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### Pygmalion's Power: Romanesque Sculpture. the senses, and religious experience by Thomas E A Dale

Ron Baxter

*Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain & Ireland, The British Academy, London*

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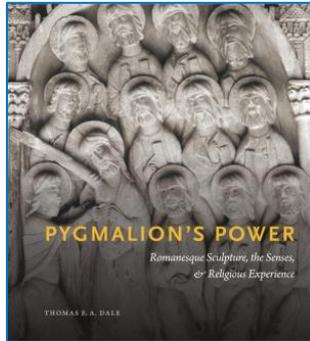
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# PEREGRINATIONS

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**Review** of Thomas E A Dale, *Pygmalion's Power: Romanesque Sculpture, the senses, and religious experience*. Pennsylvania State University Press 2019. \$99.95.

**RON BAXTER**

*Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain & Ireland, The British Academy, London*

Thomas Dale's ambitious book proposes an approach to the study of Romanesque sculpted images of the human body that relies on textual evidence and liturgical practices to explain what has been seen as a reinvention of monumental figure sculpture from the later 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Art historians have traditionally focussed on such works as the ambulatory figures at Saint-Sernin in Toulouse, the hemicycle capitals of Cluny III, and the Wiligelmus reliefs at Modena, all produced around the year 1100 (and conveniently ignoring the earlier capitals of Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire and the Irish High Crosses), and posed the central enigma of the origins of Romanesque sculpture in terms of a sudden revival of Roman forms. Dale, in contrast, takes as his starting point a new kind of response, based on the senses and producing, at its most extreme, visions of interactions between worshippers and the objects presented to them for consideration. Hence the reference to Pygmalion; the sculptor described by Ovid who made a woman out of ivory who was so beautiful that he fell in love with it. He prayed to Aphrodite for a

bride as lovely as his statue, and when he went home he found that she had come to life. Medieval Christian parallels to this story include the vision experienced by St Godric of Finchale with which the book opens. The saint is praying before a wooden carved crucifix and the Christ child issues from the carved mouth and moves through the air to an image of the Virgin, which receives him and takes him onto her lap. Another story concerns the Benedictine monk Rupert of Deutz, who described how a wooden figure of Christ on the Cross opened its eyes and spoke to him. The monk responded by seizing Christ and kissing him, while Christ responded by opening his own mouth. This is an unusually explicit, not to say sexual account of a man's response to an image, but even here it is unclear precisely what, if anything, Rupert thought had happened.

Encounters of this kind have traditionally been taken as proof of the unusual sanctity of the human participants, or by those of a more sceptical nature as evidence of the effects of prolonged fasting, self-mortification or overindulgence in the produce of the herbarium. For Dale, however, they represent an extreme response to institutional features of the liturgy or to deliberate kinds of artistic creation. Such Christian writers as Peter Damian interpreted the figure of a dead or suffering Christ on the cross above the altar as an encouragement for the worshipper to identify with him, by fasting and flagellation, and thus to share his sorrows. Related, though less extreme, were the views of Anselm of Canterbury that such sculptures could produce feelings of sympathy, or of William of Saint-Thierry who saw them as aids to prayer for novices. The positioning of such crucifixes above an altar links Christ's

suffering with the Eucharist enacted below in the worshipper's mind and the concatenation of image, liturgy and learned commentary or homiletics could tend to produce a state of receptiveness in which the kind of experiences recorded by Rupert of Deutz could take place.

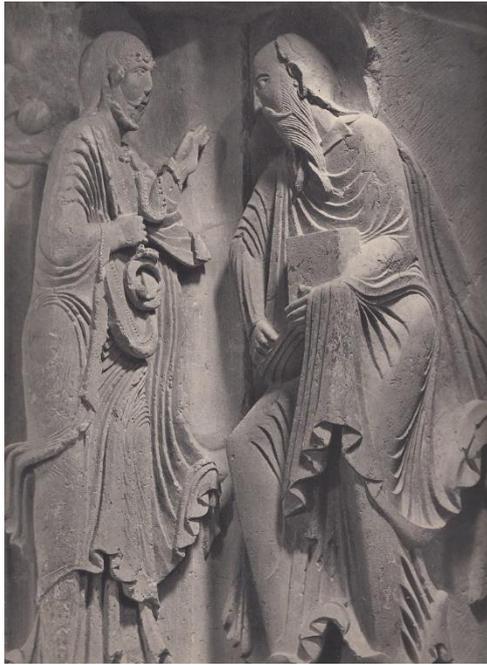
All of this may well be true, but it does not really come together as an art-historical narrative. The argument moves from Cologne to Burgundy to Catalonia, leaping across time, space, and medium as if they did not matter; as if artistic production proceeded directly from exegesis and liturgy without the involvement of patrons or artists. The book is arranged in five chapters, each concerned with one or more classes of sculpture: Crucifixions and Virgin and Child groups; nudes; portraits; monsters; and portal sculpture. In each case a few famous works are chosen as the basis for a meditation on human interactions with objects of the class. What an art historian might regret is the absence of a story: the objects came alive for a few privileged viewers, but they do not themselves inhabit a narrative. A worrying tendency is to ignore the evidence of the art itself. The justly famous reliquary of Saint Baudime in the Auvergnat church of Saint-Nectaire is one of Dale's case studies. He dates it to the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, ignoring Peter Lasko's careful analysis which suggests that the original figure may have dated from much earlier, perhaps the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, with the head added in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the hands later still. It may thus have achieved its present state by 1200, but for an important period in its history it functioned in a rather different way to that outlined here. The object itself has a history and Dale does not investigate it.

Reliquary Bust of St. Baudime  
Church of Mairie de Saint-Nectaire,  
Auvergne, France.  
Photo: Wikimedia



Lasko, a crucial figure in the historiography of church treasures in Europe, and an obvious starting point for such an investigation, is a rather surprising omission from the extensive bibliography provided. So too is George

Zarnecki, a giant of Romanesque studies, whose important work on the 12<sup>th</sup>-century frieze of Lincoln cathedral would, for most scholars, be the first port-of-call in a discussion of the sculpture with which Dale chooses to open his chapter on the Romanesque facade. But Zarnecki, like his Courtauld Institute colleague Lasko, is ignored. Dale, it seems, has his own heroes, and throughout the book, he is concerned to demonstrate their complicity in his arguments. Hence many paragraphs tend to open, “As Karl Werckmeister has shown...,” or “As Meyer Schapiro was the first to emphasize...,” or (most commonly) “Ilene Forsyth has highlighted...” The effect of this narrative strategy is to divert the reader’s understanding of his argument down a series of by-roads. At times the text reads



more like a review of the literature than a synthetic argument, which is a shame because Dale has much to tell us.

St Peter and St Paul, narthex, St Magdalen church, Vézelay. Photo: after <https://www.flickr.com/photos/44425842@N00/9344078737/in/photostream/>

Chapter five, on portal sculpture, may be the most successful from the viewpoint of the medieval art historian, although the discussion of the canonical highlights of the (largely French) Romanesque; Moissac, Autun, Vézelay, Toulouse and Conques, is thematically rather than diachronically arranged. A curious omission in the context of a study of human interactions with sculptural figures is the absence of an analysis of the tendency of figures on portals to address the worshippers who pass them, like the Ancient Mariner importuning the unfortunate wedding guests with his life story. This appears to happen in the case of Peter and Paul on the capitals supporting the main tympanum at Vézelay, whose iconography is discussed at length here. In Romanesque Italy the case is even stronger, because speech and writing are systematically distinguished by the form of the inscriptions on the Modena frieze and in the Gospels of Matilda of Canossa, so that on the facades of Cremona and Piacenza we can be sure that the prophets are addressing the incoming worshippers with the words on their scrolls.

*Pygmalion's Power* will probably not tell the professional art historian anything he, or she, doesn't already know. Its power lies rather in a presentation that is curious, challenging and sometimes extremely provocative. The reader might wish for a broader range of case studies, or a more orthodox narrative structure, but if the work provokes fresh thought and suggests new connections that can only be held in its favour. 🐉