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The Margins of Society in Marginal Romanesque Sculpture

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Abstract

In Romanesque architectural sculpture of twelfth-century France numerous components may be termed marginal. These include figural corbels installed either in series or individually, inside or outside churches, bell towers and the like. Marginal sculpture of this kind has not yet been investigated as a meaningful category.

The style and content of marginal and official sculptural programs demonstrate two completely different concepts. Official sculptural schemes employ a compositional model that is hierarchical, and symmetrically oppositional—based on contrasting parallels such as high and low, good and evil, light and dark. Their contexts impart to the individual images a specific meaning that can be read by the observer. On the other hand, marginal sculptures introduce an "antimodel." Their compositions are neither symmetrical nor hierarchical, and the oppositional schemes of official art are absent. Moreover, in marginal sculpture the stage is entirely given over to the appearance of women, men and other creatures representing the lower orders.

The series of sculptured corbels on twelfth-century Romanesque churches in France (Fig. 1) have hitherto been largely neglected by art historians. Even the corbel series of such otherwise closely studied churches as Saint-Pierre in Aulnay or Saint-Pierre in Moissac, or the west facade of Chartres Cathedral, have been merely surveyed, without being granted special attention. At most they have been categorized as decorative or grotesque or as depicting scenes from everyday life.[1] I believe, however, that corbel series constitute a distinctive if marginal element of Romanesque sculpture and that their meanings ought to be deciphered. In a previous study I examined forty corbel series from Saintonge and Poitou, whose iconography and style appear to demonstrate popular trends that diverge strikingly from the official art of the Church.[2]

The chief themes of these corbel series are animals, monsters, devils and humans. Among human representations, people from the margins of society—jongleurs, acrobats, musicians, female drunkards, fools and beggars—predominate. Why should such vagabond characters—cut loose from any distinct class of rural or urban society, and repeatedly branded as lawless and troublesome—have been chosen to play a major role in the imagery of twelfth-century corbel series? What were the intentions of the patrons and artists in creating such sculptures, and what meaning did they have for their audiences?

The human images can be classified into several groups:

1. Female or male heads thrust far forward or backward, screaming in pain, fear, or despair, through wide-open mouths. The head is often accompanied by hands engaged in some dramatic activity, such as tearing the hair or propping up the face or cheeks (Figs. 2, 3, 4).

2. Female and male jongleurs, acrobats, dancers, musicians, drunkards and the like, with identifying attributes. Two remarkable examples are a female beggar from the church at Matha Marestay and a female dice player from Saint-Nicolas, Civray (Figs. 5–8).

3. Female and male heads grimacing in laughter or mockery (Fig. 9).

4. Pairs of lovers and other couples (Figs. 10, 11).

These human images may be termed grotesque in the sense defined by Mikhail Bakhtin: "The grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depth."[3]

The corbel series differ significantly from the official sculptural programs of facades, portals and other places of prominence. Such "official art" uses a compositional model that is hierarchical and based on symmetrical contrasts such as high and low, good and evil, light and dark. Within the coherent context of a church portal for instance, individual figures and motifs have clear meanings that can be read and understood by the observer. Such sculptural compositions are similar to the contemporaneous models of society and the universe repeatedly described by twelfth-century writers.[4] With respect to this model the corbel series introduce a marginal "antimodel." Their compositions are neither symmetrical nor hierarchical. Although some corbel figures are similar to the "lower" or negative components of Christological compositions, they are not allegories of vice and sin but direct representations of individuals marginal to even the lower strata of medieval society. Their expressions and attitudes would be viewed with disapproval by the Church. A comparison of the figures of women—both saintly and sinful—in Christological programs with those of corbel series may serve to demonstrate this point. In portal sculpture, saintly women or personified virtues, identified by veils or crowns, are devoid of emotion.[5] Sinners, or figures of sin—Eve, Luxuria, seductive mermaids—are likewise without expression but are easily recognizable by

FIGURE 1. *Matha Marestay, Saint-Barthélemy, eastern apse with corbels (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

their bared breasts and disordered hair;[6] in addition, Luxuria is characterized as tormented by serpents. The women on corbels, in contrast, are not suffering punishment, and their emotions—always extreme—are varied, as are their occupations.

In most cases the corbel series and the official Christological programs of a given church were, I believe, carved by the same artists and commissioned by the same patrons. Examination of both types of sculpture in several churches reveals that the same workshops were involved. For example, the corbels of Saint-Pierre, Aulnay,[7] Saint-Pierre, Chauvigny, and Saint-Hilaire, Foussais, and even those above the Porte Miégeville in Toulouse, show an affinity with the official sculpture on the portals of these churches.[8]

Moreover, sculptors used the same visual sources for both corbel series and official sculptural programs, although they treated these models differently. Their respective relationships to Classical models are instructive examples. In corbel series, the impact of ancient models is preserved in the vehement, foreshortened hand gestures, in the wide range of expressions, and in the bodily postures. In Group 1, the Classical "pathos formula" familiar from Hellenistic and Roman art appears several times. For example, the woman's head corbel from Notre-Dame, Surgères (Fig. 12) may be compared to the head of a barbarian woman holding her son from the Column of Marcus Aurelius,[9] and the head of an old woman from Saint-Pierre, Moissac (Fig. 13) may be compared to the head of the Hellenistic sculpture of an old drunkard now in the Munich Glyptothek.[10] A large number of the corbel images in Group 2 may be compared to Hellenistic and Roman figurines of the same genre.[11] And those in Group 4 seem to be related to Gallo-Roman and Early Christian sepulchral art, where effigies of the deceased are commonly in pairs (husband and wife, two brothers, etc.) on sarcophagi and tombstones.[12] In contrast, in official church art, sculptors radically transformed Classical models—by changing their content and context, by stylizing and flattening of form, and by eliminating expres-

FIGURE 2. *Civray, Saint-Nicholas, corbel from west facade upper gallery: woman propping her cheek (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

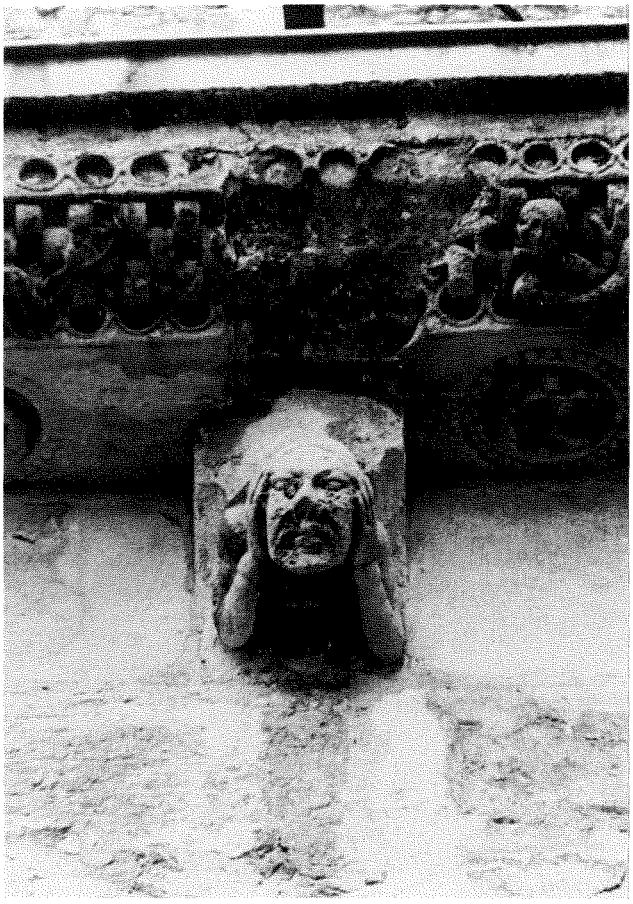

FIGURE 3. *Cahors, Saint-Etienne, corbel from north wall: woman holding her head in her hands (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

siveness. A famous example is the sacrificial procession on the lintel of the central tympanum of Sainte-Madeleine in Vézelay.[13]

Furthermore, the corbels can be considered as "anti-models" not only because they preserve the spirit of pagan sculpture but because they transgress and overturn the representational codes of official art. Two neighboring corbels from the apse of the church at Matha Marestay are cases in point. The first (Fig. 6) depicts a seated young beggar woman with a high, intricate headdress. Her eyes are wide open and she holds a child, who places his hand over hers; both are presented frontally, looking torward the observer. On the next corbel sits an old woman with the same headdress playing a stringed instrument decorated with a "devil's head" with her thin, long fingers. Such a group is rare in twelfth-century Romanesque art, and later too. I believe that images from the sphere of official art served as the initial models, while their opposites were actually rendered: the mother and child refer to the holy image of the Virgin and hild, but with a beggar woman instead of Maria Re-gina and a miserable child instead of the infant Christ; and similarly, on the next corbel, a beggar-musician takes the place of an angel-musician.

At Saint-Nicholas, Civray (Figs. 7, 8), paired corbels depict the head of a young woman in profile with three dice placed nearby and a mocking male face. The woman's head reveals the acquaintance of the artist with contemporary twelfth-century female jamb statues at Chartres and Angers, especially the queens in the central portals. However, the transgression of these official images is manifested in the twisted lower lip and aghast stare of the woman of the Civray corbel. The sharp realism of the dice is the antithesis of the stylization of the head. The mocking face on the adjacent corbel, turned toward the woman with the dice, has its tongue thrust into the right cheek, while the mouth has been placed in the left. These humorous distortions of the face forecast the bitter future of the beautiful dice player. The grotesque dislocation of the mouth to the cheek is a deliberate deformation that shows a conscious preoccupation with the possibilities of distortion for metaphorical purposes.

Four heads of hooded men (probably fools) that constitute variations on the same theme—one from Saint-Pierre, Moissac (Fig. 14), one from Saint-Sernin, Toulouse

FIGURE 4. *Cahors, Saint-Etienne, two corbels from north wall, upper gallery: grimacing male head and woman screaming with hands engaged (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

(Fig. 15), and two from Saint-Etienne, Cahors (Figs. 16, 17)—present a further example of code transgression. At Moissac and in the first corbel of Cahors, the heads are bent far back helplessly; in the second corbel from Cahors physical pain is expressed through a twisted head and mouth, and in Toulouse the distress of a head-to-head pair of hooded men is communicated by their distorted lower lips. Similar hooded images, representing peasants and dwarfs, are known from late antique popular art.[14] They can also be found in works of official art of the twelfth century[15] as shepherds, peasants, jongleurs and musicians, who are traditionally depicted full length and without overt emotion. However, the corbel makers again transgressed these codes by presenting emotion-laden faces in isolation.

Corbel series probably held different meanings for different audiences. Although emotions, gestures, activities and professions reprehensible to the Church were depicted, ecclesiastical patrons who commissioned the corbel series could bestow on them their own interpretations. As supporters of architectural elements these grotesque, distorted figures could be understood as punished sinners, although their punishment was expressed only metaphorically, implicit in the burdens they had to bear. This was the view of Vitruvius, known to the Middle Ages through numerous copies of his *Ten Books on Architecture*.[16] Consequently, ecclesiastical patrons could regard corbel images as personifications of vice and sin,[17] while the laity could recognize in them people on the margins of society—women, drunkards, jongleurs, and fools—who evoked ambivalent attitudes of attraction and suspicion.[18]

The artists—creators of the corbel series as well as the Christological programs—merit special attention. They probably belonged to a new class of artisans, including stonemasons and stonecarvers, that emerged with the stone industry of the twelfth century. They cannot be regarded as mere craftsmen but should rather be viewed as mediators between their own culture and that represented by the patrons they worked for. These sculptors seem to have mastered both the formal visual language of their patrons and the patois of the popular culture they came from. In the Christological programs they retained the codes of learned culture, using traditional images, symbols and programs. In the corbel series they were direct, emotional and experimental.

FIGURE 5. *Surgères, Notre Dame, two corbels from eastern apse: acrobat and musician (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

FIGURE 6. *Matha Marestay, Saint-Barthélemy, two corbels from northern wall: beggar woman with child and woman playing a stringed instrument (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

FIGURE 7. *Civray, Saint-Nicolas, west facade, lower gallery: female head with dice (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

FIGURE 8. *Civray, Saint-Nicolas, west facade, lower gallery: mocking male head (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

Different explanations of the same image to varied audiences can be demonstrated using the famous relief of the woman from the left tympanum of the Porta de la Platerías in Santiago de Compostela as an example (Fig. 18). The woman probably is an allegory of Vanitas or Luxuria,[19] but the author of the Pilgrim's Guide describes her thus: "She is holding in her hands the foul head of her lover, cut off by her husband, which at his command she must kiss twice a day. O what a terrible and admirable punishment for an adulterous woman which all should know about!"[20] By telling this story, the author of the Pilgrim's Guide assumed the role of a mediator between the otherwise hermetic sculpted image and his audience,[21] clarifying the essence of the allegory by means of a "real-life story." The sculptors of the corbel series may have been playing a similar mediating role when they created real people who could also be understood allegorically.

Various genres of twelfth-century literature—such as courtly romances, parodies, fabliaux, and contemporaneous writings attributed to the *Clerici vagantes*—also reveal a familiarity with ecclesiastical high culture, yet confront and parody it in the protesting spirit and humor of popular culture.[22] The aged, the love-sick, and the handicapped appear routinely in twelfth-century romances alongside their heroes, as subjects of laughter.[23] But parodic literature probably offers the closest parallels to the imagery of the corbel

FIGURE 9. *Cahors, Saint-Etienne, north wall, upper gallery: head of young woman (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

FIGURE 10. *Corme-Ecluse, corbel from west facade: lovers (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

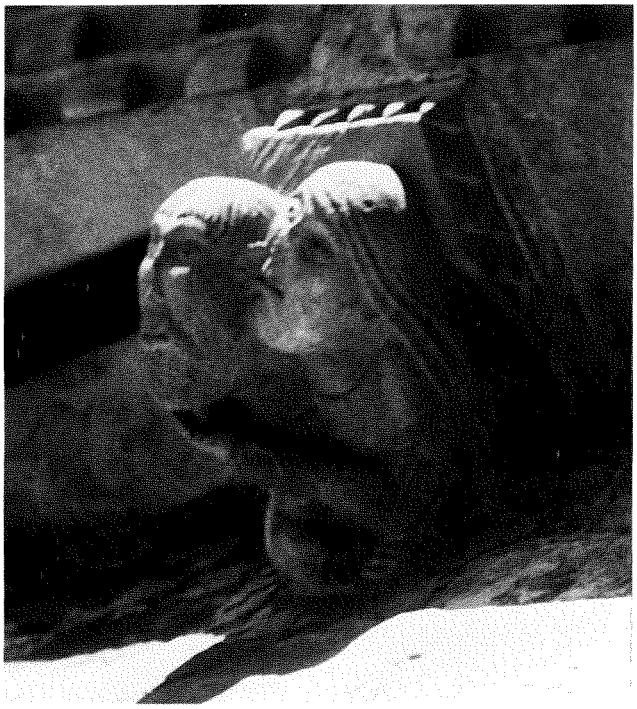

FIGURE 11. *Toulouse, Saint-Sernin, corbel above Porte des Comtes: knightly couple (photo: author).*

FIGURE 12. *Surgères, Notre Dame, corbel from west facade: female head expressing fear (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

FIGURE 13. *Moissac, Saint-Pierre, south facade: aged, toothless woman (photo: author).*

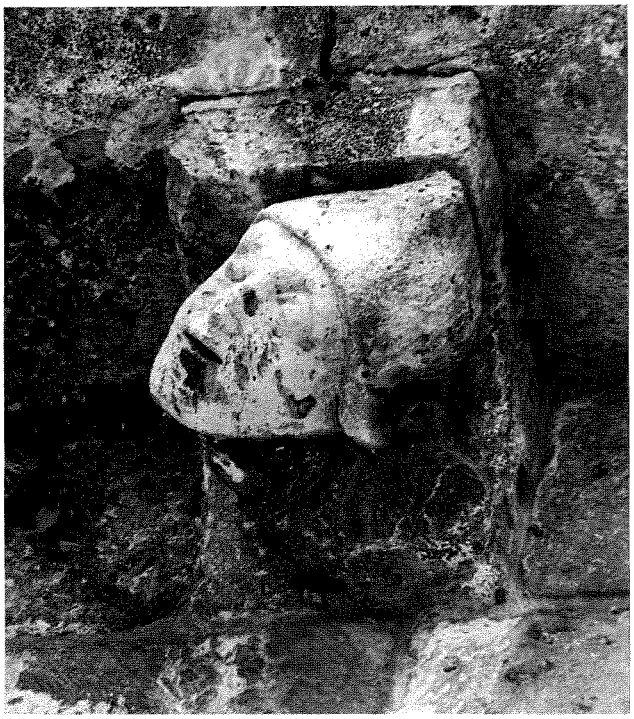

FIGURE 14. *Moissac, Saint-Pierre, south facade: hooded male head (photo: author).*

FIGURE 15. *Toulouse, Saint-Sernin, corbel above Porte des Comtes: two hooded male heads (photo: author).*

FIGURE 16. *Cahors, Saint-Etienne, north wall: hooded male head (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

FIGURE 17. *Cahors, Saint-Etienne, north wall, hooded male head (photo: B. Z. Kedar).*

FIGURE 18. *Santiago de Compostela, Porta de la Platerías, left tympanum (photo: author).*

series that can be found. In such works as *Audigier* and *Turbert* grotesque figures of knights, peasants, and marginals are the major protagonists, obscene scenes abound, and the language is coarse.[24]

Such literary works may shed light on the sculptors' use of different artistic languages for Christological programs on the one hand and corbel series on the other. The well-known *Dialogus Salomonis et Marcolphi* is a case in point. In the words of Maria Corti, the dialogue combines "two cultural realities, the sacred the higher and profane the lower. On one side the *rex*, who is Solomon the wise man par excellence, the chief *auctoritas* of upper level culture, and on the other Marcolph, a villain, a *rusticus, turpissimus*."[25]

The comic dialogue between Solomon and Marcolph is contrapuntal. While Solomon's lines express the conventions of high culture, those of Marcolph parody it by the use of popular imagery, language and wit:

> Solomon: I am descendant from twelve generations of prophets . . .
> Marcolph: And I of twelve generations of peasants.
>
> Solomon: A good and pretty woman is an ornament to her husband.
> Marcolph: A pot full of milk must be guarded well from the cat.
>
> Solomon: A well-formed and chaste woman should be esteemed above all desirable goods.
> Marcolph: A fat and gross woman on being ordered is more generous in giving.
>
> Solomon: He who turns his ears from the cry of the poor will himself cry out and will not be heard.
> Marcolph: He loses his tears who weeps before a judge.[26]

Corbel series seem to have served the Romanesque sculptors in a similar manner. For them these sculptures were a reflection of the world of day-to-day experience and thus a parody of the rules and codes of official art. Their protagonists, however, were not Marcolph's peasants or rulers, but women, entertainers, and fools—society's transmitters of emotions.

NOTES

1. N. Kenaan-Kedar, "Les modillons de Saintonge et du Poitou comme manifestation de la culture laïque," *CCM*, XXIX (1986), 311–13; especially notes 2–8.
2. Kenaan-Kedar, "Les modillons," esp. notes 9, 10 for detailed bibliography on each of the churches; Kenaan-Kedar, "Unnoticed Self-Representations of Romanesque Sculptors in Twelfth-Century France," *World Art, Themes of Unity in Diversity, Acts of the XXVIth International Congress of History of Art* (Philadelphia, 1989), II, 487–93.
3. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, England, 1968), 317–18.
4. G. Duby, *The Three Orders. Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago-London, 1960). O. G. Oexle, "*Tria genera hominum*. Zur Geschichte eines Deutungsschemas der sozialen Wirklichkeit in Antike und Mittelalter," *Institutionen, Kultur und Gesellschaft im Mittelalter. Festschrift J. Fleckenstein*, ed. L. Fenske, W. Rusener, T. Zotz (Sigmaringen, 1984), 483–500.
5. The image of Mary Magdalene is sometimes an exception: as a converted sinner she retained her long hair as well as dramatic gestures as attributes. See, for example, the tympanum of Neuilly-en-Donjon in Burgundy or the relief on the facade of the twelfth-century church of Saint-Hilaire, Foussais (Vendée).
6. See, for example, J. Leclercq-Kadaner, "De la Terre-Mère à la Luxure," *CCM*, XVIII (1975), 37–43; C. Frugoni, "L'iconographie de la femme au cours de X^{e}-XII^{e} siècles," *CCM*, XX (1977), 177–88.

7. F. Werner, *Aulnay de Saintonge und die romanische Skulptur in Westfrankreich* (Worms, 1979), 55–60.
8. M. F. Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture* (Oxford, 1981), 139–41. The corbels of Saint-Pierre, Moissac seem close to the corbels of Saint-Etienne, Cahors and point toward a date for both works, perhaps by the same workshop, around 1130.
9. R. Bianchi Bandinelli, *Rome, the Centre of Power. Roman Art to A.D. 200* (London, 1970), Fig. 367.
10. P. Zanker, *Die trunkene Alte, Das Lachen der Verhöhnten* (Frankfurt, 1989), 43–48, Fig. 29.
11. Zanker, *Die trunkene Alte*, Figs. 31, 32, 39, 40. See for example S. Moralejo, "Un reflejo de la escultura de Jaca en una moneda de Sancho Ramirez (†1094)," *Scritti di storia dell'arte in onore di Roberto Salvini* (Florence, 1984), 29–35, Pl. XI.
12. S. Moralejo, "La reutilizacion e influencia de los sarcofagos antiguos en la España medieval," *Colloquio sul reimpiego dei sarcofagi romani nel medioevo* (Marburg, 1984), 187–203.
13. A. Katzenellenbogen, "The Central Tympanum at Vézelay," *AB* XXVI (1944), 148–51; Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture*, 186–89, Fig. 126.
14. R. Schindler, *Landesmuseum Trier. Führer durch die vorgeschichtliche und römische Abteilung* (Trier, 1972), Figs. 104–8; J. Onians, *Art and Thought in the Hellenistic Age. The Greek View of the World 350–50 B.C.* (London, 1979), 33, Fig. 27; Zanker, *Die trunkene Alte*, Figs. 16–19.
15. Kenaan-Kedar, "Les modillons," 327–30.
16. Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, ed. and trans. F. Granger (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), I: book 1, 5–7; 9–13.
17. Kenaan-Kedar, "Les modillons," 318–20.
18. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 73.
19. S. Moralejo, "Artes figurativas y artes literarias en la España medieval: Románico, Romance y roman," *Boletín de la Asociación Europea de profesores de Español,* XVII (1985), 66-67.
20. *Le guide du pèlerin de Saint Jacques de Compostelle*, ed. and trans. J. Vielliard (Macôn, 1938), 102–3.
21. S. Moralejo, "Artistas, patronos y publico en el arte del camino de Santiago," *Compostellanum*, XXX (1985), 395–423, Figs. 11, 13.
22. From the extensive literature on the subject I would like to draw attention to H. Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars* (London, 1926), and two more recent works: L. R. Muir, *Literature and Society in Medieval France: The Mirror and the Image 1100–1150* (London, 1985), 87–103; and K. Gravdal, *Vilain and Courtois, Transgressive Parody in French Literature of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1989), 51–80.
23. P. Menard, *Le rire et le sourire dans le roman courtois en France au Moyen-Age* (Geneva, 1969), 156–62.
24. Gravdal, *Vilain and Courtois*, 3–11, and 65–69.
25. M. Corti, "Models and Antimodels in Medieval Culture," *New Literary History*, X (1978), 357–64.
26. Corti, "Models and Antimodels," 359–61. (The translation is by M. Corti.) It is worth noting that the marmousette figure of Marcolph depicted as a Spinario under the jamb statue of Solomon in the right portal of the north facade in Chartres is hooded in the same manner as those on the corbels.