Reading the Reverse Façade of Reims Cathedral

Royalty and Ritual in Thirteenth-Century France

Donna L. Sadler
READING THE REVERSE FAÇADE OF REIMS CATHEDRAL

Though long recognized as one of the most beautiful works from the second half of the thirteenth century, the magnificent sculptural program of the reverse façade at Reims Cathedral has received little in the way of scholarly attention. Interpreting the iconography in the light of Latin texts associated with the building, its history and its ceremonial use, Donna Sadler assesses the significance of the reverse façade in light of other thirteenth-century visual programs associated with the court of Louis IX.

The book’s chapters deal with the history of the cathedral and its architectural antecedents; the iconographic message of the visual program, the meaning of the reverse façade and how it intersects with the overall iconography; the function of the verso and how it is enhanced by the marriage of form and content; and a consideration of contemporary works linked to the court of Saint Louis, concluding with a brief look at the new roles sculpture assumes as it migrates inside cathedrals.

Ultimately this book reveals how the imagery on the reverse façade not only conforms to a system of memory and mode of medieval narratology, but also articulates a dominant ideological position regarding the interdependence of ecclesiastical and royal powers.

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Abbreviations

BnF        Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
CNMHS      Caisse nationale des monuments historiques et des sites
CNRS       Centre national de la recherche scientifique
Coron. Regiae  Coronationes Regiae
De Cavendis  De Cavendis Vitiis et Virtutibus Exercendis
De Coerc.   De Coercendis Militum Rapinis
De Divor.   De Divortio Lotharii Regis et Tetbergae Reginae
De Regis    De Regis Persona et Regio Ministerio
MGH         Monumenta Germaniae Historica
Pat. Lat.   Patrologia Latina
Vita        Vita Sancti Remigii Rhemorum Archiepiscopi
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When I first began to study the reverse façade of Reims Cathedral my efforts were met by an unlikely theological debate with the priest. I was naturally facing west, and he approached me and pointed to the altar and said, “Dieu est par là!” I responded that God was everywhere, which began a rather contentious relationship that prompted him to ask me to face east whenever he saw me studying the west wall. It was my good fortune that the woman selling postcards near the cathedral entrance had a fondness for the verso of the façade, and she would shield me from the priest’s unidirectional tendencies. Months later the priest had almost forgotten my existence when a scholar, Peter Kurmann, rented a fire truck with a cherry picker extension with which to ascend the western façade like some latter-day angel to view the sculpture of the upper parts of the gables and grand rose. When he asked if I would like to come along, I was delighted to be able to see the sculpture at closer range. Despite the local excitement inspired by this event, nothing could diminish the havoc wreaked by the fire truck; the latter had left oil stains on the square before the façade and this was the last straw for the priest of Reims. The fate of our mortal souls was sealed in stone.

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Introduction

Reims Cathedral has always exercised tremendous power. In stripping away the centuries that separate one from the medieval worshipper, the force once sustained by this institution is difficult to imagine (Figure I.1). What follows in these pages may be nothing more than a conversation with the past. However, as several scholars have already demonstrated, it is the ability to pose the right questions of the past that have yielded the most productive reconstruction of the distant periods that have gone before us.¹ This dialogue with the prelates of Reims, the master masons, the head of the sculptural atelier assigned to the reverse façade, begins with a question of their intentions (Color Plate I). At what juncture did the designers decide to pierce the tympana of the west façade and historiate the three portals of the verso with tiers of sculpted niche figures? Was edification always the goal of an ecclesiastical sculptural program—or was there ever scriptural “filler”? What galvanized the chapter of the cathedral to spend more money at the end of a long building campaign on a sculptural program that may have had a rather select audience?

Although these are some of the underlying questions regarding the motivation for this unusual sculptural program, other aspects of the reverse façade may yield more immediate insights into the working of the medieval mind. For example, the discussion of the interior sculpture naturally begins with vision: what is portrayed on the “wrong side of the façade” and how does its meaning embellish that of the iconography of the visual program of the cathedral? The first chapter of the book will deal with the history of the cathedral, its architectural antecedents, and the iconographic message of the sculpture. How did the colorful past of Reims continue to inspire the sculptural programs deployed throughout the cathedral’s long history?

The second chapter will consider the iconography of the sculpture of the reverse façade and how it intersects with the overall message imparted by the visual program. In the niche figures flanking the central portal are scenes from the early lives of the Virgin, Christ, and John the Baptist, punctuated with prophecies of their lives from the Old Testament
I.1 West façade of Reims Cathedral, stone and polychromy, 1235–1285. Photo: Pascale L.-R.
Reverse façade of Reims Cathedral, central portal, stone and polychromy, 1265–1285. Photo: Pascale L.-R.
(Color Plates II–III). The central portal of the west façade (Figure 1.16) portrays the more mainstream moments of Christ’s life and lineage—such as the annunciation, visitation, presentation in the temple—so that together, face and interface, one is struck by the complementary nature of the iconography. It is in the disposition of scenes on the interior as well as their “iconographic updating” that occurs with the addition of Saint Nicasius on the inner trumeau that the idiosyncrasies of the program begin to come into focus.

The inner north portal is flanked by pairs of male figures surmounted by low relief voussoirs with Old Testament scenes prefiguring Christ’s Crucifixion on the left and miracles performed by Christ on the right (Figure I.3). The latter, as we shall see, do not constitute the major miracles one would expect to see, but rather events that parallel the miracles performed by St. Remigius and depicted on the Saints’ portal on the north transept of the cathedral (Figure I.4). In this instance the interior sculpture again enriches the exterior sculpture of the north portal with the Crucifixion in the gable and scenes leading up to the Passion in the archivolts.

Inside the south portal are pairs of male figures who once held crowns identifying them as Elders of the Apocalypse, whereas the other figures on the north portal could be either prophets or disciples bearing books or swags of drapery (Figure 2.16). The voussoirs above the paired figures are occupied by scenes from the Apocalypse, often imaginatively conceived, such as the four winds, whose disembodied heads seem to form a small choir. Other scenes are repetitive: St. John on Patmos listening to an angel, or an angel speaking to St. John on Patmos. However, all reflect the apocalyptic subject matter of the archivolts of the exterior south portal.
I.4 North transept, Reims Cathedral, saints’ portal, stone and polychromy, 1225. Photo: Pascale L.-R.
I.5 Reverse façade of Reims Cathedral, inner south portal archivolts, stone and polychromy, 1265–1285. Photo: Pascale L.-R.

I.6 Reverse façade of Reims Cathedral, detail of central portal, Herod and Herodias, stone and polychromy, 1265–1285. Photo: Pascale L.-R.
The third chapter concerns the possible function of the verso of the façade. Most would agree that the sculptural program is more than an experiment in decorating the wrong side of the façade (Figure I.2).Because the distinguishing feature of the Cathedral of Reims was its role as the coronation cathedral of French kings, that seemed to be a logical point of departure. Similarly, Reims was the fertile see that nourished the imagination of Hincmar, the ninth-century archbishop of Reims, whose prolific writings included the coronation ceremony for Charles the Bald that forms the backbone of the coronation Ordines used in the later Middle Ages. That Hincmar was also the author of the greatly enhanced “version” of the baptism of Clovis and the miraculous deeds of Remigius and his importance for the see of Reims only strengthened Hincmar’s connection to the thirteenth-century cathedral and the choice of iconographic themes deployed throughout the building, but particularly on the verso of the façade. Erik Inglis demonstrates in his study of Fouquet’s *Grandes Chroniques de France* that the images in the text not only portray a noble and recognizable past tailored to contemporary concerns, but also allow Fouquet’s audience to become more than mere readers of the past; further, they become witnesses and heirs to the illustrious history before them. The sculpture on the reverse façade functions in the same evocative and ultimately participatory manner.

In viewing the carved frontispiece of the nave as a cicerone for the neophyte rulers anointed in Reims, the iconography, though exclusively biblical in content, imparts some of the most significant and timely medieval lessons for monarchs to obey. For example, two of the most egregious agents of bad conduct for the ruler were to heed the counsel of a bad wife (Figure I.6) and not heed the wise instruction of his advisers (Figure I.2/Color Plates II–III). The emphasis on what not to do in the sculpture—such as massacre the innocents, mastermind the death of Zacharias and John the Baptist—is delineated in a stone framework punctuated by Old Testament prophecies of Christ’s birth, Moses receiving the Law on Mt. Sinai, Gideon’s fleece, and Melchisedek offering bread and wine to Abraham and his soldiers. When the tense changes to the “present,” or New Testament, John the Baptist starkly points to the axe buried deep in the roots of the tree that does not bear good fruit. Time then becomes liquid, unconstrained by history; Nicasius stands on the inner trumeau, ushered to his death and place of honor by two Vandals and two angels on the jambs (Figure I.7). By juxtaposing this fifth-century local martyr with the protracted treatment on the lintel of the martyrdom of John the Baptist, the precursor of Christ, the spiritual status of Reims was immediately enhanced.

Above in the glazed triforium was what was once believed to have been the baptism of Clovis, which has been conflated with his coronation by the hands of Remigius, thereby weaving the various strands of Remois history into a seamless mantle awaiting the measurements of the new ruler (Plate IV). Indeed, the princely body was to be clad in righteousness so
I.7 Reverse façade of Reims Cathedral, Nicasius and lower rose window, stone and polychromy and stained glass, 1265–1285. Photo: Pascale L.-R.

I.8 Manuscript illumination, Arthur playing chess with his seneschal, Le roman de Guiron le Courtois c. 1370–1380, Bibliothèque nationale de France, NAF 5243, folio 3v. Photo: BnF.
that he could be the head of his realm. The newly anointed head of the royal domain must be dressed in the virtues prescribed in the coronation Ordines, which were underscored by the prayers, and reiterated in the visual lessons of the reverse façade. A more powerful immersion in the rhetoric of kingship is difficult to envision.13

The thrust, then, of the third chapter will be devoted to the manner in which the reverse façade of Reims functions as a Mirror of Princes in stone. That it relies on its unique placement in time and history, in form and content, only underscores the plausibility of this interpretation. One other device in the battery of “texts” for new princes was the game of chess. Though more popular in the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the game of chess was a well-known and edifying diversion for kings (Figure I.8).14 Pieces in the form of knights, bishops, kings, and queens used the foil of a squared-off chessboard to enact the precepts of good kingship. Did the bishop of Reims harbor a taste for this game to teach the monarch the signs of just rulership?15 If so, the chessboard of sculpted figures created a simulacrum of the moralizing lessons embedded in the “jeu de rois et le roi des jeux” (the game of kings and the king of games).16

The subject of the fourth chapter is the powerful conspiracy forged between form and content on the reverse façade of Reims.17 The framework of horizontal tiers of niche figures divided by lush bands of foliage foregrounds the biblical narrative it houses. As Madeline Caviness has demonstrated, the medieval gaze may have had a much greater discursive role than we imagine; indeed, there is a connection between power and ocular behaviors.18 Further, the formal construct of the reverse façade of Reims lends itself to a type of sight-reading: one ascends the rows of narrative, both spatially and sequentially, and the story with some prompting seems to come full circle in temporal terms (Figure I.2/Color Plates II–III). Indeed, if the bishop of Reims were teaching the neophyte ruler the ABCs of kingship using the verso as his text, how did he remember what was written on the wall?

Recent studies of ancient and medieval treatises on memory and techniques of apprehending knowledge suggest the primacy of an architectural construct within which to place the building blocks of meaning.19 The framework formed by the series of trilobed niches bracketed by foliage creates the architectonic ladder upon which the meaning of the wall is suspended. In creating an aide memoire, medieval commentators proposed a house to store knowledge—such as a beehive, a bookshelf, a pigeon coop. This architectural framework or house would then trigger the order of “inhabitants” lodged in these chambers. By scaling the grid of lush niches that provided a foil for the meaning sheltered within, the looming carved triptych of Reims would have served as a mnemonic device to parcel out the lessons of just kingship to the newly anointed monarch.

If medieval treatises on memory insured the persistence of royal memory, contemporary literary devices applied to the sculptural language underscored the importance of the tenor or narrative mode employed. Alyce
Jordan’s consideration of the stained glass windows of the Sainte-Chapelle in light of the principles of Geoffrey de Vinsauf’s *Poetria nova* demonstrates the close parallels in verbal and visual thought. Similar alternations of abbreviated, amplified, or elliptical scenes compose the patois of the verso narrative. At the same time, a rather marked insistence on gesture as a means of communicating intention characterizes the transition from one narrative mode to another.

This book will thus view the reverse façade within the context of the cathedral’s history as well as within the framework of the power and sanctity of Capetian French rulers. It is in this quest that one begins to weave together the iconographic strands from the inner north portal and its anachronistic choice of Early Christian miracles (Figure I.3); the treatment of the Last Judgment on the north transept with its protracted appearances of the king and queen in heaven and hell (Figure I.9); and the final “act” of the verso in which John the Baptist’s disciples question Christ to see if he is the one to succeed the precursor (Figure I.2). The latter event was the beginning of Christ’s ministry, just as the French king left the cathedral a new man, anointed with the holy chrism, as Christ’s vicar on earth. Could this not have been a parting sculptural message to the king?—a reminder that his power stemmed from God, just as Christ was baptized by the Holy Spirit descending at the moment John the Baptist anointed him in the Jordan. The allusion to the dove that delivered the holy oil to Remigius to baptize Clovis would not have been lost on the medieval audience. The significance of the
new monarch identifying with Christ’s ministerial inauguration was that the first act the French king performed after his unction and coronation was to try his hand at healing the scrofulous. The importance of linking his royal medical prowess with God’s grace as bestowed by the archbishop of Reims could not be overstated.

Catherine Bell noted “ritual is a strategy for the construction of particular relationships of power. Those who control ritualization are in command of a particularly powerful form of objectification.” Though one might envision bishop and king standing crosier to scepter in the nave of Reims, it was clearly the ecclesiastics who had ritual on their side. To this argument one must add the visual tactics waged by the medieval theologians who scripted the sculptural and stained glass program for the cathedral. Everywhere the royal eyes gazed were exemplars of good kingship, particularly in the lives of David, Solomon, and Clovis; but there were also the bad kings wreaking havoc on their kingdoms, such as Herod the Great and Herod Antipas, vividly enacting murderous deeds and heeding misguided, if seductive, women (Figure I.2/ Color Plates II–III). The queens too had much to learn from the faithful Anna, Elizabeth, Clotilde, and of course the Virgin, the queen of heaven. But also unavoidable were Herodias and Salome, whose pedagogical presence in the sculptural program could not be overlooked: the devious duo instigated not only the decapitation of St. John the Baptist in the niche figures to the right, but also on the interior lintel they preside over both the burial of his body and the burning of the Baptist’s bones, even though the latter occurred during the reign of Julian the Apostate three centuries later (Figures I.6 and I.7). The power of heredity is formidable, both for kings and tyrants.

Interwoven in the iconographic program of Reims Cathedral is the dialectic between ritual and legitimacy. The latter was hollow without the former, and the verso of the façade projected the outline of just kingship from the perspective of the sacerdotal powers that invested the rulers with their power. What was the royal response to this ecclesiastical view of kingship? The fifth chapter will deal with contemporary monuments that constitute “royal replies” (as it were) to the Remois iconographic stance. The Bibles moralisées, Saint Louis Psalter, the Sainte-Chapelle, and the tomb program realized during the reign of Louis IX in the 1260s in the crossing of Saint-Denis all bear the imprint of Saint Louis’ personality and political savvy. Where do they place the king with regard to the bishop? The chessboard has assumed quite a different configuration, and the king holds all the pieces. Indeed, the game of chess in the later Middle Ages became a way to reinforce the king’s authority, and an ideal vehicle for royal propaganda. The “most Christian king” was not above the fine art of self-promotion, particularly when it hastened the delivery of the Holy Land to Gaul.

Reading the Reverse Façade of Reims, then, would suggest the dialogue between kingship and priesthood commences with the accession of a king in Reims Cathedral. It is a ceremony that unites the king with his people; Peter the Chanter saw this as a moment when the polity’s head and body were
united and participated in the same community of nature. But the lessons prescribed on the reverse façade of Reims reveal that the archbishop saw the royal body as one to be dressed in power as the head of his realm. As the king was anointed, his body became an object of performance in the ceremony. The verso sculpture, working in concert with the coronation ceremony, trains the “body politic” in the tenets of sound governance. And it is not only the body and mind of the king, but also the body politic of the Capetian order that takes shape under this carved tutelage.

In closing the book on medieval inroads to the meaning of the reverse façade, the conclusion will consider the new role that sculpture assumes as it moves into the interior of cathedrals. Do the Column of Angels of Strasbourg, the apostles in the Sainte-Chapelle, and the Virgin and saints in the choir of Carcassonne share common traits? Or does their shift of venue suggest a move towards more intimacy between the worshipper and the object of his devotion? Do these works anticipate the new performative piety that characterizes the art of the later Middle Ages? The purpose of this study, then, is to demonstrate how the imagery on the reverse façade not only conforms to a system of memory and mode of medieval narratology, but also articulates a dominant ideological position regarding the interdependence of ecclesiastical and royal powers. The recitation of prayers for the coronation of the king would have reinforced the visual lessons of the verso, so that the king would not forget that his power stemmed from ecclesiastical sanction. In this way, the reverse façade of Reims Cathedral modified the paradigm formulated by Strayer—the French king had indeed become a type of Christ and the kingdom of France a type of heavenly realm; but the Church was the agent in this transformation. The writing was on the wall.

Notes

1 Dominick LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” History and Theory 19, no. 3 (1980): 248–251. Heidegger and Derrida both stress the importance of “thinking the unthought to break the excesses of somnambulistic replication of the excesses of a historical tradition.”

239–256. Gillerman stresses the apocalyptic emphasis of the central portal sculpture as it culminates in the Coronation of the Virgin that signifies the final triumph of the Church. The most recent additions to the Remois bibliography are Reims, La cathédrale by Patrick Demouy, Robert Neiss, William Berry, Bruno Chauffert-Yvert, Bruno Decrock, and Sylvie Balcon, under the direction of Patrick Demouy (Paris: Zodiaque, 2000) [hereafter Demouy et al.] and Nouveaux regards sur la cathédrale de Reims by Bruno Decrock and Patrick Demouy (Langres: Dominique Guéniot, 2008).

3 Both Nicasius and Remigius help to anchor the cathedral in its historical context, the context of newly anointed kings of France.

4 This subject is explored further in Donna Sadler-Davis, The Sculptural Program of the Verso of the West Façade of Reims Cathedral (1984): 335–340. By aligning Remigius with Christ, the curative power remained in the hands of God. Clovis and his Capetian successors were mere recipients of God’s grace and thus, in the case of the latter, his thaumaturgical power. Cf. Jean-Pierre Albert, Odeurs de sainteté: La mythologie chrétienne des aromates (Paris: Éditions de l’École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1990): 289, who compares the life and miracles of Remigius to those of Saint John the Baptist.

5 The damage to the interior of both side portals was caused by fire to the tambours that were sandbagged to protect them during World War I.

6 Frankl remarked in his text on Gothic architecture that “The inside surfaces of west walls were usually left very simple and plain, as though it was intended that the church-goer should not be held up by any display of grandeur on his way out of the church. Reims is an exception to this general rule.” Paul Frankl, Gothic Architecture, trans. Dieter Pevsner (Baltimore, MA: Penguin, 1962): 110.


9 Herodias’ conspiracy with Salome to procure the head of John the Baptist has profound repercussions in the sculptural program of the reverse façade, not only in causing the future desecration of the Baptist’s bones under the reign of Julian the Apostate (on the lintel), but also in contrast to the sacred unfolding of the union of Anna and Joachim juxtaposed to the niche figures of Herod and Herodias.

10 See Anton, Fürstenspiegel, 347–349; 425. Hincmar in particular saw the prophets as the direct precursors of the bishops and saw their mutual role as the “advisers of kings.” Hincmar, De Regis, Migne, Pat. Lat., 125, 979.

11 The decapitated Nicasius, head in hands, displays an enormous halo created by the stained glass window behind him. The Vandals who were responsible for his death on the threshold of the fifth-century cathedral of Reims are on the inner wall, while the angels occupy the space closer to the nave. One of the latter points to the rouelle that marked the site of a commemorative ceremony to St. Nicasius that still took place in the Middle Ages. See Henri Deneux, Dix ans de


15 Chess was depicted on the cathedral of Puy-en-Velay, with no less a ruler than Charlemagne wielding the pieces, and also at S. Savino in Piacenza.


Again, the research on this topic is legion. The most important, though contested, study remains Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).


Buc, *L’ambiguïté*, 323.
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