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**With an apocalyptic imagination heated by a fearful faith,
Gislebertus attempted to instill fear of God's judgment in
those who entered the cathedral of St. Lazare.**

Terrible Judgment

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

Every narrow street of Autun, France, leads to its cathedral of St. Lazare. This small town, tucked neatly into the side of a hill in the Burgundy region, was once a major village of Roman Gaul – its name comes from *Augustodunum*, town of Augustus Caesar. Later in medieval times it became one of the busiest, most important towns in Europe.¹

The cathedral was constructed in about 1120 to accommodate the many leprous pilgrims attracted by the relics of their patron saint Lazarus, which were transferred from St. Nazaire in Autun.² These pilgrims were met by the sculpture *The Last Judgment* above the main portal, or entrance, in a semicircular area called a tympanum. The sculpture is signed “*Gislebertus hoc fecit*” (Gislebertus made this) immediately below the figure of Christ in the center, confirming the sculptor’s identity in a way that is uncommon in the medieval era.

The iconography of the sculpture is Byzantine: to depict Mary enthroned in heaven in a Last Judgment scene (in the upper left area of the tympanum) is a Middle Byzantine element that has no precedents in western art.³ Christ is in the center of the composition in a *mandorla*, or almond frame. The inscription around the frame, held by four angels, reads: “I alone dispose of all things and crown the just; those who follow crime I judge and punish.” Above it are medallions that contain the Sun and the Moon.

Below Christ the dead are rising. Lined up along the lintel, or lower horizontal band, they wait to have their souls weighed. On Christ’s right, Peter and eight Apostles welcome those who are entering heaven. On Christ’s left is the area of damnation. An inscription above contrasts the joy of the blessed – “Thus shall rise again everyone who does not lead an impious life, and endless light of day shall shine for him” – with the despair of the damned – “Let fear strike those whom earthly error binds, for their fate is shown by the horror of these figures.”⁴ The scale on which the dead will climb to be weighed is located in the lower right portion of the tympanum.

Gislebertus shows us the fearful process as giant hands pluck one being directly below the scales. An angel with a trumpet summons all creatures to judgment. Humankind’s pitiful weakness and littleness are distilled in terror-stricken, weeping, doll-like forms. Angels and devils fight at the scales

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Gislebertus, detail of West Tympanum, THE LAST JUDGMENT (c. 1130-1135). Limestone. St. Lazare, Autun, France. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

where souls are being weighed as each tries to manipulate the scale for or against a soul. There are hideous demons on the right side whose legs end in claws. The devil is leaning from the dragon mouth of Hell and drags souls in. Above him, a howling demon crams souls head first into a furnace.

By 1766, the apocalyptic imagery of the tympanum was considered offensive and it was covered with plaster. Since the head of Christ projected outwards, in order to create a level plastered surface it was broken off. It was rediscovered and restored to its position in 1948.⁵

Scholars believe that Gislebertus, aided by assistants, completed his work at Autun in ten years between 1125 and 1135. He sculpted four capitals that tell the story of the Wise Men and the childhood of Christ.⁶ The culmination of his achievement is the depiction on the west portal tympanum of the Last Judgment. Its grandeur and apocalyptic message can still be understood and appreciated today.

NOTES

1 Régine Pernoud and Canon Grivot, *The Story of the Wise Men According to the Gospel of Saint Matthew and Carved by Giselbertus* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 26.

2 Lazarus is the patron saint of people suffering from leprosy. One medieval legend says that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany (the friend whom Jesus raised from the dead) sailed to France. Lazarus of Bethany is sometimes conflated with the poor character in Jesus' story of the rich man (Luke 16:19-31), who waited at the gate "covered with sores" and "longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs

would come and lick his sores" (16:20b-21). Both biblical figures were associated with God's judgment of sin. In Hades the rich man begs Father Abraham to send Lazarus "to my father's house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment" (Luke 16:27-28). Before Jesus calls Lazarus of Bethany from the tomb, his sister Martha rebukes the Lord, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (John 11:24).

3 Don Denny, "The Last Judgment Tympanum at Autun: Its Sources and Meaning," *Speculum* 57:3 (July, 1982): 532-547.

4 T. F. C. Blagg and Kathryn Morrison, "Autun," in *Grove Art Online* (Oxford Art Online, accessed November 21, 2009), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T005225.

5 Ibid.

6 Pernoud and Grivot, *The Story of the Wise Men*, 4-25.



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