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The Three-Faced Representation of the Holy Trinity
Zoe Goedecke

The Holy Trinity appears on sig. 17v in the PSU Kerver Book of Hours. The Master of the Très Petites Heures of Anne de Bretagne created the plate used by Kerver. It is a full page metalcut, with the center of the image being taken up by a Shield of the Trinity (*Scutum Fidei*), and a three-faced Holy Trinity above it. At each corner of the page is an Evangelist, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, represented by the conventional angel, winged lion, winged ox, and eagle (Figure 1).

Images of three-faced figures were common in medieval Europe and earlier. Early tricephalic images can be found in Gaul from between the first and third centuries BCE (Figure 2).¹ These surviving carvings and artwork depicted pagan gods and could have inspired later artists. Beginning in the twelfth century the devil was also often given three faces, such as a carved bust found at the church of S. Pietro in Tuscania (Figure 3).² Dante Alighieri described the Devil as having three heads in his *Divine Comedy*, as in this illuminated manuscript of the text made within a century of Dante's original poem (Figure 4).⁴

In the thirteenth century artists began depicting the Holy Trinity as a single tricephalic figure, likely in an attempt to convey that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are One. The difficulties with portraying the Holy Trinity are seen in the metalcut found in PSU's Kerver (Figure 1). As part of the Shield of the Trinity, the Father ("Pater"), the Son ("Filius"), and the Holy Spirit ("Spiritus Sanctus") are separated by the words "non est," meaning they are not each other, but they each are God ("Deus"), written in the middle of the Shield. Depicting the Trinity

¹ Pettazzoni, p. 135.

² Pettazzoni, p. 151.

⁴ Inferno, Canto 34.

as one person with three heads, or faces, were partially connected was not the only strategy for attempting to convey this ambiguity, however. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries five different main formulas emerged to represent the Holy Trinity, the “Tricephalic Trinity” the only one to garner Papal criticism. The other types all portrayed the three figures separately. God the Father was often seated, and Jesus the Son could be either hung from a crucifix in front of him, seated beside him, or sitting on his lap, with a dove to represent the Holy Spirit in various positions. All three were also depicted as men, either identical or of different ages, standing side by side or interacting with each other.⁵

The medieval fascination with monsters could have contributed to the rise in popularity of tricephalic characters. This preoccupation can be seen in decorative work on buildings, in paintings, and in the marginalia of books. The prologue to the *Liber Monstrorum*, translated as *The Book of Monsters*, reads that as a result of popular demand “...I ought to describe the monstrous parts of humans and the most horrible wild and innumerable forms of beasts...”⁶ Such a widespread fixation on Otherness, as well as the apparent commonality of three-headed creatures, could have resulted in the general public not considering depictions of their own deity as out of the ordinary.

Criticism against the tricephalic depictions began in the fifteenth century, which includes St Antoninus of Florence’s *Summa Theologica*, where he writes, “Painters... are blameworthy when they paint things which are against the faith, when they make an image of the Trinity one person with three heads, which is monstrous in the nature of things...”⁷ He was not alone in his

⁵ Emery and Levering, pp. 478-480.

⁶ Mittman, p. 63.

⁷ Bildhauer and Mills, p. 38.

opinion, and after the Counter-Reformation Pope Urban VIII condemned the practice in a 1628 Papal Bull, later confirmed by Pope Benedict XIV.⁸

Such denouncements should have stopped the practice, or at least made it much less popular as a style, but this was not the case. Indeed, one of the five previously mentioned depiction types, commonly referred to as the “Paternity” style, modeled after a passage in the prologue of John’s Gospel, and had the Son sitting on the Father’s knees or before his chest, fell out of favor in the fifteenth century despite no ecclesiastical criticism against it.⁹

With these struggles in visually conveying the concept of the Holy Trinity, it is understandable why papal condemnation of the practice may have been ignored in favor of communicating the desired message. Despite the banning of such artistic representations by multiple church authorities, the tricephalous Trinity reached its greatest popularity in the Renaissance, and was venerated into the nineteenth century (Figure 5).¹⁰

⁸ Williams, p. 134.

⁹ Emery, pp. 478-480.

¹⁰ Pettazzoni, p. 151.

Figure 1. Shield of the Trinity with Tricephalic Trinity and the Four Evangelists. Kerver Book of Hours, 1507. Metalcut on vellum, Portland State University.

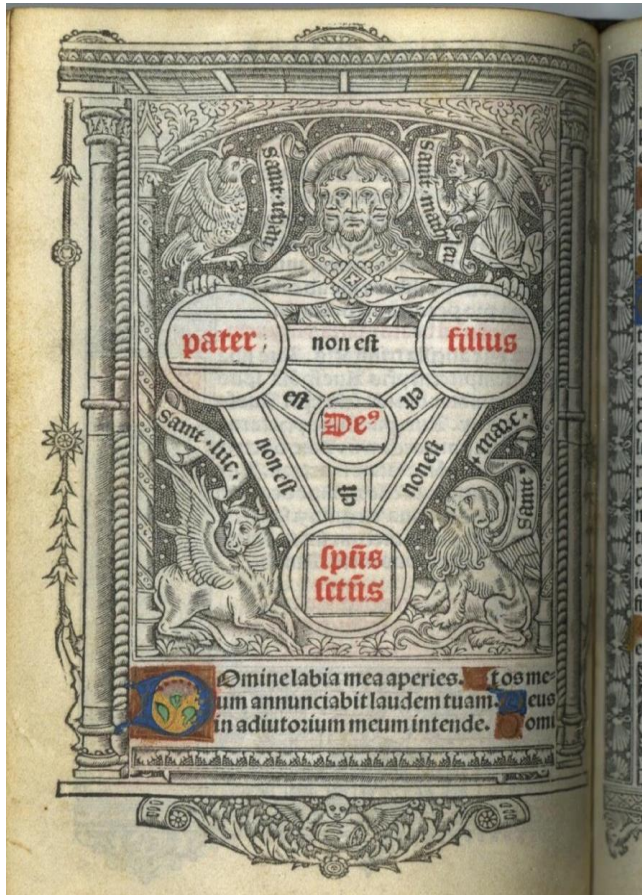


Figure 2. Sepulchral Pillar from Rheims, 1st-3rd centuries BCE, Espérandieu. doi:10.2307/750313.



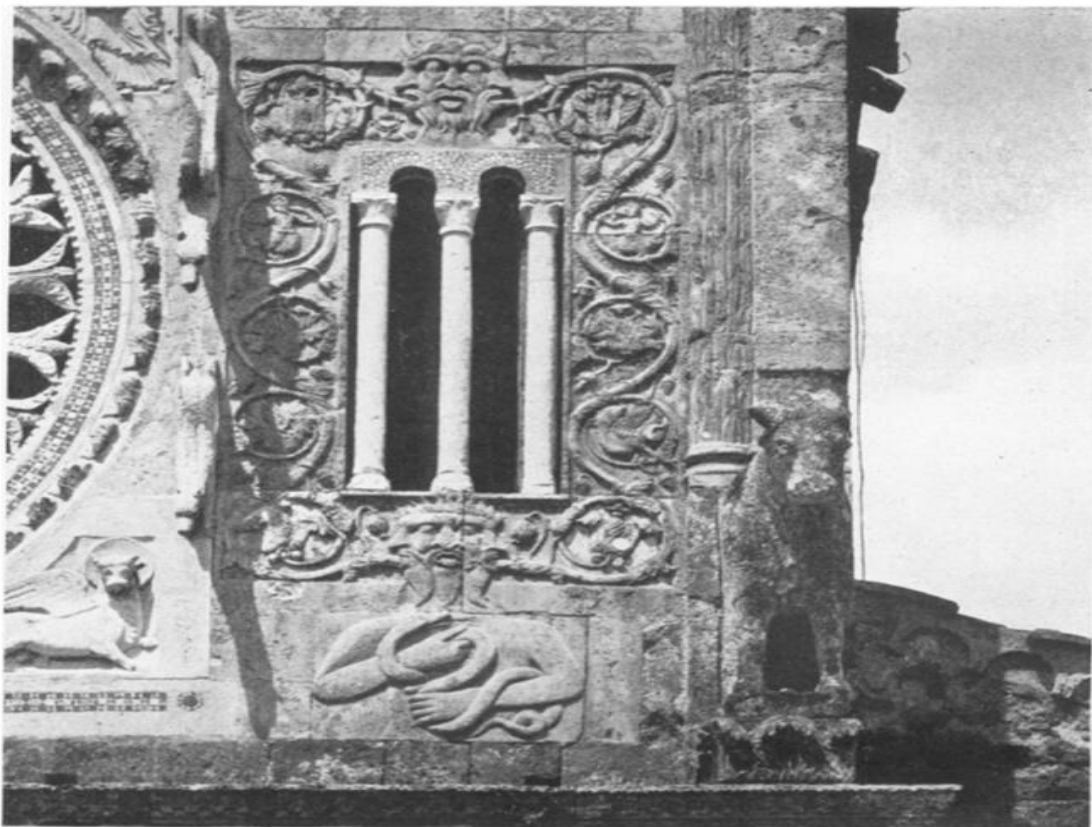
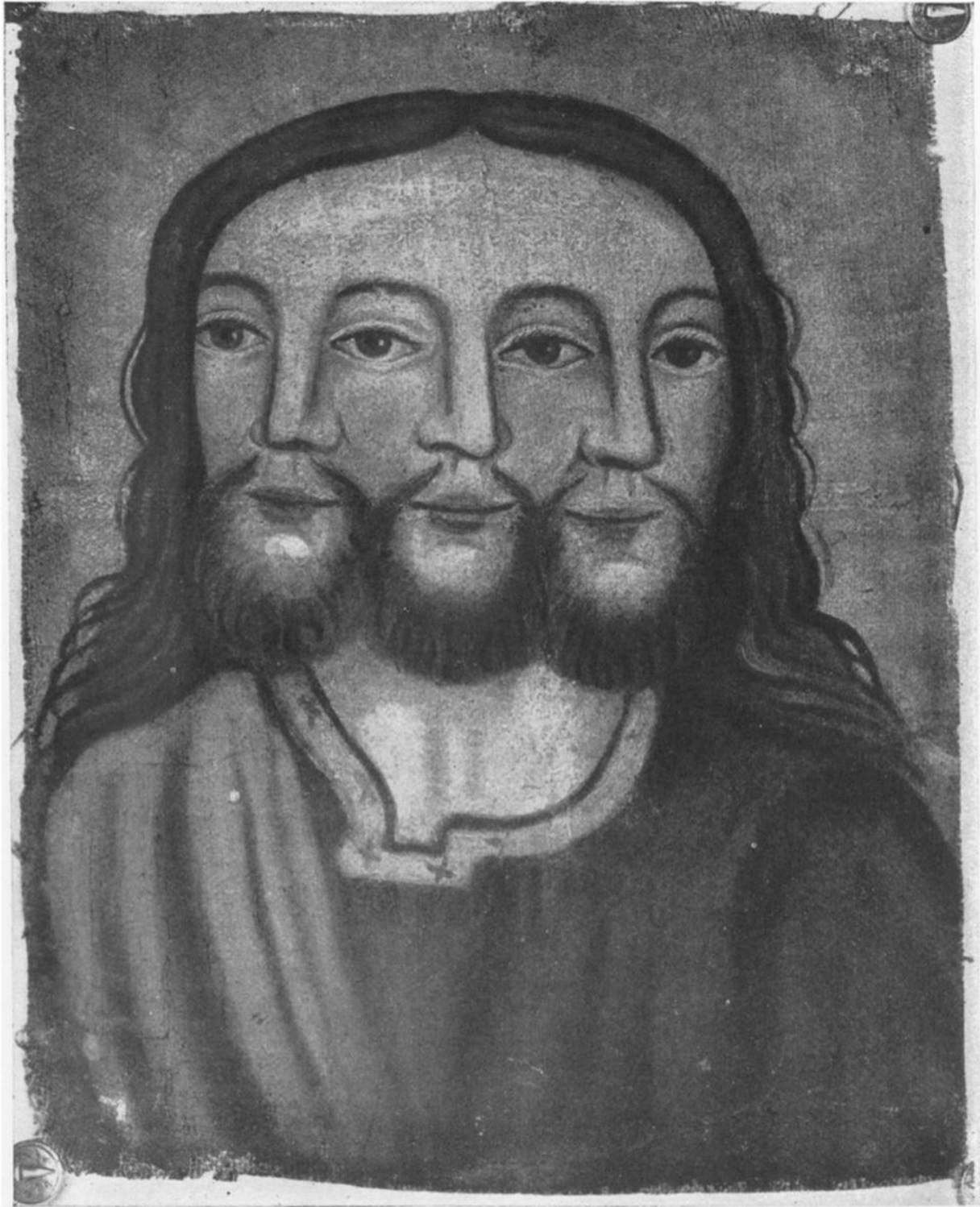


Figure 3. Detail of the Façade of S. Pietro at Tuscania, 12th century. doi:10.2307/750313



Figure 4. "Lucifer with Three Heads (46r)," Codex Altonensis, 14th century, unknown author.



*Figure 5. Oil painting from Colle Isarco, 19th century, Museo di Etnografia Italiana.
doi:10.2307/750313*

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