

The Saint-Remi Workshop

Impost with two harpies and a grotesque head



This monumental block of limestone is carved on one side in deep relief with fantastical figures which can be closely associated with the sculpture from the Romanesque abbey of Saint-Remi in Reims. Its form suggests that it is an impost: a projecting block of stone which may have been on top of a pilaster, supporting a springing arch.

The impost is decorated with a large head with flame-like hair and pointed ears in the centre. The flaming head opens its mouth as two harpies appear to fly out of it – the tips of their tails still stuck inside. The harpies have their wings stretched behind them, their hoofs in front of them and they turn their heads to look back at the flaming head. This composition complements a symmetry that was favoured in Romanesque sculpture. The faces of all three creatures are carved with bulging almond shaped eyes, deep wrinkles and distinctively thick moustaches which start just above the nostrils. The diagonal chisel marks on the sides, which would not have been visible, are characteristic of carving from the 12th century. The extended depth of the stone behind the carved moulding is evidence that this impost once carried a heavy load. Sometime in its post-medieval history, the stone was removed from its original setting and turned into a basin by hollowing the top of the impost block and drilling a hole for drainage.

The fine carving of this piece survives in a very good condition and its style closely resembles sculptures from the second phase of the basilica of Saint-Remi in Reims, dated to c. 1140. It is the carving of the flame-like hair, the modelling around the eyes and the moustache that starts above the nostrils that is analogous to those same features on the

France, Reims, Basilica of Saint-Remi?
c. 1140

17 x 85 x 55cm; limestone, surface slightly abraded caused by weathering, impost later transformed into a basin, diagonal chisel marks visible on the undecorated sides of the block.

Provenance:

By repute Joseph Altounian Collection

Literature:

Cahn, Walter. Review: Saint-Remi de Reims: l'oeuvre de Pierre de Celle et sa place dans l'architecture gothique by Anne Prache. In *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (1980) 39 (1): 68.

Prache, Anne. Saint-Remi de Reims: l'oeuvre de Pierre de Celle et sa place dans l'architecture gothique. Geneva, 1978.

surviving capitals and corbels of Saint-Remi in Reims (figs 1 – 3). The small heads on the corners of the capital from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, with their bulging eyes, flame-like hair and curly moustaches, find particular parallels with our sculpture (fig. 1). Additionally, the shape of the moulding upon which the two corbels heads now in the Musée de St. Rémi are positioned is the same as the moulding profile of our piece (fig. 2).



Fig. 1
Capital from the
Cloister of the
Monastery of Saint-
Rémi
France, Reims
c. 1140
Philadelphia Museum
of Art 1945-25-39

Some of the most highly accomplished sculpture of Romanesque and Gothic France survives in Reims because of its status as the site where King Clovis was baptised on Christmas Day in 508 by Bishop Remigius and where the later kings of France were crowned. According to tradition, the oil used in the baptism of King Clovis came from a sacred phial that was brought down from heaven by a dove and this phial is said to have been kept in the basilica of Saint-Remi, which was built on the site where Remigius was buried. The basilica of Saint-Remi went through several phases of rebuilding, starting in the 11th century and ending with the rebuilding of the choir in c.1180. The monsters, harpies, scaly figures and biblical scenes that survive in the Musée de Saint-Remi and the Philadelphia Museum of Art come from the second phase of rebuilding, which occurred in c. 1140 under

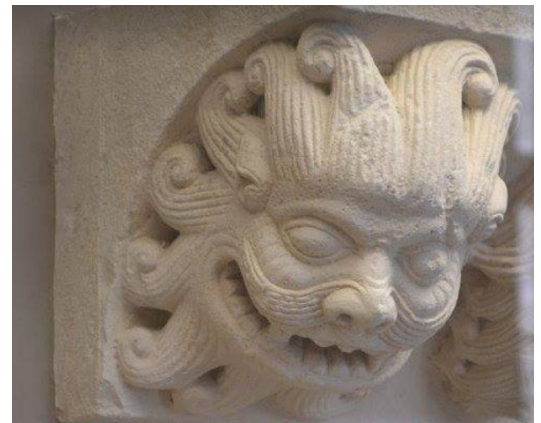


Fig. 2
Corbel head (above)
Musée St Rémi, Reims
c. 1140
(Detail of corbel head from St Rémi (above) and
the head on our impost (below))





Abbot Odo, a contemporary of Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis. It is this phase that our sculpture belongs to. The relationship between the Saint-Remi sculptures and those that survive in and around Paris, such as the capitals from the cloister of Saint-Denis, should not escape mention because their dating, the style of their carving and their iconography are extremely similar (fig. 3). The possibility that these sites shared the same masons thus cannot be excluded.

The iconography of our piece, depicting a grotesque head with creatures emerging from its open mouth, is a common theme in Romanesque churches, and examples survive in the basilica of Saint-Remi and in Saint-Denis (fig. 1, 3 - 4). In these examples, the creatures depicted were a visual representation of the devil – resembling scenes of the mouth of hell in reverse. Such visual descriptions of hell were common in the margins of medieval churches. To the distress of reformers, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, such sculptures were not only disturbing but also highly entertaining. As Bernard wrote in his *Apologia* in 1125: ‘in cloisters, where the brothers are reading, what is the point of this ridiculous monstrosity, this shapely misshapeness, this misshapen shapeliness? In one place you see many bodies under a single head, in another several heads on a single body. In short, so many and so marvelous are the various shapes surrounding us that it is more pleasant to read the marble than the books!’ Sculptures such as these would have enlivened the stone, yet they themselves were trapped within it – forever supporting the weight of the building on their heads and reminding the viewer of their fate, should their mind wander further.

The style of this magnificent impost suggests that it likely originated in the basilica of Saint-Remi or that it may have at the least been carved by the same workshop.

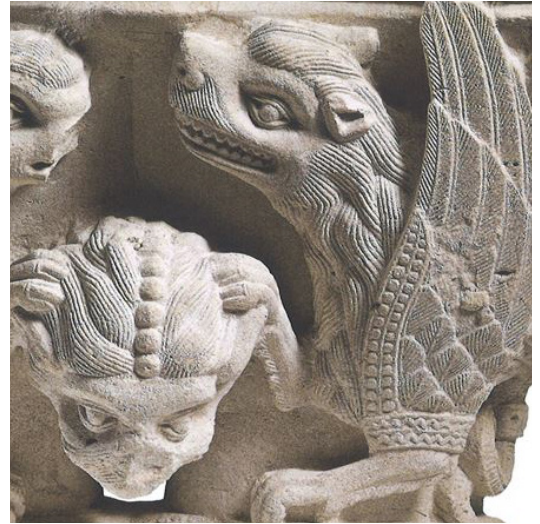


Fig. 3
Capital from Saint-Denis, Paris
c. 1140
Musée de Cluny 18925a



Fig. 4
Capital from St Remi
c. 1140
France, Reims