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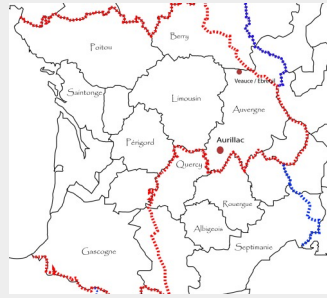
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Pilgrimage churches of eastern Aquitaine and Liturgical Sculpture. The example of Saint-Geraud abbey and its chancel screen (Aurillac, Cantal - 11/12th centuries)



Map of the medieval Aquitaine: Kingdom (blue border) and feudal duchy (red border)

Saint-Geraud abbey and its *pluteum* - Introduction

During the Romanesque Ages, a great number of pilgrims used to visit Saint-Geraud's abbey in Aurillac, in southern France. Their goal was to venerate the relics of saint Geraud, the founder of this Aquitanian monastery. Behind the abbey walls, at least three churches were present. The first one, St Clement's church was founded by Gerald, Geraud's father. It was the parish church of the convent. Another one, nearly unknown, was St Benedict's church. If the original location of the building is still a mystery, the main information known about this sanctuary is its very name. The most important building remains St Geraud's abbey church. Theoretically reserved to the monks, the church was still open to numerous laymen visitors.

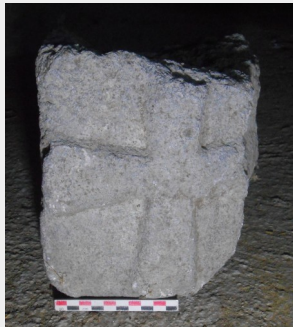
As for a great number of abbey churches, it is quite common to have a double partition of the sanctuary. Initially reserved for the monks, the growing affluence of pilgrims led to the materialisation of this "liturgical border". As the French historian Dominique Iognat-Prat said, this type of solution came of the Romans Synods of 826 and 857 which have forbidden to the believers to access the choir. The "church corps" – sociability space dedicated to the faithful in parish churches or space where their presence was tolerated in the abbey churches – was separated from the chorus and chancel – i.e. the space reserved for the clergy – by liturgical screens. These choir screens constantly evolve during the Middle Ages, from Early Christian and Early medieval chancel screens to Gothic Rood screens. In Aurillac abbey the preserved fragments display a Romanesque type that followed an older chancel screen with standardized height. The carved slabs kept in the northern chapel are higher than the Carolingian specimens used until the beginning of the 11th century. Three choir screen pieces may provide a better understanding of the liturgical fitting used in the pilgrimage at St Geraud's abbey.

The study of the carved ornaments also provides important data about the artistic geography. The two slabs from St Geraud's abbey church show a sculpting type related to western Auvergne and not to Clermont city, the episcopal see of the diocese. They are also an exception inside the abbey: their carving is quite different from what is to be seen in the Romanesque capitals. The Building Sculpture in St Geraud's church is dominated by interlacing patterns from the Carolingian period until the first decades of the 12th century. For the two screen slabs, the vegetal patterns use thick leaves unlike the "Aurillac interlace type" which uses ribbed leaves and a great number of parallel ribbons – two patterns originating in the Carolingian Art. With its Choir Screen Sculpture, St Geraud's abbey appears to be linked to others pilgrimage churches in the Aquitaine duchy, from Gascony to the Limousin areas.

Saint-Clement pillar's head

Unlike the two St Geraud's fragments, this item is not a slab but the only remain of the chancel pillars from the abbey. Now to be found among others stone pieces in the "Grange de Candoloubé" (a private building in Aurillac town), its main side is decorated with a cross pattern. It can be identified as a chancel pillar thanks to the grooves of the two opposite sides (7,5 cm large and 4 cm deep) probably used to fit in the chancel slabs.

If the original context of the two St Geraud's chapel slabs is clearly identified with a position in the choir of the main church, it is unknown for the pillar. What seems sure for now is that it belongs to another chancel screen, different from the one in St Geraud's church. The larger part of the lapidary collection of the Grange de Candoloubé comes from the archaeological remains of St Clement's church – for example the biggest capitals from the abbey, covered with interlaces. If it was certainly a parish church, the liturgical ceremonies were made by the monks and a choir screen presence was needed to separate the Aurillac faithful from the Benedictine monks. By its current context and the patterns displayed in its sculpture, St Clement's church is the most credible origin for this fragment of chancel pillar.



Saint-Clement church plates (11th century)



Saint-Geraud abbey church plates (end of the 11th century)

The choir screens of Saint Geraud church (11th century end)

Those two plates came from the same choir screen. They are now wall up in the Saint-Geraud chapel, in the main church of the same name. The carved decoration and the dimensions could be the proof of this common lapidary origin.

The lion's plate (left)

- Size : 129 cm (height) x 84 cm (length).

The Plant plate (right)

- Size : 145 cm (height)

The Saint-Clement parish church pillar fragment (11th century)

- Size : 20,5 cm (height) x 15 cm (length) x 19 cm (thickness)

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Plates historiography. The tale(s) of a discover

The two slabs are known since the 1820's but mentioned for the first time in 1901 by Roger Grand. Concerning their identification, several hypotheses were suggested. The first oldest one alleged that they were fragments of a Carolingian Monumental Mausoleum made for Geraud's body. This fanciful theory was sustained between 1944 and 1963 by Abel Beaufrière, a local and erudite priest who did argue that the slabs could ornate the access to an hypothetical crypt below. However, Beaufrière had some hesitations during the 1970s in contact with other searchers.

During this decade, the research advanced a lot. Art historians as Marcel Durlant or Pierre Quarré casted a look on the Aurillac Romanesque productions. Quickly the idea of a Romanesque chancel screen emerged for the two slabs. Even Abel Beaufrière accepted this hypothesis after discussing it with the academics. In the 1990s, the greatest part of the publications considered the slabs as chancel fragments from the end of the 11th century.

But other searchers, especially since the 2000s, are more moderate. If they accept that the slabs belong to a choir screen as a certain fact, the precise type of liturgical limit is still in question. For the Art historian Jean-Claude Fau, the "chancel screen type" is overall a Carolingian heritage which disappeared gradually during the 11th century. For him the chancel slabs never exceeded 80 cm height. In Aurillac the biggest slab is 149 cm high. More recently, Laura Foulquier gave an accurate description of the pieces but preferred not to put a type name on this two slabs.

In my opinion, what we have here is a transitional chancel screen type, between the Carolingian solutions and the 12th century formulas, higher than the past ones.

An Aquitanian Sculpture

Those two slabs could be compared with other analogous pieces in the Western Auvergne lands. The artistic treatment is the same in other churches where thick leaves are also used. Capitals dating from the end of the 11th century with lions facing one another can be found in St Ménéleuc's abbey in Menat (Puy-de-Dôme), or at St Peter's and Paul's Collegiate church of Evaux (Creuse), in the northeastern Limousin. The Sculpture type displayed on the slabs of St Geraud's church is clearly related to the greatest part of Aquitaine duchy.

If the area of Clermont, head of the Auvergne diocese, is early linked to the northern and Capetian architectural choices, the western third of this region – quite autonomous – was looking at the Limousin and Poitou areas. The vegetal patterns that we see at Aurillac abbey can be found in the Choir of St Hilaire's church in Poitiers or on the remnants of the disappeared pilgrimage church of St Martial's abbey in Limoges.

Aurillac is the only geographical area in Auvergne which offers this type of sculpture. In the Aquitanian eastern borders, some other rare chancel screens can be found. A close example are two wall'd up slabs in the Holy Cross' church of Venutec (Allier). The compositions is the same with beasts, probably lions, surrounded by thick leaves and other vegetal patterns. The church in Venutec belonged to St Léger's abbey of Ebreuil (Allier), quite artistically related to Aurillac abbey. Both have made for their architectural decoration a choice based on the local Carolingians artistic traditions. The dating is also similar with a realization starting at the very end of the 11th century but achieved in the first decades of the 12th century.

