
BEYOND GRAPHICAL BOUNDARIES

Arabic Writing and a Poem to the Virgin Mary inscribed on the Tympanum of Saint-Pierre-le-Puellier at Bourges

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Beyond Graphical Boundaries

The twelfth-century tympanum¹ of Saint-Pierre-le-Puellier at Bourges is well known by art historians because it shows one of the earliest representations in Western art of the *transitus Mariae*, the death and the burial of the Virgin Mary (fig. 1). Yet the tympanum is less known for the incised Arabic letters that accompany the sculpted images. This may be due to another contemporary sculpture from Bourges, now in the Beaux-Arts Museum at Lyon², which steals the show because of its many motifs: an archivolt with a juggler framed by oriental script. Dating to the second half of the twelfth century, the tympanum, now in the Berry Museum at Bourges, is the only vestige of Saint-Pierre-le-Puellier church. It is fragmentary and the inscription is incomplete. Because archeological evidence is scant, we must also consider a small number of textual sources about this building and its community.³ A transcription of this verse inscription is found in the recent edition of the 26th volume of the *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale*, which is devoted to the epigraphic documentation of the department of Cher, and presents us with the opportunity to consider the graphic composition of this tympanum.⁴

¹ I have the pleasure to thank Nicole Cottart, Vincent Debais, Benoît Grévin and Daniel Russo for their stimulating suggestions and Kristine Tanton for her help with the English translation.

² In the mid-nineteenth century, this sculpture was located in the gable of a house (maison Dumoutet) located in front of the cathedral of Bourges. See R. Jullian, *Catalogue du Musée de Lyon, III. La sculpture du Moyen Âge et de la Renaissance*, Lyon 1945, p. 25-28, fig. III; Adrien de Longpérier, *De l'emploi des caractères arabes dans l'ornementation chez les peuples Chrétiens de l'Occident*, in: *Revue Archéologique* 2 (1845-1846), p. 701-702.

³ The monastery was destroyed in 1793. It was located in the center of the city of Bourges (at the northwest corner of Saint-Peter Place). Originally a convent for women in the sixth century, it was let to regular canons from 1012 onwards, and then to secular canons. See M. Deshoulières, *Le tympan de Saint-Pierre-le-Puellier*, in: *Mémoires de la Société des antiquaires du Centre* 38 (1917-1918), p. 38-46; Jacques Péricard, *Les communautés canoniales en Berry. L'exemple des chapitres Saint-Ursin et Saint-Outrille (XI^e-XVIII^e siècle)*, in: *Collégiales et chanoines dans le centre de la France du Moyen Âge à la Révolution*, ed. Anne Massoni, Limoges 2010, p. 77.

⁴ *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale (CIFM)* 26 (2017), n° 97, p. 122-125. It is now in the room of the museum dedicated to the Middle Ages (inventory number 1950.1.157). Its dimensions are: 2,70 m length and 1,35 m height. It is made up of six fragments and was restored during the 1990's.

The extraordinarily widespread and consistent use of Arabic lettering on Christian manuscripts, objects and monuments produced in the Latin West has long occupied the attention of historians and art historians. One of the earliest articles documenting this interest is that of Adrien de Longpérier in 1845.⁵ A century's worth of studies allowed Kurt Erdmann to produce a catalogue of Arabic signs employed as ornament in Western art in 1953. This catalogue, organized by century, country (France, Germany, England, Italy), technique and material (architecture, wall paintings, manuscripts, stained glass windows, metal, wood and ivory carved, easel painting) is still considered the most complete (although not exhaustive) study.⁶ The tympanum from Berry, not included in Erdmann's catalogue, must be added to other instances of explicit reference to Arabic script found in French Romanesque architectural decoration: the capital in the cloister at the abbey of Moissac, an angel at Conques⁷ (fig. 2), the lintel of Saint-Pierre-de-Rhèdes at Lamalou-les-Bains⁸, the doors of Le Puy cathedral⁹ (fig. 3 and 4), the church doorway at Lavoûte Chilhac (fig. 5), etc. These inscriptions, generally carved in relief in stone or in wood, are found in the southern half of France, whereas Bourges is in the center.

Scholarship about the appearance of Arabic writing in the West typically centers on two chief concerns. On one hand, scholars have considered the numerous vectors of transmission and circulation by artists and/or artefacts brought to Europe through indirect ways (e.g., as relic containers, royal presents, or booty from the Crusade) or directly (e.g., as eastern luxury goods such as textiles and ivory, Arabic coins), which provided models for western artists, for example, at the beginning of the eleventh century, Adhémar of Chabannes.¹⁰ On the other hand, scholars have tried to understand why this script and these objects were integrated into Christian culture far from the Mediterranean areas of major interaction. Avinoam Shalem has shown that objects with Arabic script made their way into church treasuries, even though these objects evoked Islam.¹¹

Ornament is a recurring term used to explain the presence of this script, not because of the foreign quality of this type of writing, but by its use, particularly as pseudo-writing which by its intrinsic virtue has no explicit meaning, and its status in Arabic culture. Renewed interest in the study of ornament in the Middle Ages¹², which

⁵ Longpérier, *De l'emploi* (see note 2), p. 696-706. See the complete bibliography given by Kurt Erdmann until his article in 1953: *Arabische Schriftzeichen als Ornamente in der abendländischen Kunst des Mittelalters*, in: *Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz. Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse* 9 (1953), p. 467-468.

⁶ Erdmann, *Arabische Schriftzeichen* (see note 4), p. 467-513.

⁷ CIFM 9, Aveyron 10, p. 17-25.

⁸ CIFM 18, Haute-Loire 20, p. 105-106.

⁹ CIFM 18, Haute-Loire 23, p. 111-113.

¹⁰ Leiden University Library, manuscript Voss Latin 8 15, fol. 210v^o. Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, *Les dessins d'Adémar de Chabannes*, in: *Bulletin archéologique du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques. Nouvelle série* 3 (1967), p. 163-225.

¹¹ Avinoam Shalem, *Islam Christianized. Islamic Portable Objects in the Medieval Church Treasuries of the Latin West* (*Ars faciendi* 7), Frankfurt a. M./New York 1998.

¹² A synthesis on this subject, with bibliographical references, is proposed by Jean-Claude Bonne, *Ornementation et représentation*, in: Jérôme Baschet/Pierre-Olivier Dittmar, *Les images dans l'Occident*