

La Città Palinsesto

The City as Palimpsest

**Tracce, sguardi e narrazioni
sulla complessità dei contesti urbani storici**

Tracks, views and narrations
on the complexity of historical urban contexts



Tomo primo
Memorie, storie, immagini
Memories, stories, images

a cura di
Francesca Capano e Massimo Visone

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Tomo I - *Memorie, storie, immagini*

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Dating reuse: the statue columns of the Last Judgment portal of Reims Cathedral

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Abstract

The Last Judgment portal of Reims Cathedral underwent a series of transformations from its inception ca. 1225. This essay presents evidence that the early 13th century statue columns along the right lateral wall were installed in their current location in the 16th century. This dating corresponds to a significant moment of change in the use of the north transept when a new grand organ above the central portals was installed ca. 1570 and suggests a continued engagement with the sculptures outside the portal.

Keywords

Cathedral of Reims, gothic sculpture, reuse.

Introduction

The monuments we often label as “medieval” are complex temporal objects, which have survived into the present moment because they have been valued by institutions or individuals throughout their lives [Trachtenberg 2010, 15; Feltman 2018, 1-6; Camerlenghi 2018, 18-21]. A premodern building with its resident imagery was seldom created in a single campaign. For this reason, we should consider such a building as an architectural palimpsest - that is, a composite object, consisting of multiple layers of intervention, including adaptive reuse, restoration, demolition, and new construction. These layers are not only material constructions - they are traces of human interaction that have the potential to illuminate the events of the past, if the historian can observe and sympathetically breathe life into their dust. A fracture in stone is not a mere crack; it is a sign of the stress of a specific moment expressed in material. It tells a story. In order to understand the life of a monument, material signs of change must be analyzed and coordinated with what can be known about the social and institutional history of that monument. While many layers remain concealed within the walls of the monuments, others are set within plain sight. This is the case with the portals of the north transept of Reims Cathedral (fig. 1), which were inserted between its buttresses and in front of the transept's terminal wall within 20 years of its initial construction ca. 1220 [Feltman 2016, 7-9]. Some of the sculptures of the portals were clearly designed for this location, including those of the central, Saints portal and most of the Last Judgment portal, but others were reused, especially those of the Virgin portal and portions of the tympanum and the statue columns of the Apostles in the Last Judgment portal [Kasarska 2008; Kasarska 2016; Feltman 2016, 123-124; Hinkle 1975]. Limestone analysis has confirmed that the statue columns of the Apostles are among the earliest gothic sculptures of the cathedral, but the date of their installation has never been determined [Decrock 2008, 99; Clark 2017, 344; Frisch 1960]. In this short essay, I examine the supports beneath the statue columns of the Last Judgment portal alongside post-medieval documents. These provide new insight into the extended development of the Last Judgment portal.

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1: Reims cathedral, north transept façade, photo by J. Feltman.

1. The statue columns of the Last Judgment portal

The literature on the six statue columns of the Apostles (fig. 2) has focused on questions of their original location and possible earlier plans for the west and north transept façades of Reims Cathedral [Branner 1961a; Branner 1961b; Hinkle 1975; Kurmann 1987, I, 163-185; Wu 2016]. Whatever they were, the plans were never realized, and the sculptures of the Apostles most likely resided in a sculpture depot until their installation in the Last Judgment portal. But when were they installed? The answer to this question requires attention to the archaeometry of the portal. An initial study by Iliana Kasarsaka notes that the statue columns on the left and right lateral walls have different supports: the statue columns on the left stand upon marmosets with which they are integral, and the statue columns on the right were cut just below the feet of the statues and fitted onto new rectangular plinths [Kasarska 2016, 88-90, 97]. Nancy Wu also has noted the 'cube-like plinths' beneath the figures on the right lateral wall [Wu 2016, 51]. As I have examined these sculptures in situ, I have observed additional peculiarities: although the statue columns on the left lateral wall are integral with the marmosets, the round bases of the columns to which they are attached rest on plain stone blocks and protrude rather inelegantly over the edge of these stones. The plain stones also bear chisel marks. This lack of finish contrasts with the supports of the Saints portal statue columns, which are continuous and uniformly decorated with sculpted foliage. It is clear that the statue columns of the left lateral wall were retrofitted to their location, but it is difficult to date their installation because the plain stones could have been made at any time.

The statue columns of the right lateral wall provide a different case. St. Paul, St. James the Greater, and St. John the Evangelist (left to right) are placed upon rectangular plinths, which appear to date to the 16th century.



2: Reims cathedral, north transept façade, Last Judgment portal, left and right lateral walls, photo by J. Feltman.

Additionally, the plinths have visible traces of paint, and, in the good lighting, titulae bearing the names of the saints are visible. A mason's wheel can also be seen on the north face of the plinth of St. John. As mentioned above, it is hypothesized that the statue columns were designed for a plan for the west façade that was never executed, and that they were later installed in their present location when the rest of the Last Judgment portal sculptures were made ca. 1225-1241. As Kasarska has shown, the construction history of this portal is complex. The sculptures in its tympanum and lintels date to ca. 1225 and some show signs that they were recut to fit their location. I have pointed to the re-cutting of the female figure in the Court of Heaven on the far-left side of the lintel as evidence. On the other hand, other sculptures, especially those in the archivolt, have been recognized as having been made for their present location because they conform to the unusual barrel-shaped vault of the portal [Hinkle 1975, 208-210]. The trumeau figure of Christ is among the latest sculptures of the portal, dated ca. 1240, based upon style. It has been presumed that all of sculptures of the Last Judgment portal, including, its statue columns were in place by 7 September 1241, the date given in the *Annales of Saint Nicaise* to mark the moment that the canons took possession of their 'chevesum', the area that encompasses the high altar in the crossing. However, the plinths below the statue columns suggest that they were installed at a post-medieval date. Visual and documentary evidence supports this inference.

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3: a. Reims Cathedral, plinth below statue column of St. James, photo by J. Feltman; b. Reims, Hôtel de la Cloche (i.e. Hôtel de La Salle), plinth from staircase, photo by J. Feltman; c. Plinth from design by J. Cellier, 1593.

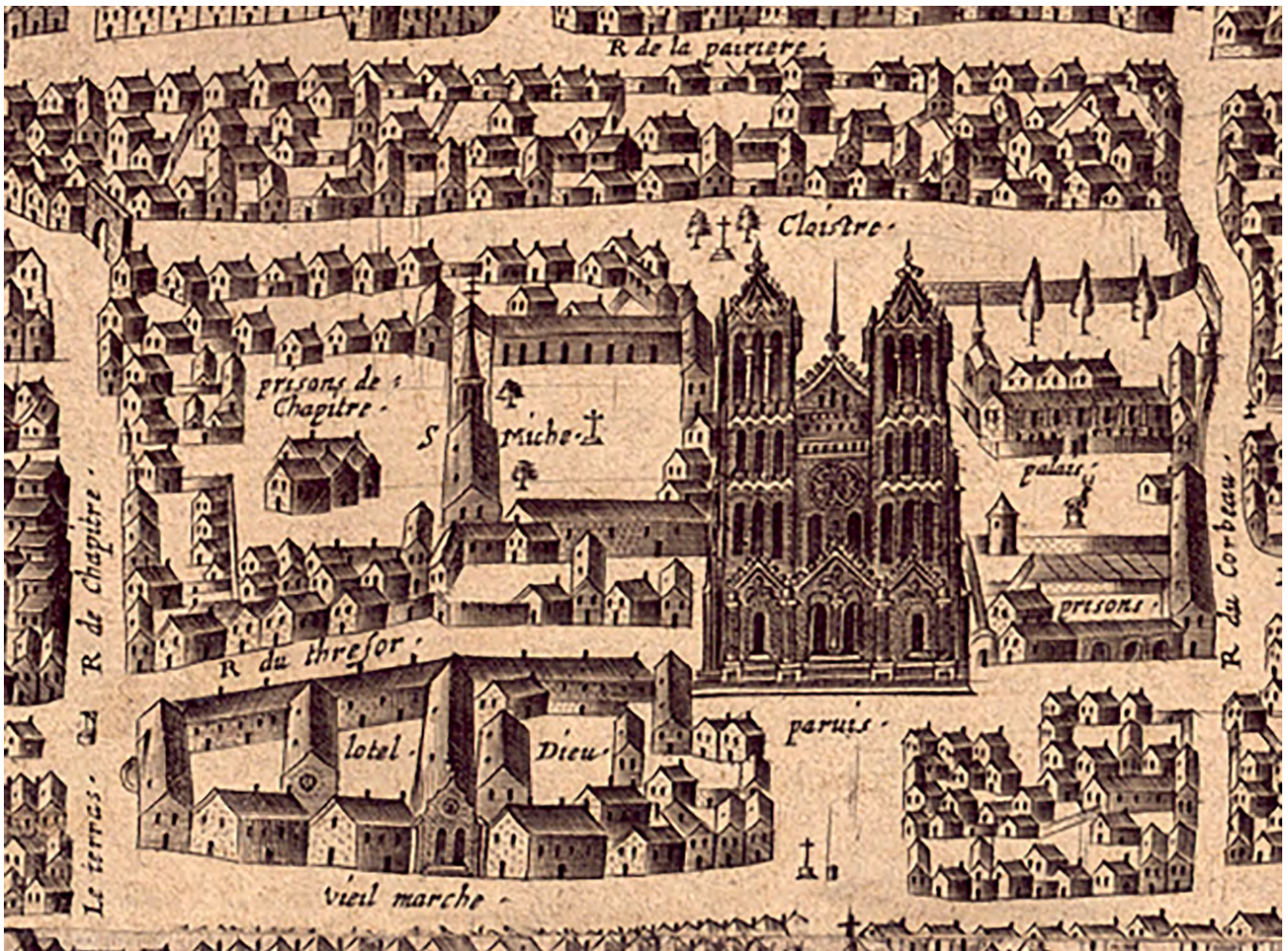
2. The late 16th to early 17th centuries

Although about 80% of the buildings in Reims were destroyed during World War I, some of its pre-modern architecture still stands. An example of a 16th century plinth can be found just to the north of the cathedral precinct on a staircase within the courtyard of the Hôtel de la Cloche (1545), known today as the Hôtel de La Salle. The plinth is comprised of a rectangle set upon a slightly larger square base, similar to that of the plinths of the left lateral wall of the Last Judgment portal (fig. 3a-b). However, because the molding profiles differ, the comparison does not suggest an architectural relationship between the cathedral and the Hôtel de la Cloche. It simply verifies that rectangular plinths of this general form were in use in Reims in the 16th century.

A 1593 drawing by Jacques Cellier (ca.1550-ca. 1620), from a book of 27 Dominical prayers set within fictive architectural frames, provides more specific visual evidence for a late-16th century date for the plinths beneath the statue columns (fig. 3c)¹. The design is similar, not only in form, but also in its details. The inset rectangle of the plinth is outlined in a darker color and the fill is of another color. This is strikingly similar to the polychromed plinth beneath the figure of St. James. Although the evidence provided by the drawing is circumstantial, it can be connected to the cathedral through the person of Jacques Cellier. Cellier is best known as the draftsman of the plan of the city of Reims (fig. 4)². He also held important roles at the cathedral as its organist and as designer of numerous works for the cathedral's renovation at the end of the 16th century [Jadart 1900]. Among his many designs are a drawing for a new jubé, the famous octagonal plan of the labyrinth containing portraits of

¹ Paris, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, *Mellange, curiosités et petites inventions de Jacques Cellier*, 1593. MS 1111, f. 21r.

² Reims, Bibliothèque municipale, *Plan de Reims*, J. Cellier, 1618, TGF II 37.



4: Cathedral quarter from the plan of the City of Reims by J. Cellier, 1618.

the four master masons of Reims, and a new plan for the cathedral's great organ, which was installed on the interior of the north transept façade, above the doorway of the central, Saints portal from 1570-1573³. Publications on the great organ focus on the successive restorations of the instrument, but do not consider its impact on the architectural fabric of the cathedral [Duforcq 1962; Hermant 2017, 401]. I suspect that alterations made during the time of Cellier included the addition of the figures of the Apostles on the right lateral wall of the Last Judgment portal and, possibly, those of the left lateral wall as a way to further embellish this doorway for the canons. According to the floorplan of the cathedral by Cellier, the Last Judgment portal was used at this time as the 'porte pour aller au cloister des chanoines'.⁴ Somewhat confusingly, the Saints portal is labeled as the 'porte du cloister', but these two labels must be read in context with the city plan by Cellier. The 'porte du cloister' refers to what remained of the medieval cloister immediately north of the cathedral. This cloister is believed to be based upon and, perhaps, included portions of the Carolingian cloister. However, some caution must be taken when discussing this cloister because it seems to have been altered several times, and

³ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Jacques Cellier, end of the 16th cen. MS fr. 9152, f. 68r-81r.

⁴ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, *Recherches de plusieurs singularités... portraictes et écrites par Jacques Cellier*, end of 16th cen. MS fr. 9152, f. 68r.

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we now know that its northern walk, had to be entirely demolished so that the 13th century north transept arm could be built over its foundations [Berry 2016, 22-26; Wu 2016, 46-50; Demouy 1998; Demouy 2005]. At the time of Cellier, the Last Judgment portal provided the canons with access to another cloistered area, the large enclosed space that encompassed the entire eastern end of the cathedral, which also belonged to the chapter. This area is clearly labeled on Cellier's city plan. Unfortunately, neither Cellier's plan of the cathedral nor his city plan shows exactly how the north transept façade communicated with these cloistered spaces, nor does either provide an exterior view of the portals. The earliest view of the statue columns in situ comes from the early 18th century.

3.The early 18th century

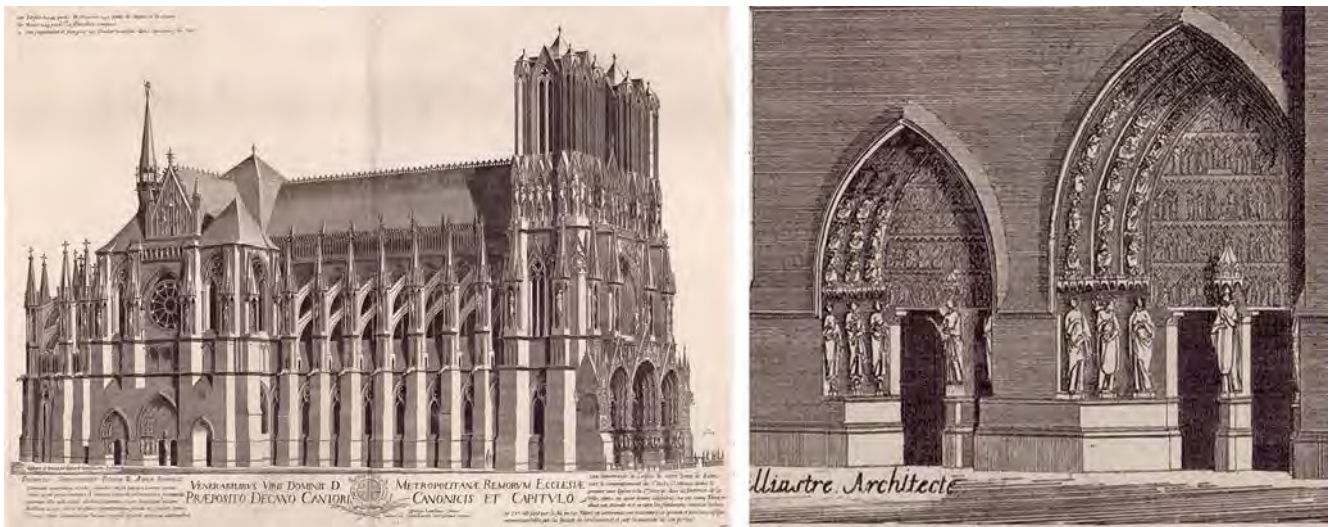
Under Canon Godinot (1661-1749), restorations to the cathedral were made by the architect Liénard Gentillastre [Carrière 2011, 12-15]. A 1713 engraving (fig. 5a-b) by Gentillastre presents an unencumbered view of the cathedral from the north, and may be the earliest image to show this vantage⁵. Similar views can be found in engravings dated 1750 and generally to the 18th century⁶. Unlike the depiction on Cellier's plan, which represents only the west façade, the Gentillastre engraving captures the entire body of the cathedral, enabling a view of the sculpted portals of the west and north transept façades within a single image. The text at the bottom of the engraving seems to indicate why. It touts the superiority of the Gothic era cathedral over the earlier cathedrals on this site, describing it as 'bigger and more magnificent, commendable for the beauty of its design and by the majesty of its portal[s]'. Anyone who has photographed the Cathedral of Reims knows that it is impossible to capture the entire north side of the building in a single image because of the proximity of the cathedral to existing buildings. So, the question must be asked whether or not the engraving contains some amount of capriccio? After all, where are the claustral buildings along the transept façade that are pictured in Cellier's drawing? As Nancy Wu has recounted, Gilbert's descriptions of the cathedral reported that the cloister immediately to the north of the façade obstructed a view of its portals until the 1790s, when it was entirely destroyed [Wu 2016, 42-43]. Apparently, some portion of the cloister was in place until then. On the other hand, there are aspects of Gentillastre's engraving that correspond to precise details that could only have been visible to him if they were not obstructed by a claustral building, especially the unique opening above the Virgin portal. It is possible that the buildings along the north flank, as visible in the Cellier plan, had been demolished by 1713, but that the western, northern, and eastern cloister walk and other claustral buildings not attached to the north transept were in place. This would verify Gilbert's description, but add more nuance to our understanding of what was actually destroyed after 1790. Regardless of how this evidence is interpreted it must be admitted that Gentillastre's engraving suggests that the desire to view the north transept as an integral three-portal façade dates to at least 1713, about 80 years earlier than previously thought. The engraving also suggests that the cloister's connection to the north transept, as represented in Legendre's city plan of 1765, was the result of new construction at that time, not a representation of its medieval state.⁷

Of significance to the questions of the statue columns of the Apostles, the engraving provides limited, but useful evidence that they were in place by 1713 (fig. 5a). All of the statue columns of the left lateral wall are visible and their supports (columns placed atop plain stones)

⁵ Reims, Bibliothèque municipale, *Cathedrale de Reims, façade septentrionale*, L. Gentrillastre, 1713, GF 26.

⁶ Reims, Bibliothèque municipale, Fonds iconographique, 51-422 and 51-423.

⁷ Reims, Bibliothèque municipale, *Plan générale de Reims*, J. Legendre. TGF II 43.



5: a. Northern view of the Cathedral of Reims, L. Gentillastre, 1713.; b. Detail of a.

correspond to their present state. Although it is impossible to see the plinths of the statue columns on the right lateral wall of the portal, the outermost statue column is visible, providing a good indication that the statues of the right lateral wall were also in place. Although the right lateral wall statues were most likely installed in the late 16th century, the engraving establishes 1713 as a *terminus ante quem* for their installation.

Conclusion

The case of the Last Judgment portal sculptures and the ‘architectural palimpsest’ of the north transept of Reims Cathedral shows the complexity of pre-modern architectural sculpture. It is a portal that contains retro-fitted early-13th-century sculptures alongside site-specific sculptures, which were made ca. 1225-1241. While the early-13th-century statue columns of the Apostles of the right lateral wall seem to have resided elsewhere for centuries before being installed, likely a decade or so after 1570, when Cellier was completing designs for the cathedral’s renovations.

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