



Central door, right top jamb figure



Capital above right, central door

## Part 3 of the Royal Portal Series

November 2020

### *Chartres Royal Portal - the embrasures and door jambs*

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Do we know this man? Two similar and powerful figures were carved in the upper right side of the central door and in a capital immediately above. Their heads are characterful, depicting a cultured, intelligent, self-assured and yet benign individual. The details, the sharp nose, almond-shaped eyes and so on are handled in much the same way on the jamb and in the capital, and may have been the same carver. The unusual concertina-like folds in the jamb figure suggest the left arm had just been raised at that moment. Unlike the majority of male figures in the capitals, this one has no beard.

Was this a portrait of the bishop of Chartres at that time? It would have been Geoffroi II de Lèves who had been bishop for over thirty years

#### Links to the Series

In bold those that have been completed.

1. Summary
2. Towers, narthex, portal plinths
3. **Embrasures and jambs**
4. Colonnets, portal heights
5. Capitals, plinths and imposts
6. **Lintels and plinth geometry**
7. **Central tympanum**
8. Lateral tympani, archivolts
9. Contractual issues
10. Carvers identified?

between 1116 and 1149. Lindy Grant describes him as “the leader of the moderate reformers in the French church, and the most politically adept, and thus, politically prominent of his many colourful contemporaries ... he was the great conciliator of his time. Where there was discord, Geoffrey brought peace.”<sup>1</sup> Here is the man to oversee the reconciliation of royalty and sainthood, the past and the present. His role in France was immense. With Abbot Suger, he could have promoted the political value of figured portals.

This may well be the bishop, particularly when you consider that above the door he welcomes, indeed blesses all who enter the cathedral and in the capital he performs a cleric’s role in The Baptism of Jesus [this and next page].

If so, I wonder about the thin man standing next to him in the capital, who is no stereotype. He is a stooped older man, well-groomed, long-nosed and big-eared. Could he have been the bishop’s right-hand man, or some other key dignitary in the cathedral? He is a fully drawn character who we might meet with pleasure anywhere, were we able to identify him [page 3, top].



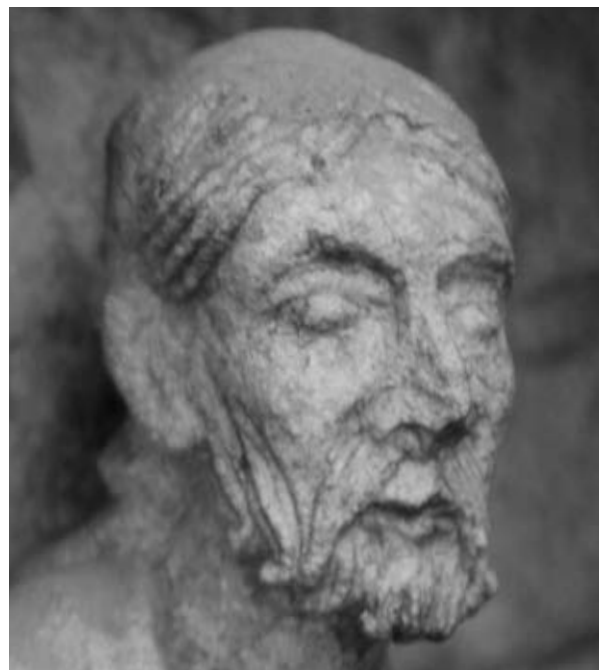
Capital above right central door

Jamb figure from below, side view of the head, and head in the capital





Two figures in the capital and the head on the right



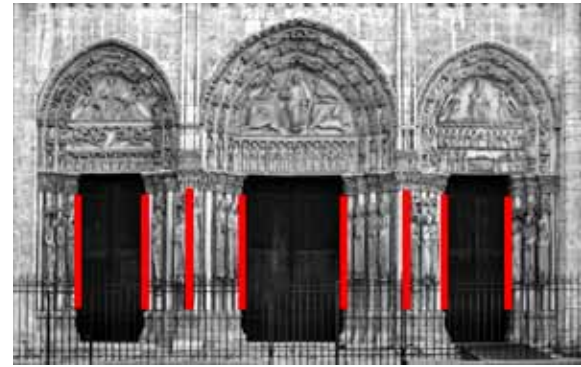
Capital figure from above, head from below, and the head in the jamb from the left



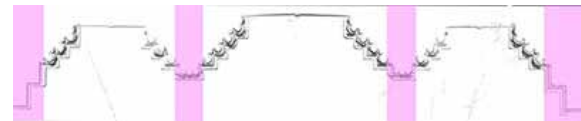
*The jamb and pilaster figures*

Each of the three doorways is flanked by column-statues with colonnettes between. This is what we see as we enter. They are the fame we come to admire, and unless we peer closely, we don't notice the structural masonry behind the sculpture. The masonry forms the piers that support the façade with the embrasures, the door jambs, and the interior walls of the narthex. There are six courses of masonry, and each can be followed around all sides of the pier. They were builder's work.

Forty-eight figures have been carved into the masonry and, sadly, are little-noticed [b]. They do not stand alone, but are integral with the masonry, course by course of the embrasure walls. There are a dozen figures on the pilasters at the western ends of the 'structural' strips shown in pink [r2],<sup>2</sup> and a dozen on each side of the door frames. Most are beautifully carved, some are outstanding, yet for most of us, our attention is drawn to the attenuated column-statues guarding the entrances.

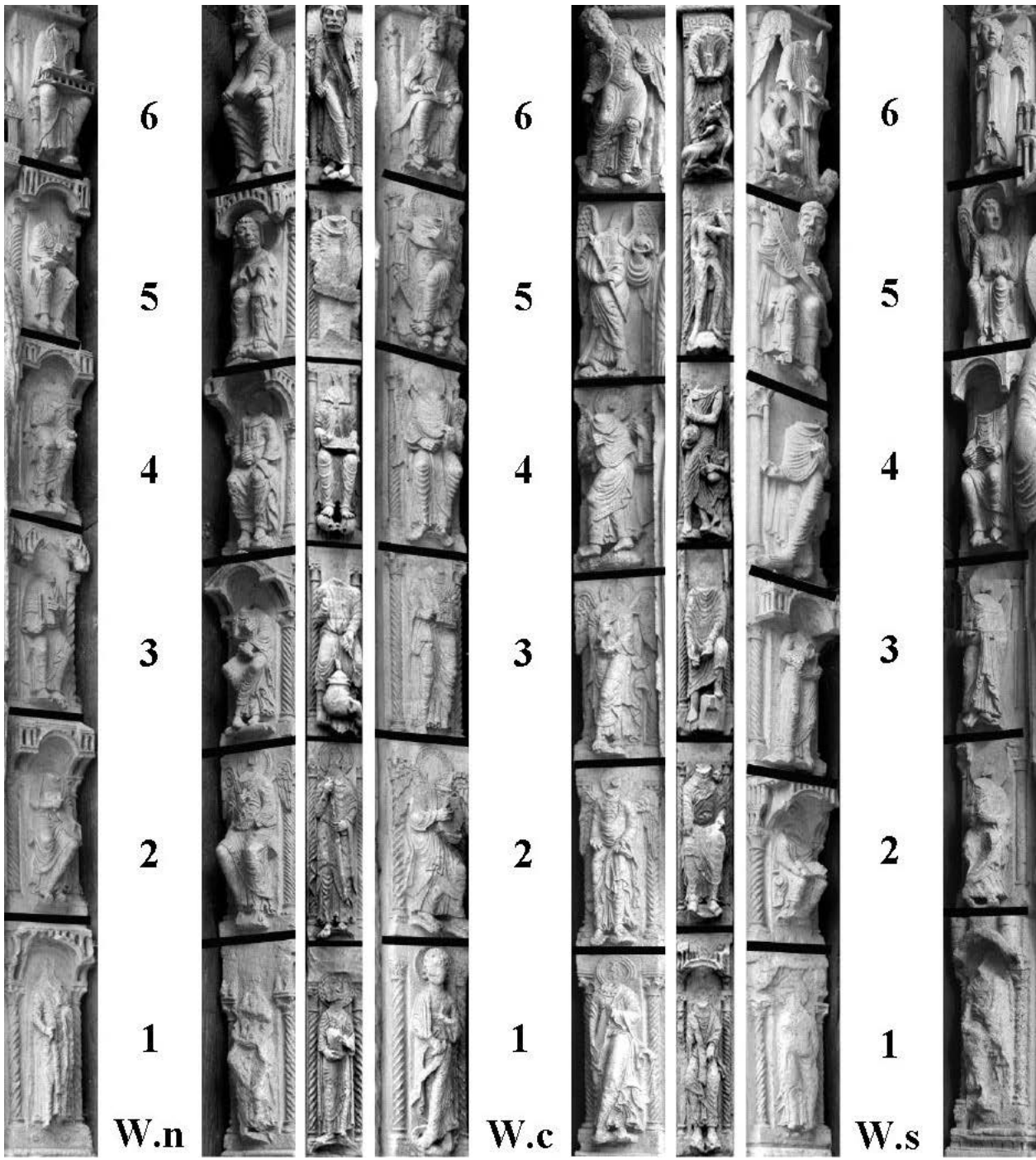


The eight groups of jamb figures marked red



Pink marks the 'structures' that flank the embrasures

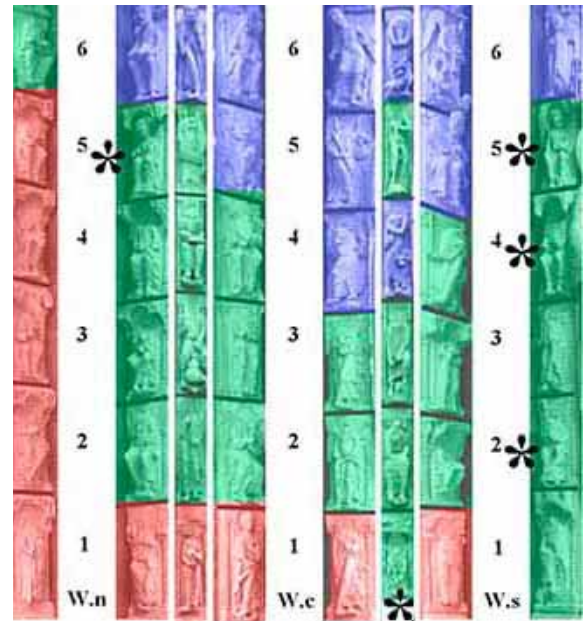
Layout for the 48 jamb and pilaster figures.



The figures may be divided into three distinct groups [b1-3], and are coloured [r]. They are not separate from the building, unlike the colonnettes that could be stockpiled in the shed until the embrasures were ready to receive them. They are part of the pier itself, and had to be placed before anything else, and therefore would have been shipped straightway to the site and erected (with the possible exception of one in the middle of the right pilaster).

If they had been prepared in advance and stockpiled in the shed until the erection gangs were ready, the history of the colonnettes in Part 4 shows that we should not expect an orderly erection process. The arrangement makes sense only if the piers were carved and placed as needed. Because there are small differences in coursing heights from pier to pier that would disclose any misplaced stone, it looks like they would have been carved for where they were placed. Also, many figures are so designed that only those meant for the right side of a jamb could be placed on the right, and vice versa. Being builders work I would expect that many of the carvers would have been masons rather than *imagiers*.

This was unlike the sculpture for colonnettes, lintels and so on that could be carved in anticipation and left in the shed, and where the original order could be lost. Was this because one employed *imagiers* only for as long as they were needed, and such expensive men may not have been available when the builder required them? <sup>3</sup>



Three groups of carvings, coloured



North, right jamb fifth figure in A - red



South, right jamb fourth figure in B - green



Centre, left jamb top of Isaiah in C - blue

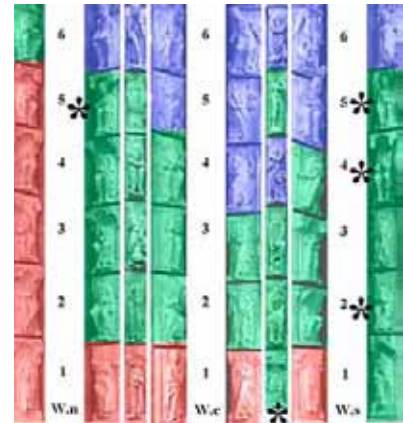
*The three groups in detail*

Group A consists of ten figures, being five on the left jamb to the north door and five more in some of the lowest courses [r1, red]. The former almost completed the pier. The figures are ascetic, their postures are frontal and their garments are not deeply etched and are static with little movement [b1, illustrated page 10]. Some stand and some have bent legs as if resting on a ledge.

The third Group C (blue) consists of a dozen pieces on the upper courses of the embrasures. These figures are in strong contrast to the As, for they are fully present in their space, with solid bodies and firmly delineated postures. They display great vigour and a powerful plasticity. There is nothing ethereal about them [b3, illustrated pages 14-15]. They are the most realistic of all, holding a stance and presence of their own, with powerful clothing and at times with over-stated postures. Exceptionally, none have canopies and most show movement..

The middle Group B (green) is a stylistically mixed collection without the same level of consistency of either of the others [b2, see pages 11-13]. They are more sculpturally creative than A, yet not as corporeal nor as real as those in the uppermost courses from C. The figures are very different from one another, and represent a varied collection of personal statements. The single blue in the right middle panel from group C that sits under a green from B just shows that some may not have been placed immediately they were carved. It also supports the north to south erection order.

The Group B canopies are more massive and creatively decorative than their predecessor's [b2]. Some canopies present a comparative brutality in their elements, more like fortresses than sacred coverings [r2].



Three groups of carvings, coloured



South, right jamb bottom canopy in B



Centre, left jamb bottom figure in A



North, right jamb fourth figure in B



Centre, left jamb fifth figure in C

Five jambs have no brackets under the canopies, so the weight of the 'city' is cantilevered outwards with only a small attachment at the back [b1]. There are five of these, marked with asterisks [r1], one near the top of the north door and three in the south.

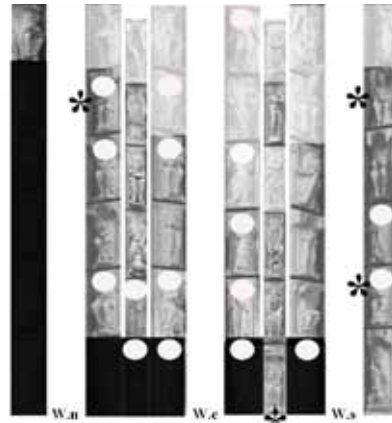
In four, the space at the back of the canopy has been chiselled out to allow the light to flood through in an extraordinary and risky, even Baroque, detail. It could be easily broken, as it was where only parts remain [b2]. Some in the pilasters are narrow [b2,3] and some have additional elements to help with identification that are entirely absent in the A group [b3].

Some of the arrangements in Group C are complex, considering the available space, as with the twisted figure with crossed legs by the central door that stands on creatures, and also has drilled surround to the halos [b4].

The distribution of the plain and twisted columns that flank the figures do not provide clues, for there are ten with twists in the north door and only one at the bottom of the south pier, and only one in the Group C.

There is little order in the placement of motifs, such as halos. One figure in the north has a halo, two in the centre have none and there are three with halos in the south [r1]. As halos are usually the attributes of heavenly spirits and the apostles, their locations at Chartres are whimsical, to say the least. Only one in Group C has a halo [b4], though there are ten among the Bs and four among the As. There is one angel with a halo on the north without a canopy that may have been more at home as one of the angels on the central door.

The two angels with halos from group A at the bottom of the central door suggest this master may have intended to install angels for the full height of the jambs alongside the middle door. Groups B and C seem quite indiscriminate in their use of halos and angelic beings.



Jamb figures with halos



North, right jamb second figure in B



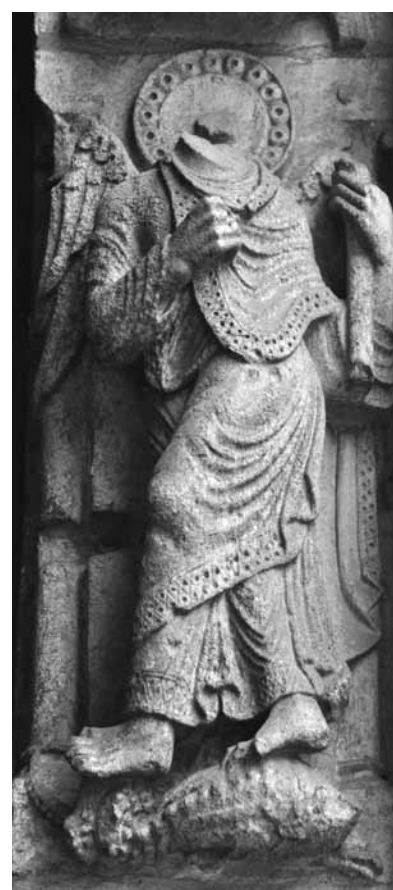
North, right jamb fifth figure in B



Right pilaster, bottom figure in B



Left pilaster, third figure of Gideon in B



Centre, right jamb fourth figure in C

### *Was Rogerus a possible leader in group C?*

The top figure on the front of the right embrasure is inscribed with the name 'Rogervs' [b2].<sup>4</sup> One possibility is that Rogerus was a leading hand who was given the topmost stone out of respect. Another is that he was the head of the carving team in the C group, especially as there are other indications that the men from that group carved some of the capitals and some archivolts in the upper courses of the central portal. He may also have been the master mason in charge of campaign-I, and by association possibly of campaign-F when the first steps were taken to design the portal for the *Maiestas Domini* arrangement. Was Rogerus the man who created the cartoon that all followed? Maybe we could look for him in Bourges, Le Mans and Saint-Loup-de-Naud and the other great portals that carry this canonic design?

Priest called this cosy lissom little animal with a languid tail hooked around the column, a hippogriff [b1].<sup>5</sup>

### *Relative chronology*

In this part we can start to examine the links between the three groups of embrasure figures and the five building contractors [Part 2]. Elsewhere this will be integrated with the four groups of colonnettes [Part 4], the carving and placement of the capitals [Part 5] and the five stages in the carving above



Right pilaster top figure, Hippogriff from the left.



Right pilaster, top figure in C.



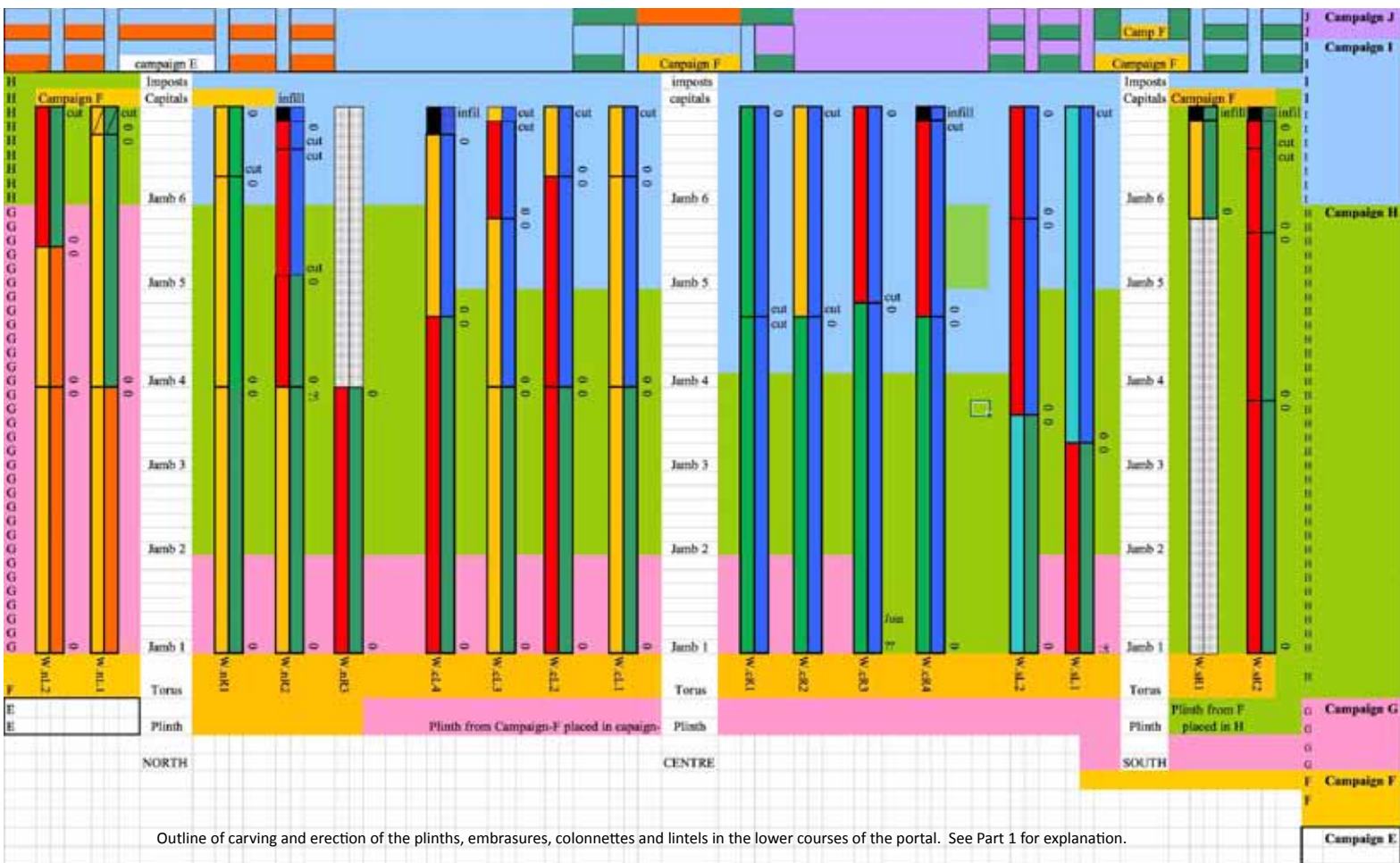
the imposts [Part 8]. It is only by separating the work into parts and then linking them through the logical consideration of the on-site evidence that we are able to extract the true history of this most complex portal.

I am concerned only with evidence from the stones rather than the carvers. Though they may have been identified by others as the St Denis Master, and Master of the Angels etc,<sup>6</sup> this has no bearing on a toichological analysis.

The complex figure below is a foretaste of the summary of the lower masonry of the portals with the embrasures and the carving and erection of the colonnettes (each in separate columns). We cannot make a detailed analysis until all the key items of evidence from the rest of the portal can be assembled in Part 1.

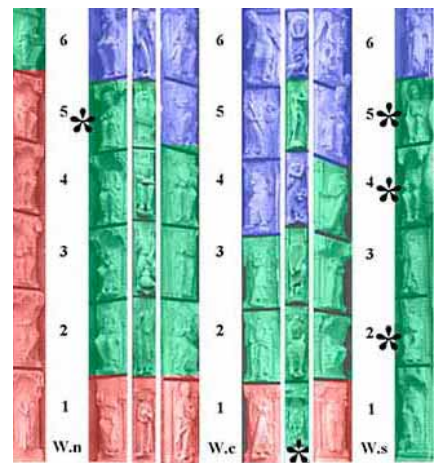
The distribution of the three groups of jamb figures shows the tilt in carving and erection from north to south. Five of the figures on the north jamb from the first group (pink) show that most of the north embrasure was ahead of the others; a logical sequence as the wall of the tower offered a natural support. At the other end, the courses of the south portal embrasure are bonded into the tower and would have been constructed with it course by course (green). Since this green group was carved in campaign-H, therefore the pink figures would have been from campaign-G, and group C in blue would have been from campaign-I.

cuts in the lintels, the altered widths of the doorways, the vandalism of the colonnettes and the confusion around the lateral tympani demonstrate that the plinths and tori of the portal were carved before the first jamb statue, in campaign-F, though most were left in the shed to be placed in the next campaigns.



*Ten figures in Group A - red*

Group A [r, red] consists of ten figures, being six of the eight lowest courses and an additional four on the left jamb to the north door that almost completed the pier. The figures are ascetic, their postures are frontal and their garments are not deeply etched. Some stand and some have bent legs as if resting on a ledge. Those with halos are placed beside the central door, and some with canopies with minimal projection are situated in the lateral doors.



Three groups of carvings, coloured



Above: North door left jamb figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

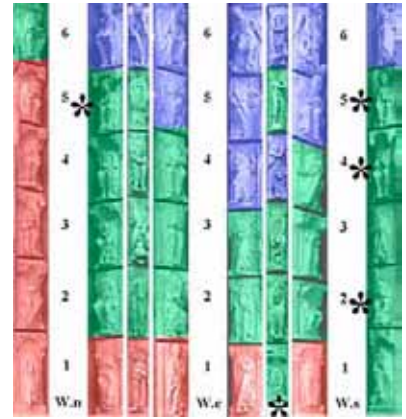
Below: bottom figure in North right, left pilaster, Centre left and right and South left.



### *Twenty-six figures in Group B - green*

The middle Group B [r, green] is a stylistically mixed collection without the same level of consistency in either of the others, and little order in placement. They are more sculptural and individually creative than A, yet not as corporeal nor as realistic as those in C. The figures are very different from one another as a varied collection of personal statements.

The canopies are more like fortresses than sacred. Five have no brackets under the canopies so the weight of the 'city' is cantilevered [see asterisks]. In four, the space at the back of the canopy has been chiselled out. Some have elements that are entirely absent in the A group. One figure in the north has a halo, two in the centre have none and there are three with halos by the south door.



Three groups of carvings, coloured

Right:  
North door  
left jamb  
figure 6.

Below:  
North door  
right jamb  
figures 2, 3, 4, 5

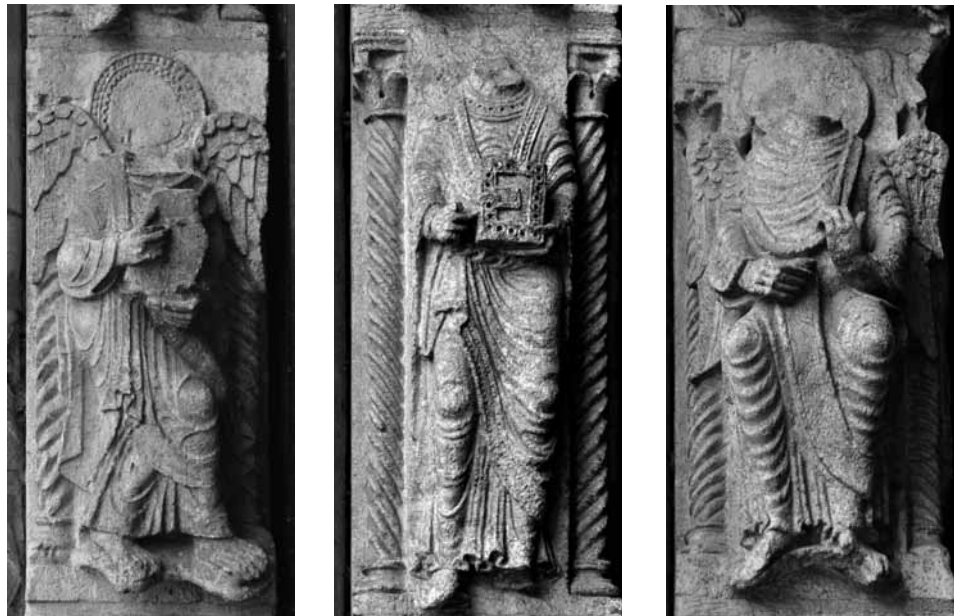




Above:  
Left pilaster,  
figures 2, 3, 4, 5

Middle:  
Central door  
left jamb  
figures 2, 3, 4

Below:  
Central door  
right jamb  
figures 2, 3.





Above:  
Right pilaster,  
figures 1, 2, 3, 5

Middle:  
South door  
left jamb  
figures 2, 3, 4

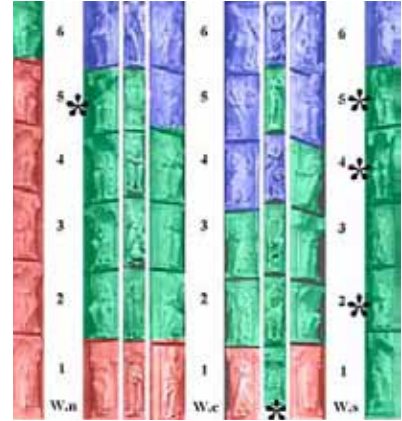
Below:  
South door  
right jamb  
figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.





**Twelve figures in Group C - blue**

The third Group C (blue) consists of a dozen pieces, mostly on the upper courses of the embrasures. These figures are in strong contrast to the As, for they are fully present in their space, with solid bodies and firmly delineated postures. They display great vigour and a powerful plasticity. There is nothing ethereal about them. They are the most realistic of all, holding a stance and presence of their own, with powerful clothing and at times with over-stated postures. None have canopies.



Three groups of carvings, coloured

Above:  
North door,  
Left jamb  
top figure



Middle  
Left pilaster, top  
Central door  
left jamb  
figures 5, 6

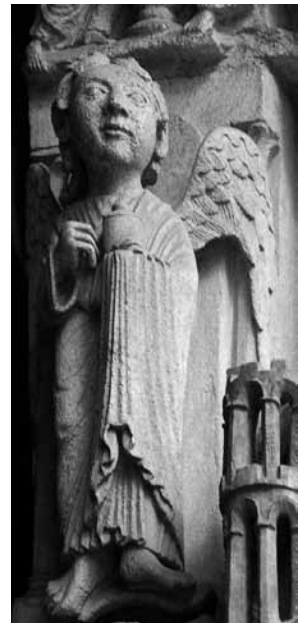
Below:  
Central door  
right jamb  
figures 4, 5, 6





Above:  
 Right pilaster  
 figures 5, 6  
 South door  
 left jamb  
 figures 5, 6

Right  
 South door  
 right jamb  
 figure 6



## Endnotes

1. Lindy Grant, *Abbot Suger of St-Denis: Church and State in early twelfth-century France*, 1998, London, 122.
2. The concept of a separate structural zone within the piers is discussed in Part 6.
3. See <https://www.creationofgothic.org/acoga/files/articles/Laon-carvers-methods.pdf>.
4. Janet Snyder, "Standardization and innovation in design: Limestone architectural sculpture in twelfth-century France", *New approaches to medieval architecture*, ed. Robert Bork et al., Ashgate, Burlington, 2011, 113-128.
5. Alan Priest, "The masters of the west façade at Chartres", *Art Studies*, i 1923, 28-44.
6. Whitney Stoddard, *Sculptors of the west portals of Chartres cathedral: their origins in Romanesque and their role in Chartrain sculpture*, New York, 1987; Adelheid Heimann, "The capital frieze and pilasters of the Portail Royal, Chartres", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xxxi 1968, 73-102; Von Simson, op cit.; Priest, op cit.; Edson Armi, *The 'Headmaster' of Chartres and the Origins of 'Gothic' Sculpture*, Philadelphia, 1994.