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### Review of Shirin Fozi, Romanesque Tomb Effigies: Death and Redemption in Medieval Europe, 1000-1200

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

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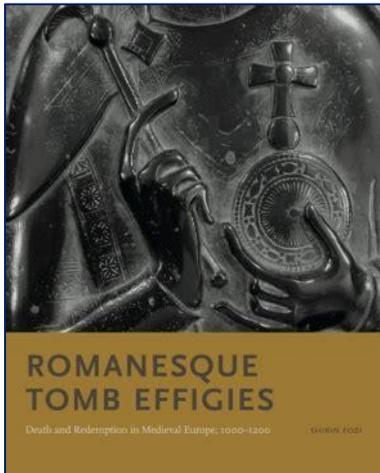
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# PEREGRINATIONS

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**Shirin Fozi, *Romanesque Tomb Effigies: Death and Redemption in Medieval Europe, 1000-1200*, Pennsylvania State University Press 2021. \$89.95.**

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

Romanesque tomb effigies inhabit a shadowy space in the history of sculpture. Romanesque, for people like us, is a term applied most comfortably to architecture, because the buildings of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries take their inspiration from those of ancient Rome in very specific and identifiable ways. Romanesque sculpture also borrows from the Roman past in its Corinthianesque capitals and in the figure styles of various parts of the early medieval world. On the other hand, much Romanesque figure sculpture bears little resemblance to its lifelike Roman forebears; hardly surprising when we consider that the Christian ideology considered the outward appearance of the world to be a snare and a delusion, and that a person's physical body, subject to deterioration and finally decay, was no more than a fragile container for the immortal soul. This has repercussions for the art

of death. Roman funerary monuments could include portraits of the dead, often with other members of their family, as living beings. Roman epitaphs concentrated on the achievements and worth of the dead person. Despite these inherent contradictions, earlier treatments of Romanesque funerary imagery by Panofsky<sup>1</sup> and Bauch<sup>2</sup> attempted to relate them to the Roman past, but their arguments were unconvincing at best.

At the root of the difficulty lies the fact that we think we know what Romanesque tomb sculpture should look like; but our perception is based on the overwhelming mass of tombs produced from the late-12<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the Middle Ages. By the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century the tradition of effigies that represented a dead person as living was well established, and it is assumed that the bones of the corpse lie, or lay, beneath the horizontal effigy. This is true of the earliest English example, the tomb of Bishop Roger of Salisbury, who died in 1139, but whose imported Tournai tomb might not have been carved until a quarter century later. Before this we have a handful of broadly similar objects, each of which has its own story, which Fozi has deftly picked apart. By the time we reach the end we can no longer be certain that what we have been looking at qualifies for the label *Tomb Sculpture* at all.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture: Four Lectures on its Changing Aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini* (New York, 1964).

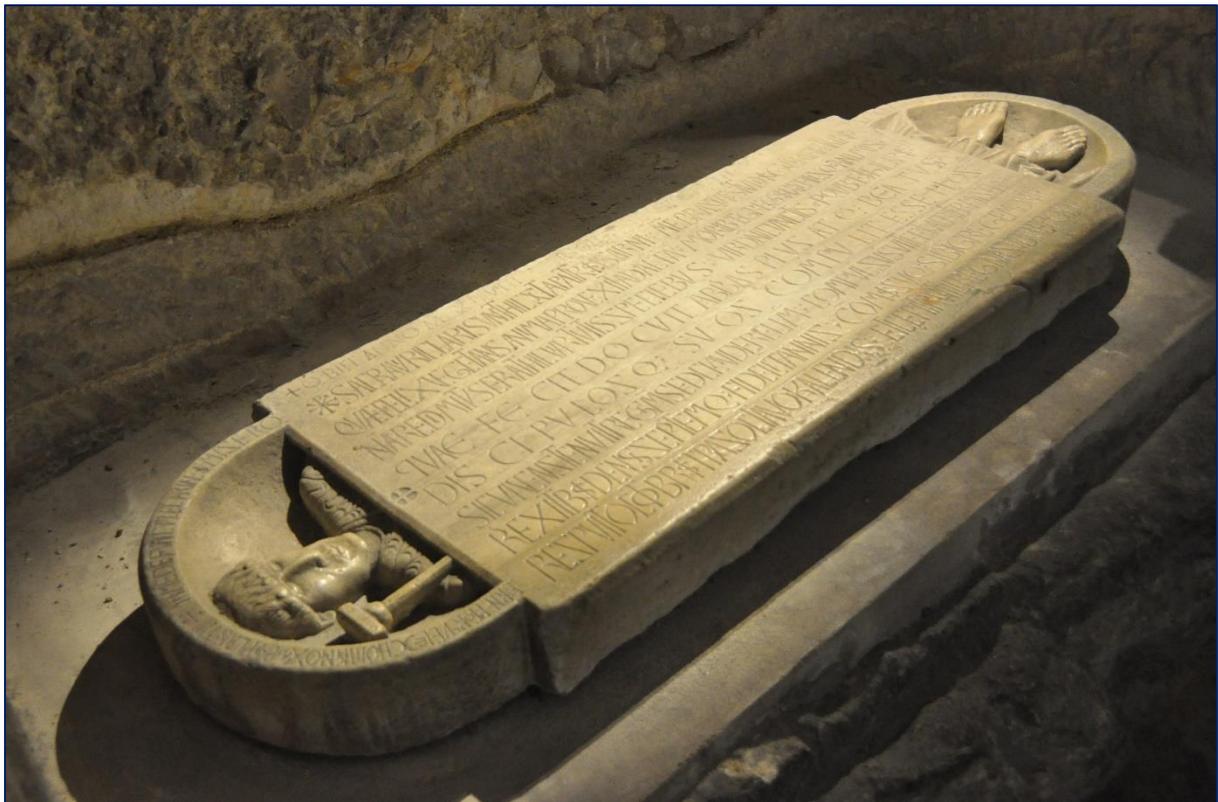
<sup>2</sup> K. Bauch, *Das Mittelalterliche Grabbild: Figürlicher Grabmäler des 11. Bi 15. Jahrhunderts in Europa* (Berlin, 1976).

The opening chapter, labeled Epitaphs, provides an essential insight into the way elite tombs and their occupants addressed an intended audience. It centers on three famous early Romanesque memorials: the tombs of Abbot Bernward of Hildesheim and Abbot Isarn of Marseille, and the relief depicting Abbot Durandus in the cloister of Moissac. Abbot Bernward is represented by his sarcophagus, its lid, and a slab bearing an inscription. He died in 1022 and was canonized in 1193, but neither event provides an unambiguous date for the sarcophagus or the slab. In 1193 the sarcophagus was opened, and the relics removed. The sarcophagus is rough-hewn, but its lid is finely carved with a complex iconographic program and an inscription that makes no mention of Bernward, but is instead a quote from Job (I know that my Redeemer liveth and in the last day I shall rise out of the earth-clothed in skin I shall see God.)

It is only when the lid is removed that the identity of the occupant is revealed in a naming inscription on the rim of the sarcophagus (BERNWARDUS EPS SERVUS SERVORUM CHRISTI). This leaves the inscribed slab, which was dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century until recently, while the sarcophagus had been dated around the time of his death. Epigraphy now suggests that both might well be early-11<sup>th</sup> century, and this would explain why there was no need for a naming inscription on the tomb lid. The text on the slab reads:

*Part of a man Bernward was I; now I lie pressed in this dreadful sarcophagus and behold worthless ashes. Woe is me that I have not carried out the dignity of my high office well. May merciful peace be granted to my soul and you sing Amen.*

This is a personal statement, notionally by Bernward himself addressing future generations of monks and stressing that the body buried here is a mere part of the man himself, and not the whole. There is no image of Bernward on his memorial, and this, together with the humility of tone in the inscription emphasizes the ephemeral nature of even a great life.



Tomb of Abbot Isarn, Abbey of Saint-Victor, Marseille, France, 11<sup>th</sup> century.  
Photo: author.

Abbot Isarn's is one of the most striking pieces of Romanesque funerary sculpture to come down to us. It is a unique combination of effigy and epitaph: the abbot shown lying in a shallow sarcophagus with head and feet emerging at top and bottom below a heavy slab bearing the inscription that apparently crushes his body. On the slab we read a lengthy tribute to Isarn written in the third person and the

date of his death (1047). Encircling his head and feet are further texts which appear to be spoken by Isarn himself:

*Look reader ...at what the law of man through the guilt of Adam imposes on me in death .... Speak: God have mercy on this man. Amen.*

This distinguishes between the words on the slab, a biography describing a famous man in the third person, and those at head and feet – spoken by Isarn to his audience.

The third of her early Romanesque memorials is the relief of Abbot Durandus (d. 1072) in the cloister at Moissac. He is shown frontally on a pier in the center of the east cloister range, and like the apostle reliefs on the other piers, he is carved from a reused sarcophagus stood on end. Corresponding to Durandus, in the center of the west range, is an inscription on another pier relief, highlighting that the cloister was made in the time of Abbot Anquetil and supplying a date of 1100 for its construction. The Durandus relief is by no means a tomb effigy, but it is certainly a monumental figural plaque that memorializes a local man. Durandus was probably buried at Moissac, but he was also Bishop of Toulouse, as recorded in the inscription on the arch surrounding his head, so this is not certain. Fozi's justification for including it with the tombs of Bernward and Isarn in this section marks a broadening of her definition of the term 'effigy' to include life-sized figural plaques that served as memorials to local figures. In this case, Abbot Anquetil was seeking to evoke his illustrious predecessor at a turbulent time for Moissac, in order to associate himself with its successful past.

The next three chapters are devoted to the subjects of the memorials described: Rulers, Patrons, and Canonesses, but further themes recur in the course of the treatment. The first is the vital issue of materials, and Fozi's examination of memorials of cast bronze, enamel, colored stone, various freestones and marbles, and plaster is sensitively handled throughout. A second, we have seen in the treatment of the Durandus relief, where the imagery is considered from the viewpoint of current events. This is certainly interesting, yet because a large proportion of the monuments discussed were produced in the Holy Roman Empire the last quarter of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the first quarter of the 12<sup>th</sup>, the Investiture Controversy provides a recurring backdrop to the narrative.

Most of the chapter on Rulers is devoted to a wide-ranging study of the gilt bronze tomb of Rudolf, Duke of Swabia (c.1025-80) in Merseburg Cathedral. Rudolf was never a ruler in the accepted sense, but when the Emperor, Henry IV, was excommunicated by Pope Gregory VII in 1076, the Pope chose Rudolf to replace him. Henry did public penance to lift the excommunication the following year and Gregory reluctantly lifted the excommunication, but since the post of Emperor was an elected one, another election was needed, and Rudolf was chosen by the electors. For the next three years the situation was unresolved. The two sides met in battle near the River Elster, and while Rudolf's troops were victorious, the man himself was mortally wounded, and opposition to Henry gradually collapsed.

Rudolf's monument is in Merseburg Cathedral and dates from shortly after his death in October 1080. It is of cast bronze in shallow relief except for the head,

which is more deeply modeled. The clothing is chased to represent rich embroidery. It was once enriched with enamels and precious stones – lost now. Also lost is the gilding that once covered it. The effigy is framed by a poetical inscription comparing Rudolf to Charlemagne and recording that he died for the church as a sacred victim of war. In that sense, therefore, it presents him as a martyr. He is shown crowned and carrying orb and scepter, as a sanctified king. The monument is positioned on the floor of the cathedral with the inscription encircling the image, starting at the top left and always oriented towards the center. To read it, the viewer must stand at his feet to begin and move clockwise around him.

It remains to consider why the memorial took the form it did. Cast bronze was unusual at this date, and technically this was a *tour de force*. It is associated in the modern mind with royal tombs, but the evidence for this comes from a later period. Members of the Salian dynasty that provided most of the Emperors in this period were typically buried in plain stone sarcophagi in Speyer cathedral, so Rudolf's burial in the Saxon royal center of Merseburg, and in an elaborate gilt tomb differentiated him from them. It also emphasizes his personal history, and again the Salian Speyer tombs bear only the briefest of notices of their occupants. It can also be read as a statement of Saxon pretensions: Merseburg was the site of Henry the Fowler's palace, and the grandeur of Rudolf's tomb stood as a memorial to Saxony's Ottonian hegemony.

The Patrons of the following chapter include the tombs of the Nellenburg family, founders of the monastic church of Allerheiligen in the Swiss town of



*Effigy of Widukind of Saxony,*  
Widukind-Museum Enger.  
Photo: Harald Wurm

Schaffhausen, close to the German border. They were carved as a group in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, but represent slightly earlier patrons. They can thus be seen as a retrospective family group, and documentary evidence makes it certain that the group was originally larger. They also

introduce a notable ambiguity better known in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century tombs of the Archbishops of Mainz.<sup>3</sup> They are shown as if standing upright in lively poses, but architectural features indicate that the tombs lay flat on the pavement. Another retrospective memorial discussed here is that of the 8<sup>th</sup>-century Saxon warlord Widukind, who led a pagan revolt against Charlemagne. By the time his plaster

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<sup>3</sup> R. Baxter, "The Tombs of the Archbishops of Mainz," in U. Engel and A. Gajewski (ed.), *Mainz and the Middle Rhine Valley: Medieval Art, Architecture and Archaeology* (British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions XXX, 2007), 68-79.

effigy was produced in the 1120s he had gained a mythical status as the forebear of the Ottonian dynasty. The effigy, in St Dionysus in Enger, shows a lively figure carrying a scepter, and as with the Nellenburgs and Rudolf of Swabia himself one cannot avoid reading his presence at Enger as a claim for dynastic status that would benefit the spiritual economy of the house.

The Canonesses of the next chapter are three plaster effigies at St Servatius, Quedlinburg, a house of great prestige linked to Ottonian emperors' daughters and sisters since its foundation in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The figures are carved with fine linear V-folds and swirls applied to simple geometric forms. They are standing, frontal figures practically identical to one another with masklike faces and wide, staring eyes. Each woman is shown with a book pressed to her chest; one (Adelheid I) raises her dexter hand in blessing.

The aristocratic canonesses of Quedlinburg enjoyed a secluded and comfortable life under the rule of a series of abbesses from the Imperial house. Nine funerary monuments dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century were discovered in an excavation of the 1860s. The three earliest are those described above, probably belonging to the same campaign of sculpture. The women are successive abbesses: two were half-sisters and the other a cousin, although the family ties are not mentioned in the inscriptions on their tombs. Even though their rules covered a sixty-year period they are pictured identically. The three are Adelheid I (ruled 1039-43), Beatrix (c. 1045-62) and Adelheid II (1063-95). Their inscriptions identify the abbesses and quote from the book of Psalms and all the quotations emphasize the

transitory nature of life. If, as seems obvious, the three are contemporary products, they must postdate 1095 when Adelheid II died. The current tendency is to date them as part of the rebuilding before the consecration of 1129 following an earlier fire. This allows Fozi to speculate on the nature of a larger program to which they may have belonged. The bare facts have led scholars to consider them in the light of *memoria* (to remind canonesses of the three abbesses), as nostalgic (to recall the abbey's great history) or as political, in relation to monastic reform. All may be true without necessarily exhausting the possibilities.

It is not until we reach the final chapter that the narrative turns to carved images of the dead associated with their bodies, and the subject is approached obliquely; through Bernard of Clairvaux's ambiguous relationship to the ephemeral body and to a re-awakened interest in the human form that the author exemplifies not with funerary images, but with the sculpture of the Headmaster at Chartres and Corbeil. The central objects in the chapter are not German, but Tournai marble memorials of English clergy: the tombs of Bishops Roger of Salisbury, Alexander of Lincoln, and Nigel of Ely, all dated to the middle years of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. By this time we are on much more familiar ground, and it is fair to say that in Shirin Fozi we have had a knowledgeable and entertaining guide to lead us here. If at times we feel we are reading a series of case studies rather than a connected narrative, that is inherent in the material. This is not an easy read but it repays the readers' efforts.

