

## The “acrobat” in the antiislamic Theory of 11<sup>th</sup> Century Western Sculpture

Paper read by  
**Dr. Claudio Lange, Berlin**  
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For the mentioned pictures, please see  
<http://www.claudiolange.de/imiscoe/>

It is the nature of humans that the Self is partly a stranger and something other to the self itself. That truth is valid through historical, climatological, sexual, imaginative or biological (intestinal flora and fauna) constituents in any healthy identity. The Delphic commandment of “Know yourself” was therefore a hard and utopic memento of this surprising fact.

Now, if one forgets ones essential and unconditional heterogeneity, perhaps even campaigning for a fundamentalistic homogeneity of ones identity, one soon will have difficulties distinguishing a guest, a foreigner, an opposer, an enemy or a deadly foe. In fact, the only real enemy could be the one, who has forgotten or forbidden to himself his own heterogeneity, be it himself or someone else. That is to say, that to forget or repress ones own heterogenic identity is to invent oneself as the enemy.

When in the curse of early eleventh century the Western Church decided, while beginning it's inner reform, that Islam was to be erased from the planet, an non worth living enemy, and declaring the conquest of Jerusalem from Muslim hands as will of God (“deus le veult”), the West invented itself as the enemy of Islam and invented Islam as the enemy of the West, which often enough surprised Islam. The inner effect, in any case, was a certain homogenization of the West.

But now there was the absolute Good One as the obedient follower of the own God and the absolute Evil Other, Islam. As the holy Bernard from Clairvaux (12<sup>th</sup> century), the famous enemy of Abelard and ideologist of the Templers put it: To kill a Muslim wasn't homicide but malicide, killing Evil as such.

Wherever a holy war is fought, the enemy, being the enemy of (the holy) God, becomes directly dirt, the devil, the demon, in Christianity the Antichrist.

And exactly at this time, while the idea of a holy crusade against Islam began to spread, strange and never seen sculptures appeared in Christian churches.



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Science (one should say “Christian science” as well as “Jewish” or “Muslim” science) has if not ignored, interpreted these figures as demons, monsters, from folklore and carnival to the fight against sexuality or magic. I only agree with the interpretation of “evil nature” of these images, their extreme pornographic nakedness talks clear; disagreement starts, when there is to decide, if this evilness refers to sinful Christians – sculptures as part of the inner reform; or if they correspond to a unseen campaign, dedicated to invent the big Evil, the absolute Unholy: Islam, and put there to be seen by everybody and for the sake of mobilizing Christians to fight this enemy in Gods name.

There is no contemporary or later text which explains the sense of these millions of newly emerging sculptures. Sciences of medieval art follow as a cliché the explanation of their apotropaism: to scare away bad demons. At the same time they remain unable to explain the fact of their “epidemic” appearance, that wave of obscene and violent sculptures in churches of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Meanwhile my thesis, which affirms, that these sculptures have to do with the agitational and conscious needs of the coming Holy War (1095; 1098) explains exactly why they appeared at that time and place. So. these figures either had an apotropaic function and criticized bad behaviour inside the Christian community or they referred to the construction of Islam as deadly enemy.

So, in addition to presenting a new thesis of western art history, this study, if successful, demonstrates that a revolution will be needed to approach in a scientific way the identity of the West itself.

The appearance of sculpture in Western churches from the 11<sup>th</sup> century on is called “Romanesque” and thought as a “Renaissance”. These names clarify neither the sculptures’ meaning nor their popularity. The 11<sup>th</sup> century saw no revival of Rome, on the contrary, the new images appear at the time, when an unheard new poetry was written and sung in France not in Latin but in the vernacular “langue d’oc”.<sup>1</sup> On the other side, not the renaissance but the creative and renovational character of that time is present in different manners in sculpture, in music, in poetry and in warfare.

Speaking of the art of sculpture, it was the triumphalistic message of some of the sculptures of the 11<sup>th</sup> century together with the roman triumphal arch in it’s church portals that did justify the term Romanesque for.

Unhappily for all of us the universal history of triumphalistic art has remained unwritten, so we will not get in details about that here.

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1 One of the many achievements of the Arabic poetry of Iberian al-Andalus was its use of colloquial Arabic, in contrast to other periods or Arabic speaking places; Ibn Guzmán was the leading poet of this movement. The first verses written in the romance language in al-Andalus were by Arab and Jewish poets.



03

In those days sculpture and architecture were quite even in their importance.<sup>2</sup> But being all the new sculptures by no means triumphal (Romanesque), we must ask ourselves what those other figures which do not explicitly depict triumphalism, represent.

In any case, with that same implausible “academic rigour” with which the usual science talks of the Romanesque, it classifies 11<sup>th</sup> century sculpture in ways that have little or nothing to do with the traditions of Roman culture. Basically, the appearing stone images are divided by the cliché into four types:

- a) Narrative, images which tell a biblical story or the legends of the martyrs and saints;
- b) Ornamental, to embellish the buildings and delight the viewer;
- c) Apotropaic, to frighten away demons, nobody really knows, how that works;
- d) Allegorical, to encourage theological, social, ritual, and pedagogical discourses.

As we can see, all classes address directly to the Christian community. What we shall show is that this imagery cannot refer to such internal needs – the obscene, for instance, not relating –at least primarily and directly- to the sexual sins of Christians but in broad brushstrokes to the great “obscenity” of polygamy and of sexualized paradise of the Qur’an.

My calculation for supposing this basic fact of an outer and not an inner enemy is very simple: the (eternal) fight against inner enemies (sins) wouldn't have displayed this amount of new, energetic and extreme images, specially in such a heavy and problematic medium as was sculpture.

I'll take two images of sculptors' marks which should remember the ruin of the until recent times accepted *topos* that the new images were anonymous: because the apotropaic went very well together with the anonymous. More than 500 marks are known to us from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, proving that the sculptors took considerable pride in their works. This pride can only be explained when you see the sculptors fulfilling the new task of inventing new ways of denigrating and mocking the programmatic enemy, Islam.

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<sup>2</sup> Many churches of the period appear to be little more than structures supporting antiislamic sculptural programmes and messages.

Figure 04 shows Mary as a portal figure with Bible with an inscription; figure 05 shows a capital with the adoration of the magi, with the Hand of God. Both, inscription and gods hand are there to tell us that these sacred figures are just artefacts produced by one sculptor or another.



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This narcissistic modernity of these signatures prove that here were no stone-cutters but creative sculptors inventing a new western sculpture. But with what justification, to what end?

Let's take an image from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (figure 06), where a defeated (enemy) visibly a young African enchained prisoner in Arab clothes by forcing him (just like his 12<sup>th</sup> century ancestors, as we shall see immediately) to carry the shell-receptacle for the wine the Koran forbids Muslims to drink. And on top, the western drinkers hand will, while raising the cup, imprison the Muslim again.



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Returning now to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, let us consider an corbel from a Spanish church (figure 07), exhibited in upright position in a little museums room. It shows a nude mega-phallic figure with a barrel on his shoulders. Do we understand this sculpture? Well, this barrel could be certainly again a wine barrel –what else could it be- like the cup from the Prussian court. But here are no chains and no turban; instead we see a megaphallic naked man. This sculpture too could mock on the wine-prohibition of the Qur'an: but what means it's pornographic manner?



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The least that we can plainly state here is that this sculpture was no embellishment, ornament, narrative element, triumphalistic or apostrophic demon nor a copy of a roman model, being of the common type of new church-sculptures of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

One of the pillars of the thesis of anti-Islamism is, I repeat, that the new sculptures only later in gothic times, but in there start only exceptionally refer to internal enemies (Jews, heretics, sinners, demons, vices, bad behaviour), that first of all they present the programmatic building up of the chosen external enemy, Islam. But this thesis, that anti-Islamic agitation, like for example the mocking at a Qur'an law about alcohol prohibition, was the overall energy behind the widespread introduction of sculptures in the West from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards has yet to gain support in the academic community.<sup>3</sup> Let us therefore direct our attention to a very common sculpture, a figure, that the traditional theory of the "Romanesque" designates as "acrobat."<sup>4</sup> Analyzing it in anti-Islamic key, we will recon, that the earliest, most common and seemingly inside-addressed figure of the new generation of church-sculptures, which we are told is just the denunciation of marginal and bad Christian behaviour, is a basic antiislamic figuration.

We meet the earliest 11<sup>th</sup> century "acrobat" with contorted body in finished and unfinished capitals of the crypt of Saint Benigne, Dijon (figure 08, France, around 1020 CE) and which may be not unrelated to the one in the portico of Saint Benoît sur Loire (figure 09, circa 1040 CE, France).

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<sup>3</sup> For our purposes, it is likely that there is no anti-Islamic insult that does not appear as an image in some church of the period.

<sup>4</sup> See Claudio Lange, Von der ältesten Karikatur Mohammeds, to appear the 15th of september 2009..



08



09

The fact that we find the “acrobat” in Saint Benoît is of profound significance to me, given that my researches suggest that in the portico of St. Benoît sur Loire we find for the first time a complete sculptural program of anti-Islamic iconology.<sup>5</sup>

From Saint Benoît onwards, most churches come to have masculine or feminine figures contorting their bodies. Never the less these figures, which are said just to embody bad behaviour of Christians,<sup>6</sup> are keeping some form of semantic secret, given that they can be accorded attributes which at have nothing to do with Christian vices.

Therefore a number of examples of acrobatic figures shall follow.



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<sup>5</sup> See C. Lange, *Der Nackte Feind*, Parthas 2004.

<sup>6</sup> For St. Bernard of Clairvaux, even laughter is a sin.



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It is particularly noteworthy that one (figure 10) has a turban and Arabic shoes, another one, (figure 14) links heaven to earth,<sup>7</sup> while another (figure 15) carries a cord or rope around his neck, a classical iconology for an enemy prisoner. A third is at the base of a column (figure 16), which is where the worst represented personages went. While nobody has attributed apotropaic meaning to any of these figures, how is one to explain this gigantic and implacable hatred for simple unchristian behaviour of a Christian? And, by the way, how come justly the “acrobat,” a completely marginal figure in Christian society would come to represent Christian internal misbehaviour? Now, given that these bodily distortions which characterize both men and women “acrobats” can be often found directly linked to obscenity, the confusion grows and the simple nomenclature collapses. Acrobats were finally represented as obscene as the polygamous Muslims with their sexualized paradise, and there were.”<sup>8</sup>



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<sup>7</sup> Something which exactly matches the expected anti-Islamic semantic.

<sup>8</sup>For the anti-Islamic meaning of obscenity, see *Der Nackte Feind*. I agree with N. Daniel and his followers that to anti-Islamic Christian eyes Islam was the essence of the dirty and the obscene.



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Here the obscenity of mostly feminine acrobats is more than evident. On some corbels (figures 17, 18, 19, 20) a naked woman acrobat taps her ears like the muezzins do, but with her feet and showing her vulva or her anus; in another corbel (figures 21) we can see an obscene female acrobat again closing her ears with her ankles, beside a man exhibiting an enormous phallus with his hand on his chest, in the manner of an Arab greeting.<sup>9</sup> Another one (figure 22) is of an exceptionally beautiful female acrobat covering her ears like a muezzin.



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<sup>9</sup> Many of the figures in San Pedro de Cervatos, for example, are paradoxically beautiful. I have commented on some in *Der Nackte Feind*. Whether semantically or psychologically, the identification of "Islam" with "obscenity" is due to polygamy, the sexualized Muslim paradise, and the campaign in favour of celibacy. The mega-phallus, for its part, suggests the adage that Muslims believed that their sexual member grew in paradise, so that their enjoyment might be total, as N. Daniel notes.

Figure 23 shows a male acrobat with closed ears and carrying a moustache, classical iconographic features of the Muslim.<sup>10</sup> Figure 24 shows an acrobat monkey, besides a mandrake on one side and on the other another obscene monkey, the monkey representing the failed creation of man. The acrobatics of the following three illustrations depict spectacular auto-fellatio, which iconographically could be seen as synonymous to acrobatics. The first, (figure 25) is French (12<sup>th</sup> century), the next (figure 26) is German, from the old City Hall in Cologne (14<sup>th</sup> century, built upon the ruins of the Jewish ghetto), showing him beside monkeys making music. The next example (figure 27) shows an obscene “acrobat” carrying again a cask on his shoulders. This acrobat is for our argument here of extreme importance, having met already the obscene cask carrier.

Lastly we see (figure 28) an obscene “acrobat” licking his own ass on a gothic misericord (15<sup>th</sup> century), confirming the historical stability of these allegorical figures.

That the semantic of these and other figural motives, born in the 11<sup>th</sup> century sculpture and reproduced relentlessly for centuries should be forgotten today or have become incomprehensible to us indicate a real Western cultural amnesia. So is, we have to ask, after seeing the acrobat, a supposed simple figuration of any incorrect Christian behaviour contaminated with the most violent representations of the deadly sin of *lascivia*, is this just accidental or is it in fact, that the so called acrobat is in itself an image of big sin.

This we know for sure: obscenity was for the medieval Christians<sup>11</sup>, fighting sex and divinizing the virginal Mother of God, synonymous with the Muslim as such, thanks to their polygamy and sexualized ideas of paradise,. And so it seems to make sense, that the “acrobat” performing sex often mocks illicit sexual positions, and through amalgamation and synonym, the acrobat becomes synonymous with obscenity.



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<sup>10</sup> See C. Lange, *Der Nackte Feind*.

<sup>11</sup> Rather than mediaeval, I prefer to refer to the Islamic-Christian Era, and to the 11th century as that of a cultural revolution. See C. Lange, *Liebesfreuden im Mittelalter* (1994, Belser Verlag, Stuttgart).

Let me say here, in the context of acrobatics, that we can observe another very interesting phenomenon, meaning a sort of sculptors acrobatics (or archaic cubism) in which the sculptor suggest a more or less acrobatic but evident sexual act which is illusory, because not being really explicitly depicted (figures 29, 30). We can note in one of them (figure 30) that the male individual in the sexual act is pulling his beard, which is a widely repeated iconological signature of defeat.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in a 15<sup>th</sup> century gothic misericord (figure 31) we see an acrobatic fantasy of three people in a sex affaire take place, a “cubistic” scene, but something that in reality is still referred today to in good Spanish as *cama turca* (Turkish bed).

The next six examples of acrobatics, (figures 32 to 37) do not specially show acrobatic obscenity, but suggest in the first place and with quite typical humour, the scorn of the bodily position that always draws the attention of Christians and their sculptors concerning Muslims, that is the Muslim way of praying in proskynesis.



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The first figure (figure 32) is found inside a romanesque cathedral and brings together in one acrobatics a Turkish cap, the (Muslim) moustache, the call to

<sup>12</sup> See Der Nackte Feind.

prayer, palms on the ground and acrobatic legs covering ears, like a muezzin.<sup>13</sup> Then follow (figures 33, 34, 35) some female and male acrobatic figures in proskynesis. Then (figure 36) we find the mocking image of an acrobatic collective proskynesis - the mosque. Finally we see a spectacular sculpture from a capital of the cloister of Großmünster in Zurich (figure 37, 13<sup>th</sup> century), which combines, unified by the typical cutting spine of the sinner (*spina dorsalis*): proskynesis, nudity, bodily contortion (“acrobatics”), and anal auto-fellatio.

We have now looked on the different connotations of the “acrobat”. Before closing this argument, let me reconsider one of our first images, the one of the naked mega-phallic individual carrying a cask. Now we can significantly remark that there too are many “acrobats” to be found (and other obscene figures or recognizable figures as Muslims) that carry casks (barrels) on their shoulders, no monsters nor narrative figures, neither allegories nor ornaments.



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Now, the only explanation I know of “the barrel bearer figure” is found in antiislamic code, that he makes fun of the Qur’anic prohibition of drinking wine. And surprisingly carrying a turban or being an obscene acrobatic figure seems to mean the same. Because the first barrel bearer figure (figure 38) is not an acrobat but wears an Arab dress and a turban, (instead of being a naked figure with mega-phallus). The other two (figures 39, 40) are acrobatic barrel bearers.

“Acrobatic” merged with obscenity, moustaches, turbans, and pulling ones own beard, finally shows that acrobatics is just another iconological stereotype for a ridiculed Muslim.

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13 See Der Nackte Feind.



41

If the acrobatic is, for whatever reasons, only one logo more of the Muslim in the anti-Islamic iconological repertoire, developed by sculptors of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the syntax of one of the masterworks of anti-Islamic sculpture, the apse of the collegiate church of San Pedro de Cervatos (figure 41, circa 1120 CE, Cantabria, Spain) could be readable at all from left to right (or from right to left), as masked figure, then a figure you couldn't tell if it is an acrobat or a proskynesis figure – being both-, a smoker of hashish, and a mandrake, often repeated in more or less in similar orders in other churches, and could only make any sense in an anti-Islamic key.

There rests to asks, how and why did physical contortion i.e. “acrobatics” come to be identified by the western sculptors with Islam? If so-called Romanesque art owes its existence to the need of delivering enthusiasm for the anti-Islamic war, the western church, trying to embark Christians in it, so needed anti-Islamic images to mobilise against an enemy almost unknown and 5000 kilometres distant.

“Just as the literature of the crusades called mosques the “devil’s house” (*domus diabolica*), the Muslim were branded demons.”<sup>14</sup> The sculptural monsters and demons were not apotropaic but the unconvertible Muslims (B. de Clairvaux) in the images of the campaign for a holy war.<sup>15</sup> And it was innovative sculpture in the first place, and not, as was the case for Gothic, architecture, that gave de essential expression to the Western project.

But why did the new sculpture, justified by its anti-Islamic, triumphalist function start with such incomprehensible allegory of Islam as the acrobat (tumbler, contortionist)? The simple knowledge of anti-Islamic legends will allow us to answer this question too.

The acrobat is the image of the (supposed false) prophet of Islam himself, of Muhammad, and as such the acrobat is his oldest caricature. To understand this, one only needs to see, with the eyes of anti-Islamism, the contortions not as an acrobatics but as the heteronym and disjointed movements of an

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14 P. Dinzelsbacher: Bernhardt de Clairvaux, Wissensch. Buchg. Darmstadt 1998. In his anti-Islamic argument, St Bernard of Clairvaux redirects the great invective of the anti-Semite tradition against Islam. The relationship between traditional anti-Semitism and the acute anti-Islamism of the 11th century is not, however, the object of this study.

15 Pope Urban II called for the crusade in 1095, and in 1099 the population of Jerusalem was massacred. Eighty eight years later the war turned in favour of the Muslims, who in 1187 retook Jerusalem, unleashing a crisis in the West which sought renewed self-definition: the Gothic. From 1187 onwards it was internal enemies who served as scapegoats for the Holy Church Militant. In 1204, Christian Byzantium fell into the hands of the crusaders. A few years later the crusade against Christians in the south of France began. The holy inquisition was founded to fight internal enemies and installed anti-Semitic sentiment.

epileptic attack. And the epileptic is the representation of an epileptic Muhammad, who – as Theophanes (752 – 817) wrote in his *Chronographia* - whose body became distorted as he heard the voices he believed to be the words of God.

The legend of the epileptic Muhammad spread fast and early throughout Christendom<sup>16</sup> and is alluded to in all his biographies. That many believed that Muhammad was possessed by evil spirits is mentioned even in the Qur'an, where it is than denied.<sup>17</sup> At the end of Sura 68, the Qur'an affirms that the belief that Muhammad is not a true prophet but an epileptic is at the base of all anti-Muslim discourse. Is it not a little to much to suppose that this essential Christian belief would not find its privileged place in an anti-Islamic iconography?

There is no acrobat nor acrobatics, it is the Muslim, Islam being the fruit of epileptic hallucinations – whence its association with other anti-Islamic logos. Iconological contortion means epilepsy, which equals Islam, synonym for Muslim.

The deciphering of the “acrobat” as Muhammad, in particular, and as a general antiislamic stereotype of anything related to Islam, provides my theory of antiislamism as the cause of the 11<sup>th</sup> century sculptural revolution with its central piece.



42

Now, before ending, we will try to proof our thesis deciphering our last example of 12<sup>th</sup> century sculpture (figure 42) with the antiislamic key; there is no other known key to do that. An acrobat, that is to say a Muslim, is sodomized by another Muslim – homosexuality being a common variation of the topic sexual perverse Muslim in antiislamism, since Hroswitha from Gandersheim. At the same time both drag their beards, a recurrent image of the defeated or vanquished.

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16 There are also hadith that speak of a strange symptomatology in regard to Muhammad. Here we are not interested in medical diagnostics; the iconology of the contortionist in the context of an anti-Islamic code could even reveal, that the contortions of the two other crucified next to Jesus could mean their belonging to Islam – being Jerusalem in Muslim hands..

17 Sura 34 in the German edition of Rudi Paret. See also Suras 68, 69, 81.

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