THE ROLE OF POPULAR PIETY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK MADONNA ICONOGRAPHY

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the
degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

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Washington, D.C.
November 10, 2011
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ABSTRACT

In Europe there are over three hundred churches dedicated to the Black Madonna. In particular, one hundred and forty of these Black Madonna sites are located in southern France. The purpose of this thesis is to identify and explore the existence of Black Madonna iconography in Europe in order to provide insight on why this alternative Marian imagery flourished during the early medieval period. In addition, this thesis will trace the complex role of Black Madonna imagery in rural France as a means to explore the relationship between Christian iconography and pre-Christian folk traditions.

This study was aimed at exploring the development of Black Madonna iconography in Europe and the means by which this imagery reflected the transformation and absorption of pre-Christian symbolism into the emerging tradition of Marian representation. Black Madonna iconography is classified as a representation of the Virgin in which she is intentionally depicted with a darker skin tone and a rustic demeanor. Black Madonna iconography in contrast to images of a “white” Madonna reveals unique social, cultural and religious traditions of the medieval folk community. The veneration of Black Madonna imagery within the European Christian community is considered to be a unique cultural and religious phenomenon due to the appeal of this
dark-skinned Virgin to a largely Caucasian community. Part of the mystery regarding Black Madonna veneration is the enduring devotion to these images by a devout Christian sub-culture who is provided with a representation of the Virgin that is distinctly different from the image that contemporary Christianity has come to embraced.

In conclusion, the cultural and historical analysis of Black Madonna imagery in this thesis indicates that:

1. In the middle ages Black Madonna iconography emerged in rural areas where there was already the presence of strong pre-Christian folk traditions that contained powerful feminine deities.

2. Many Black Madonna mythologies are directly connected to the earlier traditions of feminine deities in eastern and western religions.

3. Due to their darker color, Black Madonnas are considered more powerful than their traditional white counterparts. In addition, many of these dark Virgins are appealed to for their unique dominion over death.

4. The physical characteristics of Black Madonna statuaries from southern France echo the appearance of the local rustic community.

5. In the middle ages as in contemporary Christianity, Black Madonna iconography was used as a metaphor for the disenfranchised populace who may have had very little authority in the political or social hierarchy.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Dr. Ann Meyer has been the ideal thesis supervisor. Her support, sage advice, insightful criticisms, and patient encouragement aided the writing of this thesis in innumerable ways. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Drs Anna Lynn Priddy, Richard Bailey, and Annette Kilmer whose steadfast support of this project was greatly needed and deeply appreciated.

A special thanks goes to Dr. Diana Apostolos-Cappadona whose enthusiasm and encouragement sparked my passion for Black Madonna imagery.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their support and understanding.
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INTRODUCTION

Black Madonna iconography has been the subject of special reverence and devotion throughout the last millennium. These early Christian dark-skinned Marian images are often appealed to by the faithful for their purported ability to ensure and protect the spiritual and physical well being of the local community. These unconventional Marian images are often sought out by devout Christians who desire a miraculous intervention that only the Black Madonna’s supposed miracle-working powers can achieve. For devotees, the power of the Black Madonna lies in her life-giving capabilities and her unique dominion over death.

As early as the tenth century A.D., a multitude of Marian statuaries and paintings have existed along popular European pilgrimage routes that lead to the Holy Land. In particular, European villages such as Rocamadour, Le Puy, Aurillac, Clermont, and Montserrat have long been the traditional homes of powerful, miracle-working Black Madonnas. Though this iconography is stylistically different from conventional Marian imagery, the distinctive artistic representation of the Black Madonna has been the object of special veneration by a subset of the Christian community for hundreds of years.

However, the importance of Black Madonna imagery within the Christian framework is not solely limited to the exceptional devotion it inspires. For instance, the existence of early medieval Black Madonna statuaries and the widespread emergence of Romanesque three-dimensional representations of the Virgin Mary are a remarkable cultural phenomenon in Western Christianity, since they follow more than five hundred years of
minimal figural production by European artists of devotional subjects. Black Madonna statuaries in particular reveal the presence of a complicated religious tradition that is interwoven with pre-Christian iconography and principles. In addition to pre-Christian values, Black Madonna iconography also alludes to a matriarchal belief system regarding the mysteries of the natural world and the formalization of theology regarding religious personas in the Christian hierarchy. In contrast to later Marian imagery, Black Madonna iconography reveals popular folk beliefs regarding the authority and growing influence of Christianity and the tension inherent in the continuing presence of powerful, regional pre-Christian goddesses.

This study will examine Black Madonna imagery in Europe, paying particular attention to those located in Le Puy, Orcival, Rocamadour, Monteserrat, and Clermont-Ferrand, as a means to illustrate the relation between medieval religious imagery and the conflict between pre-Christian iconography, rural matriarchal beliefs systems and Christianity. On a micro-level, the Marian statuaries at Le Puy, Rocamadour, and Monteserrat are valuable examples of the community’s relationship to agriculture and how the tradition of regional and agriculturally based pre-Christian goddesses survived Christian conversion.

The popularity of medieval pilgrimages to Black Madonna sites in Western Europe rivaled travel to legendary religious sites in the Holy Land and Rome. The economic growth and survival of these rural religious communities was contingent upon the popularity of the local church within the larger European Christian community. The
mysterious folklore surrounding the Black Madonna and other early Romanesque
statuaries in Le Puy, Rocamadour, Montserrat, and Clermont facilitated the popularity of
this iconography beyond the local region and onto a wider religious audience.

Primary scholarship regarding Black Madonna imagery is limited to the early
research of European scholars such as Louis Bréhier\(^1\), Marie Lefebvre-Durand\(^2\); Emile
Saillens\(^3\) and Jacques Huynen\(^4\). Byzantine historian Louis Bréhier’s work *L’Auvergne*
examines the Romanesque architecture of local churches along the pilgrimage road to
Compostela. Although, Bréhier’s main focus is Romanesque churches he does provide
historical insight for the Black Madonna shrines located in Auvergne, France. *Etude sur
l’origine des Vierges Noires* by Marie Lefebvre-Durand is the first scholarly work to
attempt to examine and catalogue Black Madonna imagery throughout France. Although
Lefebvre-Durand’s research is limited to approximately 200 images, her work is
imperative for the future study of this topic, since it contains images that have since
disappeared, and is the initial inquiry demonstrating a scholarly interest in this unique
iconography. However, as is the case with the books of later researchers, *Nos Vierges
Noires* by Emile Saillens and *L’énigme des Vierges Noires* by Jacques Huynen, there is

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no English translation of Lefebvre-Durand or Bréhier’s work and available texts are limited.

Peripheral Western scholarly inquiry is incomplete; scholars such as Ilene Forysth in *The Throne of Wisdom* and Professor Leonard Moss in his work, *The Black Madonna: An Example of Culture Borrowing* and *In Quest of the Black Virgin* have attempted to catalogue the wide range of statuaries associated with this particular iconography. Ilene Forysth’s research in *The Throne of Wisdom* is considered the foundation for study involving early Marian iconography. However, Forysth’s research is not restricted solely to the significance of Black Madonna iconography but to the general category of Romanesque *sedes sapientiae* statuaries. According to Ilene Forysth, the term *sedes sapientiae* or *Throne of Wisdom*, refers to the iconography of the early Romanesque composition of the Virgin and Child together. In the traditional grouping, the severe, forward-facing Virgin acts as a seated throne for the prominently displayed infant Christ on her lap. *Sedes sapientiae* wooden statuaries are unusual due to the fact that they are specifically connected to their region and use specific materials according to their time period.

In his article, “The Black Madonna: An Example of Culture Borrowing,” Leonard Moss discusses the emergence of Black Madonna iconography as a cross-cultural transmission of social and religious traditions by dominant cultures. Although, Moss limits his study to Italian Black Madonna imagery in order to emphasize specific cultural

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connections between the geographic dominance of the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean basin and North Africa, he does acknowledge the presence of other Black Madonnas within Europe. Moreover, Moss suggests that Black Madonna iconography is the artistic expression of a common religious heritage transferred throughout regions previously occupied by cultures who worshipped pre-Christian Egyptian, Greek and Roman goddesses:

We wish to emphasize that all the black madonnas mentioned above are miracle-working madonnas, and, with the exception of the Polish Madonna, all these images are found in areas occupied by the Roman legions.  

Furthermore, Moss indicates that the presence of Black Madonna imagery is more dynamic in these areas due to the popular conception that pre-Christian feminine divinities are more adept at satisfying individual needs. Since the polytheistic religious tradition of pre-Christian Europe included the worship of several mother-goddess divinities it facilitated the acceptance of another powerful but nurturing mother figure in Christianity:

For the most part, however, mankind is not easily detached from the patterned customs and beliefs, which have fastened themselves securely upon human beings. The adoption of new beliefs is facilitated when the beliefs can be equated in some fashion with the older and compatible experiences.  

According to Moss, Black Madonna iconography is the result of a medieval compilation of a recurring symbolic image whose commonality can be found in the

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6 Moss, The Black Madonna: An Example of Culture Borrowing, 320.

7 Ibid., 324.
religious practices of Egyptian, Greek and Roman civilizations. The cross-cultural utilization of mother-goddess imagery by Egyptians, Greeks and Romans is due to the power of this iconography to project important cultural concepts regarding fertility, women and the cycle of life to ancient societies throughout the Mediterranean basin:

The black madonnas are Christian borrowings from earlier pagan art forms which depicted Ceres, Demeter, or Isis as black in the color characteristic of these goddesses of the earth. Along this line, in 1335 a prior at the Chalis Monastery named Guillaume de Digulleville noted that Mary represents the earth, which is the body and darkness. Hence, Mary, being of the earth, can rightfully acts as a celestial attorney for all earthly sinners.⁸

In particular, European Black Madonna iconography follows in the same tradition of mother-goddess imagery as she is viewed as a powerful divinity in her own right. For the faithful, the Black Madonna is a direct source of divine power and is capable of answering prayers without divine intervention from Jesus. In addition, Moss states that as such:

The Madonna is worshipped for its power rather than the grace normally accorded the Virgin. It is showered with wheat, corn, and other sacrificial offerings on feast days, particularly on those feast days which coincide with the seasons of planting and harvesting. It is accorded powers relating to fertility (human, animal, and vegetative).⁹

This thesis will expand on previous Black Madonna research as a means to explore the pre-Christian tradition and the subsequent development of Marian iconography in medieval Western Europe. Black Madonna statuaries continue to fulfill an important spiritual need, which is linked to the particular artistic, functional and representational

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⁸ Moss, The Black Madonna: An Example of Culture Borrowing, 324.
⁹ Ibid., 324.
characteristics that differentiate this imagery from later Marian iconography. Since western treatment of the Black Madonna is limited, this is an imperative area of study that bears reexamination by scholars. The trans-cultural continuation of pre-Christian veneration at these religious sites and the later emergence of a deeply compassionate Marian iconography make this an appealing topic for scholars studying medieval culture, politics, religion or art history.

In addition, the continued reverence for Black Madonna iconography since the tenth century stands as a testament to the fulfillment of emotional and spiritual needs these Marian images provide for the Christian faithful. Moreover, the development and dissemination of Black Madonna imagery throughout the global Christian community speaks to the ubiquitous desire by marginalized groups for a powerful local divinity that represents regional struggles, but also has a place of power in the divine Christian hierarchy. Black Madonna iconography for medieval Christians was a symbolic representation of the folk population in the social hierarchy. In modern Christianity, Black Madonna iconography is still believed to embody the underrepresented in society, especially those on the margins of political and social power, such as women and the poor.

According to some common traditional interpretations, the medieval structure of society was divided into three major social orders: “those who prayed (oratores), those who fought (bellatores), and those who worked (agricultores).”

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writers such as St. Bernard, Abbot of Clairveaux (1090-1153), popularized the idea of a well-ordered tripartite society, which placed the most social power in the two groups at the top of the hierarchal ranking; clergy and knights. In medieval society rural peasantry located at the bottom of the hierarchical social system were excluded from positions of power since they were geographically and politically furthest from the ecclesiastical and political centers. One problem with this interpretation of medieval social order is that it only includes men; women were not considered part of the three major social groups and as a consequence their issues are not often addressed in traditional interpretations of Christianity.

In addition to his views on the well-ordered medieval society, St. Bernard also wrote a series of sermons meant to explain the role of Mary in Christianity and elevate her position in theology. Much has been written regarding St. Bernard’s devotion to Mary and his sermon on the *Song of Songs*. The *Sermones super Cantica canticorum* is important to the study of Black Madonna iconography as it addresses the unique color of this Marian imagery and promotes an image of the Virgin as an equal and necessary part of a divine partnership. The ecclesiastical and lay popularity of St. Bernard’s sermon on *Song of Songs* influenced the medieval attitude of devotion towards Mary and in some cases justified the existence Black Madonna imagery as authentic representations.

Black Madonna statuaries were extremely popular among rural women. In many regions veneration of Black Madonna statuaries by women looking for help with fertility
or problems related to childbirth was common. In the pre-modern world childbirth was a particularly vulnerable time for a woman. At no other time was a woman’s health more in jeopardy than during the event of childbirth, which often placed women at the nexus of life and death. For medieval women, the veneration of the powerful Black Madonna statuaries seen as having an unusual dominion over death was believed to protect both the mother and child.

Furthermore, the mortality rate of children in the Middle Ages was extremely high. According to statistics, twenty to forty percent of children under the age of five were victims of childhood diseases and accidental deaths. The collective religious rituals and beliefs of medieval communities often reflect their cultural concerns; hence one can speculate that the veneration of Black Madonna statuaries in Avioth, Orvical and Ay, who were believed to resuscitate stillborn babies and children, thus making it possible for “them to receive baptism and avoid limbo, entering eternal bliss.”¹¹ are found in areas with a high concentration of childhood mortality.

But the popularity of Black Madonna iconography extended beyond women’s issues and to the protection of the entire community. Medieval rural life was a collective effort. The survival of an individual often depended upon the collective protection of the whole community as an extension of familial ties. Prior to the tenth century, medieval Europe was extremely turbulent; cohesive nation states had not yet appeared and territorial disputes were common in areas where cultural and national boundaries were undefined. For instance, the legendary Black Madonna of Częstochowa (fig.1) is one of Poland’s

most revered national symbols. Although the legends connected to the Black Madonna of Częstochowa vary, this painting is believed to have protected the citizens of Poland for hundreds of years.

Despite the fact that there is no written documentation to provide information about the origins of Our Lady of Częstochowa, the oral tradition surrounding the painting is rich in religious history. There are claims that the painting is from the Holy Land and is an authentic portrait of the Virgin and Child. Although there is no definitive proof, folklore suggests that St. John was the original artist of the painting, which imbued the image with an overwhelming religious importance. For the faithful, Our Lady of Częstochowa is not only an image of the Holy Family but also a religious relic that once belonged to St. John. The painting began its journey to Poland in the fourth century when St. Helena saw the portrait on her travels in the Holy Land. St. Helena was so taken by the beauty of the painting that she brought it to Constantinople where it was revered as a holy relic by the faithful for 500 years. But, during a politically turbulent period in the fifteenth century, the painting was taken by a prince in order to save it from Tartar attacks from Constantinople to Częstochowa, Poland where it has remained ever since.

Since the early 1600’s, Our Lady of Częstochowa has become an important part of the Polish cultural landscape. Polish devotion and prayers to the Black Madonna of Częstochowa appear to be more common during episodes that threaten the population’s cultural identity. The Black Madonna of Częstochowa has remained a constant source of
comfort for the Polish Christian community even as the national identity was being
dismantled during the partition in 1765, the Russian invasion in 1920 and the German
occupation during World War II.

Similarly, many medieval French Black Madonnas have also been accorded the role
of protector. Even though most Black Madonnas are not depicted with militaristic
iconography, nonetheless they been portrayed as a guardians of the defenseless and
advocates of Christianity. The famed Black Madonna of Aurillac is believed by the
faithful to have helped defeat the Huguenots in August of 1581. According to the legend,
this powerful Black Madonna changed the late summer weather pattern to produce an
unusual snowfall to ward off the foreign invaders and protect the town. In some
instances, crusaders marched into battle under the banner of particular Black Madonnas.
The shrine dedicated to the Black Madonna of Clermont was an influential medieval
religious site often visited by popes, kings and crusaders on the way to the Holy Land to
fight for the survival of Christianity. For medieval crusaders veneration of the Black
Virgin in Clermont was a thought to insure military success and guarantee personal
survival.

This study examines the enduring devotion to these images (statuary and paintings)
by a devout Christian sub-culture that is provided with a likeness of the Virgin distinctly
different from the image that contemporary Christianity has ultimately embraced. To
support the relationship between Black Madonna statuaries, pre-Christian iconography,
matriarchal beliefs, and the statuaries’ function within the Christian community this

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thesis will trace key elements of the role of pagan traditions in early Christian iconography. In addition, this study will analyze the development of Black Madonna imagery during the Romanesque period, and explain the link between these Marian images and the cultural and religious traditions of the local community using several prominent statuaries and paintings as illustrative examples.

Chapter 1 shall discuss the historical influences that likely contributed to the development of Black Madonna imagery within Europe. This chapter will pay close attention to the sudden emergence of three-dimensional Marian statuaries during the early medieval period and how theological traditions regarding Mary influenced the artistic development of sacred art.

Chapter 2 shall discuss the influence of pagan traditions in the development of early Christian iconography. As Christianity gradually spread across Europe it required the acknowledgement of local polytheistic religions and the incorporation of their talismans and rituals was a means to slowly integrate emerging Christian theology into these deeply entrenched pre-existing folk traditions. Ulla Kasperson and Soren Haastrup, authors of *Images of Cult and Devotion: Function and Reception of Christian Images in Medieval and Post-Medieval Europe*, discuss how the Christian Church aligned the mythology and power of specific Christian saints with pre-Christian divinities in rural areas to make the transition between the two religions easier: Kasperson and Hasstrup explain:

The Church seems to have fought the superstitions of the recently converted peoples on several levels. The period of religious transition was
particularly drawn out on the Continent with its many different Germanic tribes in the north and the deeply rooted Romano-Celtic traditions in the south. There must have been a number of different reasons why the Christian cult statue was created, but one of them, and not the least important – may have been an attempt to eradicate remains of pagan idolatry by substituting statues of Christian saints. The attempt succeeded with the people because the saints could cure and succor the worshippers in the same manner as the pagan powers had done.\textsuperscript{12}

Even though pre-Christian statuaries and talismans were eventually appropriated and transformed by the Christian Church it did not diminish their perceived miracle-working abilities or their powerful regional connection to the community. In many cases, the Black Madonna still retains the miracle-working power of the pre-Christian goddess that it replaced.

For early Christians, Black Madonna statuaries at Le Puy, Rocamadour, Montserrat, and Clermont were physical representations of a divine presence. Local communities surrounding Black Madonna statuaries envisioned these objects as historically and culturally linked to the community since they often pre-dated the Christian conversion of the region. According to Signe Horn Fuglesang in \textit{Christian Reliquaries and Pagan idols}, “The Christian statue similarly proved to be an effective substitution for idols, initially combined with relics zeal or invented later as miracle making in its own right by virtue of being the likeness emanating from the saint.”\textsuperscript{13}

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\textsuperscript{12} Soran Haastrup and Ulla Kasperson, \textit{Images of Cult and Devotion: Function and Reception of Christian Images in Medieval and Post-Medieval Europe} (Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004), 27.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 26.
\end{footnotesize}
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Chapter 3 will discuss the development of specific Black Madonna statuaries between the late tenth and twelfth centuries and how this Romanesque iconography reveals early medieval conceptions of divinity and their proper artistic representation. Although there is no historical documentation regarding the physical appearance of the Virgin, beliefs regarding the appearance of the Holy Family have been modified over the centuries and are often reconfigured to fit contemporary cultural ideals about beauty, race, gender roles, and religion. Notwithstanding the fact that the Middle East was the historical location of Mary’s narrative in the Gospels, the European location of the Christian Church’s hierarchy greatly affected the appearance of the Holy Family as depicted in religious imagery. As the Church concentrated more of its administrative power in Western Europe the imagery of the Holy Family began to reflect a similar heritage, and traces of the Middle Eastern aspect of that narrative and heritage in their likenesses were eradicated. For most Western Christians, their concept of Mary is the one that has been propagated since the height of Marian popularity in the late middle ages and Renaissance. In this western mythology Mary is envisioned as a deeply compassionate, light-haired, alabaster or fair-skinned young woman, seemingly of Northern European heritage.

In contrast, Black Madonna iconography at Le Puy, Rocamadour, Montserrat, and Clermont does not fit into the regal northern European Marian imagery of the late middle ages and early Renaissance. The fourteenth-century imagery of the upright, swaying, maternal Virgin encapsulated the new emerging theology of Mary as a loving and human
mother. In contrast, the seated, enthroned and stoic imagery of the Black Madonna, by nature of its uniquely commanding appearance, seems to suggest a disconnection between the object and the viewer.

Chapters 1 and 2 lay the foundation for a more detailed examination. In subsequent chapters the discussion of the statuaries at Le Puy, Rocamadour, Montserrat, and Clermont is a means to discuss the history of these Marian images in relation to the cultural and religious traditions of their local communities. The Black Madonna imagery in these locations are believed to be some of the earliest three-dimensional forms of Mary that exist in the Christian community. Popular folklore and evidence suggest that these Black Madonna statuaries located along popular medieval pilgrimage routes in France and Spain are actually pagan cult idols reinterpreted to fit emerging Christian theology regarding the Virgin.

The thesis will conclude by synthesizing the evidence from the broader-level analysis of pagan influences and Romanesque iconography (Chapters 1 and 2) and the case-based analyses of the cultural and religious traditions of four important pilgrimage sites (Chapters 3), showing how these two perspectives complement each other in supporting my central argument: the popularity of Black Madonna statuaries illustrates the local desire for regional representation in the Christian hierarchy and that Black Madonna imagery is greatly connected to the agricultural culture of the region. In addition, evidence demonstrates that Black Madonna imagery is connected to the desire of the faithful for a powerful divinity that addresses their particular conditions.
CHAPTER 1. WHAT IS A BLACK MADONNA?

The Marian iconography referred to as the Black Madonna is a controversial and often mystifying subject. For hundreds of years a small subset of Marian iconography has been classified under the category of Black Madonna imagery. Although Black Madonna iconography has been part of the artistic Byzantine heritage of the East, in Western Christianity the continuing veneration of this unusual imagery that has been overlooked by the scholarly and the religious world is compelling. In western scholarship, the examination of traditional Marian iconography is more commonly seen as a focus of study.

Considered one of the earliest forms of Marian iconography, Black Madonna imagery expresses important cultural and religious concepts regarding the existence of a powerful pre-Christian divine feminine figure and her subsequent integration into rural medieval religious communities. In fact, Black Madonna imagery connects the emerging stages of medieval Marian veneration with the regional desire to be part of the historical biblical narrative.

The impassive and aloof nature of the Black Madonna iconography is distinctly different from the late medieval Marian sculptures and paintings that were popular in Northern Europe after the twelfth century. In particular, Black Madonna iconography lacks the emotion that is often expressed in the thirteenth and fourteenth-century versions of Marian imagery.
In addition to the artistic distinctions that separate traditional medieval Marian images and Black Madonna iconography, minor cultural idiosyncrasies distinguish this Romanesque imagery from later incarnations. In the Romanesque period, Marian imagery only depicted Mary’s biological relationship to Jesus and her hierarchal position within the Christian Church. As late medieval theology began to explore Mary’s narrative and take a greater interest in her role in the divine hierarchy, Marian imagery evolved to express a stronger emotional connection between Mary and the Holy Child.

In the iconography of Madonna and child in the late medieval and early Renaissance, Mary begins to turn her gaze slightly away from the viewer and inwards towards the infant Jesus. In comparison to Romanesque Marian imagery, the interactions between Mary and the child are depicted as more loving and nurturing. In this imagery, Mary often holds the infant Jesus on her hip as he gently touches her in a gesture that often resembles a blessing. Moreover, in this traditional imagery the Holy Child loses the adult appearance that is seen in the Romanesque era statuaries and is, instead, portrayed as an infant. The new appearance of the infant Holy Child further promotes the visual and emotional appeal of Mary and Jesus as mother and child.

In contrast, a Black Madonna is a dark, flesh-toned Marian image that is not ethnically representative of the indigenous population. Although Black Madonnas are described as “black”, it is not a racial qualification but a signifier to distinguish this imagery from traditional Marian iconography. In fact, the color of the Black Madonna is secondary to the purported power it appears to possess.
In general, Black Madonna iconography in Western Christianity is a sculptural medium. Even though Black Madonna imagery is predominately figural, I would be remiss not to mention that there are a few notable paintings and drawings that are exceptions, such as the Our Lady of Częstochowa (ca. 1382).

Although there are a few exceptions, the overwhelming majority of the approximately three hundred European Black Madonnas are wooden sculptures that stand between two and three feet tall. The largest concentration of this type of unusual Marian imagery is located throughout France, Spain, and parts of southern Italy. France contains the highest percentage of Black Madonna imagery, with the majority of statuaries located in the southern plateau region of Auvergne.

Although the current number of existing Black Madonna statuaries is relatively small in comparison with other Marian imagery, there is historical evidence to suggest that this figure has been reduced by several factors over the centuries. Original Black Madonna statues in Arles, Le Puy and Blois were destroyed during periods of iconoclasm and political reforms, when the concept of Mary as an authority figure aligned too closely with the ruling hierarchy and became a target of anti-government movements. In Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives by Victor Witter and Edith L.B. Turner, it is stated that the alignment of Christianity with state authority in France was so strong that citizens associated Mary with the political hierarchy:

The shrine of Our Lady of Le Puy occupies the ancient cathedral in the chief town of the department of Haute-Loire in south central France. Le Puy was once a center of ancient Celtic worship and pilgrimage (reputedly, a Druid altar, a monolith reminiscent of Stonehenge, once
stood on Mont Anis, and was replaced in Roman times by Jupiter’s temple.) For centuries Le Puy was the greatest Marian shrine in France. Even after the Reformation it remained a center for Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and French pilgrims, three hundred thousand of whom are alleged to have visited it in 1622. But during the French Revolution, troops swept into the cathedral and turned it into a Temple of Reason. The image of the Madonna was treated like the queen of France, dragged to her trial in a manure cart, and from there, in the same tumbrel used for Royalist victims, to the square, where it was burned with other ecclesiastical objects.\textsuperscript{14}

In some cases, Black Madonnas have been lost, stolen or hidden away by Church authorities in an attempt to protect them from the curious or thieves. Other Black Madonna statues have been destroyed as a result of natural decay. Wood does not have the same permanence or resilience as other sculptural mediums such as stone or precious metals. The rarity of Black Madonnas compounds the mystery surrounding this imagery.

As wooden sculptures, the relatively small size and lightweight nature of Black Madonnas indicates that these statues were intentionally designed for intimate public viewing and limited portability. Furthermore, the use of wood as an artistic medium speaks to the availability of the material and as an indication of the economic status of the surrounding agrarian communities. However, one could also speculate that the use of wood is not a coincidence, since trees are highly revered in many agriculturally based pre-Christian traditions.

As in present day Europe, there seems to have been a distinct cultural difference between northern and southern communities in the middle ages. The northern urban

cities of France were associated with the cultural, educational and political centers. In contrast, the southern regions were strange lands filled with rustic, uncultured peoples. In That Old Pride Of The Men of the Auvergne: Laity and Church in Auvergnat Romanesque Sculpture, author Avital Heyman examines the unique artistic development in that region and the medieval view of southern France by the northern population. Heyman discusses Abbott Suger (1080-1151), a contemporary of St. Bernard who traveled to the rural area of Auvergne and documented his impression of the region:

Already in the twelfth century a cultural distinction existed between the northern Latins, with whom Sugar naturally sympathized, and the Auvergnats. Suger describes the Auvergnat castles as ‘strongly fortified pinnacles of the mountains’, and the Latins as having a ‘boldness….worthy of giants’. In fact, this terminology forms part of a long-enduring dispute between northerners and southerners.15

The artistic development of sacred art varied from north to south. Unlike the northern medieval French preference for ivory statues, wooden Black Madonnas were extremely popular in southern France, especially in Auvergne. Ivory was an extremely rare material in medieval France, and the use of this material indicates a particular economic difference. In comparison to Black Madonna imagery, the precious material and the delicate small size of ivory Marian statues points towards their potential use as personal devotional items. On the other hand, the durability of wood in the production of Black Madonnas indicates the involvement of these statuaries in acts of public devotion.

15 Avital Heyman, That Old Pride of the Men of the Auvergne: Laity and Church in Auvergnat Romanesque Sculpture (London: Findar Press, 2005), XXV.
Unlike stone, which weighs considerably more and is used in permanent monumental sculptures, wooden Black Madonnas are solid and durable yet are still easily transported from one location to another. In contrast to stone, free standing Black Madonna statuaries demonstrate that these objects were not intended to be permanent and static decorations in churches, but rather integral elements in public liturgical processions. The three-dimensional aspect and intricate carving on the backside of many Black Madonnas is further proof that this imagery may have been meant to be viewed from all perspectives.

All Marian imagery can be divided into several popular visual prototypes, which have been commonly repeated in religious art throughout the centuries. The oldest are the rigid Byzantine forms of Panagia Nikopoia (fig. 2) and Theotokos Hodegetria (fig. 3). Both of these treatments strongly emphasize Mary’s position as Theotokos, or God-bearer and focus on her role as Great Mother. In the initial Byzantine form of Panagia Nikopoia, Mary is depicted in a frontal seated position with the Holy Child placed prominently in her lap. The severe and imposing iconography of the Panagia Nikopoia form is reminiscent of representations of earlier gallo-roman deities, such as Cybele and Demeter, whose divine status was emphasized in their seated enthroned portrayal. The seated posture of these pre-Christian deities aligned with the early theological descriptions of Mary as “most holy”. The Panagia Nikopoia prototype highlights Mary’s role as divine Mother, which can be interpreted as more important than the Holy Child displayed in her lap.
Over time as Christian theology sought to explain the connection between the Virgin and the Holy Child, the earlier form of Panagia Nikopoia slowly transformed into the Theotokos Hodegetria. In the Theotokos Hodegetria prototype Mary is depicted in a standing position with the Holy Child in her left arm. In this treatment, Mary is no longer the focus of the imagery as she gestures towards the infant Jesus with her right hand. For early Christians, Mary’s gesture is meant to show them the way to salvation, which is through the Holy Child.

As theology evolved to incorporate more of Mary’s biblical presence, Marian iconography adapted to explore new theological concepts regarding those attributes. The Marian iconography created in the late medieval and early Renaissance was the more expressive and less rigid forms: Maria Deomene, Mater Dolorosa, Madonna of Misericord, Madonna del Latte, Madonna Expectans, Madonna of Humility, Madonna of the Rosary, and the Virgin Orans.

However, the Theotokos Hodegetria series was the most repeated Marian type in the late Middle Ages. The new form of Theotokos Hodegetria during the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance had removed the rigid Byzantine treatment of Mary and softened her depiction. The new Theotokos Hodegetria is identified by the exceedingly compassionate and sympathetic interactions between the Virgin and Child. Although this iconography was developed during the medieval period, it is often closely associated with how contemporary Christians envision the Madonna.
In contrast to this compassionate, late medieval Marian iconography, Black Madonna imagery is more commonly associated with the Byzantine Panagia Nikopoia treatment where according to Penny Schine Gold, author of The Lady & the Virgin: Image, Attitude and Experience in Twelfth Century France:

Mary and Christ are presented as a closely related unit. Christ is always seated in Mary’s lap, creating a figural symbiosis, neither one could, or did, exist without the other. Mary is the larger of the two figures, and it is understandable that the statues were and are often referred to as statues of Mary. But the form of the statue tells us clearly why it is that Mary is important – it is because of her role as the mother of Christ.\textsuperscript{16}

As one of the oldest forms of Marian imagery, this severe looking enthroned Madonna does not exemplify the human qualities that the faithful have come to expect; in fact, as Gold writes, “The statues look much like idols and have a powerful effect on the viewer, combining both intimacy and a hieratic aloofness.”\textsuperscript{17}

One of the first misconceptions regarding Black Madonna iconography is that these images solely portray a Madonna of African ancestry. Although the creation myths surrounding a small number of Black Madonnas allude to an African heritage, the main function of this darker skinned imagery is meant to convey a wider range of social, religious and philosophical concepts. Medieval artists were capable of realistically portraying non-Caucasian figures in paintings. According to the essay, Iconographical Evidence on the Black Populations in Greco-Roman Antiquity by Frankish M. Snowden,


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 49.
Jr., artists in antiquity had a particular interest in the physical characteristics that defined blacks from areas in North Africa, such as Ethiopia and Egypt. In many instances, images of blacks can be found on Greek and Roman pottery, statues, coins and mosaics from antiquity which alludes to their presence in Western culture:

Representations of Negro peoples appear in every major period of classical art. Yet very few illustrations of blacks are included in handbooks and histories of Greek and Roman art, and when some are given, the choice always turns to the same small group of examples. Such a practice creates the impression that the Negro was not a familiar sight in the ancient world. There is abundant evidence, however, that he was far from being a prodigy as rare on earth as a black swan – Juvenal’s rara avis.\(^1\)

This is evident in *Aurora Consurgens* (fig. 4), which contains a small symbolic depiction of an Afro-centric Virgin Mary.

The Marian image in *Aurora Consurgens*, often referred to as the *Dark Angel*, demonstrates that the medieval world was multi-cultural and largely transient. Although *Aurora Consurgens* is dated much later than most Black Madonna statuaries, it can be acknowledged that medieval Europe was largely a mobile society. In fact, the European medieval population was familiar with Afro-Asiatic cultures since the transmission of religious traditions, social customs, and knowledge flowed back and forth along trade routes between East and West.

Even though the presence of Africans and minorities was not a popular theme in conventional medieval religious art, the cross-cultural nature of trade and travel to locations in the East and North Africa made these foreign cultures a familiar frame of

reference for artistic representation. The Black Madonnas located in southern France and in northern Spain are exceptional images due to their unique combination of Caucasian features and dark skin. My fundamental belief is that the exoticism of these darker skinned Caucasian figures is meant to be an indication of an alternative cultural view regarding the history of nature, religion and knowledge. When Marian imagery is depicted in the traditional form and corresponds to mainstream contemporary cultural ideals regarding religion and society, the color is not indicated. However, when Marian imagery appears to contradict the contemporary ideal and represents an alternate view they are often referred to as Black Madonnas.

It is important to note that the focus of this study does not expand to include the racial connotations of depicting minorities in the medieval world. In some Afro-Asiatic, Caribbean and Spanish cultures it is a common to depict the Virgin Mary as darker skinned as a way to have her mirror the indigenous population. In response to theological concerns in non-western societies it is important to regionally envision the Holy Family for the local community so that they can see their inclusion in the salvation promise of Christendom. This type of cultural reflection is beyond the scope of this study.

However, there are some conclusions to be drawn from these non-traditional and culturally based depictions that might be helpful to this discussion. Historically, the visual language of the biblical narratives has always been shaped and influenced by the European cultural lens. Even in non-western societies where the dominant population is dark-skinned, the local Christian community is familiar with the conventional depiction
of the Holy Family and may view their own interpretations as less authentic. Arno Lehmann, the author of *Christian Art in Africa and Asia*, states that in the case of subjugated African cultures where black Madonnas are present there is a hesitancy among the religious community to accept this image as valid: “on the other hand where whites had treated them with nothing but contempt and where their self-confidence has been shaken, if not destroyed, there might be objection to a black Madonna. We are not used to seeing a black Madonna; she could prove to be less effective and less blessed than a white one.”19 In African cultures where subjugation to a European culture and Christian theology that preached the traditional white Madonna but instead presented the community with a black Madonna caused resentment amongst the population. To the African community it seemed as if the “white” Madonna was still reserved for those at the top of the hierarchal system. In addition, African communities could not believe in the elevated veneration of a Black Madonna by the white community when it did not reflect the degraded status of their own culture.

In contrast, Black Madonna imagery located in predominately caucasian regions within Europe do not reflect the local heritage and, therefore, must serve a different and unique cultural purpose. At select European sites, the Black Madonna there is considered more blessed, authentic and powerful than her paler counterpart. Perhaps in these instances the darker imagery is embedded with a distinct cultural belief that the Black Madonna’s miracle working abilities surpasses that of the more traditional iconography.

Many believe that it is the Black Madonna alone who has the divine ability to alter the natural cycle of the universe. Particular Black Madonnas are venerated for their ability to resuscitate the dead, especially children. In fact, the Black Madonna statues at Bargemont, Ay, Chatillon-sur-Seine, and Arfeuilles are specifically venerated for their ability to resurrect drowned, still-born, or babies who were yet to be baptized.

To understand the medieval view of the Black Madonna it is also necessary to reconstruct the Romanesque cultural lens, which does not contain the same bias regarding race with which we currently live. In contemporary society, black or Afro-centric Marian imagery may be seen to imply a cultural inferiority or a disenfranchisement from the social and political hierarchy. Instead, the Black Madonna iconography discussed here seems to illustrate the importance of the darker skin color in correlation to the hidden visual language prevalent in medieval symbolism.

To understand the distinctions between the Black Madonna and traditional medieval Marian imagery it is imperative to understand the cultural and artistic distinctions that define the two forms of iconography. According to the author of *The Lady and the Virgin*, Penny Schine Gold, the study of cultural influences in an effort to understand the development of religious art is imperative: “However, because medieval art is rarely accompanied by detailed literary explanation, it can be difficult to penetrate beneath the concreteness of the images to its deeper meaning, to the attitudes, concerns, and values contained in the images.”

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the creation of Black Madonna iconography, examination of this imagery may lead to insight into the cultural attitudes regarding Mary’s divine presence in medieval communities.

One of the main factors contributing to the development of Black Madonna imagery is the time period in which these statues were initially created. Historical accounts recorded the presence of Black Madonna statuaries in southern France and northern Spain as early as the tenth century:

The earliest known image of this type dates from about 946, and there is continued evidence of these statues through the eleventh century. However, of the approximately one hundred statues surviving in France, only sixteen are from before 1100, and only one more from the first half of the twelfth century.²¹

Even though the style of most Black Madonnas is limited to the Romanesque, a few later replicas of original statues that were destroyed still follow the earlier artistic tradition. In these cases, the replicas were often repainted black to recreate the look of the earlier statue for devotees that demanded a black Virgin. The color for the faithful is an important aspect of the iconography and cannot be separated from the image.

There has been much speculation surrounding the surprising reemergence of monumental religious sculpture in the late tenth century after centuries of non-production. Many scholars attribute the loosening of Mosaic Law and other religious mores that banned idolatry to the sudden reappearance of sculpture. One popular supposition is that Byzantine and Eastern artistic traditions that preferred non-figural

²¹ Ibid., 49.
representation delayed the artistic development of Western sacred art. Another possibility indicates that the tradition of three-dimensional and monumental sculpture that was previously exploited in the ancient world for civic purposes was too deeply associated with those non-Christian traditions to satisfy the medieval faithful.

However, Meyer Shapiro, author of *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture*, suggests that it may have been the diminishing of a strong state presence in civic life and the rise of Christianity that was responsible for the disappearance and subsequent reemergence of three-dimensional religious sculpture. Shapiro states:

> If, then, you ask, how did sculpture come to an end, it becomes apparent that a large part of the function of sculpture, being connected with the power of the state and particular occasions of the state, and also with a certain form of civil life and culture in which aesthetics had its own independence – though bound up also with education and family traditions – you can see at once that a large part of the use of sculpture would have had to disappear with two great circumstances; one, the decline of the Roman state, and second, the changes in the social order, and the disappearance of that large class of aristocratic and wealthy landholders and cultivated people who traveled, who were instructed in the classics, who still held to pagan traditions.\(^{22}\)

In effect the Romanesque tradition that emphasized minimal decoration on the outside of sacred structures slowly started to give way to the emergence of monumental sculpture on cathedral doorways like those at Velezay, Mosaic and Chartres. Perhaps these external sculptures in the round are closely associated with the production of similar looking enthroned Black Madonna statuaries that decorated the interior of nearby churches.

The early Black Madonna statuaries at Le Puy, Clermont and Montserrat reflect the distinctly simple Romanesque and Byzantine artistic style of the era. Even though many view this early Romanesque imagery as more primitive and less sophisticated than late medieval and Renaissance Marian iconography, these Black Madonna statuaries are embedded with a complex theological message that explores a literal interpretation of Mary’s role in the divine story.

As mentioned earlier, one third of the existing Black Madonna statuaries are located throughout the French countryside. It is not surprising that France possesses a majority of the oldest Black Madonna images in Europe, since there was a strong cultural heritage of medieval Marian veneration throughout the country. As one of the main patron saints of France, Mary’s veneration transformed the medieval twelfth-century landscape with hundreds of churches dedicated in her honor.

It is unclear whether any correlation can be made between deep Marian veneration and the fourth-century religious mythology connecting portions of the biblical narrative with France’s southern region. What is known is that early medieval Christians displayed a strong desire to be participants in the divine story and desperately wanted to associate their community with the Holy Family.

Christian attitudes regarding Mary have evolved over time, and as a consequence subtle cultural and theological shifts can be detected in the visual language of sacred art. In particular, the artistic development of medieval art is intrinsically linked to institutional values and aesthetic attitudes promoted by Latin Christianity. As a highly
influential institution, medieval Christianity was deeply entrenched in all aspects of community living. Meyer states:

The Church was not simply a religious organ, outside material affairs. It claimed a temporal power and was subject to all solicitations of social and economic development and the changing forms of community life. As a great landholder possessing, it has been estimated, almost one-third of the landed property in France, the Church exercised feudal authority over vassals and serfs, and its bishops carried arms, made war, and engaged openly in the political struggles of the time.23

As a consequence, boundaries established between religion and secular life were often indistinguishable for medieval Europeans, since Christianity affected almost every part of their daily physical and spiritual existence.

In the middle ages the symbolic language of religious art, including architecture, became the quickest and most convenient method for disseminating new theological and cultural concepts to the faithful. Even in geographic regions located farther away from the center of Church and state authority, sacred art transformed the way in which Christianity was introduced to the religious community. For the medieval people, the strength of sacred art was that it was also embedded with regional cultural values meant to parallel a similar religious view.

In the early centuries of Christianity, biblical narratives provided sacred art with a bountiful supply of inspirational themes and subjects. Narratives of beloved biblical characters were meant to provoke devotion in the faithful and as a practice were commonly reproduced in as many visual forms as possible, such as illuminated

23 Meyer Shapiro, Romanesque Architectural Sculpture, 2.
manuscripts and paintings. Gold explains that “most of the major images of medieval art illustrate a specific literary passage, whether from the Old or New Testaments, the Apocrypha, saints’ lives, or some other text. The Death and Assumption of the Virgin are among these.”\(^{24}\) Although the early visual tradition was a powerful complement to the oral language of Christian liturgy it was limited by an artistic method that favored flat renderings over three-dimensional representations.

One of the most venerated pictorial narratives, second only to the iconography of Jesus, is the biography of Mary, which has remained an inspiration for sacred art since the third century. Evidence of this long tradition of Marian veneration can be seen in the early Christian paintings decorating ancient catacombs in Rome and the Holy Land. The depiction of the Virgin and Child in the Catacombs of Priscilla suggest her place in the biblical narrative was seen even then as an integral part of the Divine story.

Although extremely brief, Mary’s presence in the Gospels is multi-faceted and pivotal. Mary’s elevated status as the Mother of God combined with her unique connection to divinity represents an important relationship for Christians to reflect upon:

The Madonna is also seen as the loving mother, and the protector of all humanity. Her followers believe that only she can fully understand human grief, passions and happiness; she forgives, mediates, and consoles, and she is the connection between human beings and their God. She has been venerated as the Queen of Heaven, the Mother of All, and as the embodiment of compassion.\(^{25}\)

\(^{24}\) Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady & The Virgin*, 54.

Medieval sacred art explored the duality of Mary’s divine and human nature in a way that the oral tradition was unable. For medieval Christians, the visual language of religious art had the capacity to express Mary’s human attributes and make recognizable unique connection to divinity. The cultural appeal of the Madonna for the faithful is in her ability to fulfill social and theological demands of early Christianity generated by the unpredictable state and frailness of the human condition.

According to Penny Schine Gold, author of *The Lady and the Virgin*, the various iconographies of Mary after the eleventh century demonstrate her shifting cultural relevance to the Christian faithful. The transformation of Marian imagery after the eleventh century was driven by the changes occurring in various social structures within the medieval world. The evolution of medieval Marian imagery coincided with the cultural and religious expansion of Mary’s biblical narrative in the Christian Church.

To fully explore the connection between Black Madonna iconography and Christianity it is important to address the relevance of religion as a reflection of the medieval social structure and artistic expression. Gold states:

> Religious art is a convenient and useful focus for the analysis of changes in the image of Mary in the twelfth and early thirteenth century. Changes in iconography are readily visible when a traditional image is treated in a new way or when a new event is portrayed. Medieval art relied so strongly upon the repetition of traditional representations that we are assured of finding multiple representations of important images.²⁶

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²⁶ Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady & The Virgin*, 44.
The recurrence of Black Madonna imagery in sacred art indicates the iconography’s popularity among the Christian faithful and its success as a conduit of theological information.

Other factors in the political and geographic environment of the early middle ages influenced the cultural development, emotional attachment and location of French Black Madonna iconography. Evidence suggests that the medieval pattern of dissemination and veneration of Black Madonna imagery was more prevalent in regions that contained popular trade/pilgrimage routes, unique topography or loose political and religious associations.

In fact, the early stages of French Black Madonna iconography required a unique combination of cultural components in order to provide rural communities the framework for a small degree of religious and political autonomy. Since rural communities often reside on the periphery of power, they are able to function independently and are less likely influenced by the restrictions of any centralized authority. This marginalization allowed the continuation of pre-Christian folk traditions that were practiced alongside Christianity. For example, many believe the legendary Black Madonna images at Le Puy and Rocamadour are regional pre-Christian goddesses who continued to be venerated under the guise of Christianity.

The medieval French countryside, especially Auvergne, contained an exceptionally high concentration of Black Madonna imagery. Even though the twelfth century experienced an explosion of Marian devotion in France, dark skinned Black Madonna
iconography continued to be favored by the rural populations. One may speculate that the chaotic medieval political atmosphere may have facilitated the rural populations enduring devotion to these religious images as expressions of regional authority. Although the political history of medieval France is complex and requires a comprehensive study beyond the scope of this research, I will briefly address the political factors that I suspect provided the foundation for the emergence of such a strong rural French devotion to Black Madonna imagery.

Between the ninth and tenth centuries, the political structure of the early Frankish Empire was extremely turbulent and unstable. The modern misconception of the medieval Frankish Empire as a united and cohesive nation state with one unique cultural heritage is inaccurate. In fact, the Frankish kingdom was divided among several feudal duchies without allegiance to a central ruling authority. In an attempt to stabilize the region and bring peace, the Frankish kingdom was eventually divided into two separate territories. In 1000 A.D., the region of East Francia, or modern day Germany, was absorbed into the Holy Roman Empire and West Francia assumed the boundaries of what is now considered modern day France. Although these territorial boundaries were established James Westfall Thompson author of An Introduction to Medieval Europe: 300-155, states that “none of this corresponded to the linguistic boundary between the Romance, or French, speaking western part and the German-speaking eastern part of the empire”\(^{27}\), the division did not account for regional differences.

By some estimates the discord among the Frankish realm was so profound that in a relatively short period of time the fragmentation of territories more than doubled. Jo Ann H. Moran-Cruz, author of *Medieval World: 300-1492*, explains that “at the end of the ninth century there were twenty-nine separate territories within West Francia; by the end of the tenth century, the number had risen to fifty five.” 28 The tenth century emergence of strong feudal territories was the direct consequence of the dissolution of a centralized Frankish hierarchical structure. As the central authority weakened, the power shifted from the State to the various regions. Rural populations began to identify and culturally express themselves in terms of familial and regional associations. The conflict between centralized and regionally based representation is important in the development of Black Madonna iconography since it illustrates the desire people may have felt to have a symbolic delegate who understood their regional and personal concerns.

As was common in large empires that stretched across vast territories, Frankish heritage varied widely from within its borders. Territories along the borders were vulnerable and needed the most protection, as they often were the objective of foreign invasions from hostile neighbors. This is seen in the regions along the southern French and Spanish boundary, which were always under threat of Islamic invasion.

Any attempt to culturally define the Frankish Empire in terms of geographic boundaries will be problematic due to the fact that territorial borders were arbitrary and

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often divided communities that shared the same linguistic or cultural heritage. This is illustrated by the early appearance of Black Madonna imagery in southern France and northern Spain that share artistic influences from Moorish and Byzantine art.

As in other medieval kingdoms, the Frankish population was as culturally diverse as the topography. Each region contained distinct dialects, ancestry, religion and customs. In fact, the early medieval Frankish culture did not exhibit any common unifying characteristics that could be defined as uniquely French. The Frankish Empire struggled to define itself and the Christianization of its territories would become the commonality that would essentially unite them:

With the collapse of the institutions of the empire into the chaotic localism of feudalism, the Church evolved a conception of its importance as a unifying agency in the west and formulated a program for the realization of its largest ambitions. For the theoretic government of Charles the Great the Church was ready to substitute its own theocracy as the chief directing force in western society, with the great difference that now the kings and emperors and all secular lords were governed by the church, as Charles had conceived of their directing the Church as an organ of the state.29

The political manipulation of Christian conversion was common throughout European history, as it effectively united cultures with varying languages and varying pre-Christian traditions. James Thompson states, “the only actual European unity was the unity of Christianity and the Church.”30 In fact, political and ecclesiastical rulers quickly realized the benefits of uniting vast territories and peoples under the umbrella of a single


30 Ibid., 264.
Christian religion. Furthermore, massive conversion to Christianity was also viewed as an attempt to address an emerging linguistical problem. Unlike medieval Islamic territories, which shared the same language and religion, polytheistic pre-Christian communities were regionally divided and did not share a common language. The multitude of pre-Christian worshippers throughout the Frankish kingdom was a hindrance to the unification of the empire:

The Islamic world has its local traditions, often very vigorous; but there is a degree of unity in the civilization of cities – in values, standards and social customs – that is without parallel in the medieval west. “The Franks”, says Rashid al-Din, ‘speak twenty-five languages, and no people understands the language of any other.’ It was a natural comment for a Muslim, accustomed to the linguistic unity of the Muslim world, with two or three languages serving not only as the media of narrow clerical class, like Latin in Western Europe, but as the effective means of universal communication, supplanting local languages and dialects at all but the lowest levels.  

Although as Westfall states in An Introduction to Medieval Europe: 300-1400, the practical use of Christianity as a single cultural unifier was different that the Islamic approach to a single culture connected to the religion as the “Latin of the Church, the only language common to all western Europe, was as yet known to few men outside the clergy.” Furthermore, the role of centralized power in the protection of regional territories became an issue. In contrast to a

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32 James Westfall Thompson, An Introduction to Medieval Europe, 280.
strong central authority, the protection and livelihood of folk populations often became the responsibility of regional sovereigns:

The landed aristocracy and public offices who sapped the strength of the central government themselves assumed the obligation of protecting Europe from barbarian attacks, and organized a system of economic, political and social relationships that replaced both the discredited empire and the ineffective kingdoms into which it dissolved.\(^{33}\)

As a consequence, rural communities tended to have an allegiance to regional rather than centralized authorities. This is a significant hypothesis since the emphasis on regional authority allowed the population to continue folk practices that may have been interrupted or abolished by either the Church or State authority:

The chief force making for order, which was left was the tie of vassalage. This, although not yet crystallized into true feudalism, yet provided a framework and local centres around which the anarchic military, or knightly in later language, class of landowners grouped themselves, and unknowingly recreated the government of the state in a localized and particularist form. While the tie of the subject to the sovereign slipped gradually all away but out of sight, and the tie to the royal vassals, who did not live at court, to the king, grew feebler and feebler, the tie of a vassal to his private lord, reinforced by local connection and economic and social dependence, grew stronger and became the main bond of society.\(^{34}\)

The power struggle between regional and centralized authority in the development of Black Madonna iconography illustrates the specific regional attachment that communities expressed towards particular images, as opposed to traditional images promoted by central Church.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 290.

\(^{34}\) James Westfall Thompson, *An Introduction to Medieval Europe*, 285.
The popular folklore of Black Madonna iconography often has it that the statue was discovered in the dirt or in a mountain, underscoring that it belongs, literally, to the specific land it is found in. In some cases the mythology has the earth actually birthing the image. But the unique relationship Black Madonna statuaries have with the local community extends beyond their spiritual connection to the surrounding topography. A key element in the creation myths of miracle-working Black Madonnas is the physical link to the natural environment. For instance, the mythology surrounding Black Madonna statuaries located at Le Puy and Montserrat claims that these statues were found buried in the ground. The subterranean discovery of statues seems to connect it to the fertility of the soil of the area. The sacred sites of the Black Madonna were exceptional by the distinct characteristics of their topography, which set them apart from other areas, such as unusual mountain ranges, volcanoes or water sources.

In addition, the sacredness of Black Madonna sites is often connected to a pre-Christian consecration of the land. The more sacred the site was considered in pagan traditions, the more sacred it was likely to be viewed as it transitioned to Christianity. In fact, several Black Madonna images are thought to have directly displaced pre-Christian images and to have marked the first emergence of Christian influence at these locations. The local pre-Christian use of the site facilitated the transition of the location to Christianity since the local population already attached the area to some form of Divinity.
CHAPTER 2. PRE-CHRISTIAN FOUNDATION

The distinctive and powerful imagery of medieval European Black Madonna statuaries and paintings represent a combination of the images of regional pagan traditions with the emergent early Christian symbolism. Not only is the imagery strongly indicative of its pre-Christian roots, the unique topography of many prominent Black Madonnas sites also indicates a strong connection and belief in the power of the natural world. Black Madonna imagery is unique as it often mirrors the cultural beliefs and religious traditions of the local population.

In the early middle ages the steady expansion and influence of Christianity became a watershed moment for the evolution of religious art and architecture in medieval Europe. As Western Christianity was formalized into a central authority the Church utilized various means to strengthen its presence in the surrounding community and communicate important ideology. Religious art and architecture proved a successful method for transmitting complicated religious and cultural subjects and expressing the emotionally driven concepts embedded within Christian thought.

The development of Black Madonna iconography is historically unique as it closely parallels the popularity of medieval Christianity, which depended upon the successful development of a cohesive visual language that could support the newly emerging religious theology while taking into account the regional attachment to local folk beliefs. Medieval Black Madonna imagery is embedded with the cultural expression of an emerging monotheistic religion absorbing local pre-Christian traditions as a means to
introduce new theology. To fully appreciate Black Madonna iconography one must study the visual foundation of this imagery as it pertains to the evolution of Christian images.

The medieval acceptance of Christianity among indigenous populations coincided with the absorption and alignment of regional, popular deities with Christian biblical figures. Kyra Belán, author of *From Madonnas: From Medieval to Modern* states:

> The presence of the Madonna was critical to the universal acceptance of Christianity in Europe, both eastern and western; her presence created a bridge that allowed the followers of the matriarchal goddess-worshipping religions to join the new patriarchal cult.\(^{35}\)

For the regional population this alignment provided something familiar to ease the transition in a time of religious upheaval. Regional deities, such as Isis (fig. 5), Demeter (fig. 6) and Cybele (fig. 7) provided the newly emerging Christianity with a tapestry onto which could be integrated into the new religious teaching regarding Mary’s narrative and iconography. Belán states, “The new Christian religion needed its own Great Mother, and that Mother manifested itself first in the early interpretations of the Holy Ghost as female, and the Sophia as the Wisdom of God.”\(^{36}\)

The foundation of Marian imagery in religious art is thought to have developed from a cross-cultural amalgamation of the visual characteristics and narratives of several pre-Christian goddesses, such as Isis, Demeter, and Cybele. Although their myths pre-date the story of Mary by thousands of years, these Eastern goddesses share a common archetypal role as “great mother,” “protector” and “life bearer.” Belán explains:

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\(^{36}\) Ibid., 19.
The Christian dogma of the early centuries included another powerful female figure, the mysterious Sophia, or the Word of God, as the female element within the Creation. Many early images were dedicated to her, and Mary, the Mother of God, was often represented as Mary/Sophia. In addition, the parallels between the images of Mary and images of the Goddess Isis contributed to the acceptance of Christianity by a larger sector of the medieval population that formerly worshipped Isis and other female gods. This last development unified and cemented Christianity as the dominant religion of both eastern and western Europe.37

One can argue that since the fundamental feminine presence in pagan, eastern and western religious traditions shared similar imagery and mythology the distinction between these deities was weakened. In the middle ages, Mary’s mythology and iconography was reminiscent of earlier traditions in an effort to appeal to a large religiously diverse audience.

According to Maarten J. Vermaseren in *Cybele and Attis: The Myth and Cult*, the inclination to represent goddesses as earth-mothers was a natural progression for cultures in the East. One may speculate that Eastern cultures understood the biology of the female as one uniquely connected to the creative powers of the divine and tried to communicate that information through various cultural and religious outlets. Vermaseren states:

> However the Goddess, Gaia, Ga, Rhea or Hera as she was called by the Greeks, was not primarily a queen, but the revered Mother Earth. Her divine authority did not reside in her power to command, but in her mysterious gift of being able continually to create new beings. Prehistoric art had already depicted this Goddess—in a seated or standing posture—heavily emphasizing her opulent physique and typically female features, thus stressing fertility.38

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It is plausible then to assume that as some of the earliest depictions of Mary, Romanesque Black Madonna iconography exemplifies a much closer relationship to the goddesses of the pre-Christian tradition than late medieval Marian imagery. Moreover, the connection between non-Christian goddesses and Black Madonna imagery goes beyond the similarity in their iconography. Shrines dedicated to the Black Madonna are built upon the foundations of older Gallo-roman temples devoted to pre-Christian gods and goddesses. Archeological evidence has been uncovered that supports the connection of Black Madonna sites at Arles, Auxerre, Clermont-Ferrand, and Le Puy with worship of Isis, Demeter, and Cybele.

The appropriation of culturally sanctioned religious sites was a common occurrence in the ancient world. In many cases, when a new religion attempts to establish in an area that is already occupied by a conflicting faith, images and locations that are deemed significant are often appropriated, altered, or destroyed. In some religions, the locations assume an importance beyond the religion itself. The building of churches upon pre-Christian worship sites was meant to establish a sense that Christianity was preordained.

Similar to the appropriation of religious sites, deities are often absorbed into emerging traditions as a means to link the new faith to history. Isis, Demeter and Cybele are Eastern goddesses who appealed to the polytheistic religious population of the ancient world, due to their common trans-cultural themes of motherhood, fertility, and communal protection. In agrarian cultures from Egypt to the Orient, mother-figure goddesses were highly revered. The existence of the population depended upon the
fertility of the land and hence the need to understand the unpredictable cycles of nature. Ancient goddesses such as Demeter and Cybele follow in the same religious tradition first established by the legendary worship of Isis. In the Greco-Roman world, the age-old worship of Isis was as familiar to them as the goddesses of their own mythologies. Ancient Greeks and Romans were fascinated by Egyptian culture, which they considered to have a meaningful historical legacy.

Although there is much visual evidence of Isis in Egyptian culture, the first written account of her in the Mediterranean was composed by Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus, a Greek with Roman citizenship. Born in 46 AD, Plutarch composed a lengthy narrative explaining the mythology of Isis as a goddess whose legacy is as ancient as time, “In Saïs the statue of Athena, whom they believe to be Isis, bore the inscription: I am all that has been, and is, and shall be, and my robe no mortal has yet uncovered.” However, it is not known whether Plutarch erroneously attributes Isis’ heritage to Greek culture as a means to simultaneously connect the two historical traditions. Or did Plutarch understand that the foreign presence of an Egyptian figure among Greek deities demanded further explanation for his audience? In Moralia, Plutarch explains that the personification of wisdom is known by many names in different traditions but she is always the same. Plutarch states:

Therefore the effort to arrive at the Truth, and especially the truth about

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39 A more detailed account of Isis narrative can be found in Plutarch’s Moralia.

the gods, is a longing for the divine. For the search for truth requires for its study and investigation the consideration of sacred subjects, and it is a work more hallowed than any form of holy living or temple service; and, not least of all, it is well-pleasing to that goddess whom you worship, a goddess exceptionally wise and a lover of wisdom, to whom, as her name at least seems to indicate, knowledge and understanding are in the highest degree appropriate. For Isis is a Greek word, and so also is Typhon, her enemy, who is conceited, as his name implies, because of his ignorance and self-deception.\(^4\)

Although the Greek Demeter and Roman Ceres are considered later incarnations of Isis, the mythology of Isis contains a human element that is not shared by the other Greco-Roman goddesses. Isis’ unique interaction with death is more closely aligned with the human experience than it is with her Greco-Roman counterparts who viewed mortality from a distance. Greco-Roman gods were thought immortal and therefore unable to experience death in the way humans do. In contrast, Isis’ was allowed to have an understanding of death in a uniquely human manner. In fact, the death of Isis’ beloved Osiris and the subsequent resurrection of Horus connects Isis more closely with Marian mythology than other goddesses.

Many proceeding Greco-Roman goddesses borrowed and were influenced by the characteristics of Isis. Isis’ narrative as the archetypal model of the “great-mother” has been echoed in different variations through the myths of Demeter, Cybele and Mary. Isis’ supremacy as a deity is based on her dominion over both life and death. Her role as life bearer is intrinsically united with her ability to resuscitate Horus and therefore defy death. Aesthetically, the early Byzantine enthroned iconography of the Black Madonna

\(^4\) Ibid., *Volume II*, 2.
statues in Le Puy, Clermont, Rocamadour and Montserrat echo the regal posture of Isis when she is depicted as Queen of Heaven. It is in this imagery that one can clearly see the influence of the Isis tradition in Black Madonnas.

Cybele is another goddess often associated with Black Madonna iconography. Although Cybele is believed to be derivative of a prehistoric Eastern-based fertility deity, her narrative as written by Pausanias in the second century AD, closely resembles the mythologies of Isis and Demeter. Pausanias’ adaptation emphasizes Cybele as a powerful source of fertility and regeneration after the castration and death of her lover, Attis.

The dispersal of Eastern goddesses throughout the Mediterranean follows the movement of the dominant culture and ruling authority. As power moved from the East to West, cultural practices also moved along inter-cultural trade routes. The Egyptian, Greek and Roman cultures heavily influenced the pre-modern world. Their religious traditions, art, and politics could be felt everywhere throughout the ancient Mediterranean. In the pluralistic religions of ancient Egypt and Greco-Roman societies, female goddesses whose narratives emphasized their connection to the natural agricultural cycles through their own life-bearing abilities were considered the most powerful deities. The divine feminine power of creation was an aspect of the divinity that agriculturally based societies particularly revered.

The pre-Christian tradition in Europe during the early middle ages differed vastly from region to region, but it still contained some of the same basic cultural elements. As
pre-Christian communities incorporated the gods and goddesses of the Greeks and Romans, their main focus was in revealing a symbol that could explain the mysteries of the natural world and protect them from the uncertainties in their lives. The necessity of good health and the impact of sudden death were of constant concern in the ancient world. Totems and other visual objects represented an important part of the ceremonial interaction between the supernatural and natural world.

Even as Marian imagery was being formalized during the medieval period, Mary’s deeper connection to previous goddesses was being diluted and lost in the new theology. Mary embodied all the characteristics of previous powerful goddesses. But for the people in the communities surrounding the Black Madonnas, Mary continued to have the sociological and agricultural importance of the older goddesses.
CHAPTER 3.
BLACK MADONNA STATUES – ROCAMADOUR, CLERMONT, AND LE PUY

The artistic tradition that seems to belong to the European Black Madonnas is rooted in the Byzantine iconography of the Virgin that emerged in southern France during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Although written accounts vary, oral folklore claims that the statuaries in Le Puy, Clermont, and Rocamadour are among the oldest Black Madonna iconographies in Europe. Assuming this to be true, the Romanesque statuaries of the enthroned Virgin from Auvergne must then be viewed as the templates for later Black Madonnas located throughout Europe. Although the creation of subsequent Black Madonna imagery may have occurred than the twelfth century, the unique iconography of these statuaries did not deviate far from the rural origins of the Romanesque originals.

Despite the fact that the majority of the Romanesque enthroned statuaries (fig. 8 & 9) created in Auvergne are anonymous, the commonality among them is quickly apparent. The Islamic influences and the Byzantine artistic traditions can both be witnessed in statuaries from across the region. The enthroned Virgins at The Walters Art Museum (fig. 11), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 12), and the North Carolina Museum of Art (fig. 13) are just a sampling of surviving Auvergnat Madonnas. Emile Mâle in Religious Art in France: The Twelfth Century provides a concise definition for the Marian statuaries created in this region. Mâle states:

The Auvergnat type of Virgin is a wooden statue; she wears no crown; the veil closely covering her hair invests her with the air of chaste solemnity of Eastern virgins. She sits on a throne pierced with arcades. Her costume
and solemn pose, and the seriousness of the Child seated on her knees awakens the memory of the Eastern models. But here the grandeur of the Byzantine Virgin has become somewhat rustic and simple. These Virgins, carved for peasants and placed in remote chapels in the mountains and the forest, resemble grave peasant women; they have all the virtue; they lack only beauty.\textsuperscript{42}

The examples of the Marian imagery from Auvergne share the same humble appearance and circular drapery of their clothing. Instead of depicting the regalia of nobility, the Virgin exudes a rustic simplicity. On the other hand, the Holy Child follows the Eastern tradition of representing the infant Jesus as an adult male, rather than the cherubic infant popularized in the later centuries.

The medieval popularity of the Auvergnat Madonnas is illustrated in the repetitive use of this similar iconography in church tympanums and statuaries throughout the southern region. Part of the tremendous appeal of this early Romanesque enthroned iconography for the folk population is that this imagery mirrors their own rustic appearance and social status. However, even though the enthroned iconography of the Virgin that populated the majority of the churches is identical to the Black Madonna, only Black Madonna statuaries possess the unique and powerful, miracle working abilities and historical connection to Christianity.

In the study of Black Madonna iconography the characteristics that differentiate late Gothic and early Romanesque architecture and art also underscore the cultural division between white and black Madonnas for the faithful. More importantly the contradiction between the ecclesiastical development of Gothic principles and the popularity of

Romanesque Black Madonna shrines highlight the unique folk devotion to this imagery. The evolution of religious art and architecture in the late twelfth century is a direct reflection of the ecclesiastical desire to emphasize visual elements and incorporate spatial relationships into the design of Christian churches. Certainly it can be argued that the subsequent rise of Gothic architecture and art in the twelfth century was motivated by the ecclesiastical desire to display concepts such as salvation and the hierarchical authority to the faithful in medieval Europe. The cathedrals of St-Denis (1130-1140), Chartres (c. 1140), and Amiens (1220-1270) are exemplars of how architecture and imagery can be combined to form a symbolic liturgical experience that helps Christians understand biblical narratives and important theology.

The devotional strength of Gothic architecture is that it appears to transcend the earthly realm and transport the faithful to the spiritual kingdom of Christendom through its soaring architecture and elaborate art. The transcendence represented by the Gothic Churches becomes an act of public ritual, which is experienced by many upon entrance to these holy sites. As Moran-Cruz states in *Medieval Worlds: An Introduction to European History 300-1492*, the spatial arrangement of medieval cathedrals is meant to heighten the devotional experience for the laity. She explains:

It has been noted that medieval cathedrals represent a form of scripture written in stone. They signify the Heavenly Jerusalem, dwelling place of the saved – facing Jerusalem in the east, built in a cruciform pattern, with the western (entry) portal depicting the Last Judgment and responding to the words from John 10:9: I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved.\(^\text{43}\)

It can be argued that the veneration of Black Madonna statuaries in Le Puy and Rocamadour create private and individual experiences by virtue of the difficult topography of their remote locations. As with other pilgrimages, medieval visits to the Black Madonna sites at Le Puy and Rocamadour tested the physical endurance and religious dedication of the faithful. The elevated topography of the Black Madonna sites at Le Puy and Rocamadour mirror the act of transcendence for the faithful.

By the late twelfth century ecclesiastical power was being concentrated along with political power in the northern urban communities in France. The emergence of Gothic architecture coincided with the desire to align political and divine power in these locations. The Gothic cathedral of St-Denis is a perfect example of the merging of divine and royal power. Kathleen Ashley and Marilyn Deegan, authors of Being a Pilgrim: Art and Ritual on the Medieval Routes to Santiago, state that “the result of Abbot Suger’s rebuilding project was a church at Saint-Denis that represented the ideal fusion of royal glory and divine power.” Gothic churches according to Ashley and Deegan became the repository of Christian as well as royal relics in an attempt to symbolically unite the earthly and divine authorities for the faithful. Furthermore, the experience of a fifteenth century pilgrim to Saint Denis, as envisioned by Ashley and Deegan illustrates

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44 Kathleen Ashley and Marilyn Deegan, Being A Pilgrim: Art and Ritual on the Medieval Routes to Santiago, (Farnham: Lund Humphries), 37.
The adventurous young nobleman Arnold von Harff, who visited Saint-Denis at the end of the fifteenth century, notes that in this church lie buried all the kings and queens of France in fine sculptured stone graves. He lists the many relics owned by the abbey, among them the famous piece of the cross and the nails and thorn from the crucifixion.

The emerging power of ecclesiastical influence in medieval Christianity was so strong that it shaped key elements involved in the act of public devotion. In many cases, ecclesiastical leadership regulated Christian devotion by controlling the laity’s access to churches and by declaring which calendar feast days should be observed. In addition, Church authorities presented the faithful with visual concepts of Christendom based on complex religious dogmas.

As a consequence of this heightened ecclesiastical authority, the late medieval iconography of Mary and Jesus begin to emphasize their status as royalty in the Christian hierarchy rather than as the humble personas that were highlighted in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. Over time, as churches slowly moved away from the Romanesque concepts of heavy and simple structures to the lightness of the towering cathedrals, the figural imagery also changed to reflect the Holy Family’s enhanced ecclesiastical status.

As mentioned previously, the Auvergne iconography of the Virgin follows the Byzantine tradition of *sedes sapientiae*, which represents Mary as enthroned wisdom or as *theotokos*. However it is interesting to note that the throne upon which the Virgin sits in many versions of this imagery is less a statement of nobility than a form of function.

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The use of the word “throne” is a misnomer in regard to the early Romanesque iconography of the Virgin, as it more closely resembles a bench or stool.

The representation of the throne in Black Madonna iconography is in direct contrast to the imagery of the late medieval enthroned Virgin popularized in northern France. In these depictions the throne becomes more prominent as it takes on royal and authoritative symbolism. The cultural transition between the artistic interpretation of religious and royal hierarchy is evident in the different examples of the Black Madonna of Le Puy.

The basilica of Notre Dame du Puy, which contains the shrine of the Black Madonna of Puy is located on a volcanic plateau in southern France (fig. 13). Already popular in the medieval world as a Marian pilgrimage destination, millions of Christians also visited the shrine on their way towards Compostela in Spain. Even though the provenance of the original statue is in dispute, popular belief is that it was brought to Le Puy in 1254 by Saint Louis IX after his release from captivity in the Holy Land.

One legend claims the Black Madonna statuary was already present in Le Puy as early as the reign of Charlemagne, who is purported to have twice visited the site in 778. It is evident that following Charlemagne’s visit in 778, Le Puy became an important medieval religious destination. Besides the local peasantry, there was a steady influx of notable political and religious figures who flocked to Le Puy to kneel before the Black
Virgin and recite her prayer:

I am black and yet I am beautiful… it is the sun which burned me. Here your mother, sinning and sick man. Marie receives in her heart of mother your sufferings and your prayer. Its face was let blacken by the smoke of your candles of speech. You do not have anything any more to fear, it will carry what you are not able to carry all alone.46

Listed among those medieval pilgrims are fifteen kings, five popes, Joan of Arc, Pope Urban II, Louis XI, Anthony of Padua and Peter the Venerable. The Black Madonna was such an integral part of religious culture in France that the first Crusade Council was prepared there and crusaders were said “to march to the anthem of Le puy, the Salve Regina.”47 The fact that the Black Madonna shrine at Le Puy appealed to such a diverse population speaks to the cross-cultural connection this imagery had among the faithful.

As do Rome and Jerusalem, Le Puy claims to be the setting of the oldest jubilee to the Virgin, celebrated since 1065, when Lady Day and Good Friday coincide on March 25th. Although this occurs only two or four times per century, this moment of Redemption and Incarnation coinciding are marked by the jubilee in Le Puy. The significance of the transition between salvation and rebirth is not lost on the faithful who connect those powers with the Virgin.

Even though the Black Madonna of Le Puy (fig.14) is believed to perform many miracles, the Virgin’s main miracle working ability resides in her protection of women and children during childbirth and protection of the military during warfare. One can


argue that the Black Madonna of Le Puy has the important duty to protect the lives of new Christians being born and to ensure the survival of those fighting for Christianity.

Although the original Le Puy statue was destroyed on June 8, 1794, during the French Revolution, and the replica wasn’t created until much later (fig.15), there is a contemporary description of the statue recorded in 1778:

The statue is two feet and three inches in height, and is designed in a rough and rigid style. The attitude is that of a person seated on a bench, in the manner of certain Egyptian divinities…the arm-chair upon which she reclines is detached, and I believe is of modern workmanship. All the statue is entirely enveloped, from head to feet in many bands of fine cloth, very solidly glued to the wood, in the manner of Egyptian mummies…the feet in the same manner, and also the hands. In examining the faces very closely, they resembled Ethiopian and Moorish features.48

Besides the contemporary description there are also two surviving woodcut illustrations from approximately the years of 1500 (fig. 16) and 1523 (fig. 17), which appear to represent the original statute and can be used to highlight the opposing cultural views of ecclesiastical authority between the late 1200’s and the early 1500’s.

Nevertheless, the mythology that makes this Black Madonna exceptional is its unique connection to pre-Christian divinity. In the description of the Black Madonna in 1778, scholar Faujas de Saint-Fond also notes the archeological evidence of pre-Christian worship near the foundations of the present church. Saint-Fond’s account can be used to emphasize two important concepts, the statue’s connection to a pre-Christian divine tradition and the fear that the Christian faithful will revert to the worship of

powerful non-Christian divinities:

The temple of Diana, which we may see at the foot of the rock Saint-Michel-du Puy, makes us believe that the goddess Isis was venerated at Puy in the Roman era, and consequently our amateurs of antiquity are concerned that the present statue should not be venerated, regarding it as a statue of Isis and Osiris syncretized in the Virgin, which in any case could make no problem for religion, since it is the intent that is important. 49

When examining the Le Puy woodcuts and the wooden statuary it becomes evident that the cultural view of ecclesiastical authority shifted during that small period. The difference between the Le Puy woodcuts and the statuary is reflected in the reduction of the throne in the statuary and the oversized proportion of the throne in the illustrations. Upon closer inspection it is clear that the throne and cathedral in the illustration from 1500 are the focal points of the woodcut. In the print from 1500 the throne and cathedral are presented as a cohesive unit, which occupies the entire vertical frame of the woodcut. In addition, the Virgin’s throne appears to become the foundation for the soaring church behind her. This is in contrast to the 1523 print, where the oversized throne appears to dwarf the Romanesque structure behind the seated Virgin.

Moreover, the depictions of the figures also change. In the 1523 woodcut the Virgin and Child take on the mantel of royalty instead of the clerical robes of the previous illustration. In fact, the Virgin’s open crown, flowing hair and royal robes suggest an earthly nobility rather than the pious figure of the Virgin in the print from 1500. This change in visual representation is meant to emphasize Mary’s status in the divine hierarchy and stress her connections to royalty. In fact, the attributes connected to

royalty in the woodcut far outweigh the religious treatment of the holy figures. Joseph Breck, in *A Souvenir of the Black Virgin of Le Puy* states:

The woodcuts show the image in the tabernacle of silver-gilt given by Louis XI after his visit to Le Puy in 1476. Of this tabernacle, or chadaraita is it is called, our sculptor has retained only the shield with the arms of France on the front panel.\(^{50}\)

However, the later reproduction of the earlier statue is intriguing as it closely resembles the earlier models of the Auvergnat Virgin since it lacks a prominent throne and other noble regalia. The iconography of the statuary is more in line with the original concept, since it follows the same traditional characteristics of other Auvergnat Virgins, which are simple in decoration and style. The only hint of a royal connection attached to statuary is in the early medieval closed crown and the coat of arms located on the bottom of the platform. In essence, the sixteenth century sculptor recaptured the intention of the early artist whose main objective was to create an image of the Virgin devoid of political and secular hierarchy.

Even as Christianity moved toward the ornate Gothic art and architecture that would transform the European landscape, popular piety still favored the simple rural Romanesque Churches with their unusual imagery of the Black Madonna. It can be argued that popular devotion to Black Madonna imagery is in direct opposition to the ecclesiastical trajectory of Christianity in the Middle Ages that promoted the light, emotive, and regal iconographies of the Virgin.

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However, in contrast to the Gothic style, the Romanesque churches of southern France contained an amalgamation of Islamic and Byzantine influences from the surrounding cultures. These rural Romanesque churches were simply adorned structures with minimal figural representation. In many cases the decorative elements of the interior space of Romanesque churches was often limited to sculptural columns rather than the monumental sculptural designs and narrative scenes popularized in Gothic cathedrals.

The Black Madonna statuaries located in Rocamadour, Clermont, Montesserat and Le Puy were immensely popular with medieval Christians. Millions of Christians traveled each year to visit these Romanesque churches and to venerate at the Black Madonna shrines. The main focus in these minimally decorated churches was not the soaring height or the elaborately pictorial stained glass promoted by the gothic style, but rather the statues of the Black Madonna, which by all accounts were simple and rustic figural representations of the Virgin and Holy Child.

One may speculate that the regional devotion to rural Romanesque churches was influenced by economic and social factors in which the lower members of the communities relied on the architectural program of the local church for economic survival. In fact, “large scale building of churches, cathedrals and monasteries allowed wealth to filter down to master masons, carpenters, pavers, tillers, brickmakers, plasterers, quarrymen and many unskilled laborers.”51

51 Jo Ann Hoeppner Moran-Cruz, Medieval Worlds, 229.
In southwestern France the shrine to Our Lady of Rocamadour (fig. 18) is still as remote and isolated as it was in the Middle Ages. Similar to the topography at Le Puy, Rocamadour is situated high on a vertical plateau. The unusual location speaks to the attractiveness of the area as a religious site, as it fulfills the religious symbolism of both pagan and Christian worship. As with Gothic principles of architecture, the natural formation of the vertical plateau jutting high into the sky acts as a natural point of transcendence. To further enhance the devotional experience, pilgrims often ascend the 216 steps to the shrine on their knees while reciting the rosary.

Although it is considered among the oldest Marian shrines in Europe and possesses the most unusual Black Madonna statuary, accounts vary on the actual date of consecration. Even though written documentation does not mention veneration at Rocamadour until the twelfth century, popular folklore claims that a Black Madonna has been continuously there since the sixth century.

As with the sites of other Black Madonnas the Marian shrine at Rocamadour possesses a direct connection to the historical bible. One mythology attached to Rocamadour claims that St. Amadour came to France in biblical times after his exile from the Holy Land. After roaming the area, Zacheus, also known as Amadour, and his wife Veronica eventually settled in Soulac. After Veronica’s death, Zacheaus carved a figure of the Virgin from a piece of dark wood and retreated to a cave where he lived his remaining years as a hermit.
In 1166, the cave where Amadour’s body was purported to be laid to rest was exhumed. Upon opening the cave, witnesses were amazed to see his body uncorrupted by death. Convinced that the cave and surrounding area was already a consecrated and sacred site, church authorities built a chapel on the plateau to commemorate the life of St. Amadour. Tradition asserts that the Black Madonna of Rocamadour is the statuary of the Virgin that St. Amadour carved. Another account attributes St. Amadour’s connection to the Holy Family through the biblical narrative that states that he owned the “field where grain grew miraculously to hide the Holy Family in their flight to Egypt.”

Like the Madonna in Le Puy, the Black Madonna of Rocamadour (fig. 19) performs powerful miracles, but the most common miracles attributed to her are the resuscitation of babies, the restoration of fertility to those longing to conceive, and the protection of those held captive in foreign lands. Among her devotees beyond the pious peasants of the region, were religious and political leaders, such as Charlemagne, Roland, Henry II Plantaginet, Saint Bernard, King Philip IV, and King Louis XI. All came to venerate at her shrine. Evidence shows that the Rocamadour church is built on the pre-Christian foundations of a temple to Cybele, Sulivia and Minerva.

The Rocamadour Black Madonna statuary is visibly the most unusual Virgin in the region. Unlike the bulky and detailed iconography seen in other rural Auvergnat Madonnas, the Rocamadour Black Madonna contains elegant and vertical lines, which emphasize the elongated torso. It is understandable that devotees may have attributed the

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52 Ean C.M. Begg, *The Cult Of The Black Virgin*, 216.
Rocamadour Black Madonna to an Egyptian tradition due to the fact that it is vastly
different from any Marian iconography in the area. The Black Madonna’s slender and
regal torso is reminiscent of the statues of Isis that were popular in antiquity. However, it
is clear that the crude statuary is from a date earlier than the other Black Madonnas from
the region.

Much like the sites at Le Puy and Rocamadour, the Black Madonna shrine at Orcival
is also situated near two vertical plateaus and claims a unique connection to the Bible.
According to local legend the Black Madonna of Orcival (fig. 20) is attributed directly to
the hand of St. Luke. As with other early Romanesque Virgins from the region, the
Black Madonna of Orcival follows the eastern enthroned iconography and shares the
same miracle working powers to resuscitate babies, cure the barren and ensure military
victories. Although the Orcival Virgin shares a similar historical legacy and cultural
foundation this Black Madonna only achieved local notoriety and never the broader fame
of those at Le Puy and Rocamadour.

Even in the middle ages the possession of Black Madonna statuaries did not
guarantee that the community would be a popular religious destination. Although the
medieval region of Clermont-Ferrand was a powerful religious center and the seat for
ecclesiastical authority in Auvergne, popular devotion to the Black Madonna there never
surpassed that of other cities. As in the other Black Madonna mythologies, the shrine to
the Black Madonna at Clermont-Ferrand is believed to have been built upon a pre-
Christian temple to Cybele.
Despite the fact that the original Black Madonna statuary has disappeared, legend has it that a Black Madonna has been present at this site since antiquity. It is said that the original Black Madonna was found in the crypt next to a sacred well dedicated to Cybele. However, the two Black Madonnas currently there are suspected to be thirteenth and fourteenth century imitations of the earlier Romanesque original. There is evidence to suggest an enthroned Madonna may have existed in Clermont-Ferrand as early as the tenth century since one is drawn in the borders of a religious manuscript (fig. 22) from that period. Scholarship points to this statuary being the inspiration for the iconography of the enthroned Virgin in Auvergne since the manuscript is the oldest illustration of Marian imagery from the region. Nevertheless, there is no written evidence that the original enthroned Virgin possessed miracle-working abilities.

One can argue that this representation was a product of ecclesiastical authority and therefore did not possess any miracle working abilities. When the medieval popularity of Clermont-Ferrand as a religious center shifted it may have loosened ecclesiastical control, which allowed for the creation of thirteenth century Black Madonna imagery. Unfortunately, the folk popularity of Clermont-Ferrand as a Black Madonna pilgrimage destination never attained the status of Le Puy or Rocamadour. Although the Virgin of Clermont-Ferrand may have inspired the artistic tradition of Marian imagery in the region, the Black Madonna statuaries there only received local fame.

The folk appeal of the Black Madonna statuaries was never realized in Clermont. Perhaps the popularity of Black Madonna statuaries is connected to the treatment of the
mythology that aligns with the Bible that allowed these small, relatively isolated communities to feel they were directly participating in the divine story. In some cases it is evident that the topography of the areas surrounding a few Black Madonna shrines contributed to the uniqueness of the imagery. On the other hand, many Black Madonna shrines attribute the miracle-working ability of the Virgin to the pre-Christian consecration of the location. In conclusion, all these instances show that the folk appeal of the Black Madonna is independent of ecclesiastical authority and largely dependent upon the representations of the Virgin as a member of the rural community.
CONCLUSION

It is clear that in the middle ages the Black Madonna owed her appeal to the faith of the rural people and the desire to continue their local religious traditions. Most of the medieval world consisted of impoverished rural laborers, and like them, she was a humble figure, at least in material and perhaps color. Black Madonnas, especially those along pilgrimage roads in southern France, evoke images of the rural peasantry and the simplicity of their lives. It may be that the rusticity of the Black Madonna resonated with medieval peasantry, as she was a symbol for their potential elevation from earthly suffering through a feminine religious tradition rather than by political or economic means. In her, the peasantry could envision rising from their humble station to make willing supplicants of religious and secular leaders. Curiously, the power of the Black Madonna is revered since she is believed to relieve the suffering of the human condition. Yet, she is, beyond suffering and the experiences of those who come to petition her. She is immune from the pain of childbirth, the trauma of sickness and the decomposition of death. Unlike others, she transcends mortal limitations to achieve spiritual and physical perfection.

The relationship between the sacred and profane is complicated. Words, art and architecture often aren’t able to express the thoughts regarding the unknown and unexplainable. As with the Black Madonna, abstract symbolism becomes the language by which we begin to know her. Even though many Black Madonnas are simple in
design, they are also complex since this imagery is defined by what is not depicted. For example, the Black Madonna is part of a composition representing birth, yet she is venerated for her dominion over death and the power of resurrection. In many instances, the Black Madonna is portrayed as stoic and regal, and still she is revered by the humble and powerless. The mystique of the Black Madonna is that the faithful are able to comprehend the uniqueness in her iconography.

It is evident that the development of Black Madonna imagery is steeped in the culture of medieval peasantry and the authority figures they turned towards in times of physical and emotional vulnerability. In fact, the cultural acceptance of the Black Madonna by early Christians was influenced by the miracle-working powers of local feminine deities whom the peasantry believed alleviated their suffering. Yet, devotion to the Black Madonna is not limited to the past; her continuing religious relevance and strength lies in her ability to appeal to a broad multicultural demographic by addressing fundamental human experiences, such as, birth, sickness, and death.

Although Black Madonna iconography encompasses Eastern and pre-Christian religious traditions, one cannot ignore that this darker imagery also embodies fundamental Christian values, such as humility and mercy. Medieval theology alludes to the rejection of the temporal world as part of the religious journey towards spiritual perfection. In fact, much of medieval Christianity emphasized poverty as a contemplative instrument to better understand the teachings of Christ. In some instances, ecclesiastical leaders, such as Bernard Clairveaux, promoted the impoverished status of
the peasant class and their simplistic lifestyle as if the rejection of temporal possessions was a way to separate humanity from earthly evils. It may be that medieval devotees were able to make the connection between the early representations of the Black Madonna as a member of the rural populace and principles of humility that were promoted as virtues by the Christian Church.

In rural communities as medieval Christianity slowly replaced local traditions the Black Madonna appropriated the healing powers of local pre-Christian deities. Although it was little understood, sickness was a major concern in the pre-modern world since it had the ability to affect an individual and destroy interpersonal relationships within the community. For instance, a devastating illness had the potential to isolate an individual from their community and leave them vulnerable. In the pre-modern view, sickness and death were unknown and unpredictable forces. The notion of a deity, such as the Black Madonna, that has a foot in both worlds, as both human and divine is comforting, as they are able to bring understanding to the incomprehensible and protect those who patronize them.

Sickness and physical deformities were thought to be punishments or curses associated with evil forces. It is evident that the stigma of illness placed these individuals at risk and on the fringes of the community. The physical condition of the human body was often considered a barometer of a person’s spiritual well being. The concept of good health corresponded to notions of human perfection and divine favoritism. It may be that
for the rural peasantry good health became a valuable commodity to ensure their
communal ties and overall survival.

The Black Madonna, like pre-Christian divinities before her is able to bring order to
the chaos of sickness and death. The Virgin of Rocamadour has been considered one of
the most powerful miracle-working Black Madonnas. The majority of the miracles that
are attributed to her are associated with curing physical ailments. Curiously, medieval
documentation illustrates that she was particularly adept at curing the physical
deficiencies of the peasant class, such as loss of speech, sight, hearing, sanity and use of
limbs:

A mad woman from Auxerre was securely tied up and led around the
shrines of the saints, which are number in those parts. Denied the saints’
intervention, she did not recover her health. Her relatives were pained by
her raging madness and took it very badly. Since the physician’s art could
do nothing to help her, they directed both the focus of their desire and
their devotion towards the greatest of the great, the Lady of Rocamadour.
They had not yet finished their prayer when the women regained her
sense. She came to the Church and gave thanks.53

Pilgrimages to Black Madonnas are not solely restricted to the peasantry; in fact,
noble, secular and religious leaders often made visits to her shrines. However, there is a
distinct contrast in the petitions of these groups. In Black Madonnas: Feminism,
Religion, and Politics in Italy, author Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum examines noted cultural
anthropologist Tullio Tentori observations on the cultural nuances that distinguish the
use of religious imagery between the poor and privileged class. Tenori states that “the

53 Marcus Bull, The Miracles of the Our Lady of Rocamadour (The Boydell Press, 1999), 139.
poor put their trust in holy figures to liberate themselves from personal misfortune and social exploitation”\textsuperscript{54}, while the politically dominant culture often use the same religious figures to reaffirm and secure their authority. This is clear in the veneration of the Black Madonna by secular and religious leaders who associate themselves with her as if the likelihood of defiance is reduced, if the populace believed them to be connected to her.

In southern Italy, as in France, the Black Madonna is still revered by the most disadvantaged members of society. Many believe that the religious veneration of Black Madonnas in European cultures is as prominent today as it was centuries ago. In fact, the modern appeal of the Black Madonna has not faded and devotees still use her image to represent the working-class struggle against injustice and big corporations. For modern devotees, the Black Madonna represents the simplicity and honesty of rural and localized traditions. As Tenori states: “in these liberation movements, perhaps symbolized in Black Madonnas, there is a preferential choice for the poor, a commitment to a simpler life, and work for a model of economic development focused not on wealth, but on health and life.”\textsuperscript{55} In contemporary society, as in medieval cultural, the Black Madonna represents a rejection of material wealth and the evil associated with it.

Paradoxically, despite the fact that Black Madonna imagery may have been viewed as an early symbol of the rural peasant class, in the later iconoclastic movements throughout Europe she was viewed as a metaphor of the ruling authority by the peasantry.


\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 140.
and destroyed in many of those communities. In the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance the Black Madonna began to take on more aristocratic elements, such as the throne or crown found in some. Even though there wasn’t a significant change in Black Madonna imagery it may be that the popularity and universal acceptance of her iconography left the early religious community behind. In fact, one may speculate that in these communities the concept of the Black Madonna moved away from the early regional connections by seeking a deeper alignment with the church and state hierarchy, which followers may have viewed as a rejection and disenfranchisment of their local traditions.

Although French and Italian veneration give us marvelous examples of the continuity and transformation of Black Madonnas, there are cultural and geographic impediments to the continuity of her veneration. In comparison to other cultures the religious popularity of Black Madonna iconography in North America never fully developed beyond a few churches in the same manner as it has in Europe. In fact, the most popular Black Madonna shrine in the United States is a replica of Częstochowa, found in Eureka, Missouri. In this case, it is understandable that there is no religious connection between North America and the biblical tradition, and as in other instances the establishment of this religious site would have to look towards an older one for legitimacy.

Furthermore, it would appear that minorities and the gay and lesbian communities would have a strong infinity for an image that is symbolically representative of cultural disenfranchisement from a political hierarchy which is founded on the placement of
Caucasian males at the top of the power structure, but one would struggle to make such a connection. It may be that for minorities, in particular African Americans, it is not a natural progression to embrace a religious image that was disenfranchised from a political authority that reinforces their suffering. In communities of color, Black Madonna imagery doesn’t have the same authority as white images of the Madonna who appears to be more closely aligned with the traditional power structure. Instead of Black Madonna imagery with Caucasian features, African Americans are more likely to turn towards their own ethnic representations of the Madonna for comfort.

It may be that this thesis gives rise to more questions than it provides answers. Certainly the Black Madonna is worthy of further investigation, but much of what might be known about her may be lost to time, and the mystery that surrounds her might finally be thought of as a part of her legacy, as a part of what she embodies is the mysterious. Many of the ideas currently attached to Black Madonna imagery are centered on the symbolic rather than the factual.

Was she created as a black figure, or did she turn black with time? It seems there are images of which either might be said. But the symbolism of the Black Madonna perhaps rests in what she does. Some believe that she becomes black by taking on the sin of others. That is, the blackness that is hidden in the souls of human beings is manifest upon the Madonna. She takes it from them and replaces what they give to her with divine light. Still others claim that she becomes black by taking on the sickness of those
who come to pray for the unbaptized dead. Her blackness is viewed as an earthly reminder of her journey to the underworld to retrieve those lost souls.

It is hard to ignore the ways this mirrors the story of Jesus, who martyred himself in order to save a fallen people who can never be less than fallen unless they appeal to him and accept his sacrifice. In a sense, she acts as a mediary and a martyr. But her ability to perform this sacrifice of herself for the faithful is also a testament to her strength. Even though the infant Jesus sits securely in her lap, the Black Madonna is the one they appeal to in their prayers. In many cases, the miracle-working power of the Black Madonna is a contradiction in Christianity. According to Marina Warner, author of *Alone Of All Her Sex: The Myth And The Cult Of The Virgin Mary*, Marian devotees often do not distinguish between miracles performed by the Virgin and those of a higher power. In fact, in opposition to traditional Marian imagery, the miracle-working power of the Black Madonna is attributed to her alone:

> The theology of the Virgin’s intercession maintains very strictly that the Virgin does not have the power to grant any boon by herself, but only intercedes with her son, who as God is the only source of salvation. But the powers of mediation attributed to her throughout Christianity are considered sovereign; the son can refuse his mother nothing. So a prayer to Mary, made in a spirit of repentance and resolve, is wonder-working; and men and women gathered together to pray to the Virgin forget the distinction between direct and indirect power.\(^{56}\)

Furthermore, as in so many stories, it is a woman who “bears,” both children and in this case all the darkness of the world. Another aspect of her appeal is her accessibility. There is no one in the world without a mother. Even if she in no way resembles Mary,

we have a concept of motherhood that we carry with us, as well as a conception of what a mother should be. Therefore, all people should be able to feel the power of that maternal figure. It may be that the early Christian church understood the power and cultural importance of motherhood and used Mary’s theology as a way to explore the commonality between all humanity. As Marina Warner states:

She is approached as a human mother who brims over with mother’s love. This element in her cult is present in earliest Byzantine times, recedes in the early middle ages, when she is at her most queenly and hieratic, and then re-emerges in the thirteenth century, to last undiminished to the present day. Her love of mankind is maternal, and her qualities of mercy, gentleness, loving kindness, indulgence, forgiveness, are all seen as motherly. All men are her children through Christ her son, who gave her to them from the Cross; and so she lavishes a mother’s love and pity on all her brood.\textsuperscript{57}

It might also be said that the color of black has been given many negative connotations through the years that remain attached to it still. In modern times, scholars often associate the blackness of this imagery with aspects of racial inequality, colonialism and cultural suppression in an effort to explore the appeal of Black Madonna imagery to marginalized populations. Unfortunately, the cultural lens of the modern West has embedded this imagery with modern experiences and social stigmas of color, which may not belong to the Black Madonna.

During the Middle Ages the dark and drab of course belonged to the poor. As purple is considered the color of royalty, we know that there was a time in history when only the very wealthy had access to the expensive dyes needed to produce color. We too are

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 286.
familiar with the idea that it was once considered a mark of poverty to have darkened skin, because that darkness came about from the work people had to perform in an agricultural economy, outdoors and for long hours in the sun. It is hard to imagine ancient times in other than black and white by many contemporary people. And yet, while the Black Madonna has the black skin that seems to equate her with her poorer brethren, this is often combined with the exuberantly colored robes of royalty.

And yet, if her skin color somehow made her relatable to a peasant population, there could be no doubt of her power. She was not a weeping Madonna, but a powerful, goddess-like figure, with the ability to alter life in all its forms. She is known to dispense mercy as well as vengeance. The color of her robes linked her to divinity and may have even symbolized the process by which humans might become divine. The process of this requires a purification rite. The human being is filled with impurities. Quite literally, being alive is also being in the process of becoming something dead. In the natural world, the flesh decays, becomes rotten, turns black, and eventually returns to dust. On the Black Madonna, her skin color represents her humanity and perhaps also the sin of humankind. In the realm of the supernatural, the flesh can be cleansed or forgiven while still in life. Then, the light enters. The soul becomes clean, white, and purified. This has so much resonance, as we think even now of death at its best as a process of entering into “the light.” Red, often seen in Mary’s robes, represents the fire that will burn away the impurities, the process the soul has to move through before it can be cleansed.
The meaning these images held and continues to hold with the people in the regions where they are located is undeniable. As the church began to recognize the Black Madonna’s power, it sought to turn them to their own uses. For the rural population, the Black Madonna was more powerful than the earthly rulers who knelt before her. The recognition of select Black Madonnas was a strategic move by the Christian church to incorporate her followers into the conventional church hierarchy. Nevertheless, somewhere in that process the Black Madonna also used the church; she became a more powerful symbol and less a regional phenomena. Visits to these Marian shrines from Popes, kings, and other notable personages allowed her fame and influence to spread throughout the Christian world.

The church would like to control this power and at times has tried to explain away her black color. Most church officials do not focus on the color of the Black Madonna and instead say that she is what she is. One official explanation is that the Black Madonna has become blackened by soot. Since many figures of the Madonna are accompanied by ex-voto offering, such as oil lamps or candles, that could cause such a residue; the explanation has some merit. And yet, those same candles and lamps represent the power with which the people imbue her. Without their prayers, she would not be surrounded by those lights. The faithful light candles and lamps to her as they pray. Again, the blackness comes to stand as a testament to her power. Some churches have moved their Black Madonna statuaries to lower crypts in an effort to hide them.
away. The faithful still seek them out, however, and illuminate the darkened chapels as if lighting the way back from the underworld.

There are those Madonnas who clearly were painted black and were meant to be black. Even when the blackness was perhaps the sign of time and deterioration, people clearly attached some meaning to her dark color. The Black Lady of Einsiedeln went through a restoration in 1799 during which she was whitened. That change was unacceptable to the people who worshipped at her shrine. The restorer attempted to comply with their demands by darkening her skin while keeping some color in her eyes, lips, and cheeks, until he was forced to give in to the people and paint her skin completely black. The division between the restorer and the faithful might be seen as comparable to the separation between those who would try to move the church away from its pre-Christian roots. Although newly indoctrinated Christians would allow some compromises in their religious rituals, the early followers were more comfortable with imagery that was familiar to them. The power and authenticity of the object is in its original form and any change would lessen its power or offend the deity.

Others are more comfortable with the idea that the church was established upon the foundation of pre-Christian beliefs it sought to supplant. There is in Rome a church called Santa Maria Sopre Minerva, which loosely translates to Saint Mary on top of Minerva. This seems to allude to the practice that Christianity followed of building churches and consecrating sites as holy that were once temples or believed to somehow be related to a godhead. It is as if the religious beliefs that existed before lend the new
beliefs legitimacy. It could be said that there was something sacred in these places, even before the people were able to identify it as Christian. This offers a parallel with the artistic tradition behind Black Madonna images. The folklore regarding many of Black Madonna imagery is that they were created in the Holy Land by St. Luke or St. John and are, therefore, intimately tied to the biblical tradition. In other folklore she simply appears or is sometimes discovered. Sometimes people were led to her. Sometimes she emerged from out of the earth as if she were born from it. Black Madonna imagery appears to be timeless and infinitely attached to the earth.

Christian beliefs and practices united the rural communities with the larger centers of religious culture. Even those who still believed in their former gods were inundated with Christian teaching. The ecclesiastical authority fully recognized the power of pre-Christian images. It was The Council of Ephesus in 431 C.E. that sought to align as much of this power as they could with the Virgin Mary. Thus, she was given the title of Mother of God, a title that had formerly been given to any number of goddesses. The Lady of Oropa is a Black Madonna installed in Italy at a site that was once dedicated to Apollo. This figure has been accorded so much power by the church that she wears three crowns set off by a halo. These were given to her by four separate popes to commemorate miracles worked by her.

There is no escaping the belief in the power of the Black Madonna, and some scholars have attached the black color to her power, seeing it not as a sign of humility. Black, after all, is the color of the earth, and the darker the earth is then the more fecund
it is. Nothing in the stance of the Black Madonna signals weakness. She tends to be portrayed looking directly at the viewer, straight ahead. The Child on her knees also stares directly out. There is also the possibility that this Mary is connected to other goddesses who were explicitly goddesses of the darkness or of night. The Egyptians worshipped a deity called Nuit (French for night). They sometimes portrayed her in a curious position (much like the “downward dog” of contemporary yoga): she arches her body over top the earth like a canopy and wears on her dark skin a gown of stars. The Greeks worshipped Nyx as the goddess of night and, therefore, the one who held dominion over sleep, dreams, and death. Hesiod identified Nyx as the mother of all gods.

We commonly refer to the Earth as our Mother. Is it any wonder that these goddesses were seen as coming from and having dominion over the Earth, just as the Egyptian Nuit reigned over the earth, her husband? That many Black Madonna are believed to have sprung from the earth illustrates that, just as Mary gave birth to Christ, so the earth gives birth to her, and to us. It further emphasizes both our origins and our destiny. Perhaps it also explains the lack of other dark religious icons, as there are few ancient portrayals of a dark Jesus or dark church fathers. It is only Mary who contains the darkness of the earth and of flesh. And it points to her curious position, at once human and divine, passing between the two kingdoms and the luminal space between birth and death.

In the modern world there is still a hunger for what the Black Madonna represents. Particularly, perhaps, feminist theory, Black studies, Greek, Egyptian, Hinduism, and
Celtic traditions may have reawakened an interest in this figure. Adherents to these various movements or beliefs find ways to explain the unusual modes the veneration of these figures takes. The church has little place in it for the burning of fire before them, sometimes in the shape of a wheel, or the bathing of them in wine. These rites point to beliefs that predate Christianity. Yet, some they offer a vision of Christianity that is more woman-centered and inclusive. In the popular novel (2002) and film (2008) The Secret Life of Bees, written by Sue Monk Kidd, the figure of a Black Madonna becomes the mother-protector we all wish for. On our road to the light, she is the darkness we know and can rest in, and where we can be assured she is there, watching over it all.
Figure 1. Painting of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, 1382.
Source. ARTstore Slide Gallery Data from: University of California, San Diego
Figure 2. Ceiling mosaic of the Virgin and Child (Panagria Nikopoia), c. 867 A.D.
Hagia Sophia, Constantinople
Source. ARTstore Slide Gallery
Data from: University of California, San Diego.
Figure 3. Ivory Triptych Icon of the Virgin Hodegetria with Saints, 950-1000
Source. ARTstore Slide Gallery
Data from: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland.
Figure. Aurora Consurgens, ca 1420 (detail of black bride)
Zurich, Zentralbibliothek, Codes Rhenoviensis 172, f. 29v
Figure 5. Isis and Osiris, 26th-30th Dynasty
Department of Image Collections
National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, DC.
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore
Figure 6. 4th century BCE Seated Demeter, Turkey
Source: Saskia, Ltd.
Photo © Ronald Wiedenhoeft
Figure 7. Seated Cybele, Kamarina
Department of Image Collections
National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, DC.
{591 02629}
Figure 8. 12th century, Notre Dame la Brune
Department of Image Collections
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.
©Photo Zodiaque
Figure 8. 12th century, Romanesque Madonna and child
Department of Image Collections
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.
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Figure 10. 12th century Auvergne Virgin and Child
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National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, DC.
Metropolitan Museum of Art: Cloisters, New York
Figure 11. 12th century Enthroned Virgin and Child, Auvergne
Department of Image Collections
National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, DC.
{61-21} North Carolina Museum of Art
Figure 13. View of Le Puy
Figure 14. Painting of the Black Madonna of Le Puy
Figure. 15. Le Puy statuary
Figure 16. 1500 A.D. Woodcut of Black Madonna of Le Puy
Figure. 17. 1523 A.D. Woodcut of Black Madonna of Le Puy
Figure 18. View of Rocamadour, France
Figure 19. Statue of the Black Madonna of Rocamadour
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National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, DC.
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Figure 20. 12th century, Notre Dame of Orcival
Department of Image Collections
National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, DC.
473 00320
Figure 21. 10th century manuscript of Clermont Virgin and Child Statuary
Bibl. Mu., ms. 145, fol. 130v (detail)
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