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Notes on the Marginal Sculpture of the Cathedral of St Nicholas

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> After that we first went out to find the church and came into the Cathedral of Saint Nicholas, a church as incredibly magnificent as any could be. For it is like a monstrance, decorated throughout with gold leaf and finials and sculptures of stone, not lacking in any possible splendor or ornamentation. And there are also two bell towers there, rendered through and through with such artistic construction as is mentioned above. Each of these towers has an octagonal spiral, which one ascends up to the bells, also created with great artistry. Also, that the church together with its towers and incredible treasures is to be more admired than all other art and splendor which one can admire and talk about.[1]
>
> Conrad Grunemberg, 1486

The fourteenth-century cathedral of St Nicholas in Famagusta (Plate 1) looms like a lighthouse at the edge of the sea, its towering and richly gabled corona serving solemn watch towards the shores of the Holy Land. Emphatically European, perhaps, because of its dramatic geographical isolation from the Western centres of Christianity and its ideology of crusader conquest, the church is a statement of imperium at the edge of empire. St Nicholas embodied only one of several institutional elements in the urban heart of

[1] 'Darnach gingen wir zuerst die Kirche aufzusuchen und kamen in das Stift Sant Nicolas, eine Kirche, so wunderprächtig, als eine nur sein kann. Denn sie ist gleich einer Monstranz ganz mit Blattwerk un Fialen und Bildern von Stein durch und durch geschmücht, keiner Pracht noch Zierde mangelnd. Und sind auch da zwei Glockentürm, ganz durchsichtig von solchem genannten Bauwerk kunstvoll aufgeführt. Dieser Türme hat jeglicher eine achteckige Schnecke, darin man aufsteigt bis zu den Glocken, auch durchsichtig und mit grosser Kunst gemacht. Also dass die Kirche mit sampt den Türmen mit der grossen Kunst mehr zu bewundern ist denn alle Kunst und Pracht, die einer noch so bewundern und erzählen mag.' It continues with a description of the tomb of King James II, 'In der Kirche liegt der letzt vergangne König Jacob neben dem Fronaltar gar in schönem Marmelstein. Man zeigte uns da die Reliquien und Kleinode der Kirche' [trans. Beverly Freeland-Clajus]. From *Excerpta Cypria Nova. Voyageurs Occidentaux a Chypre au XV Siècle*, ed. G. Grivaud (Nicosia, 1990), 1: 126.

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Famagusta that conveyed Eurocentric codes of architectural expression and social organization. Surrounding the cathedral square was the palace of the Lusignan kings, the bishop's palace and the church of the Franciscans. These and other structures comprised the city's monumental civic core, to which all streets led. The architecture resonated in an urban context which was a powerful statement of Lusignan, and Latin, hegemony. Famagusta may have been a very cosmopolitan city, with Jewish, Greek, Syrian, and Latin quarters, but St Nicholas was decidedly the most monumental expression of Latin domination, eloquently marking the Latin quadrant as central and the other quarters as peripheral. Without question, it is the most important architectural monument of the city's rich and illustrious history.

This is an introductory chapter on the marginal sculpture of St Nicholas cathedral. No one has yet dealt with this aspect of the structure even though sculpture has long been seen as an important feature of Gothic cathedrals and a crucial element in their symbolism and design.[2] As a disregarded aspect of the building's heritage, we are encouraged to consider how examining the sculptures might broaden our knowledge of this important example of crusader architecture. Comparative work on the sculptures could, for example, provide new information about the origins of the masons who built the cathedral. While scholars have done this kind of work in considering the purely architectural elements of the building, the sculpture has not been utilized as a critical component of St Nicholas's history. This chapter includes an extensive section on the various interpretations of marginal sculpture, which will provide the reader with a perspective on the issues surrounding this specific classification. Some provisional hypotheses are forwarded regarding the meaning the St Nicholas sculptures may have had in the context that produced them. Part of the impetus for this study is to supply readers with a photographic record of the more significant examples of St Nicholas's figural sculpture, since a dearth of published documentation has hampered academic interaction on the subject.[3]

Preliminary observations suggest a few functions of the sculptures over and above the purely decorative. Representations of roses, lions, and dragons, for example, could be considered Lusignan symbols, motifs, or heraldic elements. Other sculptures may have had apotropaic functions, such as the winged angels found in the upper reaches of the south tower. We also find several images of hunting animals killing their prey, the significance of which we can only guess. They may act as metaphors for the military power of the dynasty or perhaps a more generalized notion such as good triumphing over evil. Certainly, at the very least, they were dynamic displays of the sculptors'

[2] One exception is J.-B. de Vaivre, who has considered some figural fragments in Famagusta and their possible relation to St Nicholas in his 'Sculpteurs parisiens en Chypre autour de 1300', in M. Balard, B.Z. Kedar, J. Riley-Smith (eds), *Dei gesta per Francos. Crusade Studies in Honour of Jean Richard* (Aldershot, 2001), 373–88.

[3] I would like to thank my friend Wilbert 'Skip' Norman who assisted me in my efforts to document these sculptures.

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skills and provocative decorations – perhaps inspired by textile designs – that animated and accented architectural nodes of form and function (corbels, water drains, etc). There are also ancillary figures, some identifiable and others not, where meanings are difficult to determine. Taken as a whole, the sculptures do not seem to be organized into any sophisticated iconographic programme.

Much of St Nicholas's sculpture was severely damaged when the Ottomans converted the cathedral into a mosque after their conquest of Famagusta in 1571.[4] As part of the purification of the building almost all of the sculptures were beheaded in a flurry of iconoclasm. Those that survive have lost attributes which would have helped determine their subjects. Seven centuries of erosion have also taken their toll.[5] This is especially true for the works on the towers which have been exposed to rain, wind, and the sea air. Some of these figures appear as if they are melting away, such as a statue from the north face of the south tower. Even so, we can still make out the beak of an eagle-like bird with feathered wings and talons which grasp a small four-legged animal (Figure 6.1).[6]

The sculptures of St Nicholas cathedral have never been systematically documented or discussed by art historians. The otherwise thorough Camille Enlart largely ignored them, although he did pay some attention to the sculptures on other ecclesiastical monuments in Famagusta such as St George of the Latins.[7] Other early visitors who studied the city's historical edifices, such as Edward I'Anson and Sydney Vacher, were similarly blind to the myriad figures which populated the structure. They too focused exclusively on architectural features, as do more recent studies. Nonetheless, such studies

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4 St Nicholas is known locally as the Lala Mustafa Pasha Cami, after the Ottoman general who conquered Famagusta in 1571.

5 Having made these observations it should be added that the Gothic cathedrals of Europe have also suffered many instances of destruction, especially during the French Revolution and numerous wars. Much of what can be seen on French buildings today are reconstructions, original medieval fragments often having been destroyed or relegated to museums. St Nicholas is exceptional in that it would appear that much of its sculpture is 'original'. However, there are caveats. We do not know, for example, whether there may have been any replacement of statuary as part of the restoration work carried out during the period of British rule on Cyprus. Greater scrutiny needs to be given to one of the most important resources for the historical architecture of the eastern part of Cyprus, the Mogabgab Archive, which is a vast photographic record of conservation projects undertaken by the Department of Antiquities from the 1930s until the early 1960s. It is not known for certain whether all the negatives in the collection have been printed. The original negatives are kept in archivally insecure conditions in the antiquities department offices in Famagusta.

6 The four gargoyles which extended from the horizontal moulding above the façade's portals have completely disappeared. Only their ragged footings remain. They may have resembled those surviving gargoyles from the church of St George of the Latins in Famagusta or those on the cathedral of the Holy Wisdom in Nicosia.

7 C. Enlart, *Gothic Art and the Renaissance in Cyprus*, trans. David Hunt (London, 1987), 258–62. First published 1899. See also C. Enlart, 'Fouilles dans les Eglises de Famagouste de Chypre', *Archaeological Journal*, 62 (1905): 195–217.

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Fig. 6.1 Sculpture of winged figure on the north face of the south tower of St Nicholas (photograph: Allan Langdale)

could be useful guideposts for scholars tracing the iconographic and stylistic sources for St Nicholas's sculptures.[8]

The eliding of this aspect of the church's decoration is not surprising since the only sculpture that can be found on St Nicholas may be classified as 'marginal', depicting strange creatures and hybrid figures rather than the type of sculpture which represents characters from religious narratives and which might provisionally be called 'official' sculpture. There have been many attempts to solve the iconographic mysteries of marginal sculptures, but it was only in the late 1980s that art historians began to develop methodologies to contend with the social functions of this ubiquitous but rarely studied genre of sculpture that adorns the cathedrals, churches and even the public buildings of the Romanesque and Gothic periods.[9]

[8] E. I'Anson and S. Vacher, 'Medieval and Other Buildings in the Island of Cyprus', *Transactions of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 33 (1883): 33–52. See also M.J.K. Walsh, 'A Gothic Masterpiece in the Levant: St Nicholas Cathedral, Famagusta, North Cyprus', *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, 6 (2004): 1–6; N. Coldstream's introduction in Enlart, *Gothic Art and the Renaissance in Cyprus*, pp. 9–10; A. Franke's essay in this volume as well as his thesis on St Nicholas, *Die Kathedrale in Famagusta und die gotische Architektur auf Zypern*, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München, 2006; P. Plagnieux and T. Soulard, 'La Cathedrale Saint Nicolas de Famagouste', in J.-B. de Vaivre and P. Plagnieux (eds), *L'Art Gothique de Chypre* (Paris, 2006), 218–37. Coldstream and Franke argue that the origins of St Nicholas's architectural style can be found in the Rhineland, though they disagree about which churches served as primary exemplars. Their hypotheses challenge Enlart's belief that St Nicholas's architectural progenitors lay in the Champagne region of France.

[9] The primary works are A. Woodcock, *Liminal Images. Aspects of Medieval*

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Disdain for such sculpture was recorded early with St Bernard of Clairvaux's (1090–1153) well-known denunciation of them in Romanesque monastic architecture:

> What profit is there in those ridiculous monsters, in the marvelous and deformed comeliness, that comely deformity? To what purpose are those unclean apes, those fierce lions, those monstrous centaurs, those half-men, those striped tigers, those fighting knights, those hunters? … For God's sake, if men are not ashamed of these follies, why at least do they not shrink from the expense?

Following his lead, the few other medieval commentators who made any mention of marginal sculptures were similarly contemptuous. Eight centuries later, the great French historian of medieval art, Emil Mâle, had barely diverged from Bernard's evaluation, dismissing such sculptures as meaningless. Indeed, in his famous work *The Gothic Image*, Mâle used the quotation from St Bernard as proof of the sculptures' lack of significance, projecting his disdain into the later centuries of the Gothic period.[10] But it is not surprising that Mâle would align himself with St Bernard as his own views were profoundly scholastic and intellectual. Mâle proposed that, 'The countless statues, disposed in scholarly design, were a symbol of the marvelous order that through the genius of St Thomas Aquinas reigned in the world of thought.'[11] Marginal sculptures did not, however, fit easily into this 'marvelous order'. Yet Mâle by no means ignored these myriad strange forms. In some instances he identified what he thought were legitimate symbolic meanings gleaned from medieval bestiaries such as the *Physiologus* and works such as the *Speculum Ecclesiae*.[12] But for the more unruly instances Mâle chided those who tried to force symbolic or iconographic significance upon them. Thus, while he could happily claim that the Middle Ages saw the world as a symbol, he also believed that scholars wasted their efforts in trying to find symbolism in all cases:

> In their point of departure, however, they were right; they perceived that for the great minds of the Middle Ages the world was a symbol. But they were mistaken in their belief that a symbolic meaning was concealed in even the least important work of art.[13]

Architectural Sculpture in the South of England from the Eleventh to the Sixteenth Centuries (British Archaeological Reports 386, Oxford, 2005); N. Kenaan-Kedar, *Marginal Sculpture in Medieval France: Towards the deciphering of an enigmatic pictorial language* (Aldershot, 1995). Other studies include J.R. Benton, *Holy Terrors. Gargoyles on Medieval Buildings* (New York and London, 1997); A. Weir and J. Jerman, *Images of Lust. Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (London, 1986); R. Sheridan and A. Ross, *Gargoyles and Grotesques. Paganism in the Medieval Church* (Boston and New York, 1975).

[10] E. Mâle, *The Gothic Image. Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. D. Nussey (New York, 1958), 48–9. First published in 1913.

[11] Ibid., p. vii.

[12] Ibid., pp. 33–46. See also Woodcock, *Liminal Images*, pp. 25–6.

[13] Mâle, *The Gothic Image*, p. 48.

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And later:

> True symbolism holds too large a place in medieval art to make it necessary to look for it where it does not exist.[14]

A shift in the scholarly consideration of the marginal has occurred only more recently, prompted by Michael Camille's books such as *The Gothic Idol* of 1989 (intentionally echoing Mâle's *The Gothic Image*) and *Images at the Edge* of 1993, which provided a theoretical framework for addressing not only marginal sculpture but also other instances of the marginal in medieval art.[15] Nevertheless, one proceeds to study such material mindful of Mâle's dispiriting warning that 'all attempts at explanation must be foredoomed to failure'.[16]

Mâle established that the significance of some enigmatic sculptures could be traced to local origins. Citing the instance of the oxen in the towers of the cathedral at Laon and their relationship with a native Laonese story, he saw that meanings could be found in depictions which otherwise, and elsewhere, would have variant, or no, meaning.[17] Thus specific context was vital to determining significance and valid meanings could be revealed through indigenous or highly localized mythologies. In recent publications Nurith Kenaan-Kedar and Alex Woodcock have refined this approach, thereby reframing the issues surrounding the marginal sculpture of the middle ages.[18]

The architectural sculptures that can be found on most Gothic cathedrals and churches can be roughly parsed into the two aforementioned general categories, official and marginal, about which more should be said.[19] Official sculpture refers to that sculpture which depicts biblical and religious narratives or personages and images of the saints, their lives, martyrdoms or miracles. Official sculpture is largely didactic, and it is the plentitude of such representations (along with similar kinds of imagery in stained glass, wall and panel paintings, as well as metal- and woodwork) that has given Gothic churches the reputation of being visual Bibles for the illiterate masses, providing encyclopedic representations of Biblical and hagiographic narratives and, further, extensive development of typologies and moral and religious themes.[20] Marginal sculpture, on the other hand, depicts strange gargoyles, fantastic mythical or hybrid creatures, themes from vernacular culture, and grotesques of various kinds. Even sculptures representing sexually lewd figures are common. While the elite sacred sculpture, the official sculpture, is characterized by its grandeur, solemnity, restraint and dignity, marginal sculpture is its converse: offensive, violent, bestial and

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14 Ibid., p. 51.

15 M. Camille, *The Gothic Idol. Ideology and Image-making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge, 1989); *idem*., *Images on the Edge. The Margins of Medieval Art* (London, 1992).

16 Mâle, *The Gothic Image*, p. 61.

17 Ibid., pp. 55–6.

18 See above, note 9.

19 These terms are also used by Kenaan-Kedar, *Marginal Sculpture in Medieval France*.

20 See, however, the informed discussion in Woodcock, *Liminal Images*, pp. 7–9.

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perverse. Their fabulous figures are often contorted, gesticulating wildly, glaring, pulling orifices open and displaying genitals. It is as if the cast of the hell portion of a Last Judgement scene has escaped the confines of the tympanum and colonized the whole cathedral, allowing sin to roam about unfettered on the consecrated structure.

The binary categorization of official and marginal, though, is in many instances a misleading opposition which might direct us away from more useful and inclusive parameters. Indeed, there is a substantial amount of Gothic sculpture that straddles this opposition armature. Even themes and imagery from popular culture could be reinterpreted through theological prisms and given religious significance. A marginal type could jump over and have a quasi-official or didactic status. There was thus a substantial grey zone where the distinction between marginal and official was shifting and pliable. Among the many examples, mention can be made of the popular notion of the lion breathing life into its cubs reconfigured as a symbol of the resurrection, or the pelican as a symbol of Christ. Astrological symbols, too, were common subjects in the archivolts of portals, where they hinted at the celestial scope of the created universe. These, accompanied by the labours of the months, indicated the sacred time of heaven equated with the annual seasonal cycles experienced by humans. An argument might be made that the sculpture we often refer to as marginal was, in fact, quite central to the lives of the medieval people who viewed it. One could propose that such sculpture is not so much marginal, but, rather, has been marginalized through history by the hierarchy inherent in the classical intellectual tradition, and, later, by the similarly exclusive nature of high iconography in art history.[21] Yet in the present case, the marginal/official classification helps define categorical boundaries germane to our study, since all of St Nicholas's surviving sculpture can be counted among the former. We are obliged, in this context, to give close consideration to the leaven of the marginal at St Nicholas.

Official sculpture normally occupied the most visible locations on the church or cathedral (the portals, in particular, the liminal zones between interior and exterior). Marginal sculptures, conversely, usually populated the less visible upper portions of the structures.[22] Because of this the marginal sculptures had a different relationship with spectators. As worshippers entered the church they were embraced by the sacred figures in the tympana, archivolts, and jambs of the recessed portals. These official sculptures defined

[21] Woodcock, *Liminal Images*, pp. xvii–xix. See also N. Kenaan-Kedar, 'Interaction of Marginal and Official Iconography: The West Facade of St Hilaire in Foussais – Its Oral, Visual and Literary Sources', in N. Kenaan-Kedar and A. Ovadiah (eds), *The Metamorphosis of Marginal Images: From Antiquity to Present Time* (Tel Aviv, 2002), 159–75.

[22] Mâle also believed that this fact also supported the idea that the sculptures had no important meanings, noting that one can only see them with a good pair of binoculars, a tool obviously not available to medieval people. See also Kenaan-Kedar, *Marginal Sculpture in Medieval France*, p. 2, and Kenaan-Kedar, 'Sculpture High Up: The Forgotten Meanings of Monumental Sculpture on Churches' Roofs and Towers', in A.W. Reinick and J. Stumpel (eds), *Memory and Oblivion* (Amsterdam, 1997), 719–26.

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the threshold of the sacred and were dramatic signifiers of the transition from a secular exterior to a sacral interior.[23] These sculptures confronted believers and reminded them of religious hierarchy and prepared them for the decorum and *ordo* of the mass. Marginal sculptures, on the other hand, were more likely to be seen while standing back from the cathedral, passing by it, admiring it as an object, a production of the secular world and an edifice connoting various notions that might include very worldly ones such as civic pride or the wealth of a city and the skill of its masons. St Nicholas is somewhat distinctive in that substantial marginal sculptures are found not only in the upper reaches but around the main entrances as well. The numerous dragons, leonine figures and contorted and attacking animals which surround the western portals dominate the façade with a forceful presence never overshadowed by the monumental human figures of Christ, Mary and the Saints that might otherwise have commanded devotional, alternative gazes.

Whatever official sculpture may have been planned for St Nicholas, there is no evidence that it was ever executed or put in place. The only part of the cathedral where there appears to have been architectural accommodations for official sculptures is around the central doorway (Figure 6.2).[24] These accommodations were for monumental statues of sacred figures (seven of them) about three-quarters life size and very slender in proportion, one of which was almost certainly Christ or St Nicholas in the trumeau and, perhaps, another being John the Baptist in one of the jambs as there is a well preserved boss in one of the canopies which depicts the *Agnus Dei*, a symbol associated with John (Figure 6.3).[25] As for the other five statues, we have no clues. However, we might at least make an educated guess. Since St Nicholas, like the cathedral of the Holy Wisdom in Nicosia, functioned as a coronation cathedral (in Nicosia, the Lusignan kings were crowned as kings of Cyprus, while at St Nicholas they were crowned kings of Jerusalem), some references to virtuous kings from the Old Testament – Solomon or David, for example – might have been iconographically appropriate and worked in a fashion similar to the royal imagery in the Nicosia cathedral.[26] However, more

[23] Woodcock challenges this dichotomy of the internal and external and provides examples of highly secular activities which could take place in church interiors. Woodcock, *Liminal Images*, p. 78.

[24] There is perhaps one exception. At the apex of the arch of the central portal, at the crest of the archivolts, are the much damaged remnants of an angel which once held a scroll and pointed to a text once painted on it. Enough of this figure survives for us to compare it with a much better preserved example in the same location above the portal of the Carmelite Church in Famagusta. This fragment is discussed in de Vaivre, 'Sculpteurs parisiens en Chypre autour de 1300'. See note 2.

[25] But since the *Agnus Dei* was a fairly common boss or capstone decoration in Lusignan architecture – indeed, another exists in one of the other canopies – we cannot press this very strongly.

[26] Arne Franke has suggested, however, that St Nicholas was not originally intended as a coronation cathedral even though it took up that function at a later date. See Franke, *Die Kathedrale in Famagusta*, pp. 22–5. For the sculpture of the cathedral of the Holy Wisdom ('Santa Sophia') in Nicosia, see J.M. Andrews, 'Santa Sophia in

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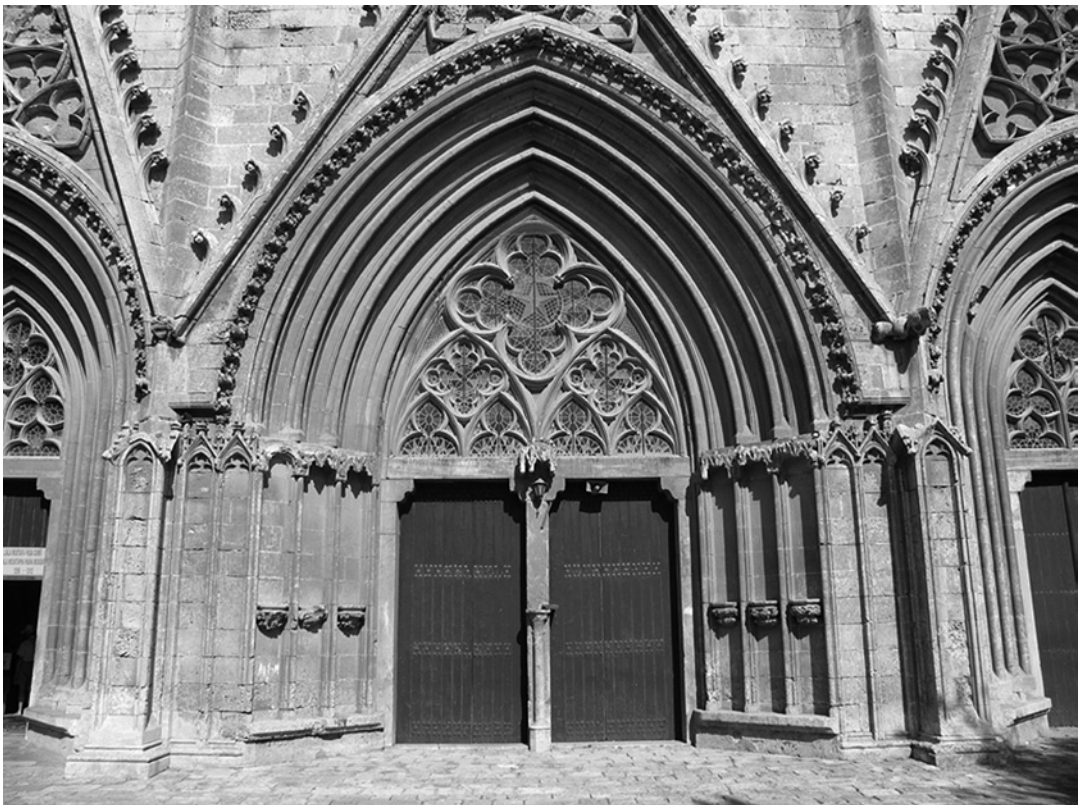

Fig. 6.2 Central portal of St Nicholas (photograph: Allan Langdale)

certainty about such intentions awaits additional confirmation, either textual or archaeological.

Only one lifesize figure from Famagusta survives, though without a head (Figure 6.4), depicting an ecclesiast wearing a chasuble. The back side of the statue is not carved, indicating that it was to be seen only frontally. We do not know what church it came from, or what kind of monument it decorated, but it gives us some idea of the high quality of the works which have been lost.[27]

The interpretive work dealing with marginal sculpture is made more challenging by the paucity of textual information around which to gather interpretations, which is why modern theories abound as to their significance. One school emphasizes the pagan heritage of many of the characters and hybrids. Griffons, for example, are seen as survivals from antiquity, representing an unbroken link to the pagan past as guardian figures. The Green Man, too, an antique visage who survived the centuries after the decline of Rome (his earliest manifestations are of a male face amongst the acanthus leaves of Corinthian-style capitals) enjoyed a long metamorphosis. He is the

Nicosia: the Sculpture of the Western Portals and its Reception', *Comitatus*, 30 (1999): 63–80.

[27] This statue is discussed in de Vaivre, 'Sculpteurs parisiens en Chypre autour de 1300'. See note 2.

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Fig. 6.3 Boss of the *Agnus Dei* from one of the canopies of the central portal of St Nicholas (photograph: Allan Langdale)

most ubiquitous of all the marginal types in Cypriot Gothic architecture, and he appears at least three times on St Nicholas. He may be a type of apotropaic figure or connote resurrection with his breath of life emanating from his mouth and nostrils.[28] Many of the scholars who think that such figures represent pagan survivals emphasize their protective nature, where they ward off evil rather than being embodiments of it. And while such a function may have accrued to some such forms in antiquity, the attribution may seem incongruent for the Middle Ages and the context of cathedrals.[29] The towers of St Nicholas are populated mostly by winged creatures, but these include angels as well as monsters. Perhaps there is some logic in having such figures in the upper reaches: it may well be that the angels, griffons and eagle-like creatures had a protective function, guarding the cathedral from evil, keeping watch over the island and eyeing the nearby coast of the Holy Land, a locus of both desire and dread for the Lusignans who still cherished their lost kingdoms but also feared the Muslim threat to their island realm.

Emil Mâle supported the idea that marginal sculptures were the masons' inventions and demonstrations of skill. He characterizes the medieval masons as creative craftsmen, too naïve to be called artists. In characterizing the work of the sculptors, he wrote:

[28] Woodcock, *Liminal Images*, pp. 54–61. Woodcock also cites the green man's numerous appearances in funerary contexts. However, while this might be the case in England it does not seem to be the case in Cypriot medieval architecture. See also K. Basford, *The Green Man* (Ipswich, 1978), and Lady Raglan, 'The Green Man in Church Architecture', *Folklore*, 50 (1939): 45–57.

[29] Woodcock, *Liminal Images*, pp. 13–14.

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> But for the most part they were content to be craftsmen who delighted in nature for its own sake, sometimes lovingly copying the living forms, sometimes playing with them, combining and contorting them as they were led by their own caprice.[30]

But, more than their own caprice, the sculptors had not only bestiaries but model books and eastern textiles to provide a corpus of strange and hybrid creatures.[31] Yet Mâle, so focused as he was on 'high culture', used this naiveté of the sculptors to once more dismiss the sculptures as meaningless. A currently more accepted variation on this theory is that the gargoyles and monsters of marginal sculpture represent popular cultural elements which found their way onto the cathedrals as part of the vernacular repertory of the masons. In this formulation the masons' sculptures are unthreatening drolleries designed for the popular tastes and imaginations of ordinary medieval people who appreciate their playfulness, capriciousness, vulgarity and, at times, their references to fables from folk culture.

Fig. 6.4 Statue of an ecclesiast or saint, limestone, ht. 56 in. Kept in the 'Chimney Mansion' Museum, Famagusta (photograph: Michael Walsh)

For some contemporary theorists the marginal menageries are complementary to the festivals of inversion and disorder that punctuated the medieval calendar. Examples include the Feast of the Ass (or Feast of the Fool) where the public enjoyed the inversion of the lower and higher, complete with parodies of the mass and other religious institutions.[32] The marginal sculptures are equated with the carnivalesque instances when the world was turned upside down and the divine order was turned into chaos, where the clerical and the common traded places in the chain of being. They are moments when the folkloric and the popular competed with the canonical text and the law. While the hierarchical and sacred human figural sculptures of the Biblical personages and saints offered order, edification and salvation, the grotesques offered distractions and relief from the heavy didacticism of the official sculptures. Given the rich and varied popular and folk culture of the middle-ages, there is much to recommend this position.

Kenaan-Kedar suggests that the poses and gestures of some marginal sculptures were part of a vernacular language derived from stereotyped

[30] Mâle, *The Gothic Image*, p. 48.
[31] Ibid., pp. 49–50.
[32] Woodcock, *Liminal Images*, pp. 28–9.

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characters from street theatre (jongleurs, acrobats, drunkards, prostitutes, fools) where there was a great deal of improvisation and variations on themes that were well known in specific locales.[33] Kenaan-Kedar's notion of the improvisational nature of marginal sculpture points to the myriad nuances of meanings that types could have had in specific contexts. Indeed, this is why she has undertaken analysis of a number of particularized case studies. Meanings of popular types were fluid and ever being altered in creative ways in response to local circumstances, even while their general codification had certain consistencies. Such circumstances could have had profound influences on the expression and readings of specific marginal sculptures. That the functions of some marginal sculptures may be intimately related to local or regional visual dialects might explain why we find it so challenging to deal with them today. One of the projects yet to be realized is a further fleshing out of a Lusignan, Cypriot 'dialect' to provide a lens through which to evaluate St Nicholas's sculptures. Such a visual-cultural dialect would be complex indeed, given the cosmopolitan nature of medieval Cyprus.

There is another inflection to consider. The fantastic hybrid beasts and strange human figures may also represent the evil which is a moral antithesis to the sacred figures. In this interpretation, the marginal sculptures are far from fun or playful. Working as potent opposites to the sacred images, they caution the viewer about the evil which lurks in every shadow, ready to take advantage of moral weakness. The panoply of creatures is in this sense as didactic as the Biblical scenes to which they were normally pendant. They provide a dichotomy to official sculpture and thus they represent the choice to attend to virtue or vice, or sanctity or sin. The cathedral itself, a sacred edifice bound to the earth but aspiring to heaven, becomes a liminal structure caught in the battle between the earthly and the heavenly, a great psychomachia of good versus evil. It is the type of relation frequently found in medieval art, literature and philosophy, where good opposes evil in diverse situations.

Another issue germane to our consideration of the St Nicholas's sculptures is the issue of realism (or naturalism) in Gothic sculpture. In the Gothic period, people were still at a relatively early stage as regards the reintroduction of monumental sculpture in the West. In the centuries after the decline of Rome the tradition of monumental representational sculpture was interrupted. Viewing images, especially three-dimensional ones, was a rare experience for most people. Thus the impact of any image, and especially three-dimensional images, must have been very powerful. Freud noted that the uncanny is best exemplified in experiences when one mistakes an inanimate representation for an actual living thing. Medieval people may have had just such uncanny experiences when viewing realistic sculptures. It is just such a possibility, of course, which hastened theologians to warn against idolatry. But while idols may have indeed elicited misdirected devotion with their quasi-living fascination, depictions of creatures or grotesque humanoid figures may have also instilled real fear, real belief and uncertainty as to their reality. It may

[33] Kenaan-Kedar, *Marginal Sculpture in Medieval France*, pp. 62, 70.

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well be that the doubly uncanny nature of these haunting marginal works functioned as potent incentives to obedience and devotion for fear of their malign influences. This issue becomes even more relevant when considering the high degree of realism in Gothic sculptures as opposed to their more abstract and, often, more two-dimensional Romanesque predecessors. The Gothic sculpted image seemed more alive because of its naturalism and volume, and the sculpture of St Nicholas partakes of this degree of naturalism, even if the figures are of 'fantastic' beings or creatures. This is also an issue for any scholars wishing to undertake comparative analyses of St Nicholas's sculptures. They are the products of a well trained master and workshop (or group of workshops). Though much damaged, what remains indicates a high degree of skill and an ability to convey a striking level of naturalistic and expressive detail, especially in the animal figures.

The numerical superiority of animal figures on St Nicholas is also a subject of some interest: for Europeans the carvings of strange and fabulous creatures signified the regions beyond the 'civilized' world; in the same way that the depictions of strange peoples sometimes indicated exotic lands well beyond Europe or the Middle East, as in the depiction of foreign peoples in the Pentecost tympanum at Vézelay.[34] Many medieval people believed that strange creatures, such as griffons, actually did exist.[35] Thus the preponderance of fantastic animals on a cathedral at the eastern edge of Christianity may have engendered certain inflections having to do with periphery or exotic hinterlands.

Kenaan-Kedar has observed that the fabulous creatures that were very common in Romanesque architectural sculpture became much less pervasive in the Gothic era. She observes that, 'In addition, the virtual disappearance of Romanesque images of monstrous creatures points perhaps to an urban society that was increasingly rational and less in thrall to fears of the unknown.'[36] This interpretation could certainly be qualified, but it is nonetheless intriguing since the prevalence of animal figures at St Nicholas might in this light be seen to be somewhat anachronistic. Perhaps, in the spirit of Kenaan-Kedar's observation, the Lusignans were acutely aware of their position at the margins of Christianity and thus rather more 'in thrall to fears of the unknown'.

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[34] A. Katzenellenbogen, 'The Central Tympanum at Vézelay: Its Encyclopedic Meaning and its Relation to the First Crusade', *Art Bulletin*, 26 (1944): 141–51.

[35] The Dominican Felix Faber, from Ulm, made two pilgrimages to the Holy Land, in 1480 and 1483, and visited Cyprus on both occasions. He tells a story involving 'gryphons' and, even in the late fifteenth century, seems to believe that they existed. *Excerpta Cypria. Materials for a History of Cyprus*, trans. and ed. by C.D. Cobham (Cambridge, 1908; repr. New York, 1969), 42.

[36] Kenaan-Kedar, *Marginal Sculpture in Medieval France*, p. 78. Her study focuses almost completely on those sculptures that represent human figures. Such anachronism is common on Cyprus. For example, a Venetian renaissance period house in Nicosia (now the Lapidary Museum) is decorated with corbels with reliefs of figures very much derived from a Romanesque repertoire.

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Fig. 6.5 A gargoyle water spout from St Nicholas (photograph: Allan Langdale)

Although no clear programmatic organization or complex symbolism seems to present itself in St Nicholas's sculpture, a synopsis of the major subjects can at least give some sense of the range of representations. Most of the marginal sculpture can be found on the façade of the cathedral and on the two towers, though several small dog-like creatures dot the upper reaches of the apses. Some are gargoyles that functioned as waterspouts (Figure 6.5), though most are corbel figures at the bases of gables and hood mouldings (Plate 2, and Figures 6.6–6.7). Several small sculptures, mostly of dragons and lions (or strange hybrids with serpentine and leonine body parts – many are too damaged to be clearly identified) – can be found populating the canopies of the jambs of the central portal (Figure 6.8). One small dragon, well concealed, is the only whole survivor of the vagaries of time (Figure 6.9). It gives us a good idea of what the other fragmentary dragons originally looked like. It is here where we might propose some degree of iconographic consistency, for if there was indeed some regal imagery intended around the central portal, both the lions and dragons would have been appropriate representations of Lusignan royalty, since lions appear in the Lusignan coat of arms and the dragons may have alluded to Melusine, a central figure in Lusignan mythology. The story revolves around the legendary love between Raymondin (or in some versions, Guy) de Lusignan, count of Poitou, and Melusine, who, unbeknownst to Raymondin, is a part serpent, mermaid-like creature. She agrees to marry Raymondin but, wanting her true identity to remain a secret, exacts a promise: that he will never gaze upon her while she bathes. However, the temptation becomes too great and Raymondin peeks while she is bathing. She turns into a dragon and flies away, never to return.

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Fig. 6.6 Corbel figure from St Nicholas (photograph: Allan Langdale)

Fig. 6.7 Corbel figure from St Nicholas (photograph: Allan Langdale)

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Fig. 6.8 Fragments of leonine animals on the canopies of the central portal jambs of St Nicholas (photograph: Allan Langdale)

Fig. 6.9 Dragon near the canopies on the façade of St Nicholas (photograph: Allan Langdale)

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Fig. 6.10 Dragon figure from the façade of St Nicholas, south tower (photograph: Wilbert 'Skip' Norman)

It is possible that another allusion to the Melusine myth might be found in the tower sculptures, where the northernmost figure on the façade has what seems like a long, scaled tail. On the opposite, southernmost side is a dragon that holds some weaker beast in its talons (Figure 6.10). Could it be Melusine as mermaid balanced with her dragon counterpart? The notion of dragons being protectors of the cathedral is supported by this myth, since the dragon Melusine was considered to be the protector of the Lusignan castle in Poitou.[37] She makes an appearance hovering over the Lusignan castle in the March page of the Duc de Berry's *Très Riches Heures*. The dragon imagery on St Nicholas provides a case illustrative of the problems of interpretation. While it may be attractive to juxtapose these sculptures with a Lusignan myth, it is far from certain that such a reference was either intended or read in this manner. At least in the case of the lion figures and the roses, we have a more

[37] See C. Naud, *Le dragon dans l' art roman du Poitou-Charentes* (Poitiers, 1972). In some descriptions of Melusine the lower part of her body is described as serpentine. Snakes also figure in Lusignan heraldry where they are shown twining around swords, as in the well-preserved marble coat of arms mounted in the ravelin of Famagusta.

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definite link to Lusignan heraldic iconography. But to venture beyond we find interpretation is beset with uncertainties.

The rose, which appears in the bosses of a couple of the canopies of the central portal (it is a motif that appears frequently in Lusignan architectural decoration), is also found in bouquets held by some of the figures which decorate the tower. One, who seems to be dressed in mail like a knight, on the west face of the north tower, carries such a bouquet (Figure 6.11). The Dominican monk, Felix Faber, recounted the tradition where knights would present themselves to the king or queen of Cyprus and pledge to support the island realm. For their promise they received a dagger decorated with a rose.[38] Perhaps the sculpture alludes to the virtue of chivalry and the knights who swore to defend Cyprus if it was ever attacked. Chivalry was certainly a fundamental component of Lusignan culture: the youthful and tragic King Peter I of Cyprus (1328–69) was seen in his day to be an embodiment of this medieval virtue so definitive of the crusader mentality.

Another compelling figure, on the west face of the south tower, is one of St Nicholas's most recognizable generic types: the figure of a nude man suffering in hell (Figure 6.12). Figures like him appear in many instances in medieval Last Judgement scenes. He is most frequently naked with his genitals clearly visible, holding his head in despair as he contemplates the eternal pain he will suffer for his adulterous life.[39] A number of other figures on the towers seem to hold pots, with the mouths of the pots perhaps functioning as actual drain spouts. Since figures with spouting pots often signified the personifications and sources of rivers in Christian art there may be some references here to the Jordan River or the Four Rivers of Paradise. Of course, like the gargoyles out of whose mouths rainwater would flow, the pots would similarly be animated by draining water and the logic of the representation would be evident.

Another figure, which seems to be a harpy with a gaping mouth, decorates the eastern face of the south tower (Figure 6.13). The harpy exchanges looks with a figure of a man with crossed legs who seems to gaze back with a worried expression. Since the harpy was a decidedly negative creature emblematic of temptation and sin, the concerned visage of the man might be read as an appropriate reaction. The naked suffering man appears on the same tower as a reminder of the wages of sin. Famagusta was infamous for its moral decrepitude and descent into luxury. St Brigit, addressing the people of the city at the height of their wealth c. 1370, gave an accounting of Famagusta's innumerable sins, calling it a modern day Sodom and Gomorrah. Could she see, as she gave her sermon in the square in front of St Nicholas, those beasts looking down from the city's most sacred edifice? They may have offered eloquent illustrative material for her dire warnings. Indeed, although marginal sculpture may never have been intended to function in this way, it seems likely that the medieval preachers who often delivered their fiery

[38] See *Excerpta Cypria. Materials for a History of Cyprus*, p. 37.

[39] Kenaan-Kedar publishes a similar figure from Ste Radegonde, Poitiers, in *Marginal Sculpture in Medieval France*, p. 109, fig. 3.33.

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Fig. 6.11 Knight (?) figure from the façade of St Nicholas, north tower (photograph: Wilbert 'Skip' Norman)

Fig. 6.12 Nude man suffering, from the façade of St Nicholas, south tower (photograph: Wilbert 'Skip' Norman)

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Fig. 6.13 Figure of a harpy (?), St Nicholas, east face, south tower (photograph: Allan Langdale)

sermons in cathedral squares would have, at least on some occasions, made effective rhetorical use of this convenient and powerful imagery to emphasize their dire warnings.

In Famagusta, metaphors of marginality find an uncommonly rich context. St Nicholas teetered for centuries at the far eastern edge of Christianity, on the seaboard demarking Orient and Occident, Christian and Muslim, 'betwixt Greek and Saracen' as St Willibald noted of the island when he passed through Cyprus in the early eighth century. Thus the building's liminal locus is strangely complemented by the marginal sculptures that ornament it. Metaphors of margin and edge, centrality and periphery are, however, complicated, for where, exactly, was the centre for the Lusignans? Was Jerusalem the *axis mundi* for the crusaders or their ancestral homes in France? Did they consider themselves to be at the periphery – the furthest outpost of Catholicism, or tantalizingly close to the centre, Jerusalem? What inflections might the marginal sculpture have had in the rarified context of Lusignan Cyprus? Thus, one of the key problems in any consideration of the context of St Nicholas is to define, in as much as it is possible, how the Lusignans saw themselves. There is evidence that at least a few of them really did see themselves as representatives of Christianity on the edge of its range, on a borderland where threat lurked just a day's sail away.

The work of producing detailed photographic documentation of the sculpture of St Nicholas still confronts us. A comprehensive archive would assist greatly in encouraging scholarly research. Work needs to be done by those art historians equipped to attend to the iconographic and formal details of the sculptures with an aim to determining any consistencies with sculptures

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in France or Germany. Similarities in the depictions of subjects or in the hands of artists might support or weaken either Enlart's claim that St Nicholas was constructed by masons from the Champagne or more contemporary ideas that trace the building's origins to the Rhineland. Such analysis might also bring to light new, alternative theories about the masons and workshops associated with the cathedral. Crusader era sculptures from the Holy Land might also provide tantalizing information about St Nicholas.[40]

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[40] More studies of crusader era marginal sculptures from the Holy Land would assist research, such as in N. Kenaan-Kedar's essays, 'A Neglected Series of Crusader Sculpture: The Ninety-Six Corbels of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre', *Israel Exploration Journal*, 42 (1992): 103–14; 'The Two Lintels of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem', in *Knights of the Holy Land. The Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem*, ed. S. Rosenberg (Jerusalem, 1999), 176–86; and 'The Role and Meanings of Crusader Architectural Decoration: From Local Romanesque Traditions to Gothic Hegemony', *Schriften des Historischen Kolleges Kolloquien*, 37 (1997): 165–78. Numerous illustrations of capitals and sculptural fragments appear in J. Folda's *Crusader Art in the Holy Land: from the Third Crusade to the Fall of Acre, 1187–1291* (Cambridge, 2005).

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