

ICMA Master Carvers Series

These are drafts for vols. 6 and 7 of *The Ark of God*.

A resource for discussion and information.

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23 *The Recognition: A rite of passage?*

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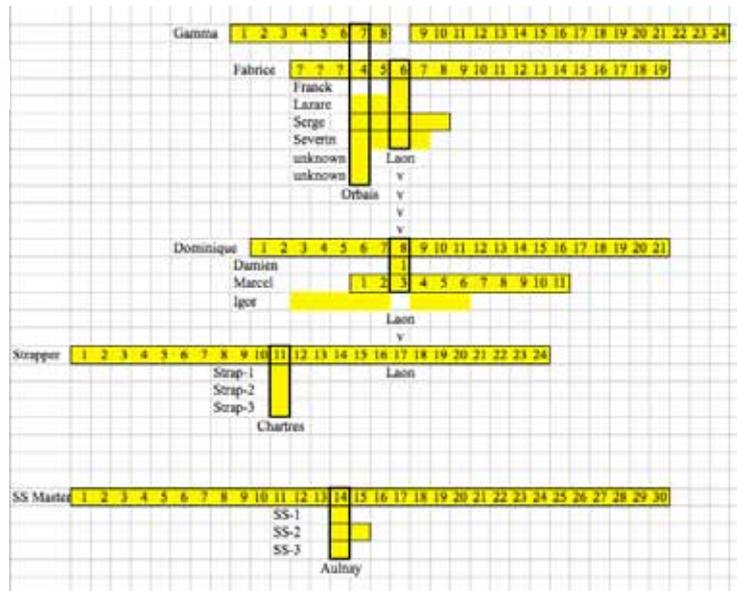
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The capitals discussed here may be examined in larger format in vols. 3-5 of *The Ark of God*, and when completed and professionally edited these studies will be published in volumes 6 and 7.

This is number 23 of an on-going series describing Early Gothic carving masters for discussion and comment

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Pattern of campaigns by masters with one-off sharing of current template.

The Recognition: A rite of passage?

I have now accumulated six examples of a strange phenomenon. A carver has a unique template that he and only he uses. Then, usually fairly early in his productive life, his template is shared with others who use the bones of the template and reinterpret the detailing in their own way. In nearly every case those who copied the template had superior working skills. In other words the more experienced and creative carvers abandoned their own designs in favour of one who was competent if not as highly skilled.

I will set out the evidence in a condensed manner and refer you to the chart above and other studies in the *Master Carvers Series* for further details.

- Firstly, the SS Master in Aulnay-sous-Bois in about 1130;
- Secondly, Gamma in the Orbais ambulatory just before 1160;
- Thirdly, Fabrice in the Laon cathedral gallery just afterwards;
- Fourthly, Dominique and the Cog Masters, also in the Laon gallery;
- Fifthly, Strapper in levels 3 of the Chartres south tower around 1158;
- Sixthly, Cyprian in the apse of Meulan in the early 1150s and
- Lastly, Auguste probably in the Nouvion north chapel, 1163.

The SS Master at Aulnay-sous-Bois, 1131.

After many years as a carver the SS Master master worked on the church of Aulnay-sous-Bois, just before construction commenced on the narthex of Saint-Denis. He was already a highly skilled carver [r]. Three other men used his template on the same campaign. Only one can be found in any other building, in the nave of Acy-en-Multien, where he began to change the template he had worked on at Aulnay. Thereafter his forms, along with those of the other two men, disappear as I have found no trace of them elsewhere.

For more details see “#02 The SS Master” page 2.



Aulnay-sur-Bois EN1s(a)



Aulnay-sur-Bois WN3e(a)



Aulnay-sur-Bois WN1e(a)



Aulnay-sur-Bois EN1w(a)

DRAFT

Gamma in the ambulatory of Orbais-l'Abbaye, 1159

In the ambulatory walls of Orbais the Gamma strap design was used not only by Gamma himself [r], but by six other masters [b]. Each one modified the template in small ways to suit what I take to have been their own preferences. None of them repeated this design anywhere else. However, Fabrice did redesign the straps in a quite radical manner, and took that with him to the Laon gallery. Gamma did not accompany him there.

For more details see “#25 Laon gallery - Gamma and the Fabrice team”.



Isse ES2n by Gamma



Orbais E3s(a) by Fabrice



Orbais ES3w(a)



Orbais ES1ne(a) by Lazare



Orbais A2c by Serge



Orbais ES1nen(a) by Eugene



Orbais EC2s(a) by Franck

Fabrice in the gallery of Laon cathedral, 1161

When Fabrice used the strap motif provided by Gamma in Orbais he followed the form fairly exactly, but immediately on the next job in the Isse windows morphed the straps into a new design and then into the magnificent complex arrangement used in the Laon gallery [r].

In Laon he was joined by three talented men who followed his design, but each with their own variations [b]. Only Fabrice continued to use the design over the next twenty years, whereas the others quickly dropped it and evolved new templates or returned to their old ones.

Why would three experienced carvers follow another man’s template at Laon, subsuming their own preferences in order to manifest his, and not continue to do so on other occasions?

For more details see “#25 Laon gallery - Gamma and the Fabrice team” where I could as easily have chosen Franck or Lazare instead of Fabrice.



Fabrice 4 capitals in ES5 pier



Laon gallery ES6w by Franck



Laon gallery NE3se by Lazare



Laon gallery NE3s by Serge

Dominique and the Cog Masters in the Laon gallery, 1161

In the Laon gallery there are three varieties of cog designs [b]. The very open gappy arrangement with turned-back corners by Denis was not repeated anywhere else, nor was the tightly organised one by Damien, with its large and pendulous terminals. Only Dominique’s can be found in five campaigns before Laon, and in eighteen more afterwards. The continuity of his work suggests that the template was his, and that, especially in the case of Damien, it was shared at Laon by carvers who were more experienced than he was. Indeed, the fact that his capitals are on the inner side of the pier away from public view hints that his work was not considered as important as that of the other two. It was the same with Fabrice, whose capitals were also on the inside of the pier

For more details see “#21 Laon gallery - the Cog Masters”.



Laon gallery ES3w by Denis



Laon gallery EN2+ by Damien



Laon gallery ES3e by Dominique

Strapper in level 3 of the Chartres south tower, 1157

In a typical design by Strapper the elements weave over and under each other [r]. Just after the Crusade he joined in the hazardous work on the octagon of the Chartres west-south tower. In the third level his template was used by the carvers of ten capitals. One of the carvers was Léonard who did use the design elsewhere, but none of the others employed the strap arrangement again [b]. Before Chartres Strapper had worked in ten different campaigns, and afterwards on a further fourteen.

For more details see “#27 Strapper the Intricate”



Chartres WS(3) by Strapper



Chartres cathedral, capitals from the WS tower level (3) not by Strapper, but in his manner.

Cyprian in the apse of Meulan, 1154

As construction recommenced after the Crusade the rebuilding of the Meulan choir was undertaken. The template for Cyprian that was used in the gallery at Laon was, in a simplified form [r], employed by at least three other masters, on different capitals on the same two piers.

The others that follow the same template and were presumably by Cyprian are in the first row below. In addition there are three other capitals with large central leaves, encasing laterals with lobes sticking outwards, but with utterly different ways of handling the outlines and the tips. These remarks apply as well to the small adjacent capitals. This was a large body of work by three or four men using the one design.

Another explanation in this case could be that Cyprian had a number of coworkers or associates or apprentices who carved under his direction. But if so, why do we not find many men carving the same template elsewhere. Instead in each building the Cyprian template, as with all the others in this study, was used by the one carver, not by a team.

For more details see “#24 Laon Gallery - Cyprian and Hugues”.



Meulan As1

1153



Meulan E4

1153



Meulan ES4e

1154



Meulan ES4s



Meulan ES4

1155



Meulan ES4w

1155



Meulan ES3s

1155

Not sure who in Nouvion north, but may have been Auguste

Strap designs were carved by five masters, but I am not sure which one received the Recognition This was around 1163, just after Auguste had been working in the gallery at Laon [b1]. The others are unique, and one in particular has an especially well considered layout, but never repeated [b2]. The other capitals were all small in window reveals [next page].



Nouvion north by Adrien



Nouvion north



Nouvion north



Nouvion north



Nouvion north



Nouvion north



Nouvion north



Nouvion north



Nouvion north

Interpretation and a proposal

Considering only the evidence from Orbais and Laon (being somewhat typical), how do we interpret the facts that

- six carvers based their work at Orbais on 14 capitals on just the one Gamma template,
- four of them also used it, considerably modified, in the Laon gallery,
- and except for Fabrice, nowhere else, and
- only Gamma and Fabrice left large *œuvres* of the same strap-like designs elsewhere in the Paris Basin?

Were the carvers at Orbais under Gamma's control? Though the template was his, the details vary: Terminals point sharply upwards or were left out altogether and straps were finished plain or scooped. I do not see him being excited by the changes made to his template by other men in the same shed, for he did not incorporate their ideas in later work. The influence of so many carvers interpreting the one template seems to have had virtually no impact on him.

Would it be that Gamma had some pre-emptive rights in the shed? Did he attract men to use his ideas from force of personality or from being given charge in some sort of way? Not the first because we do not find him exercising the same authority anywhere else. Not the second for the same reason. This unusual event is similar to what happened to the Cog Masters in Laon, to Strapper at Chartres and to the SS Master at Aulnay-sous-Bois.

Was Gamma a foreman or otherwise in charge? And as such could he require others to do it his way? Why then did this not happen in later jobs when he was an older man with more experience and kudos?

The fact that the Orbais masters did not continue to use his design in later work suggests that their agreement to abide by another's templates had something to do with Gamma's position or reputation. If he were the Master Mason he would have determined the templates for the imposts, arches and ribs in both churches. But there are no correlations in the two sets of profiles at all. At best he may have been the master's assistant as Clerk of Works.

Examining all five instances, the one thing these masters have in common is that they carved more capitals after the sharing than before.

Gamma had completed work in only five buildings, Dominique in six and Strapper possibly only a dozen or so, though his program had been interrupted by the Crusade. I do not know of Fabrice's early work as I have not traced him, yet.

I would hazard the suggestion that this sharing of templates was a unique and important moment in each master's journey. They were at that time all accomplished men, and I believe this could have been a ritualised celebration, an inclusion into the company of masons, an acknowledgement that they had reached a sufficient level of skill and experience to justify a sort of joint valediction, as a precious rite of passage.

I suggest that after completing his training, his journeyship and his travels, he was required to complete a given number of set pieces, and on the basis of this independent dossier would be granted some senior status amongst his peers. The sharing of his template may have been a ritualised acknowledgement of his skill, involving a sharing of his own self-devised template for the joy and edification of his peers.

This would be why in most cases the others who share his template were far more skilled than the originator. This is particularly clear in Laon, where Fabrice and Dominique were both relegated to the less visible sides of the piers, and in Chartres where the decorative items in the non-strapper capitals were much more delicately composed than any of his.

This may have been an essential step in the completion of a carver's training, perhaps even an introduction into the confederacy of figurative sculptors. Almost all identified work by the SS Master was after Aulnay, though for the others I cannot say.

The fact that the SS Master did not have his sharing until 1130, after he had accomplished many jobs, may have been that the procedure had not been current before that, or perhaps his contribution at Bourges had been sufficient to bring him to the attention of the "Guild of Sculptors", for want of a better name.

Strapper too had to wait until he had completed many works, perhaps because he had not been sufficiently creative in his early years to merit entry into the 'Guild', at least until he had completed the concentrated group of capitals in Saint-Germer-de-Fly during the Crusade. His acknowledgement would not have been helped by the break in available commissions between 1145 and the early 1150s.

I can find no mention of such a stage in the documents, not in Knoop and Jones, nor Shelby nor in the proceedings of the various conferences on stone-working methods and organisation.