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*H-France Review* Vol. 13 (June 2013), No. 77

Janet E. Snyder, *Early Gothic Column-figure Sculpture in France: Appearance, Materials and Significance*. Farnham, United Kingdom and Burlington, Vt: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011. xx + 266pp. 203 b&w illus., 20 color plates, notes, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$119.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4094-0065-3.

Review by Linda Seidel, University of Chicago, emerita.

Art historians from Wilhelm Vöge to Willibald Sauerländer, transfixed by the poetic splendor of the well-preserved figural screen that articulates the embrasures of the arcaded western entries into Chartres Cathedral, examined the novel statuesque columnar forms in search of an understanding of their appearance and significance. As the largest surviving corpus of their type, these majestic figures have stood in for the larger issue of monumental figural sculpture's re-emergence in medieval France at a time of territorial expansion and consolidation. Engagement with this material and this phenomenon has been the engine driving the study of medieval stonecarving since its inception in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Two decades ago, Janet Snyder began to apply her training in theater design to a study of column-figures by combining her knowledge of fabrics and costumes with scrutiny of the garments that the carvings at Chartres Cathedral are shown wearing. The observations she made hinted at new meanings for those sculptures and others like them at portals throughout northern France without getting tangled up in irresolvable issues concerning the figures' conceptual origins and the sources of their style. In the book under review here, she summarizes her findings and presents conclusions that are connected to extensive reading of recent work by current historians of the period. An appendix includes commentary that pulls together informative technical observations on limestone composition and quarrying habits which others have put forward elsewhere.

The results of Snyder's primary and secondary research are contained in four suggestively titled chapters of unequal length. The first and longest, "Secret signals: the meaning of clothing in sculpture," identifies forms of dress based on well-observed, carved details that indicate pleating, gathering, and lacing; neckline and hem contour; and sleeve length. The author examines the apparent appetite for such accessories as belts, buckles, brooches, and sashes by supplementing what she observes in the carvings with information gleaned from contemporary texts and two-dimensional imagery (manuscripts, glass, enamels). Since the fineness of the local limestone allows exceptional differentiation of surfaces, and recently recovered remnants of painting reinforce hints of carved seams and stitches that heretofore were invisible to the unaided eye, Snyder is able to identify implied textiles and characterize subtleties of dress. The fact that linen, wool, and silk ripple and wrinkle in different ways allows her to suggest both what kind of fabric was being represented and where it was produced; ties to the Mediterranean are indicated by the inclusion of decorative bands that recall the richly woven, highly decorative linen patches worn by persons of rank at Islamic courts and known as *tiraz*. Based on the array and nature of the clothing and accessories with which figures are clothed, and buttressed by knowledge of a given fabric's rarity and cost, Snyder distinguishes individuals of different social station, naming the column-figures Chamberlain, Court Lady, Seigneur, Chevalier, Norman Lady, and so forth.

An overview of the manufacture and traffic in textiles, derived from studies by economic historians of trade in the eastern Mediterranean, forms the basis of the third chapter, "Good business: commerce in the north." While the material reviewed here is interesting and important, commerce between northern France (where the column-figures proliferated) and the Mediterranean is infrequently documented in much of what she cites. Moreover, the exchange that occurred at fairs in Champagne, the late twelfth-century development of which she summarizes in this chapter, has little to do with the specific historical rationale for the column-figures that she proposes in chapter two.

This portion of the book, Entitled "Structures of Power: the support of the peers," sets out Snyder's argument regarding the significance of the column figures. She claims that the idea for them was precipitated by critical events that occurred during the reigns of Louis VI and his son Louis VII; in particular, she views the overwhelming response of French peers in 1124 to Louis VI's call for their support during the Investiture Crisis as pivotal in this regard. Quoting Suger's *The Deeds of Louis the Fat*, she writes that, in that year, "the king united 'the whole of France' against its opponents..." who were led by the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry V (p. 113). She goes on to suggest that "[i]t may have occurred to Suger to use artwork to convey political ideas after traveling to Rome as an ambassador for Louis VI in 1118 and 1123..." There, she notes, he could have seen depictions of figures in contemporary dress in mid-seventh-century mosaics at the Lateran Baptistery and been inspired by them (p. 114). Certainly the wise, well-read, and worldly abbot of St-Denis would not have needed such a prompt, nor would his workmen; throughout the twelfth century and even before, sculptors differentiated dress in their carvings, ineluctably expressing political ideas in their work.

Snyder notes that the expensively and, in part, exotically dressed figures shown framing the entries to northern French churches are "arranged along the jambs like courtiers in reception lines" (p. 105). Eastern motifs that decorate their clothing invoke the Holy Land, she remarks, without necessarily identifying them as Crusaders. To her mind, the figures "describe the support of a community of the French unified by Louis VI" (p. 114) and "concretize the conceit that Louis VII, first among peers and chief defender of the Church, was the elected, legitimate heir to the throne of France" (p. 125). But they do not create an exclusively political body, because they also recall *adventus* processions. Since "iconographically, a portal like the ... Royal Portal at Chartres is about the entrances of Christ, [it] is also, by extension, about the entrance and welcoming of God's *christus*, the anointed king" (p. 120).

Chapter four, "Significant Stuff: textiles and a language of dress," elaborates on certain material aspects of medieval garments and comments on the diverse implications that Byzantine and Islamic fabrics had for Europeans. A portion of this information provided the grounds for Snyder's claims regarding the status of cloth and clothing that she articulated in chapters one and three; consequently we are reminded of much of what we have already read, as often occurs throughout this book. What I had looked forward to in this final chapter was an integration of image, evidence, and argument; what I found was a layering of new claim upon previous one, in unintended replication of the way in which the costumes of some of the lesser column-figures, at portals other than the central ones at Chartres, are also constructed. Like those figures, Snyder's text as a whole, for all its interesting and novel elements, produces, at the end, an awkward patchwork made up of what have become, by then, familiar elements. This effect is far removed from that produced by the rhythmic, innovative, and ineffably expressive entities that screen the façade at Chartres and once existed at St-Denis as well. As the prototypes for the group, these carvings await an explanation that acknowledges a wider range of artistic developments beyond the Paris basin, and offers a more agile and nuanced argument regarding the significance of visual forms.

Throughout, Snyder's restatement of her observations in different ways leads to fuzzy generalizations; these confused this reader. Her insistence on an overly determined historical explanation for the emergence of an exceptional body of carved imagery dumbs down our sense of the sculpture. By treating it as *Realpolitik*, she chills any hint of its aesthetic function or poetic meaning. If art historians have too

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often erred either by reaching for an elevated interpretive overview or idealizing masons and carvers who may never have existed, Snyder goes in another direction: in her hands, sculptures resemble charters whose epigraphy can be precisely decoded and whose scribes had, at best, a mechanical relationship to what they recorded.

Yet, by focusing on fabrics, she has opened our eyes to exciting possibilities for appreciating and understanding the new style of architectural sculpture that emerged toward the middle of the twelfth century, with its expanded portal programs. Insofar as these involve issues of contemporary historical, social, and economic activity, Snyder's book makes an important contribution to the recasting of Emile Mâle's emphasis on the role that religion played in early Gothic sculpture, traces of which regrettably linger on in current studies of medieval art.

Unfortunately, her effort falls short of an effective argument for what these new possibilities might be. She both leans too heavily on the conclusions of others and neglects the fact that visual forms possess a language and power of their own. By fixing on a limited group of sculptures and associating them with a single historical event, Snyder diminishes the carvings, however multi-leveled she repeatedly asserts they may be. Once their format was determined, Snyder suggests, replicas were produced and distributed throughout the kingdom until a new idea came along, one that favored economic over political signification. Thus, later twelfth-century figures are swathed in what appears to be wool fabric she observes, in tribute to locally manufactured wares. Much more needs to be said.

In regard to production values, for which authors are not necessarily to be held accountable, recurrent typos interfere with reading and sometimes disrupt the sense of a passage; too many photographs of small size and mediocre quality make many of Snyder's points impossible to corroborate, particularly in the first chapter. But a generous set of colored plates stunningly brings to life a few fabrics while others document recently recovered polychromy on some of the column-figures. These illustrations remind the reader of how visually arresting and evocative the material culture of the twelfth century was, and make this one wish Snyder's book had been as attentive to those facts as it was to the political and economic ones that governed the formulation of its author's claims.

Linda Seidel, emerita  
University of Chicago  
[lseidel@uchicago.edu](mailto:lseidel@uchicago.edu)

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ISSN 1553-9172