

NAVEL LORE

Hiking in the Alps one summer, I came upon a Benedictine convent just outside of Mustair in the Engadine. In the museum, where fresco fragments were displayed, there was a 13th-century(?) atlante with the interesting peculiarity of having a navel shaped like an eye (with pupil and eyebrow; above). I would have chalked this up to abuse of fresh air had I not just seen a bas-relief Baptism of Christ in the convent church in which Christ's navel was very clearly carved in the form of an eye—again with pupil and eyebrow (next page).

My half-hearted efforts to find further examples of this curiosity have remained fruitless, but I suspect that there was an artist or group of artists going around the alpine regions making these *clins d'oeil* to ancient omphalic wisdom, and getting away with it.

Odd, vestigial, useless, the navel suffers the onus meted out to most forms of social short-circuitry. Contemplation of it is a byword for self-absorption, self-centeredness, self-indulgence. The French naturally have a word for it: *nombrilisme*. But so do the Dutch: *navelstaren* (see entries 9 and 51). What could it mean as a sort of psychological sense organ, staring back out of the depths of the past?

*PS: Much later, I found out that my former professor, the art historian Daniel Arasse, discovered an eye in the navel of Antonello da Messina's St. Sebastian (ca. 1476) in Dresden (Gemäldegalerie). Arasse's book *Le Détail: pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*, Flammarion 1992, would have been a major guide for my work had I discovered it sooner.*

