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Donna L. Sadler, *Reading the Reverse Façade of Reims Cathedral: Royalty and Ritual in Thirteenth-Century France*. Farnham, Surrey, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. xvi + 278 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. £60.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4094-3243-2.

Review by Jennifer M. Feltman, Young Harris College

A highly original iconographic program comprised of registers of sculpted niches was created for the interior, or reverse (verso), side of the west façade portals of Reims Cathedral during the second half of the thirteenth century. Surrounding the central portal are seven registers of tri-lobed arch niches, populated with figures who narrate Old Testament prophecies concerning the Virgin, Christ, and John the Baptist along with events from their lives. The flanking portals, which open onto the northern and southern side aisles, each include four registers of figures (Prophets, Apostles, and Elders of the Apocalypse) surmounted by a double-archivolt of low relief voussoirs. On the north verso, the voussoirs depict Old Testament prefigurations of the Crucifixion and the Miracles of Christ, while the south verso depicts imagery from the Apocalypse. *Reading the Reverse Façade of Reims Cathedral* places these sculptures in their Remois context and explains the complex typological connections that its programmers made among biblical narrative, the rich local history of the Cathedral of Reims, and its function as the site for French royal coronation ceremonies during the thirteenth century.

Sadler's long awaited book both crystalizes and expands the initial arguments made in her dissertation.<sup>[1]</sup> In addition to a typological reading of the verso's iconography, Sadler analyzes its moral-didactic content. She considers its meaning for a royal audience by comparing the message of the verso to the game of chess and the moralizing genre of literature known as *Mirrors of Princes*. Sadler's close reading of the reverse façade also addresses the interrelationship of form and content in its visual language. Through careful formal analysis, she reveals the subtle interweaving of the architectural mass and the sculpture on the reverse façade and suggests that its formal qualities bear structural similarity to contemporary rhetorical and mnemonic strategies used in literature and sermons. Sadler extends the reading of the reverse façade beyond the confines of the Cathedral of Reims, considering it in the context of royally patronized works such as the Sainte-Chapelle. Finally, the reverse façade is also read alongside other thirteenth-century interior sculptures that engaged viewers in new and interactive ways.

Chapter one, "Reading the Reverse Façade through the Palimpsest of its Past," places the sculptures of the reverse façade in dialogue with the legendary history of the city of Reims, the successive building campaigns of the cathedral, and earlier iconographic programs throughout the building, including the sculptures of the choir and buttress aedicules, the north transept, and the west façade. Mention is made of the stained glass programs, but these are beyond the scope of Sadler's book. The succinct and up-to-date review of the literature and iconography in this chapter serves as a useful introduction to the historiography and iconography of Reims. Although the sections on the earlier iconographic programs of the building are brief, Sadler infuses each with new insights, many of which demonstrate the importance of local history and typological thinking in constructing narratives about the Cathedral of Reims.

In chapter two, “The Reverse Façade as Complement to Iconographic Program,” Sadler shows how the iconographic program of the reverse façade was intimately connected to the iconography of the west portals. The narratives of the central verso, which are read from the bottom left register to the upper left, and then down the right-hand side of the verso to the bottom register, recount prophecies of the Virgin birth and the lives of the Virgin, Christ, and John the Baptist. These dovetail with themes of the Annunciation, Visitation, and Presentation found in the exterior sculpture. Similarly, the verso sculptures of the flanking portals interact with the themes found on the exterior. The north verso archivolt depicts prefigurations of the Crucifixion, while the exterior focuses on the Crucifixion of Christ. The south verso expands upon the Apocalypse imagery that is depicted on the exterior of the portal. Sadler also suggests that specific elements of the reverse façade’s iconography are in dialogue with the cathedral’s earlier sculptural programs. For example, the miracles of Christ depicted on the right archivolt of the north portal verso are specifically miracles of healing. These echo the healing miracles performed in the life of the local saint, bishop Remigius, which are sculpted on the north transept, Saints’ Portal.

Sadler reads the façade through attention to visual cues, many of which encourage the viewer to make connections across the central verso registers. On the fourth register of the left side the center verso, the figure of a prophet (Isaiah or Habakkuk) points to a Nativity scene, while to the right side of the portal, the figure of John the Baptist on the fourth register mirrors the gesture of the prophet as he points to the Lamb of God. Perhaps the most important reading that Sadler provides is of the pairing that takes place across the bottom register of this portal. On the left side stand three figures. From left to right these include the figure of a king, whom Sadler identifies as King David, a prophet with an open scroll, and a prophet with a bound scroll. Sadler reads this scene in context with the narratives of the miraculous births of the Virgin and Christ above, suggesting that the David is included here as “...the antitype of Christ...” since he was both king and prophet of the Messiah as well as the royal ancestor of Christ through the lineages of Mary and Joseph (p. 72). She connects this image of kingship to the figure of the priest who serves communion to the knight on the bottom register on the right. Sadler convincingly argues that the priest represents Melchizedek, the mysterious Old Testament king of Salem who acted as a priest when he served Abraham bread and wine.

Sadler then demonstrates the rich typological connection that the programmer made between this scene and the imagery from the life of John the Baptist that is shown in the above registers: “Melchizedek, like John the Baptist, was both a prefiguration and symbol of Christ” (p. 85). So the figures of King David and Melchizedek together imbue the central verso program with iconographic meaning that brought together imagery of priesthood and kingship, as was done in the royal ceremony at the Cathedral of Reims.

The third chapter, “Mirror of Princes in Stone,” considers a royal audience for the cathedral’s imagery. Although Reims was not the exclusive site of royal coronations, the history written by Hincmar in the eighth century, which described the miraculous chrism used by bishop Remigius to anoint Clovis as king of the Franks, placed the bishop of Reims in the guise of the Old Testament priest, Samuel, who anointed David. Possession of the holy ampulla containing the chrism provided the basis for the claim of the Cathedral of Reims to be the only legitimate site for French royal coronations. Sadler argues that aspects of the reverse façade’s iconography functioned in a manner similar to *Mirrors of Princes* and the game of chess. An important theme found in the *Mirror of Princes* is the receptivity of a good king to ecclesiastical counsel. David stands as the exemplar of this because he heeded the guidance of Nathan. Sadler argues that the figure of King David who heeds the words of the prophet on the bottom left register of the central portal verso depicts the ideal “...harmonious relationship between kings and clerics” (p. 122).

In chapter four, “The Marriage of Form and Content,” Sadler provides a close reading of the formal qualities of the reverse facade. Visual cues, such as the use of a draped socle on the exterior and a

similarly draped dado on the interior faces of the portals, suggest they should be read together (pp. 162-164). This formal aspect reinforces the dialogue between iconographic meaning on the interior and exterior discussed in chapter two. Sadler also notes how the niche figures of the central portal move from more deeply carved reliefs in the bottom registers to shallower reliefs in the uppermost registers. This is echoed in the treatment of the pairs of figures that flank the verso's side portals and the low relief sculptures of the archivolts that frame their tympana. Thus, the side portals and central portal versos are connected in their formal treatment. For Sadler, the "...tension between the plane of the wall and the sculptural decoration that animates it is an important aspect of how the interior façade works visually" (p. 165). The figures that pierce the wall are also integral to its structure, so that the viewer is caught up in a play between solid and diaphanous surfaces. Sadler then draws comparisons between the formal composition of the reverse face and contemporary mnemonic techniques in literature, preaching, and the game of chess.

Chapter five, "The Royal Context of Reims Cathedral's Reverse Façade," places the imagery of the reverse façade sculptures in the context of contemporary imagery connected to the court of Louis IX, including the Sainte-Chapelle, the Saint Louis Psalter, and plans for the royal necropolis at Saint-Denis. While Sadler identifies similar interests in using biblical kings as exemplars for Capetian royalty at both Reims and the Sainte-Chapelle, she suggests that an "...ecclesiastical voice governs the messages of the Reims verso..." (p. 208). The Psalter of St. Louis, whether commissioned by him or not, certainly provides insight into the way in which history was understood typologically as well as the position in which the Capetian dynasty saw itself bringing forth the kingdom of God on earth. As a text that prepared the king to read history as the unfolding of complex biblical typologies, it would certainly have given a royal viewer a context from which to understand the typologies presented in the reverse façade at Reims. The royal necropolis at Saint-Denis is also discussed in terms of the desire of Louis IX to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth through the Capetian bloodline, but, most importantly, this case demonstrates the power struggle between Reims and Saint-Denis over their roles in establishing the Capetian dynasty. While Reims laid claim to the holy ampulla used to anoint kings, Saint-Denis laid claim to the royal regalia and the bodies of the kings. Viewed against the foil of these royal commissions, the imagery of the reverse façade asserts the right of the clergy of Reims Cathedral to instruct the king.

Sadler concludes the book with a consideration of the advent of interior sculptural programs and the ways in which these asserted themselves to viewers in new and more direct ways beginning in the later thirteenth century. Focusing on examples such as the Column of Angels at Strasbourg, the Bamberg Rider, the Naumberg Choir Screen, and ending with the works of Claus Sluter at the Chartreuse de Champmol, Sadler argues for an increasingly interactive relationship between viewer and subject.

The criticisms of Sadler's book are minor. One wishes that more could have been said about the dating of the reverse façade sculptures, but as Sadler concedes, this is difficult territory. She repeats what scholars following Jean-Pierre Ravaux have come generally to agree upon: "...the façade could not have been begun before c. 1255 and its erection would have lasted through most of the thirteenth century" (p. 170).<sup>[2]</sup> Yet one wonders if there is evidence in the façade's iconography that could shed more light on its chronology? Finally, the book lacks an image or diagram of the entire reverse façade program. While the inclusion of full-color plates of each of the verso portals is certainly helpful, the figures are difficult to see due to the size of the page. A diagram would have facilitated the comprehension of the reverse façade's numerous and complex themes. Nonetheless, Sadler's descriptions throughout her text are vivid enough to guide the careful reader in a mental reconstruction of the whole.

Sadler's book is certain to remain an important work on the iconography of the Reims reverse façade. In addition to her astute typological, moralizing, and formal readings of this iconographic program, Sadler has provided an up-to-date and masterful synthesis of the vast and complex literature on this building, which will be welcome to students of this building, both new and old alike.

## NOTES

[1] Donna Sadler-Davis, "The Sculptural Program of the Verso of the West Façade of Reims Cathedral," (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1984).

[2] Jean-Pierre Ravaux, "Les campagnes de construction de la cathédrale de Reims au XIIIe siècle," *Bulletin monumental* 137 (1979):11-13.

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