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Vincent Debiais

## Writing on Medieval Doors

### The Surveyor Angel on the Moissac Capital (ca. 1100)

Monumental texts have often been placed at the entrance to medieval buildings. Façades and doors are adorned with epigraphic inscriptions that underscore the importance of passageways and architectural joints through graphical representations. In this way, the physical act of passing through doorways is accompanied by the material experience of writing. In western Middle Ages, most inscriptions on religious buildings dealt with symbolic aspects of the architectonic elements they were painted or carved on. According to John 10.9 (*Ego sum ostium. Per me, si quis introerit, salvabitur, et ingredietur et egredietur et pascua inveniet*) they refer to Christ, the door to salvation,<sup>1</sup> but more generally to the sacredness of the Church or “door of Heaven” (*porta coeli*), as can be seen on each side of the western portal of the Saint-Pierre-de-l’Isle church (Saintonge, France, 11<sup>th</sup> century): *Haec est domus Dei et porta coeli* (fig. 1 a–b).<sup>2</sup> They reinforce the separate, distinguished features of ecclesial spaces and act as a portal between both indoor and outdoor and the sacred and profane *loci*.<sup>3</sup> In this way, writing functions as both border and walkway between one space and another. Text gives this door the appearance of being a contact point and a bridge, inviting the reader to cross the threshold while connecting the spaces through writing.<sup>4</sup>

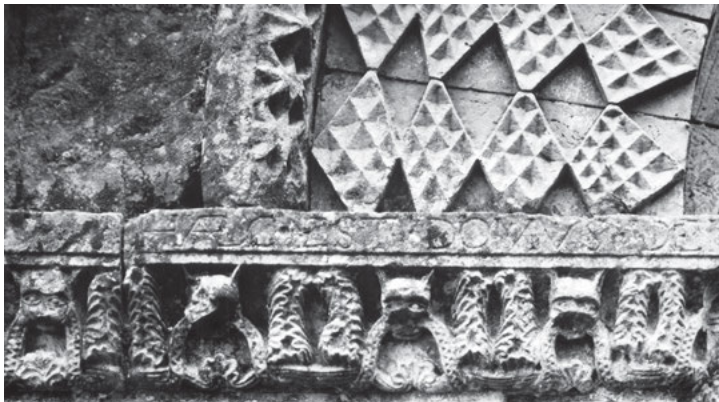


Fig. 1a: Saint-Pierre-de-l’Isle (France), western portal of the church © J. Michaud, CESC/CIFM.

1 Favreau 2010, 170–172.

2 Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale [from now on CIFM] 3, 110 no. 26.

3 Church sacredness and medieval sacred spaces have been studied a lot during the past ten years. For a general overview, see Iogna-Prat 2006.

4 Debiais 2006, 286–288.



**Fig. 1b:** Saint-Pierre-de-l'Isle (France), western portal of the church © J. Michaud, CESC/CIFM.

As they often are iconic documents of medieval epigraphy—the monumental inscription of the portal of Saint Foy church in Conques<sup>5</sup> is published in all the catalogues dealing with Romanesque sculpture in France (fig. 2)—these inscriptions have been studied repeatedly by medievalists.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, as can be deduced from their titles, these works deal mainly with the content of the inscriptions and the symbolic, theological or iconographic implications of their location at the doors of churches. Such a lexical approach is essential and leads to a better understanding of how medieval inscriptions were composed according to their function. However, it tends to consider doorways and epigraphic writing as separate elements whose presence within a shared ‘writing space’ and ‘reading moment’ is either fortuitous or insignificant to the form and meaning of the architectural structures.<sup>7</sup>

This article has a quite different purpose as it does not intend to consider inscriptions as a complement to the doors and entrances of buildings; nor does it see epigraphic writing exclusively as a way of explaining the liturgical and ecclesiological meaning of these doorways. This paper seeks to examine how writing—as both physical presence and visual device—is a way for viewers and readers of epigraphic inscriptions to delve deeper into the meaning of the object or monument through these written shapes. The material features of epigraphic writing, rather than the content of the texts, will be the focal point of this study, even if (as with all semiotic systems) it is impossible to deconstruct the inscription to the point of isolating the contents of the language from its means of expression. Nevertheless, this paper postulates that the (visual and graphical) presence of letters can create a meaningful

<sup>5</sup> CIFM 9, 17–25 no. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Favreau 1991; Kendall 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Debais 2013, 185–186.

passage that allows to enter spaces that lack a door or open those defined by their separate and inaccessible nature.



Fig. 2: Conques (France), Sainte-Foy abbey, western portal of the church © Vincent Debais.

## 1 A Matter of Shape

To begin with, it should be noted that the location and layout of medieval inscriptions on doors and windows generally reinforces the shape of these architectural elements that connect inner and outer spaces. On covings, archivolts and lintel piers, inscriptions emphasize and duplicate these elements by painting ‘windows of letters’ and carving ‘textual doors’. These are then placed in a circular or square written frame that strengthens their visual presence on the wall.

The semiotic split between geometric, iconic and alphabetic signs used on the cloister door of San Juan de la Peña<sup>8</sup> (Aragon, Spain, 11<sup>th</sup> century; fig. 3), the Saint-Genis-des-Fontaines church lintel (Roussillon, France, 11<sup>th</sup> century; fig. 4)<sup>9</sup> and the

<sup>8</sup> Durán Gudiol 1967, 83.

<sup>9</sup> CIFM 11, 138–139 no. 118. This inscription is engraved on a stone piece that originally has been sculpted for an altar or an altarpiece. It has been placed upon the door a few years after being carved, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Chauvigny church window (Poitou, France, 12<sup>th</sup> century; fig. 5)<sup>10</sup> reinforces the interruption of the linear stone organization and draws the viewer's attention to the path opening into the wall. As medieval reading is a whole body activity that uses the eyes, hands and feet, seeing the text sets the passer-by in motion; it can also cause him to stop in front of the door. It offers the possibility of a journey from the outside to within the building; it could also invite the reader to walk around the church.

On the outer walls of Saint Macé priory church (Anjou, France, 12<sup>th</sup> century; fig. 6), a long inscription is carved on a single line of huge capital letters.<sup>11</sup> This line spreads all the way around the building, creating a twenty-meter long text that starts and ends on either side of the main entrance to the church. The linear display of the inscription is only broken in order to follow the square shape of the door and underline (with letters) the path leading to the sacred space. The inscription creates a dynamic process of reading around the building and establishes the door as a graphical locus on the priory's empty walls.

The contents of the text emphasize this dynamic pattern by using verbs of movement and change: *intrare, ingredire, egredire, venire*. On the first arch of Saint-Léger-en-Pons portal (Saintonge, France, 12<sup>th</sup> century; fig. 7), one can read the brief verse sentence *Sit pax intranti; felix sit cessus euntis*.<sup>12</sup> The letters are placed on each claveau and the curved design of the text creates an additional arch above the door. The contents refer both to the blessing given to the faithful on entering God's house and the journey of the deceased's soul. Set at the threshold of the church, writing stands at the crossroads of several different spaces and invites passage from one to another.

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**10** CIFM 1/2, 26 no. 19.

**11** CIFM 24, 131–133 no. 116.

**12** CIFM 3, 108–109 no. 25.



Fig. 3: San Juan de la Peña (Spain), monastery, cloister door © CESC/M/CIFM.



Fig. 4: Saint-Genis-des-Fontaines (France), lintel of the church door © J. Michaud, CESC/M/CIFM.





**Fig. 5:** Chauvigny (France), church, east window of the south wall © J. Michaud, CESC/CIFM.



**Fig. 6:** Chênehutte-Trèves-Cunault (France), St Macé priory © J. Michaud, CESC/CIFM.



**Fig. 7:** Saint-Léger-en-Pons (France), church door © J. Michaud, CESC/CIFM.

As is the case with Saint Macé church, such a reading *iter* appeals directly to viewers. With individual apostrophes, inscriptions warn and invite readers to focus on the meaning of crossing the threshold to enter the church. Reading the text should not only produce physical movement (from one place to another) but also a mental turn (from one state of mind to another). An inscription of this type is written on the lower part of Saint-Marcel-lès-Sauzet church's tympanum (Rhône Valley, France, 13<sup>th</sup> century; fig. 8): *Vos qui transitis, qui crimina flere venitis, per me transite, quoniam sum janua vite. Janua sum vite, volo parcere, clamo: "Venite!"*<sup>13</sup> In contrast with the semi-circular shape of the tympanum, the inscription carved on a single line just above the door strengthens it as a threshold and serves as a visual full stop that is in opposition to the dynamic verbs in the three hexameters: *transitis, venitis, transite, venite*. They surround the word *janua*, highlighted in metric composition by its location and repetition. In this case, writing, in both its content and presentation, establishes the door as a physical and moral portal to enter into Christ's glory.

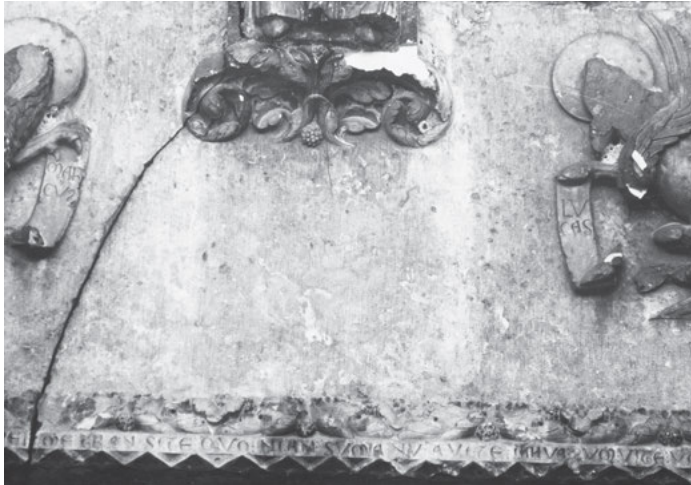


Fig. 8: Saint-Marcel-lès-Sauzet (France), church tympanum © J. Michaud, CESC/M/CIFM.

As is the case with many medieval images, epigraphic practices are active in the polarization of ecclesial buildings.<sup>14</sup> They create graphic *loci* where the presence of letters acts as visual device to differentiate one space from another. Because they have been carved into the material, inscriptions located on doors or windows serve to strengthen both the isolation and separation of sacred spaces and their essential porosity.

<sup>13</sup> CIFM 16, 183–185 no. 66.

<sup>14</sup> Baschet 2008, 120–124.



Alcuinus' poem, composed for the door of Saint-Hilaire-le-Grand church in Poitiers (Poitou, France, ca. 800), shows this tension between the outside and inside:<sup>15</sup>

*Porta domus Domini haec est et regia caeli,  
Haec tibi pandit iter sancti et sacraria templi,  
Quo mox invenies magnos requiescere patres.  
Sit tibi spes precibus horum praeclara salutis:  
Si tu corde pio, prostrato et corpore poscis  
A Christo scelerum veniam, peccator, habebis.  
Nullatenus dubius sacri tere limina templi:  
Omnia credenti praestat pia gratia Christi.  
Fecerat has valvas arae pius Abba minister,  
Ut mandavit Ato fratrum venerabilis abbas.  
Ingrediens templum pro quo intercede, viator,  
Ut Deus omnipotens illum conservet ubique.<sup>16</sup>*

The poetic flow seen here reflects the traveler's movement and gestures (*iter*, *invenies*, *prostrato*, *ingrediens*, *viator*). Nevertheless, in the middle of the poem, the door separates the sinners from the faithful with 'static' words: *habebis*, *limina*, *praestat*. If one assumes that Alcuinus' text was composed with a view to be engraved or painted on (or near) the doors (*has valvas*), the epigraphic writing must have been intended as a checkpoint; it describes what will be seen in the church, initiates an examination of the self and prepares the faithful to pray. The lexical construction gives rhythm to this change: *iter ... templi* at the beginning leads to *limina templi* in the center of the poem and to *templum ... ubique* at the end.

Alcuinus provides the Saint-Hilaire abbot's name, Ato, in verse 10, but his poem actually describes the Carolingian idea of a church door according to theological developments; it is not simply making an archeological statement about one specific door in Poitiers at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless, this text shows that written and architectural interactions can be very rich. As we saw in Le Puy cathedral and Saint-Macé priory, writing underscores the sacred features of the building and permits us to enter into its symbolic depth.

## 2 The Holy City on the Moissac Capital

Rather than accumulating examples, the second part of this paper will focus on a (perhaps unexpected) medieval epigraphic object that shows how writing acts as an interface between interior and exterior spaces.

<sup>15</sup> CIFM 1/1, 36–37 no. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Dümmler 1881, 326.

This example is the double capital representing the Holy City in the cloister of Moissac abbey in southwest France (fig. 9).<sup>17</sup> Carved around 1100, it is located in the south gallery in front of the door connecting the cloister and the church. This piece is one of eighty capitals from one of the most astonishing Romanesque cloisters in Western Europe. The density of epigraphic writing in the Moissac cloister contributes to the visual impact of the sculptures since 80% of the capitals feature one or more inscriptions. If one adds to these the almost 300 words of text located on the corner pillars and the well-known inscription stating the end date of the cloister's work to be 1100, the Moissac complex is a medieval epigraphy superstar. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards<sup>18</sup> some of the world's greatest art historians have been interested in this cloister, although its inscriptions have been received very differently throughout the years, including with neglect, incomprehension and mystification. Meyer Schapiro has formulated the most challenging thoughts with regard to the Moissac cloister;<sup>19</sup> viewing the letters scattered around the capitals, he avoided any preconceived analysis regarding the intention and reception of the forms and instead took the epigraphic phenomena for what they are, i.e. displays of letters on material backgrounds. With humility and respect, this paper on the Holy City capital would like to follow Schapiro's methodological approach to the Moissac cloister by beginning with a look at the object itself.



**Fig. 9:** Moissac (France), cloister abbey, Holy City capital © J. Michaud, CESC/CIFM.

<sup>17</sup> Cazes 2001, 112–113.

<sup>18</sup> Cazes 2001, 113 for a bibliography on this capital.

<sup>19</sup> Schapiro 1931, for example 275 about the inscription for *Durandus*: “That the artist was aware of these effects and was not merely determined by the narrowness of the surface and the length of the inscription is evident from the great variety in the amplitude of the letters, the irregularity of spacing of forms which in their individual details are cut with an obvious decisiveness, and from such peculiarities as the horizontal line passing through the BB of ABB(A)S, as a contraction of the word.”



Fig. 10: Moissac (France), cloister abbey, Holy City capital, detail © J. Michaud, CESC/CIFM.

The main part of the capital presents the image of a walled city located under a foliate frieze on the abacus, along with a blank *tailloir*. We can see that the artist has sculpted the bulwarks, high towers and monumental gates with care. The city walls are topped with a series of human figures, perhaps soldiers, defending the town.<sup>20</sup> On the long sides of the capital, these figures point their right arms towards the door of the abbey church on the opposite wall, indicating with their fingers the south gallery of the cloister and inviting the viewer to look beyond the capital (all the bodily movements create a dynamic towards the church wall—from the city wall on the capital towards the church wall in the cloister). All around the bulwark (fig. 10) one can read the inscription *sancta Iherusalem* or *Iherusalem sancta* (depending on the point at which the reader begins). The city on the capital is not just a town but *the town*, the Holy City described in the Bible,<sup>21</sup> both in the Old Testament (as the historical place of God's people) and in the Book of Revelation (as the promise of God's realm). The

<sup>20</sup> Cazes 2001, 112–113.

<sup>21</sup> Is 48.2; Joel 3.17; Neh 9.1; Rev 21.10.

expression *Iherusalem sancta* is used by God himself to refer to *his* city, the city of *his* people, the one in which he established his residence in the temple: “Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, dwelling in Zion, My holy mountain. So Jerusalem will be holy, and strangers will pass through it no more”;<sup>22</sup> “And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God”.<sup>23</sup>

The letters are finely carved on the fortification. They visually surround the basket and highlight the continuing closure of the bulwarks—note that this closure effect is reinforced by the fact that the city gates are not open. Thanks to such a circular display of letters in the forefront of the stone, a ‘belt of letters’ materially circles the capital. Monumental versions of such displays—on the scale of buildings—can be found in some churches of southern France. Cécile Treffort, in a recent and brilliant article,<sup>24</sup> has interpreted these alphabetical belts to be connected to the liturgical ceremony of church consecration. During this very complex celebration (in which writing plays a crucial role), two monumental and ephemeral alphabets were traced by the bishop in the form of a large cross on the entire surface of the floor of the church, temporarily created in sand or ash.<sup>25</sup> Holy oil crosses were also traced on the walls by the bishop in order to define the sacred space of the church.<sup>26</sup> Some of these ephemeral signs have been fixed into stone as perpetual *signa* of the ritual, as is the case in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela (Galicia, Spain, 1211; fig. 11).<sup>27</sup>

Treffort’s hypothesis analogically establishes these belts of letters as *signa* of the consecration. Continuing the author’s point, circular alphabetical displays—as can still be found in Beaumont-de-Ventoux<sup>28</sup> and the Holy City capital in Moissac—could act as markers of sacredness, placing their content in a separate, protected environment in which “strangers will pass through... no more”.<sup>29</sup> An alphabetical belt can be read on the tailloir of an ornamental foliage capital very close to the Jerusalem capital in Moissac (fig. 12).<sup>30</sup> The inscription consists of a complete alphabet followed by a

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22 Joel 3.17.

23 Rev 21.10.

24 Treffort 2010, 160.

25 See for example what William Durand wrote in his *Rationale divinarum officiorum* at the 13th century: *In pavimento ecclesie scribitur alphabetum hoc modo: fit enim crux de cinere et sabulo ex transverso ecclesie super quam crucem pulveris scribitur alphabetum in modum cruces, litteris grecis et latinis, non autem hebraicis quia Iudei recesserunt a fide; et scribitur cum baculo pastoralis*. Davril/Thibodeau 1995, 71; quoted by Treffort 2010, 165.

26 One reads in the *Romano-German Pontifical*: *Deinde in circuitu ecclesie per parietes de dextro usque in dextrum faciat cruces cum pollice de chrismate in duodecim locis, dicens: sanctificetur hoc templum in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus sancti*. Vogel 1963, 83.

27 Suárez González 2013, 60–99.

28 Codou 2008, 275.

29 Joel 3.17.

30 CIFM 8, 153–154 no. 28.

complex alphabetical composition combining two letters, and ends with a few words from Ps 54.3: *Deus in nomine*. In this scale representation of the capital, the Latin alphabet surrounds nature as if it has been shaped in stone. Christian exegesis of the alphabet associates the layout and number of letters with knowledge and creation.<sup>31</sup> The inscription in Moissac could be interpreted as follows: writing delimits and contains the sculpted shapes both in material and analogical terms.



**Fig. 11:** Santiago de Compostela (Spain), cathedral, consecration cross © CESC/CIFM.

Letters underlining circular structures or forms can be found on many other Moissac capitals.<sup>32</sup> This device is a constant in Romanesque patterns where inscriptions are often used to strengthen or duplicate circles, *mandorla*, frames and enclosing structures with letters, as one can see in the Saint Junien sarcophagus (Limousin, France, 12<sup>th</sup> century; fig. 13)<sup>33</sup> where four verses are inscribed around a beautiful *Sedes sapientiae*, and in Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe crypt (Poitou, France, ca. 1100; fig. 14)<sup>34</sup> where a distich is painted on the circular glory to create a golden image of the Pantocrator. In these examples, the ‘circular’ devices allow the separation of the inside from the outside, the Virgin and Child from the Elders in Saint-Junien. Similarly, the enthroned figure of Christ is separated from the saints’ procession in Saint-Savin. They also allow

<sup>31</sup> See for example Sicard of Cremona, *Mitræ VI* (Migne, PL 213, 30–31).

<sup>32</sup> 50% of Moissac capitals bear an inscription on the *tailloir* the reading of which induces a circular movement around the capital. See for example the Good Samaritan capital; CIFM 8, 148–149 no. 21.

<sup>33</sup> CIFM 2, 185–188 no. 83, fig. 78.

<sup>34</sup> CIFM 1/2, 101–109 nos. 60–63; Debais 2011, 320.

movement from the outside inward: both the act of reading and the poetic content lead the viewer's eyes and mind into the heart of the visual construction.



**Fig. 12:** Moissac (France), cloister abbey, alphabetical capital © J. Michaud, CESC/CIFM.



**Fig. 13:** Saint-Junien (France), church, Saint Junien's sarcophagus © Manon Durier.





Fig. 14: Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe (France), abbey church, vault of the crypt © Vincent Debiais.

### 3 Walking with the Angel

On the capital of the Holy City, the circular layout of letters that designates Jerusalem invites the reader to walk around the sculpture, i.e. to create a physical, dynamic experience from the city and its scale, even if this experience must be considered ‘virtual’, for obvious archeological reasons. In the context of the cloister and its reading experience, the graphic ordering of the letters creates a parallel between the walking reader and the figure of John as he discovers the Holy City. In the Book of Revelation, the angel who leads John during his visit to the city is a “surveyor angel”; with his stick, he measures the extent of the city:

The one who spoke to me held a gold measuring rod to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. The city was square, its length the same as [also] its width. He measured the city with the rod and found it fifteen hundred miles in length and width and height. He also measured its wall: one hundred and forty-four cubits according to the standard unit of measurement the angel used. The wall was constructed of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the city wall were decorated with every precious stone; the first course of stones was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh hyacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls; each of the gates made from a single pearl; and the street of the city was of pure gold, transparent as glass.<sup>35</sup>

35 Rev 21.15–21.

Reading the inscription is therefore akin to surveying, an intellectual process governed by the rational, structured principles of algebra and geometry. Letters do not only allow us to know the name of the city, but also pave the way for a rational, internalized understanding of what the capital shows *in fine* when we move beyond its shape; the Holy City descending to earth.

Medieval exegetes have interpreted the measuring of the Holy City as a demonstration of its perfection, established by God for his people, according to Wisdom 11.21: *In numero et mensura et pondere disposuit*. Ambrosius Autpertus, an abbot of San Vincenzo al Volturno who died in 778 or 784, makes just such a link; he also likens the surveying of the Holy City (Rev 21.14–17) to John’s measuring of the Temple (Rev 11.1–6).<sup>36</sup> According to Ambrosius, the surveying stick (*harundinea, calamus*) can be compared to the stylus used to write down the Revelation experience as a demonstration of faith.<sup>37</sup> Measuring the temple and the Holy City constitutes another way of ‘writing’ God’s knowledge, giving it a graphic and material shape.

Revelation 11.1–6 and 21.14–17 have been represented in many medieval manuscripts, from the Carolingian manuscripts to vernacular commentaries, not to forget the manuscripts of Beatus of Liebana’s *Commentary on the Apocalypse*. In many of them, the link I point out between measuring and writing is staged in a unique image representing both the surveying act and John eating the book. This is the case with folio 146 of the Morgan Beatus (Spain, 935–950),<sup>38</sup> where the short labels painted within the image strengthen this comparison: *Ubi Johannes librum accepit on the left side; Ubi Johannes ab angelo arundinem accepit on the right*. In the manuscripts of Beatus’ *Commentary*, the image representing the Holy City and the surveyor angel emphasizes the geometric, harmonious shape of Jerusalem; the rhythmic deployment of towers, walls and doors recalls what can be seen in the Moissac capital. By combining circle and square patterns, this architectural element offers appropriate spaces to shape the Heavenly City with a center presenting the Holy Lamb, and a frame of towers and doors protecting the people of God. Folio 207v–208 of Saint-Sever Beatus (France, 11<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>39</sup> presents a similarly complex interweaving that includes a central circle, one of the first perfect squares flanked by semi-circular arches and a second square that contains the whole composition.

Such a complex geometric composition—the ordered features of the shape lie in the angel’s stick—might evoke our Romanesque capital—as seen from the top. The reader can rest assured: my purpose here is not to draw a direct line between the

<sup>36</sup> *Expositionis in Apocalypsin X*, 807.

<sup>37</sup> *Expositionis in Apocalypsin X*, 807: *Quid autem per mensuram harundineam auream intellegimus, nisi divini verbi praedicationem? Quia enim harundine scribitur, recte ab efficiente illud quod efficitur, id est sacrum eloquium, designatur.*

<sup>38</sup> Williams 1994, 22–33 fig. 61.

<sup>39</sup> Paris, BnF, ms. lat. 8878; Williams 1998, 44–59.

Moissac capital and Saint-Sever Beatus. I merely intend to show that the shape of the capital, the sculpted image of the Holy City, the use of letters, and their circular display merge to simultaneously represent both the image and the means to interpret it. Reading the text is to walk side by side with the angel and discover Heavenly Jerusalem.

## 4 Letters at Play

Let us return to the object. The elements of fortification on the Moissac capital are stamped with letters from the expression *Iherusalem sancta*; the stones are marked with letters, just as elements of heraldry and sculpted pieces are in contemporary buildings, enhancing the frontier between inside and outside through visual signs.

Writing often plays a role of demarcation and separation in Romanesque monumental art, in particular with christograms and chrismons engraved on church portals.<sup>40</sup> Composed of alphabetical (and sometimes iconic) signs projected onto the stone screen of a tympanon, the early Christian *chi-rho* symbol is interpreted as a sign identifying the church as God's house, protecting the building against the devil's assaults and inviting the faithful to respect the sacredness of the church.<sup>41</sup> For example, the chrismon from the Hospitaliers church in Toulouse, today housed in the Musée des Augustins collection (France, 12<sup>th</sup> century; fig. 15), bears the following text:<sup>42</sup> *Hic Deus oratur domus ejus et ista vocatur. Huc ergo veniat quem conscia culpa fatigat*. Previously located upon the main door of the church, this inscription is engraved over the monumental display of Greek letters that establish the wall as an object (*domus*) and the door as a passage (*veniat*). The protective action of writing in such a prominent, visual way on an ecclesial building is especially obvious in the monastic church of Santa María la Real abbey in Irache (Navarra, Spain; fig. 16).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> On the topic of medieval chrismons, see Favreau 1996, 540–542; Kendall 1996, 405–419; Debais 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Ocón Alonso 2003, 80.

<sup>42</sup> CIFM 7, 96–97 no. 57.

<sup>43</sup> Catálogo monumental de Navarra 1983, 505.

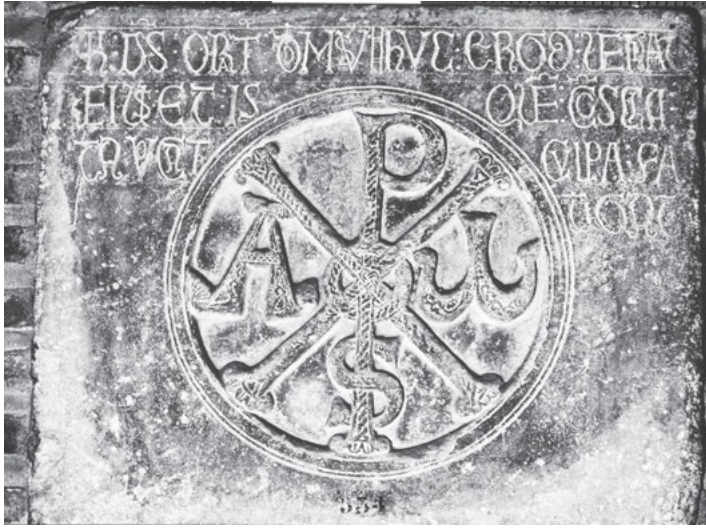


Fig. 15: Toulouse (France), Musée des Augustins, chrismon from Hospitaliers church © J. Michaud, CESC/CIFM.



Fig. 16: Irache (Spain), Santa María la Real abbey, church doors © Vincent Debiais.

The three doors of the church are stamped with a chrismon: the west door, opening to the outside; the north one, facing the *Camino de Santiago* and giving access to the pilgrims; and the south one, opening onto the cloister and reserved for the monastic community. With a lasting representation of the crosses traced with Holy Oil during the liturgical ceremony of consecration, Irache's chrismated doors can be considered

a permanent sign of the church's sacredness displayed upon all the entrance doors. They are both an outer projection of the sacred on the walls of the building and an invitation to discover its meaning inward.

Paradoxically, inscriptions in doorways invite the reader to stop; to suspend the movement induced by crossing the doorway. The content of epigraphic texts relies on the social, liturgical and broadly symbolic implications of changes in space to transform the suspension of the reader's movement into a dramatic understanding of the precise features of the space he is entering. On the Moissac capital, narrative tension is concentrated at three points: on the gates to Jerusalem; on the long sides of the basket where the character sculpted behind the walls points to the city's door; and on the door that provides access to the church (fig. 17).



Fig. 17: Moissac (France), cloister abbey, Holy City capital, detail © J. Michaud, CESC/CIFM.

These gestures establish Moissac church as an anticipation of the Heavenly Jerusalem. In some illustrated manuscripts of the Book of Revelation dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century, such an interpretation is suggested by analogies of the image that depicts John measuring the Temple (seen as an allegory of the Church by many Carolingian commentaries of Rev 11.1–6) on the one hand, and the image showing the surveying angel on the other. This is also the case in the 'Apocalypse 1313' manuscript (Liège, Belgium, 1313)<sup>44</sup> where the position of the stick and the architectural details of doors, windows and roofs can be compared where they are found in folio 31 (Rev 11.1–6) and folio 80 (Rev 21, 14–17).

<sup>44</sup> Paris, BnF, ms. fr. 13096; Besseyre 2008.

Paleographical features of the *Iherusalem sancta* inscription in Moissac have been carefully used by the artist to draw the viewer's attention to the doors sculpted on the capital. On the east side, the capital *E* placed above the wall jamb recalls the vertical lines of the construction and the horizontal ones of the stone apparatus. In contrast, the uncial *M* takes the form of the door and its semicircular arch. On the west side, the letter *E* placed above the door is uncial and serves to underline the arches, as does the *M* on the opposite side. It might seem strange to associate, as I have done here, the ability of inscriptions in the shape of letters to frame the door. It could be said that seeing the letters and reading the text are limited in Moissac by the size of the signs, the location of the capital and the objective impossibility of walking around the basket; but all the functions I have been discussing here exist in the lettering itself, irrespective of the viewer's ability to read them. Carving letters in stone, removing material from material and setting these texts upon the wall are actions that involve an active graphic dimension, one that goes beyond their mere legibility.

In order to support this theory of epigraphic writing guiding the viewer to discover the meaning of graphic places, we should perhaps turn to a monumental example in which the inscription has no problem with visibility or legibility. In the crypt of the abbey church at Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe (Poitou, France, ca. 1100),<sup>45</sup> the texts that comment on the hagiographic scenes painted on the walls draw a linear path (not a circular one, as in Moissac) from West to East, allowing the viewer to enter the sanctuary following the graphic 'flow' (fig. 18). To ensure the effectiveness of the writing as a communication tool, the designers of the inscriptions sublimated the architectonic elements, creating narrative tension within the wall painting 'letter by letter' and thus leading the viewer to Christ's contemplation in a *mandorla* at the East. This *mandorla* is underlined, as we saw, by a beautiful verse inscription.<sup>46</sup> Nothing in the content of the text invites us to move from West to East, nor to stop under the vault of the sanctuary; the notion of a passage, door or path does not appear in the *tituli*, but the combination of topographic, paleographic and semantic aspects of the inscription transforms it into a device of visual mediation. In this way, the visual experience of decoration is transformed into a bodily experience in order to finally allow the body dissolution into Christ's ecstatic contemplation. However, as in Moissac, the form of the letters was not left to chance and serves to enhance this anamorphosis. Moving from a mixed script made from uncials and capitals in the western area of the crypt to a timeless capital script in the eastern part is a way of making legible these variations of temporality in visual experiences.

<sup>45</sup> CIFM 1/2, 101–119 nos. 60–63.

<sup>46</sup> *Dat sanctis dignas mirabili sorte coronas. Sit clarus iudex meritorum splendidus index.*





Fig. 18: Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe (France), abbey church, wall painting in the crypt © Vincent Debiais.

## 5 Opening – *Via*

The examples of Moissac and Saint-Savin are a manifesto in favor of limitless medieval graphic practices. When viewed in relation to its environment *in situ*, writing always says more than what is contained in the words inscribed in stone or painted on plaster.

In the center room of Saint-Jean baptistery in Poitiers (France, 12<sup>th</sup> century; fig. 19), an inscription painted on Christ's book in the monumental Ascension scene on the east wall reads: *Ego sum via*. According to John 14.6 (*Ego sum via, veritas et vita*), the word *via* designates Christ himself. His figure is painted in a *mandorla* located between two windows opening onto the sky. From the ground level, looking at the Ascension scene means staring at the sky. Seeing Christ on the wall means seeing beyond the wall. The graphic path to Heaven lies in the topographic relationship between Christ and the altar, the place of Eucharist sacrifice (with a strong visual echo between the liturgical book located on the altar and the *liber vitae* held by Christ). The viewer moves his eyes from the altar, which illustrates the commemoration of Christ's sacrifice, into the central room of the baptistery, to the place he is hoping to be raised bodily at the end of his journey on Earth. The *via* inscription cannot be considered exclusively as a complement of the image; it is also the focal point of the decoration of the baptistery and a place of conversion, where earthly contingencies become heav-

only aspirations. Because Jesus is *Verbum Dei*, this medieval graphic phenomenon plays on the deliberate ambiguity between the hyper-materiality of the written shapes and the absolute transcendence of its contents.



Fig. 19: Poitiers (France), St John Baptistery, central room © CESC/CIFM.

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