

# Invention and Innovation: Unusual Trinitarian Images in BnF MS Français 14969, BnF MS Latin 12833 and Chartres Cathedral

A Research Report to the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature

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My doctoral project examines the representation of the Trinity in Gothic art and culture, with a particular focus on images produced in England and France in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The thesis explores the ways in which artists found solutions to the complex and paradoxical idea that God is ‘three persons in one’, and examines the relationships between contemporary ideas about the Trinity as recorded in texts, such as prayers, hymns, commentaries or theological treatises, and the representation of this concept across a range of different visual media. In particular, I am interested in instances in which artists departed from more ‘usual’ ways of representing the Trinity in order to create new and inventive designs. The research trip I undertook with the generous support of the Medium Aevum research travel bursary enabled the consultation of material that will be integral to my understanding of a number of these more ‘unusual’ Trinitarian images.

During my research trip to Paris in January 2017, I was able to conduct an in-depth analysis of two manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, as well as taking a shorter trip out to Chartres to examine one of the stained glass windows in Chartres Cathedral. The first manuscript I consulted in the BnF was the ‘Bestiary of Guillaume le Clerc’ (MS Français 14969). This bestiary, which was made in England c. 1260-80, is unusual for including large illuminations of allegorical and moral scenes alongside the more traditional images of beasts and animals. It is in these allegorical images that we find a number of unusual representations of the Trinity, such as the unique depiction of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden (f. 54r) and an image of the Trinity above the Bestiary description for the mandrake plant (f.61r). To date, the significance of these Trinitarian images amongst the texts and images of the Bestiary have not been considered. My extensive research time at the Bibliothèque Nationale allowed me to establish a detailed understanding of the relationship between these images and their accompanying text, which I had not been able to do through the partial digitisation of the manuscript on the Bibliothèque Nationale website. I found that, in most cases, the allegorical images in the bestiary correspond very closely to the allegorical interpretation of the animals and plants in the bestiary text, with the artist of the bestiary illustrations incorporating even small details from the text into his images. The result of this close consultation of the text on behalf of the artist or designer results in highly inventive images that often depart from more established iconographic patterns in order to reflect specific details of the bestiary description. The unusual image of the Trinity in the tree on f. 54r, for example, can be explained with reference to the allegorical interpretation of the tree in the bestiary text, which describes the tree itself as God the Father, the fruit of the tree as the Son and the shadow of the tree as the Holy Spirit. The bestiary in the Bibliothèque Nationale contains a wealth of material related to the ‘unusual’ representation of the Trinity, and a detailed description of this manuscript, along with an analysis of its Trinitarian images, will form one of the chapters in my thesis.

Another of the chapters in my thesis examines the highly atypical representation of the Trinity with three heads or faces. It is possible to trace the influence behind this unusual design to images of the Roman god Janus with three faces produced in France in the early thirteenth

century. The earliest extant examples of these three-faced figures occur in the Calendar illumination for a Martyrology made in Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale (MS Latin 12833), and a panel in the lower windows of the choir at Chartres Cathedral. During my time at the Bibliothèque Nationale I was thus also able to examine the Saint-Germain-des-Prés Martyrology. This fascinating manuscript is not yet digitised, so my consultation in person meant I was able to confirm that the figure of Janus was represented with three faces, and that the style of illustration was consistent with illumination completed in Paris in the 1210s-1220s. Notably, this means that the Saint-Germain-des-Prés Martyrology contains the earliest extant example of a three-faced Janus, the type that would go on to inspire the invention of the three-faced Trinity.

The final part of my research trip involved a visit to Chartres Cathedral in order to view another example of an early three-faced Janus in the stained glass in the southern aisle of the Cathedral choir. Interestingly, in contrast to the Martyrology image, which shows Janus' three faces merged onto one head, the Chartres stained glass, which was completed c. 1217, represents Janus with one central face and two extra heads looking to the left and right. From an examination of these two images, I was able to gain an idea of the incredibly varied and innovative nature of Calendar iconography in early thirteenth century Paris. This is an avenue of research I hope to explore further, with a view to future publication.

I am so grateful to the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature for their generous support, without which this research trip would not have been viable. I look forward to acknowledging the Society's support in future presentations and publications related to this research.