

# **The Basilica of La Madeleine, Vézelay**

## **Spatial and Symbolic Narratives in the Medieval Western Christian Church**

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### ABSTRACT

Sacred architecture can be understood, in part, as a cultural artifact that traditionally has symbolized religious beliefs and facilitated the enactment of shared rituals. This paper argues that the entry, path sequence, and sanctuary of sacred architecture often symbolized the spiritual path and its goal, and its ambulation by the religious acolyte recapitulated the spiritual quest. The introduction discusses patterns of the psyche, mythology, and pilgrimage with a particular emphasis on the recurring theme of the hero-redeemer figure and the spiritual quest. There is also an examination of patterns of architectural form and organization, with a particular emphasis on spatial sequences and symbolic narratives in sacred architecture to document the interrelationship of mythology, religious beliefs, and sacred architecture.

The spatial sequence and symbolic narrative of The Basilica of La Madeleine in Vézelay (Fr.), serves as the paper's case study, and is examined in depth. The Medieval Western Christian church comprised a complex matrix of cultural and religious forces: Roman, "Pagan," Christian and regional elements influenced its organization, imagery and ritual use. For example, as the Roman Catholic Church eventually replaced the political structure of the Roman Empire, its authority was expressed, in part, through the replication and transformation of Roman architectural elements, motifs and symbols of power. The ecclesiastical and political power of the basilica was symbolized by the imagery, iconography, organization, and spatial and temporal sequence of the architecture. The Christian pilgrim recapitulated the spiritual journey to a place of authority and sacrality, a mimesis of Christ's journey to apotheosis.

The paper utilizes a range of scholarly texts to structure its argument: Carl Jung's theory of archetypes; Mircea Eliade's concepts of sacred space; Joseph Campbell's writings on "universal mythic themes" and in particular the "myth of the hero's journey;" and E. Baldwin Smith's "City-Gate Concept" inform the argument. The conclusion argues that the interrelationship of belief, ritual and architectural symbolism found particularly potent expression in the Medieval Western Christian Church.