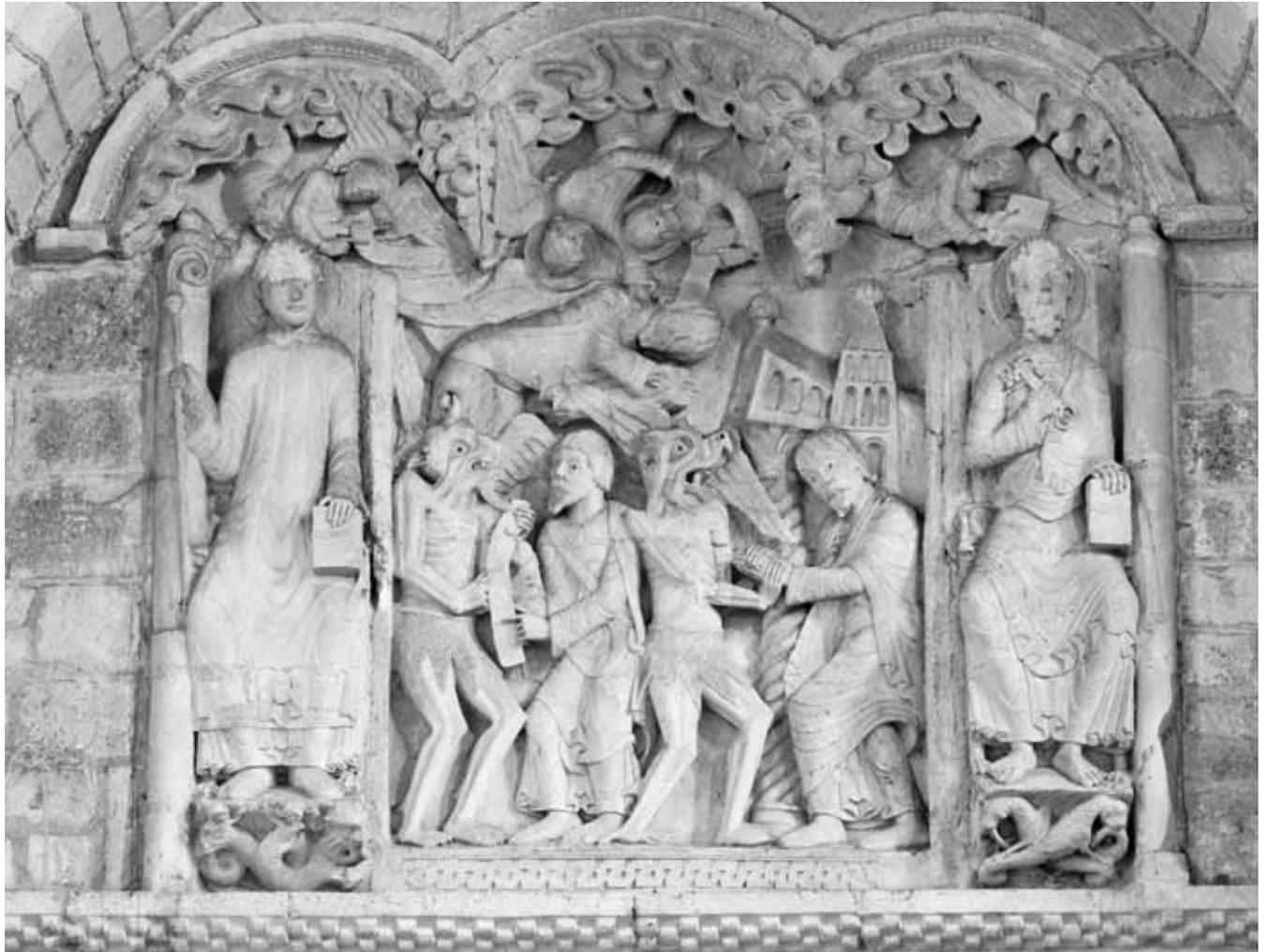


Figure 2. Theophilus relief, abbey church of Sainte-Marie at Souillac (Photo: J. Bugslag, 2012).



Figure 3. Central narrative component of the Theophilus relief, abbey church of Sainte-Marie at Souillac (Photo: J. Bugslag, 2012).

The iconography of the relief at Souillac can be considered against the textual traditions of the legend. The three superimposed elements on the left of the narrative field of the relief (fig. 3) represent the three major episodes of the legend—Theophilus’s fall, his penitence, and his pardon.¹⁶ On the lowest level, Theophilus and the devil point to the agreement they have concluded. At the median level, Theophilus lies on his side before a church, his eyes closed. At the top, the Virgin and her accompanying angel return the recovered agreement to Theophilus. This ordering places the Virgin and angel in the spiritual realm, with the devil and errant human firmly at the base. At the centre, bridging the two realms in art as they did in the thought of the day, are penitence and the Church. Visually, however, we are not encouraged to read the relief hierarchically. Theophilus’s strong horizontal form acts as a barrier between the earthly and heavenly realms and turns the viewer’s attention toward that which transpires below. The relative scale of the three

superimposed episodes contributes to the turn of focus away from the Virgin, since she and her accompanying angel are by far the least visually significant figures in the central panel. In fact, they are incomplete, intercepted by the upper frame.¹⁷ The agreement that the Virgin returns to Theophilus is smaller and less conspicuous than the one displayed by the standing figures of Theophilus and the devil. These elements, including the apparent devaluation of the Virgin, are sufficiently marked that, in 1974, the archaeologist Jacques Thirion undertook a study intended to show that the relief was patched together when it was moved into the nave. In the end, he concluded exactly the opposite: that the present relief reflects the original medieval design. Thirion’s findings, while invaluable in terms of understanding the integrity of the relief, do not address its narrative gaps¹⁸ or its curious visual emphasis, which is neither on the Virgin nor on penitence (Theophilus is presented sleeping), but on Theophilus, the devil, and the agreement to which both unashamedly point.

The relief also contains elements that do not derive from the written sources. The most obvious is in the right-hand scene depicting Theophilus with the devil, where a distinctive hand-clasp takes the place of the agreement. This gesture was first identified by Émile Mâle as representing the ritual of feudal homage. Jacques Le Goff, in his study of the symbolism of feudal vassalage, quotes from the text of Galbert of Bruges concerning the homages paid to the new count William of Flanders in 1127. Galbart recounts how, after a future vassal verbally agreed to become the man of the count, “he [placed] his clasped hands in those of the count, who grasped them.” This ritual, according to Le Goff, had not changed since the ninth and tenth centuries.¹⁹ Mâle explains the inclusion of the second scene at Souillac by stating, “This is a scene of feudal homage taken from life.”²⁰

I would argue that the second scene, however, is not simply a restatement of the first in the familiar symbolic language of the day. The first scene, consistent with the legend, takes place in open space, while the second is set indoors, against a distinctive column that supports the cloistered church above. Important differences exist in the manner in which the two devils are presented. The devil in the second scene has a different, much larger head than the one who, by agreement, conveys the ecclesiastical office to Theophilus. The flanking saints—the monastic saint on the left and St. Peter on the right, the largest figures in a relief in which scale appears to be significant—have no apparent connection to the legend. However, a thematically unified and far more comprehensive reading of the relief is possible, one that takes into account not only the symbolism in the relief but also its many narrative irregularities and anomalies. This reading presupposes that the relief would be studied by literate individuals, the monks of the abbey, who were knowledgeable about

the politico-ecclesiological issues of the day and about regional artistic conventions. It also requires that the relief be permitted to reveal its meaning gradually to those who look slowly and carefully at the various details of the carving and consider their possible import.

Theophilus's agreement with the devil would, at the time of the design of the relief, have been understood to constitute simony.²¹ The term derives from Acts 8:18–24, where the magician Simon Magus offers the apostles money in order that he might acquire the power to impart the Holy Spirit. The apostle Peter answers, "Keep thy money to thyself to perish with thee: because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased by money."²² The eradication of simony was a central component in the reform of the Church that began in the middle of the eleventh century and continued until about 1125.²³ In the early years of reform, the reforming councils primarily directed their attention to the Church itself, toward churchmen, usually bishops, who sold ordinations or consecrations, sometimes parish churches, for money or gifts (although Simon Magus offered money, from earliest of times property and gifts were also included among the forms of simoniacal payment). The practice of simony at the outset of the period of reform was so pervasive and overt that when Leo IX convened his first synod at the Lateran in 1049 and proposed that all consecrations by simonists be invalid, the synod erupted with the concern that divine service would be brought to a complete halt. Eventually, the synod settled for a decree that prohibited simony but imposed a period of forty days of penance on all who had knowingly allowed themselves to be consecrated by a simonist bishop.²⁴ The scene depicting Theophilus and the devil pointing shamelessly to their agreement, with the divinely forgiven Theophilus above, fully reflects the situation regarding simony in the earliest years of the reform papacy.²⁵

The second scene, where Theophilus pays feudal homage to a devil with a different head, in a different setting, is also connected to papal reforms against simony. The gesture of homage shown in the relief was the first step in a common three-step vassalage ceremony. The second step of the ritual was the fealty, completed by an oath. The rite concluded with the investiture, in which the lord delivered to the vassal an object symbolic of that with which the vassal was being invested.²⁶ Le Goff writes of the ritual of feudal vassalage,

Homage, fealty, and investiture are necessarily interdependent and constitute a symbolic ritual that remains intact not so much because of the force and, in this case, the almost sacred character of tradition as because of the internal coherence of the system. It seems, moreover, that contemporaries perceived it in this way.²⁷

Two interdependent components of this ritual would become the next focus of the anti-simoniacal attentions of the reforming Church: homage by churchmen to secular authority and investiture by secular authority of church office and benefice. During the last quarter of the eleventh century, homage to²⁸ and investiture by lay authority²⁹ were forbidden. Paschal II, in a letter recording the events of the Lateran council of 1102, wrote that the council forbade any clerk to do homage to a layman and to receive either churches or property from the hands of a layman, "for this is the root of the evil of simony."³⁰ At the outset of the reform movement, therefore, the simonist was most frequently regarded as someone within the Church. Over the course of the next half-century, he became a secular monarch, investing high church office and demanding homage in return. The artistic representation of the two interconnected scenes of Theophilus and the devil at Souillac thus reflects the developing understanding of the simonist.

Control of simony by the papacy is represented elsewhere in the regional monumental sculpture of the day. To the right of the Porte Miègeville at Saint-Sernin, Toulouse (1115–18), the standing figure of St. Peter (fig. 4) appears to contain Simon Magus who is shown being licked by two demons.³¹ His identity is unmistakable—the name "MAGUS" is inscribed above his head. Peter is not presented here as the individual apostle of the Gospels. Elizabeth Saxon has noted that angels above his head carry the triple crown of the papacy.³² It should also be noted that Peter's feet are fully shod. The apostle would be expected to wear only sandals in accordance with the instructions of Jesus³³ and to be presented in profile or part profile as he appears on the jambs at the entrances to the abbey churches at Moissac and Beaulieu. As we shall see, the foot covering and frontality of presentation acquire special meaning in this new reading of the Theophilus relief at Souillac.

While the Souillac scenes of Theophilus and the devil can be understood to represent the developing concept of simony and the changing character of the simonist, this reading does not fully satisfy the design of the narrative field. The ritual of vassalage would be expected to culminate with the conferring of a symbol of that with which the vassal was being invested. The absence of any suggestion of ring and staff—the two elements that had come to epitomize the dispute over investiture—in this relief raises questions about the sufficiency of confining the reading of the second narrative to homage to or investiture by lay authority. The horizontal figure of Theophilus, previously mentioned as an impediment to a hierarchical reading of the relief, visually encloses the three standing figures beneath him, but not the fourth, the figure of Theophilus in vassalage. Lastly, the relief contains a prominent symbol—the distinctive spiral column with its elaborate capital—that has not yet been considered. The placement of that column between Theophilus and



Figure 4. St. Peter containing Simon Magus, Porte Miègeville, Basilica of Saint-Sernin at Toulouse (Photo: the author, 2012).

the devil echoes the placement of the agreement between the two in the first scene. It breaks the flow from left to right and separates Theophilus in vassalage from the three standing figures to the left. The column is too significant in scale, location, and form to be merely a decorative backdrop for the ritual hand-clasp. The most obvious association for such a column would have been with the Shrine of the Apostle at Old St. Peter's in Rome³⁴ even though homage to and investiture by secular authority certainly did not take place there.

The differences in the representation of the devil's feet in the central field of the relief carry symbolic importance. At Toulouse, St. Peter's feet helped identify him with the papacy rather than with his role as Jesus's apostle. Although we do not know the height of the door above which the Theophilus relief was originally set, the base of the relief would necessarily have been above eye level. The effect of that elevation, coupled with the protruding decorative string course on which the players stand, would tend to turn casual attention away from their feet. Meyer Schapiro noticed that the two feet of the devil on the left are the same and resemble those of a quadruped, while the feet of the devil on the right are different not only from those of the devil on the left but from one another. The right foot resembles the talons of a raptor; the left is a cloven hoof.³⁵ These differences are significant. In the early twelfth century, the devil had not yet assumed a particular form, although Lucifer had, from earliest times, been portrayed as a serpent.³⁶ The feet of the devil in the second scene suggest that the one body represents two different individuals or authorities, each wrongfully demanding homage and investing church office or benefice.

The two figures of Theophilus also reveal important differences. His feet are not different, but his dress is. On the left, he is dressed as a layman, consistent with conceptions of simony at the beginning of reform. On the right, however, he wears a simple, cape-like overgarment, the only distinguishing feature of which is the subtle suggestion of a band of cloth that seems to circle his neck and descend down its front, disappearing into the folds. This band of cloth has ritual significance. Under the reform papacy, significant changes were introduced to the office of the metropolitan, an office akin to that of an archbishop, and a ritual reflecting those changes took place at the Shrine of the Apostle.³⁷ That ritual involved a pallium, a narrow scarf of wool, traditionally worn by popes over their capes. Before conferment, it was placed on the altar above the tomb of Peter, making it a contact relic.³⁸ During the Carolingian era, the pope granted the pallium to metropolitans with whom he had a particularly close relationship. From 1053, however, a metropolitan could only assume his duties after he had received the pallium in Rome.³⁹ I. S. Robinson sets out the procedure that took place in Rome: the credentials of those seeking office were examined to ascertain that they were in accord with the reforming positions of the papacy. Then, the newly elected metropolitans were required to swear an oath, which evolved over time in the interests of papal primacy. Only then would they receive the pallium from the pope.⁴⁰ That procedure and the ritual of feudal vassalage as set out by Le Goff are clearly similar. Urban II wrote that the metropolitan is subject only to the Roman pontiff, to whom he owes obedience.⁴¹ The metropolitan had become, in other words, the pope's "man" just as the vassal was the lord's "man." The symbol of investiture by lay

authority—the ring and staff—is missing from the Theophilus relief, but the symbol of investiture by the papal authority—the pallium—is present.

The separation of the second figure of Theophilus from the three standing figures to the left by the spiral column, against which the symbol of feudal vassalage is set, can thus be better understood as referring to ecclesiastical relations with the papacy in Rome. So too is the church building depicted in the relief, which is more closely connected to the spiral column beneath than to the horizontal figure of Theophilus. That building, which resembles a cloister, suggests either a monastery or a cathedral supporting a chapter of Augustinian canons who lived together and shared a common life akin to that of monks. A cathedral is the seat of a bishop. One of the principal tenets asserted by reforming popes against secular authority from the middle of the eleventh century was the right of the people and clergy of a diocese to choose their own bishop, free from external interference.⁴² Considerations of papal primacy, however, gradually overcame that concern for local autonomy.⁴³ At the Roman Lenten synod of 1080, the pope and the metropolitan were given a new role in the process of selection of a local bishop.⁴⁴ On the death of a bishop, the people were required, “with the consent of the apostolic see or their metropolitan, [to] elect for themselves a pastor according to God.”⁴⁵ The effect of the requirement that the election of a bishop could take place only with the consent of the apostolic see or the metropolitan, the pope’s man, was, according to Robinson, that “in the new ecclesiastical regime envisaged by the Gregorian papacy after the prohibition of lay investiture, the metropolitan was to assume the role in episcopal elections formerly usurped by the secular ruler.”⁴⁶ The reading of the second devil as representing two different authorities, each exercising control over the selection of a bishop, therefore accords with contemporary ecclesiological realities. The left to right temporal reading of the narrative is maintained.

Events at nearby Cahors shortly before the design of the relief may have influenced the perspective of the Souillac monks on outside interference in the episcopate. The cathedral of Saint-Étienne, Cahors, had supported a chapter of canons living a regular life since 1095.⁴⁷ On 30 July 1119, following a visit to Cahors to consecrate the main altar, Pope Calixtus II disciplined the cathedral chapter by stripping it of the right to choose its own bishop⁴⁸ and giving control of the chapter to the metropolitan of Bourges.⁴⁹ At the time of the relief, external interference over the choice of bishop may have been a live issue in the diocese.⁵⁰

My analysis so far has focused solely on the meaning of the relief’s narrative. It is important also to attend to the flanking seated saints and to the setting beneath an irregular arch upon



Figure 5. Scene under right arch, Theophilus relief, abbey church of Sainte-Marie at Souillac. Detail of fig. 2 (photo: J. Bugslag, 2012).



Figure 6. Scene under left arch, Theophilus relief, abbey church of Sainte-Marie at Souillac. Detail of fig. 2 (Photo: J. Bugslag, 2012).

an irregular base. Thirion directed particular attention to the irregularities and anomalies in areas of the arch and base, but the framing elements have received little attention in the literature. A consideration of the framing elements and of the fact that the experience of the relief changes with the viewer's movement through space helps us gain a new perspective on the relief's narrative.

The saints set to the sides of the central narrative are the largest, most conspicuous elements of the frame, and it is reasonable to begin with them. Their identification seems at first to be clear. The saint to the right (fig. 5), with his book and keys, is clearly St. Peter; by his bare feet he would seem to be presented as the apostle rather than as the pope. The saint to the left (fig. 6), with his inward-turned staff, book, and slipper-clad feet is a sainted abbot. Because he is visually the counterpart to St. Peter, early historians considered him to represent St. Benedict. However, he bears no attributes that would permit us to ascertain his precise identity. Jérôme Baschet argues that the figure is not necessarily Benedict but should be taken to embody monastic authority.⁵¹ Beyond these basic facts, the depiction of these saints presents a dizzying array of oddities and anomalies. Their bodies are irregularly proportioned: their lower limbs and feet are unduly large and prominent relative to their heads and shoulders, a feature that is compounded by the fact that their feet protrude significantly into the viewer's space. The monastic saint is conspicuously baby-faced and apple-cheeked, while the figure of Peter is old and gaunt.⁵² In the early polemic of reform, reformers described the Church in the terminology of illness: the evils of simony and nicolaitism were diseases that ate at the flesh of the Church. Those advocating change expressed their desire to return the Church to a glory associated with its earlier history.⁵³ It is generally accepted by historians that renewed monasticism influenced those early reforms.⁵⁴ By the time of the design of the relief at Souillac, however, the evil of simony in the Church had been largely brought under control: Simon Magus at Toulouse, contained beneath St. Peter, reflects that reality, as do the twin dragons beneath the feet of St. Peter at Souillac, who do nothing more threatening than bite their own tails.⁵⁵ Had these saints been designed in the middle of the eleventh century, the contrast in their appearance might have evoked that anti-simoniactal feature of the polemic of reform. Three-quarters of a century later, I would suggest, that concern would no longer have been as relevant.

The poses of the Souillac saints are highly irregular in numerous respects. In the first place, it is unusual that the figures be shown seated rather than standing; saints and apostles conventionally stand. The apostles on the tympanum at Beaulieu are an exception (fig. 7), but as Yves Christe has shown, this is likely explained by Matthew 19:27–28, where Jesus tells Peter that the apostles would ultimately sit with him in judgment



Figure 7. Tympanum, abbey church of Saint-Pierre at Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne (Photo: J. Bugslag, 2012).

over the twelve tribes of Israel.⁵⁶ The fully frontal presentation of the Souillac Peter is also highly irregular. The bare feet suggest that Peter is the apostle, but apostles are ordinarily presented in profile or semi-profile.⁵⁷ At Toulouse, Peter is presented in full frontality, but with his papal crown and shod feet, he is not depicted as an apostle. Marguerite Vidal has described the fully frontal saints at Souillac to be “seated in majesty.”⁵⁸ In the monumental art of the day, it was Christ alone who was thus seated, surrounded by his court, be it the court of apostles at Beaulieu or the court of kings at Moissac. The seating of a figure in majesty, with its implications for power, would ordinarily involve a visible throne. The chairs on which the saints at Souillac are seated are not readily visible, although the feet of both saints are flanked by small, somewhat recessed, clawlike feet, perhaps

suggesting the feet of a chair. Their size and the direction in which they point make it plausible that they represent the back feet, but then the question is, where are the front feet? The columns on either side of the saints may in fact represent the front arms of the chairs. They are formally similar to the arms of the throne of Christ at Beaulieu. But if that is so, why do they reach so high and where is their base?

In order to bring some clarity to the representation of the saints, it is necessary to explore other points of view concerning some features of the design. First, the top of the relief comprises an irregular tripartite arch, which, according to Schapiro, appears to be “modeled on a freehand drawing of a frame.”⁵⁹ The arch is fully independent of that which is below. The vertical columns that define the spaces below do not connect to the arch

and do not correspond in placement to the divisions in the arch. The Virgin and her accompanying angel descend downward and to the left, toward the horizontal figure of Theophilus. The Virgin, the angel, and Theophilus form a visually closed group through their arms and through the descending agreement. The mercy of the Virgin and the forgiveness of her son are extended to the standing group of three below Theophilus.

Within each of the realms defined by the lateral arches, a flying angel carries written materials. These lateral angels are smaller, more deeply recessed into the relief, and less elaborately dressed than is the angel who accompanies the Virgin. The bodies of these angels, like those of the heavenly beings under the central arch, are cut by the frame so that their feet are not visible.⁶⁰ The angel on the left holds a scroll to which he points with his right hand. He moves downward and slightly to the right, toward the head of the monastic saint. He does not appear to stop at the monastic saint's head, but rather to fly over him and turn to the right, touching the saint's head as he goes, perhaps in blessing. The monastic saint and the angel appear to be in accord, a feature that will become more meaningful when the connection between the angel and saint on the right is considered.⁶¹

The angel on the right, flying almost horizontally from left to right, enters the space defined by the right arch from the pendant of clouds on his left. His path appears to terminate at Peter's head, on which he seems to place the open book that he carries.⁶² The book is most likely the Gospels, the source of Petrine authority. With his right hand, the angel points to the right page of the open book on which are inscribed the words, "PE[TR]JUS ... PE[TR]A..." A different message is contained on the left page, to which the angel points with his left hand, the words, "NON SAPE."⁶³ This probably derives from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans 11:20, "*noli altum sapere sed time,*" which translates, "be not high-minded, but fear."⁶⁴

To the angel who drops from the arch on the left, the monastic saint would appear to be reasonably centered and his occupation of the space defined by the arch would be modest. A different scene would reveal itself to the angel who crosses the arch on the right. Peter would appear to have moved to the extreme right of the space defined by the arch, the extent of his movement emphasized by the near-horizontal trajectory that the angel must take to reach him. Peter would have brought within his control, under his arch, the figure of his vassal, the metropolitan, and the cloistered church, the seat of the bishop.⁶⁵ As to the figure of the metropolitan, Blumenthal writes that "eventually, in the late eleventh century, the conferring of the pallium made the archbishop seem more like the pope's deputy with a delegated share in the universal primacy."⁶⁶ The cathedrals had been brought under the papal arch by the requirement that local bishops be subjected to the approval of the apostolic see or



Figure 8. Serpent beneath monastic saint, Theophilus relief, abbey church of Sainte-Marie at Souillac (Photo: author, 2012).

metropolitan, an extension of that power that had been seen in action at Cahors. The angel's injunction "*non sape*" becomes clear if Peter's action in bringing the cloistered church and the metropolitan within the papal arch is seen by the angel to be an act of arrogance.

Looking down from the point of view of the angels in the lateral arches has helped to answer certain questions, but there are limits to what can be seen from above. The base of the frame offers a different perspective on the saints. Like the arch above, the base is tripartite and irregular, but all obvious similarity ends there. The base is not independent of that which transpires above it. Running laterally beneath the central narrative field is a well-defined decorative ribbon upon which devils stand, human beings function, and appointments to church office are made. The base beneath the saints, however, is not this well-defined ribbon. Thirion initially considered this lack of definition to be an indication that the base was incomplete and fragmentary. Beneath the saints is the realm of another footless being, Lucifer, and seen from his viewpoint, the oddly proportioned bodies of the saints would appear regular and the ambiguous columns to the sides of each of the saints might look like the arms of thrones reaching up to the heavens, arms that could recall to Lucifer his own thwarted aspirations as voiced in Isaiah 14:13,

“I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God.” Each of these details reinforces the central drama of devilish interference with God’s divinely ordained scheme.

Contained beneath the feet of the monastic saint, and corresponding in setting and scale to the crossed dragons under the throne of St. Peter, is a coiled serpent with a large, bearded, human head (fig. 8). Sprouting from its body are two ugly little creatures. The most obvious association for the serpent is the devil in the Garden of Eden. In the writings of the early fathers, and continuing into the more contemporaneous works of monastic writers such as Odo of Cluny (d. 942), Adam’s original sin was not sexual but the sin of pride. From that, lesser sins of the body—lust, avarice, and gluttony—arose. The form of the serpent beneath the monastic saint reflects this conception. The monastic saint’s containment of pride is explained by the purpose of monastic discipline. According to St. Benedict, the object of monastic asceticism is the renunciation of self-will. Silence, poverty, obedience, and the elimination of carnal desires are central to the practice of monasticism, but this outward cleansing must be accompanied by an inner cleansing of the self.⁶⁷ The containment of pride, which monasticism achieved by actively pursuing humility, was as fundamental to monastic belief as the containment of simony was to the reform papacy.

Pride is a vice to which the powerful are particularly prone, and the relationship between pride and power was of great concern to monastic writers. John Cassian wrote of pride that it does not “only tempt ordinary folk and small people, but chiefly those who already stand on the heights of valour.”⁶⁸ Gregory I addressed that same concern, cautioning that although a man is sometimes forced by the will of God to take command, “pride is ever wont to attend on the powerful.”⁶⁹ The saints at Souillac, seated in majesty, occupy positions of power and they are therefore particularly vulnerable to pride. The manner in which pride comes to the powerful is significant. Cassian wrote of King David’s watchfulness against pride:

As he knew how hard is that watchfulness, even for those that are perfect, he did not so presume on his own efforts, but prayed to God and implored His help, that he might escape unwounded by the darts of this foe, saying “Let not the foot of pride come to me.”⁷⁰

Psalms 35:12 is the source of the words that Cassian attributes to King David, “Let not the foot of pride come to me.” Although both saints are vulnerable to pride by virtue of the power of their office, the monastic saint shows fear and has fully covered his feet. St. Peter’s feet, on the other hand, are exposed. His are the feet of the apostle, a detail of the design that has not thus far been explained. Historians of the polemic of reform consistently remark on the self-identification of the reform papacy with this apostle.⁷¹ This blurring of the identities of the

pope, the Roman Church, and the apostle was by no means merely a quaint affectation. In the writings of churchmen such as Peter Damian, it related directly to the primacy of the Roman Church.⁷² Blumenthal speaks of this identification in the following words: “The Apostle Peter, the pope, and the Roman church were...one and the same, and the obedience owed to the pontiff thus became absolute.”⁷³ During the period of the Gregorian papacy, “obedience to papal commands was raised to the level of dogma.”⁷⁴ The bare feet of the seated figure of St. Peter, reflecting the identification of the papacy with the apostle and the implications for power of that identification, suggest that pride may have come to the foot of the papacy.

Lucifer, the footless coiled being who lies unseen beneath the two saints, looks upward at their feet. The devils that negotiate with Theophilus in the narrative field, on the other hand, are basically human in their form. It is their heads and feet, not the cores of their being, that have been altered. They are, according to my reading, those powerful authorities to whose feet pride has come: the simonist who wrongly sells church office or benefice for a price; the secular monarch who invests bishoprics or abbeys and demands homage as his price; and the papal authority who takes ultimate control over the appointment of local bishops, either directly or through his vassal, the metropolitan. The design of the framing elements not only supports this reading of the narrative field but contextualizes it, placing it within the larger framework of pride. The details of the relief thus come together to form a thematically integrated and harmonious whole.

The sculptures within the nave at Souillac have always been considered by scholars to be highly important stylistically. As long as they were thought to be fragments of a larger, unknowable whole, the issues they raised could not be fully addressed. Recent archaeological research has freed the reading of the relief from those concerns. We have seen the Theophilus relief take as its point of departure not abstract theological concepts relating to the end of days, but rather a visualization of the agreement between an errant human and the devil for the purchase of high office in the Church. Building upon that narrative clarity, the details of the design direct consideration to contemporary anxieties within the Church relating to the papal reforms of the eleventh and early twelfth centuries. The design of the relief brings to bear on those contemporary events all the unprecedented complexity ordinarily reserved to the abstract theology of the great portals. The fundamental nature of the changes to the Roman Church was as worthy of the sculptural attention of the monks as were the more traditional biblical subjects. By approaching the Theophilus relief from the perspective that its various iconographic departures were deliberate, and by placing those departures within the historical context of reform, it is

possible to postulate a thematically unified and meaningful reading of the Theophilus relief, with all parts of the work contributing toward a complex and richly symbolic narrative.

There may additionally be a broader historical significance to the Souillac relief. Because almost all the reforming popes to 1119 came from a monastic background, the history of the papal reform movement tends to treat “monasticism” outside the empire as being cohesive and supportive of the directions of papal reforms. The enduring voice given by the Theophilus relief to a small monastic house located outside both the empire and the kingdom of France, a house that was independent of large enterprises such as Cluny, reflects a somewhat different and more nuanced perspective. The secular monarch, wrongly interfering in the autonomy of the local dioceses, is cast in the body of the devil, but so too, according to this reading, is papal authority.

For the faithful, the Theophilus relief at Souillac would have recalled the purposes to which the legend was put in the sermons of the day—the magnification of the Virgin and the efficacy of penitence. For the literate monks of the abbey, however, who understood artistic conventions, who were aware of contemporary issues relating to Church reform, and who were able to allow the more subtle implications of the relief to reveal themselves gradually, the message of the Theophilus relief was a markedly different one. It is that message which has been explored in this paper.

Notes

- 1 The major works on the sculptures at Souillac include, in order of their date of publication: Alfred Ramé, “Explication du bas-relief de Souillac: la légende de Théophile,” *Gazette archéologique* (1885): 225–32; Meyer Schapiro, “The Sculptures of Souillac,” *Romanesque Art: Selected Papers* (New York, 1939): 102–31; Jacques Thirion, “Observations sur les fragments sculptés du portail de Souillac,” *Gesta* 15 (1976): 161–72; Régis Labourdette, “Remarques sur la disposition originelle du portail de Souillac,” *Gesta* 18 (1979): 29–35; Carol Knically, “Decorative Violence and Narrative Intrigue in the Romanesque Portal Sculptures at Souillac,” PhD diss., UCLA (1992); Jérôme Baschet, *L'iconographie médiévale* (Gallimard, 2008): 189–229; and Jérôme Baschet, “Iconography beyond Iconography: Relational Meanings and Figures of Authority in the Reliefs of Souillac,” in *Current Directions in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Sculpture Studies*, ed. R.A. Maxwell and Kirk Ambrose (Turnhout, Belgium, 2010): 23–47.
- 2 For the great French Romanesque portals built from the early twelfth century until approximately 1140, see M. F. Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture: The Revival of Monumental Stone Sculpture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (New York, 1981), 169–91, and Eliane Vergnolle, *L'art roman en France* (Paris, 2009), 236–56.
- 3 Henri Pradalier, “Sainte-Marie de Souillac,” *Congrès archéologique de France (Quercy)* (Paris, 1989): 481–508.
- 4 The abbey at Aurillac was a reformed Benedictine house, which by its foundational charter had been placed under the direct control of the Holy See.
- 5 A.-C. Chaix de Lavarène, *Monumenta pontificia Arverniae, Decurrentibus IX, X, XI XII saeculis: Correspondance diplomatique des papes concernant l'Auvergne depuis le pontificat de Nicolas 1er jusqu'à celui d'Innocent III* (Clermont-Ferrand, 1878), CLII–CLIV, 246–47. The *Monumenta pontificia Arverniae* is included in Dom Claude de Vic and Dom Vaissete, *Histoire Générale de Languedoc*, vol. 4 (Toulouse, 1841).
- 6 Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture*, 172–79, and Vergnolle, *L'art roman en France*, 241–46.
- 7 Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture*, 172.
- 8 Schapiro, “The Sculptures of Souillac,” 102; Thirion, “Observations sur les fragments sculptés,” 161.
- 9 Labourdette, “Remarques sur la disposition,” 33.
- 10 Labourdette, “Remarques sur la disposition,” 34.
- 11 The legend was first introduced to the West by Paul the Deacon of Naples in the ninth century. That version appears at “Miraculum S. Mariae de Theophilo Poenitente, Avctore Evtychiano, interprete Paulo Diacono Neapoleos,” BHL 8121, in *Acta Sanctorum*, IV Februarii, ed. J. Bolland (1643; Paris, 1902), available on <https://archive.org/details/actasanctorum04unse>, 489–97.
- 12 A thorough review of the early versions of the legend can be found in A. W. Boyarin, *Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England: Law and Jewishness in Marian Legends* (Cambridge, 2010), 45–47.
- 13 For a translation into French and study of the *exemplum* of Fulbert of Chartres, see Gilbert Dahan, “Fulbert de Chartres, sermon IV, sur la nativité de la Vierge Marie, vierge et génitrice de Dieu,” *Bulletin de la Société archéologique d'Eure et Loire* 94 (2007), 23–46.
- 14 Michael W. Cothren, “The Iconography of the Theophilus Windows in the First Half of the Thirteenth Century,” *Speculum* 59 (1984): 308–41. For the illuminated manuscript, see Paris, BN, MS lat. 11750, fol. 51r.
- 15 In the thirteenth century, the legend of Theophilus began to appear more frequently in the art on French Gothic cathedrals. The focus was on the miraculous recovery of the agreement by the Virgin. Elements of thirteenth-century French Gothic representations of the legend reflect the precedent set at Souillac. See Cothren, “The Iconography of the Theophilus Windows,” 325.
- 16 Ramé, “Explication du bas-relief de Souillac,” 225–32.
- 17 Schapiro, “The Sculptures of Souillac,” 117.
- 18 Thirion, “Observations sur les fragments sculptés,” 161–66.
- 19 Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work & Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1977), 240–41, 243, 244.
- 20 Émile Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Twelfth Century: A Study of the Origins of Medieval Iconography*, trans. A. Colin (Princeton:

- 1978), 436; from the 1953 edition of *L'Art religieux du XII^e siècle en France* (Paris, 1922).
- 21 Elizabeth Saxon writes, without offering any examples, that the Theophilus legend “may have been used to support the anti-simony platform of Gregorian reform” but illustrates her thesis with examples of the use of the Cleansing of the Temple. I have come across no instance other than that at Souillac where the Theophilus legend was so used. Elizabeth Saxon, *The Eucharist in Romanesque France: Iconography and Theology* (Woodbridge, 2006), 122–23.
- 22 All biblical references are based on the Douay-Rheims English translation of the Latin Vulgate bible and have been accessed at <http://vulgate.org>.
- 23 Uta-Renate Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy: Church and Monarchy from the Ninth to the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia, 1988), 74–75.
- 24 Blumenthal, *Investiture Controversy*, 74.
- 25 Much has been written about this period of Church history. Excellent starting points are Blumenthal’s *Investiture Controversy* and I. S. Robinson, “Reform and the Church, 1073–1122,” *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. IV, part I, ed. D. Luscombe and J. Riley-Smith (Cambridge, 2004), 268–334.
- 26 Le Goff, *Time, Work & Culture*, 240–44.
- 27 Le Goff, *Time, Work & Culture*, 244.
- 28 Blumenthal, *Investiture Controversy*, 140.
- 29 Gregory VII, *The Register of Pope Gregory VII*, Book 6, 6.5b., ed. and trans. H. E. J. Cowdrey (Oxford, 2002).
- 30 Paschal II, *Patrologia Latina Database* (hereafter *PL*), ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, 1st ed., 1844–55, 163:91B at <http://pld.chadwyck.com>.
- 31 For the dating of the sculptures on the Porte Miègeville, see Vergnolle, *L'art roman en France*, 240, and Jean Wirth, *La datation de la sculpture médiévale* (Geneva, 2004), 32.
- 32 Saxon, *The Eucharist in Romanesque France*, 121.
- 33 Matthew 10:10; Luke 10:4, Mark 6:8–9.
- 34 J. B. Ward Perkins, “The Shrine of St. Peter and its Twelve Spiral Columns,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 42 (1952): 21–33. See also Malcolm Thurlby, “The Building of the Cathedral: The Romanesque and Early Gothic Fabric,” *Durham Cathedral: An Architectural Appreciation*, ed. Douglas Pocock (Durham, 2014), 21–53. Thurlby sets out a number of examples in which the design of the Cathedral at Durham in the late eleventh century reflects the influence of Old St. Peter’s in Rome, including its use of spiral columns, to create an iconographic link between the shrine of St. Cuthbert and that of St. Peter.
- 35 Schapiro, “The Sculptures of Souillac,” 110–12. Schapiro considered the differences in the feet of the devil to reflect a “progressive revelation of the demon, a final emergence of his lower nature and ugliness as in the changing shape of his head.”
- 36 Luther Link, *The Devil: The Archfiend in Art: From the Sixth to the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1995), 68.
- 37 Robinson and Cowdrey both use the term “metropolitan” to describe the office. Blumenthal uses the term “archbishop.” I will use the term “metropolitan” except where I am referring to the words of Blumenthal.
- 38 H. E. J. Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory VII: 1073–1085* (Oxford, 1998), 597. An apse mosaic at Sta. Maria in Trastevere, dated between 1140 and 1143, shows Innocent II (d. 1143) as donor of the church wearing, over his cape, a pallium which, in its width and form, is similar in appearance to the band around the neck of Theophilus at Souillac. The cape worn by Innocent II is also similar to that of Theophilus.
- 39 Uta-Renate Blumenthal, “The Papacy: 1024–1122,” *The New Cambridge Medieval History IV: 1024–1198*, part II (Cambridge, 2004), 8–37, 11.
- 40 Robinson, “Reform and the Church,” 324.
- 41 Urban II, *PL 151: 310B* “*Statuimus etiam ut nulli, nisi solummodo Romano pontifici, subjectionem et obedientiam debeas.*”
- 42 I. S. Robinson, “*Periculosus homo*: Pope Gregory VII and Episcopal Authority,” *Viator* 9 (1978): 103–32, 106.
- 43 For more on this see Robinson, “Gregory VII and Episcopal Authority.”
- 44 Robinson, “Reform and the Church,” 324.
- 45 Gregory VII, *Register*, vii. 14a., 482.
- 46 Robinson, “Reform and the Church,” 324.
- 47 Charles Dereine, S.J., “Vie Commune, règle de Saint Augustin et chanoines réguliers au XI^e siècle,” *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique* 41 (1946): 365–406, 384.
- 48 Jean Dufour, *Les Évêques d’Albi, de Cahors et de Rodez des origines à la fin du XII^e siècle* (Paris, 1989), 64; Phillip Jaffé, *Regesta Pontificum Romanorum: ab condita ecclesia ad annum post Christum natum MCXCVII*, 2nd ed. (Graz, 1956), 785.
- 49 Callixtus II, *PL 163:1115D–1117A*.
- 50 The globe on the cloister of the cathedral, as distinct from the finial on the church, is likely intended to function as a symbol. I am unable to offer an explanation for the globe. The roof of the cathedral at Cahors displayed two prominent domes on pendentives, an unusual architectural feature in the region, but their number and location do not correspond to the globe on the cloister in the relief.
- 51 Baschet, *L’iconographie médiévale*, 224.
- 52 Schapiro, “The Sculptures of Souillac,” 107–08, writes of the “tension and rigidity” of Peter, of his “skeletalized” frame and “claw-like” feet, in contrast to the monastic saint, whom he describes as more rounded, stable, and relaxed, a roundness reflected even in his slippers.
- 53 Robinson, “Reform and the Church,” 270.
- 54 I. S. Robinson, *Authority and Resistance in the Investiture Contest: The Polemical Literature of the Late Eleventh Century* (Manchester, 1978), 2.
- 55 Whether the crossed dragons represent simony and nicolaitism on

- the one hand or simony in both its conceptions on the other is not an issue that is important for the present article.
- 56 Yves Christe, “Le portail de Beaulieu: étude iconographique et stylistique,” *Bulletin archéologique* VI (1970): 57–76, 58 n.3.
- 57 In addition to the patron saints on the jambs at Moissac and Beaulieu to which reference has been made above, all the apostles in the cloister at Moissac are presented standing in full or part-profile, and all wear only sandals on their feet.
- 58 Marguerite Vidal, Jean Meury, and Jean Porcher, *Quercy Roman* (La-Pierre-qui-Vire (Yonne), 1959), 284. Vidal remarks on, but does not attempt to account for, the exceptionality of the placement of such figures to either side of an action-filled narrative.
- 59 Schapiro, “The Sculptures of Souillac,” 107.
- 60 In the monumental sculpture of the region, angels are frequently shown with feet.
- 61 The document carried by the angel to the left contains no writing visible from ground level. In its correspondence to a message delivered by the angel on the right, it may refer to the *Rule of Benedict* and reflect the emphasis in the *Rule* on the need to fear the urgings of self-will.
- 62 Thirion, “Observations sur les fragments sculptés,” 162, “l’ange de droite...semble planter son livre sur la tête du Saint Pierre.” That conspicuous “planting” of the book on the head of Peter was one of the features of the design that caused Thirion, initially, to question the integrity of the relief.
- 63 The inscription is not now visible from ground level.
- 64 Thirion, “Observations sur les fragments sculptés,” 170, n.13. In the course of examining the relief from scaffolding, Thirion was able to read these inscriptions and published them in a note to his paper. He identified two possible sources in the Gospels, the second of which would derive from the *Epistle to the Romans*, 12:3. I agree with his assessment that the second source is less likely and have not pursued it in this paper.
- 65 The eccentric setting of Peter has been remarked by Schapiro, “The Sculptures of Souillac,” 107 and Thirion, “Observations sur les fragments sculptés,” 162.
- 66 Blumenthal, “The Papacy,” 11. See also Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory VII*, 597.
- 67 Matthew Baasten, *Pride According to Gregory the Great: A Study of the Moralia*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 7 (New York, 1986), 99.
- 68 John Cassian, *On the Institutes of the Coenobia*, Book XII.6, trans. C. S. Gibson, in *A Select Library of Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, vol. 11 (New York, 1985) at <http://www.osb.org/lectio/cassian/inst>.
- 69 Gregory I, *Moralia in Job*, Vol. III, Part V, Book XXVI, trans. John Henry Parker, J. G. F. Rivington, and J. Rivington (London, 1844), <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoraliaIndex.html>.
- 70 Cassian, *On the Institutes*, XII.6.
- 71 Robinson, *Authority and Resistance*, 19; Blumenthal, *Investiture Controversy*, 72.
- 72 Peter Damian, Letter 31, in *Peter Damian: Letters 31–60*, trans. O. J. Blum (Washington, 1990), 3–54.
- 73 Blumenthal, *Investiture Controversy*, 72.
- 74 Blumenthal, *Investiture Controversy*, 72.