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Cistercian Spirituality and Emergence of the Coronation of the Virgin in the Late Middle Ages

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Abstract

The twelfth century saw a tremendous rise in Marian piety. From then on, this piety was intensified all over Christendom. Along with the popular devotion to the Virgin Mary, the theme of the "Coronation of the Virgin" acquired high popularity through the artistic representation of the Virgin. The proliferation and diffusion of the Coronation theme are indebted to the Cistercian spirituality grown out of the traditional Christian mysticism and elaborated through that of St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Cistercian monks. The theme of the "Coronation," however, reflects the monastic concepts and sentiments which the twelfth and thirteenth centuries professed for the Virgin, demonstrating the problematic and complex nature of the late medieval monastic spirituality.

Expanding upon the affective piety and Cistercian mysticism of the late Middle Ages, this paper traces the emergence of the artistic theme of the "Coronation of the Virgin" in the context of spousal imagery of the Song of Songs and demonstrates how St. Bernard interpreted the Virgin's Coronation and linked it to the mystical pilgrimage of the human soul in attaining the ultimate dependence on and union with God.

The twelfth century saw a tremendous rise in devotion to the Virgin Mary. From then on, the Virgin's supremacy came to a climax not only in the popularity of her cult and in the dedication of churches to her but also in the artistic theme of her "Coronation," which rapidly spread all over Christendom. However, the cult of the Virgin and the proliferation of her images demonstrate the problematic, complex nature of late medieval monastic spirituality that is closely related to the new ecstatic strain of piety expressed by St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Cistercian monks.

St. Bernard, a prominent twelfth-century mystic and a central figure of the Cistercian Order¹, all of whose churches were dedicated to the Virgin, felt a particular devotion to the Virgin as the gateway by which salvation entered the world. He gives full praise to the Virgin by paral-

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¹ Cf. The Trappists (Ordo Cisterciensium Reformatorum seu Strictioris Observantiae; O. C. R. ; O. C. S. O.) were founded by the converted courtier Armand de Rancé (1626-1700), who had held in *commendam* the Cistercian abbey of La Trappe in France, which he transformed (1662) into a community practicing extreme austerity of diet, penitential exercises and absolute silence.

leling her with Eve at the beginning of a sermon on the Sunday following the feast of the Assumption :

A most cruel mediatrix was our mother Eve, through whom the "old serpent" (Apoc. xii. 9) communicatd the mortal poison of sin even to the man ; Mary is faithful, Mary offers the remedy of salvation both to men and women. The former became the means of our seduction, the latter co-operated in our reconciliation ; the former was made the instrument of temptation, the latter the channel of redemption.²

Unlike the cursed Eve--- the symbol of women's licentiousness, seduction and disobedience--- the Virgin was endowed with the image of the New Eve, through whom the sin of the first was ransomed. The monks venerated the Virgin for her purity and sanctity. In their veneration of her, the monks believed that the Virgin would protect them from the temptation of earthly women who got in the way of salvation. Furthermore, the Virgin was exalted by the religious orders as a sublime ideal to which the monastic soul might aspire. The monks who fled from actual women found the Virgin Mary --the eternal essence of womanhood-- in solitary conversations with themselves. Through intense contemplation by celibates, the ascetic ideals associated with virginity culminate in the projection of ideal feminine imagery :

Always thinking about the Virgin, the monks saw her everywhere : the beautiful spring flowing in the cloister was her purity, and the high mountain against the horizon was her greatness. She was springtime, wreathed in flowers making a garland of virtues. When the monk left his cell, all the surrounding magnificence seemed to him like pale reflections of the beauty he saw in the Virgin.³

The Virgin serves as a perfect embodiment of the conflicting ideals of virginity and motherhood men sought in women. But the intense devotion to the Virgin is not accompanied by an increased respect for the status of actual mothers. Instead, the religious writings and the artistic images of the Virgin were "the creation of men, and can be understood as fulfilling the emotional needs of the monks and clerics who created them."⁴

In the twelfth century, new devotion to the Virgin and an increase of feminine imagery are prominent in Cistercian male writing. As Simone Roisin's study of thirteenth century Cistercian hagiography demonstrates, "women are particularly likely to emphasize the handsome Christ

² St. Bernard, *St. Bernard's Sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. A Priest of Mount Melleray (Devon : Augustine Publishing, 1987), p. 207.

³ Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France : The Late Middle Ages* (Princeton : Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), p. 195.

⁴ Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin* (Chicago : Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 73.

whereas male religious more frequently have visions of the Virgin Mary.”⁵ However, Cistercian monks who glorified the Virgin and who equated motherhood with compassion and nurture also “used woman as a symbol of physical or spiritual weakness, of the flesh, of sin, of inability to bear burdens or resist temptations.”⁶ For the celibate men who repudiated any relationship with real women, the Virgin provided an ideal substitute : a woman free of all stain of sin. The monks also have found erotic compensation in this idealized woman. However, we must be careful not to press such argument, for we cannot assume that the twelfth-century monks “associated certain physical or affective responses with sexuality in the way that we do.”⁷ Rather we can assume that the cloistered males idealized the mothering role because of their psychological need.

In contrast to those traditional monastic orders which drew their recruits from among the children who had been presented by their parents, new orders (principally Cistercians) recruited their members from among adults. The adult recruitment, in turn, meant that “entrance into the monastery gradually became more and more of a personal and free choice.”⁸ While most of the monks in the old orders had never known life other than that of the cloister and had been happy monks, the members of the new monastic orders had gone through puberty and had definite knowledge of secular human life. With a fully-converted will and a desire for greater observance of asceticism, poverty and regularity, they renounced all family ties and the company of women. They viewed themselves as renouncing dependence on the world to learn dependence on God.

In his fifth sermon for Christmas Eve, Bernard preaches to his monks progress toward and total dependence on God:

In the first place, therefore, we must seek after faith, by which, as St. Paul testifies, God purifies our hearts. For “blessed are the clean of heart because they shall see (the Majesty of) God.” Abandon thyself, therefore, to God, commit thyself to Him, “cast thy care upon the Lord and He shall sustain thee.” Then mayest thou say with confidence, “The Lord is careful for me.” But such confidence is unknown to men who love themselves, who are wise in their own conceit, who “seek the things that are their own,” and “make provision for the flesh in its concupiscences,” who are deaf to the voice which calls out to them, saying, “Cast all your care upon Him, for He hath care of you.” . . . [I]t is only humility of heart that can induce the faithful soul not to rely on her own strength, but, abandoning herself, to rest upon the Lord, and thus to “ascend from the desert, flowing with delights, (because) leaning upon her Beloved.”⁹

⁵ Simone Roisin, *L'Hagiographie cistercienne dans le diocèse de Liège au XIII^e siècle* (Louvain, 1947), pp. 108 and 111-13.

⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* (Berkeley : Univ. of California Press, 1982), p. 144.

⁷ Ibid., p. 162.

⁸ Jean Leclercq, *Monks and Love in Twelfth-Century France* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 11.

⁹ St. Bernard, *St. Bernard's Sermons on the Nativity*, trans. A Priest of Mount Melleray (Devon : Augustine Publishing, 1985), pp. 106-7.

The sensitive and anxious souls worried about the quality of their inner life and looked to their abbots for spiritual guidance in attaining the ultimate dependence on and union with God. The Cistercian use of feminine imagery that tends to add the qualities of nurturing, affection and accessibility to authority reflects the psychological need of the monks "to supplement authority with love."¹⁰ In addition to complementing authority with compassion, maternal imagery emphasizes dependence on and union with God. For example, in his sermon on the Song of Songs, Bernard preaches on the verse : "For your breasts are better than wine, smelling sweet of the ointments" (Song of Songs 1 : 1-2). Commenting on the passage, he associates nursing with Christ the bridegroom and expounds that the richness of grace that flows from the bridegroom's breasts contributes to the spiritual progress of the bride to union with God.

William of St. Thierry, whose friendship with Bernard had a profound influence upon Bernard, also uses maternal imagery to express an image of dependence and union--- of hanging on God's breast as a suckling child, even of crawling inside God's body :

It was not the least of the chief reasons for your incarnation that you babes in the church, who still needed your milk rather than solid food, who are not strong enough spiritually to think of you in your own way, might find in you a form not unfamiliar to themselves.¹¹

Those unsearchable riches of your glory, Lord, were hidden in your secret place in heaven until the soldier's spear opened the side of your Son our Lord and Saviour on the cross, and from it flowed the mysteries of our redemption. . . . Open to us your body's side, that those who long to see the secrets of your Son may enter in, and may receive the sacraments that flow therefrom, even the price of their redemption.¹²

. . . Blessed are the souls whom you have hidden in your heart, that inmost hidingplace, so that your arms overshadow them from the disquieting of men and they hope only in your covering and fostering wings.¹³

Furthermore, in his letter, Bernard encourages his monks to renounce earthly mothers in order

¹⁰ Bynum, p. 155.

¹¹ *Meditativae Orationes*, chap. 10, PL 180 : col. 236A ; trans. Sister Penelope, *The Works of William of St. Thierry 1 : On Contemplating God*, Cistercian Fathers Series 3 (Spencer, Mass., 1971) : 152-53, as quoted in Bynum, pp. 119-20.

¹² *Meditativae Orationes*, chap. 6, PL 1 : cols. 225D-26A ; trans. Sister Penelope, *Works 1* : 131, as quoted in Bynum, p. 120.

¹³ *Meditativae Oratione*, chap. 8, PL 180 : col. 230 C ; trans. Sister Penelope, *Works 1* : 141, as quoted in Bynum p. 120.

to depend on Christ :

He [Christ] will be your mother. . . . But a man's household are his own enemies [Matt. 10 : 36] . These are they who love not you but the satisfaction they derive from you. . . . And now hear what blessed Jerome says : "If your mother should lie prostrate at the door, if she should bare her breasts, the breasts that gave you suck, . . . yet with dry eyes fixed upon the cross go ahead and tread over your prostrate mother and father. It is the height of piety to be cruel for Christ's sake." Do not be moved by the tears of demented parents who weep because from being a child of wrath you have become a child of God.¹⁴

The mystical union is attainable only by renouncing false dependence on this world. Thus, the deep and spontaneous attitude to femininity and the use of maternal imagery in Cistercian writings were the expression of an intense emotional dependence of the soul on God and its union with God.

Then, how is the emergence of the Coronation theme related to the affective Cistercian spirituality and to that of Bernard ? The theme of the Coronation of the Virgin alludes not only to her Assumption and triumph over death but also to the consummation in her spousal relationship with Christ.

The image of the Virgin as bride is profoundly indebted to the imagery from the Song of Songs interpreted by the Church Fathers since Origen (185?-254?). Ever since the Song had been interpreted as an allegory, the Bridegroom was identified with Christ and the Bride with the Church, who in turn was mystically equated with the Virgin. As Warner states, "[h]owever contradictory, Christian asceticism absorbed the Jewish virgin bride as a primary symbol,"¹⁵ and in the twelfth century Marian commentators on the Song "self-consciously identified Mary both as mother and as bride of Christ."¹⁶ Thus, for the late medieval mind this connection between the Coronation of the Virgin and the espousal imagery of the Song was all the more natural.

However, the explosion of the theme of the Virgin's Coronation in the late Middle Ages owes its inspiration especially to the eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs given by Bernard. He interpreted the lover of the Song as Christ and his bride as the Church, as the individual soul, as the monks of Clairvaux and as the Virgin. Yet, as he tells his listeners in the first sermon that "[i]t is preeminently a marriage song telling of chaste souls in loving embrace, of their wills in sweet concord, of mutual exchange of the heart's affections,"¹⁷ the main focus is placed on mystical communion between Christ and the individual soul. Bernard expounds in his sermon the mystical proc-

¹⁴ St. Bernard, *Letter* 322, PL 182 : col. 527C-D; trans. Bruno Scott James, *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux* (London, 1953), letter 378, p. 449, as quoted in Bynum, pp. 145-46.

¹⁵ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* (New York : Vintage, 1983), p. 123.

¹⁶ Gold, p. 59.

¹⁷ St. Bernard, Sermon 1, in *On the Song of Songs* I, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo, Michigan : Cistercian Publications, 1981), p. 7.

ess of the soul's wandering and return : ". . . [I] f it returns to its beginning and goes back to its origin, seeking its source again, it will always draw afresh from it, and thereby flow freely."¹⁸ In essence, his conception of the mystical experience lies in a state in which a human soul returns to God and comes to be in perfect accord with the will of God.

Bernard hopes to bring every faithful soul to that summit of spiritual experience which allows the human soul to be fully embraced by the love of God. To attain this eternal bliss, the human soul begins a journey to salvation through a progression of both a spiritual and a practical kind. The spiritual progress is also described as mystical ascent that "will turn him from an animal into a man who has returned to the state in which Adam was created ---a likeness of God."¹⁹

When the soul attains the divine likeness, Christ the Bridegroom bestows the kiss of consummation, as expressed in the Song of Songs ; thus the soul becomes united with God. Bernard expresses the joy of union with God in terms of "merging, dissolving, fusing, absorbing swim in his stream of consciousness :"²⁰

As a small drop of water mingled in much wine seems to be wholly lost and to take on the colour and taste of the wine ; as a kindled and glowing iron becomes most like to fire, having put off its former and natural form ; and as air, when flooded with the light of the sun, is transformed into the very brightness of light, so that it seems not to be so much illuminated as to be the light itself, so it must need be that all human affection in the saints will then, in some ineffable way, melt from itself, and be entirely poured over into the will of God. . . .²¹

Unlike human beings who have fallen through concupiscence and sin, the Virgin is exempt from the Fall. She is the only one who can triumphantly enjoy the spiritual union in the eternal beatitude of the heavenly Jerusalem for the virtue of immaculate virginity and purity. For Bernard, the Virgin is the embodiment of the most intimate relationship between divinity and humanity ; she thus mirrors the most sacred aspects of spiritual union and ecstasy to which the human soul aspires. In one of his sermons on the Assumption, Bernard quotes from the Song : "Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved ?" (Song of Songs 8 : 5) and continues :

¹⁸ St. Bernard, Sermon 83, in *On the Song of Songs* IV, trans. Irene Edmonds (Kalamazoo, Michigan : Cistercian Publications, 1980), p. 184.

¹⁹ St. Bernard, Sermon, In *Cantica Canticorum* ; as quoted in G. R. Evans, *The Mind of St. Bernard of Clairvaux* (Oxford : Clarendon, 1983), p. 121.

²⁰ Warner, p. 133.

²¹ St. Bernard, Sermon 83, In *Cantica Canticorum* ; as quoted in Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (London : 1940), pp. 131-32.

. . . [W]ith what mighty ardour of tenderest affection the whole multitude of the heavenly legions issued forth to meet her and to escort her to the seat of glory ; with what serenity of countenance, with what loving looks, with what joyous embraces she was welcomed by her Son and lifted high above every creature to that eminence of honour which becomes so great a Mother and is worthy of so great a Son ! Happy, doubtless, were the kisses which the Mother received from the lips of her suckling Babe whilst she fondled Him on her virginal lap. But ought we not to regard as still happier those which He gives her to-day in loving salutation from His seat at the Father's right hand, when she advances to the throne of Majesty, singing her epithalamium and saying, with the Spouse in the Canticle, "Let Him kiss me with the kiss of His mouth"? (Song of Songs 1 : 1)²²

In Bernard's mystical interpretation of the Song of Songs, "kisses of his mouth" become the special symbol of the moment of ecstatic union which the human soul eternally longs for. The Virgin, assumed into heaven as bride and receiving kisses from Christ, "becomes the example for every Christian of his future joy."²³ Thus, the matrimonial imagery of the Song of Songs is translated from the context of human love into that of the love of God for humanity and serves to express the human impulses and aspirations toward the eternal bond with God.

The heavenly union of the eternal bridegroom and his bride is celebrated in art through the sequences of the Virgin's Death, Assumption and Coronation which bring to a glorious end the Virgin's pilgrimage as bride. The images in which the Virgin is crowned and enthroned as bride mystically symbolize the profound desire of the human soul aspiring for union with God.

The first appearance of this subject in Gothic sculpture is seen in the west portal of Senlis Cathedral (plate 1). However, prior to Senlis a transitional image of the Bride and Bridegroom theme occurs in Rome in the mosaic in the apse of S. Maria in Trastevere created around 1140 (plate 2). This iconographical innovation reflects the growing cult of the Virgin promoted by the Cistercian monks. Although the icon that shows the golden queen wearing a crown retains a hieratic image of Maria Regina, it manifests a further development of the subject. In the icon, Christ and the Virgin are seated on a throne like Bride and Bridegroom with His arm embracing her. Furthermore, the Virgin holds a scroll inscribed : "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me" (Song of Songs 8 : 3).²⁴ With the explicit reference to the Song of Songs, the Virgin prefigures the Church's future glory and the soul's promised union with Christ in terms of the mystical love song, the Cantica Canticorum.

Eighteen months before the mosaic was made St. Bernard had visited Pope Innocent II, who

²² St. Bernard, *Sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary*, pp. 169-70.

²³ Warner, p. 129.

²⁴ This passage is directly referred to in Bernard's sermon for the Sunday within the octave of the Assumption in *St. Bernard's Sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary*, pp. 211-12, "Go forth now to see the Queen in the diadem wherewith her Son hath crowned her. . . . For the Bridegroom's 'left hand is under her head and with His right He embraces her'."

commissioned the icon, in Rome. Bernard was ardently welcomed by the anxious Pope, for it was due to the Saint's support and his political manoeuvres that the Pope was recongnized as the true successor to St. Peter against the claim of the antipope Anacletus II. It can be assumed that the inspiration for the treatment of the Virgin as the Bride of Christ comes from the Song of Songs, "which since 1135 St. Bernard had been expounding in an extraordinary sequence of sermons to the monks of Clairvaux."²⁵ The icon was produced under the direct influence of Bernard's spirituality and thus enshrines the passionate imagination and mystical piety of St. Bernard.

The scene of the Coronation soon became popular, displaying a new aspect at each stage. The western portal of the Cathedral of Senlis, which is usually dated about 1170, glorifies the Virgin. With the entire portal dedicated to her, the crowned and enthroned Virgin is shown blessed by Christ in the tympanum. At Senlis, the Virgin is not a subsidiary subject in the Christological doctrine. Instead, she is elevated above all human beings to be blessed by Christ, her Bridegroom. She claims herself as the subject of her own cycle of death, resurrection and triumph, and exults in the mystical union with God.

At Notre Dame in Paris, an angel who comes from heaven places the crown on her head, while the Virgin expresses wonder, gratitude and modesty in her attitude (plate 3). Furthermore, about the year 1250, there appeared a new treatment of the scene in which Christ Himself places the crown on the Virgin, which is a sign of the greater reverence accorded her (plate 4). Thus, the Coronation scene marks the zenith of the cult of the Virgin in the thirteenth century. The notion behind the sentiments which the twelfth and thirteenth centuries professed for the Virgin should be understood as "the product of intense introspective meditation in the mysteries of the faith by high-minded celibates breathing the pure air of the Christian ascetic tradition."²⁶

As the nuptial images of the Song of Songs interpreted by Bernard illuminate the eternal hope of humanity for union with God, the emergence and proliferation of the Coronation theme symbolically express the monks' religious longings to be united and fused in the essence of eternity. The Coronation theme highlights the Virgin's triumph over human weakness and evil and symbolizes her special relationship with divinity, making us more aware of our own sin. However, as discussed above, in the depths of Cistercian mysticism, the Virgin serves as the channel of grace through which flow the monks' sentiments about the vision of salvation and the eternal union with God. The Coronation of the Virgin, thus, mirrors the Mariological mysticism in which she is venerated as the personification of feminine perfection who protects the monks' celibacy, who guides the route to God, and who inspires them to envision the unification with the Divine.²⁷

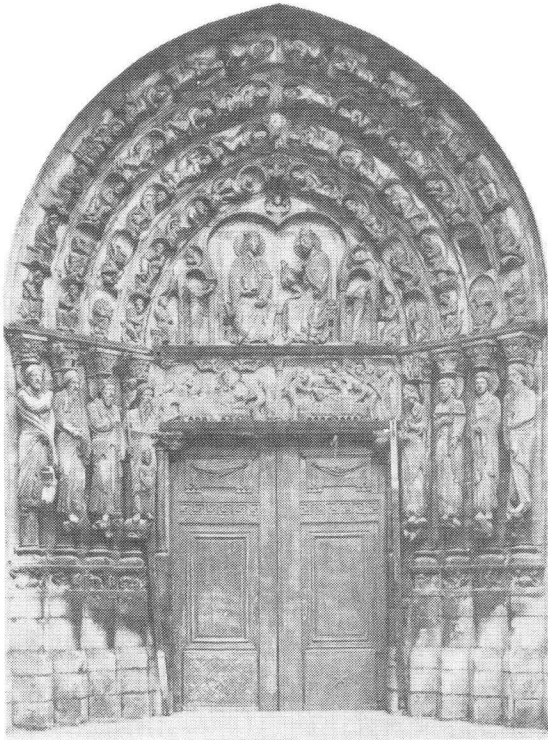
²⁵ Warner, p. 122.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 147.

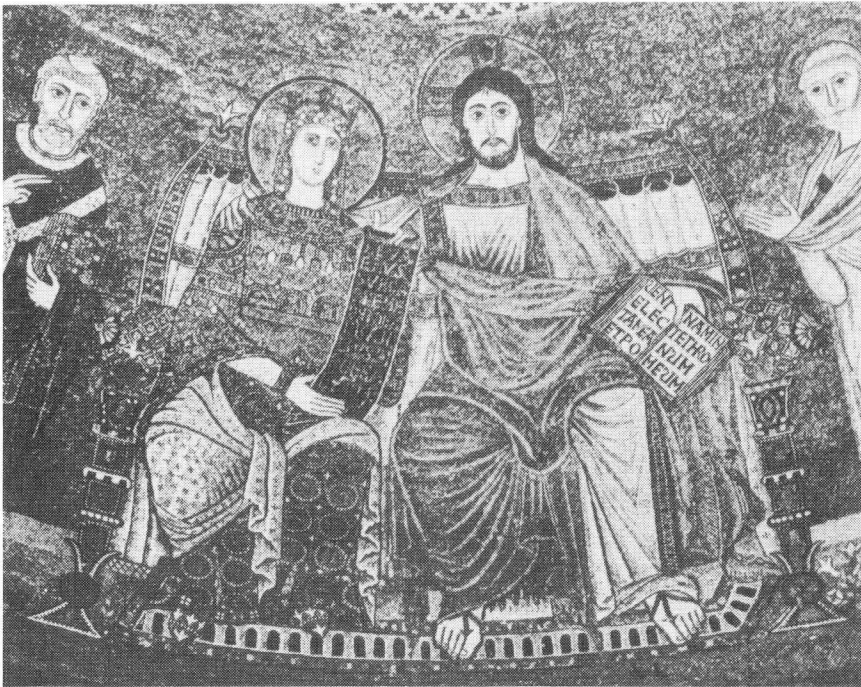
²⁷ I wish to thank Dr. Lillian M. Bisson for her many helpful ideas during the preparation of the present essay. The debt of my gratitude extends to Dr. Elizabeth Nightlinger, who initially introduced me to the scholarly research of iconography and to Dr. Takahiko Nitta, who supported my efforts at word processing.

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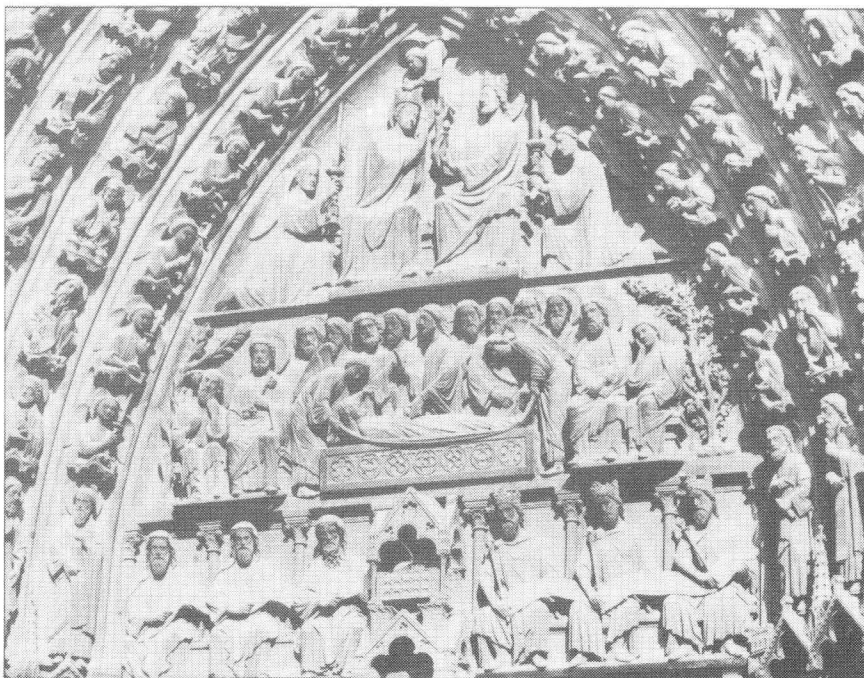
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Pl. 1. Senlis. Tympanum (west facade, center) : Triumph of the Virgin; Lintel : Death and Resurrection of the Virgin. Ca. 1170.



Pl. 2. The lover in the Song of Songs. Christ embraces his mother, enthroned by his side as his queen and his bride in a twelfth century mosaic in S. Maria in Trastevere, Rome. Ca. 1140.



Pl. 3. Paris, Notre Dame. Tympanum (west facade, left) : Coronation of the Virgin ; Lintel : Old Testament figures, the Resurrection of the Virgin. 1210-1220.



Pl. 4. Coronation of the Virgin, French ivory of the thirteenth century, in the Louvre.