Open Access

Open Access:
Contextualizing the Archivolted Portals of Northern Spain and Western France within the Theology and Politics of Entry

By

Mickey Abel

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

Open Access:
Contextualizing the Archivolted Portals of Northern Spain and Western France
within the Theology and Politics of Entry,
by Mickey Abel

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-3564-1, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3564-0

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

Anyone who has visited the rural towns and villages of western France and northern Spain has experienced something of the communal energy of these places. Whether it is the morning queue at the bakery for the daily bread, the weekly bustle of the itinerant markets, or the more occasional gatherings associated with the transitional moments of life—a just-missed wedding evidenced by the remnants of rice and rose petals scattered on the plaza, a christening or first communion celebrated by joyful bands of children and parents banqueting in the garden beside the church, or the more somber farewells following a funeral—one comes to recognize the ubiquitous presence of the small, Romanesque churches that stand at the center of these villages and act as a backdrops to all of these events. Even today, as these villages begin (sadly) to clad themselves in the banal uniformity of corporate modernity, one senses that it is this singular building that still provides not only the focal point of the village, but the magnetic force that draws the inhabitants in and binds them to the center.

This was certainly my experience, particularly in the early stages of the research for this book. Frustrated by the lack of a comprehensive catalogue of these churches, I set out cross-country, naively thinking I would—or even could—compile such a catalogue as the preliminary stage of a more quantitative or statistical analysis. Traveling in my little rental car for months at a time, sometimes on roads where I had no business taking anything other than a four-wheel drive vehicle, and other times traversing as little as ten or fifteen kilometers, but stopping to see six or eight very similar churches, I came to realize that, unlike Arthur Kingsley Porter with his fancy touring car and unlimited budget, the monumental task I had set for myself was not only beyond the scope of my time, and my finances, as well as my family's understanding, but in the end, not all that necessary. This is because the real insights did not come from the impressive number of these buildings, although that fact certainly substantiates many of my conclusions. Rather, the insights came in the more intimate experience of the architectural form within its particular geographical and cultural context. The insights transformed my approach and although as a method it is not without its own inherent set of problems, the adoption of a social anthropological mode of observation allowed me to witness and record the various ways in which people

continue to use and respond to the churches that sit at the center of their villages.

One particular day in this program of observational experiences stands out among many as one of those cathartic moments when the pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place. This took place in the small town of Estella, Spain, in the state of Navarra, on the 25th of July, which is the feast day of Saint James or Santiago, as he is known in Spain. Most anywhere along the famous pilgrimage route to Compostela is an exciting place to be on this day dedicated to patron saint of pilgrims, but Estella takes particular pride in its pilgrimage heritage. In the Middle Ages this place was known as the "trailhead" for the Spanish portion of the pilgrimage; it was the place where those following the various French routes coming down through the Pyrenees to Roncevalles and then on to Pamplona, passing over the bridge at Puenta la Reina, would rest and celebrate before turning west toward Compostella and their final destination, the tomb of Saint James. This locational legacy translates into a significantly festive occasion, which I discovered was celebrated with the upmost of enthusiasm by throngs of pilgrims, tourists, and locals alike. In fact, the whole of the week leading up to the feast day was alive with activities as people flocked to the town filling the hotels and populating the public parks and campgrounds. There were outdoor arts festivals complete with food purveyors, theatrical re-enactments, and wandering minstrels of various sorts dressed in localized medieval costume.

Like many towns of both western France and northern Spain, Estella features a perplexing number of medieval religious sites. Here, as one follows the twenty kilometers of the pilgrimage road from the town of Puenta la Reina with its own two Romanesque churches—the Templar's El Crucifijo and Santiago, across the extant medieval bridge that gives the town its name, one comes to the spectacular façade of the more rural San Roman on the outskirts of the village of Cirauqui, with its portal comprised of ten archivolts, the centermost lobed in a form that makes reference to Islam. Approaching Estella proper, one comes to Santa Maria y Todos los Santos where one gets their first view of the hilly topography of the place—essentially two ridges separated by the meandering Rio Ega. To the north and the south, atop these two ridges, two major foundations, the monastery of San Pedro de la Rúa and the parish of San Miguel seem to confront each other. To the east and west of these sites, there are two smaller churches, Santo Sepulcro and San Nicolás, and in the old center, near the medieval palace of King Sancho Ramirez, there is the convent of Santo Domingo and the church of San Juan on the main plaza—all within

easy walking distance. By any account, this place was not lacking in religious buildings.

Each of these religious sites held their own celebratory masses during the festive week of Santiago, but on the actual feast day they coordinated their celebrations in what I now recognize as an activity that was particularly medieval in character and organization. Recreating the emotional excitement of many a medieval procession, the clergy of these churches systematically and incrementally processed a reliquary casket out of the monastic church of San Pedro on the south hill, down its elaborate staircase to the center of town, past the palace, across the bridge over the Ega, pausing at both San Juan and Santo Domingo before winding up the opposite northern hill to the parish of San Miguel. The gathering entourage, which grew in size and enthusiasm along the way, was greeted at San Miguel by a waiting crowd of clergy, a singing choir, acolytes ringing bells, and costumed children who danced around the arriving reliquary. All of this activity took place in front of the northern portal of the church. Finally, the entire processing crowd, including the crowd of onlookers filed through the open entry into the church where mass was said. When this mass was concluded, every bell in all of the town's churches peeled in an amazing cacophony of sound as the various contingents of the procession reassembled behind the relic bearers, to reverse the route, retracing their previous steps down the hill to the river and back up to San Pedro. Pausing there at the top of that long staircase, one more round of blessings, song, and praise were offered before returning the relic to the safety of the altar.

While all of this was engaging in its color, sound, and action, two important revelations occurred to me as I witnessed these events. First was the contagious emotional swell that developed in layers of enthusiasm as the staged event unfolded, step-by-step, in front of me. Second was most particularly the role played by the various church portals in this dramatic staging. Significantly, all the active elements were concentrated in front of not just the open door of the church, but before and within the porch-like space configured by the elaborate system of concentric arches above and around that open entry. Recalling for me the little half-dome, open-air theater in my hometown park, where as kids we would climb onto its little stage to perform for our parents, I came to see the arched form of these church portals as theatrical backdrops. Like that tiny stage of my youth, the shallow porches, created by the set of concentric arches, were treated as spaces waiting to be filled with actors—activated by performance. The imagery carved within that space could no longer be

seen as static reading material, for it too had become an essential component of the dramatic activity.

Compounding these burgeoning insights was a third revelation that came later that same day, after all the festivities had concluded. As the sun was beginning to set, I once again climbed back up to San Miguel, where standing at the edge of the plaza beside the church, looking down at the town below, I realized that one could see from this vantage point not only the path of the day's procession and each church along the way, but directly across the river to San Pedro's portal. Reflecting the portal of the church where I stood, I realized that the repetitive nature of the underlying architectural structure of the portal configuration made sense. In the same manner as the golden arches along the freeway signal for the modern traveler a familiar place to pull over for a restful, clean spot to get a bite to eat, the prominent and similarly configured portals acted as a type of corporate affiliation, signaling for the traveling faithful a similarly reviving potential, albeit somewhat more spiritual in nature.

These insights thus changed the focus of my research. Rather than seeking to catalogue the totality of the "archivolted" corpus, I became more interested in how these churches and portals functioned and how people functioned within them. The new questions that developed out of the exploration of these insights form the basis of the following chapters: What meaning was entailed in an exterior porch form? How can imagery be read and understood when moving? How did repetition contribute or amplify this moving interpretation? And what was the collaborative relationship between religious foundations in such close proximity?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

At the end of a prolonged project like this book there are so many people to thank, but four very special mentors require particular mention, for without their insight and guidance this project would most certainly never have seen its fruition. Going back to the beginning, I want to thank Corine Schlief from Arizona State who, in that very early stage, was instrumental in convincing me that I had something to say. She embraced and nurtured the convoluted, circular nature of my thought and knew instinctively that I would find a kindred spirit in the pages of Linda Seidel's *Songs of Glory*. Similarly encouraging, Joan Holladay and Marjorie Curry Woods, both of the University of Texas, Austin, worked in opposing harmony to insure my bifurcated interests in Romanesque architecture and medieval cosmology were equally represented and well developed. I thank Joan for both keeping me on track and pushing me to straighten and clarify my inherent circular proclivity, and Jorie for continually sending me back around for one more look at the interlacing orbits that link architecture and philosophical ideas in the Middle Ages. Finally, serving as the supporting weight to keep me upright and clear-headed through it all, was the measured wisdom of Clark Maines, who taught me the benefits of faith in one's own ideas, patience with the process, and perseverance to see things through to the end, not to mention the beauty of a good Bordeaux red.

Also having made important contributions to the production of the book are a myriad of colleagues and graduate students. George Neal, Kim McCarty, and Brittany Gregory all participated in the measuring, field survey, and G.I.S. mapping aspects of the project, while Kelly Bevin Butler was invaluable in organizing bibliography and other research assignments. My colleagues in UNT's Interior Design program, Cynthia Mohr, Mary Lamb, Jorge Palos, as well as Francis Lefever, contributed to the drafting and Autocad reproductions. A special thanks is due to Ann Graham of our Visual Resource Center, who never flinched at the number of images I asked her to reconfigure or digitize, and to Shannon Venable, who is the most astute, intuitive editor ever!

Institutionally I have been supported by many separate grants and internal funding. Dissertation writing was supported by matching funds from Spain's Ministry of Culture's Program for Cultural Cooperation and

the University of Texas at Austin. Grants from the University of North Texas include two Junior Faculty Summer Research Grants, a Research Initiating Grant, a Research Enabling Grant, a Research Creativity Enhancement Grant, and funds from the Global Hispanic Initiative. Editing and image copyright expenses have been supported by a grant from UNT's Office of Research and Development and, importantly, an ICMA-Samuel H. Kress Research Grant. For their help in securing this support, I thank my dean, Dr. Robert Milnes, as well as the continuing assistance of the office of the Provost.

The other side of this professional support is, of course, my family. My two daughters, Highland and Hillary, have no idea of the many important ways they contributed to this book. Obvious are the tangible things like driving those back roads of Spain so that I could focus on the seeing and thinking, or the beautiful photography taken to replace many a shaky shot or old slide, or even the technical help with ever bewildering and constantly changing computer programs. Less tangible, but immensely more important are the times when they insisted I put the work aside for a little "girl time" with mom. Even as they pitched in to nurse me back after a fall where I broke both arms, they reminded me that the key to life is balance; that the book would not only be there when I could once again reach the keyboard, but that it would be better because I had been granted the time to think. To them, I dedicate this book.

INTRODUCTION

OPENING THE DOOR: FREEING THE ORNAMENTAL FORM

> "It was as if the whole world were shaking itself free, shrugging off the burden of the past, and cladding itself everywhere in a white mantle of churches."[1]

Raoul Glaber's often quoted line most certainly applies to western France and the northern kingdoms of Spain at the end of the eleventh century. In both of these regions there was a proliferation of building that produced hundreds of small churches easily identified today, even by the non-specialist, as originating in the period of time we call the Romanesque. The architectural feature that links many of these churches and makes them so visually recognizable—not only today, but most significantly in the time they were conceived—is their portal configuration [Fig.1]. This entry unit is comprised of a set of concentric, semicircular arches (archivolts) carried on paired columns set into stepped embrasures. These arches contract inward toward a central open void, which is defined by the rectangular space more generally associated with the doorway plus the semicircular area otherwise found above a lintel and filled with a tympanum. The inward contraction of the archivolts above this open space is mirrored below by an equal number of steps that lead from ground level up to the actual threshold to form a podium-like porch. When the doors that filled that arched space at the threshold were opened to welcome a throng of traveling pilgrims or to accommodate a saint's day procession, the portal and the façade as a whole would have closely resembled their Roman antecedents [Fig. 2].

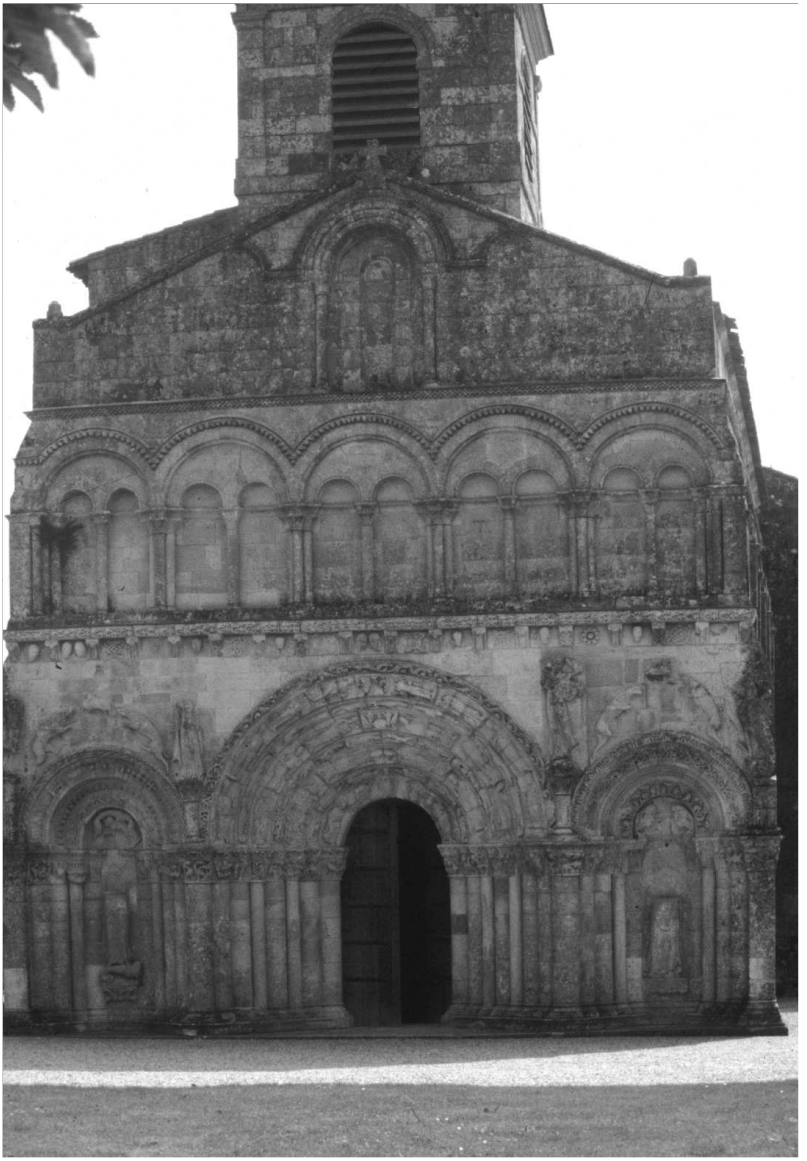

Figure 1. Saint-Martin, Chadenac, France, west façade

Figure 2. Roman arch, Saintes, France

Figure 3. Abbaye-aux-Dames, Saintes, France, west façade

Dating from the middle of the eleventh century to the beginning of the thirteenth century, the corpus of churches with this tympanum-less, "archivolted" portal configuration encompassed a variety of ecclesiastical affiliations to include monasteries such as that at Abbaye-aux-Dames, Saintes [Fig. 3], as well as local parish churches such as Condeon [Fig. 4]. It could be found in the most remote outposts of Spain, as at Villar de Donas, Lugo [Fig. 5] and as the focus of large urban foundations, like that at Surgéres [Fig. 6]. These portal units were variously positioned on the north, south, or traditional west façade, as at Barrio de Santa Maria [Fig. 7], Cervatos [Fig. 8], and Echillais [Fig. 9] respectively. They could be part of a complex façade program such as that at Fenioux [Fig. 10] or as the only elaboration of an otherwise blank façade as at Arthénac [Fig. 11]. They could even be isolated within an architectural addition that projected out from the façade wall, as was typical for many of the churches in Spain, like that at Fromista [Fig. 12]. But always, the essential elements of concentric arches around an open, tympanum-less entry, visible in some cases from miles away, remained consistent throughout this very large group of churches. The widespread proliferation of this distinctive and prominent architectural unit can thus be understood as a type of

monumental monogram, serving to identify the nature of the building as specifically Christian. As we will see, identiy issues of this sort can be shown to have had economic and political implications, particularly as more and more of the population began to move from place to place, undertaking a pilgrimage, responding to the call to Crusade, or simply circling in prosession the precinct of the monastic domain.

Figure-4. Condéon, France

Figure 5. Villar de Doñas, Lugo, Spain

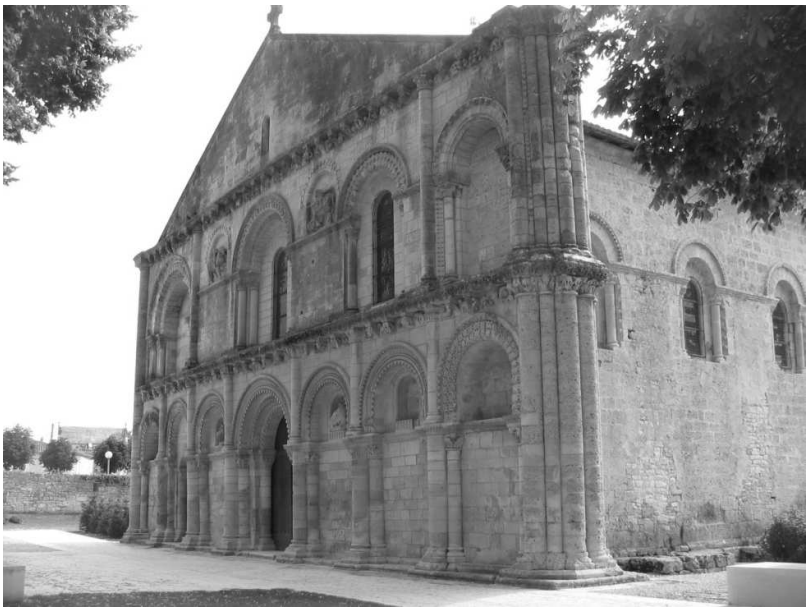

Figure 6. Notre-Dame, Surgéres, France

Figure 7. Barrio de Santa Maria, Spain

Figure 8. San Pedro y San Pablo, Cervatos, Spain

Figure 9. Notre-Dame, Échillais, France

Figure 10. Notre-Dame, Fenioux, France

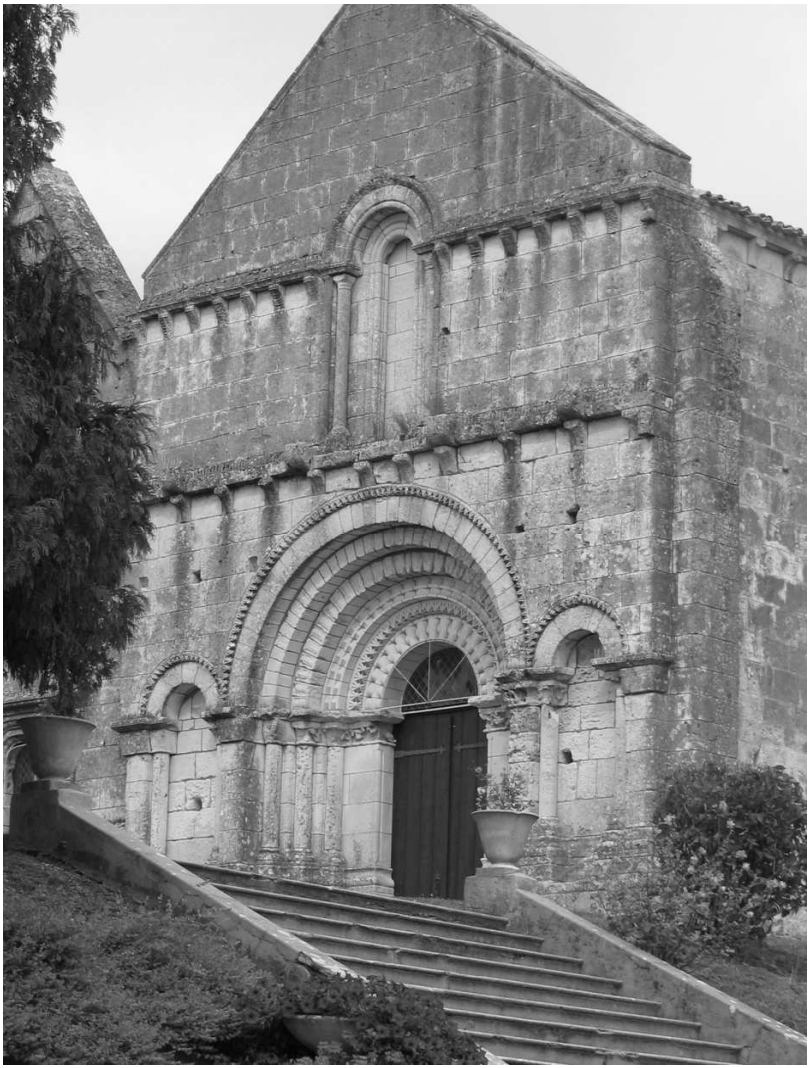

Figure 11. Arthénac, Spain

Seen from within the cultural phenomena of physical movement, the structural consistency of the programs contrasts dramatically with the diversity of the intricate sculptural elaboration of the individual archivolts within any given portal composition, which was not only unique from one site to the next, but in many cases quite baffling in its rich complexity. Ranging from simple geometric patterns to sophisticated figural iconography, the variety and multiplicity of the sculpted forms brought together to create a "program," defied a quick decipherment or easy codification. The visual experience of these portals at close range would therefore have been quite different from that ready identification had from afar.

Figure 12. Saint Martin, Frómista, Spain

An area with many examples of this visual dichotomy can be found in western France, between the Garonne and the Loire rivers [Fig. 13]. By the beginning of the twelfth century this region was occupied by at least twelve churches of very similar architectural configuration. Further linked by the sculptural compositions comprising the portal programs dominating their western façades, most of these churches featured an upper and lower register divided by a corbeled string course.[2] At the upper level was a high arcade of blind arches under a pointed false gable. Below this at ground level, these façades were divided vertically into three parts, a blind arch on

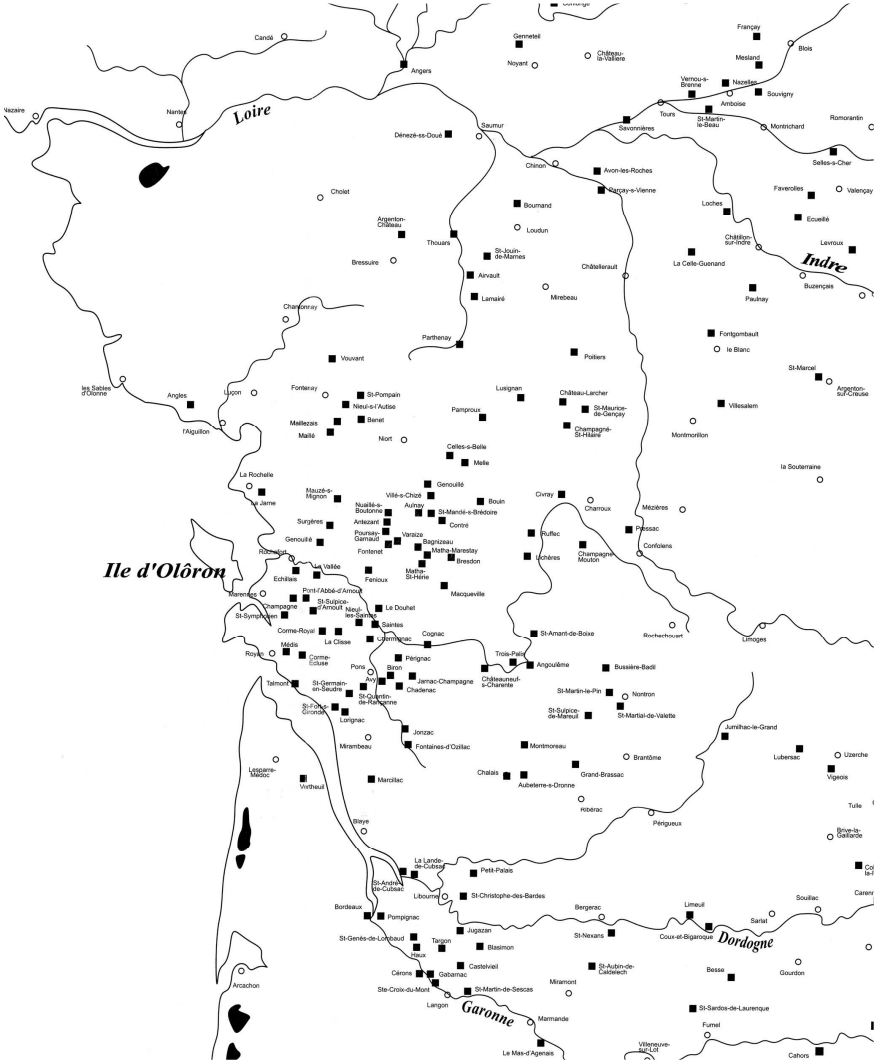

Figure 13. Map, Western France, between the Garonne and Loire rivers

either side of the ubiquitous and defining archivolted portal. The scholarship of "space" and "place" tells us that monuments such as these with their similarly distinct visual and structural configurations served to define a territory, signal the linkage between the inhabitants and the local topography, and convey an internally perceived corporate affiliation.[3]

The church of Notre-Dame d'Avy [Fig.14] was not particularly unique within this exemplary geographical set, but makes a vivid example of the individualized complexity to be found within the sculptural programs of these otherwise very similar façades.[4] Like others in this group, this church's portal composition was comprised of four main archivolts of varying depth, which at first glance appear as a mass of chaotic geometric and foliate pattern. It is only upon closer inspection that one is able to make out the detail of this particular combination of intricate intertwining forms.

Figure 14. Notre-Dame-d'Avy, Pons, France

Under an outer molding, a row of overtly geometric shapes, arranged in a radial pattern around the semicircular opening, follows the angles of the individual voussior like spokes on a wheel [Fig. 15]. Appearing as a row of geometric "Xs" that stand shoulder-to-shoulder, one after another, spanning the length of the archivolt, the human identity of these forms is obscured until examined more carefully. The detail that comes into view at

Figure 15. Notre-Dame-d'Avy, Pons, France, detail

close range reveals that this "X" pattern is composed of the triangular shape of a robe with long full sleeves that form pendant triangles, as the arms of what can now be seen as a human form come together at the chest to hold a stringed or wind instrument. Further challenging the task of figural identification is a similar band of "Xs" sculpted on the soffit

directly under the frontal face of the archivolt [Fig. 16]. Visible as one physically makes their way up into the porch-like space, this pattern is discovered to be the legs of the figures whose upper bodies are sculpted on the frontal face of the archivolt. It is only from this view, looking upward at the archivolt as one passes under it while moving up toward the portal threshold that one comes to understand that rather than standing these figures are actually seated with their legs crossed. Imaginatively, the sculptor has used the three-dimensional shape of the arch's frontal face and soffit as a pseudo-bench, positioning the row of musicians as a synchronized choir, seated and ready to take up their instruments to perform at some anticipated cue.

Figure 16. Notre-Dame-d'Avy, Pons, France, detail

Unlike the musician's archivolt, the arch below these figures is quite shallow and curves into the one below it, eliminating the intervening soffit. Nonetheless, the subject here is equally difficult to decipher, this time because the animate figures are disguised by an elaborately intertwined and knotted vine. At the apex of the arch [Fig. 17], on the keystone, one figure has, however, been singled out for easy identification. This human is depicted as holding the heads of two dragon-like beasts, one in each hand, as if to single-handedly conquer the parade of fanciful animals to the right and left with his bifurcating action. Similarly, the larger archivolt below this contains a row of large birds within another tangled vine. Like the animals above, these birds are also separated at the keystone by a single human who grasps the throat of a bird in each hand. Less fantastic than the figures above, the more-worldly reality of this subject calls to mind an action familiar to the farming community of this rural setting. Moreover, the identification is not complicated by the soffit below, as this surface is blank. There is, however, one additional arch at the innermost edge of the composition where the nature of the small intertwining pairs of four-legged creatures is so abstract as to be completely indiscernible. Confounded by the correlation between the musicians, the fantastic animals, the dense foliage, and the rural references, one realizes that even with close examination it is difficult to come to a clear understanding of the meaning intended in this program's imagery.

What does become apparent in this interpretational exercise, and what can be shown to be the case in many of the archivolted programs, is that there is an underlying structure that seems to be designed into the program to provide clues to the general method of decipherment, and that this is often perceived most clearly at the keystone. These visual clues signal a pattern of "reading" that moves the eye vertically from one archivolt to the next in a process where the pieces of the puzzle can be brought together in a meaningful manner. Within this scheme, one has to acknowledge, however, that each archivolt requires a concerted amount of interpretive contemplation in order to simply make out the figural forms, and that assigning iconographic significance to these forms is, therefore, difficult. Comprehending the relationship between the arches to form a didactic or narrative "program" with a cohesive meaning thus becomes problematic, if not impossible.

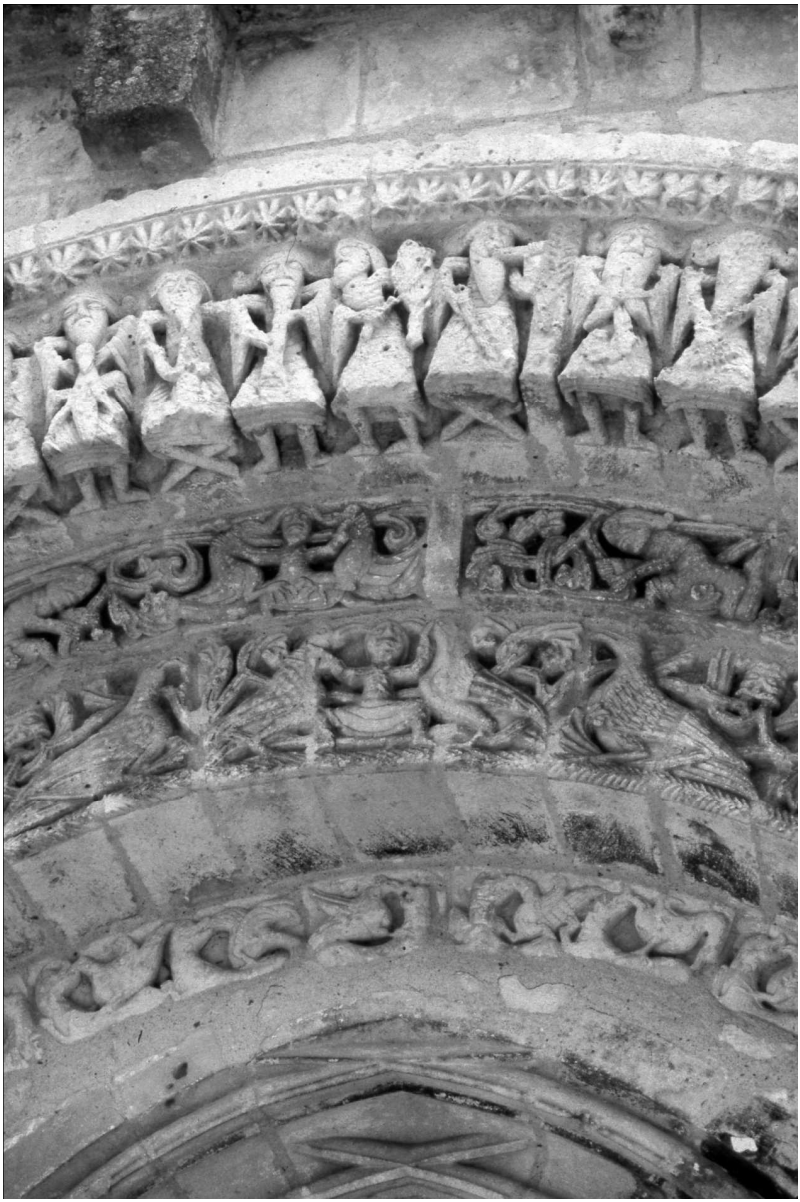

Figure 17. Notre-Dame-d'Avy, Pons, France, detail

There are two revelations of note in these observations. On the one hand, our experiential analysis suggests that there was an awareness of the role played by the individual viewer's physical movement up the steps and through the archivolts in the comprehension or "reading" of the florid imagery above that viewer's head. One can surmise in this that the same distinctive three-dimensionality of the architectural unit that contributed to the building's identification from a distance also served to structure and physically facilitate the viewer's interpretation of the sculpted imagery. In other words, it appears that the architectural form and the elaborate sculptural ornamentation were conceived to be mutually supportive.

On the other hand, it is equally easy to see why these portals have been dismissed as decorative, purely ornamental, and devoid of programmatic cohesion;[5] the avenues of decipherment are seemingly elusive and the resulting meanings too abstract to be readily understood by the average parishioner or traveling devotee. This explains the fact that despite the broad distribution and the vast number of churches with this same architectural form and sculptural complexity, analysis of them as a distinct corpus has, with few exceptions, escaped the focused attention of art historical research.[6]

This is not to say that churches with archivolted portals have been summarily ignored.[7] Most recently, Myrielle Boss-Favre has produced a monograph that catalogues the various iconographic topics to be found within French archivolt sculpture.[8] While helpful in the decipherment of particular subjects and obscure iconography, the parameters of the study are limited in several ways. Ignoring archivolts outside of France, the study also overlooks the myriad of geometric and foliate forms found on many archivolts to consider only those that contain figural imagery. Moreover, the study fails to address even the figural iconography in terms of programmatic meaning. Most importantly in terms of the current study, Boss-Favre's study does not consider the significance of the supporting architectural form or its contribution to the decipherment of individual subjects or the overall theme.[9]

Similarly limited, but nonetheless important, is Anat Tcherikover's *High Romanesque Sculpture in the Duchy of Aquitaine, c. 1090-1140*.[10] Even more geographically exclusive than Boss-Favre's study, Tcherikover's work considers only those churches of the Charente-Poitou region of western France (medieval Aquitaine). She further abridges the body of monuments by examining only those churches built in what she labels the "High Romanesque."[11] She justifies these limitations by suggesting that the portal configuration of the churches built before 1090 lack significant figural sculpture and those constructed after 1140 fall into what she calls