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Department of Art History

Master of Arts in Art History

The Cathedral of Assisi: The Beasts of San Rufino and the Dance of King David

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Abstract

The façade of the Cathedral of San Rufino in Assisi is decorated with multiple animal sculptures that make it an outstanding example of Romanesque architecture. Overall, 166 various creatures are depicted on the façade, but one is given an exceptional prominence. This is a birdlike reptile with wings, two feet, often a beak and cock's crest and a snaky tail makes up 23% percent of all the creatures represented on the façade of the cathedral. Most prominently the sculptures of the reptile, which the thesis identifies as basilisk, is employed in the embellishment of engaged colonnettes that decorate the main portal of the cathedral. The segments of the decorative arch that the colonnettes support are in turn decorated with a representation of King David enthroned holding a book of Psalms and figures hand in hand, in pairs dancing. These elements raise multiple questions on the iconographic meaning of the decorative programme. Through analysis of representations of King David in earlier and contemporary illuminated manuscripts and Romanesque architecture, the thesis proposes that the dancing figures should be viewed as an iconographic reference to King David depicted below them. With the employment of primary literary sources both from antiquity and the Middle Ages, the paper identifies the reptile as a basilisk and investigates the question whether this reptile was possibly conceived as a negatively charged symbol. With the conclusion that basilisk was viewed as the incarnate of the devil, which is supported in the Old Testament, the thesis views the representation of King David, the dancing figures and the basilisks on the colonnettes as one composition and provides a reading that derives from Christian scripture. The reading is based on the prediction of the arrival of the Messiah made in the book of Isaiah. The conducted research proposes a new iconographic reading of certain elements of the decorative programme of the façade that scholarship on the cathedral has paid little attention to.

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1. Introduction

The twelfth-century San Rufino Cathedral in Assisi (fig. 1) is an exceptional example of Romanesque architecture with a peculiar façade the decorative programme of which continues to pose multiple questions. It features representations of curious figures as well as various animals and mythical creatures the meaning of which is yet to be deciphered. The main portal, a crucial space within the ecclesiastical structure, is decorated with an arch, which is the primary focus of this study. This element is one of the three concentric arches that decorate the portal, but what makes it stand out is its tubular shape that projects from the flat. While the other two arches are decorated with a geometric pattern, this element is embellished in a highly particular way. The segments of the arch present King David enthroned on the bottom left. Above him are couples holding hands and who seem to be dancing. Below are two slender, segmented engaged colonnettes that are in turn enriched with representations of birdlike reptiles with wings, two legs, and snaky tails. Such a composition and the possible relation between these sculptural decorations is perplexing. Apart from the colonnettes, the same reptile is represented a multitude of times in various other locations around the façade, making it the most depicted creature overall. Scholarly writing on the iconography of the façade is surprisingly rare, but such unusual elements call for deeper investigation.

This thesis sets out to analyse the decorative elements of the arch in question and to propose a reading for such an unusual composition. It questions whether the dancing couples could be iconographically related to the representation of King David and why they are being supported by colonnettes covered in sculptures of birdlike reptiles. The paper aims, furthermore, to propose

an identification for these hybrid creatures and questions whether it could have been conceived as a symbolic image charged with a particular meaning crucial to the interpretation of the whole façade. Through an analysis of the decorative elements of the projecting arch, together with the lunette of the main portal, this thesis hypothesises a reading of these peculiar elements deeply rooted in Christian scripture.

The possible meaning of the dancing figures is also investigated through an analysis of the role of dance in mediaeval Christianity, based upon recent scholarship that challenges the long-established opinion that dance was never accepted by the Church. Investigation of the two key symbolic images of dancers in Christian scripture, those of Salome and King David, allows to analyse the dancing couples as an established iconographic prototype image of King David and his praised dance. The symbolic meaning of such representations is explored through similar imagery found in manuscript illuminations and Romanesque architecture. Primary textual and iconographic sources are also employed to propose an identification of the birdlike reptile as a symbol of evil and an incarnation of the devil. Medieval interest in animals and their moralising qualities is clearly illustrated by the vast number of surviving bestiaries from the thirteenth century. The investigation also turns to classical literature and the predecessors of bestiaries — manuscripts of the *Physiologus* and its derivatives — not only to propose an identification of the birdlike reptiles but to explore both the physical properties (and their developments throughout time) and the moral qualities that the reptile was endowed with. This analysis brings out how the creature was perceived in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries and explores whether it could have been a well-recognised symbol charged with meaning. Identification of the beast as that of a basilisk allows the paper to explore the references to this reptile in Christian scripture especially in the book of Isaiah where the basilisk

is employed as a symbol of evil. This leads the paper to analyse the sculptural decoration of the arch as a sole unitary composition together with the *Majestas Domini* in the lunette and a visual reflection of the predictions made in the book of Isaiah (Chapter 11:8). The thesis proposes that figures basilisk of basilisks on the façade should be viewed not solely as the most venomous reptile, but also as a symbol of evil, as confirmed by the horrendous qualities it was granted with and the words of Isaiah. The research presented here leads to the conclusion that the decorative programme of the main portal of the façade revolves around Isaiah's prediction of the Messiah, whose lineage would sprout from the root of Jesse and trample evil in His glorious reign and proposes that such reading is strongly suggested by the dozens of basilisks represented on the façade.

Visualising the Façade

The façade consists of three distinct registers (fig. 1). The lowest register has three portals, a main portal, and two smaller ones flanking it, which grant access to the aisles. The second register is separated from the lowest by a colonnaded arcade, which is supported by corbels decorated with animal and human heads. Mirroring the composition of the portals below, the second register houses a centrally placed rose window flanked by two smaller in size. The third register is the least decorated out of the three and is enriched only with an ogival blind arch.

The decorations are densest in the lowest register, which is heavily ornamented with sculptured elements including reliefs that concentrate around the three portals, while the adjacent walls are decorated with a geometric gridding (fig. 2). The two minor portals are identical to each other in their composition. Their doors are accentuated by door jambs embellished with flowers and animals and lintels enhanced with representations of the Evangelist symbols. Some

animals are well-known Christian emblems such as the lamb representing Christ, while others are mythical creatures. Some of the latter resemble snakes with long tails but also have wings and two feet characteristic of a basilisk (figs. 3 and 4). Each of the portals is further embellished with a lunette and projecting guardian figures at the bottom. On the right, the lunette portrays two peacocks drinking from one vessel, and the portal is guarded by winged lions (fig. 5). The lunette of the left portal presents two lions also with one vessel in between them. The guarding animals of this portal are instead hybrid with wings, two legs, and reptilian tails (fig. 6).

The richest décor is employed for the main portal whose significance, both symbolic and in the composition, is underlined by its central location and bigger size compared to the flanking doors (fig. 7). The door jambs and lintels are decorated with geometric motifs, above which is a lunette that portrays Jesus enthroned, flanked by the Virgin nursing the Christ Child and by Saint Rufinus (fig. 8). The lunette is framed above by three concentric elements, each with its decoration. The closest to the lunette is a sculpted depiction of coiling stems that are populated with figures holding clusters of grapes, and animals (fig. 9). A similar motif decorates the furthestmost concentric element from the lunette and the outer door jambs, but the animals depicted there are more often mythical in nature and include representations of basilisk (fig. 10). The middle concentric element consists of the protruding decorative arch. The segments of the arch are enriched with a representation of King David enthroned holding a harp in the bottom left segment (fig. 11) and figures in pairs above him (fig. 12). These couples are portrayed hand in hand, some holding onto their robes, others with their arms and legs slightly raised in postures that suggest that the figures are dancing. The engaged colonnettes that support these figures are also segmented by capital-like elements. The colonnettes are decorated with a deeply chiselled spiralling band, which makes them reminiscent of Solomonic columns, and are further enriched

with sculptural representations of animals, most of which are presented in pairs (fig. 13). Each colonnette portrays five animals, three of them are reptiles. Although there are some physical differences between the six snakelike creatures, has two legs, a reptile's tail, and wings. These features strongly suggest that all represent basilisks. Below the basilisks on each colonnette is a representation of another pair of animals: on the left a gryphon paired with a four-footed creature, and on the right two quadrupeds presented as a pair. Although unrecognized in previous scholarship, these quadrupeds appear to be weasels suggested also by their elongated tails, furry body, and small round ears pertinent to this animal. This identification adds further weight to the hypothesis that the hybrid reptilian figures were meant to represent basilisks, as I shall argue in Chapter Four.

Multiple representations of basilisks continue in the architectural frieze beneath the colonnaded arcade that runs across the façade and separates the bottom and middle registers. The basilisks are depicted in line along with other creatures (fig. 14). These are roosters, peacocks, stags, oxen, lions, and other quadrupeds as well as mythical creatures that often share heads or bodies. The colonnaded arcade on the other hand is embellished with four sculptural representations of animals. On each end, one finds a representation of He and She wolves, while in the middle sculptures of two oxen. Although in a significantly reduced manner, representations of animals continue into the second register of the façade. The main rose window is accentuated by the Evangelist symbols, while three telamon figures, portrayed supporting the rose window each stand on their own mythical creature (fig. 15). The middle figure stands atop a birdlike reptile with prominent wings that stands on two feet and supports itself with its serpent's tail (fig. 16). The basilisk is depicted once again underlining the prominence and questioning the possible significance of the creature in the iconography of the façade. The other two creatures

under the telamon figures cannot be identified as basilisks, since they are both quadrupeds and have long tails with a bulge. While it is difficult to identify the animal on the right, the one on the left also has a prominent beak and wings that suggests that it is a gryphon.

2. The Façade of San Rufino in Scholarly Discussion

Although the iconography of the façade's decorative programme has yet to be deciphered, scholarly writing about the façade of San Rufino is surprisingly rare and, until recently, has focused less on iconography than on questions of the façade's chronology and authorship. An inscription written in square Roman capitals (fig. 17) once found outside on the exterior east wall of the cathedral and now concealed within the later built presbytery, affirms that the construction of the structure began in April 1140 and attributes it to Giovanni da Gubbio.¹ The inscription states:

*ANNO DOMINI MILLENO CENTENOQUE QUADRAGENO AC IN QUARTO SOLIS // CARDO
SUUM EXPLET ITER ANNO DOMUS HEC EST INCHOATA ET EX SUMPTIBUS APTATA A RA //
INERO PRIORE RUFINI SANCTI ONORE EUGUBINUS ET IOANNES UIUS DOMUS QUI //
MAGISTER PRIUS IPSE DESIGNAVIT DUM VIXITQUE EDIFICAVIT*²

Before 1907, publications that mentioned the Cathedral of San Rufino did not question the attribution of the architectural structure to Giovanni. Following the statement of the inscription Giuseppe Giustino Di Costanzo, an eighteenth-century historian, Benedictine monk,

¹ Giuseppe Giustino Di Costanzo, *Disamina degli scrittori e dei monumenti risguardanti S. Rufino, vescovo e martire di Assisi* (Assisi: Nella Tipographia Sgarigliana, 1797), 175.

² "In the year of the Lord 1140 at the end of the fourth month April, this cathedral was begun and conducted, with expenses covered by the prior Raniero, in honour of San Rufino, and Giovanni da Gubbio, who was the master in this cathedral, was the one to give design, and for as long as he lived, he presided over its construction." Transcription by Antonio Cristofani, *Delle storie di Assisi* (Assisi: Forni, 1980), 72.

and abbot in Assisi, in his work *Disamina degli Scrittori e dei Monumenti Risguardanti S. Rufino* (1797), attributed the façade and its decorative programme to Giovanni di Gubbio.³ Antonio Cristofani, a historian from Assisi active at the end of the nineteenth century, in his publication *Guida d'Assisi* published in 1884 on the history of the city, also stated without doubt that the façade was the work of Giovanni.⁴ In 1907, art historian and museologist Umberto Gnoli raised for the first time the question of whether the whole façade could be attributed to Giovanni da Gubbio.⁵ Although the inscription claims that the cathedral's design is Giovanni's work, it also mentions that Giovanni overlooked the project only until his death, meaning both that the master passed away before the completion of the cathedral and that the inscription was added after his death in commemoration.⁶ Events such as the death of Giovanni and the extended period of time that was required to complete the structure, together with the evident stylistic differences between the lower register of the façade and the uppermost section, led Gnoli to speculate whether the whole façade should be attributed to Giovanni.⁷ Gnoli pointed out that the termination of the façade with a large pointed arch is a definite stylistic feature of the thirteenth century and could not be the design of Giovanni.⁸ Although Gnoli claimed that the rose windows of the second register were planned by the master, the fact that the two smaller ones occupy a much lower position compared to that of the main rose window (fig. 1) suggested to Gnoli that this area of the façade was completed by a different master who did not follow the potential drawings of the façade's design left by Giovanni in a meticulous way.⁹ The scholar concluded

³ Di Costanzo, *Disamina degli scrittori e dei monumenti*, 11.

⁴ Antonio Cristofani, *Guida d'Assisi e i suoi dintorni* (Assisi: D. Sensi, 1884), 72.

⁵ Umberto Gnoli, *L'antica Basilica Ugoniana e il Duomo di Giovanni da Gubbio in Assisi* (Perugia: Unione Tipografica Cooperativa, 1907), 2.

⁶ Gnoli, *L'antica Basilica Ugoniana*, 10.

⁷ Gnoli, *L'antica Basilica Ugoniana*, 16.

⁸ Gnoli, *L'antica Basilica Ugoniana*, 16.

⁹ Gnoli, *L'antica Basilica Ugoniana*, 17.

his work by asserting with certainty that the whole of the lower register, where the most sculptural decoration is concentrated up to the colonnaded arcade, had been decorated by Giovanni himself. Such a conclusion was made by Gnoli by examining the visual differences between the lowest and the other two registers. Gnoli wrote that the rest of the façade belonged to a “sloppy” construction that most likely belonged to the thirteenth century when the works on the structure restarted once again after a hiatus.¹⁰

The same question was re-addressed three years later by an architect, archeologist, and art historian from Assisi, Alfonso Brizi. Brizi conducted important research into physical and documentary evidence that shines light even further upon the construction of the Cathedral of Assisi. Going against Gnoli’s claim, Brizi stated that the façade could not be attributed at all to Giovanni.¹¹ As evidence for his hypothesis, Brizi discussed aspects such as the position of the inscription in such a “humble” location rather than on the façade itself.¹² The façade was a common location for inscriptions commemorating the architect and can be found in other contemporary examples for example the church of San Silvestro in Bevagna, province of Perugia.¹³ From the tradition of terminating the construction of Romanesque cathedrals with the building of the façade Brizi also concluded that the façade could not be the work of Giovanni.¹⁴ He stated that the long suspension of works on the new cathedral due to political instability within the city beginning at the end of the twelfth century, meant that Giovanni most likely passed away long before the construction of the façade.¹⁵ The author analysed the creatures

¹⁰ Gnoli, *L’antica Basilica Ugoniana*, 17-18.

¹¹ Alfonso Brizi, “La Facciata del Duomo D’Assisi: Non è opera di Giovanni da Gubbio,” *Atti dell’Accademia Perpeziana del Subasio* vol. 3, no. 8 (December, 1910): 177.

¹² Brizi, “La Facciata del Duomo D’Assisi,” 178-180.

¹³ Brizi, “La Facciata del Duomo D’Assisi,” 178-180.

¹⁴ Brizi, “La Facciata del Duomo D’Assisi,” 178-180.

¹⁵ Brizi, “La Facciata del Duomo D’Assisi,” 178-180.

depicted on the corbels on the exterior of the apse, which depict animal and human faces, stating that they were of a lower quality of execution than those represented on the façade, as well as the main portal, which Brizi described as a “truly admirable and very valuable work of art.”¹⁶ These elements led Brizi to suggest that the decorations of the façade could not have been executed by Giovanni.¹⁷

Adriano Prandi, archeologist and a mediaevalist, in his description of the cathedral’s façade published in 1979 in a book that focuses on Umbrian ecclesiastical architecture, stated that the differences between the three registers offer clear evidence that the construction and decoration of the façade took place across an extensive time period.¹⁸ Prandi argued that, while the second and third registers demonstrate a new interest in the Gothic forms with the inclusion of elements such as a rose window, the lower register adheres to the Romanesque style, which was favoured from the time of Giovanni through the second half of thirteenth century.¹⁹ Prandi mentioned the peculiar gridding that the lowest register bears and stated that it is highly characteristic of the time period not only in Umbria but also in Abruzzo and Marche regions for example in the Church of Santi Vincenzo and Anastasia in Ascoli Piceno and Pieve Romanica di San Pietro in Messa in Pennabilli.²⁰ However, in the case of San Rufino, it was executed by Giovanni in a more artistic manner, with the gridding being not geometrically accurate in order to accommodate the portals. Prandi pointed out elements borrowed from antiquity, such as the spiralling pattern on the colonnettes and the geometrical patterns on the door jambs of the main

¹⁶ Brizi, “La Facciata del Duomo D’Assisi,” 190-193.

¹⁷ Brizi, “La Facciata del Duomo D’Assisi,” 190-193.

¹⁸ Antonio Prandi, “San Rufino ad Assisi,” in *Italia Romanica: L’Umbria*, ed. Antonio Cadei (Jaca Book, 1979), 258.

¹⁹ Prandi, “San Rufino ad Assisi,” 259.

²⁰ Prandi, “San Rufino ad Assisi,” 258.

portal, which were fully consistent with the style of the twelfth century.²¹ He then discussed the multitude of animals decorating this register of the façade.²²

Brizi's conclusion that the façade should not be attributed to Giovanni da Gubbio initiated a discussion that stimulated several subsequent publications and continues to be pertinent in the contemporary scholarly discourse. An article in 2013 by Stefano Riccioni on the space of inscriptions on exteriors of Romanesque Umbrian churches continued to argue the hypothesis that the decorative programme of the façade was conceived by Giovanni da Gubbio and executed posthumously according to his plan.²³ While Enrica Neri Lusanna attempted to identify a different master who could have been behind the intricate decorations of the Cathedral of San Rufino through stylistic analysis of elements, such as the coiling vegetal motifs above the lunette (fig. 9) and the figure of a winged angel found in one of the segments on the left side above one of the colonnettes (fig. 18). Neri Lusanna compared these decorative elements to stylistically similar figures for example, the Archangel in the San Michele Basilica in Bevagna and the door jamb from the Spoleto Cathedral. Following the analysis, she proposed a hypothesis that the decoration of the façade can be attributed either to Rodolfo and Binello themselves (two Umbrian craftsmen active in the late twelfth - early thirteenth century) or their students.²⁴ However, other peculiarities of the façade, namely the significant employment of animal sculptures and the various figures decorating the main portal are left unmentioned by the scholar.

²¹ Prandi, "San Rufino ad Assisi," 260.

²² Prandi, "San Rufino ad Assisi," 260.

²³ Stefano Riccioni, "Lo spazio della scrittura sui prospetti delle chiese Romaniche in Umbria (Secoli XI e XII): Iscrizioni di Committenti e Artisti," in *Umbria e Marche in età Romanica: Arti e tecniche a confronto tra XI e XIII Secolo*, ed. Enrica Neri Lusanna (Todi: Ediart, 2013), 68.

²⁴ Enrica Neri Lusanna, "Le officine della scultura in Umbria: Binello, Rodolfo e gli altri," in *Umbria e Marche in età Romanica: Arti e tecniche a confronto tra XI e XIII Secolo*, ed. Enrica Neri Lusanna (Todi: Ediart, 2013), 68. 87-93.

Iconographic Interpretations of the Façade in Previous Publications

The iconography of the façade and a proposed reading of its decorative programme were not considered on an important level within the scholarly discussion and have produced only a few publications highly spread out in their dates. The very first publication that dealt with the various iconographic elements of the façade and attempts to read them was published in 1893 by Giuseppe Elisei, at the time a canon of the Cathedral of San Rufino.²⁵ Elisei proposed that the decorative programme of the façade could be read as the route of the faithful to redemption in which the Church plays a significant role.²⁶ This remained the most important proposed reading of the façade until 1986, when Franco Prosperi, a sculptor and art historian from Assisi identified each of the animals and the scenes represented on the façade and proposed an overall interpretation of the decoration. Prosperi suggested that the iconographic programme of the façade was developed by Joachim of Fiore, a Calabrese abbot, and confessor of a small Umbrian city nearby Assisi for three years from 1194.²⁷ Prosperi claimed that the iconographic composition of the façade is based on Joachim's commentary on the Gospels – his *Tractatus super quatuor Evangelia* was the final work of the abbot and remained incomplete.²⁸ The author stated that the iconography of the façade must have been developed by Joachim himself since his thought was not widely known at the time and the façade had to be done prior to 1198 when Joachim's work was banned by Innocent III.²⁹ Nevertheless, the tractate is known to have been

²⁵ Giuseppe Elisei, *Studio sulla Chiesa Cattedrale di S. Rufino vescovo e martire in Assisi* (Assisi: Stab. Tipografico Metastasio, 1893).

²⁶ Elisei, *Studio sulla Chiesa Cattedrale di S. Rufino*, 44.

²⁷ Franco Prosperi, *Gioacchino da Fiore e le sculture del Duomo di Assisi* (Assisi: Dimensione Grafica, 2003), 22-37.

²⁸ Francesco Santi, *Le edizioni critiche dei Tractatus super quatuor evangelia di Gioacchino da Fiore* (Rome: 2002), 109.

²⁹ Prosperi, *Gioacchino da Fiore e le sculture*, 22-37.

written between the years 1191 and 1202 (completed after the date proposed by Prosperi for the construction of the façade) making it rather difficult to be the textual source for the façade's iconographic programme.

Francesca Cristoferi re-addressed the iconography of the façade in 1999. After a careful analysis of the various elements that make up the decorative programme, she proposed a reading based on Elisei's hypothesis and stated that the iconography of the San Rufino façade is meant to highlight the fundamental dogmas of the Catholic Church and outline the route to Salvation through the Sacraments.³⁰ Elements of the main portal, such as the outer door jambs and the segments above the lunette depict the symbolic representation of the faithful avoiding any danger or evil temptation and reaching salvation through the portrayal of miniature figures grasping onto stems while animals attempt to destroy the plant by devouring it,³¹ coincide with the reading of the scholar. Nonetheless, elements such as the beasts holding onto the flanking colonnettes of the main portal are only vaguely analysed by Cristoferi and fit into the proposed reading in a rather ambiguous way, which the paper will focus upon further at a later point.

A recent doctoral dissertation by Silvia de Luca with San Rufino Cathedral as the case study, returned to and continued to challenge Prosperi's argument. De Luca stated that the author makes important claims that are weakened by a lack of evidence.³² The scholar pointed out that Prosperi mentioned only one codex that contains Joachim's text housed in Perugia (Perugia, Biblioteca del Monastero di San Pietro, Codice 15) to demonstrate the diffusion of Joachim's ideas within Umbria, but the codex is dated to the second half of thirteenth century, that is much

³⁰ Francesca Cristoferi, "La Facciata, l'architettura e le sculture della Cattedrale di San Rufino ad Assisi," in *Grandi restauri in Umbria*, ed. Vittoria Garibaldi (Perugia: Quattroemme, 2001), 185.

³¹ Cristoferi, "La Facciata, l'architettura e le sculture," 185.

³² Silvia de Luca, "Quando Assisi non era serafica. La facciata della cattedrale di San Rufino nel contesto storico-artistico di una città-stato del XIII secolo" (Phd diss., Università degli Studi di Firenze, 2016), 65.

later than the proposed date for the iconography of the façade by Prosperi and thus could not be the textual source that the decoration was based upon.³³ As will be demonstrated and explored in this thesis, De Luca re-identified certain beasts that decorate the colonnettes of the main portal and proposed a new reading to the iconographic elements. Both in the dissertation and a later publication on the iconography of the façade, De Luca stated that it is social and political conflicts and events of the twelfth and thirteenth century Assisi that influenced the decorative programme of the façade.³⁴ Complications of this proposal will be discussed in the following chapter of the thesis.

³³ De Luca, “Quando Assisi non era serafica,” 65.

³⁴ Work in discussion is: Silvia de Luca, “Sul ‘bestiario’ di San Rufino ad Assisi. Storia e iconografia,” in *Animali figurati: teoria e rappresentazione del mondo animale dal Medioevo all’età Moderna*, ed. Stefano Riccioni and Luigi Perissinotto (Rome: Viella, 2019), 93-114.

3. The Dancing Figures

The segments of the decorative arch in the main portal, which is supported by the two colonnettes, are decorated with deeply cut figures that create a strong shadow. They are represented in pairs holding onto each other with their hands while the deeply chiselled folds in the fabric of their robes as well and the position of their limbs suggest that the figures are dancing (fig. 12). The segment on the left-hand side below the dancers depicts an enthroned figure identifiable as King David (fig. 11). Such identification is possible because the figure is holding a book of Psalms, a typical attribute of David. In previous scholarly publications, the decoration of the segments with dancing couples has been most often overlooked or interpreted without considering the representation of King David and the iconographic relationship between David and dance. In the works of Prandi and Neri Lusanna, the segments were left unmentioned, and the attention was rather paid to the coiling vegetal motifs in between of which the dancing figures are represented. Gnoli pointed out the figures, stating that they are representations of circa twenty couples that are depicted holding hands or arm in arm.³⁵ Prosperi's work identified the figures as dancing and attempted to correlate this aspect with Joachim's theory.³⁶ The theory consists in the belief that there is no human existence possible solely of the spirit without its corporal vessel and that one should not expect to free one's soul from the body, but rather to transform the body's flesh into a spiritual body.³⁷ Prosperi explained that following Joachim's theory, dance is an attempt to express carnal and spiritual values and the subtle relationship

³⁵ Gnoli, *L'antica Basilica Ugoniana*, 20.

³⁶ Prosperi, *Gioacchino da Fiore e le sculture*, 287.

³⁷ Prosperi, *Gioacchino da Fiore e le sculture*, 293.

between the body and the spirit.³⁸ It is through dance, Prosperi suggested, that the master of the decorative programme of the cathedral expressed Joachim's theory.³⁹

Cristoferi on the other hand proposed that the dancing figures were a representation of people who have been saved by God through the effective guidance of the Church on their way to salvation.⁴⁰ A recent interpretation of the meaning behind these figures proposed by De Luca acquired a political reading to them.⁴¹ De Luca argued that celebrating figures as part of the decorative programme of a cathedral is a rather surprising element since the Church is known to have been against such merry-making behaviour.⁴² However, she claimed that in the case of the Cathedral of Assisi, such a decorative programme would have been accepted by the clergy, since it was linked to important political events that the Assisani (citizens of Assisi) had experienced not long before the façade of the cathedral was erected.⁴³ The events De Luca was referring to is the civil war in Assisi that began at the end of the twelfth century and concluded at the end of it 1210.⁴⁴ This reading of the dancing couples is highly problematic both from chronological and iconographic points of view. It implicitly assumes that the whole façade was executed in the thirteenth century and thus ignores the previously discussed strong likelihood, discussed above, that the lowest register of the façade was made before the thirteenth century. It also assumes that no merry-making behaviour or celebratory dance could be approved by the Church. As a comparandum De Luca proposed the fresco cycle depicting political stability and prosperity by celebrating figures from the thirteenth-century Palazzo della Ragione, an assembly hall for the

³⁸ Prosperi, *Gioacchino da Fiore e le sculture*, 287.

³⁹ Prosperi, *Gioacchino da Fiore e le sculture*, 293.

⁴⁰ Cristoferi, "La Facciata, l'architettura e le sculture," 186.

⁴¹ De Luca, "Quando Assisi non era serafica," 128.

⁴² De Luca, "Quando Assisi non era serafica," 128.

⁴³ De Luca, "Quando Assisi non era serafica," 128.

⁴⁴ De Luca, "Quando Assisi non era serafica," 128.

municipal organs of Treviso.⁴⁵ However, this is a troublesome comparison to the San Rufino since Palazzo della Ragione is not an ecclesiastical structure. The decorative programmes of Romanesque ecclesiastical architecture would not feature recent political events, especially in a location of such importance as the main portal.⁴⁶ Portals were deemed as one of the most crucial elements of the façade in Romanesque architecture not only because they welcomed often large groups of faithful and granted them access to the ecclesiastical structure, but because they were important fields for sculptural decor that would impress the viewers and send a didactic message that was based on Christian teachings or a Bible story.⁴⁷

It is important to comprehend the political turmoil that De Luca referred to and related to the decorative elements of the San Rufino's main portal to understand where De Luca's hypothesis originates from, and why this thesis challenges her proposed reading. The conflict began in 1194.⁴⁸ The reigning Holy Roman Emperor, Henry VI, marched an army into Italy and captured Assisi, making it a part of the duchy of Spoleto, but the city never embraced German rule.⁴⁹ Three years later, Henry VI died from a cold.⁵⁰ His heir, Frederick II, was still an infant, which left the Empire without an adult successor and allowed various other political groups to fight for control.⁵¹ The political instability reached Assisi soon after Henry VI's death.⁵² In 1198 the *homines populi* (merchants, artisans, and other members of the population that did not belong to the noble-class) revolted against the *boni homines* (the noble-class landowners, who for the

⁴⁵ De Luca, "Quando Assisi non era serafica," 128.

⁴⁶ Marilyn Stokstad, *Medieval Art* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 225.

⁴⁷ Stokstad, *Medieval Art*, 225.

⁴⁸ Frank Jastrzembksi, "Soldier Before Saint?: The Military Career of St. Francis," *Medieval Warfare*, vol. 6, no. 1 (March/April 2016): 47.

⁴⁹ Jastrzembski, "Soldier Before Saint?," 47.

⁵⁰ Jastrzembski, "Soldier Before Saint?," 47.

⁵¹ Arnaldo Fortini, *Nova vita di San Francesco d'Assisi* (Alpes Casa Editrice, 1926), 15.

⁵² Chiara Frugoni, *Storia di Chiara e Francesco* (Giulio Einaudi editore, 2017), 4.

most part supported the Emperor's rule), attacking their properties and forcing them to escape to Perugia for refuge.⁵³ In return, the *boni homines* were asked to give away at least part of their land to allow the city of Perugia to expand.⁵⁴ In 1202 the conflict transformed into a true war between the two cities with their armies meeting at the village of Collestrada, situated between Assisi and Perugia.⁵⁵ There, the *homines populi* were defeated and thus had to sign a peace pact in 1203, which obliged them to pay compensations to the *boni homines* and to reconstruct their destroyed houses and castles.⁵⁶ The peace pact proved to be an important setback to the civil rights of the citizens of Assisi. The *boni homines* found themselves once again ruling over the city and were providing protection to all of the population, but in return they believed to be entitled to use the goods and the force of the *homines populi* as they desired, taking away all of their civil rights.⁵⁷ However, the newly growing civil conflict between the two groups, as well as the weakened image of Imperial power that supported the *boni homines*, meant that the *boni homines* very soon were not able to take advantage of their privileged position anymore.⁵⁸ In 1210 the *Patto della Concordia*, a new Pact of Concord, was signed.⁵⁹ This new document established peace and urban harmony between the two groups of citizens by abolishing the distinction between the two groups in Assisi and establishing a communal government.⁶⁰ In celebration of the final end to the civil war and this important change in the lives of citizens of Assisi, specifically those belonging to the *homines populi*, the document ordered for the

⁵³ Frugoni, *Storia di Chiara e Francesco*, 5.

⁵⁴ Frugoni, *Storia di Chiara e Francesco*, 5.

⁵⁵ Jastrzembski, "Soldier Before Saint?," 48.

⁵⁶ Fortini, *Nova Vita di San Francesco d'Assisi*, 15.

⁵⁷ Frugoni, *Storia di Chiara e Francesco*, 8.

⁵⁸ Frugoni, *Storia di Chiara e Francesco*, 9.

⁵⁹ Assisi, Archivio Comunale, codex M. 1, f. 14. Brizi, "La Facciata del Duomo D'Assisi," 180.

⁶⁰ Brizi, "La Facciata del Duomo d'Assisi," 180.

Cathedral of San Rufino to be completed.⁶¹ De Luca argued that it is most likely that the dancing figures were born out of these historical events and that they are in fact a representation of citizens of Assisi in celebration of the Pact of Concord.⁶² Nevertheless, if it is accepted that the façade's lowest register was completed prior to 1210, a different explanation to the one proposed by De Luca for the merrymaking figures in the arch has to be identified.

Dance, Music, and Celebration. The View of the Church

To begin with, it is important to understand the true stance of the Church in the Middle Ages on dance, music, and celebration to comprehend the true opinion of the Church on the employment of dancing figures as decoration of the main portal. Dancing in the Christian tradition is a topic that has recently received an important amount of attention in scholarly discussion, with new publications that attempt to change the way the Church viewed ritual dancing and dance overall. In an article published in 2016, Laura Hellsten explained that the current stance of the scholarship leads one to believe that dance has never had a place within the Church.⁶³ The scholarship continues to ignore the importance of dance as part of the Christian liturgy.⁶⁴ Neither the more general scholarly publications, such as *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Ashbrook *et al.*, 2008) and *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies* (Jeffreys *et al.*, 2008), mention dance in any of their articles, nor do the classics that focus specifically on Christian liturgy, such as Bradshaw and Hoffman's *Life Cycles in Jewish and Christian Worship* (1996) or Hurtado's *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and*

⁶¹ Brizi, "La Facciata del Duomo d'Assisi," 180.

⁶² De Luca, "Quando Assisi non era serafica," 128.

⁶³ Laura Hellsten, "Dance in the Early Church: Sources and Restrictions," in *Approaching Religion* vol. 6, no. 2 (December 2016): 56.

⁶⁴ Hellsten, "Dance in the Early Church," 56.

Character of Earliest Christian Devotion (1999).⁶⁵ Donatella Tronca has recently argued that this omission is because dance had been long deemed for long by scholarship as an idea of manifestation of evil in the Christian tradition.⁶⁶ This idea is most likely derived from such sources as the fourth-century commentary on Matthew by John Chrysostom in which he states that “where dance is, there is the devil.”⁶⁷ In 2022 Kathryn Dickason suggested that such an opinion on the dance could have also been strongly influenced by the story of cursed carolers, who were dancing instead of attending the mass on Christmas Day in a Saxony village.⁶⁸ Descriptions of this and similar events exist in Latin texts that date to c. 1020 and are described by Dickason as the predecessors of the early modern period dance epidemics.⁶⁹ However, as Tronca wrote, the time has come to challenge this previously indisputable belief since it shows only blindness towards the existence and promotion of the celebratory dances performed in praise of God and welcomed by the Church.⁷⁰

While celebratory behaviour and dance were frowned upon by the Church, celebrations, and festivities that took place under the Church's patronage were accepted.⁷¹ Religious dancing was also transferred from pagan rites to Christian funerals and weddings and was an important part of celebrations of Shrovetide (a period of preparation for Lent), Easter, and the first of May.⁷² Dancing, which often was accompanied by music and singing was in fact a highly important element of Christian festive liturgies and was not only permitted by the Church but

⁶⁵ Hellsten, “Dance in the Early Church,” 57.

⁶⁶ Donatella Tronca, “Restricted Movement: Dancing from Late Antiquity Through the Early Middle Ages,” in *Journal of the Lucas Graduate Conferences* (2016): 56.

⁶⁷ Tronca, “Restricted Movement,” 56.

⁶⁸ Kathryn Dickason, “Medieval Dance: Transmissions and Traces,” *Dance Chronicle* vol. 45, no. 1 (2022): 109.

⁶⁹ Dickason, “Medieval Dance: Transmissions and Traces,” 109.

⁷⁰ Tronca, “Restricted Movement,” 57.

⁷¹ Barry Magrill, “Figurated Corbels on Romanesque Churches: The Interface of Diverse Social Patterns Represented on Marginal Spaces,” in *Canadian Art Review*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2009): 50.

⁷² Timothy J. McGee, *Medieval Instrumental Dances* (Indiana University Press, 1990), 1.

was performed by the clerics themselves.⁷³ Accounts of clerics from the Middle Ages testify to this. John Beleth, a twelfth-century French liturgist, and William Durand, a thirteenth-century French canonist, and liturgist, both recalled bishops, archbishops, and canons playing ball games in celebration of Easter Day.⁷⁴ Sicard of Cremona, a thirteenth-century bishop of Cremona, specified that these ball games indeed should be considered almost as ritual dances since, when throwing the ball, the players were known to perform certain dance movements in honour and celebration of God, same as gentiles once did to honour the cosmic harmony.⁷⁵

Dancers accompanied by musicians were not an unusual subject matter for Romanesque architectural sculpture. For the most part, such scenes were based on well-known Biblical accounts or otherwise moralising imagery that would be easily recognised and understood by most viewers.⁷⁶ As Elizabeth Valdez del Álamo has pointed out, the Bible, with its multiple allusions to symbolic meanings, has to be understood as the basis for the iconographic interpretation of elements decorating mediaeval architecture.⁷⁷ Two specific Biblical references were the most popular iconographic prototypes for the representation of dance: the dance of Salome and that of King David. These two biblical images can be analysed as two pendants of dance within Christianity in the Middle Ages, representing opposite poles of the moral spectrum.⁷⁸ While the dance of Salome was perceived as sinful and lustful, the performance of King David before the Ark was thought to be the image at the other end of the spectrum

⁷³ McGee, *Medieval Instrumental Dances*, 1.

⁷⁴ Philip Knäble, “L’harmonie des sphères et la danse dans le contexte clérical au Moyen Âge,” in *Medievals: Langue, textes, histoire* no. 66 (2014), p. 74.

⁷⁵ Knäble, “L’harmonie des sphères et la danse dans le contexte clérical au Moyen Âge,” 75.

⁷⁶ Stokstad, *Medieval Art*, 225.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Valdez del Álamo, “The Iconography of Architecture,” in *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Iconography*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2017), 373.

⁷⁸ Sandra Pietrini, “La santa danza di David e il ballo peccaminoso di Salomé: Due figure esemplari dell’immaginario Biblico Medievale,” *Quaderni Medievali* vol. 50 (December, 2000): 47.

representing a devotional and celebratory of God performance of a “praiseworthy” dancer.⁷⁹ The idea that this pair of Biblical characters were employed to successfully illustrate the two worlds of dance in Romanesque architecture remains pertinent in modern scholarship as well. A recent publication by Dickason continues to discuss Salome’s and King David’s dances as two well-known iconographic symbols for the mediaeval viewers, which each stand for their dance and the intent behind it.⁸⁰

The Sinful Dance of Salome

Although the dance of Salome was viewed by the Church in a negative light, it was an important moralising image and was widely employed in Romanesque architectural decoration. A capital in the cloister of the Collegiate church of Santa Maria in Alquézar, Spain (consecrated in 1099), portrays a row of figures at a table, who represent the banquet of King Herod Antipas with his guests. A contorted figure, performing a movement almost like an acrobat, in front of them is identifiable as Salome (fig. 19). While the early twelfth-century bronze door with bas-relief biblical scenes of Basilica of San Zeno Maggiore portrays Salome’s body curled in a complete circle while performing her dance (fig. 20). The story of Salome’s Dance is recounted by the Evangelists Mark and Matthew.⁸¹ The youthful princess performed her dance before King Herod Antipas and the guests at his banquet.⁸² Upon the request of her mother, Herodias, Salome asked in return the head of John the Baptist, who had criticised the marriage of King Herod and

⁷⁹ Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and Susan Emanuel, “Salome’s Dance,” in *Clio. Women, Gender, History* no. 46 (2017): 190.

⁸⁰ Work in discussion is Kathryn Dickason, “King David in the Medieval Archives: Toward an Archaic Future for Dance Studies,” in *Futures of Dance Studies*, ed. Susan Manning (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).

⁸¹ Mark (6. 17-29). Matthew (14. 3-12).

⁸² Klapisch-Zuber and Emanuel, “Salome’s Dance,” 186.

Herodias and had already been arrested.⁸³ Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and Susan Emanuel stated that the Church viewed Salome's dance as wicked, seducing, and sinful, because not only did she behave immorally by exposing her youthful body, but by dancing for the King and his guests she became complicit in a crime – the death of John the Baptist.⁸⁴ The Dance of Salome became a well-recognised symbol for seductive carnal dances that aroused sexual desire and thus stood for the sin of lust.⁸⁵

In the Middle Ages, this imagery became a subject for manuscript illuminations and decorative programmes of Romanesque architecture.⁸⁶ The twelfth-century French or German Flabellum of Hohenburg (fig. 21) (London, British Library, Add MS 42497), which depicts scenes from the life of Saint John the Baptist, exemplifies the iconographic tradition depicting Salome performing the most acrobatic moves. Here the princess is portrayed in a handstand with her legs right in front of Herod. The King in turn reaches out towards them with his hand possibly as a confirmation of being seduced by the youthful body and the dance (fig. 22). Because exaggeration of movement in dance was deemed both socially and morally unacceptable, illuminators and craftsmen portrayed Salome in such poses to underline the sinister and sinful nature of her dance.⁸⁷ Even in sculptural decoration where King Herod Antipas and the banquet are not portrayed and instead the female figure is accompanied only by a musician (most often with a harp but sometimes a flute to accompany the dance with music) the scene can be easily identified as Salome's dance thanks to the contorted body of the female figure. The tradition of representing this subject was especially strong in Aragon. They include

⁸³ René Girard, "Scandal and the Dance: Salome in the Gospel of Mark," in *New Literary History* vol. 15, no. 2 (1984): 311.

⁸⁴ Klapisch-Zuber and Emanuel, "Salome's Dance," 191.

⁸⁵ Klapisch-Zuber and Emanuel, "Salome's Dance," 188.

⁸⁶ Girard, "Scandal and the Dance," 311.

⁸⁷ Klapisch-Zuber and Emanuel, "Salome's Dance," 189.

the capitals of the Church of El Salvador Ejea de los Caballeros consecrated in 1122 (fig. 23), the Church of San Gil de Luna consecrated in 1170 (fig. 24), the cloister of the Abbey of San Pedro el Viejo dating back to the twelfth century (fig. 25) as well as the portal of the twelfth-century Church of Santiago de Agüero (fig. 26). All of the examples mentioned present female dancers in contorted positions with their backs arched, their hands on their hips, and their heads tilting down to the ground making their long hair sweep the floor. The style of the dress that accentuates the feminine waist and the circular decorative pattern of the robe highlighting the dancer's breasts are also common to all of these figures in Aragon. These similarities between all of the Salome representations in different ecclesiastical structures led to a scholarly conclusion made by Carmen Zaval Arnal that all of these capitals were done by the school of Master of Agüero who was active in the twelfth-century Aragon.⁸⁸ Analysis of the dance of Salome as an iconographic image that was a symbol for the evil of dance is an important foundation to understanding how the danced of King David, represented in the portal of San Rufino, was viewed as the positive iconography of dance.

The Praised Dance of King David

While the dance of Salome was the chief Christian iconography for the dangerous dance, its counterpart – the dance of King David before the Ark, as Klapisch-Zuber and Emanuel stated, was seen as a highly positive image portraying not only the celebration of God through dance but David's great humility, as well.⁸⁹ As the first psalmist known and praised for his musical talent

⁸⁸ Carmen Zaval Arnal, "La Danzarina Contorsionada y el Juglar Músico: Una Nueva Mirada a un Tipo Iconográfico-Musical del Arte Medieval Aragonés," in *Argensola* vol. 125 (2015): 393.

⁸⁹ Klapisch-Zuber and Emanuel, "Salome's Dance," 190.

King David was most often represented in Romanesque architecture enthroned, holding a Psalm book or otherwise a harp or a fiddle, with lion skin at the bottom of his throne.⁹⁰ One of the best-known examples of such imagery decorates the left buttress of the Gate of Las Platerías in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela dating back to c. 1103 (fig. 27).⁹¹ Iconographic representations of King David as the musician were also highly popular in manuscript illuminations and can be spotted in manuscripts such as the decorated initial portraying King David with a harp in Psalm I in the London, British Library, Harley MS 4804/1, a manuscript dating to the first half of twelfth century (fig. 28). This particular iconographic motif for the depiction of King David was of such popularity during the Middle Ages that it was featured not only in manuscripts and Romanesque architecture but also in other art media. David enthroned with the book of Psalms or as a musician was portrayed in fresco, enamel, ivory, leather works, stained glass, textiles, mosaic, and metalwork.⁹² On other occasions, King David was portrayed dancing before the Ark of the Covenant celebrating God. Examples of such iconography are particularly popular once again in manuscript illuminations and can be observed for example in the eleventh-century illumination in Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr.333, or Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Supplément gr. 1335. This paper suggests that the dancing figures that decorate the segments of the arch in the main portal are iconographically linked to King David and his virtuous dance.

San Rufino is an exceptional example that combines the two iconographic types. While both of the recent publications on the iconography of the façade, those of Francesca Cristoferi

⁹⁰ Rosario Álvarez Martínez and Miguel Ánel Anguilar Rancel, “Music Iconography of Romanesque Sculpture in the Light of Sculptors’ Work Procedures: the Jaca Cathedral, Las Platerías in Santiago de Compostela, and San Isidoro de León,” in *Music In Art* vol. 27, no. 1/2 (2002): 19.

⁹¹ Martínez and Rancel, “Music Iconography of Romanesque Sculpture,” 28.

⁹² Colum Hourihane, “As Musician,” in *King David in the Index of Christian Art*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton University, 2002), 74.

and Silvia De Luca, describe the depiction of King David and the dancers above him, neither scholar connects the two elements to one other. De Luca acknowledges the presence of David but does not interpret it.⁹³ Cristoferi, on the other hand, only states that David is depicted because he is the prefiguration of Christ and the founder of the liturgy.⁹⁴ However, Cristoferi does not connect the representation of King David to the images of the dancing figures and David's dance as an important foundation of Christian liturgy.⁹⁵ An earlier publication by Prosperi described the image of King David as a visual and symbolic reference to the book of Psalms to which Joachim dedicates one of his fundamental works – the *Psalterium decem chordarum*.⁹⁶ Prosperi pointed out that David is represented on the portal enthroned and holding the book of Psalms, which are typical attributes of David; however, he did not identify the dancing figures represented above as another important attribute of David.⁹⁷

In c. 1000 B.C. King David made Jerusalem the capital of his kingdom.⁹⁸ According to the Old Testament (2 Samuel 6), in celebration of this the Ark of the Lord, the most sacred relic in Judaism consists of a wooden casket covered in gold that contains the two plaques with the Ten Commandments as well as the pot of manna and Aaron's rod, was brought over to Jerusalem from Kiriath-jearim.⁹⁹ The Ark of the Lord entered Jerusalem accompanied by sounds of the ram's horns, shouts of joy, and King David singing prayers and dancing around the Ark of Covenant.¹⁰⁰ After blessing his people, David returned home where his wife, Michal, expressed

⁹³ De Luca, "Quando Assisi non era serafica," 128.

⁹⁴ Cristoferi, "La Facciata, l'architettura e le sculture," 185.

⁹⁵ Cristoferi, "La Facciata, l'architettura e le sculture," 185.

⁹⁶ Prosperi, *Gioacchino da Fiore e sculture*, 305.

⁹⁷ Prosperi, *Gioacchino da Fiore e le sculture*, 305.

⁹⁸ Colum Hourihane, "Introduction", in *King David in the Index of Christian Art*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton University Press, 2002), xix.

⁹⁹ Karel Van Der Toorn and Cees Houtman, "David and the Ark," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* vol. 113, no. 2. (1994): 209.

¹⁰⁰ 2 Samuel 6:15.

to him how ashamed she was of her husband for exposing himself in such a way dancing around only in a linen garment.¹⁰¹ To which David responded that he was dancing and celebrating God who had appointed him to be the leader of Israel and the people of the Lord and thus he had nothing to be ashamed of.¹⁰² “And David said to Michal, it was before the Lord, which chose me before thy father, and before all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the Lord, over Israel: therefore will I play before the Lord.”¹⁰³ King David, represented solely with a harp, dancing around the Ark, or surrounded by musicians and dancers, became one of the earliest Western mediaeval known representations of celebration, dance, and music-making.¹⁰⁴ The Early Christians effectively distanced the dance of the King from any negative associations that it might have had, for example, pagan performers of Roman theatre in which performers often would be nude.¹⁰⁵ In turn, King David was fashioned as the prototype for the holy Christian dance establishing him and the dance as a model for worship with a long-lasting effect.¹⁰⁶ Same as Solame was understood by the mediaeval viewer as a symbol of the evil of dance, King David and his dancers were seen as the symbol of the accepted dance that both of the Testaments associated with joy, thanksgiving, prophecy, and praise of the Lord.¹⁰⁷ Other examples of celebratory dances that are mentioned in the Bible include for example Myriam dancing with the women once they crossed the Red Sea. Therefore it is clear that King David’s dance was the foundation for establishing the importance of dance as a Judeo-Christian tradition.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ 2 Samuel 6:20.

¹⁰² 2 Samuel 6:22.

¹⁰³ 2 Samuel 23:1.

¹⁰⁴ Susan Boyton, “The Visual Representation of Music and Sound,” in *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Iconography*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Routledge Taylor & Francis), 479.

¹⁰⁵ Kathryn Dickason, “King David in the Medieval Archives: Toward an Archaic Future for Dance Studies,” in *Futures of Dance Studies*, ed. Susan Manning (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 37.

¹⁰⁶ Dickason, “King David in the Medieval Archives,” 37.

¹⁰⁷ Dickason, “King David in the Medieval Archives,” 37.

¹⁰⁸ Knäble, “L’harmonie des sphères et la danse dans le contexte clérical au Moyen Âge”, 75.

Further Examples of King David and the Dancers

Early mediaeval manuscripts, most often books of Psalms, are frequently decorated with illuminations that depict King David enthroned and surrounded by dancers alluding to the celebrated dance of the King honouring the Lord. It is from such works that this iconographic image was most likely developed and translated into the decoration of Romanesque architecture, including the Cathedral of San Rufino, where it would be easily recognised and read as a symbol by the viewers. Anglo-Saxon Canterbury psalter dating back to c. 750 (London, British Library, Cotton MS Vespasian A I) is decorated with a whole page illumination that presents a pect composition with King David enthroned and flanked by musicians, while two dancers are depicted performing right beneath his feet (fig. 29). A later example that dates to 890-900 and comes from The Golden Psalter of Abbey of Saint Gall (St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 22) shows once again an enthroned figure of King David surrounded by a pair of musicians and two dancers (fig. 30). In the Carolingian period depictions of King David flourished.¹⁰⁹ The book of Psalms came to be perceived as one of the most important gifts from King David to the faithful.¹¹⁰ It is known that in monasteries of the Middle Ages, new monks and nuns were asked to recite the Psalms to demonstrate their true spiritual commitment, while the lyrical quality of the verses promoted both instrumental and vocal accompaniment as well as certain dance movements.¹¹¹ The importance of the text spiked the production of the Books of Psalms as well as other illuminated passages from the Old Testament, such as the biography of King David in which the discussed iconographic images associated with the King developed.¹¹² A book of

¹⁰⁹ Martínez and Rancel, ““Music Iconography of Romanesque Sculpture,”” 19.

¹¹⁰ Martínez and Rancel, ““Music Iconography of Romanesque Sculpture,”” 19.

¹¹¹ Dickason, “King David in the Medieval Archives,” 39.

¹¹² Martínez and Rancel, ““Music Iconography of Romanesque Sculpture,”” 19.

Psalms dating back to the eleventh century (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat.gr.752.pt.1) is a later example portraying King David enthroned and surrounded by musicians and dancers. On folio 5r., at the bottom right, one finds a miniature illumination (fig. 31). It is stylistically identical to the other illuminations present in the manuscript and consists of a background done in gold leaf and depictions of figures in colourful robes. This illumination presents two rows of figures. In the first row, the central figure is portrayed as crowned, enthroned, and holding a harp, which allows for it to be identified as King David. Surrounding him are further people, some holding musical instruments and others dancing. The figure right below that of King David is shown with one arm raised above the other performing a dance movement, not one that would not be considered scandalous or inappropriate, but associated with the praised dance once performed by David himself. Such iconography can also be found featured as part of the decorative programmes of Romanesque ecclesiastical structures where these symbolic depictions would be easily read. In the previously mentioned portal of the Santiago de Agüero, one of the column capitals is occupied by the musician with the dancing Salome, while another capital portrays King David seated with a harp accompanying with his music the dances of the figures before him (fig. 32). In this case the figures dance in a much more modest way without performing any acrobatic movements, contorting their bodies or revealing any of their body parts inappropriately, making these modestly dancing people highly reminiscent of the couples in the arch of the San Rufino's main portal. The location of the capital depicting Salome's dance in the vicinity of that portraying King David and the dancing figures confirms the idea that these two particular Biblical accounts were transformed into well-known symbols that stood for the two types of dances.

Both physical (in the way the figures are depicted) and iconographic similarities between the discussed examples and the depictions of King David and the dancing figures in the main portal of San Rufino suggest that the figures presented in motion are not the Assisani celebrating the end of the civil war, but rather the dancers associated with King David. The imagery of celebration and dancing in honour of God would be approved by the Church as the decoration of the main portal since Christianity did not exclude dance from churches, liturgical services, and the lives of the faithful and did not view it as a definite sin.¹¹³ Rather, the negative view and association of dance and overall celebration with evil derived from when the dance was part of a specific disorder, such as the drunk dances of certain women on Easter night in front of the Basilicas of Martyrs, that of the cursed carolers or the dance of Salome in the New Testament, characterised by drunkenness, misconduct, and lust.¹¹⁴ As Sandra Pietrini pointed out, the Bible also provides occasions in which dance assumes a highly negative connotation, but they are specifically linked to sinful events such as the dance of Jews around the golden calf.¹¹⁵ Otherwise, dancing is described in the holy text as a collective manifestation of joy.¹¹⁶ This concept is successfully translated into mediaeval visual arts by establishing two easily recognised symbols: Salome's dance as that of a sinful event and King David and his dancers successfully demonstrating the true nature of celebratory dance performed in praise of the Lord. The book of Psalms concludes with Psalm 150 instructing the faithful to praise God with music and dance. "Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with timbrel and dancing".¹¹⁷ Thus, once again illustrates that, in celebration and praise of the Lord,

¹¹³ Hellsten, "Dance in the Early Church," 61.

¹¹⁴ Tronca, "Restricted Movement," 58.

¹¹⁵ Pietrini, "La Santa Danza di David," 45.

¹¹⁶ Pietrini, "La Santa Danza di David," 45.

¹¹⁷ Psalm 150:3-4.

dance was an accepted and encouraged phenomenon, which the figures of the main portal of San Rufino also confirm.

4. The Mythical Beasts of the Intricate Colonnets

The colonnettes that support the decorative arch are also highly particular and are embellished with a deeply chiselled spiralling band (fig. 13). Same colonnettes, but in their miniature version, can be found decorating the throne of King David (fig. 11) and Jesus Christ's throne in the lunette (fig. 8) almost subtly connecting the three elements. The colonnettes are further decorated with sculptures of beasts presented for the most part in pairs. Most of these creatures are in combat with one another biting each other's heads, necks, or tails, and six out of the ten figures on both colonnettes are representations of the same mythical creature. Beginning on the top left colonnette, one can observe a reptile with wings, a serpent-like tail, two legs that grasp onto the column, and a human-like face with evident eyes, mouth, and a peculiar hairstyle (fig. 33). Below that is a pair of creatures biting each other's heads. They carry no human features, but similarly to the monsters above them have only two legs, broad wings, and twisting tails (fig. 34). On the top of the right colonnette, is once again a singular representation of a creature with broad wings, two legs, and scaling skin, and a beak that is grasping onto what looks like the remains of someone's tail. (fig. 35) While just beneath, is another pair of two mythical animals interlocked with a bite at their necks. While their appearance is highly similar to each other, there is a slight difference being their heads. One has an evident snout, while the other carries the head of a rooster, with a crest and a beak (fig. 36). Although there is a slight difference between the physical properties that each of the creatures carries, they all share peculiar physical properties such as the broad wings, scaled skin, and serpent-like tails, as well as only two legs each that hold onto the columns. These shared features allow for all of these creatures to be identified as s.

Same as the dancing figures in the segments, the monsters that decorate the colonnettes have not received much scholarly attention and in-depth analysis even though they are very prominent in the decorative programme of the main portal. Hardly any previous scholarship discusses the colonnettes. In the description of the main portal, Gnoli mentioned the presence of the animals on the colonnettes but described them simply as “animals that chase each other” without going into any further detail.¹¹⁸ Brizi, when claiming that the façade was executed by other craftsmen rather than Giovanni, compared the execution of the monstrous faces that decorate the corbels beneath the arcade and those that are found behind the apse, but had no mention of any other creature.¹¹⁹ In an attempt to answer the question as to which craftsman could have then constructed that façade, Neri Lusanna studied various figures of the façade such as those that populate the door jambs, but omitted looking at the colonnettes.¹²⁰ Prandi, on the other hand, did mention the colonnettes and described the monsters as “winged and tailed”, but the description concluded without any further analysis, possible interpretation, or identification of the creatures.¹²¹

Identification of the beasts was attempted by Prosperi, who stated that the central couple of beasts on the left colonnette are dragons, and the one on the top of this pair is a mantichore (even though the monster looks nothing like a lion and is not a quadruped) and the two creatures biting each other’s necks are both caladrius birds without mentioning that the two monsters are different to each other making it challenging to identify them as the same type of animal.¹²² In the recent doctoral dissertation, Prosperi’s claims are disputed by De Luca who stated that the

¹¹⁸ Gnoli, *L’antica Basilica Ugoniana*, 20.

¹¹⁹ Brizi, “La Facciata del Duomo d’Assisi,” 185.

¹²⁰ Neri Lusanna, “Le officine della scultura in Umbria,” 85.

¹²¹ Prandi, “San Rufino ad Assisi,” 260.

¹²² Prosperi, *Gioacchino da Fiore e le sculture*, 280.

two beasts biting at each other's necks should be identified as two dragons that are meant to symbolise an invitation to the Assisani to put an end to the climate of disorder in light of the civil war.¹²³ It was also noted by De Luca that one of the creatures has a head that of a bird, nonetheless, the scholar did not interpret the physical differences between the two creatures and omitted discussing how the physical differences of the two reptiles would allow for both of them to be still recognised as dragons.¹²⁴ Nonetheless, ahead of a rooster, wings and snaky tails are the physical properties that allow for the reptile to be identified as a basilisk presented in its hybrid form combining both snake and bird features. De Luca's dissertation did not compare the two monsters identified by the scholar as dragons to any other creature found on the two colonnettes, which remained unidentified in her work. Such is the case also in Cristoferi's publication. The scholar stated that the main portal is flanked by representations of dragons with a human faces,¹²⁵ overlooking that only one reptile with such peculiar features can be found on both of the colonnettes. Other creatures remained unidentified by the scholar. In the iconographic reading of the façade, it was suggested by Cristoferi that representations of these monsters allude to the general evil forces that threaten all of humanity, but in the context of a cathedral's façade possibly should be read as images of heretical violence.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, the lack of identification of all of the creatures on the colonnettes (some of which are not reptiles at all) and such a reading do not explain why this particular mythical creature is chosen for this iconography over any other monster and for what reason, not only it is given such prominence in the main portal of the

¹²³ De Luca, "Quando Assisi non era serafica," 126.

¹²⁴ De Luca, "Quando Assisi non era serafica," 126.

¹²⁵ Cristoferi, "La Facciata, l'architettura e le sculture," 180.

¹²⁶ Cristoferi, "La Facciata, l'architettura e le sculture," 186.

cathedral, but overall in the façade having its representation repeated multiple times, more than any other animal.

On Basilisk

Known as *basiliskos* in Greek and *regulus* in Latin translating to “the little king”, the basilisk was known as the king of all serpents due to its deadly properties.¹²⁷ Exploration of the reptile's history and the way the notion of basilisk was conceived and understood in antiquity is highly important to comprehend how the beast was translated into the Middle Ages. Inquiry into the developments in basilisk's properties and physical appearance throughout centuries reaching the Middle Ages allows to identify the beasts on the colonnettes of the main portal as well as hypothesise on the meaning of these creatures as symbolic symbols and therefore interpret their role in the decoration of the main portal and the San Rufino's façade overall. The beast originated in the writings of classical authors such as Nicander of Colophon, Pliny the Elder, and Lucan. Although the accounts of the beast by these three authors vary slightly, they all agree that the basilisk is the most poisonous snake known as a king, and it originates in the deserts of North African countries, most likely Libya.¹²⁸ The first surviving account of a basilisk is found in the work of a Greek Physician Nicander of Colophon (second century BC) *Theriaca* – a didactical hexameter poem that describes venomous creatures and the harm that they can inflict on a human being.¹²⁹ Nicander described the basilisk as a small snake that frightens all living creatures by being extremely poisonous and the prey that it kills continues to carry the poison long after its

¹²⁷ Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge, University Press, 2007), 18.

¹²⁸ Mark P. O. Morford, “The Purpose of Lucan's Ninth Book,” in *Latomus* 26, no. 1 (1967): 126-27.

¹²⁹ Floris Overduin, “The Anti-Bucolic World of Nicander's ‘Thearica,’” in *The Classical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2014): 623.

death and thus remains to be a threat.¹³⁰ An eleventh-century Byzantine manuscript now housed at the National Library of Paris (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS, Supplément Grec 247) is the only surviving illuminated manuscript of *Theriaca*, but it illustrates that the text was still of interest and reproduced in the Middle Ages (fig. 37).

The basilisk is once again introduced to the reader in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*.¹³¹ The Roman author still described the basilisk as a highly poisonous snake from Cyrenaica (nowadays eastern Libya) that ruled over all other reptiles but added to what was previously mentioned by Nicander of Colophon, that the reptile is very easily provoked, it "scorches up grass and bursts rocks", hisses spitting out its venom and slithers with its head raised above the ground.¹³² Due to these newly described physical properties and abilities of the serpent, Alexander McN proposed that what the Roman author described as a basilisk is most likely *Naja haje* (the Egyptian Cobra) or even more specifically *Naja nigricollis* the Egyptian Cobra that is known for spitting its venom.¹³³ To demonstrate the potency of a basilisk, Pliny described that once a man on horseback attempted to kill a basilisk with his sphere, but the venom travelled up the weapon killing both the man and the horse.¹³⁴ Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (39 - 65 AD), a Roman poet better known as Lucan, dedicated a separate book of one of his most popular works *Pharsalia*, that describes the wars between Julius Caesar and Pompey, to a description of snakes.¹³⁵ Book IX narrates how the anti-Caesarean hero, Cato the Younger, led his army through the desert in Libya and describes all of the various reptiles (seventeen to be

¹³⁰ Nicander of Colophon. *Theriaca*, 396 quoted in Alexander R. McN, "The Evolution of the Basilisk," in *Greece & Rome* vol. 12, no. 2 (October 1963): 170.

¹³¹ Book VIII, Chapter XXXIII.

¹³² Pliny, *Natural History Books 8-11*, trans. Horace Rackham (Harvard University Press, 1983), 58-59.

¹³³ Alexander R. McN, "The Evolution of the Basilisk," in *Greece & Rome* vol. 12, no. 2 (October 1963): 172.

¹³⁴ Pliny, *Natural History*, 59.

¹³⁵ Vincent Hunink, "Review of *Lucan's Snake Book*," in *The Classical Review* 55, no. 2 (2005): 546.

precise) that the army meet on their way.¹³⁶ Lucan presented the basilisk as a king that rules “the empty sands”, threatens all other creatures, and compels its victim before attacking it.¹³⁷ The author then described a tragic event that once again demonstrates the true monstrous power of the beast. Similar to Pliny’s account, a warrior attempted to kill a basilisk by driving his spear through the body of the snake causing the venom to reach the soldier’s hand through his spear.¹³⁸ In Lucan’s narrative, to save his life the warrior grabbed his sword and cut off his affected hand.¹³⁹ Although all of the three discussed classical sources that deal with the basilisk described it as the most poisonous and dangerous reptile of all (with definite exaggerations in the beast’s properties), most likely they all based their accounts on a truly existing snake.¹⁴⁰ To describe any poisonous serpent, which includes the basilisk, antiquity would employ the hypernym *vipera aspis*, which would avoid the difficulty of identifying and naming the specific serpent.¹⁴¹ Basilisk, on the other hand, was known and distinguished by its name not only due to its well-known horrifying power but also thanks to its easily recognisable physical properties that made its identification rather easy. As Henry Baker Tristram claimed, its described ability to move with its head raised high confirms that the creature, which was known as a basilisk, was a description of an Egyptian Cobra that is one of the most venomous reptiles to exist and known for its loud hissing before the attack, spitting its venom and being able to stand up reaching human height by supporting itself on its back vertebrae.¹⁴² While it is most likely that the notion of a basilisk was

¹³⁶ Morford, “The Purpose of Lucan’s Ninth Book,” 127.

¹³⁷ Hunink, “Review of *Lucan’s Snake Book*,” 547.

¹³⁸ Lucan, *Pharsalia* Book IX, trans. Matthew Fox (Penguin Classics, 2012), lines 789-838.

¹³⁹ Lucan, *Pharsalia* Book IX, lines 789-838.

¹⁴⁰ Sara Sebenico, *I mostri dell’occidente Medievale: fonti e diffusione di razze umane mostruose, ibridi ed animali fantastici* (Università degli Studi di Trieste, 2005), 178.

¹⁴¹ Henry Baker Tristram, *Natural History of the Bible: Being a Review of the Physical Geography, Geology and Meteorology of the Holy Land with a Description of Every Animal and Plant Mentioned in the Holy Scripture* (London: Richard Clay & Sons, 1898), 271.

¹⁴² Tristram, *Natural History of the Bible*, 271.

developed from an existing reptile rather than being solely the product of human imagination, it cannot be certain that the creature in discussion originated from an Egyptian Cobra. This snake is the largest of the African cobras measuring on average 150 centimetres.¹⁴³ The classical authors, on the other hand, specified that a basilisk was a small reptile only around nine inches long.¹⁴⁴ This suggests that, unless the Egyptian Cobra has experienced such important physical modifications and developments as a sub-specie throughout the centuries, then it is not possible to confirm that the basilisk described by the three mentioned classical authors is based specifically on the Egyptian Cobra rather than another venomous snake that shares its habitat with that of the Cobra.

With each account of the basilisk from the three antique sources, the beast's potency would be magnified presenting it as an even more dangerous reptile. While Nicander of Colophon just discussed its highly poisonous venom, Pliny claimed that the basilisk can spit its venom, and kill with its gaze and Lucan amplified this description by stating that the venom of the beast could saturate even spears reaching the hands of the warrior. Consequently, at the time of the Middle Ages, the basilisk was translated and viewed as a terrifying reptile that did not spare any living creature and hardly had any antidote. However, the physical qualities of a basilisk altered highly from the description of the serpent by classical authors and its small size was not something that the reptile was associated with any longer. As can be seen from thirteenth-century bestiary illuminations from the Aberdeen bestiary (fig. 38) (Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Library, Univ. Lib. MS 24) and *Liber de natura rerum* (fig. 39) (Bibliothèque Municipale de Valenciennes, MS 320 (*Liber de natura rerum*)), that represent a

¹⁴³ Eraqi R. Khannoon and Susan E. Evans, "The Embryonic Development of the Egyptian Cobra *Naja h. Haje* (Squamata Serpentes: Elapidae)," in *Acta Zoologica* 95, no. 4 (2014): 472.

¹⁴⁴ Sebenico, *I Mostri dell'occidente Medievale*, 178.

basilisk with its well-established iconography, in the Middle Ages its was viewed as a reptile of a rather large size, almost as large as a human, as if desiring to visually portray the danger of the serpent through its size. The creature also has a serpent-like tail, two front legs, and wings possibly employed to justify the serpent's ability to raise its upper body as was described by Pliny. Another peculiar detail is that often, specifically in the later Middle Ages, a basilisk would be represented with a cock's head, beak, and crest. Although not a strictly necessary attribute of a serpent for it to be identified as a basilisk, the beast was often depicted in such a way from which the later name 'cockatrice' derives.¹⁴⁵

It is a highly peculiar inquiry as to why the beast experienced such important physical changes and came to be viewed and represented as a hybrid monster in the Middle Ages. The creature became widely known from Isidore of Seville's, a Spanish sixth-century bishop, description in his *Etymologiae* encyclopaedia that described the basilisk as the king of snakes that kills any other reptile with its stench and humans with its gaze, harms birds that fly above it by burning them however distant they may be, hisses, searches for dark hiding places and is hydrophobic.¹⁴⁶ From this description, it can be hypothesised that at the time of Isidore's *Etymologiae*, the basilisk was still conceived as a highly potent reptile, most likely with physical properties that of a snake, just like the sources from antiquity suggested.

It is only in c. 1100 that the belief that a basilisk is a hybrid creature with a rooster's beak, wings, and legs but a serpent's tail is introduced by Theophilus Presbyter, a German monk, and artist, in his third book of *Schedula diversarum artium* that describes various mediaeval arts and art techniques.¹⁴⁷ Theophilus described how one can obtain pigments of various colours

¹⁴⁵ Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, 18.

¹⁴⁶ Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 225.

¹⁴⁷ McN, *The Evolution of the Basilisk*, 175.

including *de auro hispanico* – The Spanish gold – that has the properties of real gold both in its colour and weight.¹⁴⁸ According to Theophilus, the recipe for the Spanish gold pigment consisted of mixing red copper, human blood, vinegar, and basilisk powder.¹⁴⁹ The monk then described what is a basilisk and how to obtain one for making Spanish gold. Theophilus stated that it is a hybrid serpent with cock’s features and that to hatch a basilisk an egg must be laid by an old rooster and then hatched by a toad for a basilisk to develop out of it.¹⁵⁰ Although with slight variations, the idea that a basilisk hatched from an old rooster’s egg was later mentioned throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by authors such as St. Hildegard (*Physcia vii*), Alexander Neckam (*De Naturis Rerum cxx*) Bartholomew Glanville (*De Proprietatibus Rerum xii*) and Vincent of Beauvais (*Speculum Naturale xx*) and therefore became widely known and believed.¹⁵¹

The Septuagint, the first translation of the Bible that translates the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek made in c. 132 BC in Egypt,¹⁵² also mentions the basilisk several times.¹⁵³ Specifically, the words of Isaiah “he who would eat of their eggs, having crushed the unfertilised egg, finds in it a basilisk”¹⁵⁴ might be the source from where Theophilus claimed that a basilisk would hatch from an egg came.¹⁵⁵ However, it is not certain that Theophilus was able to read

¹⁴⁸ Aden Kumler and Christopher R. Lakey, “*Res et Significatio*: The Material Sense of Things in the Middle Ages,” *Gesta* 51, no. 1 (2012): 8.

¹⁴⁹ Theophilus, *The Various Arts: De Diversis Artibus*, trans. Charles Reginald Dodwell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 96.

¹⁵⁰ Theophilus, *The Various Arts: De Diversis Artibus*, 97.

¹⁵¹ McN, “The Evolution of the Basilisk,” 177.

¹⁵² Clyde Weber Votaw, “The Septuagint Greek Version of the Old Testament,” *The Biblical World* 16, no. 3 (1990): 186.

¹⁵³ Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, 18.

¹⁵⁴ Isaiah 59:5.

¹⁵⁵ Manuela Gianandrea, “Tra fedeltà al testo e concessione alla creatività Medievale. L’immagine del basilisco nel Rabano Mauro di Montecassino e della Vaticana,” in *Sodalitas: Studi in memoria di Don Faustino Avagliano*, ed. Mariano dell’Omo, Federico Marazzi, Fabio Simonelli and Cesare Crova (Montecassino: Miscellanea Cassinese, 2016), 392.

Greek and thus he was most likely quoting some now unknown older alchemist tradition.¹⁵⁶ In antiquity, Pliny and in Mediaeval times authors such as Cassian (fifth century) and Theophylactus Simocatta (seventh century) stated that ibises were Egyptian birds that controlled the population of venomous snakes by eating them resulted in their stomachs and eggs being full of reptiles from which basilisks hatched.¹⁵⁷ It could be hypothesised that, since the ibis was a more unfamiliar and uncommon bird in the Western territories in the Middle Ages, the notion that a bird would lay eggs full of reptiles was translated to cocks. Such a common household bird allowed for its eggs to be observed from which the belief that basilisks hatched from cock's eggs could also have originated. As McN explained, a yolkless egg is a natural phenomenon that is known to sometimes occur in domestic fowl.¹⁵⁸ Nonetheless, in the Middle Ages, it was seen as something against the laws of nature and was believed that such eggs were produced by the cocks rather than the hens and thus were looked at with horror and as a portal for other deformities to come into the earth.¹⁵⁹ Such eggs were thought to be those from which the basilisks hatched since when the egg would be cracked open 'embryo serpents' would be found inside of it.¹⁶⁰ What was thought to be the 'embryo serpents' were, in fact, chalazae of these eggs, which is a structure that in normal eggs is meant to hold the yolk, but in those that are yolkless can be visible and could be interpreted as small snakes due to its spindle-like structure.¹⁶¹ Encountering such eggs would confirm that basilisks were indeed creatures that existed and that they would hatch from the eggs that were thought in the Middle Ages to be laid

¹⁵⁶ Gianandrea, "Tra fedeltà al testo e concessione alla creatività Medievale," 392.

¹⁵⁷ Malcolm South, *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide* (Greenwood Press, 1987), 116.

¹⁵⁸ Gianandrea, "Tra fedeltà al testo e concessione alla creatività Medievale," 392.

¹⁵⁹ Gianandrea, "Tra Fedeltà al Testo e concessione alla creatività Medievale," 395.

¹⁶⁰ McN, "The Evolution of the Basilisk," 178.

¹⁶¹ McN, "The Evolution of the Basilisk," 178.

by the cocks, confirming the abnormality and danger of the serpent in the discussion. This physical evidence of where basilisks originated from and the combination of various information from multiple literary sources resulted in basilisks having such a hybrid appearance, which the San Rufino portal also depicts. The hybridity of a basilisk meant that the creature also moved even further away from being understood simply as a highly venomous snake, but rather in the Middle Ages it became ever so more perceived as a deadly creature, an incarnate of evil, which was reflected not only in its unnatural birth but also in its amalgamated physical appearance.

Basilisk and Weasel – The Established Pair

A further confirmation that the creatures depicted on top of the colonnettes of the San Rufino's main portal are indeed basilisks are the sculptural representations of quadruped animals just below the reptiles on each of the two colonnettes (figs. 40 and 41). Their round small ears, sharp claws, elongated body, and tail are all common physical features of a weasel, which are native creatures to the nearby park of Monte Subasio in Assisi (fig. 42).¹⁶² Same as most basilisk representations, these creatures are also presented in a pair interlocked in a fight. On the left-hand side the weasel is presented together with a gryphon, a mythical creature easily recognised by its wings, sharp claws, and skinny tail with a bulb at the end (fig. 40). On the right colonnette is a depiction of a pair of weasels (fig. 41). Prosperi identified these animals as mongoose that are physically similar to weasels, but belong to a different family.¹⁶³ Nonetheless, it is most likely that the craftsmen working on the Cathedral of San Rufino were unfamiliar with such a creature since it was not native to Umbria and it has not been featured, especially in combination

¹⁶² Luigi Torreggiani and Paola Savini, "Parco regionale del Monte Subasio: uomo, ambiente e gestione sostenibile," *Habitat nei Parchi dell'Umbria* Arezzo: Compagnia delle Foreste, 2015): 15.

¹⁶³ Prosperi, *Gioacchino da Fiore e le sculture*, 271.

with the basilisk, in the primary literature, such as the *Physiologus* and its derivatives that the craftsmen must have been familiar with. In such texts, vipers and later basilisks were often presented together with the *mustela* (a weasel) and later were most often depicted together throughout the Middle Ages.¹⁶⁴ Such a motif can be observed for example in the previously mentioned Aberdeen bestiary (Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Library, Univ. Lib. MS 24 folio 66r.) in which a weasel is presented attaching the basilisk's back (fig. 38). While basilisks were conceived to be the most potent and dangerous reptiles, weasels were thought of as the natural remedy, since in sight of a basilisk the little animal would chase after the reptile and attack it, killing it at the end.¹⁶⁵ Same to the notion of a basilisk, its antidote was also translated into the mediaeval culture from the works of early classics. Pliny the Elder wrote that weasel's venom is fatal for the most dangerous reptiles, but such is the decree of nature; nothing is to remain without its remedy.¹⁶⁶ "The venom of weasels is fatal: so fixed is the decree of nature that nothing shall be without its match."¹⁶⁷ It is believed that for this reason, in Egypt weasels would be domesticated to protect against venomous reptiles.¹⁶⁸ "They throw the basilisks into weasels' holes [...] and the weasels kill them by their stench and die themselves at the same time, and nature's battle is accomplished."¹⁶⁹ There is a thought that domesticated weasels would be then brought inside churches by Copts to chase the basilisks out of their dark hiding spots and away from the religious edifices.¹⁷⁰ Therefore the depiction of a reptile together with that of this

¹⁶⁴ Florence McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 16.

¹⁶⁵ McN, "The Evolution of the Basilisk," 255.

¹⁶⁶ Pliny, *Natural History*, 59.

¹⁶⁷ Pliny, *Natural History*, 59.

¹⁶⁸ Barney, Lewis, Beach and Berghof, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, 225.

¹⁶⁹ Pliny, *Natural History*, 59.

¹⁷⁰ Barney, Lewis, Beach and Berghof, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, 225.

particular animal on the colonnettes confirms the identification of the reptiles as basilisks since these two creatures were conceived and most often depicted as a pair in mediaeval manuscripts.

Basilisks occupy a very prominent position decorating the main portal. What further underlines the curiosity of employment of this particular creature in the decorative programme of the Cathedral of San Rufino is that it is employed to decorate multiple other areas of the façade. Representations of basilisks can be also spotted decorating the outer door jambs of all three of the portals (figs. 3, 4, and 10). Basilisk is the creature that the middle telamon figure stands upon in the second register (fig. 16). Although highly damaged, the guardian figures of the left minor portal can also be identified as basilisks. The two wings and just two front legs of each beast with curling reptile tails and scale-covered skin allows for such identification to be made even with the heads of the sculptures absent (fig. 6). Furthermore, multiple representations of basilisks can be seen in the array of alternating animal representations in the arcade (fig. 16). It is important to notice that some of the represented basilisks in the arcade carry a reptile body, but a human face and iconographically are highly similar to the basilisk sculpture with the human-like face found on the left colonnette of the main portal (fig. 33), most likely coming from one source of inspiration for such depiction of the reptile. This iconographic similarity between certain elements of the lowest register of the façade and the arcade that divides the lowest and the middle registers could suggest that they were done by the same craftsmen at a similar time. Although multiple animal representations are a specific peculiarity of the San Rufino's Cathedral, out of the overall 166 depicted animals 38 are basilisks, meaning that this specific creature makes up 23% of all of the represented animals on the façade and thus is the most represented creature overall. This raises the question as to possibly why this monster was so

highly represented and whether the answer to the posed question could lay in the possible meaning that the image of a basilisk was charged with.

Position of Animals in the Middle Ages

Nevertheless, before exploring the possible meaning behind the represented basilisks specifically in the façade of the cathedral, it is important to understand what animals and mythical creatures would have meant for the viewers in the Middle Ages. This is needed to obtain an understanding as to what position a dangerous reptile such as a basilisk would occupy in the mediaeval hierarchy of life and give an important suggestion as to what symbolic meaning representations of such a creature could have been charged with. The existence of monsters is thought to never have been questioned by the mediaeval societies, but rather they were believed to be testimonies of God's power to create all sorts of forms of life.¹⁷¹ However, to rationalise the world that man lived in, all of the creatures that were thought to exist were allocated a place in the constructed hierarchy of the world's inhabitants. Visually this would be most often conceived as a representation of a world map, which the *Mappa Mundi* illumination from the c. 1260 English Psalter is a great example of (fig. 43) (London, British Library, Add MS 28681). The Psalter depicts a mediaeval representation of the world with Jerusalem at its centre and Christ ruling over it. What is peculiar is that at the bottom of the world, at the opposite edge of the page from Christ, is a representation of two dragons that are thought to stand for the 'underworld'. On the right edge of the earth are depictions of distorted human figures and other monstrous races each enclosed in their cell.¹⁷² The illumination suggests that the artist attempted

¹⁷¹ Daniel Kempf and Maria Gilbert, *Medieval Monsters* (London: British Library, 2015), 5.

¹⁷² Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art. Essays in Art and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), 14.

to represent their understanding of the world being the further one moves away from the epicentre of human life and religion (represented by Jerusalem) the more distorted the species get. As Michael Camille argued, representations of monsters and other outlawed members of society in enclosed spaces on the world maps were a necessity for mediaeval societies, since they were unable to deny the existence of any of God's creations, but preferred to seclude the species deemed dangerous into areas far away from the epicentre of the human existence to establish at least some degree of control over those who pose a threat.¹⁷³

Classification of animals in relation to men was standard practice in the Middle Ages.¹⁷⁴ The Church insisted that animals had no soul and thus were not included in God's plan of Salvation but rather, based on Genesis 1: 26-28, preached the concept of human dominion over any other living creature.¹⁷⁵ It was believed that animals were specifically created by God for the sole purpose of serving humankind, which led to the domestication and employment of some, but not all of the creatures, for purposes such as labour, clothing, food, and even art supplies with multiple pigments deriving from animals.¹⁷⁶ For example the deep red with a purple hue derived from *murex* mollusk and was often employed in manuscript illuminations.¹⁷⁷ Hot-blooded quadruplets with similar behavioural tendencies to human beings in their sleeping cycles, defecating and even mating behaviours were deemed acceptable for interaction with a man and thus were domesticated and exploited.¹⁷⁸ A popular motif throughout the Middle Ages of

¹⁷³ Camille, *Image on the Edge*, 16.

¹⁷⁴ Annamaria Ducci, "Feri Leones, Immundae Simiae, Monstruosi Centauri. Natura e figura dell'animale nel Medioevo, un profilo," in *Bestie: animali reali e fantastici nell'arte europea dal Medioevo al primo novocento*, ed. Alberto Cottino and Andreina d'Agliano (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2011), 11.

¹⁷⁵ John Aberth, *An Environmental History of the Middle Ages: the Crucible of Nature* (Taylor and Francis, 2012) 145.

¹⁷⁶ Ducci, "Feri Leones, Immundae Simiae, Monstruosi Centauri," 11.

¹⁷⁷ Ducci, "Feri Leones, Immundae Simiae, Monstruosi Centauri," 11.

¹⁷⁸ Aleks Pluskowski, "The Zooarcheology of Medieval 'Christendom': Ideology, the Treatment of Animals and the Making of Medieval Europe," *World Archaeology* vol. 42, no. 2 (June 2010): 203.

'labours of the month' illumination cycles that depict different activities carried out in various seasons successfully illustrate the important role of domesticated animals and their service in everyday life.¹⁷⁹ An illumination of a man from the twelfth-century Corpus Christi College manuscript (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS Corpus Christi College 285) portrays him drying his boots (most likely made out of animal fur) in front of the fireplace with a piglet and sausages being preserved right above him following the recently obtained November kill (fig. 44).¹⁸⁰ Archezoological investigations described by Jacopo de Grossi Mazzorin illustrate that in mediaeval Rome and Lazio region pork, sheep, and cattle meat was consumed.¹⁸¹ Observations of the discovered remains allowed it to be deduced that cattle and sheep were not employed just for meat production, but also for other goods.¹⁸² Farms that would raise animals for meat consumption would slaughter them at around two to three years of age when they have gained the most body mass, while those that would focus on milk or wool production would keep the cattle alive until six years of age.¹⁸³ Such examples demonstrate that domesticated animals were employed for various purposes by men in the Middle Ages.

Other creatures such as invertebrates, cold-blooded, nocturnal, and reptile types, which basilisks also belong to, were deemed as too different from humankind and thus were perceived as revolting and were completely avoided by man.¹⁸⁴ Nonetheless, animals, such as monkeys,

¹⁷⁹ Krish Seetah, "The Middle Ages on the Block: Animals, Guilds, and Meat in the Medieval Period," in *Braking and Shaping Beastly Bodies: Animals as Material Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Aleksander Pluskowski (Havertown: Oxbow Books, Limited, 2007), 19.

¹⁸⁰ Seetah, "The Middle Ages on the Block," 19.

¹⁸¹ Jacopo de Grossi Mazzorin, "Lo sfruttamento degli animali domestici a Roma e nel Lazio nel Medioevo," in *L'Archeologia della produzione a Roma (Secoli V-XV). Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Roma 27-29 marzo 2014*, ed. Alessandra Molinari, Riccardo Santangeli Valenzani, Lucrezia Spera (Edipuglia, 2014), 311.

¹⁸² De Grossi Mazzorin, "Lo sfruttamento degli animali," 312.

¹⁸³ De Grossi Mazzorin, "Lo sfruttamento degli animali," 312.

¹⁸⁴ Francesco Zambon, "Il verme e la fenice: gli animali come 'simboli dissomiglianti' in Giovanni Scoto Eriugena," in *Animali figurati: teoria e rappresentazione del mondo animale dal Medioevo all'età Moderna*, ed. Stefano Riccioni and Luigi Perissinotto (Rome: Viella, 2019), 57.

that resembled very highly to humankind both in their physical properties and certain behavioural characteristics, were seen also avoided and perceived as the incarnate of the devil.¹⁸⁵ Humans were viewed as the most perfect creation of God, which is expressed in the harmonious balance of both physical appearance and moral qualities.¹⁸⁶ While monkeys, with an appearance that seems to be a distorted parody of humans, were perceived as mocking God's creation and thus understood as disturbing and malicious creatures, a symbol of evil.¹⁸⁷ Within the Christian paradigm, animals were employed to represent either a positive force, such as Christ, or a negative, such as the Devil.¹⁸⁸ While the positive force is once again demonstrated by the familiar and 'accepted' animals by humans (examples include the lamb to represent Christ, the stag as a symbol of Christ trampling and destroying any evil, and the dove representing the Holy Spirit), the negative forces would be represented by the unaccepted creatures.¹⁸⁹ Serpents, dragons, worms, and insects were employed particularly frequently as symbols of vice and sin.¹⁹⁰ A highly illustrative example is *The Torment of Luxuria* (Torment of Lust), which is part of the architectural decoration of the twelfth-century porch of the south door in the Abbey of Saint-Pierre of Moissac, France. Here the figure of lust is presented with two snakes clinging onto her breasts that symbolise the devil that led the woman to her sin (fig. 45).¹⁹¹ Reptiles were particularly known to be associated with evil. Although the Bible preached that in the Garden of

¹⁸⁵ Francesca Selcioni, *Gli animali della casa di Dio: Guida al bestiario delle Chiese Romaniche Ticinesi* (Dadò, 2006), 42.

¹⁸⁶ Francesca Cecchetto, "'Simia quam similis turpissima bestia nobis!'" in *Animali figurati: teoria e rappresentazione del mondo animale dal Medioevo all'età Moderna*, ed. Stefano Riccioni and Luigi Perissinotto (Rome: Viella, 2019), 18.

¹⁸⁷ Francesca Cecchetto, "'Simia quam similis turpissima bestia nobis!'" 18.

¹⁸⁸ Seetah, "The Middle Ages on the Block," 19.

¹⁸⁹ Debra Higgs Strickland, "Animal Iconography," in *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Iconography*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2017), 505.

¹⁹⁰ Strickland, "Animal Iconography," 505.

¹⁹¹ Strickland, "Animal Iconography," 506.

Eden Adam and Eve lived in mutual respect with the rest of its occupants and God's love was shared equally between all of them, it was one of these beasts, the serpent, that lured Adam and Eve into its trap of evil and convinced them to disobey God's command, leading to their expulsion from the Garden and introduction sin into the world.¹⁹² It can be concluded that, being a venomous dreaded snake-like reptile the basilisk would naturally be classified as a beast that cannot serve humankind, but rather is a threat to it. Such understanding and view of the creature would mean that in iconographic compositions it would most likely be a symbol charged with negative meaning and a representation of the evil that the Christian religion fights against.

¹⁹² Genesis 2:16-17.

5. Primary Sources. The *Physiologus* and its Developments

A highly influential twentieth-century art historian, and expert in Christian, Mediaeval, and Modern art, Meyer Schapiro expressed that European visual art dating from the late antiquity period until the eighteenth century should be seen as representations of the written text that was translated by the craftsmen into a visual image.¹⁹³ Although often images would be borrowed and translated from already existing visual material rather than scripture, there was always a textual foundation to the visual creations of the Middle Ages.¹⁹⁴ Schapiro explained that images produced by mediaeval artists should be seen as specific symbols and tokens that relate to the text and that, simple depictions of a figure and possibly an attribute, were expected to evoke for the contemporary viewer the full text and the idea it expressed.¹⁹⁵ In concordance with the scholars' point of view, this paper believes that the basilisks that decorate the façade was conceived and were meant to be viewed as specific symbols. This raises the question as to what meaning this reptile could have carried for the contemporary viewer and what textual source it could have been the token of. To explore this question the paper turns to a primary source, specifically the *Physiologus* and its derivatives, to investigate how the basilisk was perceived and what possible symbolic meaning was granted to the reptile in the most influential mediaeval written works on animals and other living creatures.

¹⁹³ Meyer Schapiro, *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text* (Columbia University, 2014), 9.

¹⁹⁴ Schapiro, *Words and Pictures*, 9.

¹⁹⁵ Schapiro, *Words and Pictures*, 9-10.

The Original *Physiologus*

It is well known that short descriptions of animals infused with theological meaning established a close link between animals and biblical exegesis in the Middle Ages and developed into bestiaries that became their manuscript type.¹⁹⁶ Such literature was infused with Christian morals and attributed moral characteristics to the described animals based on their behavioural tendencies making bestiaries almost allegorical-didactical encyclopaedias.¹⁹⁷ Nonetheless, bestiary was a particular manuscript type that flourished most widely on territories of France and England only beginning in the thirteenth-century¹⁹⁸ and consequently, most likely, were not the source of inspiration for craftsmen working on the Cathedral of San Rufino and depicting the basilisk as part of the decorative programme of the façade. Therefore, one needs to turn to earlier sources. It is known that bestiaries derived from a Late Antique compilation of moralised animal lore from North Africa, most likely Egypt, written in Greek and known as the *Physiologus*.¹⁹⁹ It consists of forty chapters each dedicated to the legend of an animal, rock, or plant that derives from very early Indian, Egyptian, and Hebrew tales together with Roman and Greek folklore (as early as Herodotus c. 484 BC).²⁰⁰ The discussed animals in the *Physiologus* were reviewed under the light of Christian teaching by the anonymous author of the work making it one of the most influential works in the Christian world as well as an important influence on the literature and arts produced thereafter.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁶ Mario Mancini, “Bestiari medievali: incanti e terrori di zoolettura,” *Il Manifesto* (September, 2018): 22.

¹⁹⁷ Gabriella Guarino, *L'animale e l'ibrido nella cultura e nella letteratura: prospettive teoriche dai Greci a Dante* (Rome: MMXIII Aracne, 2013), 123.

¹⁹⁸ Debra Hassig, “Beauty in the Beasts: A Study of Medieval Aesthetics,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* no. 19/20 (1990): 138.

¹⁹⁹ Sarah Kay, “The Textual Kaleidoscope of the Medieval Bestiary,” in *The Book of Beasts: The Bestiary in the Medieval World*, ed. Elizabeth Morisson (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019), 31.

²⁰⁰ Michael J. Curly, *Physiologus* (University of Texas Press, 1979), ix.

²⁰¹ Michael J. Curly, *Physiologus* (University of Texas Press, 1979), ix.

It is generally accepted that the *Physiologus* was written in Alexandria, Egypt since several legends can be identified as Egyptian folklore and the work mentions Phamenoth and Pharmouthi (two Coptic months).²⁰² Nonetheless, as Alan Scott argued, while it is most likely certain that the work was composed in Egypt there is little that links it specifically to Alexandria rather than any city of the North African country.²⁰³ Same as the place of production, the date of the *Physiologus* is also highly debated with two beliefs in the scholarly discussion. One confidently states that the work was written in the second century since it seems to echo the 185-254 AD writings of Greek Church fathers.²⁰⁴ The other theory claims that the work was composed at some point in the fourth century.²⁰⁵ At the end of the fourth century, the work was quoted for the first time in the *Hexameron* commentary of Eustathios, and at a similar time point, in c. 386, Saint Ambrose uses the direct wording of the *Physiologus* when recounting the legend of the partridge in his *Hexameron*.²⁰⁶ This quote does not appear in any literature before the *Physiologus* making it more likely that the work was in circulation from the fourth century onwards.²⁰⁷

Although the original *Physiologus* does not include a chapter on the basilisk but rather discusses only the viper (chapter ten), snake (chapter eleven), and weasel (chapter twenty-one), it is a text that became a fundamental repertoire of various animal symbols for their liturgical interpretation and a source for artistic inspiration that remained relevant throughout the Middle Ages.²⁰⁸ *Physiologus* spread widely and very quickly throughout the Western territories and its

²⁰² Curly trans., *Physiologus*, xvi.

²⁰³ Alan Scott, "The Date of Physiologus," *Vigiliae Christianae* 52, no. 4 (1998): 430.

²⁰⁴ Curly trans., *Physiologus*, xvi.

²⁰⁵ Scott, "The Date of Physiologus," 433.

²⁰⁶ Curly trans., *Physiologus*, xvi.

²⁰⁷ Curly trans., *Physiologus*, xvi.

²⁰⁸ Kenneth McKenzie, "Unpublished Manuscripts of Italian Bestiaries," *PMLA* 20, no. 2 (1905): 381.

popularity meant that multiple translations and new derivatives came out from the original text most often with renditions and the addition of several new chapters with a focus on animals that were previously not mentioned, reaching up to fifty in some later versions of the Latin *Physiologus*.²⁰⁹ If the theory that the original Greek *Physiologus* was made in the fourth century is accepted, then the first known Latin translation was created very quickly, in the same century or the one after, which once again demonstrates the important interest for *Physiologus* in the Middle Ages.²¹⁰ The first Latin translation of the work is now known in the scholarly discussion as *Physiologus Y* with the oldest surviving manuscript housed in Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Cod. 611 (c. fifth century). It is the most complete and reliable translation known without any main changes to the original text.²¹¹

Latin translations of the *Physiologus* did not conclude with *Physiologus Y* but rather developed into further multiple versions. *Physiologus B* is thought to be one of the first derivatives of *Physiologus Y* with the oldest surviving manuscript dating to the late eighth - early ninth centuries (Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Lat.233 ff.1-13), but most likely the version became widespread in the Western territories by c. 1000.²¹² Following *Physiologus B*, another well-known translation was the *C* version that is the version that is furthest from the original Greek work.²¹³ It is perceived to be the most corrupt version of *Physiologus* that was either contemporary to *Physiologus B* or composed very soon after in c. 850 with the earliest surviving manuscript dating to the ninth century (Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Lat.318, ff. 7-22).²¹⁴

²⁰⁹ Sebenico, *I mostri dell'occidente Medievale*, 47.

²¹⁰ Francis J. Carmody, "Physiologus Latinus Versio Y," *University of California Publications in Classical Philology* vol. 12, no. 7 (April 1941): 98.

²¹¹ Carmody, "Physiologus Latinus Versio Y," 97.

²¹² Sarah Kay, *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 370.

²¹³ McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, 34.

²¹⁴ Kay, *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, 370.

Nonetheless, all the discussed versions did not yet introduce a chapter on the basilisk but continued to recount the vipers, snakes, and weasels.

Derivatives of the *Physiologus*. *Etymologiae* of Isidore de Seville and the Notion of Basilisk

In between the mentioned Latin translations of the Greek *Physiologus*, specifically following the *Physiologus Y*, employing the information provided by the first Latin translation of the Greek manuscript and other classical and contemporary sources, Isidore of Seville, archbishop of Seville, scholar and theologian c.540 - 636 AD, composed the *Etymologiae* encyclopaedia in c. 600-625.²¹⁵ The encyclopaedia collected all of the known knowledge about the world and its inhabitants, which was the first work that importantly affected the contents of the following Latin *Physiologus* translations and other works dealing with animals.²¹⁶ While a lot of the knowledge on existing animals was translated by Isidore from the *Physiologus* (most likely from the first Latin version) he also drew upon Pliny's work to recount various creatures and beasts that *Physiologus* omits, including the basilisk.²¹⁷ Not only was Isidore's account of the basilisk one of the first in the mediaeval manuscript phenomenon, but it also had a tremendous circulation and a long-lasting influence on the consecutive works that treated the theme of animals and beasts, which from now on included the basilisk as a separate known creature.²¹⁸ The *Isidoro Malatestiano* manuscript from Cesena, Emilia Romagna Library (Cesena (Forli-Cesena), Biblioteca Comunale Malatestiana, S.XXI.5) demonstrates that Isidore's work

²¹⁵ Elizabeth Morrison, "The Medieval Bestiary: Text and Illumination," in *The Book of Beasts: The Bestiary in the Medieval World*, ed. Elizabeth Morrison (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019), 4.

²¹⁶ Morrison, "The Medieval Bestiary," 4.

²¹⁷ McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, 28.

²¹⁸ McN, "The Evolution of the Basilisk," 175.

was of interest and thus was copied in Italy as well (figs. 46 and 47). The manuscript is a complete copy of Isidore's *Etymologiae* with a colophon at the end of the work that mentions the scribe that made this copy of the encyclopaedia, Pletro, known to have been active in the second half of the ninth century.²¹⁹ Anna Bellettini, Paolo Errani, Filippo Ronconi, and Marco Palma are the scholars that have dedicated themselves to the study and complete analysis of the *Isidoro Malatestiano* manuscript. It was claimed by them that the manuscript was copied by Pletro from a previously existing version in northern Italy, but the location of the original manuscript remains unknown.²²⁰

Isidore's account of the basilisk was repeated in the tenth-century *Dicta Chrysostomi*,²²¹ a work that is thought to originate in France and is attributed to John Chrysostom.²²² At a contemporary moment to the *Dicta Chrysostomi*, between the tenth and eleventh centuries, a new Latin translation of *Physiologus* has also arisen,²²³ now known as the *Physiologus B-Is*.²²⁴ Together with the *Dicta Chrysostomi*, it is considered one of the earliest forms of European bestiary.²²⁵ Such a name was given to this particular translation of the *Physiologus* due to its high dependency on Isidore's *Etymologiae* and the beasts discussed in the encyclopaedia.²²⁶ The *Physiologus B-Is* manuscript from the Bodleian Library is a highly illustrative example of this

²¹⁹ Anna Bellettini, Paola Errani, Marco Palma and Filippo Ronconi, *Biografia di un Manoscritto: L'Isidoro Malatestiano S.XXI.5* (Viella, 2009), 11.

²²⁰ Bellettini, Errani, Palma and Ronconi, *Biografia di un Manoscritto: L'Isidoro Malatestiano S.XXI.5*, 17.

²²¹ Manuscripts include: New York, Morgan Library, MS. M.832, ff. 2-10 (twelfth century). Épinal, Bibliothèque Multimédia Intercommunale d'Épinal, MS 209, ff. 70v-75 (twelfth century). Paris, Houghton Library, MS Typ. 101, ff. 3-16 (c. 1200-1250), otherwise known as *The Hofer Bestiary*.

²²² McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, 41.

²²³ Sarah Kay, "'The English Bestiary', The Continental 'Physiologus', and The Intersections Between Them," *Medium AEvum* 85, no. 1 (2016): 125.

²²⁴ Manuscripts include: Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Pal. lat. 1074, ff. 1-22 (tenth century). London, British Library, Stowey MS 1067, ff. 1-15 (early twelfth century). Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 022, ff. 162-169 (twelfth century).

²²⁵ Kay, "'The English Bestiary', The Continental 'Physiologus', and The Intersections Between Them," 125.

²²⁶ Fausto Iannello, "Il motivo dell'Aspidochelone nella tradizione letteraria del *Physiologus*. Considerazioni esegetiche e storico-religiose," *Nova Tellus* vol. 29, no. 2 (2011): 173.

phenomenon since not only does the text incorporate Isidore's ideas, the rubrics quote directly from the *Etymologiae* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Laud Misc. 247, ff. 139-166. Second quarter of a twelfth century).

Following *Physiologus B-Is* several other Latin translations of the original Greek work have been produced. Specifically the *Physiologus of Theobaldi* and *Physiologus H. Physiologus of Theobaldi* dates to the eleventh century and was written by Theobald, bishop of Canterbury and later the abbot at the Abbey of Bec in Normandy, with the oldest surviving manuscript housed in the British Library (London, British Library, Harley MS 3093 ff. 36-38). *Physiologus H*, on the other hand, is attributed to pseudo-Hugo of Saint Victor and is also known as Books II and III of *De bestiis et aliis rebus* (an example of the manuscript is Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Digby 69).²²⁷ It dates to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century and, following Isidore's account includes a separate chapter on the basilisk.²²⁸ Nonetheless, the most influential derivative of both the *Physiologus* and Isidore's *Etymologiae* that altered highly the perception of the basilisk as a beast and its significance was the *De rerum naturis* (otherwise also known as *De Unverisum* beginning from 1467) by Hrabanus Maurus.²²⁹ Hrabanus Maurus (c. 775 - 856) was the abbot of Fulda and the bishop of Mainz.²³⁰ The work was composed in the ninth century, between 842 and 847, and became known as a highly influential universal dictionary of mediaeval thought.²³¹ *De rerum naturis* is a testimony that Hrabanus Maurus was a great follower of Isidore of Seville and his work, and therefore, when dealing with the basilisk,

²²⁷ Francis J. Carmondy, "De Bestiis et Aliis Rebus and the Latin Physiologus," *Speculum* vol. 13, no. 2 (April 1938): 153.

²²⁸ Carmondy, "De Bestiis et Aliis Rebus and the Latin Physiologus," 153.

²²⁹ Guglielmo Cavallo, "Un Autore, Un'Opera, Un Manoscritto," in *Rabano Mauro. De Rerum Naturis: Cod. Casin. 132 / Archivio dell'Abbazia di Montecassino*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo (Torino: Priuli & Verlucca, 1994), 9.

²³⁰ Jay Hopley and Kimberly Johnson, *Before the Door: An Anthology of Devotional Poetry* (Yale University Press, 2013), 49.

²³¹ Gianandrea, "Tra fedeltà al testo e concessione alla creatività Medievale," 394.

Hrabanus Maurus' description of the beast and its potency follows exactly the words of Isidore.²³² He stated that the basilisk is c. thirty centimetres long and is the king of serpents that kills with its smell, destroys men with its sight, and that even no flying bird can pass unharmed due to the horrific stench that the basilisk emits.²³³ Following Isidore's claim, Hrabanus confirmed that the only remedy to a basilisk is a weasel and thus they are often brought to the caves where the reptile hides to kill it.²³⁴ The description provided by Hrabanus of the reptile indicates that at the time the physical properties of a basilisk were still thought to be those of a snake. This is not surprising not only because Hrabanus closely followed the words of Isidore (who described the basilisk as a snake), but also since it was only at the beginning of the eleventh century that the physical qualities of a basilisk transformed from those of a snake to a hybrid creation combining both reptile and rooster features.

Hrabanus Maurus' *De Rerum Naturis* and the Hybrid Nature of Basilisk

A visual confirmation and evidence of the transformation of the reptile's appearance post the eleventh century can be found in the illuminated manuscripts of the *De rerum naturis*. The oldest surviving illuminated manuscript dates to the eleventh century and was produced under the Abbott Theobald in the Abbey of Montecassino where it is still housed nowadays (Montecassino, Archivio dell'Abbazia di Montecassino, Cod. Cassin. 132).²³⁵ In total the manuscript is decorated with 335 illuminations that are usually depicted at the beginning of the

²³² Gianandrea, "Tra fedeltà al testo e concessione alla creatività Medievale," 394.

²³³ Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologiae latinae cursus completus ... series secunda*, vol. 111 (Aquad Editorem, 1852), 232.

²³⁴ Migne, *Patrologiae latinae cursus completus*, 232.

²³⁵ Mariano dell'Omo, "'Quod Beatus Pater Benedictus Instituit...'" Montecassino e Fulda prima e negli anni di Rabano Mauro," in *De Rerum Naturis: Cod. Casin. 132 / Archivio dell'Abbazia di Montecassino*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo (Torino: Priuli & Verlucca, 1994), 9.

chapter visually introducing the described subject matter.²³⁶ The account of the basilisk is found in folio 205 and is enriched with several illuminations of the reptile that accompany each paragraph of the beast's description (fig. 48). They present the basilisk physically as what one might analyse as a typical snake with no wings, frontal legs or a cock's beak. Particularly, the reptile is depicted slithering along the ground with its head raised above the ground as was described by the previously mentioned classical authors, such as Nicander of Colophon and Pliny. This detail of the basilisk's behaviour is omitted both by Isiodre and Hrabanus and thus suggests that the illuminator was familiar with the description of the basilisk in such classical sources which, as Manuela Gianandrea stated, were surely known by contemporary society.²³⁷ Although basilisks that decorate the main portal of the Cathedral of San Rufino are represented by the physical features that the reptile was granted after its hybrid transformation, it should be noticed that not all of them have a cock's beak with a crest. The heads of many are highly reminiscent in their appearance of those portrayed by the illuminator of the Montecassino manuscript with round snouts and small curved ears (figs. 33 and 34). This could signify that illuminations that are found in a textual source produced on the Italian territory, such as the Montecassino manuscript, could have served as an inspiration and a source for the basilisk decorating the colonnettes. The potency of the reptile under discussion is particularly evident from the last two illuminations of the basilisk. The first of the two representations portrays the reptile engulfing a human showing its danger to humankind. While the second depiction portrays the basilisk with its eyes wide open and a bird above it, chasing behind a man illustrating that no living creature, nor man nor the flying bird, can escape a basilisk and that the reptile's ability to

²³⁶ Alessia Trivellone, "L'abbazia di Montecassino, fabrica dell'Eresia nell'XI Secolo," *Riforma e Movimenti Religiosi: Rivista della Società di Studi Valdesi* (2017): 51.

²³⁷ Gianandrea, "Tra fedeltà al testo e concessione alla creatività Medievale," 397.

kill with its sight leaves no survivors (fig. 48). From these images it is not only evident that the illuminator of the Montecassino manuscript followed precisely the text when creating the depictions of the beast, but that at the time the appearance of the basilisk was still perceived as that of a snake. As Gianandrea explained, it is most likely that the Montecassino manuscript was created and illuminated at the beginning of the eleventh century when the concept of the basilisk's appearance being so hybrid was still early in its development, established fully in mediaeval iconography only by the second half of the eleventh century.²³⁸ One of the plaques from the Salerno ivories that dates to c. 1084 and is now housed in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (fig. 49) portrays a scene from the Old Testament of God creating the animals.²³⁹ On the left-hand side, God is represented in the body of Jesus Christ, while on the right is the depiction of animals facing the figure that has just created them. In total, eleven animals are both of mythical and existent nature confirming the mediaeval point of view that every single creature of any nature is a valid creation of God. The viewer can observe animals such as sheep, deer, and lions as well as a gryphon and a basilisk. Since the plaque dates to the late eleventh century, it is not surprising to see the basilisk represented in its hybrid nature, as a reptile with a rooster's head, wings, and frontal legs. It is further highlighted that a basilisk was not perceived simply as a highly dangerous snake, with the inclusion by the craftsman of a snake as one of the eleven animals created by God. This further differentiates the basilisk from this reptile and establishes it as a separate creature. In a fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript of Hrabanus Maurus' *De*

²³⁸ Gianandrea, "Tra fedeltà al testo e concessione alla creatività Medievale," 397.

²³⁹ The Salerno ivories are ivories that date between the eleventh and twelfth centuries and depict scenes both from the Old and New Testaments. Originally they were housed at the Salerno Cathedral. It is believed that in total the collection comprised c. seventy ivories and that the collection survived to nowadays rather intact. Out of the presumed seventy plaques, sixtyseven are accounted for and are found either on display in the Saint Matthew Diocese Museum in Salerno or are on permanent loan in other worldwide museums. Only three plaques are believed to be missing. Kathrin Müller, "Old and New. Divine Revelation in the Salerno," *Mitteilungen Des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 54, no. 1 (2010): 1.

rerum naturis (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Pal. lat. 291) the same passage describing the beast is now accompanied by an illumination of a basilisk that still presents it as an extremely dangerous reptile as described in the text. The two illuminations portray birds dropping dead that fly over the basilisk and venom spitting out of its beak (fig. 50). Nonetheless, physically the basilisk is represented as a beast with a serpent's tail, wings, cock's head with a crest and two legs that it employs to walk thus following the known properties of the beast disregarding how it is described by the ninth-century author.

It is evident and well-established that Hrabanus Maurus' encyclopaedia drew a lot of the knowledge translated by Isidore in his work. Nonetheless, Hrabanus' work was revolutionary and highly important for understanding the image of the basilisk and how the creature was now perceived by the mediaeval mind. Hrabanus enriched the words of Isidore when describing the basilisk with allegorical meaning transforming the basilisk from a highly venomous and the most potent reptile into a symbol of sin, evil, and an incarnation of the devil.²⁴⁰ Compared to other authors, Hrabanus' encyclopaedia can be described as a hermeneutical work infused with biblical citations that are employed to support the made statements.²⁴¹ He quoted Biblical scripture such as the passage from the Psalms that mentions the basilisk: "Thou shalt walk upon the asp and the basilisk: and thou shalt trample under foot the lion and the dragon", which for the first time presented the beast as a representation of the forces of antichrist and diabolical power that can be defeated only by the power of God and the belief in Christ.²⁴² In reference to this particular Psalm, the mentioned four beasts would be often represented together or within proximity to

²⁴⁰ Laura Pasquini, "Il diavolo nell'iconografia Medievale," *Il diavolo nel Medioevo: Atti del XLIX Convegno Storico Internazionale* (2012): 480.

²⁴¹ Anna Pasetti, "'Psalterium Adinstar instrumenti musici Nominatum Esse Dubium Non Est', esegesi dei Salmi e indagine organologica," *I Quaderni del m.a.s. I* (1998): 147.

²⁴² Psalm 90:13. Gianandrea, "Tra fedeltà al testo e concessione alla creatività Medievale," 395.

each other in Romanesque architecture.²⁴³ Examples of such iconography can be found in the portal of Basilica of San Francesco in Ascoli Piceno, Marche (thirteenth century) (fig. 51) and the Porta Regia in the Cathedral of Modena (twelfth century) (fig. 52). It can be hypothesised that the engaged capital (1175-1200, Bologna) from the Cleveland Museum of Art was created for the same purpose (fig. 53). It portrays two out of the four typically represented creatures – a lion and a basilisk – identifiable not only through their representations but also with inscriptions labelling each animal above their representation.

The conducted analysis of textual sources and their mention of the basilisk allows for it to be credibly hypothesised that, the notion of a basilisk as a creature was translated to the craftsmen from textual sources such as Latin translations of the *Physiologus* and its derivatives, specifically the *Etymologiae* encyclopaedia by Isidore of Seville and *De rerum naturis* by Hrabanus Maurus familiar through the copies of these original manuscripts produced on the Italian peninsula. Hrabanus' work specifically alludes to the belief that, at the time of the decoration of colonnettes in the Cathedral of San Rufino, the basilisk was perceived as a symbol of the incarnation of the devil and evil that the devoted meant to fight and protect themselves from through Christ and the Church. San Rufino Cathedral is not the only ecclesiastical structure that features basilisk in its decorative programme. Evidence that the twelfth-century viewers and craftsmen working on the decoration of ecclesiastical structures were familiar with the image of a basilisk can be found in the decorative programmes of other contemporary basilicas in the Italian peninsula. A basilisk decorates the door jamb of the main portal of Bitonto Cathedral (twelfth century. Bitonto, province of Bari) (fig. 54). The monster can be seen in the decoration

²⁴³ Emanuele Zappasodi, "Persistenze Romaniche. La fortuna della Porta Regia nelle Marche meridionali tra due e trecento," in *Umbria e Marche in Età Romanica. Arti e tecniche a confronto tra XI e XIII secolo*, ed. Enrica Neri Lusanna (Todi: Edart, 2013), 281.

of the pulpit situated in Sant'Angelo a Pianella (renovated in the twelfth century. Province of Pescara, Marche) (fig. 55) as well as in the capitals decorating the atrium of the Milanese Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio (late eleventh century) (fig. 56). More importantly such imagery is also found in the decor of ecclesiastical structures territorially closer to San Rufino cathedral. The Cathedral of Todi (Todi, Umbria) renovating in the twelfth century has the apsidal cylinder decorated on the outside with engaged colonnettes each with a spiraling or palm tree trunk pattern (fig. 57). In the middle of each colonnette, one finds a nodule with figurative decoration consisting of various creatures. One of the spiraling colonnettes carries a representation of two basilisks facing each other (fig. 58). The monster can be spotted also in between the corbels that occupy the space between each of the colonnettes (fig. 59). The Church of Santa Maria Impensole in Narni, Umbria (twelfth century) has a low relief that occupies a prominent position between the main and the left minor portals. It depicts two animals, one of which is a quadruped portrayed being chased by a basilisk (fig. 60). While the Basilica of Saint Pietro extra moenia in Spoleto (late twelfth to early thirteenth century, Umbria) depicts the basilisk in a fight with a lion on the lower right panel of the sculpted scenes (fig. 61). Specifically in Umbria craftsmen could have used each other's work as inspiration and translated certain elements from previously existing examples. Nonetheless, since representations of this beast were not solely a local phenomenon, it is most plausible that the notion of a basilisk was translated from commonly known textual sources, such as Hrabanus' encyclopaedia, and would be employed as a symbol of evil as claimed by the bishop. Representation of creatures perceived as evil and the devil itself was not a nuisance for Romanesque architecture. One of the most well-known Romanesque examples is the representation of Hell and the devil from the Last Judgement scene in the west portal tympanum at the Abbey-church of Sainte-Foy (twelfth century. Conques, France.) (fig.

62). However, such examples can be also found in romanesque architecture in Italy. Basilica di San Pietro (Tuscania, Lazio) portrays a three-faced figure of the devil (1250) on the right side from the rose window with coiling vegetation coming out of the sides of its head and a snake in its hands (fig. 63).

6. The Book of Isaiah. Christian Scripture as an Iconographic Prototype

As the paper previously pointed out, Romanesque portals most often feature symbolic representations that were meant to evoke certain religious teachings and Biblical passages as well as scenes that derived directly from the Old and New Testaments.²⁴⁴ The Abbey Church of Sainte-Madeleine (Vézelay, France) which dates to c. 1104-1132 is decorated with three narthex portals that are further enriched with sculptural decoration.²⁴⁵ The tympanum of the south narthex portal depicts scenes of Christ's early life including the Annunciation, the Nativity, and the Adoration of the Magi (fig. 64), while the north narthex tympanum portrays events that occurred after Christ's resurrection such as the resurrected Christ surrounded by the Apostles (fig. 65).²⁴⁶ In Italy, scenes both from the Old and New Testaments are employed to accentuate the wooden door of the portal in the Basilica of San Zeno Basilica in Verona (fig. 66). The architectural plaques on the façade of the Basilica of San Pietro extra moenia in Spoleto portrays scenes from the Bible as well as events from the life of Saint Peter (fig. 67), while the Cathedral of Modena (consecrated in 1148) is decorated by sculptural scenes from the Genesis by Wiligelmus (c. 1099-1120, figs. 68a and 68b).²⁴⁷ The depicted reliefs portray events such as the creation of Adam, the Expulsion of Adam and Eve, and Noah's Arc. While the Cathedral of San

²⁴⁴ Leslie Joan Cavell, "Social and Symbolic Functions of Romanesque Façade: The Example of Mâcon's Last Judgement Galilee," (Phd diss., University of Michigan, 1997), 196.

²⁴⁵ Alice Isabella Sullivan, "Strategies of Signification in Romanesque Sculpture: The Coiled Man in the Archevolt at Vézelay," *Rutgers Art Review* (2016): 20.

²⁴⁶ Sullivan, "Strategies of Signification in Romanesque Sculpture," 20.

²⁴⁷ Dorothy F. Glass, "'Quo Vadis': The Study of Italian Romanesque Sculpture at the Beginning of the Third Millennium," *Studies in Iconography* vol. 28 (2007): 7.

Rufino does not feature scenes from the Testaments as the discussed examples, this paper proposes that certain elements present in the decoration of the main portal can be plausibly viewed as symbols that recall the Holy scripture and thus reveal not only propose a meaning to these elements but a reading to the peculiar decoration of the main portal. The work presents the hypothesis that the image of a basilisk on the colonnettes together with that of King David on the arch is supported by the colonnettes and that frames the lunette that in turn depicts both infant Jesus Christ in the hands of the Virgin and Christ Enthroned are meant to be iconographically read all together. The paper proposes that the composition relates to the ideas expressed in the Old Testament's Book of Isaiah in which the prophet predicted the arrival of Messiah and the glory of His kingdom in which children will play upon the den of the basilisk.

For the first time, the basilisk is mentioned in Christian scripture in the eleventh chapter of the book of Isaiah. "And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the basilisk's den".²⁴⁸ Such are the words that conclude Isaiah's prediction of the glorious kingdom that the Messiah will create for humankind upon His arrival. Isaiah also describes that the "wolf shall dwell with the lamb"²⁴⁹ while the "cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie together"²⁵⁰ portraying an idyllic reign of the Messiah in which even the most petrifying form – the basilisk – associated with evil, if not the devil itself, is not a danger to a child, since the belief in God and the reign of the Messiah overpowers the evil and reconciles with any creature perceived as a dangerous or an incarnate of the devil. Isaiah begins predicting the arrival of the Messiah and the description both of Him and His reign at the end of chapter ten where he describes God chopping down all of the proud, as if they were trees

²⁴⁸ Isaiah 11:8.

²⁴⁹ Isaiah 11:6.

²⁵⁰ Isaiah 11:7.

leaving behind stumps. “And he shall cut down the thickets of the forest with iron²⁵¹ [...] And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots shall bear fruit”.²⁵² Upon God’s will, out of one of the stumps would grow a tree, the tree of Jesse’s family, King David’s father, and the ancestor of the Messiah – Jesus Christ. The Shaftesbury Psalter (London, British Library, Lansdowne 383) presents a carpet page depicting the tree of Jesse (fig. 69). Out of his side grows a stem with King David, the Virgin Mary (part of the Davidic House after her marriage to Joseph) and finally Jesus Christ as the Messiah with the Holy Spirit above Him. Such iconography would be highly popular not only in manuscript illuminations but in Romanesque architectural decorations as well. The Tree of Jesse representations can be found in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela (fig. 70), a stained-glass representation in the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis (fig. 71) as well as in the previously mentioned bronze door of the Basilica of San Zeno (fig. 72) and the reliefs decorating the Cathedral of Genoa (fig. 73). These examples establish the familiarity of the craftsmen and the audience with the accounts in the Book of Isaiah. It is important to note that the tree of Jesse established an important connection between King David and Jesus Christ that is further underlined by the visual representation of the Messiah originating from the stems of King David.

Returning to the main portal of San Rufino, it depicts all of the elements that are reminiscent of Isaiah's prediction of the arrival of the Messiah and His reign. King David, portrayed on the voussoir on the left-hand side, is one of the greatest predecessors of Christ and his family ancestor. In the New, Testament Matthew begins by describing Jesus as the Son of David²⁵³ once again establishing the important connection between the two figures, which is also

²⁵¹ Isaiah 10:34.

²⁵² Isaiah 11:1.

²⁵³ Matthew 1:1.

visually expressed in the Cathedral of San Rufino both through the representation of King David in proximity, almost adjacent, to the Virgin Mary lactating the Child (fig. 8) as well as the subtle detail of employing the same decorative colonnettes for the thrones of both David and enthroned Jesus Christ that visually connects the two figures. Therefore, King David can be seen as a symbol of the tree of Jesse and Christ's ancestry in San Rufino's main portal. A nineteenth-century Old Testament Scholar and Professor of Divinity, William Robertson Smith, expressed an idea that animal totems, which derived from Semitic animal gods that were thought of as progenitors of various tribes, were still acknowledged both in Israel and nearby territories at the time of David.²⁵⁴ Smith proposed that the totem of the Davidic house was that of a serpent.²⁵⁵ The scholar explained that one of David's relatives was Nahshon, the name of whom carries a termination highly similar to "Nahash" – the serpent in Hebrew and the name of Abigail's father (David's first wife).²⁵⁶ Smith stated that hence either Jesse himself was known by the name of the family's totem, 'Serpent', or that his children were known as the children of the Serpent.²⁵⁷ Therefore meaning that both Jesus Christ and King David, being the children of Jesse, could be represented by a serpent. In the Cathedral of San Rufino, the keystone of the arch that depicts the dancing figures is a snake that creates a continuous circle by twisting on its own body and is portrayed just above the figure of Christ in the lunette (fig. 74). While a serpent was often read as a symbol of evil due to its important role in the birth of sin and expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, nevertheless, the reptile is also known as a symbol of reincarnation, the rebirth of life and resurrection (due to the snake's property of shedding its old skin and

²⁵⁴ William Robertson Smith, "Animal Worship and Animal Tribes among the Arabs and in the Old Testament," *Journal of Philology* vol. 5 (1880): 99.

²⁵⁵ Smith, "Animal Worship and Animal Tribes," 99.

²⁵⁶ Smith, "Animal Worship and Animal Tribes," 99.

²⁵⁷ Smith, "Animal Worship and Animal Tribes," 99.

reappearing it what seems to be in a new body), which are all pertinent to Jesus Christ as well.²⁵⁸ In the Old Testament, the snake appears to be even the way to salvation in the form of the Nehushtan, a bronze image of the reptile on a pole created by Moses.²⁵⁹ Moses attempted to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and bring them to Canaan, but the people began to grow highly impatient on their way both with God and Moses saying that they will die soon in the desert without food or water for which they were punished by God.²⁶⁰ “The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and many people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, we have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and thee; pray unto the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.”²⁶¹ Following God’s advice, Moses made a serpent upon a high pole that managed to heal from the venom and save anyone who looked upon it.²⁶² In c. 1000 Archbishop of Arnolfo II of Arsago brought to Milan a replica of the bronze serpent, which is still found today on a column in the nave of the Sant’Ambrogio Basilica (fig. 75) and demonstrates that the symbol was still familiar in the Middle Ages. The serpent represented in the keystone of San Rufino’s main portal could be thus viewed as a symbol both for Christ and the way to salvation. The dancing couples on each side of the keystone thus could be the representation of Christ’s children, the children of the Serpent, that celebrate both the Messiah and their Lord by dancing, as was done by King David.

The arrival of the Messiah that Isaiah predicted is expressed in the depiction of the infant Jesus. While the glorious ruler, with “the spirit of the Lord [...] upon him”,²⁶³ is represented right

²⁵⁸ James H. Charlesworth, *The Good and the Evil Serpent: How a Universal Symbol Became Christianised* (Yale University Press, 2010), 260.

²⁵⁹ Karen Randol Joines, “The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87, no. 3 (1986): 245.

²⁶⁰ Numbers 21:4-5.

²⁶¹ Numbers 21:6-7.

²⁶² Numbers 21:8-9.

²⁶³ Isaiah 11:2.

next to them. The prosperous kingdom that he created in which “with the breath of his lips [...] he slay[s] the wicked”²⁶⁴ is depicted through the basilisks on the colonnettes, which in line eight Isaiah presents as the culmination of evil, being challenged both by the weasels depicted at the bottom of the colonnettes and Christ portrayed in the lunette. Thus, the paper proposes the hypothesis that these symbols were meant to be viewed and read together to evoke the text from the Book of Isaiah that predicted the arrival of Christ and his glorious reign consequently giving clear meaning to the various elements and the decorative programme of the main portal overall. The overpowering of evil and strong belief in God establishes prosperity in the Christian kingdom as predicted by Isaiah.

The Tree of Jesse and Madonna with Child

Representation of a Virgin with Child in Romanesque portals is not an unfamiliar case. The lunette of the main portal in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore, Tuscania presents Virgin Mary enthroned with the blessing infant Christ in her hands and a symbolic representation of Jesus in the form of the lamb and a cross on the right (fig. 76). While in the Santa Maria Forisportum in Lucca (twelfth century) the enthroned Madonna and Child occupy the lunette of the left minor portal (fig. 77). A foreign example of such iconography can be found in the tympanum of the Saint Anne Portal (c. 1150) in the Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris (fig. 78). Nonetheless, none of the mentioned representations of the Virgin with Child portrays her lactating or depicts Christ in the same scene as is the case the San Rufino. The tympanum of the Cathedral of Notre Dame de la Charite sur Loire (twelfth century, Burgundy) presents both Jesus

²⁶⁴ Isaiah 11:4.

Christ at the top of the lunette and the Enthroned Madonna with Child at the bottom (fig. 79). Nonetheless, they are visually divided by a sculptural band that runs in between and it is evident that the Madonna and Child are portrayed as part of the scenes from Christ's early life, which the bottom of the tympanum is occupied with. The most reminiscent example of the Cathedral of Assisi lunette is the tympanum situated in the Basilica d'Anzy-Le-Duc (twelfth century, Burgundy), which was once the tympanum of the former Anzy-Le-Duc priory. This work presents Christ Pantocrator and the Virgin lactating the infant Jesus right beneath (fig. 80). However, same as in the Cathedral of Notre Dame de la Charite sur Loire the two scenes are divided from each other by an architectural band that signifies two different instances, rather than Christ Child and Jesus enthroned being depicted in the same space and time as is the case in the San Rufino. Such peculiarity of the lunette could be also related to the tree of Jesse and Messiah's arrival. Paulo Martins Oliveira suggests that trees of Jesse that begin with a branch sprouting from sleeping Jesse's side and that feature or even culminate with the Virgin Mary should be viewed also as a reference to Eve being created from the rib of sleeping Adam and thus allude to Eve having a relation to the Virgin.²⁶⁵ Often the tree of Jesse is iconographically conceived with Virgin Mary and Christ Child as the culminating element of the composition. Such is the case in the Scherenberg-Psalter (Straßburg, Badische Landesbibliothek, Cod. St. Peter perg. 139) in which the Madonna enthroned with Christ Child is positioned in the middle of the composition and is one of the most significant elements of the carpet page (fig. 81). Oliveira states that Eve can be also analysed as the tree and the mother of humankind, but one that is yet to be redeemed from sin, meanwhile the Virgin can be seen as the redeemed mother.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Paulo Martins Oliveira, *The Dynamic Tree of Jesse* (Editorial Dykinson, 2015), 2.

²⁶⁶ Oliveira, *The Dynamic Tree of Jesse*, 2.

Consequently, the representation of Mary holding Christ's Child is highly important in the iconography of the Tree of Jesse, since the Child does not only represent the infant Christ but could be viewed as a symbol of each new generation of the redeemed.²⁶⁷ It is thus possible that the child that the Virgin Mary is represented lactating in the lunette of the Cathedral of San Rufino is meant to be viewed not only as a depiction of Christ Child but also of the humanity that was redeemed from sin, which is illustrated by the basilisks on the colonnettes, under Christ's reign who is depicted right next to the Virgin and Child.

Basilisk within the San Rufino Façade Outside of the Main Portal

Isaiah's prediction that Christ will slay all of the wicked²⁶⁸ iconographically represented in the main portal by the representation of basilisks on the colonnettes being challenged from both sides, from the bottom by weasels and from the top by Christ, was translated also into other decorative areas of the façade and consequently could be read as the main message behind the decorative programme overall – Christ and the strong belief of the faithful is the remedy to the devil and any evil. The arcade that divides the lowest and the second register of the façade is decorated with an architectural band that is further enriched with sculpted representations of both monsters and familiar animals. In total, the band depicts 39 animals out of which twenty-four are monstrous. Nevertheless, the majority of these are once again representations of a basilisk. Two out of the depicted monstrous creatures can be easily identified as gryphons, others although portray their mythical nature (by having shared bodies or heads) are a challenge to identify due to their damaged state, but the rest (nineteen in total) are representations of a basilisk.

²⁶⁷ Oliveira, *The Dynamic Tree of Jesse*, 3.

²⁶⁸ Isaiah 11:4.

Iconographically the represented basilisks in the architectural band beneath the arcade are highly similar to those that are portrayed on the colonnettes in the main portal. A lot of them carry human faces just like the example on the left colonnette. In the original Greek *Physiologus*, the male vipers were known to be distinguished by portraying the snake with a face that of a man.²⁶⁹ Possibly this is the source from which such peculiar iconography of certain basilisks on the Cathedral of San Rufino derived in a similar way to which the notion of basilisk developed from that of a viper discussed in the *Physiologus*. The basilisk representations beneath the colonnaded arcade find themselves always depicted in between representations of other animals. Although some of them are difficult to identify due to their state, the majority of them are depictions of oxen, deers, and peacocks that all carry important symbolic meanings within Christianity. An ox (fig. 82) was not only understood as a symbol of Luke but also of redemption through the sacrifice that Luke recorded.²⁷⁰ Lucy Donkin states that an ox can be also viewed as a symbol of Christian scripture overall with the horns of the animal representing the two Testaments and the hooves of the Gospels.²⁷¹ The deer (fig. 83) on the other hand was perceived as a symbol of Christ himself that is trampling over evil,²⁷² while a peacock was associated with immortality and Christian paradise in which there would be no place for the devil (fig. 84).²⁷³ Another peculiar animal represented together with the typical symbols in Christian iconography and the beasts in the architectural band of the San Rufino façade is a cock. The representation cannot be

²⁶⁹ Curley trans., *Physiologus*, 15.

²⁷⁰ Mardith K. Schuetz-Miller, "Survival of Early Christian Symbolism in Monastic Churches of New Spain and Visions of the Millennial Kingdom," *Journal of the Southwest* (2000): 793.

²⁷¹ Lucy Donkin, "Suo Loco. The Traditio Evangeliorum and the Four Evangelist Symbols in the Presbytery Pavement of Novara Cathedral," *Speculum* 88, no. 1 (2013): 127.

²⁷² Giuliana Giai, "I santi e il mondo animale nel Medioevo. *Excursus* attraverso le fonti agiografiche e iconografiche Valsusine," *Segusium Ricerche e Studi* vol. 48 (2009): 68.

²⁷³ Jelena Anđelković Grasar, "Peacock as a Sign in the Late Antique and Early Christian Art" *Archaeology and Science* vol. 6 (2010): 243.

mistaken for that of a basilisk, since the bird does not portray any reptile features and is not of a hybrid nature (fig. 85). Instead it could be viewed to be one more creature that is meant to represent the fight against evil. As Francesca Selcioni explains, a cock must be understood as a symbol of vigilance and protection from evil since its early morning call awakens the faithful and announces not only the arrival of the sun, which repels any evil but the call for morning prayer as well.²⁷⁴ The depiction of basilisks, which symbolise evil, in between various animals of glorious connotation, that represent the fight and protection from the devil within the Christian understanding, can be said to be viewed as a representation of fight and protection against the devil through strong belief and devotion in the glorious kingdom of Christ. Such reading applies to both the architectural band beneath the arcade as well as the iconographic elements of the main portal and thus could be conceived as an overarching meaning connecting various areas of the façade in their symbolic meaning through decoration.

However, what remains to be a peculiarity is the two guarding figures that flank the left minor portal. Although highly damaged and consequently missing their heads, it is still possible to easily identify the two monsters as basilisks through the remaining features. The two statues portray animals with wings, only two frontal legs, skin in scales, and most significantly reptile's tails (figs. 86 and 87). The initial impression is that it must be rather atypical for monstrous creatures, specifically those that are conceived as an incarnation of the devil to be represented in a glorious manner guarding the entrance to the cathedral. Nonetheless, Meredith Cohen states that in a Christian context, such beasts must have served an apotropaic function and were specifically employed to ward off evil.²⁷⁵ This is what the function of the bronze gryphons

²⁷⁴ Selcioni, *Gli animali della casa di Dio*, 68.

²⁷⁵ Meredith Cohen, "The Bestiary Beyond the Book" *The Book of Beasts: The Bestiary in the Medieval World*, ed. Elizabeth Morisson (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019), 178.

positioned on the roofs above the altars of the Genoa and Pisa cathedrals in the Middle Ages is hypothesised to be.²⁷⁶ However, Cohen points out, that while the altar was indisputably the holiest place within the ecclesiastical structures, the façades that faced the outer world and entrances that would grant access within the holy buildings, required protection from evil as well and it is for this reason that portals were decorated with representations of such beasts and sculptures like the basilisks in the minor portal of the Cathedral of San Rufino were made to guard the entrances.²⁷⁷ This, therefore, confirms that a basilisk was perceived as a maleficent creature, a symbol of evil, and thus it was viewed to be an effective way to guard and protect the cathedral from any possible evil just like Christ and His Kingdom would protect the faithful from the devil through their faith and devotion.

²⁷⁶ Cohen, "The Bestiary Beyond the Book," 178.

²⁷⁷ Cohen, "The Bestiary Beyond the Book," 178.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion of the paper, the opportunity is taken to reflect upon the conducted research and the provided answers to the posed research questions, as well as the methodology employed to investigate and propose a new reading to the decorative programme of the façade of the Cathedral of San Rufino. The research project initiated with a careful visual analysis of the decorative arch in the main portal that features representations of King David enthroned, dancing figures in the segments, and reptiles on the colonnettes. Investigation in the existing literature on the iconography of the façade identified the lack of clarity as to what is the possible meaning behind such decorative elements. Further observation of the façade and the imagery employed for its decoration revealed that the same reptile is depicted a multitude of times in various locations giving the beast a significant prominence that cannot be overlooked as accidental. Such observations led to the formation of the research questions as to what is the possible meaning behind the dancing figures and King David in the segments of the main portal and could the reptile be identified as a specific creature that was known in the Middle Ages. The paper continues to enquire whether the reptile could have been conceived as a symbol charged with a specific meaning, possibly of religious nature, that was widely recognised in the Middle Ages and employed in the decorative programme of the façade. The paper explores the representation of King David and the dancing figures together with the reptiles on the colonnettes and the lunette that the arch articulates as one sculptural composition and hypothesises the meaning behind it, which is then translated to other areas of the façade that feature similar decorative elements. The investigation into the role and meaning of the dancers in the main portal employs recent scholarship publications that refute the long-established belief that dance had no place in

Christianity and argue that it was an important element of Christian liturgy. Dance in praise of the Lord was welcomed by the Church and was visually illustrated with the image of King David and his dancers referencing the King's dance before the Ark in praise of God. Examples from early manuscript illuminations and contemporary to the Cathedral of San Rufino Romanesque architectural decorations are examined to confirm that dancers were an established iconographic element depicted together with the King. This allows for the paper to propose that the dancers in the segments of the main portal are related to David that is depicted in proximity. Ancient and mediaeval primary sources, such as Pliny's *Natural History* and the *Physiologus* with its derivatives, are employed to investigate the second aspect of the arch, the colonnettes with the reptiles decorating them. The study of animals described in the works allows for the research to identify the creature as a basilisk — a highly venomous snake developed into a hybrid birdlike reptile with wings, two feet, a snake tail, and horrific properties in the Middle Ages. The mediaeval of figures like Isidore of Seville and Rhabanus Maurus clearly illustrate that the basilisk was a creature believed in and perceived with horror. Rhabanus' account specifically states that the reptile should be viewed as a symbol of evil and incarnate of the devil. This confirms that the representation of the basilisk on the façade of San Rufino was most probably employed as a negatively charged symbol meaning which would be easily read by the contemporary viewer.

Identification of the reptile as a basilisk allowed for the research to pursue mentions of this creature in Christian Scripture. Chapter eleven of the Book of Isaiah is the first mention of a basilisk in the Old Testament. Once again the basilisk is employed by Isaiah as a symbol of maleficence and the uttermost evil. The prophet predicted the glorious reign of the Messiah and to illustrate that in the kingdom of Messiah, even the most potent evil will be conquered, Isaiah

stated that even a child will put his hand on the basilisk's den. Following Isaiah's prediction the Messiah was meant to originate from the root of Jesse's tree that King David is a crucial member of and consequently the ancestor of the Messiah. In Christianity, the Messiah is viewed as Jesus Christ who is depicted in both infant and adult states in the lunette of the portal to assert and visually testify His arrival and His reign. The paper consequently proposes that the composition of the decorative arch together with the lunette derives from and illustrates the scripture from the Book of Isaiah. The Messiah arrived from the root of Jesse, which is expressed both through the representation of King David in the voussoir and the Virgin Mary with Christ Child in the lunette. As illustrated by contemporary illuminated manuscripts, the depiction of the Virgin Mary with Child was a common phenomenon in illustrations of Tree of Jesse. Together with the representation of King David identified by the dancers, the paper proposes that the arch and the lunette can be viewed as a concise representation of the Tree of Jesse from which Christ originates. The basilisks on the other hand play an important symbolic role of representing the evil that is conquered in the glorious reign of Christ, by being chased towards the lunette by weasels (antidote to the reptile established in antiquity) and overpowered by both Christ and King David enthroned. Such reading is applied to other areas of the façade in which the basilisk is represented. The representation of the reptile is found surrounded by animals that carry strong symbolic Christian meaning. They include fish, lamb, peacocks, and stags that are known symbols of Christ trampling over evil. A peculiar element remains the employment of the reptile as the guarding figure of the left portal. From pertinent scholarship it is inferred that the employment of mythical creatures that often had negative meanings connotated with their image, such as gryphons, were employed as guarding figures in front of portals and on top of cathedrals, to protect against any evil. The paper proposes the hypothesis that it is for such reason that

sculptures of basilisks were employed as guarding figures of the left portal, which reiterates the proposal that the reptile was viewed and employed as a symbol of evil that was widely recognised and easily read by the viewers. Attempts to further decipher the iconography of the façade employing the proposals made in this thesis can be pursued by analysing whether any further passages from the Book of Isaiah specifically or the two Testaments can be identified as the textual source for the decorative elements and compositions within the façade.

The project identified important elements within the decorative programme of the façade of San Rufino that have been overlooked and not explored in previous publications on the iconography of the work in question. The reached conclusions propose a new reading of the decorative composition in the main portal that is rooted in the prediction of the arrival of the Messiah made by Isaiah, which Christianity is founded upon. Identification of the reptile that is the most represented creature overall as a basilisk allows the research to reach such conclusions as well as understand the symbolic meaning of the basilisk in the iconography. The combination of the two elements allows for the proposed reading of the decorative arch in the main portal to be translated into other areas where the basilisk is depicted and read as decorative and symbolic depictions of Christ and belief in God overpowering any evil. This contributes a new proposed understanding of certain decorative elements in the discussion of the iconography of the San Rufino façade and its possible reading that has received little scholarly attention.

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