THE ROMANESQUE CHURCHES OF GALICIA:
THE MAKING OF A PROVINCIAL ART *

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The Romanesque churches of Galicia offer a privileged view of the formation and character of a provincial art, and challenge simple notions of provincial culture as conservative and derivative. More than eight hundred Galician churches guard part of their Romanesque fabric, and most of these preserve some sculpture. In addition, the five cathedrals of Galicia and five Cistercian abbeys retain much of their twelfth and thirteenth-century work. Nearly sixty dated inscriptions remain in situ, and a wealth of ecclesiastical documents complements the artistic evidence. For the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, this is an unusual amount of evidence from a small region, and, together, it reveals the links between the churches of the countryside and the cultural centres which mediated Galicia’s changing relationship to the kingdoms of the Iberian peninsula and the world of Roman Christendom.

Before turning to the churches themselves, I should explain that I use the term, «provincial», simply to describe two of their most important characteristics. First, they represent a regional version of an international style. Secondly, most

* A bibliographic note and acknowledgements: This is essentially the text of the paper which I delivered at the Congress. I have kept notes to a minimum, and I have included a selection of the photographs which accompanied the talk. In addition to the works cited, the bibliography includes recent studies of the Romanesque churches of Galicia. I would like to thank George Zarnecki for his supervision of my dissertation, and Alison Stones and Serafin Moralejo for giving me opportunities to present earlier versions of this paper. I am grateful to the George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation, the Research Council of the University of South Florida and Reed College for the financial support that helped make this research possible. Finally, I acknowledge with great appreciation the efforts of the diocesan authorities of Santiago, Lugo and Ourense, countless parish priests, and the people of so many aldeas to facilitate my work.
of their features of design and decoration can be traced to a few centres—the cathedrals and Cistercian abbeys—which enjoyed direct ties to other regions.

Too often, the term «provincial» carries negative connotations, and, for Galicia, there is a danger that it will conjure up an image of a rural region marginalized by its place at the edge of Europe, isolated by its internal geography, and condemned to a secondary status within larger political and economic systems. From that perspective, the late arrival of the Romanesque style, its slow diffusion in the first half of the twelfth century, and the longevity and lasting imprint of a style commonly viewed as archaic have all been taken as signs of the region’s conservatism and resistance to change. But the slow acceptance of the Romanesque style and its long afterlife are historical problems which should not distort our understanding of the explosion of rural construction that took place when Galicia formed part of an independent kingdom of León between 1157 and 1230.

In those years, Santiago attracted pilgrims from across Europe, and the Cistercians and international military orders established houses and built huge estates. French clerics and artisans settled the region, and Galicians fought on the Spanish frontier, studied in the universities of France, and journeyed to Rome and Jerusalem. Not only did Galicia enjoy close ties to Europe, but the countryside joined in a dynamic relationship with the cultural centres of the region. Craftsmen moved easily between major sites and humble villages, and artistic vocabularies spread rapidly. Nor was the reception of the Romanesque style a passive process. Although rural builders drew much of their vocabulary of design and decoration from a few major centres, they made purposeful choices and transformed their models. Even the conservatism of craftsmen became a force for stylistic change, as craftsmen created new forms by adapting newly introduced formulas of design and decoration to older ones.

Mapping the activity of workshops and the spread of elements of design and decoration casts light on the complexity of the links between the countryside and the artistic centres of Galicia (D’Emilio 1994). In many districts, local workshops flourished and built churches for various patrons within a radius of a few kilometres. Near Sarria, for example, three workshops were active in the last third of the twelfth century and the first decade of the thirteenth century (D’Emilio 1988: 362-364). The craftsmen who built and decorated the churches of Muro and Lousadela—three kilometres apart—carved sculpture for six other churches (San Román de Lousada, Reiriz, San Fiz de Vilapedre, Cela, Belante and Biville) within ten kilometres of Lousadela (D’Emilio 1988: 216-232). These craftsmen, however, were not isolated, for several features of their work are derived from Lugo cathedral. In the same district, a slightly later group of churches (Corbelle, Neira, Vilarmosteiro, Franqueán and Cabreiros), all within ten kilometres of Neira, was
the work of craftsmen whose simple but well-carved capitals copy Cistercian models (D’Emilio 1988: 231-232). Contemporary with both workshops was the activity of a larger group of craftsmen inspired by the decoration of the east end of the Cistercian abbey at Meira (D’Emilio 1988: 291-348; D’Emilio 1993). They built a cluster of churches in Sarria itself and the adjacent parishes (Sta. Mariña de Sarria, Vilar de Sarria and Requeixo), but their other churches (Oleiros, Bande, Samos, Hospital de Incio, Cervela, Friolfe and Castro de Rei de Lemos) dot a larger area around the county seat.

The cathedrals and Cistercian abbeys influenced these local masons, but how did new ideas reach the countryside? Maps offer some clues. The cusped lintel, for example, was introduced at Lugo by the 1170s (D’Emilio 1992: 88-90, 93). Cusped lintels bearing dated inscriptions at Ponteferreira (1177) and San Pedro de Portomarin (1182) attest to the rapid diffusion of a motif which eventually reached churches at Astureses and Porto in the neighboring dioceses of Ourense and Santiago (Yzquierdo 1983a; D’Emilio 1988: 169-170, 371-372). Many examples are far from Lugo, but they do appear in clusters. The influence of the cathedral was projected to churches some distance away, and these inspired craftsmen in surrounding villages. The variety of ways in which the cusped lintel was reproduced reminds us that the movement of a workforce was only one way that motifs spread: drawings, modelbooks, verbal instructions and even the shipment of pieces of sculpture from quarries transmitted artistic ideas.

Two examples of the artistic influence of Ourense cathedral and the Cistercian abbeys of Oseira and Melón present contrasting geographic patterns that illustrate different ways in which different kinds of motifs spread. The arched corbel table was used at all three major sites, and it soon became a hallmark of churches in the districts surrounding Ourense (Valle 1984). These churches differed widely in other respects, and the prominence of the motif facilitated its spread without the displacement of a workforce, as the variety of ways in which it was handled demonstrates. By contrast, a distinctive foliate capital decorated with clasped stems won a smaller — and more scattered — following. Introduced at Melón (fig. 1) and used at Oseira, this capital was carefully reproduced at San Clodio, Ramirás, Augas Santas, Pombeiro, Xunqueira de Espadañedo and San Xoán de Ribadavia (fig. 2). These versions are so close to their models — and so limited in their use — that it is plausible to assign them to one or two itinerant artists (D’Emilio 1988: 289-290; Valle 1989: 138-139).
Fig. 1.—Melón, Sta. María. East chapel of ambulatory, chancel arch capital

Fig. 2.—Xunqueira de Espadañedo, Sta. María. North aisle, respond capital
A closer look at these churches and the use of these capitals helps explain the role of their authors. While these churches are geographically separated, they are linked by their large scale. All except San Xoán de Ribadavia have three apses and an aisled nave, an unusually complex arrangement in the Galician countryside. This capital always appears at the east end, in the earliest part of the church, and, on a few capitals, the foliage lacks carved details, as if they were to be detailed or painted by other craftsmen (fig. 3). This suggests the presence of a craftsman who supervised middle-sized buildings that demanded skills that only experience at a major site could offer. His participation was most important at the start of the project as he assembled a local workforce and provided them with models, instructions and training. Afterwards, he could have overseen several projects at once, travelling from one site to another (D'Emilio 1988: 366-371).

![Image](image.png)

**Fig. 3.—Mosteiro de Ramirás, San Pedro. Apse, capital of south window**

Patronage and the scale of buildings were the two most important factors in directing the movements of these itinerant craftsmen (D'Emilio 1988: 364-366; D'Emilio 1994). Both account for the participation of the same craftsmen at the Compostelan church of the Sar and its affiliate at Xunqueira de Ambia (Valle 1984: 228-229; D'Emilio 1988: 85-88), or at the nunneries of Ferreira de Pantón and Sobrado de Trives (Yzquierdo 1992). Of course, patronage and scale were
interrelated. Members of the local nobility with far-reaching connections or religious houses with distant affiliates were the patrons who could afford to build churches that demanded a higher level of architectural know-how and craftsmen with experience at larger projects. These craftsmen not only spread the Romanesque style geographically, but, just as important, they spread it through different levels of production — organizing projects that served as intermediaries between the cultural centers of Galicia and the countryside.

Mapping the diffusion of the Romanesque style tells only a small part of its story, for rural craftsmen actively transformed their artistic models. The church of San Paio de Diomondi and the west portal of San Pedro de Portomarín pro-vide a good opportunity to watch rural craftsmen at work upon their models. The two monuments are dated by inscriptions of 1170 and 1182 respectively. Both display ties to the cathedral of Lugo, and their architectural sculpture is similar enough to be attributable to the same artists (D'Emilio 1988: 179-195).

Even the modest capitals at these two churches have a remarkably complex pedigree that shows how rural craftsmen blended different artistic traditions, in this case, the workshop practices at the cathedrals of Lugo and Santiago. In the middle of the twelfth century, craftsmen at Lugo cathedral took a distinctive approach to the structure of their capitals. They introduced a strict alternation of squared bosses and volutes in the abaci of their capitals (fig. 4), and they treated the two-sided window capitals (fig. 5) as halved respond capitals with one volute between the two squared bosses on each side (D'Emilio 1988: 126-133). At Diomondi, this structure was adopted for one respond capital on the apse (fig. 6), and the design of the window capitals at Lugo was used for those of the nave windows (fig. 7). There, however, lobed leaves of Compostelan origin replaced the plain foliage of Lugo cathedral. Compostelan influence also explains the structure of the portal capitals at Diomondi where the strict alternation of bosses and volutes — characteristic of Lugo cathedral — was made to conform to the Compostelan design for small, two-sided capitals by placing a pair of volutes on each face (fig. 8). Twelve years later, at San Pedro de Portomarín, the carver of the two inner capitals of the portal dispensed with the structuring of the abacus altogether, giving more prominence to the decoration of the basket (fig. 10).

If even these simple capitals reveal a subtle interplay of different artistic traditions, the designs of tympana at Diomondi and Portomarín introduce more dramatic and purposeful responses to prestigious models. At Diomondi, builders copied the cusped arch which once hooded the south transept portal of Lugo cathedral, where it is now re-used in an eighteenth-century setting (D'Emilio 1988: 124-126). On the south portal at Diomondi, a semicircle was cut out of the base
of the tympanum, ringed by two concentric cusped arches carved on superposed planes, and framed by an outer semicircle traced on the tympanum (fig. 11). Twelve years later, at San Pedro de Portomarín, the same masons responded to the recently completed cusped lintel of the north transept portal of the cathedral by combining the new motif with the cusped arch. They cut a pair of cusps from the baseline of the lintel and surrounded each of these with a cusped arch cut from the plane of the tympanum (fig. 9).

Fig. 4.—Lugo cathedral. South aisle, respond capital
Fig. 5.—Lugo cathedral. South aisle window, capital
Fig. 6.—Diomondi, San Paio. Apse, respond capital

Fig. 7.—Diomondi, San Paio. Nave window
Fig. 8.—Diononidi, San Paio. West portal, capitals

Fig. 9.—Portomarin, San Pedro. West portal, tympanum
Fig. 10.—Portomarín, San Pedro. West portal, capital
Fig. 11.—Diomondi, San Paio. South portal
The cusped lintel exemplifies a kind of motif typical of provincial architecture, one which reinterprets a feature of a larger building in an effort to mask the smaller scale or simpler design of the lesser structure. In this respect, the cathedral of Lugo may itself be regarded as provincial, when compared with the cathedrals of more powerful sees or more favored monasteries. To suggest the double portals of the transepts of Santiago cathedral or a more modest subdivided tympanum, like that at San Vicente de Ávila, the builders at Lugo designed the curious cusped lintel with its pendant capital serving at once to underscore the reference to the double doorway and proclaim their virtuosity.

Rural masons also sought to confer on their churches a grandeur designed to satisfy the aspirations of a patron or advertise their own skill. At Diomondi itself, the triple arch of the façade conceals the box-like nave and suggests an aisled interior (fig. 12). Three kilometres away, at San Estevo de Ribas de Miño, where builders sought to rival the achievements of their predecessors at Diomondi, they not only flanked the west portal with arches but placed round windows in the walls of the choir, just west of the apse, quoting the roses of transept facades, like that at Carboeiro (Yzquierdo 1987; D’Emilio 1988: 235-250, 272-273, 282-290). In addition, they fashioned niches inside the apse as scaled down versions of

Fig. 12.—Diomondi, San Paio. West façade
radiating chapels — following the lead of another modest cathedral, that of Ourense. At Xunqueira de Ambia, Augas Santas and Acibeiro, false galleries mimicked the two storey elevation of Santiago cathedral (Chamoso 1973: 269-287). In other ambitious rural buildings, ribs were used decoratively to mask traditional barrel vaults, and the moulded arches of portals were multiplied on tympana. Such ingenious tricks seem specially suited to a provincial art in search of a vocabulary that might allow it to overcome or disguise its material constraints and create an architecture of aspiration.

The concentric, studded mouldings that decorate the tympanum at Pazos de Arenteiro (Barriocanal 1988: 23-27), though unusual, represent an approach common to less pretentious churches, where craftsmen explored the decorative possibilities suggested by their more ambitious models. At Portomarin and Santa Mariña de Cangas, for example, craftsmen blended the cusped lintel with the cusped arch (figs. 9, 13). That approach won favor, as the cusped lintel was quickly adopted and its decorative possibilities thoroughly explored. Craftsmen multiplied the number of cusps at Ponteferreira and San Mamede de Carballal. They combined outlined, pierced or sunken cusps, and, at Fente (fig. 14) and Santa María de Arcos, they shifted them from the base of the tympanum to its

Fig. 13.—Cangas, Sta. Mariña. West portal, tympanum
surface. At San Xulián de Campo, they transferred them to the headstone of a window and, most curiously of all, the sculptors of the west portal at Vilar de Donas carved only the pendant capital which was left dangling from the keystone of an arch. Those artists who found such original applications for the cusped lintel often did so by ignoring the architectural allusion to the double portal and stressing instead its kinship with the more familiar cusped arch which underwent similar migrations. At Camporramiro, for example, in what could be described as a visual joke, a tiny cusped arch is lightly traced above the opening of the east window (D’Emilio 1997).

The process by which craftsmen assimilated the new cusped lintel to the more familiar cusped arch offers a pattern for many innovations in the countryside. Such efforts to accommodate new motifs to those already in the local vocabulary highlight the conservatism of local masons while generating new forms. The method of copying might hasten such change. Thus, the use of a drawing probably led to the translation of the lobed leaves on a capital in the south aisle of Lugo cathedral (fig. 15) into a two-dimensional pattern on the south capital of the inner arch of the chancel (fig. 16) at San Estevo de Lousadela (D’Emilio 1988: 221-222). This, however, only partially explains the flattening of the design, for its stylization suggests that the artist interpreted the odd motif in terms of the familiar cusped arch.
Fig. 15.—Lugo cathedral. South aisle, respond capital

Fig. 16.—Lousadela, San Estebo. Inner chancel arch, south capital
A similar effort to adapt new motifs to older ones marked the response of masons, schooled in Compostelan traditions, to the new decorative vocabulary of the Cistercians. Chevron, for example, was rare in Galicia and appears to have been brought by the foreign builders of the Cistercian abbey at Meira (D’Emilio 1988: 309-315). Although they refrained from using it in the austerely decorated abbey, their followers applied it to the outer arches and jambs of portals at Hospital de Innio and Sta. Mariña de Sarria. The artists at Bembibre appreciated the decorative possibilities of this new motif, although their own taste for lavish sculptural decoration led them to ignore other Cistercian innovations. They hooded the west portal and lined its outer jambs with chevron, but, around the arch, they transformed the zigzag of the outer hollow moulding into an original version of the familiar cusped arch. Thus, they returned to a traditional formula and combined it with the new chevron in a way that underscores their sensitivity to the difference between the right angles of the jambs and the curve of the arch.

Elsewhere, local craftsmen responded to the sobriety of Cistercian decoration by animating foliate capitals. On the north capital of the chancel arch at San Miguel de Paradela, for example, stalks have been replaced by a human figure whose long arms end in drooping leaves (fig. 17). Here, the resurgence of figural
motifs represents the deliberate assertion of a taste for such forms in the face of a new Cistercian aesthetic whose own brand of conservatism seemed strangely novel in distant Galicia. In fact, as Cistercian influence spread through different levels of production, local craftsmen re-introduced other traditional forms, like billeting or the lobed leaves of Compostelanan capitals, which had virtually been barred from the Cistercian abbeys themselves. Thus, at San Estevo de Ribas de Miño, the Compostelanan leaf reappears on one of the respond capitals of the apse, although its shape and structure derive from those of the Cistercian house at Oseira (D'Emilio 1997).

Even among craftsmen who remained close to the workshop practices of a single major monument, successive phases of construction and decoration offered them opportunities for the creative blending of forms. Thus, the carvers of the column figures on the west portal at Moraime imitated the technique and design of the early twelfth-century column figures on the transepts of Santiago cathedral where stacked figures were carved into the columns (Sousa 1983). At the same time, they responded to the larger scale of the newly carved figures of the west porch, and created their own curious hybrid. In each case, the strength of earlier traditions shaped the artist's approach to new forms, turning reception into re-interpretation.

While these cases chart some common patterns of change in a provincial art, the work of a few craftsmen collaborating on related buildings between 1190 and 1220 offers a closer look at how the assembling of a team of masons of diverse backgrounds for an important commission encouraged change. The Hospitalers' church of Hospital de Incio, about fifteen kilometres southeast of Sarria, reflects the close ties that linked the counts of Sarria, the Cistercian abbey at Meira and the military orders in the last decades of the twelfth century (D'Emilio 1988: 291-299, 331-348; D'Emilio 1993). Craftsmen from Meira were involved in designing and constructing the church: its austere decoration, and specific features, like the stepped buttresses, the banded palmette capitals (figs. 18, 19) and other ornamental motifs attest to their role.

The capitals at Incio suggest the presence of various masons, familiar with different local traditions (D'Emilio 1988: 293-294, 298-303). One copied the banded palmette capital, flattening the relief and simplifying the design (fig. 20). Another, acquainted with the local repertory of Compostelanan forms, carved two capitals with crisscrossing volutes pegged to the leaves below (fig. 21). These pegged volute capitals boast a long history as schematizations of the Corinthian capital; for those at Incio, capitals at Ferreira de Pantón (fig. 22) supply a source —itself dependent on Compostelanan models— in a nearby convent built in the 1150s and affiliated to Meira in 1175.
Fig. 18.—Meira, Sta. María. East end, capital

Fig. 19.—Hospital do Incio, San Fiz. Apse, respond capital
Fig. 20.—Hospital do Incio, San Fiz. Outer chancel arch, south capital

Fig. 21.—Hospital do Incio, San Fiz. Inner chancel arch, north capital
The masons who came together for the rapid and well-organized project at Incio separated to work on nearby churches, but their later sculpture bears the marks of their earlier association (D’Emilio 1988: 303-306, 315-331). At Samos, one sculptor produced two pegged volute capitals for the cloister portal of the Benedictine house, and copied the simplified banded palmette capital, further reducing the relief and restructuring the abacus. At Castro de Rei de Lemos, another craftsman carved a simplified banded palmette capital for the chancel arch (fig. 23), but added tubular shoots beneath the palmettes at the corners, quoting them from the leaves of the pegged volute capitals (fig. 21). On these and other pieces in the group, motifs are borrowed, added or subtracted but the basic organization of the decoration is hardly affected, providing a stable framework for change.

Two examples from this group reveal different responses to more fundamental changes. At Castro de Rei, the architect, familiar with newer principles of design linked to early Gothic buildings, surrounded the apse with finely proportioned clustered columns. The new supports called for tall, narrow windows, but, when it came time to execute them, the local craftsmen fell back on the standard shafted Romanesque window. Unfortunately, it was too wide for the space between the new supports, and one was simply cut off to make room.

By contrast, a font in the Hospitallers’ church at Portomarín stands out as a dramatic—and more successful—example of genuine invention (D’Emilio 1988:...
323-325). When a craftsman from this group was called upon to carve the font, he found himself free from the conventions of capital carving. As a result, he designed an interlacing pattern around the bowl, assembling different motifs—the palmettes, the pegged volutes and the leaves tipped with balls—from the churches where he had worked (fig. 24). The font acted as a catalyst to speed up the dissolution of the structure of the capital, and paved the way, in turn, for experiments with similar arrangements on the capitals of the west portal at Bande (fig. 25).

In other groups of buildings, where craftsmen had become familiar with a wider variety of artistic traditions, that experience freed them from their reliance on established conventions and encouraged similar experiments with the design of capitals. At Camporramiro and Herbón, for example, sculptors playfully combined interlacing stems and superposed leaves, teasing the eye with competing references to two different types of capitals (D’Emilio 1997).

While most of the motifs we see in the Romanesque churches of the Galician countryside can be traced to a handful of major buildings, charting the diffusion of these motifs is only a starting point for understanding the artists’ response to the Romanesque style. In the countryside, working practices, the range of available models, the different methods of their transmission, and the inven-tiveness of
Fig. 24.—Portomarín, San Xoán. Font

Fig. 25.—Bande, San Pedro. Capital from the west portal
(Museo Provincial de Lugo)
individual craftsmen turned reception into re-interpretation. Even the conservatism of some of these artists became a force for change, as they adapted newly introduced formulas to older ones, thereby creating new forms. The subtle alterations of the structure of capitals, the playful handling of foliate motifs, the strange evolution of the cusped lintel and the remarkable devices that enabled modest churches to surpass their powerful models—if only in the ingenuity of their designers, all of these inventions expose the weaknesses of any simple view of provincial art as a slavish imitation of models or a predictable process of degeneration through repeated copying. Together, they restore the Romanesque churches of Galicia to their rightful place as testimony to a period in which Galicia was a full participant in the culture of Latin Christendom and the countryside was drawn into a close relationship with the cultural centers of the region.

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