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## THE CORBEL SERIES OF SAINT MAURICE CATHEDRAL IN VIENNE: ROMAN AND MEDIÉVAL SOURCES

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In the ancient city of Vienne on the Rhône river, Roman and Gallo-Roman vestiges and monuments are still situated today close to medieval churches and to the Romanesque-Gothic Cathedral of St. Maurice.<sup>1</sup> Some of the ancient sites have survived only in fragmentary form but others, such as the Temple of Augustus and Livia or the Roman Pyramid, have retained their original form almost intact, if not the original environmental context.<sup>2</sup>

The Gallo-Roman city that had been transformed into a medieval Christian city could still be observed in the 19th century, when the church that was built into the Temple of Augustus and Livia still existed, before the complex was restored and the church destroyed.<sup>3</sup> Roman and Gallo-Roman urban architecture, sculpture, and mosaic pavements were probably ubiquitous in the Middle Ages. Moreover, diverse phases of their style could have served at the time as models for the medieval artists.

The antiquities of Vienne have been studied and published since the 16th century, by local erudites.<sup>4</sup> The study of the city's medieval monuments, their art and architecture, however,



Fig. 1: St. Maurice Cathedral, Vienne, general view of west wall.



Fig. 2: A strong man in the lunette.

began only later, and both early and modern research has been dedicated to Romanesque architecture and sculpture, mainly of the Church of St. André-le-Bas and St. Maurice Cathedral,<sup>5</sup> and to the Gothic portals of the Cathedral.

The impact of Roman and Gallo-Roman art on these sculptures has traditionally been discussed, as has the affinity between the workshops of the two foci of St. André-le-Bas and St. Maurice.

The sculptural programs of these two edifices consist in a large series of historiated and foliated capitals installed on the wall pillars of the former, and the combined pillars dividing the central nave from the aisles of the latter. Various scholars have convincingly demonstrated the similarity of both the themes and the subjects of groups of capitals in the two churches.<sup>6</sup>

This article examines the marginal sculpted corbel series on the north wall of St. Maurice Cathedral, part of the now destroyed cathedral cloister built adjacent to it. Although the series



Fig. 3: Left: a male head showing upper row of teeth. Right: a male head with round horns; a bowl in the lunette.



Fig. 4: Left: a triangular animal head. Right: a male head, hair growing in the corners; strong man in the lunette.



Fig. 5: Left: a monster head. Right: a male head with two ribbon like elements emerging from the mouth.

has been mentioned and dated to the last quarter of the 12th century, the corbels have not been published or described individually, nor have their sources or meanings been investigated.<sup>7</sup> The same holds true for the corbels situated on the 12<sup>th</sup>-century bell-tower of the church of Saint-André-Le-Bas and on the southern wall of the same church. A study of the Saint Maurice series in comparison with these two latter series will help to determine whether the St. Maurice and the St. André corbel sculpture series demonstrate a similar affinity between themselves as do those of the two churches capital programs.

The introduction and description of the corbel series of the northern outer wall of St. Maurice Cathedral, and the study of their sources, is thus presented within the context of Romanesque marginal sculpture in Vienne - constituting the series on the bell-tower and the southern wall of St. André church.

#### The marginal system on the northern outer wall of Saint Maurice Cathedral

The northern wall of Saint Maurice Cathedral once formed part of the canon's cloister, with its corbel series being part of the visual panorama.



Fig. 6: A bearded male head.

The series constitutes a sequence of small columns of various and greatly differing forms, bearing capitals on which small blind arches are elevated, creating little lunettes under each one (Fig. 1). Some of the arches are decorated with bead ornament, while the lunettes contain images of objects (e.g. a vase) and carved flowers in various forms (Figs. 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12). The corbels are installed between the capitals and arches supporting an uncarved cornice; the carved heads are mostly monstrous, many of them with open mouth. There are no female images in this series. The heads with widely opened mouths reveal their enormous teeth or protruding tongues, or the mouths hold a scroll emerging from either side (Figs. 3-5).

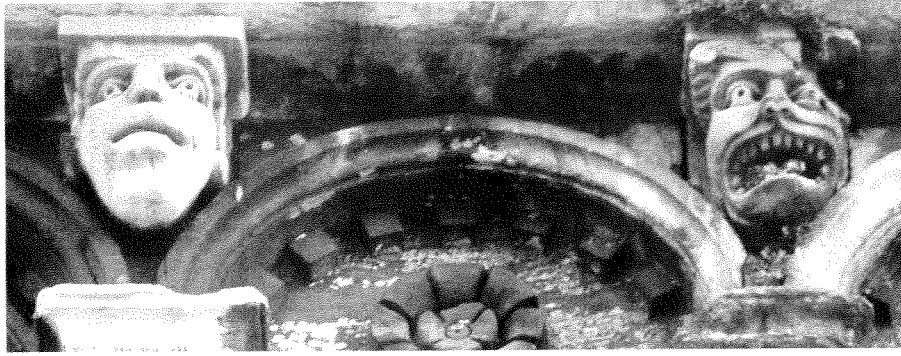


Fig. 7: Left: a Negroid head with heavy lips and fleshy cheeks, huge eyebrows, hair gathered at either side of the head. Right: a monstrous head with wide-open mouth.

The eyes too protrude to match the extreme expression of the mouths. Most of these heads are characteristically neither human nor monstrous but combine features of both, making them grotesque images (Figs. 6-8). Several animal heads, mainly of deer, appear in between the male heads.

Two images in the lunettes created by the little arches do not fit the rest of the pattern. These are figures of male strongmen, depicted with heavy heads, enormous lips and open eyes; only their shoulders and hands held to either side of the head are shown (Figs. 2, 4). Three little zigzag columns appear under them. The other columns are fluted and all of them bear capitals.

The series seems to be holding a simultaneous dialogue with two different, distinct pictorial traditions: 1. Roman and Gallo-Roman; 2. Medieval (mainly 12th century).

### The impact of Roman and Gallo-Roman art on Romanesque sculpture

The relationship of 12<sup>th</sup>-century Romanesque sculpture to Roman and Gallo-Roman art has been the subject of research and investigation by leading scholars. In *Les influences antiques*, Jean Adhémar showed the systematic use of classical themes and subjects in various medieval periods,<sup>8</sup> arguing that such use demonstrated a conscious dependence upon classical subjects and images by 12<sup>th</sup>-century patrons. Willibald Sauerländer, in contrast, sees the borrowing of antique themes and subjects or architectural elements as the reflection of a spontaneous relationship of the artists to the surviving antique traditions, rather than resulting from theoretical perceptions of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century renaissance.<sup>9</sup>

Victor Lassale too,<sup>10</sup> in his *L'influence antique dans l'art Romane Provençale*, demonstrated the systematic borrowing and usage of antique elements in 12<sup>th</sup>-century Provençal architecture and sculpture.



Fig. 8: A huge head – or rather mask – situated on a pilaster separating groups of arches.

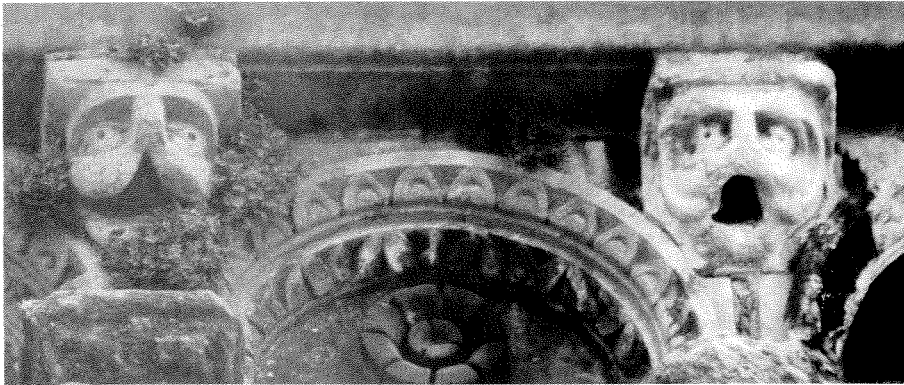


Fig. 9: Left: a monstrous head. Right: a human head.

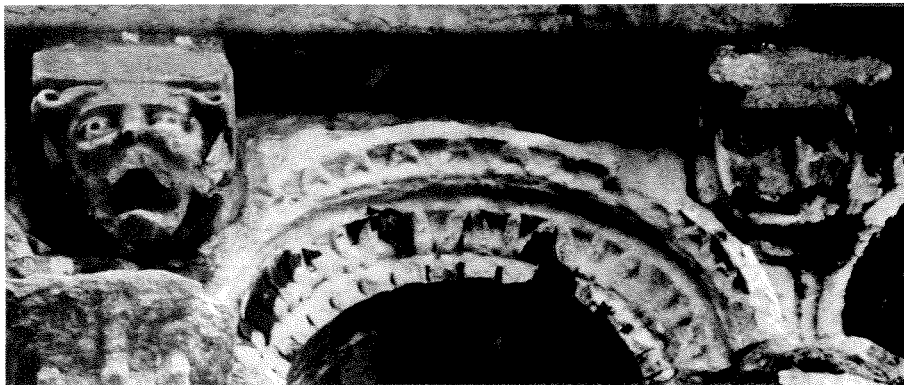


Fig. 10: Left: a head with wide-open mouth, stylized hair. Right: a smiling male head.

Furthermore, when discussing Provençal 12<sup>th</sup>-century sculpture, leading scholars such as Allan Borg,<sup>11</sup> and C.F. O'Meara,<sup>12</sup> although referring to the "antique form" used in these sculptures, have not asked whether the relationship to classical art was direct or indirect, nor in what aspects the images underwent change from Antique to Medieval. The major discussion of such works has been dedicated to the interrelationships of the workshops of the major sculptural projects such as those of St. Trophime in Arles, St. Gilles du Gard, and Ste. Marie de la Mer.<sup>13</sup> The central question of how each of these workshops related individually to the antique sources has not been raised,<sup>14</sup> with the exception of René Crozet, who contributed a major argument in his discussion of the 'survival' of the classical models and art works in the Middle Ages and of the spontaneous aspect of borrowing or using this art.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, I would argue that local classical art was crucial in the formation of Romanesque art in various centers in France as well as in Vienne. Certain antique subjects and images became stylized and were integrated within Christological cycles and those depicting an iconography of salvation. Others were demonized and were used to depict images of sin and punishment in cycles of capitals as well as in series of corbels, which in many cases present the material and sinful world.

The capitals of St. André-le-Bas and the capitals of St. Maurice Cathedral have been studied to date from two major aspects. 1. The relationship between the two workshops and their mutual influence; 2. The “classical influence”. A style that developed under this influence has been regarded as characteristic to the Romanesque sculpture in Vienne, located between Burgundy and Provence. According to various scholars, a relationship to the two schools of sculpture, in Provence on the one hand and in Burgundy on the other, was indigenous to Romanesque art in Vienne.

I would like to argue that Romanesque sculpture in Vienne also carried out a dialogue with local classical art, which had a very strong presence in the city, in a way seldom observed in other regions in France.

In earlier studies I have argued that the subjects and images of the corbel series reflect the intentions both of the patrons and of the artists.<sup>16</sup> While the donors saw these figures as representing punished sinners, the artists may well have seen in them protagonists of their own lay culture and concepts. I have also shown that each series has its own major subjects, such as women, monsters, or jongleurs, which constitute the prominent theme but are accompanied by secondary images.<sup>17</sup>

I believe that the series of corbels on the north wall of the Cathedral of St. Maurice in Vienne presents a consistent relationship to specific images of Roman visual arts, but one that demonizes it. While studying corbels in 12<sup>th</sup>-century Romanesque sculpture in other regions of France, I was able to observe a similar process of relating to motifs of the classical repertoire. In certain series it is easy to identify a Gallo-Roman repertoire, but these subjects often appear sporadically next to other images Romanesque in origin. One example is the problematic “three-face” image in the series of Saint Pierre in Moissac. Even if the “three-face” image was originally that of a Gallo-Roman deity, its role and meaning in the corbel series remain unclear.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, I believe that the corbel forms of the Saint Maurice Cathedral in Vienne could have been inspired by a large specific group of images of Roman theater masks, still extant today.



Fig. 11: A male head with wide-open mouth and emerging branches.



Fig. 12: Open flower in the lunette.



Fig. 13: Left: vegetal capital. Right: a male head with closed eyes.

Numerous sculptured masks as well as mosaic pavements depicting masks have been found in the city of Vienne. Of these,<sup>19</sup> I particularly note a mosaic pavement in the city's Musée Lapidaire located in the church of Saint Pierre.<sup>20</sup> The mosaic depicts ten theater masks spread across the entire pavement, divided by a network of octagonal frames with four square frames between them. All ten masks differ from each other and create in themselves a large repertory of forms of comic and tragic masks (Figs. 15-18). Another pavement found in Vienne also depicts theatrical comic and tragic masks, as well as athletes.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to the mask images in the mosaic pavements, many of the sculpted masks, however, are depicted with a slightly open mouth and unfocused gaze. These masks too, form in themselves a large repertory of forms (Figs. 19, 20).<sup>22</sup>

When the Roman masks are compared to the medieval corbels there is one major difference between the two groups: the Roman masks are depicted in mosaic pavements as distinct objects. The sculpted masks, however, can be regarded also as multi-layered images, combining the characteristics of an object with being a symbolic sculpture, an impression that emerges from their large dimensions. These Romanesque corbels represent a combination of simultaneously human and monstrous beings.



Fig. 14: A laughing male head, donkey ears, long beard.

Two striking similarities can also be observed in the two groups: a large open mouth, showing or not showing teeth, and huge eyes. The unchanging form of the mouth of the Roman masks however is prominent. It is constructed as a deep cave, with its lips serving as the border or rim. It is thus an instrument of emotional expression, while at the same





Fig. 15: Vienne, Musée Lapidaire. Mosaic floor depicting theater masks.



Fig. 16: A detail of Fig. 15.

time serving for the human mouth behind it to express its voice. This form turns the mask into an object with its own specific identity.

The Romanesque corbels, in contrast, have been demonized through schematization of the head and the avoidance of any specific characteristics of age, sex or mood typical of theater masks. They have become grotesque blends of man and demon. Their mouths, in contrast to the theater masks, often showing huge teeth, protruding tongue or emerging vegetation, express specific emotions such as dismay, anger or laughter. Hence, the Roman mask, which retained a repertory of images of male and female, different ages, tragic and comic characters, became in Romanesque sculpture a grotesque frightening form.

Two prominent images installed in the extreme eastern lunettes of the corbel series deserve



Fig. 17: A detail of Fig. 15.



Fig. 18: A detail of Fig. 15.

specific attention (Figs. 2, 4). These are of the two chain-breakers (strongmen), their heavy, coarse-featured faces resting on their hands. The powerful limbs of the figures, the swollen facial features and the hairstyles can be associated on the one hand with the images of wrestlers known from Roman art of the 3rd century. In a mosaic pavement from Aquilea, for example, these figures demonstrate heavy, strong heads and prominent hairstyles, with the long hair gathered up on top of the head.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the Vienne strongmen also resemble Romanesque figures such as the male chain-breaker holding a piece of iron chain in each hand, depicted on a sculpted capital in the Church of Nouaille in Berry. Moreover, the miniature columns that were designed in zigzag form and accompany these figures in Vienne seem again to be Roman in origin.



Fig. 19: Vienne, Musée Lapidaire, Roman sculpted mask.



Fig. 20: Vienne, Musée Lapidaire, Roman sculpted mask.

The theater and its actors (as well as the masks) were all defined by the Church fathers and by writers in the Middle Ages as diabolic creatures that were beyond redemption - unless they abandoned their most horrible and sinful occupation.<sup>24</sup> In the context of marginal sculpture these images do indeed seem to have served as images of sin and seduction.

The specific relationship of this corbel series on the northern wall of St. Maurice Cathedral to Gallo-Roman art becomes even clearer when the series is compared to two additional series in the city of Vienne: the corbels situated on the tower of St. André-le-Bas (Fig. 21), each installed under a miniature arch,<sup>25</sup> and the corbels forming part of the corniche on the southern wall of St. André-le-Bas.<sup>26</sup> The former are in the shape of monstrous heads, most of them devouring

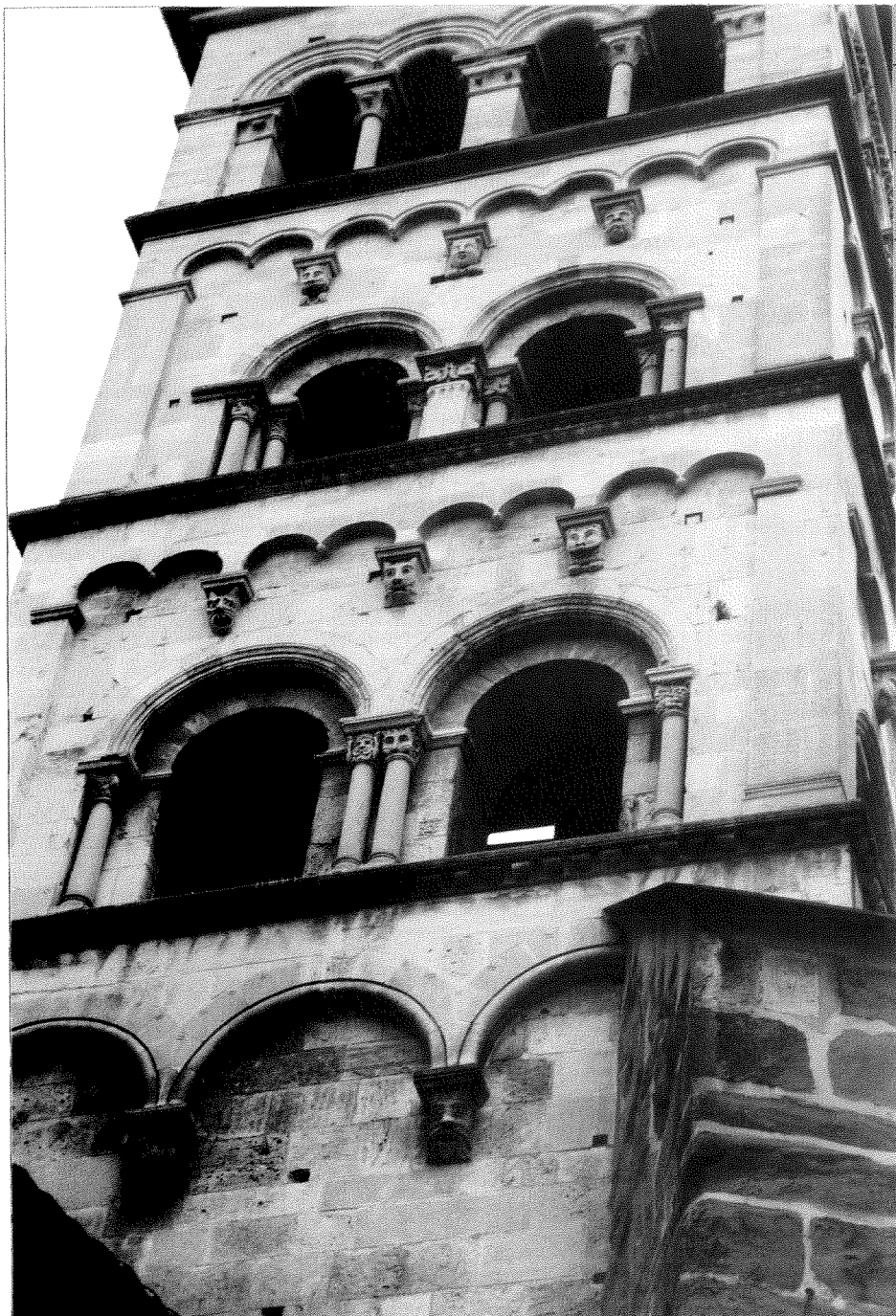


Fig. 21: St. André-le-Bas, Vienne. Mask corbels on the southern tower.



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24

Figs. 22–24: Masks from the southern tower  
(Musée de St. André-le-Bas).

human body parts such as upside-down heads, large hands, legs or a single leg emerging from the monstrous mouth (Figs. 22–24). These corbel heads were conceived much later than the heads on the Cathedral northern wall and their depiction as devouring heads may indicate the notions of Judgment and Hell. Iconographically, these can be compared with similar heads in Saintonge and Poitou that are depicted devouring human bodies, as for example in the corbel series of St. Pierre in Aulnay and others.<sup>27</sup> However, no other themes are featured in that series, other than

the monstrous heads and some human heads on the accompanying capitals. The corbels of the tower of St. André-le-Bas thus show no affinity to those of St. Maurice Cathedral in form or context.

The cornice with corbels on the southern wall of St. André-le-Bas (Figs. 25, 26) has been mentioned and described several times, and associated with similar forms in the Churches of St. Martin d' Ainay and St. Paul in Lyon.<sup>28</sup> The stylistic qualities of this cornice, however, even if not yet studied in detail, have been noted as reflecting Antique models and perceptions. The cornice demonstrates a very close affinity indeed with classical corniches, as do its corbels, consisting of human heads, objects and flowers. The Roman forms here have not been demonized, but retain



Fig. 25



Fig. 26

Figs. 25–26: St. André-le-Bas, Vienne. Corbels on the southern wall.

their classical balance and smoothness of stone. Together with these forms, two female busts situated on either face of the southern flying buttresses should, I believe, also be considered. Are they Medieval or late Roman? In any case, unlike the corbels of Saint Maurice Cathedral the Classical forms have not been demonized here and are not associated with the theater.

Thus the relationship between the three discussed corbel series does not show such strong links as those existing between the two workshops that produced the capitals for St. Maurice Cathedral and the Abbey of St. André-le-Bas. It appears, therefore, that three different conceptions, with different relationships to the Classical world, are reflected in these three marginal corbel series.

### Appendix:

#### Catalogue of Corbels

##### Northern wall, St. Maurice Cathedral (reading from east to west)

1. General view (Fig. 1).
- 1a. Blowing the horn.

2. Broken.
3. Male head. Mouth showing upper row of teeth (Fig. 3).
4. Male head with round horns. Slightly open mouth. Quadripartite beard.
5. A bird's head?
6. Male head. Huge eyes, open mouth, sticking out the tongue.
7. A triangular animal head (Fig. 4).
8. A square male head with hair growing from the corners (Fig. 4).
9. A monster with wide open mouth. Upper part in the form of a triangle and a row of teeth underlining the form. Mask-like (Fig. 5).
10. A male head with wide-open round mouth with two branches emerging from it.
11. A male head with deep-set eyes. Open small mouth with branches emerging from it (Fig. 6).
12. A negroid head with very heavy lips and fleshy cheeks, huge eyebrows, hair gathered to either side of the head (Fig. 7).
13. A monstrous head with wide-open mouth revealing upper and lower rows of teeth (Fig. 7).
14. A huge head – or rather mask – situated on a pilaster separating the groups of arches. Mouth wide-open with only two upper teeth, eyes deeply carved as shadowed holes, hair in the form of horns (Fig. 8).
15. Monstrous head - variation on no. 9 – but toothless (Fig. 9).
16. Close variation of no. 10 (Fig. 9).
17. Head with wide open mouth, hair stylized into two waves at its corners (Fig. 10).
18. A smiling male head (Fig. 10).
19. A male head with wide-open mouth and emerging branches (Fig. 11).
20. Corbel with geometric pattern.
21. Uncarved, broken?
22. A very expressive male head with fierce look and mouth open, letting the branches emerge.
23. An animal head, pig?
24. A variation on the negroid head with heavy lips and direct staring eyes.
25. An animal head, a gazelle ?
26. A male head with wide-open mouth.
27. Broken.
28. Pilaster + Classical capital.
29. A male head with protruding eyes, wide nose, huge mouth showing the teeth and stylized hairdo.
30. A tripartite bearded head with wide nose and huge teeth.
31. Huge head with gaping mouth as if screaming.
32. As no. 31.
33. Animal head with long tongue.
34. Broken.
35. Geometrical ornament (chess pattern).
36. As no. 32.
37. A vegetal capital (Fig. 13).
38. A male head with closed eyes, huge moustache and hair emerging from the mouth.
39. A capital.
40. Male head with open mouth.
41. Ornament (chess pattern).
42. Broken.
43. Vegetal.
44. Male with open mouth.

45. Animal.
46. Broken.
47. Broken.
48. Male head.
49. Not clear.
50. Not clear.
51. A laughing male head with donkey's ears and long beard (Fig. 14).
52. A bearded male head.
53. A male head in three-quarter pose, sticking out its tongue.
54. An animal head.
55. A male head sticking out its tongue.
56. A small bald male head.
57. Pilaster - a bald male head with an open mouth.
58. A bearded male head.
59. A male head.

### Lunettes

#### East to west

1. The chain-breaker I (compare Neuilly-en-Donjon) (Fig. 2).
2. Open flower.
3. Goblet (Fig. 3).
4. Plate (Fig. 3).
5. Flowers in a circle.

#### Two windows

6. Chain-breaker II (Fig. 4).
7. Flowers (Figs. 5-12).
8. Flowers.

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