

## THREE-HEADED TRINITY OR THREE-FACED TRINITY

- **Subject matter:** Three-headed Trinity or Three-faced Trinity. Three-Headed Trinity concerns the depiction of God with three independent heads while Three-Faced Trinity concerns the depiction of God with one single head composed by three adjacent faces, that is to say, four eyes, three noses, and three mouths put together creating three interlinked faces. Nevertheless both adjectives, Three-Headed and Three-Faced, have been considered to be almost synonymous, since they describe one single iconographical prototype with two minor variations<sup>1</sup>.
- **Keywords:** Anthropomorphic Trinity, Christian Iconography, Late Middle Ages.
- **Summary:** Three-Headed and Three-Faced Trinities are depictions of God under an anthropomorphic appearance sharing one single body, but expressing their triple nature through a multiplication of either heads or faces. The Three-Headed and Three-Faced Trinities can be attached to a full body or they can appear on busts. The perfect equivalence and sameness of the three *persons* was the theological thesis that encouraged this iconography. Nevertheless, the representation of an image with more than one head was also a feature of medieval diabolic depictions that later on made Counterreformation artists avoid the use of this iconography.
- **Primary sources:** The notion of the Trinity, as a fusion and even a *confusion* of three identical persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), seems to have been stated in two biblical events:
  - In Genesis 18, 1-22, Abraham hosts three men. But, there is a deliberate *confusion* around these men since they are described either as “three different male persons” or just as “one single God”, by using singular and plural grammatical forms without any distinction. Such a relevant ambiguity concerning the number of persons hosted by Abraham had an impact on theological comments on and about the event. As an example, Saint Augustine stated that Abraham hosted the Trinity, because he “saw three persons but venerated one single God” (*tres vidit, unum adoravit*). That explanation could have encouraged the Three-Headed Trinity iconography, as can be seen in an example from a 13<sup>th</sup> century Cambridge Bible (St.John’s College, ms. K 26, fol. 9v) [for more details see *Precedents, transformations, and projection*].
  - John 14, 9-10 includes another interesting sentence: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.” (Quotation taken from Bible Gateway, <http://www.biblegateway.com>, last accessed 9<sup>th</sup> February 2010). Thus, John states the perfect sameness or confusion of the three divine *persons*.
- **Other sources, non-written sources:** The Three Headed Trinity or the Three Faced Trinity had visual precedents not only in Christian art but also in Pagan works of art. Thus, several Eastern and Western religions had multiple-headed divinities and because of that, they produced multiple-headed images which could have inspired Christian medieval art. The furthest iconographical source could have come from Asia, more specifically from the

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<sup>1</sup> See Petazzoni (1946), “The pagan origins...”, pp. 135-155, Réau (1956), *Iconographie...*, pp. 21-22, and Pamplona (1970), *Iconografía...*, pp. 39-53.

triple image of Shiva, Visna and Brahma (Hinduism). There are also closer precedents, such as certain depictions from Late Antiquity of Hecate (the goddess of labors, depicted with three heads) and of Cerberus (the three-headed dog that guarded the doors of Hell). Even closer are those multiple-headed gods of the Germanic People in the Early Middle Ages. Petazzoni<sup>2</sup> stated that ancient Germanic People believed in a common solar god who had lots of heads (three, four, seven, etc.) and who was called with different names depending on the region of his veneration (Triglav, Svantevit, Rugievit, Lug, etc.). No matter how many names their gods had, these gods could have inspired the iconographical creation of the Three Faced Trinity.

Within Christian boundaries, there was another possible iconographical source. In fact, the Three Headed Trinity could have been linked to the Multiple-Headed Devil. Having more than one headed could have applied to the depiction of the Trinity of the Devil, that is to say, the Goodness or the Badness. Prof. Boespflug<sup>3</sup> explained this contradictory process of iconographical creation.

- **Geographical and chronological framework:** there are examples of this iconography from the 12th- 13th century to 19th century, all around a wide geographical territory in Western Europe (France, Spain, Italy, Balkans, etc.) and in Latin American countries. For more details, see the *images* section.
- **Artistic media and techniques:** The Three Headed Trinity was abundantly depicted in sculpture, illuminated manuscripts, engravings, and wall painting. For more details, see examples in *images* section.
- **Precedents, transformations, and projection:** As mentioned in the *non written sources* section, the Three Headed trinity had precedents in Antiquity: Hecate and Cerberus could be considered to be far sources for its iconography [for more details about Hecate, see Olympos link, under the supervision of prof. Isabel Rodríguez López [https://campusvirtual.ucm.es/SCRIPT/portal-5859886-1/scripts/serve\\_home](https://campusvirtual.ucm.es/SCRIPT/portal-5859886-1/scripts/serve_home)]

Nevertheless, the first time that a multiple-headed and human-like figure was used to depict the Trinity was around the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some cantilevers placed in Christian churches during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, especially in France, were carved under a *Vultus Trifrons* depiction, i.e. with the shape of a head composed by three faces. Although they have been studied as just decorative forms without any symbolic meaning<sup>4</sup>, they could be reconsidered to be the most ancient manifestation of the Three Headed Trinity. Regardless, this iconography became more and more important during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thus, one of the most interesting works of art showing this iconography is in one of the folios of the Cambridge Bible (St.John's Collage, ms. K 26, fol. 9v) which depicts Abraham's Hospitality. In this folio father Abraham knells down in front of one single body and a Trinity with three heads, as it is stated in the reverse inscription (*De Domino apprente Abrahe in figura Trinitatis*).

During the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was profusely used in France, Italy, the Balkans and Spain. It could be used alone or in combination with geometrical symbols, as it can be seen in the Manresa Trinity (15<sup>th</sup> century) or in Tulebras Trinity (16<sup>th</sup> century), where a three headed God holds a combination of a triangle, circles, and several inscriptions regarding the diversity and unity of the Son, the Father and the Holy Spirit. Taking into consideration its monstrosity, they were later severely criticized by Church authorities.

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<sup>2</sup> Petazzoni (1946), "The pagan origins...", *op.cit.*, pp. 135-155.

<sup>3</sup> Boespflug (1998), *Le diable et la trinité...*, pp. 156-175.

<sup>4</sup> Pamplona (1970), *Iconografía...*, *op.cit.*, p. 39.

They were rejected by J. Gerson (chancellor of Paris University in the 15th century), Saint Antoninus (archbishop of Florence in the 15<sup>th</sup> century), J. Molanus (a theologian of Leuven University in the 16<sup>th</sup> century), Pope Urban VIII (17<sup>th</sup> century), and finally Pope Benedict XIV (18<sup>th</sup> century). Nonetheless the iconography survived either in rural or non western places, far from the centers of power of the Christian Church, for example the Trinity of Museo Nacional del Virreinato de Tepotzotlán (Mexico, 18<sup>th</sup> century).

- **Typology and related themes:** there are no typological referents in the Old Testament.
- **Images:**
  - Vultus Trifrons, cantilever in San Martin de Artaiz in Navarra (Spain), stone carving, 12th century.
  - Abraham hosting the Three-Faced Trinity, Cambridge Bible (England), illuminated manuscript, St. John's College, ms. K 26, fol. 9v, ca. 1270.
  - Three-Faced Trinity, Church of Saint Quiriace de Provins (France), wall painting, 16<sup>th</sup> century.
  - Three-Faced and Geometrical Trinity, Tulebras Monastery (Spain), wooden painting, Jerónimo Cósida, ca. 1570
  - Three-Faced Trinity, Museo Nacional del Virreinato de Tepotzotlán (Mexico), oil painting on canvas, 18th century
- **Bibliography:**
  - BOESPFLUG, François (1998): "Le diable et la trinité tricéphales. A propos d'une pseudo- « vision de la Trinité » advenue à un novice de saint Norbert de Xanten », *Revue des sciences religieuses*, vol. LXXII, num. 2, pp. 156-175.
  - PAMPLONA, Germán (1970): *Iconografía de la Santísima Trinidad en el arte medieval español*. Instituto Diego Velázquez, Madrid.
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  - RÉAU, Louis (1956): *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*. Presses Universitaires de France. París, vol. II- part I (Iconographie de la Bible-Ancien Testament).
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