



## **From Christ's monogram to God's presence.**

Vincent Debiais

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# SIGN AND DESIGN

DUMBARTON OAKS SYMPOSIA AND COLLOQUIA

# SIGN AND DESIGN

Script as Image in Cross-Cultural Perspective  
(300–1600 CE)

*Edited by*

BRIGITTE MIRIAM BEDOS-REZAK  
AND JEFFREY F. HAMBURGER

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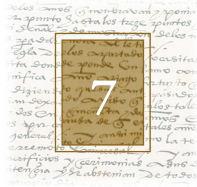




## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AA</i>	<i>Archäologischer Anzeiger</i>
<i>AER</i>	<i>De antiquis ecclesiae ritibus libri</i> , ed. E. Martene, 4 vols. (Anvers, 1736–1738)
<i>AH</i>	<i>Art History</i>
<i>AI</i>	<i>Ars islamica</i>
<i>AJA</i>	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
<i>AJP</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
<i>ArtB</i>	<i>Art Bulletin</i>
<i>ArtLomb</i>	<i>Arte lombarda</i>
<i>bBer</i>	Babylonian Talmud, tractate Berakhot
<i>BIE</i>	<i>Bulletin de l'Institut d'Égypte</i>
<i>Bm</i>	Bibliothèque municipale
<i>BMGS</i>	<i>Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies</i>
<i>BMMA</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art</i>
<i>BMQ</i>	<i>The British Museum Quarterly</i>
<i>BnF</i>	Bibliothèque nationale de France
<i>BSI</i>	<i>Byzantinoslavica</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>bYoma</i>	Babylonian Talmud, tractate Yoma
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>CabArch</i>	<i>Cahiers archéologiques</i>
<i>CabCM</i>	<i>Cahiers de civilisation médiévale, X<sup>e</sup>–XII<sup>e</sup> siècles</i>
<i>CCCM</i>	Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis
<i>CCSL</i>	Corpus Christianorum, series latina
<i>CIFM</i>	<i>Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale</i>
<i>CPh</i>	<i>Classical Philology</i>
<i>DACL</i>	<i>Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie</i>
<i>Δελτ.Χριστ.Ἀρχ.Ἐτ.</i>	<i>Δελτίον τῆς Χριστιανικῆς ἀρχαιολογικῆς ἐταιρείας</i>
<i>DOP</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
<i>DOS</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Studies</i>
<i>EME</i>	<i>Early Medieval Europe</i>
<i>Ἐπ.Ἐτ.Στερ.Μελ.</i>	<i>Ἐπετερίς ἐταιρείας Στερεοελλαδικῶν μελετῶν</i>
<i>EphL</i>	<i>Ephemerides liturgicae</i>
<i>ErJb</i>	<i>Eranos-Jahrbuch</i>
<i>FS</i>	<i>Frühmittelalterliche Studien</i>
<i>GBA</i>	<i>Gazette des beaux-arts</i>
<i>HSCPh</i>	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>IRAIK</i>	<i>Izvestiia Russkogo arkheologicheskogo instituta v Konstantinople</i>

<i>JbAC</i>	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JÖB</i>	<i>Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik</i>
<i>JÖBG</i>	<i>Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JRA</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Archaeology</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
<i>MarbJb</i>	<i>Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft</i>
MGH Poetae	Monumenta Germaniae historica, Poetae latini medii aevi
MGH SS	Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptores
MGH Ep	Monumenta Germaniae historica, Epistolae
MM	F. Miklosich and J. Müller, <i>Acta et diplomata graeca medii aevi—sacra et profana</i> (Vienna, 1860–1890)
<i>NABU</i>	<i>Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires</i>
<i>NC</i>	<i>The Numismatic Chronicle</i>
<i>Νέος Έλλ.</i>	<i>Νέος Έλληνομνημων</i>
n. st.	new style (calendral)
<i>ODB</i>	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium</i>
PG	Patrologiae cursus completus, Series graeca, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857–66)
PL	Patrologiae cursus completus, Series latina, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1844–80)
<i>PLP</i>	<i>Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit</i>
<i>RBén</i>	<i>Revue bénédictine</i>
<i>RBK</i>	<i>Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst</i> , ed. K. Wessel (Stuttgart, 1963–)
<i>REB</i>	<i>Revue des études byzantines</i>
<i>REI</i>	<i>Revue des études islamiques</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Revue des études slaves</i>
<i>SBN</i>	<i>Studi bizantini e neoellenici</i>
<i>TM</i>	<i>Travaux et mémoires</i>
<i>WSt</i>	<i>Wiener Studien</i>
<i>VizVrem</i>	<i>Vizantiiskii vremennik</i>
<i>ZKunstg</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte</i>
<i>ZPapEpig</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>
<i>ZRVI</i>	<i>Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta</i>



# From Christ's Monogram to God's Presence

## An Epigraphic Contribution to the Study of Chrismons in Romanesque Sculpture

VINCENT DEBIAIS

THE CHRISMON IS OMNIPRESENT IN ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS of the western middle ages.<sup>1</sup> It was carved in the tympanum of Romanesque churches, engraved on sarcophagi, drawn in charters and diplomas, and inscribed on seals and coins. It holds a special place in monumental sculpture, particularly in the south of France and the north of Spain, where it participates in the decoration and visual organization of buildings.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is not to propose a history of chrismons, but to explore how this symbol can be interpreted as a “hybrid sign, not necessarily bound to any specific language.”<sup>3</sup> There is actually a rich bibliography on the subject; but despite such omnipresence, the abundant studies on this topic (since the end of nineteenth century) rarely concern art history, and those that do fail to submit the chrismon to a formal analysis or interpretation of its meaning. Actually, medieval epigraphers have produced the most studies on the chrismon, seeing it as a special part of medieval written manifestations.<sup>4</sup> Apart from these epigraphic studies, most of the works about chrismons take an evolutionary

1 In this essay *chrismon* must be understood as the medieval version of the chi-rho symbol, inscribed in a circle and frequently completed by the Greek letters alpha and omega. The chrismon was not the only christogram used during the Middle Ages, but it seems to have been the only monogram. In some cases, especially when the vertical stroke of the rho is crossed by a horizontal line, the chrismon can also be considered as a *staurogram* (i.e., an iconic sign for the Holy Cross).

2 The great number of chrismons in Pyrenean churches has deterred scholars from attempting an exhaustive corpus, although there is a website providing good pictures of most of the chrismons from the Pyrenees, mainly for Spain. For the examples mentioned but not reproduced in this paper, see <http://www.claustro.com/> (accessed 5 January 2015). The examples that appear in this essay have been selected for their monumental coexistence with epigraphic inscriptions; they do not provide a representative overview of the production of the Pyrenean chrismons.

3 Quote from the conference announcement written by Brigitte M. Bedos-Rezak and Jeffrey Hamburger. I wish to thank the organizers for their invitation and for all their comments on this essay. I also want to express appreciation for the great work of the reviewers, and the friendly and accurate reading by Herbert L. Kessler, Eric Palazzo, and Daniel Rico.

4 Volume 10 of the *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale (CIFM)*, released in 1985, includes all the chrismons of southern France (Gironde, Landes, Lot-et-Garonne, Aveyron, Gers, Pyrénées-Atlantiques, Hautes-Pyrénées, Haute-Garonne, and Ariège). In short records, the authors make a formal analysis of the sign and interpret possible inscriptions accompanying it. This publication remains to this day the most important bibliographic reference for the study of chrismons in epigraphy. The introduction (pp. 5–12) provides an overview of the existing scholarship on chrismons, returns to patristic texts that explain the chrismon, and gives a few guidelines to explain its significance. Even if *CIFM* does not propose a general interpretation of the chrismon, the reader will find its

perspective and try to point out formal and semantic transformations, from Constantine's labarum<sup>5</sup> to Romanesque chrismon.<sup>6</sup>

Studies on chrismons in ancient and late antique manuscripts and on coins have established first that the symbol may not consistently or exclusively relate to the sign associated with Constantine's victory, because its monogrammatic formulation allows connections with wide range of semantic content.<sup>7</sup> The chrismon, in essence a christogram, can also be considered as a staurogram in its simplest compositions. In all cases there is a true porosity between the form composed of letters and the iconic sign of some material (the cross) or intangible (the victory granted by the deity) reality. By seeking meanings and formal evolutions of the chrismon—a mutable sign, in its form and signification—such studies have ignored the definition of the nature of this sign. From a semiotic point of view, there have been no genetic analyses of the signifier, but only attempts to extract a signified meaning from the graphic choices. As noted by Henri Leclercq, Ludwig Traube, and Larry Hurtado, the chrismon existed as a manuscript and epigraphic abbreviation long before it was used

by Constantine as a monogrammatic military or religious sign.<sup>8</sup> The chrismon then received the Greek letters alpha and omega; this essential addition and its subsequent developments (from fifth century onward) transform its semiotic nature. Through many enrichments of its initial monogrammatic structure, the chrismon became isolated and no longer factored into the composition of a sentence, as it used to when it was an abbreviation.<sup>9</sup> It acquired a real individuality and became an autonomous sign, enabling a wide range of iconic and symbolic meanings, such as peace, the Trinity, victory, protection, and divine figuration.<sup>10</sup>

### Local Context

Almost all the monumental chrismons concerned in this study come from France and Spain and can be dated from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, although there are some rare exceptions from the Carolingian period. From a geographic point of view, the sample of chrismons is found exclusively in the Pyrenees on both sides of the current border between France and Spain, with a higher density in the center of this area.<sup>11</sup> The chrismon adopts there a particular form that incorporates the Greek letters chi and rho of the labarum inscribed in a circle, completed by alpha and omega, to which is added a Latin S or a Greek sigma. These signs come in more-or-less complex compositions giving the motif particular values within the panorama of christological themes. Such variations on Christ exposed in the stone of the tympanum of Romanesque churches are often accompanied by epigraphic texts. They allow us to approach the value and

synthesis most interesting and accessible. See also Bernadette Leplant-Mora, "Réflexions sur le chrisme: Symbole et extension en Gascogne," *Bulletin de la société archéologique, histoire, littéraire et scientifique du Gers* 88 (1977): 22–33. The most complete analysis of a monumental chrismon deals with a Spanish example, that of Jaca cathedral in Aragón. In 1996, Robert Favreau analyzed the inscriptions that accompany the monumental chrismon carved between two lions in the tympanum of the cathedral; see "Les inscriptions du tympan de la cathédrale de Jaca," *Comptes-rendus de l'académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1996): 535–60; and idem, "Note complémentaire à propos d'une inscription du tympan de la cathédrale de Jaca," *Comptes-rendus de l'académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (2004): 7–10.

5 "Labarum," *DACL* 8.1:927–62. See William Seston, "La vision païenne de 310 et les origines du chrisme constantinien," in *Mélanges Franz Cumont: Annuaire de l'Institut de philologie et d'histoire orientales et slaves* 4 (1936): 374–95.

6 The most complete reference on this evolution remains the "chrisme" entry of the *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, which reviews the state of the question and gives many epigraphic examples; *DACL* 3.1:1481–1534. See also Alain Sené, "Quelques remarques sur les tympans romans à chrisme en Aragon et en Navarre," in *Mélanges offerts à R. Crozet*, ed. P. Galais and Y. J. Riou (Poitiers, 1966), 1:365–81. Though this paper gives a very useful first approach to monumental chrismons, its conclusions are quite difficult to follow.

7 Patrick Bruun, "The Victorious Signs of Constantine: A Reappraisal," *NC* 157 (1997): 41–59.

8 *DACL* 3.1:1486; Ludwig Traube, *Nomina Sacra: Versuch einer Geschichte der christlichen Kürzung* (Munich, 1907); and Larry Hurtado, "The Origin of the Nomina Sacra: A Proposal," *JBL* 117 (1998): 655–73.

9 *DACL* 3.1:1504.

10 The need to understand the meaning of the chrismon and an evolutionary approach have sometimes led to the proposal of theories that seem difficult to apply to epigraphic medieval examples. See for example the hypothesis of Anne Lombard-Jourdan, *Fleur de lis et oriflammes: Signes célestes du royaume de France* (Paris, 1991). For examples of the chrismon's various iconic and symbolic meanings, see *CIFM* 10:8.

11 French departments of Hautes-Pyrénées, Gers, and Pyrénées-Atlantiques, and Spanish autonomous communities of Aragon and Navarre.

meaning of these graphic constructions, but also to appreciate its semiotic nature.

A question arises from the mapping and statistical analysis of the Pyrenean chrismons: how can we explain their geographic and chronological concentration? No satisfactory answer has ever been formulated on this subject, and it is difficult to say more than the bare facts: they are monumental chrismons from between the Basque country and Catalonia. The concerned areas were, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, very different at political, artistic, and linguistic levels, and it is therefore impossible to reduce such graphic practice to a unique theological or historical explanation. The graphic culture in which Pyrenean chrismons were created was not homogeneous, and documentary or epigraphic practices varied considerably throughout the Pyrenees.

Starting from such changeability of intellectual and graphic contexts, it is tempting to envisage some diffusion of a model, of a figurative tradition from an initial spot, located for the most ancient examples in the northern part of the ancient kingdom of Navarre. This solution is possible even if it remains difficult to explain influences and choices that led Romanesque artists to reproduce this symbol on both sides of Pyrenees in the tympana of churches of wholly variable status, size, and location. How can we connect, whatever relationships we envisage, the portal of Jaca cathedral, that of Armentia church, the chrismon of Eusa gallery, and the portal of Oloron-Sainte-Marie cathedral? Even in the case of a dynamic diffusion (which would be a *difficilior* reading of this artistic phenomenon), it would still remain hard to explain the appearance of the chrismon in Navarre.

Dulce Ocón Alonso, who made a prodigious study of Pyrenean chrismons, proposed that the symbol be read as a sign of the Pamplonan monarchy and its fidelity to Rome.<sup>12</sup> Her explanation is appealing, but it does not seem to apply to all

Pyrenean chrismons. Nevertheless, it allows us to explain the diffusion of the chrismon thanks to an endogenous phenomenon; its limit also allows us to infer the vast range of meaning in this motif, as the inscriptions that accompany numerous chrismons show.

By analyzing these inscriptions and seeking unity amid very marked formal and functional differences, this paper tries to propose some guidelines for the interpretation of Pyrenean chrismons, their semantic value, and their role in monumental sculptural decoration.

### Giving and Hiding Christ's Name: Monogram, Abbreviation, Description

The explanation of the chrismon as Christ's name is the more common one among the Church Fathers and medieval authors, especially Paulinus of Nola and Orens, bishop of Auch.<sup>13</sup> Eusebius, in his *Vita Constantini*, describes the labarum as "a monogram giving this Holy Name by the first two letters, joined in a unique form with the P in the center of the X."<sup>14</sup> So, first of all, the chrismon is a name, reduced or extended thanks to its monogrammatic shape.<sup>15</sup> This is the explanation we find in an inscription that once accompanied Christ's monogram at the church of Saint Thecla in Milan; its formulation is complex, sometimes inelegant, but explains all the letters in a simple way: "This circle gives the High King's name who sees without beginning nor end. Alpha and omega shows that you are at the same time the beginning and the end. X and P gather Christ's holy name."<sup>16</sup>

With the introduction of two additional letters, alpha and omega, it becomes difficult to consider the chrismon as a monogram, because these two signs are not part of the monogram's solution of *Christos* in Greek, or *Christus* in

12 Dulce Ocón Alonso, "El sello de dios sobre la iglesia: Tímpanos con crismón en Navarra y Aragón," in *El tímpano románico: Imágenes, estructuras y audiencias* (Santiago de Compostela, 2003), 76–101. For a reading of Alonso's conclusions see Aiskoa Pérez Alonso, "Una nueva interpretación de la escultura del pórtico de Armentia," *Estudios Alaveses* 28 (2008): 129–56.

13 Paulinus of Nola, *Poema* 19, PL 61:544–49; Orens, *Item plus de trinitate*, PL 61:1002. See *CIFM* 10:7.

14 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 1:26; ed. B. Bleckmann (Turnhout, 2007).

15 For more on the links between chrismons and monograms, see Antony Eastmond's contribution to this volume (chap. 11).

16 Edmond Le Blant, *Inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaule* (Paris, 1856), no. 48 (105).



Latin.<sup>17</sup> Inscriptions that accompany chrismons do not miss that point and, in France as in Spain, try from the beginning of the thirteenth century to emphasize the essential relation to Christ that may have been obscured by the enrichment of the monogram. The addition of the letters alpha and omega is, in that sense, a confirmation of the meaning of the motif, insofar as they suggest God's omnipotence (thanks to Saint John's Revelation).<sup>18</sup>

Such enrichment can also be seen in the addition of the four monosyllabic words *lux*, *rex*, *lex*, and *pax*, which designated, throughout the middle ages, Christ in the paraphrases *rex regum*, *lux mundi*, *pax aeterna*, etc. Their association seems to have started in an epitaph composed for himself by Angilbert, Abbot of Saint-Riquier.<sup>19</sup> The association continued for a long time, even entering the iconography of the Holy Cross, which frequently carries the words on its four arms.<sup>20</sup> On the square chrismon drawn above the west door of Saint Orens church at Bostens (Landes), placed on each side of the rho, we read *lux* and *lex*, and on each side of the S, *pax* and *rex*.<sup>21</sup> The final X of both *rex* and *lex* is formed by the ends of the two lines that form the chi (fig. 7.1). It is a detail, of course, but it also manifests in stone the unity between the chrismon and its textual supplements, all participating in the definition of Christ's complex reality. At the base of the rho, a hand is physically holding

the cross made of letters, which is constructed by crossing and tying alphabetic signs. The horizontal stroke bisecting the chi contributes to the construction of the cross and shows the similarity between christogram and staurogram on the one hand, and on the other hand demonstrates the inextricable intertwining of visual and linguistic dimensions of the chrismon.

The square shape of the Bostens chrismon is unique, and it may be associated with the desire to create in stone the shape of a particular object. Chrismons are more usually inscribed in a circle that contains the monogram letters and possible supplements, thus isolating the figure from its surroundings. The medallion type, and more generally the idea of inclusion, concerns a large number of signs referring to Christ's figure, in particular his bust or his hand, which appear in circular medallions from late antiquity on architecture or jewelry. The enclosing shape of the medallion, like that of the mandorla, allows the artist to create a division between the inside and outside of the circle. Thus, the chrismon, like Christ's bust or God's hand, is sacred and divine, separated from the world of men; the circle and the mandorla are doors that open onto the infinity of the Deity.

The chrismon at Lème (Pyrénées-Atlantiques) is very similar to the previous one in its construction and its graphic choices (fig. 7.2): *rex* and *lex* use the chi lines; a hand holds the vertical stroke of the rho; the letters V and X are joined in the word *lux*; and the letters alpha and omega are drawn on horizontal stroke of the rho.<sup>22</sup> Despite the obvious differences between these two chrismons, we must recognize a common desire to create a complex object using effects of plan and background to show an unbreakable unity among all the components of the chrismon. The constituent lines of each complementary sign (alpha, omega, sigma) seem to pass sometimes ahead, sometimes behind the written plan of the chi and rho.

The chrismon of Peyraube church in Lamayou (Pyrénées-Atlantiques) shows that the search for unity (by the use of common elements in a chrismon and its additions) is not systematic. The words *lex* and *lux* are indeed engraved independently on both sides of the chi, in the

17 The first Christian symbols, however, often offer complex compositions in which letters can display all words of a nominal group or sentence. See Luc Renault, "La croix aux premiers siècles chrétiens," in *Le supplice et la Gloire* (Saintes, 2000), 12–22.

18 Rev. 1:8: "Ego sum alpha et omega, principium et finis." Anne-Orange Poilpré says that "le Christ, spécifiquement présent dans la lettre *chi*, contient également en sa personne l'intégralité du monde": Anne-Orange Poilpré, *Maiestas Domini: Une image de l'Église en Occident* (Paris, 2005), 165.

19 MGH SS, 15.1 (Hanover, 1887), 179.

20 See, for example, folio 4v of Ferdinand's *Beatus* (Madrid, Biblioteca nacional, ms. B.31 [olim Vit. 14.2]), on which appears a full-page Asturian victory cross flanked by the words *pax* and *lux* in the upper part, and *rex* and *lex* in the lower part. As is always the case in this type of Asturian cross, the letters alpha and omega hang from the horizontal arm of the cross, making a complex visual construction in which Christ is manifested by the image of the cross, the letters (individual elements and manifestation of his omniscience), and by the words, a paraphrase of his power: Mireille Mentré, *Spanische Buchmalerei des Mittelalters* (Wiesbaden, 2006), pl. 57.

21 CIFM 10:127.

22 Ibid., 170.



**FIG. 7.1.**  
Chrismon, west  
portal, Saint-Orens  
Church, Bostens  
(Landes).

Photo © CESM.

lower part of the chrismon, which becomes an epigraphic support for the definition of Christ's nature.<sup>23</sup> But one should note that this chrismon lacks a circle or another square form enclosing the letters. Is there a connection between these two characteristics? This chrismon carries, in addition to the words *lex* and *lux*, the two chris-tograms IHS and XPS used as abbreviations for *Ihesus Christus*. These two *nomina sacra* do not use signs or letters from the original chrismon and thus can be considered as complements to the monogram. Does the lack of a unique construction lead to redundancy in the presence of the chrismon *and* the XPS abbreviation? Actually, they can be considered as two modes of expression for the same reality, each one with a specific function of what Jean-Claude Bonne calls "ornementalité" and "littéralité."<sup>24</sup>

As seen in Peyraube, the association of the four words *lux*, *rex*, *lex*, and *pax* with the chrismon is not necessarily complete. A few more examples are needed to demonstrate that relationship. At Lacassagne (Hautes-Pyrénées), only the word *lex* was transcribed:<sup>25</sup> L and E are placed on either side of the chrismon, and the chi is used as the final X. In the tympanum of Gellenave church (in Bouzon-Gellenave, in Gers),<sup>26</sup> the word *rex* has been set up in the same way, with the chi used as final X. In Castillon-Debats (Gers), a reused bas-relief outside the south wall has a more complex form, in which the words *rex*, *lux*, and *lex* can be read. Using the alpha that hangs under the chi, we can also compose the word *pax*.<sup>27</sup> In this case, the stone-cutter has chosen to use letter games to make visible the play on the four monosyllabic nouns. This complex chrismon could be considered a monogram containing not only the letters of

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 167; [http://www.claustro.com/Crismones/Webpages/Catalogo\\_crismon.htm](http://www.claustro.com/Crismones/Webpages/Catalogo_crismon.htm) (accessed 5 January 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Claude Bonne, "Les ornements de l'histoire (à propos de l'ivoire carolingien de saint Remi)," *Annales Histoire Sciences Sociales* 51 (1996): 37–70.

<sup>25</sup> *CIFM* 10:232.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 76.



**FIG. 7.2.**  
Chrismon,  
east wall above  
sacristy door,  
Lème (Pyrénées-  
Atlantiques).  
Photo by author.



**FIG. 7.3.**  
Chrismon, west  
tympanum, Saint-  
Michel Church,  
Lamaguère (Gers).  
Photo © CESM.



Christ's name but also those of its definition by the monosyllabic words used by Angilbert in his epitaph.

In the tympanum of Azuelo church, IHS and XPS (featuring a stroke that really shows their sacred nature and excludes the chris-tograms from the construction of a unique graphic system) are placed on both parts of the

chi.<sup>28</sup> Some examples show however that the border between the chrismon monogram and the XPS abbreviation is very thin. The west portal of Saint-Christophe de Montsaunès (Haute-Garonne) carries a beautiful Pyrenean

28 María Concepción García Gainza, ed., *Catálogo monumental de Navarra* (Pamplona, 1980–97), 2.1:337.





**FIG. 7.4.**  
Chrismon,  
tympanum, Jaca  
cathedral (Aragón).  
Photo © CESM.

chrismon, in which rho is surmounted by a large tilde (increasing the crosslike shape of the chrismon).<sup>29</sup> Such implementation differs from the abbreviation XPS only by the juxtaposition of letters, an aesthetic phenomenon that affects many abbreviations or complete words in epigraphic practice, and which is not exclusively reserved for the composition of monograms.

Other examples would confirm that the chrismon can be, in a few cases, a monumental epigraphic and manuscript abbreviation for Christ's name. Let us take the example of the chrismon carved in the tympanum of the west door of Saint-Michel of Lamaguère church (Gers; fig. 7.3).<sup>30</sup> It presents a chi and rho, and the alpha and omega, but it is also supplemented with an I and an S inscribed on the middle stroke, and with an H traced where one would have expected the usual S. These letters build the christogram IHS, used alone in the epigraphic world only from the end of thirteenth century. The Lamaguère chrismon dates to the twelfth century, so one is tempted to look for the christogram XPS appearing with IHS. It is found easily in the chrismon, another form of monumental abbreviation for Christus, where a single S is used to complete both forms.

### Letters as Voices Proclaiming Christ's Peace

If the chrismon can be regarded as a monogram—that is, as a figure composed of all the letters or the main letters of a name (“ligature of ligatures” according to Otto Pächt)<sup>31</sup>—two possibilities must be considered: (1) the chrismon uses the Greek characters chi, rho, and sigma, and refers to the Greek name *Christos*, giving a monogrammatic form to the manuscript abbreviation XPS; (2) the Greek characters alpha, chi, and rho are exchanged for the Latin letters P, A, and X to make a new monogram for the word *pax*.

Associations between the chrismon and peace have been repeatedly highlighted throughout the corpus of scholarship on monumental chrismons.<sup>32</sup> These cross-references can take various forms, but the tympanum of Jaca cathedral, in Aragon, may offer the most comprehensive explanation of such relationship (fig. 7.4).<sup>33</sup>

31 Otto Pächt, *L'enluminure médiévale: Une introduction* (Paris, 1997), 67.

32 CÍEM 10:8: “There are clear interferences between the chrismon and the word *pax* . . . also used in a monogrammatic form.”

33 On the Jaca tympanum, see the important studies by David Simon, “El tímpano de la catedral de Jaca,” in *XV congreso de historia de la corona de Aragón*, vol. 3, *Jaca en la corona de Aragón siglos XII–XVIII* (Saragossa, 1996), 405–19; and Calvin

29 CÍEM 10:43.

30 Ibid., 83.



**FIG. 7.5.**  
Chrismon,  
tympanum of the  
gallery door, church  
of Eusa (Navarra).  
Photo by author.

A famous inscription on the circle around the chrismon, located between two lions, gives the following text: "In this sculpture, take care to recognize, you reader: P is the Father, A is the Son, the double [letter] is the Holy Spirit. These three are truly one single Lord."<sup>34</sup> Many interpretations can be found in the extensive bibliography about this beautiful piece from the end of twelfth century. The French scholar in medieval epigraphy Robert Favreau found the source of Jaca's inscription in the commentary on Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians by Atto of Vercelli.<sup>35</sup> It brings together the three Latin letters P, A, and X in the word *pax*, "symbol of the Trinity, composed of three inseparable letters."<sup>36</sup> If the chrismon can be linked to the Trinity, it is because the combination of letters into the word *pax* forms a Trinitarian symbol (and not because it adds to Christ's monogram the letter S symbolizing the Holy Spirit).

Kendall, "The Verse Inscriptions of the Tympanum of Jaca and the Pax Anagram," *Mediaevalia* 19 (1996): 405–34.

34 "Hac in sculptura lector si gnoscere cura / P pater, A genitus, duplex est spiritus almus / Hii tres jure quidem Dominus sunt unus et idem." Favreau, "Les inscriptions du tympan," 536.

35 PL 134:554–55.

36 Favreau, "Les inscriptions du tympan," 551.

Spanish scholars have seen in the chrismon a way for graphic medieval culture to represent the mystery of the Trinity, interpreting each letter as a single person gathered into a unique motif.<sup>37</sup> The inscription written around the chrismon at Jaca evokes "These three are truly one single Lord," but it does so in order to develop the concept of peace and actually ignores the letter S. Jaca's chrismon is the most complex monumental example of associations between Christ's monogram and the idea of peace; the very rough metrical construction of the inscription's third verse is a reflection of this complexity. This verse also raises significant difficulties in understanding the semiotic definition of the symbol. If the three Latin letters are really gathered into a monogram at Jaca's tympanum, each of them simultaneously possesses an individual semantic existence, insofar as they refer to something other than the word they begin (the Father for P, the Son for A, and the Holy Spirit for X). Jaca's chrismon therefore offers the viewer a very rich range of meanings and, at the same time, very different ways to reach them: the decomposition of Christ's monogram, the reconstruction of the word *pax*, the theological realities of symbolic letters, an iconic reading of the chrismon, and so forth. However, Jaca's chrismon also shows a strong principle of unity in its construction; the addition of ornamental devices to the circle enclosing the letters engages all the alphabetic components in a single paradigm.

The connection between the chrismon and the word *pax* transforms the Greek letters into Latin letters, and results in a monogram that possesses all the letters to form a complete word. This association is still more common from the eleventh century, especially thanks to the success, in epigraphy as in manuscripts, of the word play on *rex*, *lex*, *lux*, and *pax*.<sup>38</sup> In the tympanum of the gallery of the church of Eusa (near Pamplona, Navarra), there is a classical chrismon with alpha and omega hanging from the

37 See, for example, Dulce Ocón Alonso, "Problemática del crismón trinitario," *Archivo español de arte* 233 (1983): 242–63.

38 Robert Favreau, "Rex, lex, lux, pax: Jeux de mots et jeux de lettres dans les inscriptions médiévales," in *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes* 161 (2003): 625–35.



upper arms of chi (fig. 7.5).<sup>39</sup> Inside a circle, the word *vobis* completes the word *pax* drawn in a monogrammatic form. Though Eusa's chrismon is much simpler than Jaca's, it also transforms in a particularly explicit way Christ's monogram into an original, graphic form of the word *pax*. In such compact and voluntarily elliptical form, the motif refers to Christ's words "pax vobis," related in his successive appearances to the disciples;<sup>40</sup> it also makes reference to the verse "pax Domini sit semper vobiscum."<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the appearance of the monogram of *pax* does not sever the chrismon from its christological meaning. On the contrary, "peace" on the tympanum of churches is Christ's peace, the one that is proclaimed in one of the antiphons of the Paschal season: "Pax vobis, ego sum, alleluia, nolite timere, alleluia."<sup>42</sup> The chrismon is a monumental depiction of Christ's voice.<sup>43</sup>

In certain cases, the conventional monogrammatic form of the chrismon can disappear for the benefit of the word *pax*. Near the south door of Bon-Encontre church a relief has been reused, in which the letters rho and chi are placed side-by-side, followed by a straight line that might be an I. The letters A and X are also drawn vertically under the center of the chi. The editors of the *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale* (CIFM) convincingly read in these two groups of signs (the first one horizontal, the second one vertical) an abbreviation for *Christi* (XPI) and then the word *pax*. The bas-relief then forms the expression *pax Christi*, which is commonly found, for example, in benedictions engraved at the entrances of churches.<sup>44</sup>

39 [http://www.claustro.com/Crismones/Webpages/Catalogo\\_crismon.htm](http://www.claustro.com/Crismones/Webpages/Catalogo_crismon.htm) (accessed 5 January 2015).

40 Jn 20:21: "Et, cum hoc dixisset, ostendit eis manus et medio et dixit eis: pax vobis." Jn 20:26: "Venit Iesus, ianuis clausis, et stetit in medio et dixit: pax vobis."

41 Christine Mohrmann and Bernard Botte, *L'ordinaire de la messe* (Paris, 1953), 124.

42 *Corpus antiphonarium officii* (Rome, 1966), 3: no. 4254; Lk 24:36.

43 The association between Christ and peace is also evident in some monumental chrismons where the word *pax* is fully transcribed. This is the case in the tympanum of the portal of Sainte-Engrâce church, where the circle is inscribed with the formula "pax tecum." This inscription could give the meaning of the motive, as the words *cherubin* and *seraphin* identify the two sculptures nearby the chrismon. CIFM 10:187 and 6:PA18, 166.

44 CIFM 6:PA13, 124–25.

With the partial dissolution of the monogram—partial because the stone-cutter clearly sought to gather the three letters of christic abbreviation—a more complex syntactic construction becomes possible. This is the case with the bas-relief placed above the west entrance of Saint-Pierre-de-Cazeaux chapel, in Laplume. The form and general composition of this relief is described by the authors of the CIFM as a "symbolic wheel" that reminds one of contemporary chrismons, even if no letter of the monogram can be read.<sup>45</sup> However, in the circle divided into eight parts (just as the Greek letters chi and rho would do in a chrismon) the same formula as in Eusa was engraved: "pax vobis."<sup>46</sup> In some churches, such inscriptions can be read without any chrismon in a "visual evocation" of Christ's monogram, showing how deep the associations between this motif and peace were in medieval visual culture. At the west portal of the chapel of Saint John in Chancelade, four circles contain, from left to right, the letters P, A, a cross, and the letter X (fig. 7.6).<sup>47</sup> There is no monogrammatic construction, each sign is isolated from others within individual circles. The cross carved at the top is, however, an image of Christ, so all the signs can therefore be said to form part of a unique composition proclaiming Christ's peace at the entrance of the church.<sup>48</sup> Here, the chrismon has been excluded, and the analogy stands in the location of the text, and in the combination of the word *pax* and a christological symbol. Topographic analogies between chrismons and these inscriptions, and obvious semantic relationships between the chrismon and the *pax* formulae, invite us to ask whether the claveau inscribed with the formula "pax huic domui" in the church of Merlande has the same

45 CIFM 6:PA14, 126–27.

46 At the church of Eusa, one can see two more christograms presenting original shapes similar to the Laplume chrismon. These are reminiscent of old Christian symbols like stars and wheels, which were also used in antique pagan or medieval magic. See Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in Middle Ages* (University Park, Pa., 2006); and idem, "Written Amulets and the Medieval Book," *Scrittura e civiltà* 23 (1999): 253–305.

47 CIFM 5:D6, 11–12.

48 In Chancelade, the superior arch is surmounted by a blessing hand designating the whole building as the recipient of the protection of Christ's peace.

**FIG. 7.6.**  
Chrismon, west  
portal, Saint John  
Chapel, Chancelade  
(Dordogne).  
Photo © CESM.



status and fulfills the same space-creating function in the building, even in the absence of any explicit reference to Christ.<sup>49</sup>

Despite significant semiotic differences between Christ's monogram and the word *pax*, both elements present such similar content that they could be interchangeable from time to time, as on a tenth-century ivory now in the British Museum, on which an inscription gives the incipit of the Gloria.<sup>50</sup> Within the inscription, Christ's monogram becomes an image of the word *pax* in a complex syntactic sequence, in some ideographic use of alphabetic signs. Where the word *pax* would have been carved in the response "et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis," a very simple chrismon (in an early-Christian form composed of the two original Greek letters) appears instead.<sup>51</sup> Proclaiming

peace through Christ's monogram allows a reinforcement of its essential christological origin, according to John's Gospel.<sup>52</sup> So, the link between the word *pax* and the chrismon in monumental sculpture does not mean the end of any graphic reference to Christ's name, but participates in its affirmation, thanks to a semantic expansion of the monogram.

### Chrismon and Trinity

In Spanish scholarship on the chrismon, the adjective "Trinitarian" is applied to the Pyrenean forms with the three letters X, P, and S supplemented by alpha and omega.<sup>53</sup> The very existence of the word "Trinitarian" is a sign of the persistence of some historiographic trend that has made the chrismon the medieval solution for representing the Trinity mystery. Though this explanation seems attractive and cannot

49 CIFM 5:D10, 17–18.

50 Adolph Goldschmidt, *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen aus der Zeit der karolingischen und sächsischen Kaiser: VIII.–XI. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1969–1970), no. 159, 78, pl. 70.

51 In the first Christian epitaphs including a chrismon, the monogram appears near the word *pax* in the formula "in pace Christi"; Bruun, "The Victorious Signs of Constantine," plate 17.

52 Jn 14:27: "Pacem relinquo vobis, pacem meam do vobis: non, quomodo mundus dat, ego do vobis."

53 For an overview of this important bibliography, see the recent article by Francisco García García, "El tímpano de Jaca y la escenificación de la ortodoxia," *Anales de Historia del Arte* 2 (2011): 123–46.





**FIG. 7.7.**  
North portal,  
Saint-Miguel  
Church, Estella  
(Navarra).  
Photo © CESM

be totally excluded, it has been strongly questioned since Robert Favreau's article on the Jaca cathedral in 1996, in which he concludes that a Trinitarian meaning must have been given to epigraphic chrismons in very few instances, in France as in northern Spain.<sup>54</sup>

There is actually no inscription with a chrismon giving any explicit Trinitarian description, even if the reference to the Trinity is evident in the text inscribed around the chrismon of Saint-Sauveur church at Saint-Macaire, which reads "in honor of the triune and only Lord" ("in onore trini et unius Domini").<sup>55</sup> The expression "trinus et unus," inherited from Saint Augustine<sup>56</sup> and very common in medieval epigraphy,<sup>57</sup> certainly takes a particular meaning in its association with the chrismon, and could become, in this exceptional case, a graphic representation of Trinity. Yet the monogram at Saint-Macaire does not contain the letter S, which normally leads to the Trinitarian interpretation. The lack of S shows that the semantic relationship between the chrismon and Trinity is not located in any monogrammatic structure nor construction of specific

signs (in order to build an abbreviation or a complete word), but rather in the capacity of the overall shape of the chrismon to visually signify (as an image or symbol) a complex reality through an iconic method of perception and restitution.

Let us try to go further in this direction. If the chrismon enters the world of representations (in a broad sense of the medieval concept of *representatio*), it cannot answer to a strictly lexical approach. The letter games have from now on no ambition to form a word semantically associated with a given intellectual reality, an abbreviation, or a monogram. The chrismon becomes an autonomous representation, part of a possible visual discourse.

We find the word "sign" in the inscription placed around the chrismon in Saint-Maixant church (Gironde), which gives the metric caption "qui confidit in hoc signo speret in Deo" ("let him who has faith in this sign hope in God"), making the chrismon a representation of the whole faith.<sup>58</sup> Christ's monogram acquires a figurative dimension that exceeds the association of Greek or Latin letters. At the portal of San Miguel church at Estella, there are two representations of the chrismon. The first one is located at the top of the upper archivolt; the second is engraved on the object held by Jesus Christ, who is represented in a mandorla on the tympanum (fig. 7.7). According

<sup>54</sup> Favreau, "Les inscriptions du tympan," 553, 555.

<sup>55</sup> *CIFM* 10:124; see also *CIFM* 5:G33, 121.

<sup>56</sup> Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*, 1.1, ch. 14; PL 32:1321.

<sup>57</sup> On that point, see Robert Favreau, "Épigraphie et théologie," in *Épigraphie et iconographie* (Poitiers, 1996), 37–49.

<sup>58</sup> *CIFM* 10:125.



**FIG. 7.8.**  
Chrismon, west  
wall of the tower,  
Camparan church  
(Hautes-Pyrénées).  
Photo by author.

to Christ's iconographic type in this sculpture, this object should be a book, but its shape does not fit with this interpretation.<sup>59</sup> It is perfectly square and also too thick; it actually looks more like a stone! The object is as original as the chrismon's location: the symbol that rarely enters complex visual compositions, here in association with other representations. The text around the edge of the mandorla offers this commentary: "Nec Deus est nec homo presens quam cernis imago, sed Deus est et homo quem sacra figurat imago."<sup>60</sup> Very common in epigraphy, this formula synthesizes the noticeable tension in medieval art between a thirst for visual depictions and the transcendence of the represented contents.<sup>61</sup> It offers an attempt at defining Christ's nature and proposes a perspective on medieval implications of image theory.

The novel location of the chrismon at Estella invites us to wonder whether the epigraphic message does not deal also with the monogram carved on the object held by Christ. In the limited context of the tympanum at San Miguel, what does the expression "sacra imago" refer to? To the enthroned and blessing Christ or to the chrismon he presents to the believers entering

the church? There could be a complementarity between the two representations, in which Christ's human figuration is accompanied with a divine one thanks to the chrismon. We should notice in this sense the proximity between the monogram and the word *sacra* of the inscription. The chrismon could be considered one of the representations of Christ's divine nature.

In the case of Estella, the chrismon, as the mandorla and throne, excludes the human figuration represented in the tympanum of the world of men and instead depicts only the divine, in a very medieval sense of what sacredness is.<sup>62</sup> After reading some medieval texts, one might go further and ask whether the monogrammatic structure of certain nomina sacra or formulae related to Christ are the best graphical constructions to testify to his dual nature. Otto Pächt reports the interpretation given by Jean Belet of the monogram bringing together, in liturgical manuscripts, the letters V and D of the *Vere dignum* preface: "Closed from all sides, delta is indeed an image of the divine nature which has no beginning and no end"; the *V* expresses instead Christ's human nature, which finds its origin in the Virgin but knows no end (see Kessler, chap. 6). "The line bringing together the two elements in the center represents the Cross, by what human existence seems to be linked to divine one."<sup>63</sup>

There is a strong correlation between the shape of the chrismon, its location, and contemporary graphic practices in the consecration of the church, unction of the altar, chrismation of the dying, and so forth. Placed in the tympana of church doors, the chrismon is an image of sacredness projected on the outside of the building that designates its function, in the same way as liturgical dedication ceremony and crosses on the church walls do. As such a generic symbol, the chrismon might then have been part of nonceremonial events after the consecration of the church. Such local or historical uses may have caused the chrismon to be fixed in stone

59 In any case, this object does not look like the books held by the Evangelists on the Estella tympanum.

60 Gainza, ed., *Catalogo monumental*, 2.1:486.

61 On these verses, see the great book by Herbert L. Kessler, *Neither God nor Man: Words, Images, and the Medieval Anxiety about Art* (Berlin, 2007). The author offers a great analysis of Estella's image. My own reflections on this topic were inspired by Kessler's conclusions.

62 Jean-Claude Schmitt, "La notion de sacré et son application à l'histoire du christianisme medieval," *Cahiers du Centre de recherches historiques* 9 (1992): 19–29; see also Michel Lauwers, "Le cimetière au Moyen Age: Lieu sacré, saint et religieux," *Annales Histoire Sciences Sociales* 5 (1999): 1047–72.

63 Jean Belet, *Rationale divinatorum officiorum*, chap. 43; PL 205:53; quoted by Pächt, *L'enluminure*, 44.





**FIG. 7.9.**  
Chrismon,  
tympanum of the  
cemetery door,  
south wall, church  
of Sedze-Maubecq.  
Photo by author.

more often in the Pyrenees than elsewhere. This hypothesis is suggested by the inscription accompanying the monogram in the tympanum of Campanan church (Hautes-Pyrénées), which reads, on both sides of the circle: “olea sacra.”<sup>64</sup> The very stylized chrismon (fig. 7.8) has certain similarities to a cross of dedication found as evidence of the dedication ceremony. The episcopal ritual says, in the *Pontifical romano-Germanique* as in Guillaume Durand, that twelve crosses traced by the bishop’s auxiliaries were anointed.<sup>65</sup> The inscription of Campanan’s chrismon also has a ceremonial aspect; associated with the church dedication (which gives sanctity to the building), it also transforms this motif into a sacred mark, a sculptural demonstration of the transcendental nature of God’s house. During the ceremony of

church dedication, the bishop would have pronounced this prayer while entering the building: “Pax huic domui.” It can be found in several medieval inscriptions occupying similar positions to those occupied by chrismons in southwest France.

The friction between the motif and its theological and symbolic background generates the precise meaning of each monumental chrismon; that is why a global study of this graphic phenomenon would be so complicated. The tympanum of Sedze-Maubecq illustrates the impossibility of systematizing the study of all chrismons (fig. 7.9). The Sedze-Maubecq example deserves a long and precise study of the interrelations among letters, images, locations, and meanings. Near the chrismon are bas-reliefs of the Virgin and Child, the Holy Spirit, and the *manus Dei*. The clearly Trinitarian meaning of these images is translated in the chrismon in a literal way. This double representation allows the passage of the earthly dedicated church (which contains three flagships, signs of the Trinity) to the celestial church, throne of the Divine. How not to notice the contact between the cross and the chrismon near the deisis, and the dove on earth, upon the church? An object of mediation, the chrismon translates sculpturally what

<sup>64</sup> CIRM 10:214.

<sup>65</sup> One can find a good description of the ritual of church dedication (gesture, prayers, liturgical texts, etc.) in Jean Michaud, “Les inscriptions de consécration d’autels et de dédicace d’églises en France du VIII<sup>e</sup> au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Épigraphie et liturgie” (Ph.D. diss., Université de Poitiers, 1978). See also Cyrille Vogel, ed., *Le pontifical romano-germanique* (Rome, 1963), 83: “Deinde in circuitu ecclesiae per parietes de dextro usque in dextrum faciat cruces cum pollice de chrismate in duodecim locis, dicens: sanctificetur hoc templum in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus sancti.”



can neither be said nor represented, and allows the passage from one world to another. The alphabetical signs are no longer the instruments of linguistic expression, but the means for the Logos to take physical form.

### The Chrismon: Sign (Seal) of Protection

Since Christ's monogram loses its lexical dimension when converted into a figurative representation, it is often used for protective purposes, to preserve churches from danger and say that here is the house of the Lord. That is what we find, for example, in the inscription that accompanies a chrismon formerly located at the door of the Hospitalers church in Toulouse. The text reads: "Here we pray to God, and this House is called his home."<sup>66</sup> The chrismon below might refer to the word *Deus* or to *domus ejus*, confirming the link with the church dedication.<sup>67</sup> The association between text and image reveals the desire to ensure the identification of the building, making the chrismon act like a seal, as a guarantee of authenticity.<sup>68</sup> The psalm verse engraved under the chrismon in the tympanum of Aguilar de Codés hermitage serves the same function by declaring: "I will enter your house, Lord; with fear of you I will worship at your holy temple" (fig. 7.10).<sup>69</sup> In this composition (as in many

other examples), the chrismon is a projection of sanctity at the entrance of the building; it guarantees the security and integrity of the church by a kind of proclamation *ad limine* of the special status of sacred space.<sup>70</sup>

A fragment of the former portal of Saint-Pé-de-Bigorre church (Hautes-Pyrénées) is now reused in the northern wall of the building. On the arch of the tympanum that formerly carried a chrismon, two verses are engraved in a beautiful script from the beginning of the twelfth century.<sup>71</sup> The first hexameter has a very close meaning to that of previously mentioned texts: "Here is God's house, the way to heaven and pilgrim's hope." The second verse not only identifies God's house, but also offers protection against evil: "This door is given to Peter. You are removed, Devil." In the monumental arrangement at Saint-Pé-de-Bigorre, as at Aguilar de Codés (where this aspect of protection is reinforced by the expression "in timore tuo"), the linguistic values of letters disappear in the construction of a prophylactic sign like the cross.

Actually, the alpha and omega in the chrismon can remind us of some early medieval Asturian crosses, symbols of protection and victory.<sup>72</sup> Let us refer to the chrismon located in the tympanum of the small Romanesque church of Otazu (near Pamplona). In this beautiful piece, we see the two letters of the Apocalypse hanging from the upper arms of the chi, as in Asturian examples or images from Beatus codices.<sup>73</sup> Otazu's chrismon is reminiscent of the one from Fredenandus's epitaph preserved in the church

66 "Hic Deus oratur domus ejus et ista vocatur." *CIFM* 10:62 and *CIFM* 7:57, 96. It should be noted that there is a play between the foreground and background, just as we observed in Bostens. The principle of unity is also present here through the node in the center that seems to connect all of the constituent parts of the chrismon.

67 On the relationship between epigraphic inscription and church dedication, see the great article by Cécile Treffort, "Une consécration à la lettre: Place, rôle et autorité des textes inscrits dans la sacralisation de l'église," in *Mises en scène et mémoire de la consécration de l'église dans l'Occident médiéval* (Turnhout, 2008), 219–51.

68 The use of chrismons as seals of protection has been studied conveniently in diplomatics; see, for example, the stimulating remarks by Robert Maxwell, "Sealing Signs and the Art of Transcribing in the Vierzon Cartulary," *ArtB* 81, no. 4 (1999): 576–97. Regarding magic uses, an important question remains: does the prophylactic action lie in the chrismon's graphic existence, beyond any performance, or in the marking, reading, spelling, or touching of the sign? For monumental chrismons, and according to the inscriptions, this prophylactic efficiency lies in both presence and vision.

69 "Introibo in domum tuam Domine. Adorabo ad templum sanctum tuum in timore tuo." Gaínza, ed., *Catalogo monumental*, 2, pt. 1: 59–60; for a detailed study of this tympanum,

see José Esteban Uranga Galdiano, "El tímpano de la puerta de la ermita de San Bartolomé en Aguilar de Codés," *Príncipe de Viana* (1942): 249; see also Javier Martínez de Aguirre, ed., *Enciclopedia del Románico en Navarra* (Aguilar de Campoo, 2008), 164–68.

70 These ideas have been formulated by Calvin Kendall, "The Gate of Heaven and the Fountain of Life: Speech-Act Theory and Portal Inscriptions," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 10 (1993): 111–28; and idem, *The Allegory of Church: Romanesque Portals and their Verse Inscriptions* (Toronto, 1998).

71 *CIFM* 10:263; *CIFM* 8:HP13, 104–5. "Est domus hic domini, via caeli, spes peregrini."

72 On the question of Asturian crosses, see Robert Favreau, "La croix victorieuse des rois des Asturies (VIII<sup>e</sup>–X<sup>e</sup>s.): Inscriptions et communication du pouvoir," in *L'écriture publique du pouvoir: Table-ronde Bordeaux (14–15 mars 2002)* (Bordeaux, 2002), 195–212.

73 See *ibid.*



**FIG. 7.10.**  
North portal,  
hermitage, Saint-  
Bartholomeo, Aguilar  
de Codés (Navarra).

Photo © CESM.

of Saint Peter of Teverga. The inscription, dated to 1076, is located under the protective symbol of the cross, recalling that symbol's power in the preservation of the deceased and burial: "I wear the sign of the kindly cross: flee, demon."<sup>74</sup> Even if there is not, strictly speaking, a chrismon in this Asturian example, we can envisage that victory crosses and Christ's monograms played a comparable prophylactic role. This connection confirms that the chrismon is an iconic sign, an image beyond any lexical development.

In the marking, identification, or protection of buildings, the chrismon possesses a form of efficiency, an operating strength.<sup>75</sup> The monogram makes, acts, transforms, or generates sacred qualities—maybe even sacramental ones—and its realization in stone on churches transmits these qualities to buildings or larger spaces. Where does this operating strength come from? What gives chrismons their effective power? Certainly, we can suggest the obvious

fact of its contents: Christ, whose name is fixed and exposed in his monogram, intervenes himself to transform a building made of stone into a spiritual one, excluded from the time of men but, at the same time, the locus of their community. In the same way that the letters of Holy Scripture, from alpha to omega, contain by synecdoche all of creation, the initials of Christ's name combined in his monumental monogram contain the totality of his sacramental efficiency. The active and immediate strength of the name is added to the mechanical value of lettering, an instrument of creation by making language visible, to create a way for the name to have a participative existence in the world.

### From Letters to Images

The assimilation between chrismons and images is particularly clear in the case of some elaborate pieces in which alphabetical structures have been dissolved, as in the southern tympanum of Ardanaz church. This chrismon is quite original: the chi lines end in floral elements on the circle that surrounds the chrismon, leaving very little blank space for lettering. The S is carved horizontally and the belly of the rho is reduced; and a small cross replaces the alpha. Even if the aesthetic result is beautiful, it is difficult to consider the Ardanaz chrismon as a monogram. Similarly, the southern door of the small church of Janariz (Navarre) was engraved with a complex but small chrismon (now destroyed): the

<sup>74</sup> "Crucis alme fero signum: fuge, demon." Francisco Diego Santos, *Inscripciones medievales de Asturias* (Oviedo, 1993), no. 183, 178.

<sup>75</sup> The location of a chrismon and its efficiency has been studied in charters; its role cannot be separated from the presence and the role of monograms and seals. On that topic, see Olivier Guyotjeannin, "Le monogramme dans l'acte royal français (X<sup>e</sup>–début XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle)," in *Graphische Symbole in mittelalterlichen Urkunden: Beiträge zu einer diplomatischen Semiotik*, ed. Peter Rück (Sigmaringen, 1996), 293–318; Jean-Baptiste Renault, "Le monogramme dans les chartes épiscopales en Lorraine et Champagne (X<sup>e</sup>–début XII<sup>e</sup> s.)," *Annales de l'Est* 59 (2009): 55–90; and Brigitte M. Bedos-Rezak, *When Ego Was Imago: Signs of Identity in Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2011).

letters were composed of double lines and the stone cutter deliberately increased the size of the ornamental elements, forming a complex pattern of interlacing. O. Pächt wrote of chrismons: "The Holy Monogram no longer seeks to be decrypted or to be read; it must spontaneously be perceived as the *signum Crucis*."<sup>76</sup>

Above the southern door of the church of Santiago in Puente la Reina, a chrismon is sculpted with a figure that resembles a prophet carrying a snake in his hand and a frog on his shoulder.<sup>77</sup> The sculpture hides the letters P and S of the chrismon; only alpha and omega can be seen. This representation is unusual, but it also confirms the iconographic value of the chrismon. In Puente la Reina, it can probably be interpreted as showing the opposition between good and evil from a passage of Saint John's Revelation.<sup>78</sup> In any case, a part of the chrismon has been voluntarily sacrificed to represent another image. The chrismon was most often a support for writing, but here we see it also as a support for iconography. The center of a chrismon from the church of Olóriz (preserved in the Museum of Navarra in Pamplona) depicts a wheel. In the center of one of the chrismons from Irache church, there is a floral motif and a hand of God.

The Holy Lamb is one of the most frequently added motifs, as in the tympanum of Aguilar de Codés hermitage (see fig. 7.10), where the chrismon is clearly relegated to second place, and serves as the background for the sculpture of a lamb. Christ's sacrificial destiny is based on the complex nature of God as man, as it appears in this chrismon motif. The quality of the sculpture allows a harmonious composition, but gives prominence to the lamb, as confirmed by the inscription on the circle: "He is worthy, the lamb who was sacrificed, to receive power, wealth, wisdom, strength,

glory, honor, and blessing."<sup>79</sup> The text ignores completely the monogram (probably associated with the other inscription referencing the church dedication), which becomes simply a figurative support for another image. There are complex interactions between these two representations of the same subject. This is suggested by the two inscriptions, in which the evocation of the sacrificed lamb is the very sign of the *templum* mentioned at the bottom of the tympanum: "I will enter your house, O Lord. I will worship in your holy temple fearing you."<sup>80</sup>

To conclude, consider the rich figuration carved on the facade of the Church of La Oliva monastery (in Carcastillo, Navarra) (fig. 7.11).<sup>81</sup> In the center of the monogram, which has lost an alpha to the iconographic development, the depiction of the Lamb of God is associated with lions, griffins, and stars. Outside the circle, sculptures of the Pantocrator and the Tetramorph (a motif depicting symbols of the Four Evangelists) on the right and a Nativity on the left participate in the creation of a complex visual discourse. The interpretation of the tympanum is indeed quite difficult.<sup>82</sup> If we consider the chrismon as an iconic object, we see that it forms a junction between the scene of Christ's birth, when his humanity is proclaimed to the world, and a representation of the Pantocrator, a reference to his divinity. Lions and griffins, symbols of the Resurrection, are placed within the chrismon to link the two scenes. In its implementation within the iconographic discourse, there is no semiotic difference between the chrismon and the other images of the tympanum. Therefore it could be considered as a synthetic image of God's humanity and deity, and thus as a symbol of his dual nature. This hypothesis for the interpretation of Carcastillo adds weight to my discussion following Herbert Kessler regarding the tympanum of Saint Miguel in Estella: the sacred image of the chrismon contains both God's human and divine natures.<sup>83</sup>

76 *Medieval Illumination: An Introduction* (Paris, 1997), 68.

77 Javier Martínez de Aguirre and Asunción de Orbe Sivatte, "Consideraciones acerca de las portadas lobuladas medievales in Navarra: Santiago de Puente la Reina, San Pedro de la Rúa de Estella y San Román de Cirauqui," *Príncipe de Viana* (1987): 41–59.

78 Rev. 16:13–14: "Et vidi de ore draconis et de ore bestiae et de ore pseudoprophetae spiritus tres inmundos in modum ranarum sunt enim spiritus daemoniorum facientes signa et procedunt ad reges totius terrae congregare illos in proelium ad diem magnum Dei omnipotentis."

79 "Dignus est agnus qui occisus est accipere virtutem divinitatem sapientiam fortitudinem honorem gloriam benedictionem," Rev. 5:12.

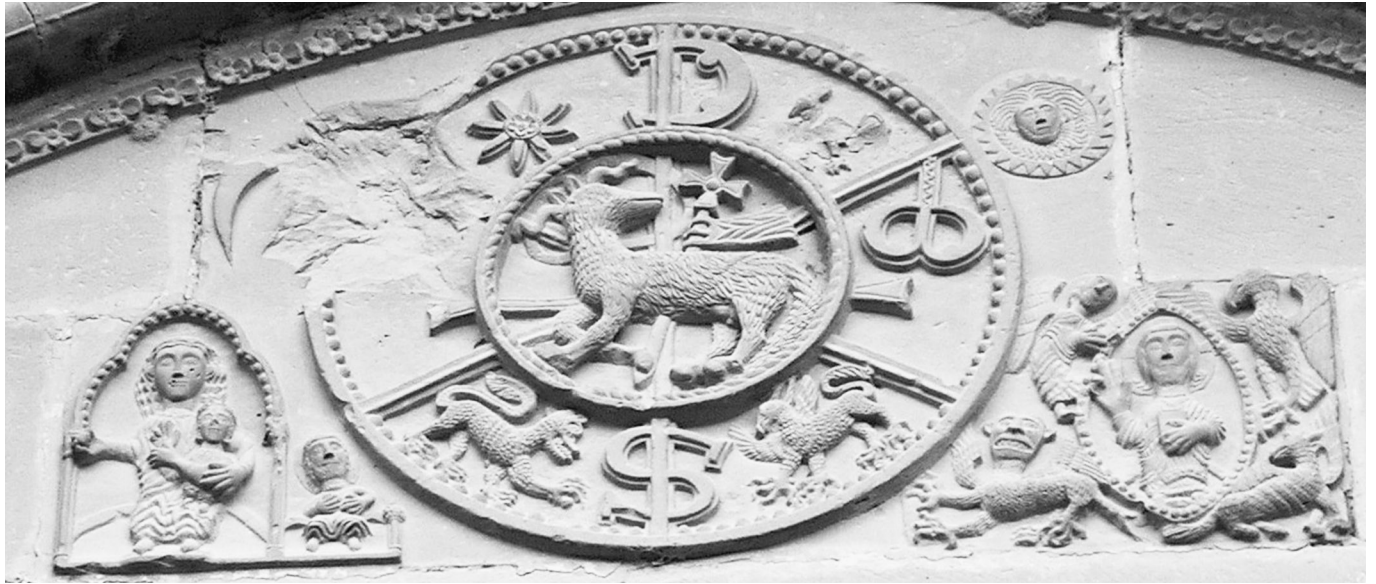
80 "Introibo in domum tuam, Domine. Adorabo ad templum sanctum tuum in timore tuo."

81 Gáinza, ed., *Catalogo monumental*, 1:205.

82 See Sené, "Quelques remarques," 372.

83 Kessler, *Neither God nor Man*.





**FIG. 7.11.**  
Chrismon, north  
portal, La Oliva  
monastery church,  
Carcastillo  
(Navarra).

Photo by author.

Due to its diversity of forms and functions, the chrismon cannot be reduced to a simple monogram using the first two letters of Christ's Greek name. Monumental examples and their epigraphic complements show that people of the Middle Ages played with the plurality of interpretations of the sign to make a full word, an abbreviation, sometimes a monogram, but especially an image, an iconic sign referring to complex notions.<sup>84</sup> The transcendence of these notions leads to its use as a semiotic paradigm, the nature of which is often difficult to determine. The chrismon shows that the borders between letter and image are not impervious in medieval graphic culture. The epigraphic examples (in contrast to letters or charters) allow us to consider this motif in relation to specific spaces and to approach the "archaeological" relationships between writing and sanctity.

The graphic build-up around the chrismon is constant. This phenomenon might certainly be explained by a graphic tropism, in which

writing attracts writing (an omnipresent fact in written cultures). A second explanation lies in the medieval practice of *titulus*, the simultaneous functioning within the same paradigm of a text and an image, both complementing visual and semantic plans. Though some inscriptions actually give an explanatory reading of chrismons, more likely they contribute to, as in most tituli, semantic expansion, considerably enriching the motif. The inscription does not make the chrismon more accessible or more understandable, but increases its layers of representational meaning.

Finally, we must understand that monumental chrismons, like those in charters or manuscripts, have a capacity to introduce and promote writing; the chrismon is no longer just a name, but an invocation, and places writing in a range of action, in the shade of sanctity or, at least, of solemnity. Inscriptions are not found near chrismons because they channel their meaning or make them explicit; on the contrary, the motif gives to the inscription a part of its sacramental efficiency. Gathered within the same monumental paradigm, chrismon and inscription are both aspects of the same effective system that gives the building and its community to Christ's name, friendship, and protection, and that creates an encounter with God's image.

<sup>84</sup> On the subject of full-page monograms in Irish manuscripts of the early Middle Ages, Otto Pächt wrote in 1984 that it is a "typical medieval approach, which gives rise to a sign full of expressiveness of a simple initial, a meaningful visual form, and which replaces symbolic abstraction by real physiognomy": *L'enluminure*, 39.