

**FROM THE END TO THE BEGINNING:  
TIME, MOVEMENT AND COSMOLOGY AT THE DAWN OF THE GOTHIC\***  
**DEL FINAL AL PRINCIPIO:  
TIEMPO, MOVIMIENTO Y COSMOLOGÍA EN LOS COMIENZOS DEL GÓTICO**

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ABSTRACT

The profound interest on the study of physics shown by mid-twelfth-century scholars such as Thierry de Chartres and William of Conches coincides with a new mimetic thrust driving the development of architecture and the visual arts aimed at re-creating the natural with features such as column statues on portals, and sculpted vault ribs and bosses on ceilings. I begin this essay by discussing how a group of exceptionally creative artists experimented with geometric patterns and iconographic formulae to give material form to the harmonious gyrations of the celestial bodies as conceived by medieval cosmology in the sculpture displayed on the vaults of the chapter house of La Madelaine of Vézelay. I continue analyzing the way they face the challenge of representing the cosmic upheavals that will announce the End of Time in arches, ribs, and keystones of the Pórtico and the crypt of the west narthex of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, linking the two stories together in a unitary discourse. There, the dislocated movement of the metaphorical rebellion of the images against the function of their architectonic supports encompasses the breaking of the cosmological order that eschatological textual traditions prophesize. I will conclude noting that, although a mimetic visual language dominated the ensemble, the Christianized platonic notion of formless matter conveyed through abstract forms emerges there embodying the final destiny of God-created forms. Accordingly,

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the visual discourse on the End displayed on the late twelfth-century narthex establishes a dialogue which with on the primordial matter was featured in the mis-en-scene- of the Origin of the Word that once adorned the early eleventh century north portal of the building.

KEYWORDS: Vézelay, Santiago de Compostela, astrology, medieval sculpture, non-mimetic forms.

#### RESUMEN

El nuevo interés que por el estudio de la física mostraron a mediados del siglo XIII autores como Thierry de Chartres o Guillermo de Conches corrió parejo tanto del surgir de nuevos géneros escultóricos –la estatua columna en los portales decorados y la invasión de escultura en claves y nervios de bóveda en las cubiertas– como de la búsqueda de un lenguaje formal mimético que permitiese re-crear el mundo creado por Dios. Compuesto como una suerte de tríptico y con las frágiles fronteras entre ornamento, abstracción y representación mimética como telón de fondo, comenzaré este trabajo reflexionando sobre el modo en que artistas especialmente creativos experimentaron con patrones geométricos y fórmulas iconográficas del más variado origen para lograr dar forma material al armónico orbitar de los cuerpos celestes que imaginó la cosmología medieval en las bóvedas de la sala capitular de La Madelaine de Vézelay. Continuaré analizando cómo, una vez llegados a Compostela, afrontaron el difícil reto que supone representar la revolución cósmica que anunciará el Final de los Tiempos en los arcos, nervios y claves de la bóveda del Pórtico de la Gloria y de la cripta del nártex occidental de la catedral, integrando ambos cuerpos en un discurso unitario. Allí el movimiento dislocado de la rebelión metafórica de las imágenes contra la función de sus soportes arquitectónicos acompasa la ruptura del orden celeste que habían anunciado las tradiciones escatológicas textuales. Concluiré advirtiéndole que, a pesar de que el lenguaje visual del conjunto es predominantemente mimético, la noción platónica cristianizada de materia informe emerge allí, expresada por medio de formas abstractas, encarnando el destino final de las formas creadas por Dios. En consecuencia, el discurso visual sobre el Final del cierre occidental de la catedral establece un diálogo con el que sobre la materia primordial se desplegó originalmente en la puesta en escena del Origen del mundo en la portada norte del edificio labrada a comienzos del siglo XII.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Vézelay, Santiago de Compostela, astrología, escultura gótica, formas no miméticas.

One of the more memorable experiences I have enjoyed as an art historian was visiting the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela with Herbert Kessler. After being inebriated with the scent emanated from the monumental censer swaying from one end of the transept to the other, we climbed up the scaffolding set in place by the conservators to reach the Glory of the Pórtico. There, I tried conveying to him my perception of the eruptive vision of the cosmic revolution that announces the End of Time. We missed the crypt down below, which offers a figurative discourse closely connected to the one in the main floor of the three-storied west narthex of the cathedral. This humble present is what I would tell him there if we had the opportunity to visit it together again which, I hope, one day we will do. It is now that I realize

that the End cannot be understood without considering the Beginning, so the conversation would move later to the *Portada de Platerías* (south transept portal), where I would show him some pieces which were originally intended for the north portal –the *Porta Francigena*–, because, as we shall see, the late twelfth century *mis-en-scène* of the End of Time on the west narthex overtly dialogues with the cosmological imagery of the visual formulation of the Beginning originally displayed on the early twelfth century *Porta Francigena*. With all this in mind, I decided to delineate a story that runs from the End to the Beginning, departing, consequently, from the crypt.

As we enter it we find ourselves in a quite intriguing space regarding its plan, its elevation, and its decoration, to the point that still today one can merely speculate on its original function. One of its peculiarities lies on the striking contrast between the severe nudity of the jambs and archivolts of the arches of the double access to the transept and their richly decorated intrados (Figs. 1a and 1b). Some decades ago, Niel Stratford noticed the kinship between the “exuberant decoration” of the Galician arches and some figural patterns in Burgundian buildings:

The series of petalled flowers which decorate the intrados of the two arches... is manifestly an echo of the rosettes so common in 12<sup>th</sup> century Burgundy... The floral designs and the medallions



Fig. 1a. Santiago de Compostela. Narthex of the cathedral. Crypt. Right side of the intrados of the left arch of the entrance to the transept. Late sixties of the twelfth century. Foto: Ignacio Mascuñán



Fig. 1b. Santiago de Compostela. Narthex of the cathedral. Crypt. Left side of the intrados of the right arch of the entrance to the transept. Late sixties of the twelfth century. Foto: Ignacio Mascuñán

of the jambs are less stereotyped and among them are a few figures and beasts: a man grasping tendrils from the foliage could come from the Avallon portals, and a pair of naked figures in foliage also surely derives its composition from the Labours of the Months and the Zodiac cycles of the archivolts of the doorways of Vézelay and Avallon. But their style has nothing in common with these sources. For instance, the naked figures belong to the stylistic milieu of the Pórtico de la Gloria. As to the animal in a pearled medallion on the south side of the N. door, it is a copy of the one of the Vézelay Chapterhouse vault medallions and other Vézelay medallions are carved with foliate designs closely similar to those of the crypt doorways.<sup>1</sup>

Stratford was more interested in the formal quality of the sculpture than in its iconography, but his remarks on the relationship between the Compostela intrados, the Burgundian Zodiac and the reliefs on the ceiling of the Vézelay chapterhouse are especially illuminating as they offer a pathway to explore their meaning. If the pair of naked young men entangled in vegetal scrolls could represent the zodiacal sign of Gemini (Fig. 2a), the animal biting its own paw in the pearled medallion could stand for the constellation of Lupus, for the same narrative formulation can be found in illuminated Bestiaries (Fig. 2b). In those medieval moralizations of the natural world the wolf is characterized by mutilating itself by biting its foot. It is said that when approaching to a sheep fold, if it steps on a branch and makes a noise, it punishes itself by biting the offending foot, as it does when scaping to a trap.<sup>2</sup>

The Burgundian ancestor of the Compostelan relief comes to remove any doubt about these wolves' astral nature (Fig. 2c). The daisy-shaped star displayed in the centre of the medallion is an abridged version of a pattern commonly featured in astrological illuminations, where yellow or golden stars use to sprinkle the figures of the celestial bodies. Sculptors working at the Vézelay chapterhouse were familiar with this procedure, for artists belonging to an earlier generation had already tried out it in the Zodiac of the central portal of the church. There, in the Gemini medallion, the young naked men embracing each other are accompanied only by two stars, one of them showing a daisy-like shape as well (Fig. 2d). Thus, both the arches of the Galician crypt and the vaults of the Vézelay chapterhouse appears to be inhabited by constellations and stars for the "petalled flowers" that Stratford saw in both monuments represent stars, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Before delving into the differences between the cosmologi-

<sup>1</sup> N. STRATFORD, "Compostela and Burgundy? Thoughts on the Western Crypt of the Cathedral of Santiago", in *Actas del simposio internacional "O Pórtico da Gloria e a Arte do seu Tempo" (Santiago de Compostela 3-8 octubre de 1988)*, A Coruña, 1999, pp. 53-82, esp. p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> These passages were illustrated in medieval Bestiaries and although I was not able to find a pictorial representation prior to late twelfth century, its proliferation in later manuscripts and choir stalls let suppose that these stories, that circulated earlier, would have been accompanied of visual representations in earlier manuscripts as well. See, for example, the French late twelfth century illustration of *Lupus* in National Library of Russia –earlier Leningrad Public Library Saltkov-Chshedrin– Lat. Q. v. V.I, fol.42, cfr. *The Medieval Bestiary. Text and commentaries* by X. MURATOVA, Paris, 1984, p. 104. The animal is not mentioned in the Physiologus tradition, but medieval Bestiaries compiled the information from Isidore XII.II.23-24, Pliny, VIII, 34.22 and Solinus 2.36. Later items which show the animal biting its foot: Bibliothèque municipale de Chalon-sur-Saône, MS 14, fol. 85v; BnF, fr. 1951, fol. 4v; BnF, fr. 1951, fol 15v (to escape the trap); *Li Bestiaires d'amours*, first quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Bodelian Library, MS Douce 308, fol 89r).

<sup>3</sup> I have already identified the "petalled flowers" with stars in Compostela and Vézelay in R. SÁNCHEZ AMEJEIRAS, "Dreams of Kings and Buildings: Galician imagery (1153-1230)", in *Culture and Society in Medieval Galicia. A Cultural Crossroad at the Edge of Europe*, J. D'EMILIO (ed. and trans.), Leyden, 2015, pp. 695-764, esp. pp. 722-725; R. SÁNCHEZ AMEJEIRAS, "Rebellious Architecture: Movement, Subversion and Transubstantiation in the Visionary Mode",





Fig. 2a. Santiago de Compostela. Narthex of the cathedral. Crypt. Right side of the intrados of the left arch of the entrance to the transept. Detail: the zodiacal sign of Gemini. Late sixties of the twelfth century. Foto: Rocío Sánchez.



Fig. 2b. Santiago de Compostela. Narthex of the cathedral. Crypt. Right side of the intrados of the left arch of the entrance to the transept. Detail: the constellation of *Lupus*. Late sixties of the twelfth century. Foto: Ignacio Mascuñán



Fig. 2c. Vézelay. Monastery of La Madeleine. Chapterhouse. Early sixties of the twelfth century. Detail of the vault of the southwestern bay: the constellation of *Lupus*. (© Bildarchiv Photo Marburg)



Fig. 2d. Vézelay. Church of La Madeleine. Central portal of the narthex. Around 1130. Detail: the sign of Gemini in the outer archivolt. (Wikimedia Commons public domain)

cal discourses visually embodied in both monuments, I will start by looking for the traces of this invasion of the physical sky on the ceilings and the arches of both buildings, considering it within the wider frame of the overall compositions of their architectural settings.

### THE COSMOS HARMONIOUS MOVEMENT

A good point of departure is the Zodiac featured in the central portal of the Vézelay narthex. Recent scholarship has focused on its cosmological character. If Conrad Rudolph views it as part of a complex figural discourse on macro and micro-cosmos,<sup>4</sup> Shelley Morweena Williams, in an illuminating article, sees it as essentially astrological, depicting medieval cosmology.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, both authors approach the portal as if it were a bi-dimensional picture, dated from around 1130, overlooking the fact that it presides over the central entrance of a two-storied narthex. For that reason, I do think that the Zodiac of the portal must be interpreted considering the celestial imagery of the central chapel of the tribune, consecrated in 1145.<sup>6</sup> Although pilgrims visiting the abbey to venerate Mary Magdalen had no access to it, the monks engaged in the conception of the ensemble were aware that a unitary discourse linked the two stories together.

The chapel was covered by a cross-ribbed vault adorned with a figurative boss preserved today, slightly damaged, in the Musée Lapidaire (Fig. 3).<sup>7</sup> Its figural decoration clearly establishes a physical and ontological hierarchy encompassing the structure of the key-stone: the lower horizontal base shows a brand-new pattern to represent stars,<sup>8</sup> and a couple of seraphim, rendered static and frontally, rise up their hands as if they were singing the Trisagion on the vertical sides. Reading the keystone with medieval cosmological theories in mind, the solid star of the base pairs the fixed stars of the eighth celestial orbit, the outermost orbit of the physical world. In addition, the fact that it almost eclipses the seraphim embodies the idea that the invisible spiritual Heavens lies beyond the visual physical world. Thus, the archivolt with the Zodiac is part of a wider cosmological structure. Displayed below the eighth sphere, its semi-circular design becomes a flattened and abridged representation of the harmonious circulation of the signs. Hence, decorating the ceiling of a building with three-dimensional sculpture was not the only novelty of the late forties at Vézelay, so is the idea of integrating the Zodiac of

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*Codex Aquilarensis* 35 (2019), pp. 85-114, esp. 97-106. Élise Haddad also read the “rosettes” of the lower lintel of the portal of Beaulieu-sur Dordogne as stars, in this case, linked to the Apocalyptic account of the dragon meant to discard one third of the stars of the sky (Ap 12, 3-4), see É. HADDAD, “Common Space or Clef Space? The example of Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne, an Architectural and Figural Space”, in *Place and Space in the Medieval World*, M. BOULTON, J. HAWKES, H. STÖNER (eds.), New York, 2018, pp. 114-125, esp. p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> C. RUDOLPH, “Macro/Microcosm at Vézelay: The Narthex Portal and Non-Élite Participation of Élite Spirituality”, *Speculum*, 96/3 (2021), pp. 601-662.

<sup>5</sup> S. M. WILLIAMS, “The Zodiac on Church Portals: Astrology and the Medieval Cosmos”, *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture*, 7/3 (2021), pp. 59-115.

<sup>6</sup> A. TIMBERT, *Vézelay. Le chevet de la Madeleine et le premier gothique bourguignon*, Rennes, 2009, pp. 49-52.

<sup>7</sup> L. SAULNIER, N. STRATFORD, *La sculpture oubliée de Vézelay*, Genève and Paris, 1984, cat. n° 133, p. 104; TIMBERT, *Vézelay*, p. 49; SÁNCHEZ AMEJEIRAS, “Rebellious Architecture”, pp. 105-106.

<sup>8</sup> The formulation is the result of displaying the elements of a Corinthian capital conforming a new pattern: the acanthus leaves are arrayed radially around a central rosette.

the portal into a complex cosmological discourse making the architectural structure match the celestial cosmos.

After the difficulties that the abbey suffered in the mid-twelfth century, already in the sixties, new attempts were made to give material form to the physical sky on the ceiling of the chapterhouse. Although this area of the monastery was heavily reconstructed by Viollet-le-Duc in the nineteenth century, he tried to be faithful to its original architectonic design and he preserved most of its sculpted decoration.<sup>9</sup> The building of three naves with two bays each is covered up by a series of ribbed vaults showing a peculiar decorative system: each keystone is surrounded by four reliefs displayed in the shape of a cross. The hierarchy which governs the figural decoration of these peculiar compositions provides the easternmost bay on the central nave (placed over the altar) with a higher status, for its imagery differs in its nature from the others: the triumphant Lamb holding the Cross in the keystone is surrounded by the Symbols of the Evangelists, a figural composition consistent with a timeless metaphysical Heavenly vision.

By contrast, the others present physical realities, for they combine several designs of “vegetal” decoration to convey stars with peculiar figural formulae representing the celestial constellations (Figs. 4a and 4b). Indeed, some of them are rendered in narrative terms, borrowing iconographic motifs from several repertoires such as Bestiaries and others – as seen before regarding the figure of Lupus –. Contaminations of repertoires were not uncommon in the Middle Ages and cosmological imagery was not spared from them. Dieter Blume, Mathilda Haffner and Wolfgang Metzger had recently adverted that medieval astronomical cycles were protean and mutable, and their protean character increased when cosmological images abandoned the territory of the page and achieved a greater degree of independence from the



Fig. 3. Vézelay. Musée Lapidaire. Keystone originating from the chapel of the tribune of the narthex. A fixed star almost hiding two Seraphim. Around 1145. (© Bildarchiv Photo Marburg)

<sup>9</sup> On the interventions of Viollet-le-Duc in Vézelay, K. D. MURPHY, *Memory and Modernity. Viollet-le-Duc at Vézelay*, University Park, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> D. BLUME, M. HAFNER, W. METZGER, *Sternbilder des Mittelalters-Der gemalte Himmel zwischen Wissenschaft und Phantasie*, Band I: 800-1200, 2 vols., Berlin, 2012; D. BLUME, M. HAFNER, W. METZGER in collaboration with K. GLASS, *Sternbilder des Mittelalters-Der gemalte Himmel zwischen Wissenschaft und Phantasie*, Band II: 1200-1500, 2 vols., Berlin, 2016. See also R. DUIS, “Celestial Transmissions. An iconographical Classification of Constellations



texts<sup>10</sup>. This is the case at Vézelay, where variations not without humor can be found both in the chapterhouse and in the portal. There, Taurus shows an inappropriate fish-tale and Balance is rendered dramatically unbalanced. As for the chapterhouse, in the western bay of the central nave (the constellation of) the Lion featured in the keystone is surrounded by several figures confined in medallions, (see Fig. 4a). The King of the animals reappears in the neighboring relief where Samson tearing its jaws could stand for the constellation of Hercules.<sup>11</sup> Nearby, Centaur embraces his shield with the right arm and holds a mace with the left hand; the sign of Piscis is represented following an Arabic model –a young man riding a huge fish while feeding it–, and, finally, a young man combing the hair of a slightly younger could ironically conjure up the Gemini<sup>12</sup>.

On the southwestern bay, stars get along with constellations (see Fig. 4b). There, the sculptors proved to be very creative, experimenting with several patterns to represent the fixed stars. Drawing on the basic formula with acanthus leaves radially displayed around a central rosette, they looked for far more complex forms, to the extent that they succeeded in creating a sort of “dynamic” sequence that, departing from the lateral reliefs ends in the keystone. One of the reliefs shows how a kind of corolla opens for new petals to emerge while hiding a central bud. A similar bud is starting to show in the second and, finally, it bulges from the keystone as a little pendant surrounded by an open and ribbed double corolla. Two constellations accompany those shiny celestial bodies. We have already seen Lupus, and the other one is represented by a hybrid being, a winged dragon with human head and hooves ¿Draco? I have only refer to two vaults, but Aquila, Orion, Sagittarius and Capricorn can be seen on the others, as well as other ways of representing stars.<sup>13</sup> I do not intend here to propose that a kind of accurate and detailed planisphere was carved on the Vélezay vaults; simple allusions -not without humour- to well-known constellations and vibrant beautiful arrangements to represent stars were enough for the monks to imagine the astral formations, a knowledge with

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Cycles in Manuscripts (8<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Centuries)”, *Scriptorium*, 59 (2005), pp. 147-202. Among the many titles on the medieval cosmology and astronomy see A. GARCÍA AVILÉS, *El tiempo y los astros. Arte, ciencia y religión en la Alta Edad Media*, Murcia, Universidad de Murcia, 2001; and B. ANDERSON, *Cosmos and Community in Early Medieval Art*, New Haven and London, 2017. Among the number of sculpted cycles showing peculiar formulations of the signs the one carved on the Portal of the Lamb at San Isidoro in León, looks specially interesting because it shows a kind of moralized zodiac, see S. MORALEJO ÁLVAREZ, “Pour l’interprétation iconographique du portail de l’Agneau à Saint-Isidore de Léon: les signes du Zodiaque”, *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa*, 8 (1977), pp. 137-173.

<sup>11</sup> It appears to be a confusion between Lion and Hercules that stems from earlier texts and images. In fact, the representation of the constellation of Leo at Vézelay accords to the Carolingian *Recensio Interpolata*, where the lion slaying by the Greek Hero was intended to represent the constellation of Hercules. See E. MAAS ed., *Commentarium in Aratum Reliquiae*, Berlin, 1898, pp. 190-91, esp. p. 206.

<sup>12</sup> In the oldest miscellaneous series of treatises entitled *Kitab al-bulhan*, (Oxford, Bodl. Or. 133, fol. 22b), Piscis is rendered as a man riding a big fish. On the manuscript, see S. CARBONI, “The ‘Book of Surprises’ (*Kitab al-bulhan*) of the Bodleian Library”, *The Latrobe Journal*, 91 (2013), pp. 22-34. This Jalayirid treatise is a miscellany that includes the famous astrological treatise of Abu Ma’shar al-Balkhani. It is possible that this peculiar formula to represent the sign of Piscis stems from earlier Arabic manuscripts of this treatise. It is also possible that Arabic models reach the abbey through rich objects of metal work because astrological knowledge also circulated through precious objects from Persia, Siria or Egypt, see A. GARCÍA AVILÉS, “Mercurio en el Libro de Astromagia”, in *Imágenes y promotores en el arte medieval: miscelánea en homenaje a Joaquín Yarza Luaces*, M. MELERO et al (eds.), Barcelona, 2001, pp. 391-406.

<sup>13</sup> A comprehensive analysis of the imagery of the whole ceiling would exceed the limits of this contribution.

which they were familiar because it was very useful for the liturgical *computus*.<sup>14</sup>

As is well known, maps of the sky decorated, instead, Carolingian mantles and silver tables or cosmological manuscripts, and the skill of the imaginary painter of a fictive planisphere celebrated Baudri de Bougueil in the famous letter he addressed to Countess Adèle de Normandie:

On the room's ceiling, celestial rotations, the motion of the planets, Heaven's perpetual turns, gyrations without end. Though it was static, the picture itself appeared to be turning. (585). Such was the artist's skill; thus, he had mastered his craft.<sup>15</sup>

Stars and constellations also appear to be turning in the humbler and hybrid celestial ensemble at Vézelay. The firm, serene, centralized composition of the “metaphysical vault” contrasts with the others’ dynamic character, where sculptors were able to conjure up the circular movement of the stars reversing the sense of the constellation figures with respect to the central keystone, making use of an artifice like the one employed by miniaturists to make visible the harmonious movement of the celestial cosmos when designing planispheres.

<sup>14</sup> On the usefulness of astronomical knowledge in the twelfth century monastic realm, see A. GARCÍA AVILÉS, “El hombre y las estrellas: el imaginario astrológico en los siglos del románico”, in *El Románico y sus mundos imaginados*, P. LUIS HUERTA (ed.), Aguilar de Campoo, 2014, pp. 85-107.

<sup>15</sup> M. OTTER, “Baudri de Bougueil, ‘To Countess Adela’”, *The Journal of Medieval Latin*, 11 (2001), pp. 60-141, esp. Baudri vv. 584-585, p. 80; for the entire description of the planisphere vv. 584-720, pp. 80-83. The Latin text in *Baldrinus Burgulinus Carmina*, K. HILBERT (ed.), Heidelberg, 1979.

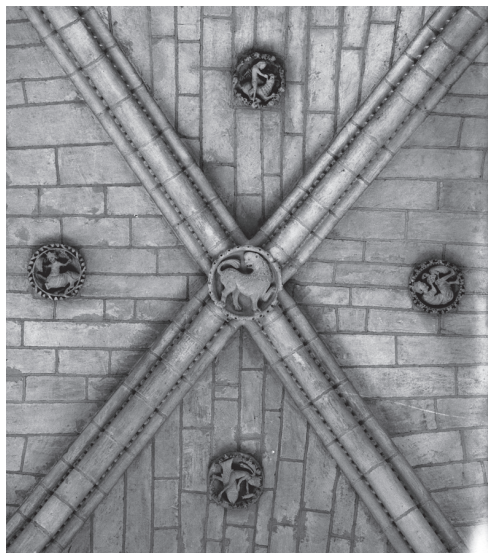


Fig. 4a. Vézelay. Monastery of La Madeleine. Chapterhouse. Vault of the western bay of the central nave. Early sixties of the twelfth century. Constellations. (© Bildarchiv Photo Marburg)

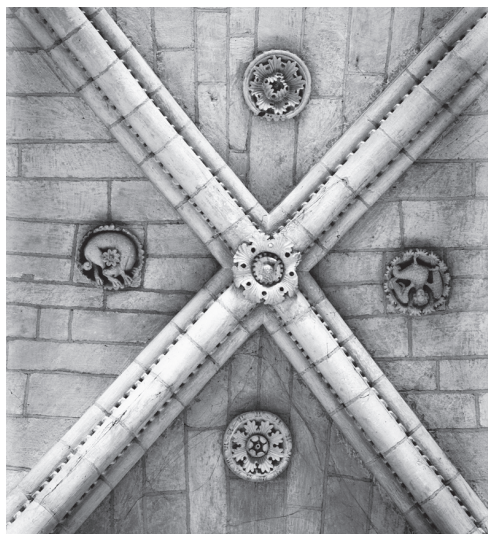


Fig. 4b. Vézelay. Monastery of La Madeleine. Chapterhouse. Vault of the southwestern bay. Early sixties of the twelfth century. Fixed stars and constellations. (© Bildarchiv Photo Marburg)



Celestial imagery makes the Vézelay ceiling lose, poetically, its physical matter, turning the stone into the physical sky, more precisely, into the gyration of the constellations and the zodiacal signs superimposed over the background of the sphere of the fixed stars. Thus, at Vézelay, the metaphysical spiritual visions which used to decorate the ceilings of ecclesiastical buildings from the end of the eleventh century yields the earthly and carnal contemplation of the physical sky. This “emerging naturalism” runs parallel to the changes occurred in mid-twelfth century theological studies.<sup>16</sup> Authors such as William of Conches or Thierry de Chartres showed a new interest on the beauty of the physical Cosmos created by God, developing the concept of *ornatus mundi*. William of Conches in his glosses on Plato’s *Timaeus* summarises the ornament of the world in terms of the variety of species in their proper elements; stars in heaven, fish in water, birds in the air, men on earth,<sup>17</sup> to the extent that, for him, *ornatus* is not only an object of sensual *delectatio*, but it is also the basis of its delectation, the investigation on forms and harmonic relations.<sup>18</sup> When seen the ceiling of the Vézelay chapterhouse I cannot help but remembering some words of his *Philosophia* where, when referring to the physical world, says of aether that “Its *ornatus* is something seen above the moon, namely the stars, the fixed ones as well as the wandering ones.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, the moving richly decorated brilliant stones sculpted on the ceiling of the Vézelay chapterhouse did not only fit with current physical knowledge -the stars were thought to be solid bodies and soul-bearing entities- they were also suitable to an emergent aesthetic that celebrated the beauty of the God-created world.

#### FROM THE END TO THE BEGINNING

Burgundian sculptors fond of searching new formulae to represent stars, of experimenting with formal devices to convey movement and aware of the keystone’s expressive potentialities were called to Compostela in the late sixties of the twelfth century where they met with other teams of carvers coming from the Île de France and the Laonnais who brought in their purses more mimetic than figural formal repertoires. Once arrived, they faced the difficult task of providing with material entity an original version of the End of Times linking together the two lower stories of the monumental narthex of the cathedral –the Pórtico and the crypt–

<sup>16</sup> A survey of what was called “early gothic,” see G. BOTO VARELA, “The Attainment of a Compelling Naturalism in Sculpture c. 1200”, in *Emerging Naturalism. Contexts and Narratives in European Sculpture 1140-1220*, G. BOTO VARELA, M. SERRANO COLL, J. McNEILL (eds.), Turnhout, 2020, pp. 13-25.

<sup>17</sup> ...est ornatus mundi quid in singulis videtur elements, ut stelle in celo, aves in aere, pisces in aqua, homines in terra. WILLIAM OF CONCHES, *Glossae super Platonem*, E. JEAUNEAU (ed.), Turnhout, 2006, CCCM, 203, 71.2-4. On the medieval fortune of Plato and Calcidius, P. DRONKE, *The Spell of Calcidius: Platonic Concepts and Images in the Medieval West*, Florence, 2008. A comprehensive summary on the issue in C. LIPRAIK GUEST, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance*, Leyden, Brill, 2016, pp. 44-49.

<sup>18</sup> T. GREGORY, *Anima mundi. La filosofia di Guglielmo di Conches e la scuola di Chartres*, Florence, 1955, pp. 214-215. On the author see also G. SPINOSA, “*Ornatus mundi*. Nota di terminologia filosofica medievale”, *Archivum Latinitatis Medii Aevii*, 66 (2008), pp. 201-212; D. ELFORD, “William of Conches”, in *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy*, P. DRONKE (ed.), Cambridge, 1988, pp. 308-327. For an accurate critical revision on the concept of “School of Chartres”, see E. JEAUNEAU, *Rethinking the School of Chartres*, Toronto, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> See J. CADDEN, “Science and Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: The Natural Philosophy of William of Conches”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56, (Jan., 1995), pp. 1-24, esp. p. 11. The quotation in *Philosophia*, II, I, § 1-2, 42: *Ornatus vero illius est quidquid super lunam videtur, scilicet stellae tam infixae quam erratae*.

into a unitary visual discourse. Making use of a massif display of images, they weaved together the prophesies of Isaiah, Daniel, John, or Mathew with other narratives –as those related to the sibylline prophesies and the *Iudicii signa*– alluding to the cosmic upheavals which will announce the End.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the Burgundian harmonious cosmic rotations yielded a Galician agitated and dislocated cosmic movement presaging the End.

The last of those signs will be the falling of the celestial bodies or, properly speaking in medieval cosmological terms, the falling of the planets, the wandering stars, the constellations and, lastly, the falling of the eighth sphere of fixed stars. In Compostela, the sidereal catastrophe was embodied in the arches and bosses of the two-storyed and three-dimensional scenario, making the cosmic revolution fit with the hierarchical structure of the medieval cosmos.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the fixed stars are the protagonists of an enthralling spectacle at the upper level, that of the Pórtico, for one can see them dropping from the arches, ribs, and bosses. Planets and wandering constellations precipitate, instead, in the crypt. Sun and Moon –considered planets in the Middle Ages– descend on the bosses of the central bay while stars and constellations glide downwards following the course of the intrados in the arches of the double access to the transept. We have already noticed that the stars made of centrifugal patterns with doubles corollas and the constellation of Lupus were much in debt to those of Vézelay chapterhouse, and the vocation to experiment with narrative formulations when featuring the constellations emerges here again. But, unlike Vézelay, where the celestial bodies moved harmoniously, the Galician metaphorical figures are depicted as if, in their fall, were suffering. An old bearded man –Cepheus?– is entangled in a foliated scroll grasping tendrils of the foliage as if he were trying to break free (Fig. 5a). The twins representing the sign of Gemini are almost devoured by an even more aggressive vegetation and, within this menacing scenario two terrified bears –*Ursa Maior* and *Ursa Minor*– tightly embrace each other while looking downwards as if they fear their final destiny.<sup>22</sup> But what will be their final fate? Are the stars falling to the floor? To the earth? If the natural word is coming to an end, what kind of earth?

Just below the bears, the cosmic upheaval appears to approach to an end for a dynamic helical comet unleashes the increasing disintegration of the stars, that split conforming new little ones, finally losing their material entity (Fig. 5b). The stones of light are pierced, released of their physical mass while the relief of the sculpture gradually decreases to run into a sort of abstract decoration: a handful of fish-scales overlap each other confined in a semicircular frame. The other arches terminate, instead, in flat half circles, carefully polished, lacking any decoration, reduced to mere matter (Fig. 5c). For better understand the nature of these “abstract patterns” which appear to convey the final destiny of stars and constellations it proves necessary to go back to the Beginning.

<sup>20</sup> SÁNCHEZ AMEJEIRAS, “Dreams of Kings and Buildings”, pp. 695-764, esp. pp. 722-725; EAD., “Rebellious Architecture,” pp. 97-106.

<sup>21</sup> A pioneering study on the relationship between cosmology and eschatology in B. KUHNEL, *The End of Time as in the Order of Things: Science and Eschatology in Early Medieval Art*, Regensburg, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> A kind of intervaluality links the terrified bears of the crypt with the image of two souls, possibly awaiting damnation, who take refuge in an angel’s bosom in the southern arch of the Pórtico, that, like the animals downstairs, appear to experience vertigo as they look downwards.



Fig. 5a. Santiago de Compostela. Narthex of the cathedral. Crypt. Left side of the intrados of the left arch of the entrance to the transept. Detail: the constellation of Cepheus? entangled in a vegetal scroll. Late sixties of the twelfth century. Foto: Rocío Sánchez



Fig. 5b. Santiago de Compostela. Narthex of the cathedral. Crypt. Left side of the intrados of the right arch of the entrance to the transept. Detail: disembodied star falling into an abstract form of fish-scales confined in a semi-circular frame. Late sixties of the twelfth century. Foto: Rocío Sánchez



Fig. 5c. Santiago de Compostela. Narthex of the cathedral. Crypt. Left side of the intrados of the left arch of the entrance to the transept. Detail: Half-circle lacking any decoration. Late sixties of the twelfth century. Foto: Ignacio Mascuñán

While the west narthex of Santiago cathedral shows the great cosmic revolution that will announce and accompany the End of Time, the Beginning of Time and the creation of the material world was generously laid out in the original Romanesque north portal of the cathedral –the *Porta Francigena*, whose remains, after being dismantled in the eighteenth century, were affixed on the embrasures, corners, and the frontispiece of the south Romanesque portal, the *Puerta de las Platerías*, or scattered and today reunited in the Museo de la Catedral de Santiago. As Herbert Kessler has recently noticed with respect to the thirteenth-century cycle of Genesis of San Marco in Venice, the rich narratives related to Adam and Eve that encapsulate the doctrine of sin and redemption made the scholars obliterate other abstract, non-mimetic, compositions that played an important role in the visual rendering of the Beginning. The same can be said of Compostela. The big amount of scholarship centered on its Romanesque north portal, recently brilliantly analyzed by Francisco Prado-Vilar, focused, mainly, in the human figure, and, especially, in the economy of salvation conveyed in the sequence of the creation and animation of Adam, probably accompanied by a creation of Eve, now lost, the Fall and its consequences.<sup>23</sup>

A sequence of a very different nature can be recognized in four rectangular marble slabs, slightly pinkish and yet frosty-white, stapled in Platerías, set vertically, flanking human figures –the Apostle Andreas, another mutilated standing character, and the scene of Eve milking Cain (Fig. 6). The eighteenth-century clerics who decided to preserve them considered the figurative and the decorative as opposite categories and thought that the slabs belonged to the realm of ornament. Accordingly, they arranged them to serve as a frame for human figures or narrative scenes. But in the Middle Ages the frontiers between those categories were blurred. In his pioneering studies focused on “spiritual seeing” Herbert Kessler brought the issue of medieval abstract images to the fore,<sup>24</sup> prompting scholars to delve into it or to question the limits of the concept of ornament. Following their example, I shall try to decipher the sense of the non-mimetic “abstract” and “ornamental” Compostelan slabs.

With all probability the plaques current placement differs slightly from the original layout, i. e. the extreme left one should be on the far right. If so, the sequence follows an increasing order, both in terms of the volume of the sculpture and of its design. It grows from simpler to more complex visual patterns, and the matter goes from being a mere smooth surface to project in very low relief and, finally, embody in a higher relief. The simpler plaque, the primordial one, is a plain rectangular slab devoid of any figural or non-mimetic sing, showing only its carefully polished surface. The second one shows a vertical composition consisting in a series of monumental fish-scales alternating a layer with a single central one with another with a couplet, overlapping each other in an extremely gentle slope. The third one is quite similar, although in the lower part was severely damaged, probably when it was removed from its original place. The last one is, instead, overtly clear: from the bottom, where the fish-scales multiply, a vegetal scroll with vines and grapes emerges upwards. Thus, the simple polished

<sup>23</sup> F. PRADO-VILAR, “The Marble Tempest: Material Imagination, the Echoes of Nostos, and the Transfiguration of the Myth in Romanesque Sculpture”, in *Icons of Sound. Voice. Architecture and Imagination in Medieval Art*, B. V. PENTCHEVA (ed.), Routledge, 2020, pp. 152-205.

<sup>24</sup> H. KESSLER, *Seeing Medieval Art. Rethinking the Middle Ages*, Ontario/ New York, 2004.





Fig. 6. Santiago de Compostela. Cathedral. *Puerta de las Platerías* (south portal). Sculptural fragments originating from the north portal (*Porta Francigena*). Ca. 1100-1110. Foto: Marina Garzón

marble transforms gradually into an abstract grid to turns finally into what could be labelled, at first sight, as “mere vegetal decoration”.

Considering that the slabs’ sequence originated from the Genesis cycle of the *Porta Francigena* one might assume that it encapsulates a material discourse on the very act of creation, equating the increasing complexity of the sculptors’ work with the process of increasing complexity which shaped the first steps of God’s creation of the world.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in the first slab, the marble careful polishing and the absence of any other sing turn the flat stone in an image in itself,<sup>26</sup> that must be understood within the frame of the platonic interpretation of the Hexameron that, from Augustin times on, reshaped Christian cosmology, incorporating the notion of the primordial formless matter. In the eleventh and twelfth century, the “platonization” of

<sup>25</sup> Already Augustin had equated the artist’s and God’s act of creation, a thoroughly survey of the issue in B. FRICKE, “Artifex and Opifex. The Medieval Artist”, in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe, Second edition*, C. RUDOLPH (ed.), New York, John Wiley & Sons, 2019, pp. 45-69. As popular as Augustin’s was the slightly different comparison draw by Calcidius in his Commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus*, see, I. WEINRIB, “Living Matter: Materiality, Maker and Ornament in the Middle Ages”, *Gesta*, 52/2 (2013), pp. 113-32, esp. pp. 127-128 and note 50.

<sup>26</sup> On the figural character of non-mimetic patterns, V. DEBIAIS, E. GERSTMAN, “Au-delà des sens, l’abstraction”, *Convivium*, VIII (2021), pp. 29-49, especially pp. 32-33 for the case of the pillars with “abstract” decoration in the cloister of Moissac. This aspect is also analyzed by Prado-Vilar in regard to the representation of “Silence in Heaven” in the early-twelfth-century Silos Apocalypse (London, British Library, Add. MS. 11695), where an empty square, devoid



Christian theology gained a new impetus as the number of manuscripts containing Calcidius's translation of Plato's *Timaeus*, and/or its Calcidian commentary dating to that time attests.<sup>27</sup> According to Calcidius, God did not create the world *ex nihilo*, rather, He gave material form to formless primordial matter, the *silva*, a troubling concept to be translated into images. Ittai Weinrib, when analyzing the complexity of the concept, noticed that, according to Calcidius, "The first element on universal matter is *silva* unformed and without differentiation, in which intelligible forms are modelled, so that the world might exist",<sup>28</sup> and continues stressing its potential nature:

All of these things we say they exist in possibility, because their existence is presumed on account of this possibility, in the same way that we say that bronze is a possible statue, though at the moment it is still a shapeless metal.<sup>29</sup>

In Compostela, not a shapeless metal but a flat marble was the material metaphor used to conjure up the primordial state. The unstable perception of the white veining on the pinkish marble invited the beholder to project the figures created by his/her imagination onto its surface, looking for the forms-to-be that were hidden behind the stone outermost layer.<sup>30</sup>

The following step in the sculptural process and in the primordial cosmic revolution is rendered in the second and the third slabs, whose simple basic pattern –the grid of scales– yields specific meaning by virtue of its relationship with the fourth one, where its germinal potentiality becomes activity, for the simple pattern appears to generate new forms: the fish scales turn gradually into a foliated interlace of vines with bunches of grapes. Within a visual discourse on the creation of the world the vegetal scroll could easily be identified as another *avatar* of the primordial *silva* that accents its animated nature. Ittai Weinrib found the

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of any representational symbol, recalls the "primordial silence" that existed before God uttered the first words that will set Creation into motion, thus connecting the apocalyptic silence of the end times with the primordial silence of Genesis, see F. PRADO-VILAR, "*Silentium*: El silencio cósmico como imagen en la Edad Media y la Modernidad", *Revista de Poética Medieval*, 27 (2013), pp. 21-43, esp. pp. 36-37.

<sup>27</sup> C. RUDOLPH, "In the Beginning: Theories and Images of Creation in Northern Europe in the Twelfth Century", *Art History*, 22 (1999), pp. 3-55. On the reception of the platonic ideas, see A. SOMFAI, "The Eleventh-Century Shift in the Reception of Plato's 'Timaeus' and Calcidius's 'Comentary'", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 65 (2002), pp. 1-21; DRONKE, *The Spell of Calcidius, passim*; on the platonic discourse on astrology, B. S. EASTWOOD, "Plato and circumsolar planetary motion in the Middle Ages", in *The Revival of Planetary Astronomy in Carolingian and post-Carolingian Europe*, Aldershot, 2002, pp. 7-26; Id., "Planetary Diagrams - Descriptions, Models, Theory", in *The Power of Images in Early Modern Science*, W. LEFÈVRE, J. RENN, U. SCHOEFLIN (eds.), New York, 2003, pp. 197-226.

<sup>28</sup> WEINRIB, "Living Matter", 126, note 42 for the Latin text. On quite different formulations of the primordial chaos, see M. A. CASTIÑEIRAS GONZÁLEZ, "From Chaos to Cosmos: The Creation Iconography in the Catalan Romanesque Bibles", *Arte Medieval*, 1 (2002), pp. 35-30.

<sup>29</sup> WEINRIB, "Living Matter," p. 126, note 43 for the Latin text.

<sup>30</sup> On marble iconopoietic power, see B. KILLERICH, "The Aesthetic Viewing of Marble in Byzantium: From Global Impression to Focal Attention", *Arte Medievale*, IV serie-anno II (2012), pp. 9-29; F. B. FLOOD, "Wonder: Marble as Medium and the Natural Images in Mosques and Modernism", *West 86th. A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History and Material Culture*, XXIII/2 (2016), pp. 168-219, and, especially, B. V. PENTCHEVA, "Mirror, Inspiration, and the Making of Art in Byzantium", *Convivium*, 1-2 (2014), pp. 10-39; EAD, *Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium*, University Park, 2017.

visual translations of the Chalcedian concept of the (living) *silva* in the abstract and dynamic form of the vegetal scrolls that lavishly adorn the frontispieces of the Gospel of John or of the Book of Genesis in several eleventh century manuscripts of different origins.<sup>31</sup> The meandering arabesques of their designs trigger the idea of movement, hence, of something animated. Among the many examples he included in his essay, one of them invites to drive a comparison with the Compostela sculpted quartet: the frontispiece of the Bernward Bible (Hildesheim, Hildesheim Cathedral, MS DS 61, fol 1r). There, under a foliate Cross, a haloed man (John the Evangelist or Bernward), holds a codex open to the first verse of the Book of Genesis: *–In principio creav(i)t D(eu)s celu(m)–* echoing the parallel history of creation of the Gospel of John. The background of this discourse on the Origins is composed by a tissue of pearled semi-circular shapes overlapping each other, vertically displayed, housing vegetal buds or already shaped leaves, evoking the process of an increasing complexity of forms, making visible the dynamic and living nature of *silva*. Thus, both in the Hildesheim Bible and the Galician slabs permeates, as Herbert Kessler would say, “a material aesthetics associated with prelapsarian experiences.”<sup>32</sup>

Calcidius’ commentaries on Plato’s *Timaeus* ought to be one of the favorite bedside books of the early twelfth century clerics of Compostela. Although in the late sixties of the century new winds on the study of physics, astronomy and mathematics blow, as demonstrates the fact that the *Scientiae astrorum et radicum motuum coelestium liber* of al-Fargani, *De ortu scientiarum* of al-Farabi, or the *Liber Alghoarsimi de practica arismetica* attributed to al-Khawirizmi were known in Compostela at the time<sup>33</sup>, the Platonic-Calcedian notion of the endless primordial matter survived because it emerges again embodied in stone in the crypt of the west narthex. The north portal generative sequence of the Beginning is inverted in the material incarnation of the End. There, the bearded man (Cepheus?) and the two young men of Gemini lose their carnality, increasingly devoured by the spiraling vegetal –the living *silva*– (see figs. 1b and 5a), and the stars turn back gradually to their primordial state, first to a hemicycle inclosing fish-scales forms and, finally, to the emptiness of the mere flat granite (see figs. 5b and 5c). The formless matter that pre-existed the creation was eternal, hence, when Time ends, the harmonious cosmos will return to its primordial state. *In principio erat... / In finis erit...*

<sup>31</sup> WEINRIB, “Living Matter”, *passim*.

<sup>32</sup> H. L. KESSLER, “Response: Astral Abstraction”, in *Abstraction in Medieval Art. Beyond the Ornament*, E. GERSTMAN (ed.), Amsterdam, 2021, pp. 329-354.

<sup>33</sup> A. RUCCOUJI, “A Cultural Centre from the Tenth to Twelfth Century”, in *Culture and Society in Medieval Galicia. A Cultural Crossroad at the Edge of Europe*, J. D’EMILIO (ed. and trans.), Leyden, 2015, pp. 512-542, esp. pp. 535-536.