

ICMA Master Carvers Series

A resource for discussion and information.

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12 The Comet Master (1075-1110)

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The capitals discussed here may be examined in larger format in vols. 3-5 of *The Ark of God*, and his full *œuvre* will be published in volume 7.

This is number 12 of an on-going series describing Early Gothic carving masters for discussion and comments

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Jouy-le-Moutier crossing

1092

The Comet Master (1075-1110)

This man's most characteristic motif is the tails attached to each side of the corner crocket. They look like comets trailing symmetrical wings.

The five phases in the work of the Comet Master are marked by notable influences from other carvers, and later from the impact of the First Crusade. In the early years growing technical skills are more apparent than innovation [r2], culminating in his first large commission at Morienvall. He then met up with a man I have not noted elsewhere in the Paris Basin, a man who covered his surfaces with beautifully organised yet freely placed elements in which it was more important to fill the spaces than to create an overall geometric order. His influence was profound, and led Comet to the densely packed work that followed [r3].

He gradually reasserted his own identity over the next couple of sites until a stint at Saint-Benoît brought him into contact with very skilled carvers from the south, and this inspired him to include an arcade-like frieze along the lower rim, which he continued to use for most the next decade [b1].

It is possible that the Crusade affected him in a powerful way, for designs became harder and more angular [b2]. As the pace of work resumed around 1100 softness returned, the lower row was eliminated and the tails turned down and inwards to meet each other along the corner axes [b3]. The five phases are illustrated on this page, and the connections between them will become clearer as the story unfolds.



Parnes apse (d) Phase 1

1081



Deuil-le-Barre WN1(a) Phase 2

1087



Crépy-en-Valois, Saint-Arnoul crypt Phase 3



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave Phase 4

1098



Acy-en-Multien tower base Phase 5

1102

Phase 1: Learning (1075-1083)

The tower base at Labruyères may be his earliest, from the unevenness of the design and the quality of the other carvers in the workshop [r1]. The comet was placed on one corner, but on the other there is a spidery figure with a gigantic head on a seat [b1]. The combination of heads and comets continued in the tower of Deuil-le-Barre and in the doorway of Rémérangles [b2].



Labruyères apse 1075

1075



Labruyère apse 1075



Deuil-le-Barre tower (Musée de Cluny) 1095

In the little church of Arthies not far from the earlier buildings, Comet worked with Bannière. The comets are elementary [b1,2]. One is decorated with lobes, the other is a double capital and the space between has become more important. There is also a Bannière capital with drill holes that were prompted by the use of the same device in the crossing underneath [b3].

1076



Arthies tower

1076



Arthies tower

1076



Arthies tower

1076

I would open the possibility that he and Aviateur carved the little doorway in Rémérangles with its ambitious lintel [r2]. One of the four capitals may have been by the Comet Master from the tails hanging down each side [r1], though now far too worn for any certainty. Notice the range of fronds



Rémérangles north door W-nr1

1079



Rémérangles north door

1079

1079



Rémérangles nave door lintel

1079

DRAFT

in the tympanum and the fan-like leaves emerging out of the bellies of the flanking animals. The outline of the latter have been distorted to fit exactly within the frame,

The posture on the tympanum and the lobes of the fronds are similar, and the lobes have been scooped while the figure has out-flung arms and legs akimbo not unlike Labruyères.

There are west walls in three churches with doors and windows that seem contemporary. Château-Landun was carved from a very obdurate stone [r1], the others from a somewhat softer material that permitted deeper cutting [b]. I have placed them in what appears to be relative order, though the dating is particularly imprecise as these years lack the sort of boundaries in time offered elsewhere. Chronologically, it is a slippery zone.



Château-Landun W-wR2

1078



Saint-Leger-au-Bois west front

1080



Pont-Saint-Mard west front

1081



Pont-Saint-Mard west front

1081

The west face of Pont-Saint-Mard in the foothills north of Soissons presents one of the earliest examples of what was to become a classic facade in the north for the next century [r2]. A slightly projecting gable over a central door, combining the square of the opening with the circle of the enclosing arch under the triangle of the roof. And above that a pair of windows, a thin drip mould connecting them and the gable with a narrow central opening. The decoration is delicately handled, especially around the doorway.

Parnes is quite an important church in this sequence. It contains one of the earliest capitals by Bannière, whose work helps to date many of the earlier buildings. It is also the first with rib vaults, the early use of which is discussed in v.3/13-42.



Parnes apse (d)

1082



Parnes apse (d)

1082

The crocket terminal in Arthies was carved from two whorls only, and the more normal use of three whorls is rare. The underside was treated in two ways. One was to fold the centre upwards as if the spiral had a thickness and you could see behind it [b1]. The other was to enlarge the underside into a keel [b2]. Though other carvers at times used these devices, such as Faceter, they remained part of the Comet repertoire from here on.



Oulchy nave

1085



Jouy-le-Moutier crossing

1093

1078

1081

1082

DRAFT

To help keep things clear, on the right I have listed the campaigns from Phase 1. As I have said, the dates have to be noted more precisely than any argument could justify for otherwise it would not be possible to order the campaigns. It is only as connections are made with other carvers working elsewhere that accuracy could be improved.

At Bruyères-sur-Oise the base to the tower is all that is left of the original church [b2]. The second storey of the tower was constructed thirty years later, and the topmost floor had to be rebuilt after the war.

This capital is on the interior, quite obscured by more recent additions [b1]. The lobes on the tail are sharper and more deeply scoured. On the other side is a splendid little capital by Sprouter, so good that it suggests that Comet may have been able to learn from him. I say this because from here on the quality of his work and his creativity spring to life.

1074	Labruyères	apse
1075	Arthies	tower
1076	Deuil-le-Barre	tower
1077	Parnes	apse
1078	Château-Landun	nave
1079	Rémérangles	west door
1080	Saint-Leger-au-Bois	nave
1081	Pont-Saint-Mard	west
1082	Bruyères-sur-Oise	tower base
1083	Berneuil-sur-Aisne	nave (a)
1084	Retheuil	tower 1

1081



Bruyères tower base

1081



Bruyères tower in 1938 (Archives Mon Hist) 1081

1082

The nave of Berneuil-sur-Aisne has the same small crocket, and long tails [r1]. It is on the largest stone yet carved by Comet, and as he was not accustomed to laying out larger blocks, the unusual scale may have caused design problems. Later work suggests he would have preferred to cover the whole surface, but other carvers on Berneuil also had difficulties with the empty areas, and may have been encouraged by the capo-master to leave them plain. In his later work he went to great lengths to see that surfaces were not left undecorated, even though in Crépy and Deuil the capitals are from enormous stones, and much taller than any at Berneuil.



Berneuil nave

1082

1083

In the tower base of Retheuil he returned to using small stones. The tails have been lengthened to cover the full height from crocket to astragal while cleverly managing to cover the whole space [r2].

The lengthened tails were adapted in the Morienvål nave to larger stones [b]. He gauged more deeply, scooping out the lobes and inserting a thin decoration up the corners to assert the importance of the crocket. The tails



Retheuil tower level 1

1083

1083



Morienvål WN2e(a) left face

1083



Morienvål WN2e(a) left face

1083

stretch down to the astragal with tips turned in to meet one another, with a head belching fire on the side panel.

Comet may have had a hand in more than one capital. One is clearly attributable to him [previous page]. The heads in the central cartouche, the flames tumbling out of the mouth, and the way the corners were structured with a central band occur in later work. The geometric pattern added to the sides may have helped him to fill the spaces on a big stone. It could have been inspired by the other men on the campaign who were much more inclined to use such motifs than Comet.

Phase 2: Density - after Montlevon (1084-1087)

1084 Montlevon lies south-west of Reims. Its capitals are an unexpected gift, with exquisite decoration that lies on the surface and does not disturb the shape of the block. They have no crockets, but instead a whimsical delicacy not found elsewhere. I do not know where the guiding master came from, but he had a profound influence on Comet.

The Comet capitals of this period depict his search for meaningful forms, a search for fluidity combined with geometric or organic blocks that could be made to fill the entire surface. At Montlevon he had at last met a teacher who could show him how to organise his templates. He seems to have been impressed when he became involved in carving one or more in his teacher's manner [r1,2,b1]. I do not believe that Comet could have carved any from the block but he would have gained a great deal by being this man's assistant. From there he went straight to Oulchy-le-Château where he used these ideas, with relatively little change, on a large stone in the nave.

This illustrates a turning point in his life, one that would not have been an isolated instance in those days. The way men travelled between sites, and combined in loose unco-ordinated ways with each other, meant the youngest and the most experienced would often be thrown together and, where the setting was right, could have had a great deal to share.

There is a Comet-style capital in the nave of Oulchy-le-Château that has crockets carved as comets. ^{Vergnolle, 2000.} But in other respects it is unlike anything that has gone before. His time at Montlevon had been so powerful he reused one of the templates he had helped to carve [b1]. He changed it, of course, but the two are comparable though clearly executed by different



Montlevon WS1s(a)

1084



Montlevon WN1s(a)

1084



Montlevon WS1n(a)

1084



Oulchy nave

1085

men [b2]. Oulchy is just 35 kilometres on the other side of the Marne from Montlevon.

Oulchy, like Montlevon, is asymmetrical, with intricately inserted figures and lots of parallel and radiating lobes. But the crockets are back, and with them the attached tails [b1]. The right face of one of the Montlevon capitals has an animal with long legs and tail, and from whose mouth issues softly curled decoration [b2]. The embedded animal's head on the Oulchy capital also has open jaws [b3]. The concept of fitting creatures among the decorative items is a bit like using heads at Morienvall [r1]

1085



Oulchy nave 1085



Montlevon ES1n(a)

1084



Oulchy nave 1085

1087

I believe that the nave of Deuil came next [r2]. It has greater symmetry and shows less influence from Montlevon. Comet has partially returned to the trend of the time, which was symmetry. The general tendency over these years was for greater self-control over designs and templates and a consequent tightened detailing. Greater order demanded more simplification. Lines and designs that wandered without control over the surface did not lead to the newly required sense of order and discipline. Gradually geometric items such as the crossed squares on the side of Morienvall capital, were removed from the decoration so that the geometry could be more subtle and lie concealed under the foliage. Setting-out geometry was transferred to the more concealed zone of the templates.

When this Deuil capital is observed from the corner a new arrangement can be seen to be emerging [r3]. The tails hanging off the crockets still cover the upper half on each side, but below them there is an additional pair of fronds that curve around and touch each other [arrow]. They are not tails, for they do not emerge from the crocket. It is a shape that was implied in earlier work, Morienvall for example [r4].

Getting the tips of the fronds to meet emerged strongly in the next job on the Loire, though they were not yet touching each other. Deuil was the first to arrange the tips to touch, followed by Crépy where they also emerged from the crockets. In the years just before the Crusade they became the dominant element in the design. After the Crusade, instead of the tails hanging, as in the earlier designs, they turn sharply inwards to allow their tips to meet. Thus the new form previewed in Deuil had come to be amalgamated with the tails by the turn of the century.

This sequence in selected buildings is illustrated below.



Deuil-le-Barre nave WN1(a) from face

1087



Deuil-le-Barre WN1(a) from corner

1087



Morienvall narthex XN2e(a)

1083



The changing tails in Morienvall narthex, Saint-Benoît gallery, the Deuil nave, Saint-Aubin in Crépy-en-Valois, the Jouy crossing and the tower room at Acy-en-Multien.

DRAFT

1086

The little tower at Laigneville has one quadruple capital with long tails hanging off the crocket, and on the right, only dimly visible in the photo, an animal with an open mouth. It too has long legs and tail, and is very simply drawn. He continued to use the idea in the capitals of four buildings with enshrouded animals. From here on he left them out.

Phase 3: Arcading - after Saint-Benoît (1088-1094)

He may have learned more of his trade from men working in the upper level of the narthex of Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire.^{Vergnolle, 1985} Here he joined an extremely competent crew who were capable of fine detailing within well-controlled arrangements [b1]. Most had moved up from the south, having worked at Meobec and Selles-sur-Cher.^{Schmitt, 1981} These men shared a number of details with each other, such as tree-like structures and complex arrangements. One of them placed trees on the corner with heavy suspended foliage underneath the crockets with tips that turn inwards to touch the trunk. This was a slightly pre-comet-like arrangement.

Comet carved a similar scheme, possibly inspired by his connections at Saint-Benoît [b2]. He not only worked in layers, but added a spiral tree trunk under the crocket and among the tumbling foliage along the bottom row. The head with the flame-like fronds emitted from the head, and the very long lobes in the tails, is close to work in the nave of Morienvall, except for the missing lower frieze [b3].



Laigneville tower

1086

1088



Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire upper narthex

1088



Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire upper narthex

1088



Morienvall WN2e(a) left face

1083

The Comet capital in Saint-Benoît, while similar to in many ways to those in the Morienvall nave, are more disciplined in execution and the edges are more carefully framed. The tails stretch down to the astragal with tips turned in to meet one another, with a head belching fire on the side panel and a thin rod under the crocket. These are the same elements used at Morienvall.

I have placed Morienvall as the earlier work from the manner of execution, the chiselling of the edges and so on that are noticeably less precise than in Saint-Benoît. Therefore I suggest that the other sites in Phase 4 came later. They all have the lower frieze like a mini-arcade, and their designs and execution are much cleaner. Within this group I have arranged the campaigns chronologically from skill in setting out and detailing.

At Morienvall his fellow workers had much the same skill as he, which was a quite different situation from Saint-Benoît where he was among masters with considerably more experience. He learned from them, and then carried that learning back to the north with him.

DRAFT

1089

We are most fortunate in still having any part of the crypt at Saint-Ayoul in Crépy-en-Valois. It could easily have been demolished, and only the western wall was retained. Without it we would have lost not only some spectacular carving, but one of the most convincing connections between Comet's early work and the mature sculpture that he was now able to achieve. There are three stones in the crypt by him.

It is also one of the few churches to be documented with any sort of date, albeit somewhat loose: we read that it was built under Prior Etienne which would have been between 1080 and 1103.^{Vergnolle, 1983.} The date is particularly important as its diagonal shafts imply the use of diagonal ribs under the vault. This is perfectly in keeping with my contention that rib vaults were being installed in northern French buildings during the 1180s.

In these designs, best examined in the large photos in v.3/228-232, we can see the comets, the lower frieze in the same semi-foliated manner of Saint-Benoît, and the lobes of the tails turning inwards to lightly touch each other [b]. In one instance a pair of fronds with touching tips encircles two curled objects [r1]. This little decorative motif is the next step in the development of the paired-frond in Deuil [arrowed, r2], and after the Crusade will morph into tails at Acy and Morienvall.

These buildings show that in most cases there is a quality common to most of the capitals in a campaign. Certainly one has this impression at Oulchy and Morienvall, and at Crépy and Montlevon, that the individuality of each man was to some degree tempered by a common program. I have



Cr py-en-Valois crypt

1089



Deuil-le-Barre WN1(a) from corner

1087



Cr py-en-Valois, Saint-Arnoul crypt

1089



Cr py-en-Valois, Saint-Arnoul crypt

1089



Cr py-en-Valois, Saint-Arnoul crypt

1089

suggested the same in other churches, such as the aisle capitals in Saint-Martin-des-Champs, the colonnettes in the Chartres portal and the nave walls in Le Mans. The shared quality goes beyond the sizes of the stones (that will nearly always follow a single criteria) to the artistry itself.

This may have been the simple process whereby ideas were shared between the gangs and between carvers. For example, at Cr py serrated tails sit over both types of bands, square tails adjoin an angled tail on the side face, and the designs for the cartouches are mixed indiscriminately.

But beyond that there may have been a directive couched in terms such as 'all capitals shall be rinceau' or 'cut longer than usual fronds with extra deep gouges' or 'increase the number of decorative elements so the surface remains almost unbroken'. Such an instruction would have come from a very senior person, probably the master mason or master carver.

The likelihood that most capitals on some sites tend to have their own singular character helps to explain why so few designs were repeated elsewhere. It has made the task of recognition painfully difficult, and subtle. The SS Master and Faceter stand out as men who maintained their design integrity no matter where they worked, but at this time such unswerving individuality was far from common. It is only later, after the 1180s, that we

find certain designs being repeated again and again across many churches. The use of on-site directions to define a style for a campaign seems to have faded along with the end of formal capitals, the subject of the last three volumes of *The Ark of God*.

The naves of Morienvil, Montlevon, Deuil-le-Barre and Oulchy-le-Château, and the crypt of Saint-Arnoul in Crépy have some of the largest capitals and densest layouts ever carved in the Paris Basin. Such enormity seems to have been a mark of the pre-Crusade period, as exemplified elsewhere in Sainte-Eutrope in Saintes and Saint-Germingny-l'Exempt, in the choir of Cluny III and in both levels of the Saint-Benoît narthex. What this means is that not only did the master establish certain parameters for the capitals, but that as well the *weltanschauung* of the period disposed carvers to use large stones and to cover every inch of the surface. The urge for scale and the avoidance of emptiness expired with or just before the First Crusade.

Saint-Benoît may represent a turning point in his level of skill. I have used the introduction of the lower frieze to date the Bitry apse, the tower at Noël-Saint-Martin and the third level (the second from the top) in the eastern towers of Morienvil [b]. Small capitals simplified design decisions as there was no room for anything more ambitious, especially for the extravagant complications found at Crépy, and therefore the decorative friezes were squeezed. Though badly worn and not as deeply incised the tails of the comets are clearly visible.



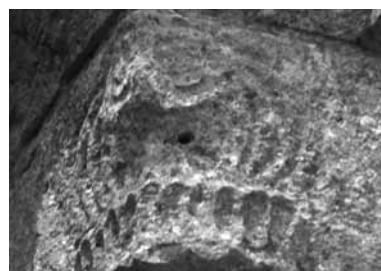
Noël-Saint-Martin tower



Bitry apse



Morienvil east tower (3)



Noël-Saint-Martin tower

1094

There is one other capital at Noël with no frieze and the tails have virtually joined along the vertical axis under the crockets [r3]. The same designs appear unchanged in a number of places besides Noël, being Rhuis and nearby Pontpoint, which are all within riding distance of one another. This could have been Comet, but it feels more like the work of a student. It would appear, from the numbers repeated in each place, that this student remained resident in the area for many years. During this time Comet himself was busy on larger projects, and the absence of his usual designs reinforces the idea that a student had taken the concept onto other buildings.



Noël-Saint-Martin tower

1094

The later capitals present a journey towards simplification. The *horror vacui* of Crépy has dissolved in the small hall at Rouffiac where he carved two capitals [r1,2].



Rouffiac

1091



Rouffiac

1091

1090
 1092
 1094
 1091
 D R A G T

Similarly in the crossing of Jouy-le-Moutier [b1]. It keeps company with an early work by Faceter, who had just arrived from Normandy [b2]. The date of 1093 suits both masters. Whatever else had been constructed at this time was demolished in the many rebuilding programs, except for the tower that sits over the crossing. The tower includes capitals by the Faceter, among others, which shows that crossing and tower were built in one project. This would have been immediately before the start of the Crusade.

1093



Jouy-le-Moutier crossing EN1w(a)

1093



Jouy-le-Moutier crossing ES1w(a)

1093

Jouy has been a puzzle only to those who found it hard to credit there could have been rib vaults in the Paris Basin before 1120. The evidence has been growing for an earlier date that in all probability would have been in the early 1080s, just after the introduction of the pointed arch into the region [v.3/13-42].

Date order in Phase 3

In establishing the date-order in this phase I followed the lower friezes more than the tails. Saint-Benoît and Crépy used a frieze of foliage, and I presumed that Comet picked up the idea when working on the former alongside the southern sculptors. Both have long tails that hang low, which was also a feature of Morienvall. The heads are another common feature. As the workmanship in Morienvall is cruder I presumed that Saint-Benoît was carved later. As Crépy was better organised and more coherent in its detailing I presumed that this was next. Changing the leaves into ‘arches’ connects Rouffiac, Jouy and Noël. I presumed he acquired the idea from the other carvers at Rouffiac, all of whom used arches, and this has prompted the order I paced them in. The tail hangs in the latter, while being a little longer in proportion to the capital in the former.

Fifteen years of creativity ceased abruptly with the call for the Crusade and the taxes that were imposed to pay for and sustain it. Henry Kraus described the impositions in detail,^{Kraus, 1979.} and I presented the evidence for a crusade-induced recession in the *Master Carvers Series "6 GrippleSon"*, and in *The Avista Forum*.^{James, 2010.}

There seems to have been reduced construction, if not a total cessation of all building work for seven or more years between 1095 and 1102. When I trace the earlier work of readily identified carvers from the 1120s and 30s back to their beginnings I can seldom get beyond 1102. This would seem to be the date by which all those who could raise taxes or funds to pay for their adventures had done so, and life had begun to return to some level of normalcy. The only exception I have found has been in two rather chilling works by the Comet Master, in Cormeilles-en-Vexin and thirty kilometres away, in Santeuil .

1098

Phase 4: Austerity - after the Crusade (1095-1100)

All the capitals in the nave aisle of Cormeilles are comets, though only two have decorated tails. Those most like Comet's are shown below [b].

Most of the tails are plain sprays. They finish at the bottom in four ways: angled, square, pointed or with three serrations. The lower frieze is either cusped or serrated. The curls in the crockets are almost identical, though some of the spirals are rounded and some flat. They all have a cartouche, though only one has been decorated and only one has a head.



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave

1098



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave

1098



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave

1098

The designs on the friezes divide the capitals into three groups. In each there are small differences in the style of cutting that, taken together, suggest they were carved by four or five masons. Yet this large number of men produced a coherent group of designs unlike anything found in any other church. Surely, the authority of one master lies behind this unity? It consists of a lower frieze, spiral crockets with elements hanging off them, and central cartouches. Who could this be but Comet?



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave

1098



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave

1098



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave

1098



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave

1098



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave

1098



Coa Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave

1098



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave

1098



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave

1098



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave

1098

DRAFT

This conclusion is not fully satisfying. Though he could have designed and carved these capitals why did he forsake the flowing softer outlines of Crépy, and even Jouy, for the metallic ruler-sharp outlines of Cormeilles?

Of course, we will never know what really happened, but can we assume that it had something to do with the Crusade? Nearly all other construction work had been stopped, the *chantiers* were silent and the cranes left idle in the middle of whatever task they had been engaged in. Many men were gone, fields would have been left unattended and more women were actively farming while their menfolk were away. And many never came back.

When they did return were they covered in glory or did they despair from the mismanagement, the lost opportunities and the bickering? Whatever it was, the response of one sensitive sculptor may have been these capital at Cormeilles.

Almost a century ago Lefèvre-Pontalis discussed them in relation to Morienvall and a dozen other eleventh-century churches, referred to these capitals as ‘archaic’ and yet preferred a date of 1120. This date has not been questioned, yet on comparing the capitals with comparable designs elsewhere, a date earlier than that is clearly called for. The forms are closer to Jouy with hanging tails and cartouches, with a lower zone of crenelations or geometric triangles. The design is closer to other capitals of the period before the Crusade, than to the softer forms being employed afterwards,

The highly austere and geometric forms, the hard edges and the mechanical outlines to all design elements suggests they would have been carved in a period of social uncertainty, an assumption we can probably make as we have seen this happen in other periods of art. I would therefore take the risk of postulating that this was built within the time of the Crusade, a unique building that reflected the despair and sorrow and broken ideals that were still fresh in people’s minds.

The first level of the tower at Santeuil in the Val-d’Oise has the same range of designs as Cormeilles, but on a smaller scale [r,b]. Most of the tails are like Cormeilles, being undecorated and serrated, or angled, square or pointed. Only one looks like a real Comet [r1]. The common tails suggest that the two works would be more or less contemporary. I have placed Santeuil later as the frieze has gone.

The plainness of the capitals in both buildings from this post-war period needs a further explanation. They look as if they were carved from a template with few of the decorative niceties that enliven the earlier designs. The emotional poverty in both jobs suggests that the Comet Master may have stopped carving himself, but was directing others. He had risen to become the master of the works in much the same way as Palmier may have done in his later years. *Master Carvers, 07.*

With this dating the earlier work in the crossing and the vaults under the tower become particularly interesting. They are mainly densely-packed foliates with an astounding maturity and skill for that time..



Santeuil tower level 1

1110



Santeuil tower level 1

1099



Santeuil tower level 1

1099



Santeuil tower level 1

1099



Santeuil tower level 1

1099

1099

DR AFT

Phase 5: Closure - after Acy-en-Multien (1102-1110)

Moving beyond the penumbra of the Crusade, the Comet Master once more obtained large stones to carve under the tower of Acy-en-Multien [b1,2]. There is no lower frieze and the wings meet like two hands holding a chalice in the manner that had begun to emerge into prominence at Crépy [b3].



Acy-en-Multien tower base

1102



Acy-en-Multien tower base

1102



Crépy-en-Valois, Saint-Arnoul crypt

1089

One capital has been so ‘restored’ that the original is only dimly recognisable [b2]. Like Parnes and Crépy, Acy is also famous for having early rib vaults. It could have been built before the Crusade, though that would have reduced the time available to complete the last jobs. Such a shift in time also creates difficulties in placing Cormeilles between Crépy and Acy without demanding too much construction on too many building in too short a time. I hope that as I identify other masons this uncertainty may become somewhat clearer.

The last work by the Comet Master was the Morienvall apse. The capitals in the north external corner are original [v.3:467]. The central one is a Comet in the style of Acy [b1] where the wings turn sharply enough to meet along the vertical corner axis and the crocket has only one turn and is indented on the underside. Sadly, too worn to be easily perceived. I will have a lot more to say on the dating and carvings in this abbey under Bannière, and refer you to that piece.

Is it possible that he would have retired to Morienvall as a safe and meaningful refuge for the last days of his life? Would this be why we did not hear of him again, though he was still close to fifty years old?



Morienvall choir chapels, north-east outer corner

1104

There is a real possibility that the last two campaigns - in Acy and Morienvall - were constructed *before* the Crusade. The pattern of motifs suggests this possibility. Further investigation may clarify the matter, but the evidence would need to be solid.

There are a number of dull and repetitive capitals in the church at Rhuis and in the tower of Pontpoint [r]. I doubt they could have been his work, as they have little imagination and none of the aesthetic tension he maintained in the gap between the tails. I would place these as the work of an associate in the early 1090s. This carver also worked in the eastern towers Morienvall.

Dating and chronology

The procedure that I use to create the chronologies has been discussed in the Cover Sheet to this series. The first step has been to determine the stylistic evolution of the campaigns, which means following specific elements and defining how they evolve. The process implies a straight-line development which would not be very likely as an idea used on one site need not necessarily reappear on the next job, but lie dormant before resurfacing some years later. I acknowledge these studies are a first attempt to bring real people into the debate, and one has to start somewhere.

If any campaigns coincide with documentary dates, they can provide pivotal points. In this period that is pretty rare.

At this point I would try to provide specific dates for each campaign. The number of campaigns by Comet made it easiest to set them one year apart.

The next step would be to relate this sequence to the time-lines of other masters and note where Comet worked on the same jobs and whether there are any contradictions. The work of other crews in the same buildings will doubtless give reason for making small adjustments to either the order or to the definitions of stylistic evolution.

When I placed the work of Comet in style order by this method and then provided an arbitrary one-year between each campaign and left a space for the Crusade between 1095 and 1100, the order fitted precisely into the order being suggested by other carvers. There was no cheating in this, for this is how it happened.

Sometimes the links with other masters left little space for items in between, and where a little crowded I would give two campaigns in one year, and if not enough work was attributable to him I would spread them wider. It was an ongoing reiterative process in which adjustments were continuously being made on an Excel sheet, with embedded comments on the reasons for each date. By now this is a large and complex file!

The order for these buildings seemed to evolve naturally from the transmission of ideas from one to the other. These dates are a first approximation in this method, and I have decided to “follow the scent” and arrange these work chronologically to create as direct a transmission of motifs as possible [r].

On the next two pages find samples of capitals from all the campaigns in his *œuvre*, in date order.



Rhuis tower level 3

1095

1075	Labruyères	apse
1076	Arthies	tower
1077	Deuil-le-Barre	tower
1078	Château-Landun	nave
1079	Rémérangles	west door
1080	Saint-Léger-au-Bois	nave
1080	Pont-Saint-Mard	west
1081	Parnes	apse
1081	Bruyères-sur-Oise	tower base
1082	Berneuil-sur-Aisne	nave (a)
1083	Morienvall	nave
1083	Retheuil	tower 1
1084	Montlevon	nave (a)
1085	Oulchy	nave
1086	Laigneville	tower
1087	Deuil-le-Barre	nave
1088	Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire	narthex (g)
1089	Crépy-en-Valois, Ayoul	crypt
1090	Bitry	tower base
1091	Rouffiac	chapel
1092	Jouy-le-Moutier	crossing (a)
1093	Morienvall	east towers 3
1094	Noël-Saint-Martin	tower 1
1095		Crusade
1098	Cormeilles-en-Vexin	nave
1099	Santeuil	tower 1
1102	Acy-en-Multien	tower base
1104	Morienvall	east chapels
1090	Pontpoint-Saint-Gervais	tower 1
1090	Rhuis	tower base
1090	Rhuis	west
1090	Rhuis	tower 2

All building campaigns by The Comet Master



Labruyère apse 1075



Arthies tower 1076



Deuil-le-Barre tower 1077



Château-Landun west front 1078



Rémérangles north door 1079



Saint-Lèger-au-Bois west front 1080



Parnes apse (d) 1081



Parnes apse (d) 1081



Pont-Saint-Mard west front (aw) 1080



Bruyères-sur-Oise tower base 1081



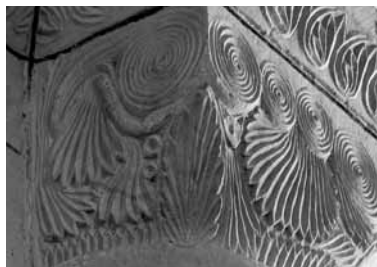
Berneuil-sur-Aisne nave 1082



Retheuil tower level 1 1083



Morienvil XN2e(a) 1083



Montlevon nave 1084



Montlevon nave 1084



Oulchy-le-Château nave 1085



Deuil-le-Barre nave 1087



Deuil-le-Barre nave 1087

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Laigneville tower 1086



Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire narthex gallery 1088



Bitry tower base 1090



Crépy-en-Valois, Saint-Arroul crypt 1089



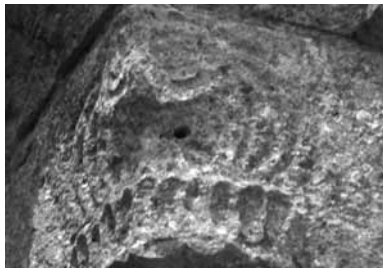
Crépy-en-Valois, Saint-Arroul crypt 1089



Rouffiac 1091



Jouy-le-Moutier crossing 1092



Noël-Saint-Martin tower (1) 1094



Noël-Saint-Martin tower (1) 1094



Morienvall east tower (3) 1093



Cormeilles-en-Vexin nave 1098



Cormeilles-e-Vexin nave 1098



Santeuil tower level 1 1099



Acy-en-Multien tower base WS1e(a) 1102



Morienvall En2(a) 1104



Pontpoint tower level 1 1090



Rhuil tower level 1 1090



Rhuil west portal 1090