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Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern Europe in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

Susan L. Green

Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern Europe in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

This book is the first detailed investigation to focus on the late medieval use of Tree of Jesse imagery, traditionally a representation of the genealogical tree of Christ. In northern Europe, from the mid-fifteenth to the early sixteenth centuries, it could be found across a wide range of media. Yet, as this book vividly illustrates, it had evolved beyond a simple genealogy into something more complex, which could be modified to satisfy specific religious requirements. It was also able to function on a more temporal level, reflecting not only a clerical preoccupation with a sense of communal identity, but a more general interest in displaying a family's heritage, continuity and/or social status. It is this dynamic and polyvalent element that makes the subject so fascinating.

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Conventions

All biblical texts are taken from the Vulgate, with translations from the Douay-Rheims version, and all transcriptions and translations of inscriptions and foreign texts are my own, unless otherwise stated.

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Introduction

The Tree of Jesse, an illustration of the prophecy of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, was once one of the most prolific images in northern Europe, and from the mid-fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries could be found on every type of religious object. This book will consider various aspects of the late medieval use of the iconography and, rather than just confining itself to traditional representations, will extend the parameters to include works that have appropriated and adapted the imagery to convey nuanced and subtle shifts in meaning. Now mostly dislocated from their original surroundings, the function of these objects has become unclear to the modern viewer, but by recreating the circumstances in which the Tree of Jesse was employed, it will be shown that they can be seen to reflect, directly or indirectly, the concerns of a society on the brink of great change. By attempting to answer fundamental questions, such as who was commissioning these works and why, this study is able to produce valuable information that can be beneficial to both cultural and social historians, contributing to our overall knowledge of the period.[1]

The Tree of Jesse had been a frequently used image in manuscript illumination and stained glass in most of northern Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[2] As has long been recognised, there was then a gradual slowing down in the frequency of representations from the fourteenth century onwards.[3] The renewed interest that took place in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries is therefore remarkable and requires explanation, particularly as it appears to have occurred in a clearly defined geographical area, centred on the Burgundian Low Countries, but also spreading to the south of Germany and other parts of northern France.[4] By looking at the subject across a wide range of media, in a manner that allows for sufficient attention to be paid to each object and its particular context, this book will explore the reasons behind this phenomenon. It will bring together works that in many instances have been largely neglected in the scholarly literature, but which, when examined against the theological and devotional background of the day, can be seen to have different functions and meanings for different social groups. By studying the Tree of Jesse and its associated iconography in light of its significance to these groups, we are able to see that it became an image of great complexity, one with deep roots in the religious beliefs of the day, but one that could also function on a more temporal level, reflecting society's preoccupation with the role of women, identity and social status in the years leading up to the Reformation.

Scholarship to Date

Previous authors to consider the Tree of Jesse have, on the whole, focused on a much earlier period, and do not engage deeply with individual objects and their backgrounds. One of the first studies to be conducted was by Abbot Corblet, who wrote a short paper in 1860 that predominantly examined examples from northern France.[5] He made the novel suggestion that liturgical prophet dramas may have been influential in the development of Tree of Jesse iconography.[6] Corblet was followed by Émile Mâle, who, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, referred to the use of the motif in his well-known publications that explore the iconography of Christian art.[7] The importance of prophet dramas in the development of Tree of Jesse iconography was pursued further by Mâle, who claimed that the dramas had inspired Abbot Suger and his artists in the creation of the twelfth-century Jesse window at Saint Denis.[8] Mâle also stated that the full or 'true formula' of the Tree of Jesse that was conceived in this work, became the model for all future representations.

Ligtenberg, who considered the Tree of Jesse for his 1929 article that discussed the genealogy of Christ in the visual arts, again addressed the issue of the importance of the prophet dramas.[9] Disagreeing with Mâle, he concluded that they were not a prerequisite for the iconography at Saint Denis, and that there were too many variants in later representations for it to be the source. In 1934, Arthur Watson conducted the first detailed investigation into the use of the iconography, although he concentrated mainly on representations of the motif before the end of the twelfth century.[10] Watson also reflected at some length on whether prophet dramas were central to the development of Tree of Jesse imagery. Like Ligtenberg, he ultimately rejected this premise, although he did acknowledge, as seems reasonable, that both were expressions of the same idea.[11] Some later examples of the iconography were discussed by Mirella Levi D'Ancona in 1957, although these were examined only in relation to the concept of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin.[12] More recently, Otto Böcher looked at examples in Germany for a brief paper written in 1973, and the motif has also been referred to by scholars primarily interested in the role of Saint Anne, the apocryphal mother of the Virgin.[13] Where relevant, aspects of these previous studies will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

Most of the literature mentioned here consists of short articles, or merely refers to Tree of Jesse iconography as part of a wider discussion; none consider the iconography with regard to the type of questions that are the focus of this investigation. There are, however, two relatively recent works, more than twenty years apart, which have touched on some of the issues raised in this study. The first, by Werner Esser in Bonn, considered representations of the Holy Kinship in late medieval Germany and the Netherlands, identifying several examples where the Tree of Jesse had been used in conjunction with this iconography.[14] The second, by Séverine Lepape in Paris, looked in some detail at the development of the Tree of Jesse motif in France and Britain from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries.[15] However, these theses are essentially surveys and although useful as sources of reference, are limited by the very nature of their broad approach.

Origin and History of Tree of Jesse Iconography

Before discussing the fifteenth and early sixteenth-century use of Tree of Jesse imagery, it is first essential to understand the origin and history of the iconography. The term 'Tree of Jesse', used so widely today, may not have been universally

recognised in the late medieval period, as it does not occur in either scripture or medieval biblical exegesis. The Vulgate discusses the '*virga de radice Jesse*' (the rod, or shoot, out of the root of Jesse), and one of the earliest references to a pictorial representation of the subject, in the twelfth century, describes it as the '*Stirps Iesse*' (stem of Jesse).[16] In the vernacular it has been referred to in several different ways. Two early sixteenth-century German contracts describe it as the '*der stam Jesse*' (the root/trunk of Jesse), or '*König Jesse Mit ainem Aufwachsenden stamb*' (King Jesse with a growing root/trunk).[17] In addition, an English document of 1635, which mentions the original late medieval stained glass in the Lady Chapel of Winchester Cathedral, talks about a now lost window as painted with the 'Genealogie from the Root of Jesse'.[18] Consequently, even though '*boem van Jesse*' (tree of Jesse) can be found in a Flemish contract of 1474,[19] it seems that the use of 'Tree of Jesse' as a general term to classify the iconography was not commonplace until the eighteenth century.[20] Nevertheless, for the purpose of clarity, the term will be used throughout this book.

As an illustration of a prophecy fulfilled by the Incarnation, the Tree of Jesse, the genealogical tree of Christ, had been a favourite theme throughout the Middle Ages. Isaiah had prophesised that a Messiah would be born to the family of Jesse, the father of King David, Isaiah 11:1–3, '*et egredietur virga de radice Jesse et flos de radice eius ascendet*'.

> And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom, and of understanding, the spirit of counsel, and of fortitude, the spirit of knowledge, and of godliness. And he shall be filled with the spirit of the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge according to the sight of the eyes, nor reprove according to the hearing of the ears.

This passage, combined with the genealogy at the beginning of Saint Matthew's Gospel, related again by Saint Luke, provided the textual basis for the iconography.[21] Support for the prophecy was found in Revelation 22:16, 'I Jesus have sent my angel, to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the root and stock of David, the bright and morning star', and also in the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans 15:12, 'And again Isaias saith: There shall be a root of Jesse; and he that shall rise up to rule the Gentiles, in him the Gentiles shall hope'. It was further enriched at the beginning of the third century, when the early Christian author Tertullian linked the Vulgate Latin word for rod, *virga* with the Virgin *virgo* and the flower *flos* with Christ.[22]

> Is it not because he is himself the flower from the stem [rod] which came forth from the root of Jesse, while the root of Jesse is the house of David, and the stem [rod] from the root is Mary, descended from David, that the flower from the stem [rod], the Son of Mary, who is called Jesus Christ, must himself also be the fruit?

Tertullian's interpretation was reaffirmed in the fourth century by Saint Ambrose, in his text on the Holy Spirit, Book II, Chapter 5, verse 38, 'The root of Jesse the patriarch is the family of the Jews, Mary is the rod, Christ the flower of Mary, Who, about to spread the good odour of faith throughout the whole world, budded forth

from a virgin womb'.[23] It was affirmed again by Saint Jerome in his letter XXII to Eustochium:

> There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a flower shall grow out of his roots. The rod is the mother of the Lord—simple, pure, unsullied; drawing no germ of life from without but fruitful in singleness like God Himself. The flower of the rod is Christ, who says of Himself: I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys.[24]

The messianic prophecies of the Old Testament are, therefore, realised in the incarnation of Christ through the lineage of David and the virgin birth. This concept, which was seen to emphasise the prefigurative significance of the biblical passage, became commonplace in early medieval commentaries.

Isaiah played a central role in providing scriptural authority for many of the widely held beliefs regarding the Virgin, and he alone among the prophets seems to refer to her explicitly, Isaiah 7:14, 'Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel'.[25] This passage, along with that relating to Jesse, became an essential part of the liturgy for Advent, and the prophecy is further recalled in one of the Greater Antiphons, *O Radix Jesse*, which was prescribed by the eighth century for Vespers on the Wednesday of Ember week.[26]

In pictorial representations of the subject, it is possible to see an evolution in the iconography over a relatively short space of time.[27] The first images present the most literal interpretation of Isaiah's text and usually show Jesse alone, with the tree growing from his body. The placement of the trunk is varied, and can be depicted either growing from Jesse's head, shoulders, heart, stomach or groin. These different placements have been discussed by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, who distinguishes between those she considers carnal, with their obvious association with the origin of life, and those she considers spiritual.[28] By the mid-fifteenth century, however, the most popular form of representation has the trunk growing from Jesse's heart.[29] Resting on the flowers of the tree are doves, which relate to the second part of Isaiah's prophecy and represent the gifts of the Holy Spirit.[30] The earliest known depiction of the subject occurs in a Bohemian manuscript dated 1086, which may have originated in the circle of the scriptorium at the Monastery of Saint Emmeram in Regensburg (National Library of the Czech Republic, MS XIV, A.13, fol.4v) (Figure 0.1).[31] This manuscript, known as the Vyšehrad Codex, contains the Coronation Gospels of King Vratislav II, the first monarch of Bohemia. The image is located on the lower register of the page preceding the Gospel of Saint Matthew, with a representation of the closed gate of Ezekiel, commonly interpreted as a prefiguration of the virgin birth, in the upper register.[32] The previous page features illustrations of the *virga Aaron* and the *virga Moses*, which were also seen as prefigurations of the Incarnation.[33] Therefore, all four images appear to relate to the virgin birth of Christ, even though the Virgin and Christ are not actually depicted. The *virga Aaron* and *virga Moses* have an obvious association with the *virga Jesse* and, consequently, it is not unusual to find Moses and/or Aaron appearing in later Tree of Jesse imagery.[34] In the Vyšehrad Codex, Isaiah is depicted with a scroll that bears the text of his prophecy '*et egredietur virga de radice Jesse*', which wraps around the seated figure of Jesse. A tree grows from beneath Jesse's foot and seven haloed doves perch on the blooming

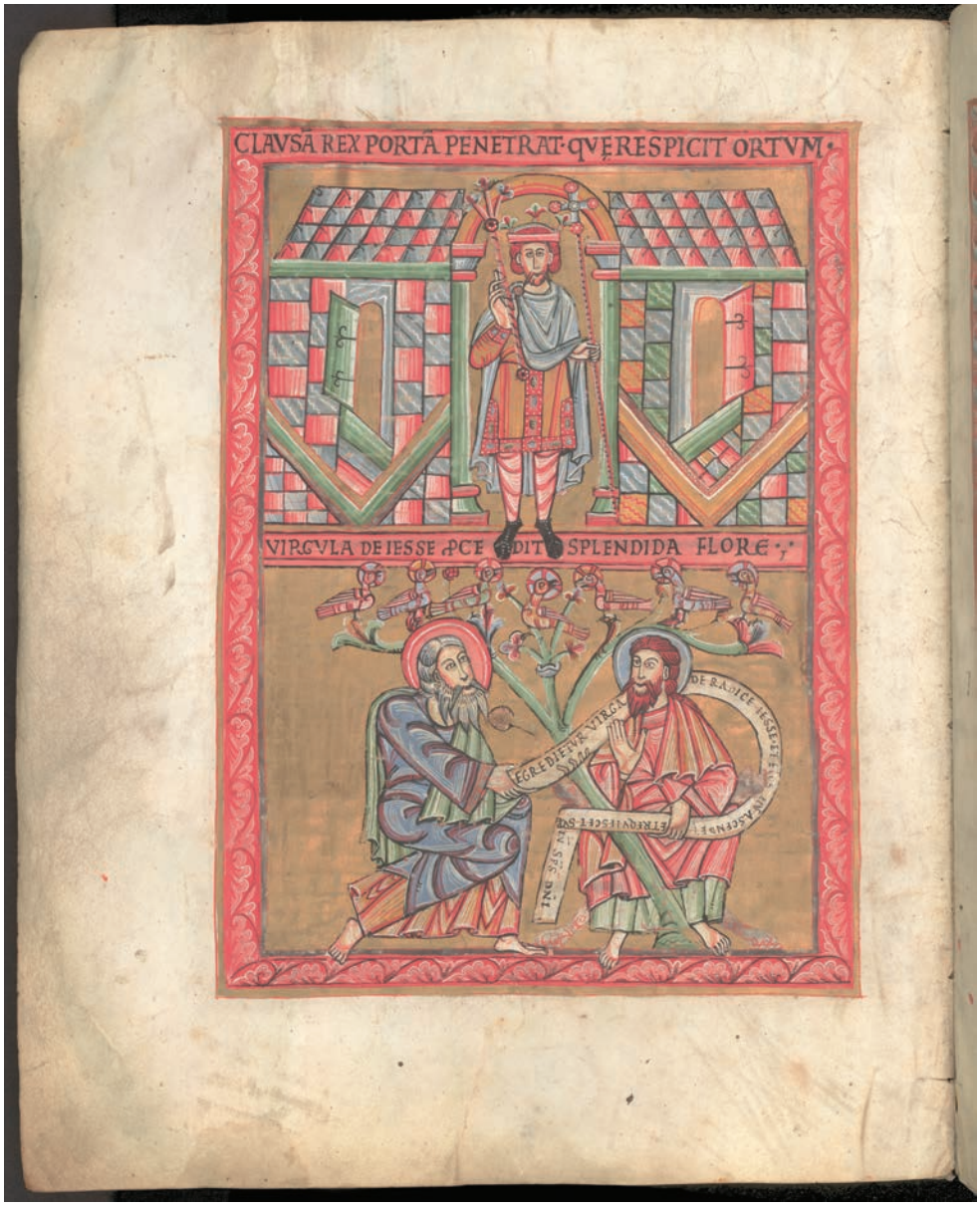

Figure 0.1 The Vyšehrad Codex, c.1086
National Library of the Czech Republic, Kodex Vyšehradský, Shelfmark: XIV.A.13.fol.4v

branches. Across the top of the image a Latin inscription reads '*Virgula de Iesse p[ro] cedit splendida flore*' (the rod of Jesse produces a splendid flower). A later representation of Jesse depicted with seven doves can be found in the Bible of Saint-Bénigne, (Bibliothèque municipale de Dijon, MS00002, fol.148r) (Figure 0.2), thought to date

Figure 0.2 Tree of Jesse Detail From the Bible of Saint-Bénigne, Twelfth Century
Bibliothèque municipale de Dijon, MS00002, fol.148r

from the second quarter of the twelfth century. This miniature appears at the beginning of the Book of Isaiah, filling the centre of the opening initial of *Visio Isaie*.[35]

A further group of images incorporate the second prophecy of Isaiah, 'Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel'. These images

Figure 0.3 S. Hieronymi Explanatio in Isaiam, c.1125
Bibliothèque municipale de Dijon, MS00129, fols.4v and 5r

emphasise the role of the Virgin as the mother of Christ. One of the earliest to assign her a preeminent position can be found in a manuscript from the Abbey of Cîteaux in Burgundy (Bibliothèque municipale de Dijon, MS00129, fols.4v and 5r) (Figure 0.3). This manuscript, the *S. Hieronymi Explanatio in Isaiam*, contains Saint Jerome's commentary on Isaiah and has been dated to c.1125. Jesse appears asleep at the bottom of the tree; he holds the trunk with his left hand and where the trunk splits into two, the Virgin stands with the Christ Child in her arms. In her left hand she appears to hold a twig, presumably a further reference to the prophecy, and a single dove rests on her halo, which may intend to imply a dual meaning. On the opposite page, Isaiah stands in the initial letter with a scroll inscribed with the text of both of his prophecies, '*et egredietur virga*', and '*ecce virgo concipiet*'. He points to the image on the adjoining page to indicate that this is the fulfilment of those prophecies. This conflation of Isaiah's prophecies gives prominence to the Virgin's role in the Incarnation, and she may even form the *virga*, the shoot of the tree, as in a miniature from the twelfth-century Lambeth Bible (Lambeth Palace Library, Ms.3, fol.198r) (Figure 0.4).

In another manuscript of a similar date, also from Cîteaux, the Virgin can be seen enthroned in the tree (Bibliothèque municipale de Dijon, MS00641, fol.40v) (Figure 0.5). Known as the *Vitae Sanctorum*, or the *Légendaire de Cîteaux*, and dated c.1110–20, this miniature also incorporates four other Old Testament prefigurations: Daniel and the Lion's Den, Moses and the Burning Bush, Gideon and his Fleece and the Three Young Men and the Fiery Furnace.[36] These prefigurations, which also came to be

Figure 0.4 Lambeth Bible, Twelfth Century
Lambeth Palace Library, MS3, fol.198r

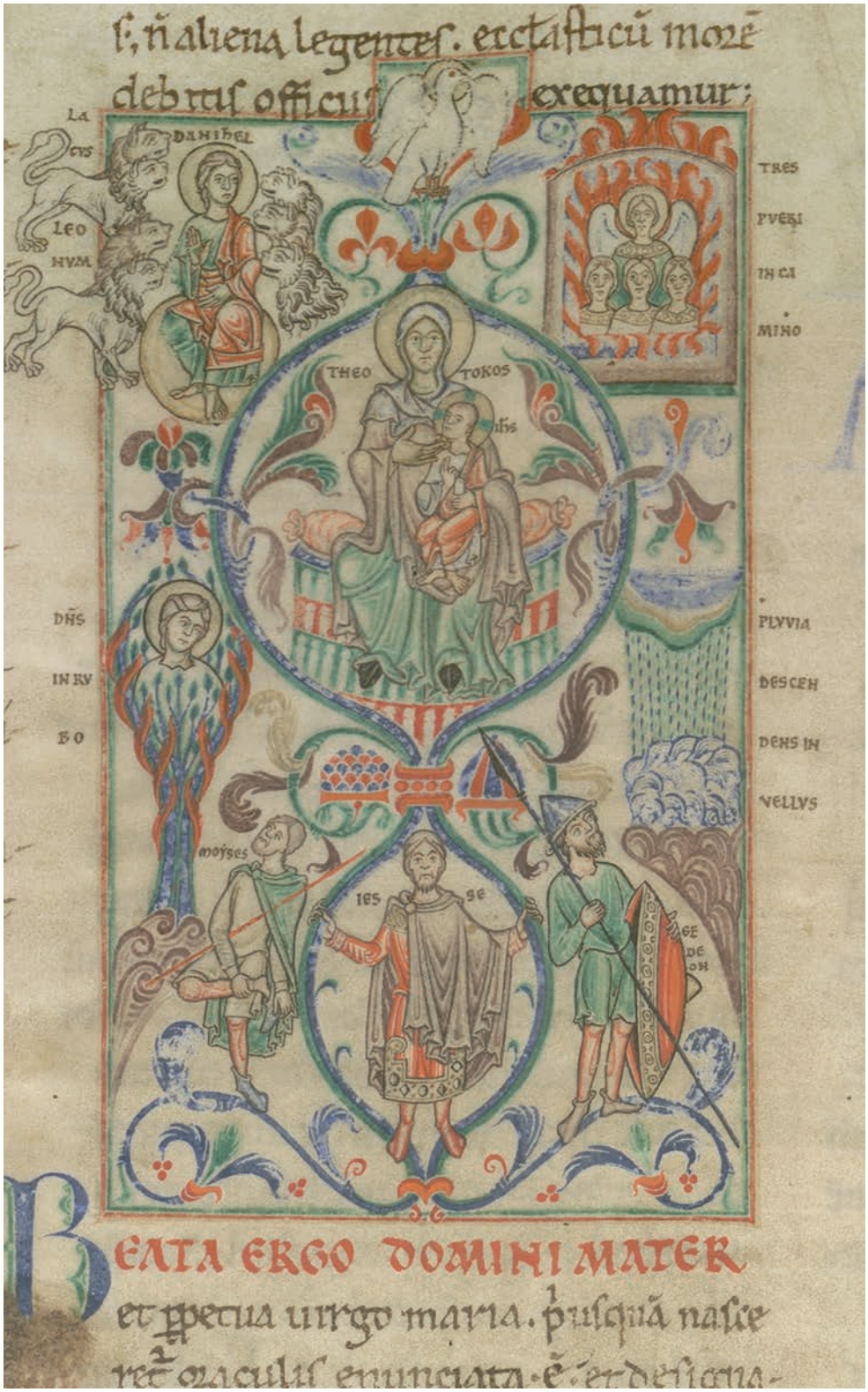

Figure 0.5 Tree of Jesse Detail From the *Légendaire de Cîteaux*, c.1110–20
Bibliothèque municipale de Dijon, MS00641, fol.40v

associated with the Virgin and Birth of Christ, can often be found represented alongside Tree of Jesse iconography. In other miniatures, Mary appears without prefigurations, but with King David, occasionally Solomon, and sometimes prophets, as in two twelfth-century manuscripts in the British Library: the Shaftesbury Psalter (Landsdowne 383, fol.15r) and the Winchester Psalter (Cotton MS Nero C IV, fol.9r).[37] Examples can also be found in illuminated Bibles, where the Tree of Jesse was often used to illustrate the beginning of the Book of Isaiah or Gospel of Matthew, as in the twelfth-century Bible of Saint Bertin in Paris (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Latin 16746, fol.7v), where a Tree of Jesse decorates the first initial of the *Liber generationis* of the first chapter of Matthew (Figure 0.6). Although not explicit from a reading of the Gospels, it is unsurprising that in time the Tree of Jesse also came to be seen as the genealogical tree of the Virgin and, as such, an affirmation of her Davidic and royal paternity.

This notion is evident in more complex representations that depict the extended genealogy from Jesse through David to the Virgin and Christ. In these images, Jesse is shown sleeping at the base of the tree in a semi-reclining position, sometimes under a tent-shaped canopy.[38] The tree that grows from his body branches out to accommodate the ancestors of Christ, who are depicted among the foliage. David is almost always shown with his harp, particularly in later representations, and sometimes Solomon can be identified from his turban. The number of secondary ancestors featured varies, depending on the space available. Crowning the tree are the Virgin and Christ, shown either separately or together, and sometimes surrounded by doves. It is also common to see prophets with scrolls inscribed with a quotation from the text of their prophecies; they are often shown in an animated state and may point to Christ as the foretold Messiah. Many early stained glass windows also include other attributes around Jesse; examples include a suspended lamp, which Watson has suggested may be symbolic of the eternal light of Christ.[39]

The earliest known example of this type of extended iconography appeared in the stained glass window commissioned in 1144 by Abbot Suger for the new choir of Saint Denis in Paris.[40] Unfortunately, this window has been extensively altered by restoration, although it is believed that the Jesse window located beneath the rose at the west end of Chartres Cathedral, dated only a few years later and considerably better preserved, is an almost identical copy of Suger's window (Figure 0.7).[41] Suger's design appears to have been popular for stained glass, and many twelfth- and early thirteenth-century windows throughout northern Europe are thought to have derived from the Saint Denis and Chartres model.[42]

By the mid-fifteenth century, the Tree of Jesse was a well established and familiar typological motif, when it seems there was a standardisation in pictorial representations of the subject. The most common number of kings depicted was now twelve, which was probably linked to the idea of the twelve tribes of Israel. This appears to derive from Acts 7:8, which states that Abraham's son was Isaac and that his son was Jacob, the father of the twelve patriarchs who were the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. This was perhaps also intended to provide an analogy with the twelve apostles, or the twelve fruits on the Tree of Life.[43] When named, the kings usually follow the order of twelve of the fourteen kings described by Matthew, starting with David, before the transmigration of Babylon.[44] Although by now commonplace, this was not an entirely new idea, as a twelfth-century precedent for the depiction of twelve kings can be found on the north doorway of the Baptistery at Parma. In addition, the

Figure 0.6 Bible of Saint Bertin, Twelfth Century
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Latin 16746, fol.7v

Figure 0.7 Tree of Jesse Window, Twelfth Century, Chartres Cathedral
(Photo: © Dr Stuart Watling)

kings were now often shown as half figures in blossoms of flowers on the tree; a precedent for this type of representation can be found in a Parisian *Bible Historiale* dated c.1414–15 (Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels, Ms.9002, fol.223r) (Figure 0.8).[45] Seven doves, representing the gifts of the Holy Spirit, also became rarer, presumably because the image now appears to focus more on the genealogy of Christ and

Figure 0.8 Parisian *Bible Historiale*, c.1414–15
Royal Library of Belgium, Ms.9002, fol.223r