



## Romanesque Capital Representing Jonah And The Big Fish, Circa 1160-1180



45 000 EUR

Period : Before 16th century

Condition : Quelques manques

Material : Stone

Width : 28 cm

Height : 27 cm

Depth : 28 cm

<https://www.proantic.com/en/862952-romanesque-capital-representing-jonah-and-the-big-fish-circa-1160-1180.html>

### Description

Romanesque historiated capital representing  
Jonah and the big fish, circa 1160-1180

Probably from the ancient abbey of  
Sainte-Enimie (Lozère, France)

Without astragalus or abacus, this capital has four  
faces, three of which are carved. The non-carved  
face was certainly opposite a wall.

The scene represented is the misadventure of  
Jonah, who was sent on a mission by the Lord to  
the city of Nineveh (Jonah 1: 1 -4: 11). Jonah's  
flight by boat to the city of Tarshish aroused  
divine wrath, and so "Jehovah sent a great wind  
upon the sea, and there was such a violent storm  
that the boat was about to be wrecked." Thrown  
into the sea by the sailors at his own request in

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order to save the ship, Jonah was swallowed by a "big fish", which kept him in his belly for three days, thus constituting a prefiguration of the Passion of Christ. Finally rejected on the beach at the request of the Lord after his supplications, Jonah set out for Nineveh where he will finally accomplish the mission entrusted to him.

If the fantastic atmosphere of this historiated capital remains very Romanesque, the careful representation of the anatomy, as well as the muscles of the legs and the ribs of the torso, is to be inscribed in the second half of the 12th century, when Gothic sculpture is nursing. We can thus compare it to the frescoes of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe, from the end of the Romanesque period, as well as to the muscular body of Jonas represented on the Verdun altarpiece of 1181.

Our capital shows the same iconography as the famous Jonas capital of Mozac. On the first side, Jonah is thrown overboard and swallowed by the fish. On the second, Jonas is thrown back on the shore at the end of the three days. Finally, on the last side, Jonah reaches the walls of Nineveh to accomplish the Lord's mission. However, Mozac's capital does not show the same narrative fluidity, since the narration is not continuous as on our capital where Jonas is represented only once, lengthwise on the first two sides and the corner of the last. . This separation of the body into two, according to researcher Anne-Sophie Traineau-Durozoy, may be an illustration of the interior conversion of Jonah, and therefore of each of us, who emerges from the ordeal as a new man. On the other hand, the smaller size of our capital forced the sculptor to limit his story by excluding the sailors.

The talent of the sculptor is manifested in the use of decorative motifs which structure the space of the capital and make the story understandable. You have to imagine this capital painted, further

reinforcing these effects. Thus on the first face, the body whose anatomy is emphasized surmounts the nave represented by long ribbons, and as if enveloped by the body of the fish, covered with rings, above a representation of agitated waves. These c-shaped waves become the scales of the serpent on the second side, occupied mainly by the head of the monstrous fish, suddenly provided with clawed legs, ears and a lion's mane. Finally, on the last side, Jonah's head emerging from the fish is found in front of Nineveh, symbolized by ramparts, two crenellated towers, a gallery of arches above the door, one of which is open, and its' hinges recognizable. We note that this representation of Nineveh is similar to that of the illumination of the Hortus Deliciarum (now lost) of the Mont Saint-Odile. According to Anne-Sophie Traineau-Durozoy, this figuration of Jonah emerging from the head of the fish in front of Nineveh - geographically impossible - would have appeared in the Parisian illuminated Bibles at the end of the 12th century.

The monstrous representation of the fish is interesting from an iconographic point of view, since the "big fish" (*piscis grandis* in the Vulgate of Saint-Jérôme) most often appears in the form of a simply disproportionate fish, sometimes provided with teeth, in illuminations, sculptures, stained-glass windows and goldsmith's work. Only a part of the representations of the Jonas episode present a monstrous fish, often inspired by early Christian representations born from the ancient Bestiaries, where it is not only marine and terrestrial but sometimes aerial with the presence of wings. Our monster, endowed on the second face of the capital with hair and clawed paws, belongs to this mixed category combining land and sea, which illustrates the duality which the medieval period was fond of, and ultimately represents death, the underworld, easy link with the Resurrection of Christ. The insistence on the monstrous and therefore mortal character is also

useful to show the miracle of Jonah's survival in this ordeal, a miracle obtained by the hero's prayers, and his repentance. Iconographically, we see it on our capital with the disappearance of teeth between the first and the second face.

Condemned to be torn to pieces upon entering the belly of the beast, Jonah miraculously emerges unscathed. There is even a complete change in the nature of the fish on both sides: the fish with teeth on the first side becomes a mainly terrestrial monster on the second, gently throwing Jonah back on the beach. This is an extremely rare iconographic feature.

Probably from the ancient abbey of  
Sainte-Enimie (Lozère, France)

Lightly golden marmoreal limestone.  
Some lacks. Some traces of polychromy.

Height: 27 cm - width and depth: 28 cm  
Weight: 26.5 Kg

Bibliography: Anne-Sophie Traineau-Durozoy.  
Jonah and the fish. Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel  
de Cuxa, Abbaye de Saint-Michel de Cuxa, 2017,  
48, pp.115-127.