

Saint-Denis narthex portals

Crosby wrote that the westworks at Saint-Denis were designed and the portals begun around 1130. Were we to use the same course-laying rate as found in the choir suggests a minimal construction period of 3 years.

Panofsky suggested work may have begun earlier, especially in view of Suger's comment that at first work proceeded slowly. As Lindy Grant has pointed out, a date just after 1125 makes political and ideological sense, and there is documentary support for a large injection of funds at that time.

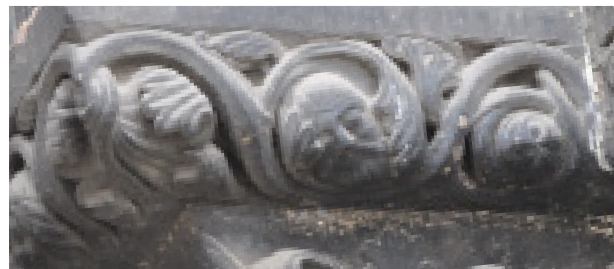
Considering the complexity of erecting a large sculptural program with builders who had not yet acquired experience in such matters, fourteen years to build the narthex may not be too long. The demands on the abbey finances were high at that time as it included wide-ranging work on conventual buildings and the cloister. On this scenario the sculpture might be approximately dated to 1129 to 1132.

Seeing it completed one has the impression that it is a singular thing, whereas during construction it was a process involving many discrete parts each of which relied on the prior erection of some other parts. Since then there have been repairs, rebuilding, floor raising, removals, decapitations and a host of minor works over many centuries. The price one pays of having a monument that carries so much history.

Nevertheless, there are still enough mismatches to hint at some of the



Saint-Denis narthex central portal left impost



Saint-Denis narthex central portal right impost



Saint-Denis narthex central portal left jamb, arrow marks stub of the canopy.

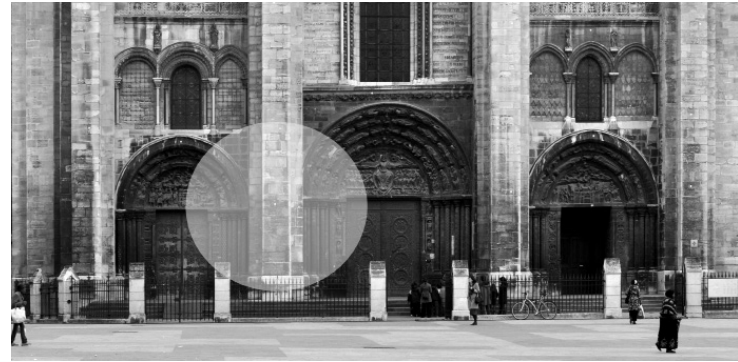


Saint-Denis narthex central portal right jamb

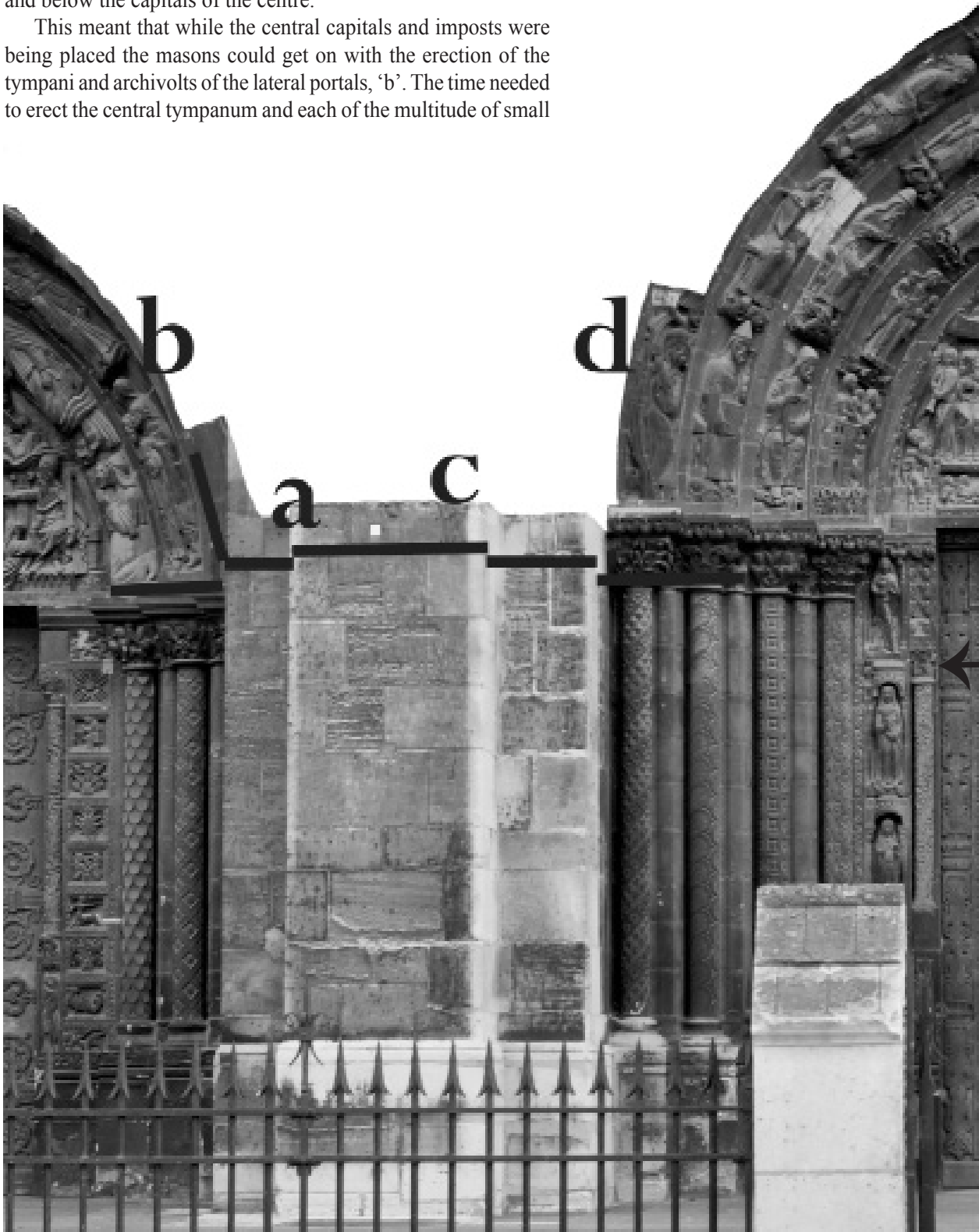
changes. We need to follow them as they would have had an impact on the order in which the sculpture was carved. The major changes are that the jamb panels on the side doors were meant to be shorter and the centre doorway taller, and that there was at the impost there as a major change to the design. The central jamb *bas-reliefs* were designed for a taller portal that would have given the entry a more centralised appearance, more in keeping with contemporary triple portals in France and Italy.

These details indicate the changes were made while construction was in progress. It occurred as the archivolts were being placed over the lateral doors. The imposts on the side portals are two courses lower than those of the centre, marked by the line 'a'. The line lies above the impost of the north portal and below the capitals of the centre.

This meant that while the central capitals and imposts were being placed the masons could get on with the erection of the tympani and archivolts of the lateral portals, 'b'. The time needed to erect the central tympanum and each of the multitude of small



Saint-Denis west front showing location of construction detail



Saint-Denis portal construction detail

stones that make up the archivolts forced the builder the pause work on the ashlar piers between them, marked 'c'.

After placing the capitals and imposts in the centre nothing more could be placed on 'c' until, at the very least, the lowest voussoirs of all four archivolts of the central portal had been placed. This was delicate work. Raising 'c' much further would have interfered with the workmen. The pier above 'c' would have been among the last parts to have been erected.

This shows that the fourth row of central archivolts 'd' would not have been placed until after the lateral portal had been completed. Only then could the ashlar of the pier that was needed to stabilise the arches be raised above 'c'. It was during this complex situation that the height of the central door was reduced.

The upper *bas-reliefs* in the central doorway would not have been reduced in place, but with great care and delicacy on a bench before erection. This would have been done before any of the capitals could be placed, because the underside of the upper *bas-reliefs* are lower than any of the capitals, as marked by the arrow on the right.

Only the imposts of the central portal are decorated. On the left they are of birds with wings that overhang a pair of fronds, and on the right woven tendrils that encase inclined heads.

List of discrepancies.

The capitals over the shafts between the jamb panels and the doorway are of different heights, and one has decoration across the top.

The one on the right is cut back with ragged edges.

On the left side of the panels on the left jamb there is a ribbon of decoration that continues to the top. On the right jamb there is no matching decoration, but instead the frame edge is plain.

The uppermost figures have lost their canopies.

Under the central tympanum the imposts are lower on the left with an infill under the lintel for the difference.

The left vertical foliate scroll alongside the *bas-relief* is shorter than the right, and both have been truncated



Saint-Denis narthex central portal right detail



Saint-Denis narthex central portal left detail



Saint-Denis reduced capital on right side central portal, compared to left side.

