

**SYMBOLIC ORGANIZATION  
IN ROMANESQUE SCULPTURES.  
II, OSONILLA AND SOME OTHER CHURCHES IN SORIA**

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*Introduction*

As a rule, Romanesque art and architecture in modest churches of the more remote rural areas of the Iberian peninsula have been less studied than their more sophisticated manifestations in Spain's great cathedrals, monasteries, and collegiate chapels. Several years ago, we began to study the «rural Romanesque» in the Cantabrian region, and in the process, learned that investigations of smaller, simpler churches could provide important information about the nature and organization of symbols in Medieval Christian art. The interpretation of regional Romanesque symbolism sent us to the commentaries of the Visigothic fathers, particularly the works of Saint Beatus of Liebana. We found that the sculptural profiles and texts were mutually illuminating, each helping to reveal dimensions of meaning in early Christian symbolism that have previously been ignored, glossed over, or misunderstood. The most important results of our Cantabrian study have been published in two articles, one in English (Freeman and González Echegaray 1987) and one in Spanish in a previous number (IV-V) of the *Butlletí* (Freeman and González Echegaray 1991). Our work in Cantabria revealed a number of recurrent principles of symbolic organization that we can now show to be more generally valid for Romanesque churches in Spain. At the same time, it suggested that organizational characteristics that apply generally throughout the region are crosscut by intraregional differences in the nature of the symbols employed. This discovery was not unexpected.

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Working in Cantabria alone, the number of illustrative examples of some of these differences is small, and their possible correlates unclear. Realizing that comparable investigations in parts of Spain environmentally and historically quite different from Cantabria might illuminate regional differences in the choice of symbols, we chose to begin such a study in the province of Soria, where small Romanesque churches are abundant and often reasonably well preserved.

Our research in Soria has scarcely begun, so this paper can not report the conclusions of the finished research project. It is instead an introduction to that larger work, focused primarily on one small but exemplary church, which proves to be exceptionally informative. There is some urgency in the documentation of this case: it contains some of the most significant decorations we have so far seen in the region, from both the Romanesque and later periods, and there is a danger that further deterioration of the church will lead to the loss of irreplaceable artistic documents.

### *Historical context*

Soria's geographic individualism is mirrored in its church decorations. The dry, pine-clad Sorian landscape that is the setting of the monuments under study is very different from the lush pastureland of Cantabria. Environmental differences between Soria and Santander are shown in graphic metaphors chosen to be more or less transparent to congregations in the two areas: representations of pine cones, bears, and snakes occur with much greater frequency in Soria's pinar than in Cantabria. Other, even more striking, differences in symbolism, such as the idiosyncratic selection of saints for veneration, reflect the peculiar historical position of the region and its role as a frontier.

The part of the province of Soria chosen for preliminary investigation forms a triangle between the city of Soria, Almazán, and Berlanga de Duero. Its Romanesque monuments were built in the twelfth century. In the years just preceding their construction, the study region was a war-torn borderland where Moor battled Christian. The shifting Duero frontier was dominated, only 50 km from Osonilla, by the imposing fortress of Gormaz, Europe's largest medieval castle. Built by Al-Hakam II in 955-56, it changed hands repeatedly over the centuries, and was only definitively Christian after 1087, when it was ceded to El Cid (Lévi-Provençal 1957: 650-651). Alfonso I of Aragon retook Almazán from the Moors in 1128 and Berlanga in 1130. His army recaptured Soria's capital by 1119, and resettlement of the abandoned city began soon after: its fuero or charter dates to 1129 (Freeman 1987; Taracena and Tudela 1962: 186-198). Romanesque churches in this part of Soria were founded while the ashes of the Reconquest were still glowing.

Within Christendom, Soria was the arena of disputes between Castilian and Aragonese. Rabal (1980: 180) considers that the bulk of regional resettle-

ment probably took place after the city of Soria passed under the dominion of Castile, when Alfonso VII «the Emperor» (d. 1157) parcelled out the formerly Aragonese territory among his loyal Castilian knights and their retainers. There was almost certainly a major influx of Christian farmers to the sparsely populated, pine-clad uplands at that time, but precisely where they came from is not known (Freeman 1987). One might expect the choice of iconography used on the disturbed Sorian frontier to differ significantly from that most commonly found in the more stable, placid Cantabrian settings we earlier studied.

Twelfth century Spanish ecclesiastical/intellectual history was especially turbulent. At the beginning of the eleventh century, religious trained in France introduced Cluniac reforms to Spanish monasteries, bringing with them a new form of worship according to the Gallican/Roman rite. Cardinal Hugo Cándido succeeded in eliminating its local rival, the Mozarabic or Gothic rite, established in Spain as long as Christianity itself, first in Aragon, then in Navarre. Finally, after a long and bitter dispute, King Alfonso VI arbitrarily abolished the Mozarabic rite in Castile: «Quo volunt Reges vadunt leges». The sentiment of the people and most of the Spanish church authorities opposed this change, but it was sanctioned in the interest of liturgical uniformity by the Council of León in 1091 (Menéndez Pelayo 1978: 402-407).

Churchmen and scholars were then increasingly confronted by new and foreign ideas. Alfonso VII welcomed Jewish leaders and teachers who had been expelled from Andalusia by the edict of Abd-el-Mumen, reestablishing their prestigious academies in Toledo. There, Archbishop Raimundo, Castile's Grand Chancellor from 1130 to 1150, commissioned Latin translations of the fundamental Greek philosophical treatises, as well as the works of Arab and Jewish philosophers. By the mid twelfth century, the dissemination and study of those translations—including religious scriptures and commentaries—had spread widely among Christian scholastics as far away as Paris. As Arab and Jewish science were diffused, so were unorthodox theologies, especially pantheism. The still dominant Cluniacs immersed themselves in the study of these new and heretical ideas, the better to refute them (Menéndez Pelayo 1978: 410-438). It is not unreasonable to expect some reflection of this ferment in contemporary religious symbolism used to decorate both the large Romanesque monasteries and cathedrals and their smaller dependencies, the country churches of Soria, and we believe that we can identify some cases already.

Sorian iconography at times reflects unexpected intersections of local history with wider European politics and the Christian world system. In the church of San Miguel de Almazán a sculpted altarpiece (Fig. 1) representing the martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket was produced just a few years after his death (1170) and canonization (1173). In San Nicolás de Soria, a somewhat later (Gothic) mural depicts Becket's murder (Fig. 2). Its location, as an altarpiece at the head of a Romanesque style side chapel flanked by sculpted heads probably representing Alfonso VIII and his queen, hints at a dedication of the chapel to St. Thomas. The Gothic mural may well have replaced an earlier one

illustrating the same theme. Devotion to Thomas of Canterbury is not particularly common outside England: depictions of his martyrdom are quite rare in Romanesque art on the continent, and their distribution is very spotty. The rapidity of spread of his cult to remote Soria, while it is absent elsewhere, seems remarkable.

It is often asserted that a penitent Henry II, the English king who was directly or indirectly responsible for Thomas' murder, himself promoted the rapid spread of devotion to Becket. This seems highly unlikely, since Henry apparently forced the election of Richard, Prior of Dover, to succeed Becket, instead of the candidate of the monks of Canterbury, their own prior, Odo, because he feared that Odo would promote Becket's cult (Kahn 1991:140). That there is not a single twelfth Century depiction of the martyrdom in Canterbury Cathedral also suggests that it was an event the king would as soon have had forgotten.

Others conjecture that the speed of diffusion of the cult was due entirely to Thomas' vast popularity (it has even been suggested, without sufficient evidence, that his early canonization was compelled by irresistible grassroots pressure). But little in his life story has the kind of broad appeal that would generate a truly popular devotion in the absence of some other stimulus (Santiago de VoráGINE 1987: 73-76; Thurston and Attwater 1956: 629-636). Thomas' symbolic significance as a martyr who died defending legalistic rights of the Roman church against a powerful state had obvious attraction for the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and was undoubtedly one factor in the diffusion of his cult. That is the likely reason why in 1175 English clerics founded a church in his name in Salamanca. Nonetheless, the geographic distribution of early representations of his death suggests that other, equally fundamental, explanations are to be found elsewhere in the domain of European macropolitics.

While we realize that ours is far from the majority opinion, we believe that the early spread of imagery of Thomas of Canterbury may be not so much a result of Henry's devout repentance, or of the popularity of the Saint with the average layman, as it is a symbolic reflection of the rebellion of Henry's children, supported by their mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine (who as a result of her betrayal was confined by the king from 1174-1183). In France, and in countries on route to the Holy Land, veneration for Thomas seems to accompany the travels of Richard Coeur-de-Lion, duke of Aquitaine from 1172, crusading King of England, duke of Normandy, and count of Anjou from 1189-1199. Richard's open defiance of Henry began precisely in 1173, at the height of the struggle between the Catholic church and the English crown. One early (ca. 1183) representation of Thomas appears in Sicily, in the cathedral of Monreale. Its presence can be explained in similar terms: Henry's daughter, Joan of England, ruled Sicily as William II's queen at the time (Wolff and Hazard 1962: 41).

Another of his offspring was certainly associated with the introduction of the Canterbury cult to Soria. Henry's daughter Eleanor (Leonor) Plantagenet married Alfonso VIII of Castile in 1170. Alfonso was particularly devoted to the Sorian region, for nobles of the house of Lara in Soria had nurtured and

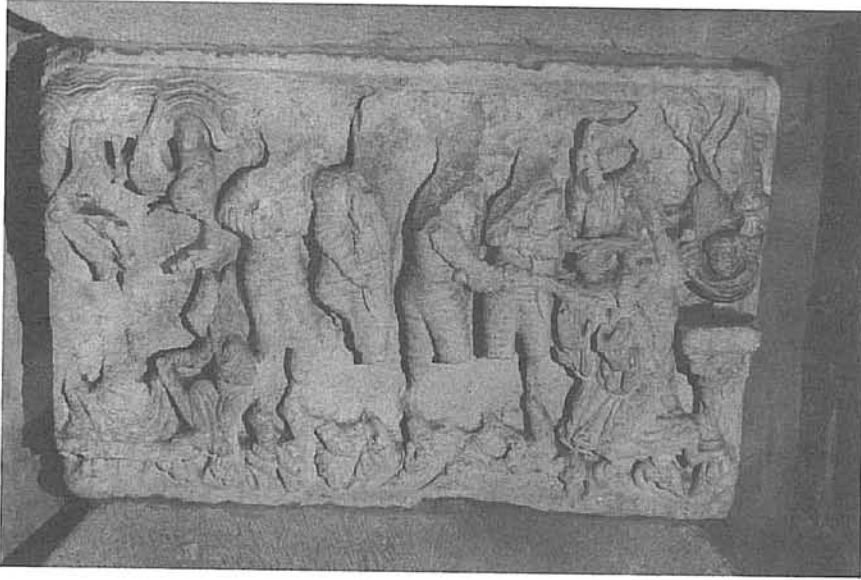


Fig. 1.- Altarpiece from San Miguel de Almazán. Martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket.

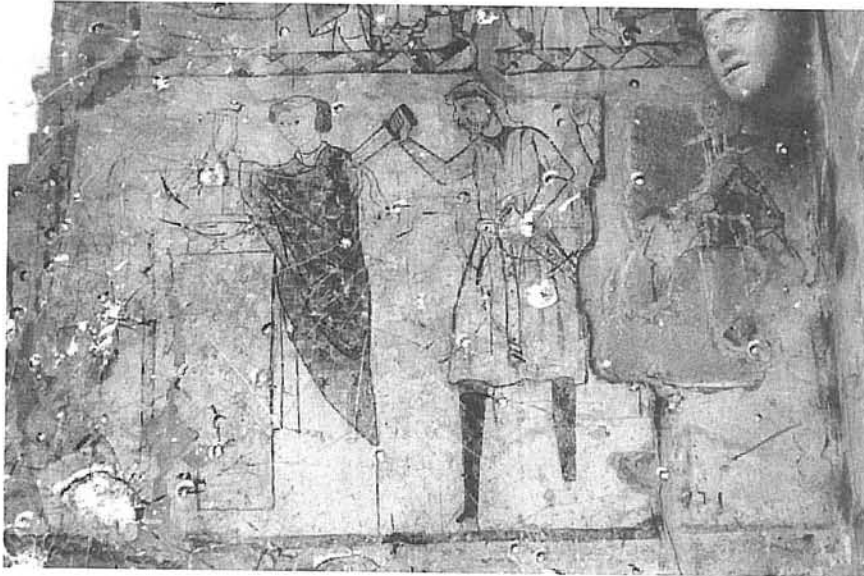


Fig. 2.- Mural, San Nicolás de Soria. Martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket.  
The church is in ruins, exposing the wall to the elements.  
Though the mural has been covered by a thick pane of plastic for its protection, vandals are gradually battering at the pane to destroy it.





Fig. 3.- Church of the Assumption, Osonilla. View from SE. The two square structures attached to the South wall are later additions.

protected him there during his childhood. After her marriage, Leonor became an especial benefactrix of the region, acquiring the title of Señora of Soria (Saenz Ridruejo 1985: 239-240). Statues of King Alfonso and his English queen flank the facade of the Romanesque church of San Pedro in Soria; other probable representations of the pair are found in the province. Together, they were responsible for the construction of many of Soria's Romanesque monuments. As elsewhere, early Sorian representations of the martyrdom of Thomas seem a fitting symbolic statement of defiance of Henry II and his power: their presence is due to Soria's historical individuality. The case clearly exemplifies the way in which iconographic choices often depend on historic circumstances.

In the ways mentioned above, as well as others, expectations of regional differences in Romanesque iconography are fulfilled by our study even in its preliminary stages. Though its major iconographic importance lies elsewhere, the church of Osonilla reflects some of these differences as well.

### *The local setting*

Osonilla, now a private estate, was formerly a tiny town, with just 14 houses and a primary school in addition to its parish church in the early nineteenth century (Madoz 1849). It is situated at about 1000 meters above sea level, in the Duero basin of the Castilian Meseta, near the center of the Spanish province of Soria, and some 23 km. from the capital city on the Soria-Berlanga road.

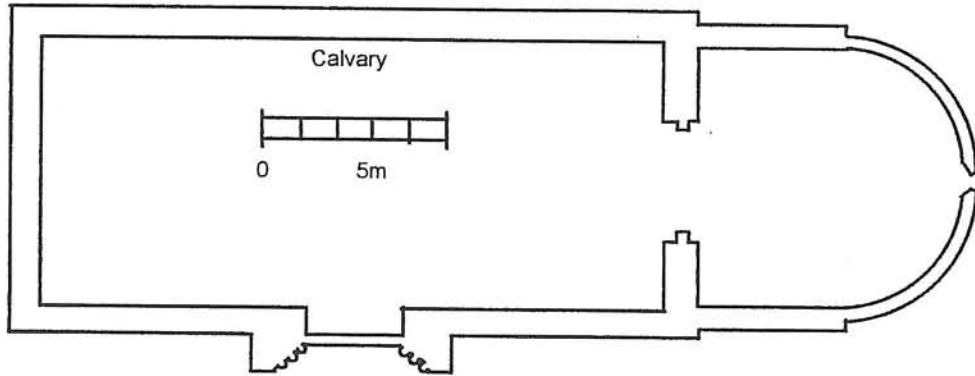


Fig. 4.- Church of the Assumption, Osonilla. Plan.

Today the dry and rolling land in this part of Soria is checkered by broad fields of wheat and sunflowers, interspersed among even more extensive stands of valuable pine forest. Formerly, Soria's fields and forests teemed with wild game—boar, deer, and wildfowl—. The hunt has been a principal attraction of the region since prehistoric times. Vestiges of its former natural wealth still provide recreation to those fortunate enough to hold land in this sparsely populated rural landscape.

Osonilla's tiny settlement nestles on the flank of a low hill, crowned by the church that is now called the Parish of the Assumption (figure 3). Religious services have not been celebrated in the church for many years, for it is partly in ruins. The roof over the nave has collapsed and the walls are in need of repair. Although the church is known to local art historians, and has been referred to in general works about the Romanesque in Soria, it has not previously been studied in its entirety nor even described in any detail.

### *Architecture*

Architecturally, Osonilla's church is quite modest (Figure 4). It has a simple nave, barrel-vaulted chancel, and semicircular apse with a quarter-spherical dome. Except for the more conspicuous parts of the edifice, it is constructed of rubble-work masonry, mostly using large local fieldstone from the nearby Duero terraces; more important and visible parts of the building are built of

dressed sandstone. The bell-tower at the foot of the church also looks Romanesque, although it is our impression that this part of the building was reconstructed at a later date than the principal construction, perhaps after a partial collapse of the tower's walls. On the one hand, a discontinuity is visible on the North face of the church, and on the other, the fabric of the tower incorporates isolated dressed stones, including one with egg-shaped decoration, doubtless of Roman origin, perhaps from a ruined villa that was discovered close by.

The door is lateral, on the south side, the church axis having the normal west-to-east orientation. There are only two other openings in the facade: one linteled window opening to the South from the nave, and another smaller one in the chancel. Their shape and style suggest that they may perhaps be later additions to the original structure. The presbytery and apse have a cornice supported by undecorated modillions. The nave and entry have neither cornice nor modillions, but that may not mean that they never formerly had them: given the roof repairs that have occurred in that part of the church after its original construction, it is quite possible that those elements might have been removed at some point along with the uppermost stone courses of the walls.

At present, the roof is entirely missing from the nave. It was obviously not vaulted, however, but covered by a wooden frame. The entry to the presbytery is set off by a large, four-centered, triumphal arch, resting on a pair of columns with decorated capitals. The chancery and apse have a continuous impost decorated with balls, extending over the capitals of the triumphal arch, on the part of the wall facing the nave. In the middle of the wall of the apse, there is a small crenellated window, broadening to the inside, and built of dressed stone, though entirely without decoration.

The simple architecture of the Church of the Assumption, in general outline so like many other Romanesque churches in Spain, is not its main attraction. In many respects, from an architectural standpoint, it is no more than another exemplification of a more-or-less «standard» plan for an unassuming rural Romanesque church, an example if anything somewhat less solidly constructed than the norm. Its sculptures and other decorations are our principal elements of interest in this study. The information provided by Osonilla's decorative elements and their associations and relationships is a good deal richer than its out-of-the-way location, small size, and modest artistry might suggest.

The church is decorated with both sculptures and paintings. Its Romanesque sculptures are reasonably well preserved, and despite their small number, particularly interesting. The vestiges of painting on the inside walls of the church are in worse condition. However, they include a quite remarkable medieval Calvary in transitional Late Romanesque/ Early Gothic style. There is additionally a handsome though unglilded Baroque retable. A Gothic statue of the seated Virgin holding the Christ child (probably XV or XVI century), formerly displayed in the church, has been removed by the parish priest from the nearby town of Tardelcuende for its restoration and protection.



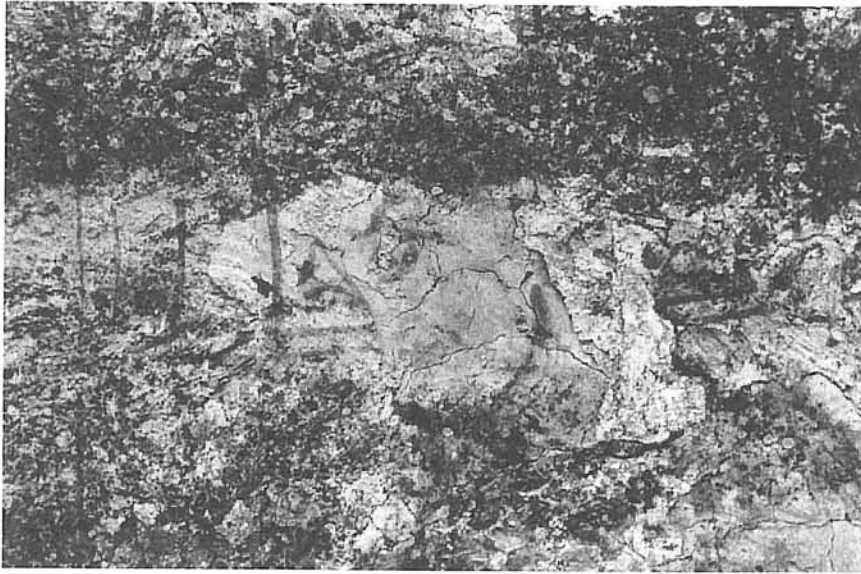


Fig. 5.- Osonilla Calvary: Head of the Virgin. Red drawing, partly obscured by overlying plaster.

### *Paintings*

The Calvary is the oldest painted decoration that survives. It is painted on the wall facing the church door, so that the crucified Christ, framed by the door, would have been the first thing seen by the faithful on entering the church. The positioning of the Calvary and its central figure is clearly intentional; it produces a second organizational axis to the church, at right angles to the principal architectural axis of the nave and presbytery.

The age of this painting cannot yet be determined: it is possibly as old as the church, a very late Romanesque construction. The best that can be said at the moment is that its style has Gothic elements; a late twelfth century date for such figures is not out of the question.

What remains of the composition is a masterful drawing, depicting in ochre the outlines of figures, with enough internal detail to show facial features and folds of draperies. Solid patches of red and blue, painted on the next layer of plaster over the sketched garments, suggest that part or all of the drawing may originally have been filled with color. It includes five nearly life-size figures: the crucified Christ, fixed to the cross with three nails, flanked by the two thieves, and the figures of the Blessed Mother and Saint John, the whole composition situated atop a conventionalized rocky hill. What can be seen of the face of the Virgin (Figure 5) is exceptionally fine.

Sometime after its execution, the Calvary was covered over by fine layers of plaster, much of which has since flaked away to expose the underlying figures. The earliest of these layers was carefully embellished with a controlled gray line forming a regular geometric pattern that imitates courses of dressed stone. Since this frames but does not seem to invade the crucifixion, the two may be contemporary. At a later time a similar pattern was much more carelessly executed in red. The red pattern extends over all the walls, including those of the apse. Quite high up the wall, just to the right of the door as one enters, and using one of the false stonecourses as a ground line, is the red schematic drawing of a naked man. Still higher, on another of the red squares, is a Greek cross in the same color.

The geometric decorations, schematic person and Greek cross have little aesthetic value. The Calvary, on the contrary, is a very valuable artistic document: it was drawn by an artist of considerable skill and talent. Through exposure to the elements, it is now in danger of destruction. It is still not too late to save it. Without any doubt, its artistic quality and its importance as a document in the history of religious art in Spain would amply justify its restoration.

### *The Romanesque sculptural program*

The Church of the Assumption at Osonilla has a magnificent though simple Romanesque baptismal font, decorated with a series of broken arches atop columns, all executed with a corded line. A continuous band of triangles follows its upper border.

The Romanesque sculptures are the elements of principal interest in this paper. They are concentrated in two parts of the building: the capitals of the exterior facade of the main entrance and the triumphal arch.

#### a) The portal

The portal (figure 6) with its short roof projects beyond the church wall. Its archivolt is decorated with four segmental arches. The three outer arches rest on six columns (three on each side of the opening), while the innermost arch rests on the jambs and is capped with a cavetto impost. The first arch is covered by a projecting lip, while the second has an inner molding decorated with rosettes enclosed in ovoids. There is no tympanum.

The column bases consist of a plinth topped by a torus, a scotia and another torus. The fusts are separated from their capitals by astragals. The capitals are storied, and atop each is an ogee embedded in the impost on which the arches rest (The stone of which they are carved is very soft, and has been seriously damaged by weathering and burrowing wasps).

The themes of the capitals, seen from the viewer's left to right, are:

1) Two lions sitting on their haunches, with heads converging as though to lick an eroded globular form that was once a human or head (Figure 7).

2) A hunter dressed in a short tunic, sounding a hunting horn (Figure 8); before him and on another side of the capital, we see a mastiff entangled in twining vegetation. A short demonic quadruped with cloven hooves and a dragon-like head twists its head back over its shoulder to bite the lower folds of the hunter's tunic. Another small, deteriorated quadruped, its right hind leg treading on the demon's neck, climbs upward, supported by a closed acanthus leaf.

3) Two mastiffs (Figure 9), entwined in thick vegetation, with a closed acanthus in the middle.

4) Two harpies (heads of women, bodies of birds, and crudely rendered feet), facing each other (Figure 10). An object (circle? wheel?) so eroded as to be illegible, between them.

5) On the proper left of the capital, a harpy, holding a lance or plant branch topped with conical foliage (or a flower) before it, faces (on its proper right) a seated patriarch with full beard and long flowing tunic (Figure 11), left hand resting on his knee, right hand raised, perhaps in blessing. On his right, what may be a tree.

6) Two dragons (heads of serpents on bodies of birds) face each other, heads doubled back behind their bodies (Figure 12). There are two wheel-like objects between them, and centered beneath these, a very eroded human or semihuman head.

#### b) The triumphal arch

Columns topped by storied capitals flank the triumphal arch. Their fusts rest on bases composed of a plinth and torus decorated with balls. On the upper part of each column there is an astragal, supporting the capital.

The decoration of the capitals, again from the viewer's left to right, is:

1) Two pairs of birds, with long shanks but beaks like eagles, eating grapes and possibly blades of wheat (Figure 13).

2) The other capital shows two pairs of birds (lacking the characteristics of shape or posture that would permit closer identification) two of which hide their heads behind upraised wings, while the others turn towards the altar (Figure 14).

#### c) Age and stylistic affinities

From the stylistic point of view, Izquierdo Bértiz attributes the Romanesque sculptures at Osonilla to the workshops of Silos, where the sculptures for

the monastery of Santo Domingo were produced. He compares them to the neighboring churches of Los Llamosos, Nafría la Llana, Nódalo, Fuentelárbol, Fuentepinilla, etc., among whose characteristics are the frequency of themes taken from the bestiaries, and the abundance of floral motifs. (We have also studied and photographed the imagery in those churches, as well as others in the region, with view to a future publication). Their execution may be placed in the second half of the XII century. As we have indicated, the floorplan of the church is one that is widespread among Romanesque churches with a single nave in the Sorian region. Its dimensions and details of its fabric and workmanship recall those of the neighboring church of Izana.

#### d) Symbolic content

Saint Gregory the Great repeatedly insisted that «pictorial representation is made use of in churches for this reason; that such as are ignorant of letters may at least read by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books» (Selected Epistles, Book IX, Epistle 105.) «For what writing presents to readers, this a picture presents to the unlearned who behold, since in it even the ignorant see what they ought to follow; in it the illiterate read» (Selected Epistles, Book XI, Epistle 13.)

The Romanesque sculptures at Osonilla, as elsewhere, strictly exemplify this principle. They have an underlying symbolic meaning that embodies the Christian theology of the day in familiar figures from the Bible, the bestiaries, and mythology<sup>1</sup>. The choice of symbols seems to us to have been made to best reflect contemporary preoccupations of the church, at a regional and local level, in ways designed to be understandable to a congregation of rustic laymen living in a particular natural setting, in small communities whose members shared a particular set of past experiences and current concerns.

Some of the symbols employed are harder for us to decipher than others; as modern scholars our life experiences, daily concerns, and expectations must differ widely from those of Medieval churchmen. Even during the Middle Ages, doctors of the church at times found religious symbols enigmatic or perplexing. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux is the outstanding example: he considered much church decoration —fantastic mythological beasts, two-headed eagles, heraldic lions, intertwined dragons, etc.— to be so much childish nonsense, that only distracted the congregation from worship (Apologia to William, Abbot of St.-Thierry).

1. The principal sources consulted to determine or verify the symbolic content of these figures are, in order of their importance for this paper: 1) the *Clavis* of St. Melito, Bishop of Sardis (2nd C.), in the edition of J.B. Pitra (1855); 2) the *Physiologus*, in Latin as edited by H. Carmody (1939, 1941) and Greek as edited by F. Sbordone (1936); and 3) the *Etimologias* of St. Isidore of Seville, in the edition by J. Oroz Reta (1982).



Fig. 6.- Osonilla, façade and portal.



Fig. 7.- Osonilla, portal. First capital on viewer's left (from the church's perspective, this is the outermost of furthest right capital to the right or the portal). Lion licking destroyed human figure. Daniel in the lion's den.



Fig. 8.- Osonilla, portal. Central capital to the church's proper right of the portal. Hunter sounding his horn, while a small demonic animal bites at the hem of his tunic.



Fig. 9.- Osonilla portal. Innermost capital to the church's proper right of the portal. Mastiff entwined in vegetation.



Saint Bernard's attitude persists among some influential modern scholars. Emile Mâle, the renowned French art historian, inveighed against the insistence of art historians of the «symbolic school» that «the tiniest flower or smallest grinning monster has a meaning» (Mâle 1913:46-47). Like St. Bernard, he insisted that many images were purely decorative. He traced the origins of mythological beasts and comparable imagery to the decorative motifs woven into Eastern tapestries, concluding that «the monsters on our capitals have no symbolic meaning. They were not meant to teach, they were meant to please» (Mâle 1978:363). However, the fact that the source for a symbolic motif can be traced to an ancient Chaldean cylinder-seal or a Medieval Persian rug is no proof that it must be solely decorative and completely devoid of symbolic content and theological value. The artistic inspiration for multitudes of meaningful Christian symbols, including the Madonna and Child, can be traced to ancient pre-Christian sources, but that has not kept them from being reinterpreted, to imbue them with orthodox Christian theological content. Clearly, one must always guard against overinterpretation, or the injection of imagined symbolic content into figures where no such content exists. But in the wholesale rejection of mythological monsters, imaginary beasts, and heraldic animals from the corpus of Christian symbols, Mâle, like Saint Bernard, went too far.

If they were simply decorative, we might expect to find such figures arranged in no particular order except that producing the most pleasing aesthetic effect. On the contrary, where they occupy their original positions and relationships, we find them situated in ways that suggest they have more than simply decorative meaning. In all the Romanesque churches we have studied, where the decorations are legible and their placement has not been altered during the periodic rebuilding of the church, or by well-meaning but misled modern efforts at restoration, the major sculptural themes in a group or series were not simply placed at random, or according to the whim of an artist or builder, but are arranged in orderly fashion that gives coherent meaning to groups of related symbols, even where the depictions employed are of mythical beasts or other figures that Saint Bernard would have considered equally frivolous.

This assertion has been tested and validated in practical application. When enough effort is invested in analyzing the arrangement of symbols, even where the content of a symbol has been forgotten over the centuries, previously unintelligible aspects of symbolic content often become quite clear (Freeman and González Echegaray 1987). This discovery is neither new nor original with us; others have made the same observation before. Mâle's reidentification of the figures that often appear in the so-called «Galleries of Kings» in thirteenth-century French cathedrals is an excellent example (Mâle 1913: 166-168). These figures, usually either eighteen, twenty-six or twenty-eight in number, had come to be wrongly identified, even by scholars, as the Kings of France. Mâle showed from their placement, arrangement, number and attributes, that they actually represented the generations in the tree of Jesse, or a sequence incorporating the Kings of Judah as a metaphor for that theme.



Fig. 10.- Osonilla portal. Inner capital on church's proper left of portal. Harpies.



Fig. 11.- Osonilla, portal. Central capital on church's proper left of portal. Patriarchal figure, hand held as though in blessing, on his right a possible tree.



Fig. 12.- Osonilla, portal. Outermost (furthest left) capital on church's proper left of portal (viewer's right). Dragon.

Romanesque sculptural series are as strictly patterned as are those Gothic images. Even when the specific symbolic content of an image is unknown or forgotten, the principles that guided its placement with respect to other figures, to produce a coherent overall pattern, can usually be determined. Once that is done, it may be possible to deduce the relative value or the symbolic content of an image by analogy with other images occupying comparable relative positions in the series, but whose meaning or value is known. Having found the key to the symbolic content of an image is just a first step: interpretations should be validated in the extensive literature on Medieval symbols. That is the procedure followed in our study.

Although their number is small, the symbolic content of the Romanesque sculptures from Osonilla, and their relative location, with respect to each other and to the fabric and architectural organization of the church, are surprisingly informative. Principles of symbolic organization that order the placement of the storied capitals stand out clearly. That is at least partly due to the fact that where there are very few sculptures, there is less opportunity for the multiplication of organizational principles that would complicate analysis. In this respect, Osonilla is like one of the simpler, yet at the same time symbolically more informative Romanesque churches in our Cantabrian sample, the church of Santa María de Yermo (Freeman and González Echegaray 1987; 1991).

As at Santa María de Yermo, laterality is a major principle dictating the placement of decorative themes at Osonilla. Again, as at Yermo, the symbolic value of the figures is determined not by their lateral placement from the viewer's perspective, but by their position from the point of view of the structure of the church itself. In the discussion that follows, the description is given as though we were part of the fabric of the church itself, either within the church wall facing the viewer (in the case of the portal capitals), or standing between the presbytery capitals, facing the congregation. Figures that occupy corresponding places on the church's own left and right are to be read as complementary in meaning and value: at the same time related in some respects and opposed in others. Laterality alone is not sufficient to explain the placement of the sculptures at Osonilla, however. Three other principles are also operative: symmetrical complementarity, centrality, and privilege. The six capitals at the portal frame the church door in groups of three, and those on either side compose a unified symbolic group that contrasts in particular ways with those on the other side of the door. Capitals that occupy symmetrical positions in the two groups—their inner or outer extremes, or the central capitals—are to be seen as complementary. The central figures in each group of three are the symbolic focus of their group. Last, the capitals beside the triumphal arch occupy a ritually privileged position in the church: they flank the entry to space that is «holier» and more important to the celebration of the mass than the nave, and the columns that support them are much higher than those flanking the church door.



Fig. 13.- Osonilla..Triumphal arch. Right hand capital from the Church's perspective.  
Birds eating grapes.



Fig. 14.- Osonilla. Triumphal arch. Left hand capital from the Church's perspective.  
«Sleeping» bird with head tucked under wing.

*The columns on either side of the church door*

Six columns flank the church door. An equally pleasing arrangement could have been produced using another number—eight, for example—. The number six is not at all accidental. Six is a «perfect number» (a number equal to the sum of its aliquot parts including unity but not including itself) in the Neo-Pythagorean numerology used by western churchmen before contamination with the Kabbala. The number six can therefore be used to mean perfection in any sphere. Six was also the number of the days of creation, after which the Creator rested, and after six ages, variously defined, but always with the sixth being the present age, the created world itself was supposed to end—a culmination that had been believed to be imminent for centuries—. The division of these six into two groups of three each is primarily an aesthetic device maintaining the visual «balance» of the doorway. But two is the number of the Testaments, and the two natures of Christ, simultaneously God and man, while three expresses the mysteries of the Trinity, and we know that these equivalences were never far from the minds of Medieval churchmen wherever they observed those numbers or could incorporate them into their work. Nor is it accidental that the arch over the columns is quadripartite: four symbolizes the four quarters of the created world and, more significantly, the four Gospels. In number alone, the structures of the portal were designed to bring to mind the nature of God, the world, and revelation.

The three capitals on the church's own left side—on our right as we approach the doorway—depict five mythological creatures, on the one hand, and one eroded human figure that looks something like the conventional depiction of an Old Testament patriarch, on the other. Most of the figures on the capitals on the other side, the church's proper right, use «real» beings as metaphors.

The capital on the church's own extreme left shows two dragons, well-known symbols of the devil in the form of a mythological beast. These are the only figures at Osonilla that at first seem derived from the Apocalypse, whose imagery, so frequent in Cantabria, seems to be quite rare in these rural Sorian churches. Considered alone, this case is doubtful, for the capital shows paired dragons, rather than the usual depictions of a single dragon defeated or enchained that are so obviously drawn from the Book of Revelation, but whatever their inspiration, such dragons in ecclesiastical decoration have negative symbolic weight, and usually symbolize the Devil or his minions. On the church's extreme right is the positive complement of these figures, a pair of lions licking a much deteriorated central figure: Daniel as a precursor of the Resurrection, without much doubt. But the lion as symbol itself has a deeper meaning—it often serves as a guardian of the passageway leading from one state of existence to the next—. At Osonilla, there may be other levels as well. According to Physiologus, the standard Medieval source on animal symbolism (Carmody 1944:103, Sbordone 1936:1, 259), the lion is frequently a symbol of



the Savior or one of his aspects: his power and dominion (he is king of glory, as the lion is king of the beasts); his vigilance (the lion sleeps with eyes open as Christ physically slept on the cross while his divine nature remained always watchful); his resurrection (lionesses were supposed to bring forth their young dead, who received life from their father's breath on the third day after their birth). Here, from their symmetrical opposition to the dragons, we suggest that the two lions may more properly represent the prelates of the Church as Christ's earthly representatives.

The capitals on the furthest extreme of each group are thus similar in some respects and contrastive in others. On the one hand, both are «animal groups», there are two of each species, dragon and lion, and each pair seems to have something between them. On the other hand, the dragons, traditional symbols of evil, are quite opposite in value from the lions on the church's right. These two capitals are enough to suggest that the church's proper right is its symbolically positive side, and in fact that is invariably the case at Osonilla. The figures on the church's own left represent the evil, the worldly, the more primitive, or the lower rungs on the ladder of creation, while those on its right depict figures generally higher on that scale, symbolizing the morally preferable, and spiritual as opposed to earthly concerns.

The two inner capitals follow this pattern. Both figure «animals». On the left side, these are two harpies or sirens, mythological beasts that represent earthly temptation, particularly the sensual weakness of the flesh. On the right side they are mastiffs, dogs that in their positive sense symbolize loyalty and faith, and more concretely the apostles or the priests (Melito IX, 59), their living representatives.

The central figure on the church's left is a bearded ancient, seated with right hand raised in blessing, while the left hand rests on his knee or holds a fold in his tunic. He looks like a biblical personage, and if so, since he is shown without a nimbus, he would almost certainly be from the Old Testament. Though he is seated, his attitude is reminiscent of that of the standing figure of the prophet Isaiah in the central bay of the north porch at Chartres, illustrated by Mâle (1913:174): if he is in fact a prophet, the Osonilla personage might very well be Isaiah. The plant or tree on his right might then symbolize the tree of Jesse, though its form is unconventional. Isaiah and the tree of Jesse are associated with the lineage of the Virgin as much as they are with Christ. If the Osonilla church was originally dedicated to Mary, as it is now, a depiction of the prophet would be quite possible at this location. In that case his «lesser value» is due to the fact that he is from the Old Testament, whereas the figures on the right of the door symbolize the New Testament fulfillment of prophecy. But the strongly negative symbolism surrounding this personage is troublesome, and makes this possible identification less likely than another discussed below.

The central capital on the right is a scene of a hunter in temporary difficulty. The hunter himself is a frequent metaphor for the Savior, searching for souls to save (Melito IX, 60). One of these— an obviously unrepentant, almost

demonic, creature with cloven hooves —turns to bite the hem of his tunic: the tunic of Christ may symbolize his flesh, but here as is frequently the case, a more probable meaning is the Church (Melito II,23). Another small creature flees from him, finding support on the demon's neck as it clammers away over a closed acanthus, symbol of night and death. Though the «demonic» figure only worries his hem, and that can do his person no real harm, the hunter sounds his horn —the Word of God (Melito I, 35)— to call the faithful to him. The struggle is to continue, for his hounds, on either side, are caught by tangled vines, hindrances and temptations placed in their way by the devil, which they have still not overcome. The symmetrical placement of the three hounds in exact opposition to the three harpies is striking.

The capitals occupying symmetrical positions on the outer extremes of the two groups are in perfect complementary opposition: the two dragons as symbols of the power of the devil parallel the two lions, as symbols of the might of God. If other symmetrically opposed capitals have similarly complementary meaning, figures occupying parallel physical positions ought to occupy analogous positions in «symbolic space». On the inside of the right-hand group (always from the church's perspective) we see two hounds, and on the right of the central column a third. They may be interpreted as faithful minions of the Lord, metaphorically represented by the hunter in their midst. In the complementary position across the arch are two harpies, symbols of carnal temptations, on the inside capital, with a third, on the left of the central bearded figure. The fact that there are three hounds and three harpies reinforces the idea that these creatures are parts of a single symbolic equation. The harpies, by analogy with the meaning of their symmetrical opposites, might be thought of as minions of the central figure on their side. If that interpretation is correct —if for each positive symbol there is a negative counterpart on the other side of the doorway— then the «patriarch» in the left-hand group is almost certainly a pseudoprophet, the devil personified as another sort of «hunter of souls». According to this interpretation, the lanceolate «plants» by his side are probably cedars, which may sometimes represent the prideful sinner, the haughty and godless heathen. «The evil cedar is a tall, sterile tree with deep roots: just so are evil men haughty and presumptuous» (Peter of Capua, in Pitra 1855: 357); «the antichrist is like a cedar, for, just as the cedar is higher than any of the other trees in Lebanon, so the antichrist will appear to be above all men and mightier than the secular powers in that time» (Distinctionum monasticarum I, cited in Pitra 1855:358-359).

Though we cannot prove this to be the correct interpretation of these sculptures, it is quite plausible, has adequate precedent in the commentaries cited, and fits each figure better than any alternative, omitting none of them, but rather integrating them all into a single symbolically coherent whole. If correct, it also gives the figures on the left of the portal Apocalyptic referents that were previously unclear. Though by no means unexpected, this imagery is unlike the Apocalyptic symbols that are most usual in the Cantabrian country churches that were the subject of our earlier study. We expect that our inter-

pretation will soon be confirmed or invalidated by the discovery of more and clearer examples of analogous figures in other Sorian churches as our study proceeds. And whether or not the specifics of our interpretation are confirmed, our analysis has quite clearly demonstrated that the placement and content of these symbolic decorations are by no means random, but instead obey strict principles of organization.

### *The triumphal arch*

Both capitals flanking the triumphal arch are decorated with figures of birds. Those on the apse's proper left do not have the diagnostics of any of the species that have special significance in early Christian symbolism (the figures look something like conventionalized pelicans that are often depicted on Romanesque capitals, but are not shown with young, or pecking themselves in the breast). They are best interpreted simply as birds in the generic sense. Saint Melito says that birds may be understood as symbols in many ways, but one of their meanings is the spiritual side or interior life of man. This is one of the meanings given to birds by St. Gregory and Bl. Rabanus Maurus, among others: «the bird expresses the mind; since the mind is raised to the heights» (Pitra 1855, Vol. 2: 470-471).

The interpretation that birds signify the spiritual side of the laity fits the Osonilla capital well. Some of them turn their heads away from the altar, hiding them behind their upraised wings, while others face the altar expectantly. The birds that face the apse are a figure of the faithful, vigilant and aware of the message of the Gospels. Birds with faces hidden are those laymen who, being either unconverted or lapsed Christians, turn away from the true Church and Christ's sacrifice.

This interpretation might seem overly ambitious and fanciful. That it is not is shown by the following facts. First, the privileged position of these capitals suggests that their symbolic content should be focal, not trivial. Second, these are the only two sculptures depicting birds in the church, and in a strictly patterned sequence like that at Osonilla, such analogous figures should have analogous meanings. Third, what we have said of the left-hand capital proves in fact to be consistent with the interpretation of its pair.

The right-hand capital shows two birds pecking grapes and two others pecking stalks that are probably wheat. Grapes and wheat are the two species that are transubstantiated to Christ's blood and body during the sacrifice of the Mass, and birds eating grapes and wheat are common symbols of the faithful souls partaking of the Eucharist. Since the focal point of the ceremony of the Mass is the Consecration, marking the transubstantiation that commemorates Christ's sacrifice, followed by the celebration of the Eucharist by the priest and congregation of the faithful, these symbols correspond fittingly to their position, flanking the focal area of the church where the Consecration takes place.

### *Concluding observations*

The symbols used at Osonilla seem quite appropriate for a newly reconquered territory, where nominally Christian rustics have previously lived under Moorish rule. Unfortunately, we still know too little in detail about twelfth century Sorian countrymen—the size of local populations rooted in the Sorian countryside, and the source and extent of repopulation from outside cannot yet be determined with accuracy—. Still, a few generalizations are possible. Christianity came relatively late to Northern Spain, and had only a few centuries to take root before the Moorish occupation. Isolated small populations of local rustics wherever found were characteristically more prone to heterodoxy than concentrated populations of urban centers - the very word «pagan» reflects that fact. Sorian Christian populations and their clerics additionally had to accommodate to non-Christians around them in order to survive centuries of Muslim domination. Under such circumstances, the orthodoxy of rural Christians may have been questionable in some degree, and a prominent graphic reminder that some still held their heads under their wings, refusing to attend to revelation, seems quite at home, and even eminently salutary, in a church established under such conditions.

In our opinion, the idea of a church struggling to survive while beset by great trials, combating external enemies, internal divisions, and lapses of faith (a not inaccurate characterization of its twelfth century state in Spain), is forcefully yet charmingly depicted in Osonilla's quaint figures. They are not frivolous, silly decorations, but legible metaphors that attract to instruct. The interpretations we have placed on them are not our idiosyncratic fantasies. Every major equivalence suggested here was commonplace in the commentaries of the church fathers that were the sources of symbolic inspiration for our sculptors. We are aware that some of those interpretations are open to discussion, but whatever may be the eventual outcome of that debate, there is no doubt whatever that the figures at Osonilla—animals, people, and mythical beasts—have an allegorical or metaphoric significance, and are more than just decorative frivolities, nor is there any doubt that these depictions were intentionally arranged according to a set of consistent and pervasive patterns, composed on the principles we have delineated: number, laterality, centrality and privilege or hierarchy. The meanings we propose for the symbols may change, if ones more consistent with those principles are proposed, but the structure of the symbols won't.

While the organization of these figures follows principles familiar to us from our study of Cantabrian churches, the specific symbols most commonly used in Soria—the themes depicted and the animals and plants represented in that region—seem at present to depart significantly from what we know in Cantabria. Figures based on the Apocalypse also seem to be rarer in the Sorian countryside than in Cantabria; if that is not the case, the Apocalyptic referents of the Sorian imagery are harder to discern than in the Cantabrian churches.

On the other hand, one kind of imagery we might have expected was not found: we thought that we might find some overt reflection of hostility to Islam in the decorations of churches built on the heels of the Reconquest, but such imagery is not in evidence. In fact, it seems to become prominent in Spain only after the final defeat of the Moors by the Catholic Kings.

All agree that Romanesque iconography differs from region to region. Nonetheless, much potential information about the causes and correlates of such differences has been missed by scholars who have been most active in the interpretation of Medieval art. They have taught us a great deal about peculiarities of iconography that betray the ultimate origins of artistic motives, distinguish the products of master sculptors and their workshops, show the influence of prominent churchmen, memorialize distinguished noblemen or events of great significance to the history of nations, reflect the cults of specific Saints, and delineate major routes of pilgrimage. Understandably, scholars have focussed their efforts on the masterpieces of Romanesque art in its most richly endowed monuments—the collegiate chapels, cathedrals, or wealthy monasteries—to the relative neglect of its simpler manifestations. From the perspective of the art historian, one line from Abbot Suger is more meaningful than all the rude sermons of Don Julio, the parish priest. Regional differences in the selection of imagery employed in humble country churches have been comparatively neglected.

Nonetheless, ideas that have a shattering impact on the scale of world empire must often be translated to simpler terms to be relevant to the life of Everyman. The heartland of Medieval Europe was the countryside, and it is in rural churches that we should search for the symbolism that countrypeople found most accessible. Despite the ravages of time, such documents are more abundant than one imagines. There were many more small, modestly decorated churches than cathedrals.

Such indications of regional difference as we have already found warrant a much more extensive study of the rural Romanesque. Much valuable information about the relationships of religious symbols to local surroundings, regional history, and the concerns of local countrymen and clerics, will result from a concentrated analysis of the Romanesque imagery in Sorian country churches, and from the incorporation of results into broader-scale comparisons. The work we report here is just the first step of a much longer journey. Though the church at Osonilla is small and its decorations modest, the quality of information they provide already hints at the symbolic richness to be expected as we proceed.



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