CHAPTER FIVE

THE ROMANESQUE ZODIAC:
ITS SYMBOLIC FUNCTION ON THE CHURCH FACADE

...no two cultures live conceptually in the same kind of time and space. Space and time, like language itself, are works of art, and like language they help condition and direct practical action.

Lewis Mumford

Changes in the conception of time have been perceived by historians to be one of the important expressions of Renaissance in the twelfth century. Jacques Le Goff, Father Chenu and others have shown that these changes emanated from the new learning in the monastic and cathedral schools as well as from technological and social developments in the urban milieu. Whether or not these changes are reflected in the art of the twelfth century has not been examined. It is my contention that the depiction of the zodiac on Romanesque church facades constitutes a visual expression of current conceptions of time. My first objective will be to explicate the connection between the monumental image of the zodiac and theories of time set forth in contemporary exegetical and philosophical texts. Upon this basis I propose to establish the specific iconographic function of the façade zodiacs.

In the past, authors, such as Marjorie Jean Panadero and Jan van der Meulen, have dealt with the problem of the Romanesque zodiac by relating to issues of theological speculation prior to and during the twelfth century with an emphasis on continuity rather than change during that period. Conversely, I wish to emphasize the conceptual changes

manifested in the twelfth century, as it is these, in my opinion, which find expression in the façade sculpture.

The Earliest Monumental Zodiads

The earliest extant sculptural cycle still in situ is located at the monastery of the Sagra di San Michele in the Val di Susa (Figs. 30 & 31). It is generally assigned to the second decade of the twelfth century. The zodiacs at Vézelay (Fig. 32) and Autun in Burgundy were probably sculpted just a few years later (ca. 1125–1135). These were followed after a decade or more by zodiacal cycles in the region of Saintonge-Poitou on the churches of St. Pierre at Aulnay (Fig. 33), St. Hilaire of Melle, St. Gilles at Argention Château, Notre Dame of Fenioux, St. Léger at Cognac and St. Nicholas at Civray. The Zodiads at St. Denis (ca. 1137–1140) and Chartres (ca. 1145–1155) (Fig. 34) are more or less contemporary with the signs sculpted at Ely Cathedral (ca. 1135) and on Kilpeck Church in Herefordshire (ca. 1140), which are the earliest known examples of this theme in English monu-

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4 See Christine Verzar, Die Romanischen Skulpturen der Abtei Sagra di San Michele, Bern, 1968.