

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY? THE COLUMN FIGURES  
ON THE WEST PORTAL OF ROCHESTER  
CATHEDRAL

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In the summer of 1991, the Romanesque west front of Rochester Cathedral (Plate I) underwent thorough cleaning and conservation.<sup>1</sup> This event draws attention, once again, to the significance of the façade and its sculptural enrichment within the development of English Romanesque art. The west portal (Plate II) is an important monument of this period and occupies a place of special significance in understanding some of the links between the theological, cultural and artistic concerns of the day. It would appear that both the patrons and sculptors of the west portal were highly aware of contemporary Continental precedents and this is made clear by an examination of the column figures incorporated into the jambs (Plates III and IV). They instigated work, which in its theological and aesthetic programme, was unusually rare in England and, perhaps more importantly, saw fit to adapt their subject-matter to express a number of concerns both spiritual and temporal. The figures' identities have been the subject of some debate and, though contemporary scholarship identifies them as King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, it is the intention of this short paper to review their formal uniqueness within the English Romanesque, the debates surrounding their attribution and to provide a possible reading of their meaning within the context of the Rochester portal. Before describing and discussing the figures in detail, it will be useful to consider their physical context within the design of the cathedral's west front.

<sup>1</sup> See N. Durnan, 'Rochester Cathedral: The West Front. Report on the Conservation of the 12th Century Stonework of the West Front', Rochester Cathedral Library, 1991. This campaign followed the 1984 conservation of the west door by Wells Conservation Centre. See Report by H. Alexander and D. Hill, 'Rochester Cathedral – West Door', Rochester Cathedral Library, 1984.



Rochester Cathedral, west front, c. 1150. Rebuilt and restored 1871-94.

The present appearance of the west façade is, like many medieval monuments, partly due to the efforts of Victorian restoration. However, unlike some nineteenth-century restoration campaigns, those conducted at Rochester were undertaken with a considerable degree of sensitivity firstly, from 1871-78, by Sir George Gilbert Scott and, from 1888-94, by John Loughborough Pearson.<sup>2</sup> The latter's rebuilding campaign

<sup>2</sup> For a brief discussion of the vicissitudes of the Rochester façade, see J. Philip McAleer, 'The Cathedral West Front: Form, Function and Fashion', in *Friends of Rochester Cathedral Report for 1990/1*, Rochester, 1991.



Rochester Cathedral, west portal, inserted c. 1160–70.

happily kept its distance from the euphemistically labelled 'improvements' of other less sympathetic restorers. An instance of this is Pearson's use of a seventeenth-century engraving when restoring the turrets. The resulting composition is, by all accounts, very close to its appearance at the end of the medieval period when the great Perpendicular west window was inserted. As such, the façade has been classified by J. Philip McAleer as a composite 'twin-tower' and 'sectional' façade and dated *c.* 1150.<sup>3</sup> Its importance as an almost complete late Romanesque composition is, however, certainly beyond question. This is not just due to the extent of its completeness or its remarkable preservation. Rochester is unusual in that it seems to have been peculiarly susceptible to a wider range of influences from the Continent and one may go as far as to suggest that the whole of Rochester's Romanesque west front, including the sculpture discussed below, is primarily eclectic and even cosmopolitan in character placing the work in a unique position within the development of the Romanesque style in England.

The tympanum of Rochester's west portal (Plate V) contains a composition based on the Apocalyptic Vision as described in the books of Ezekiel (i, 4–28) and of St. John the Divine (*Rev.*, iv:1–11). Christ sits enthroned within a mandorla surrounded by the symbols of the evangelists and two attendant angels. It is the quintessential subject of twelfth-century monumental art derived, formally and iconographically, from late Romanesque and early Gothic tympana of Burgundy and the Ile-de-France. Indeed, the tympanum of the royal portal of Chartres (Plate VI) has long been accepted as one of the principal models for the one at Rochester.<sup>4</sup> Arguably Rochester's chief glory, the tympanum is often cited as proof that the ecclesiastical patrons and their craftsmen were aware of the latest developments in monumental art on the Continent, in particular from the Ile-de-France, Normandy and Poitou. This relationship between French regional sculpture and the Rochester portal via an artistic funnelling process in Normandy and the Ile-de-France has been traced in recent times initially by Professor George

<sup>3</sup> See J. Philip McAleer, *The Romanesque Church Façade in Britain*, Garland, 1984, 304. This is a facsimile reprint of the author's Ph.D thesis, University of London, May 1963. McAleer distinguishes the following types of façade as representing tendencies within British Romanesque architecture: 'twin tower', 'west transept', 'façade block', 'west tower', 'façade-tower' and 'screen'. Rochester, however, does not fit neatly into any of these categories as it possesses both twin towers and a façade which outwardly expresses nave and aisles.

<sup>4</sup> In A. Gardner, *English Medieval Sculpture*, Cambridge, 1951, 81, the author also cites the tympanum at Le Mans cathedral.

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PLATE III



Rochester Cathedral, west portal, King Solomon, c. 1160-70.

PLATE IV



Rochester Cathedral, west portal, Queen of Sheba, c. 1160-70.



Rochester Cathedral, tympanum of west portal, c. 1160–70.



Chartres Cathedral, tympanum of Royal Portal, c. 1140–50.

Zarnecki and by Dr Deborah Khan.<sup>5</sup> Though their conclusions do not always run in parallel, Zarnecki and Khan's solidly empirical, formalistic accounts have contributed to a significant understanding of the stylistic origins of the Rochester portal's sculptural decoration and its probable date of insertion into the façade c. 1160–70.<sup>6</sup> In combination with the sculpture of the tympanum, the figures of Solomon and Sheba point to the relatively rapid spread of artistic ideas during the twelfth century and, far from being backward in the absorption of fresh approaches, an analysis of the Rochester figures can prove that some English ecclesiastics and their masons were fully in tune with both the artistic and theological ambitions of much Continental work.

The assimilation of French stylistic and iconographic motifs at Rochester was recognised as early as 1859 by James Fergusson:

'... (Rochester's) western doorway, which remains intact... is a fair specimen of the rich mode of decoration so prevalent in that age. It must be considered rather as a Continental than as an English design. Had it been executed by native artists, we should not entirely miss the billet moulding which was so favourite a mode of decoration with all the nations of the North'.<sup>7</sup>

Fergusson's reserved praise for the Rochester work is, no doubt, indebted to that particular brand of cultural xenophobia which afflicted many high Victorian commentators. The implication that 'native artists' could not possibly have produced such a piece obviously pre-dates much modern scholarship. Nevertheless, his recognition of 'Continental' influence is a pioneering one in the historiography of the English Romanesque. It is clear that, in referring to the mouldings of the Rochester portal, Fergusson must have been thinking of the Poitevin Romanesque as a source for the voussoirs. He was probably the first popular commentator to draw this analogy. Thus, works such as the south portal of St. Pierre, Aulnay-de-Saintonge, of c. 1130

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, G. Zarnecki, *Later English Romanesque Sculpture*, Tiranti, 1953; G. Zarnecki, 'The Transition from Romanesque to Gothic in English Sculpture', in *Acts of the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art*, New York, 1963, 1; D. Khan, *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture in Kent*, Ph.D Thesis, University of London, 1982; D. Khan, 'The West Doorway of Rochester Cathedral', in (Ed.) N. Stratford *Romanesque and Gothic: Essays for George Zarnecki*, Woodbridge, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Professor Zarnecki's revised view that tympanum, voussoirs, capitals and column figures were produced contemporaneously at Rochester was put forward in 'The Transition from Romanesque to Gothic in English Sculpture', 155. In this he departed from an earlier assertion in *Later English Romanesque Sculpture*, 39, that the column figures were introduced into the composition as late as 1175.

<sup>7</sup> J. Fergusson, *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture*, John Murray, 1859, 852.



(Photo: Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London)  
 Aulnay-de-Saintonge, St. Pierre, south portal, c. 1130.

became important precedents for later historians to examine (Plate VII). Unusually, Fergusson does not mention the column figures in the jambs – a surprising omission given their obvious rarity in England – and, as will be shown later, they are yet further proof of Rochester's assimilation of influences from abroad. Taking the seated figure of



Christ within the Rochester tympanum as a means of orientation, the figures of Solomon and Sheba appear, respectively, to His right and to His left. Though badly weathered, enough work survives for a close study of the figures to be carried out.

Both figures are dressed in long, flowing robes. Solomon holds a sceptre in his right hand which, as Bayard writes, is 'the mark of royal power, termed the sceptre of rectitude, and the rule of virtue, for the proper guidance of the king himself, the Holy Church, and the Christian people'.<sup>8</sup> Thus the *historia* associated with Solomon is one which places him in a position of profound importance in relation to Christ the supreme judge as he becomes, in effect, administrator of temporal power and signifier of royal virtue. The figure probably once held a banderole or book in its left hand. What remains of the head suggests that the figure once sported a short beard and simple crown. The front of the queen's crowned head is missing, but her long plaited hair survives. Unlike the figure of Solomon, the banderole is extant but, from the treatment of similar examples, it is by no means certain that any inscription was originally carved upon it and it was probably employed as the familiar attribute of saint or prophet.

The treatment of the Rochester figures has been directly related to examples from the Ile-de-France, which first appeared on the west portal of St. Denis, Paris, c. 1130–40. Though now destroyed, they were illustrated in Montfaucon's *Monuments de la Monarchie Française* of 1729, published in Paris (Plate VIII). Still extant, and perhaps of more significance for Rochester, are the figures at Chartres of c. 1140–50 (Plate IX) and those of the offshoots of the so-called school of Chartres at Corbeil of the same date (Plates X and Plates XI) and Le Mans (Plate XII) made before 1158.<sup>9</sup> The origins of the use of column figures remains unclear. However, it would be fair to assume that their incorporation within the design of portals performed more of a theological than a formal, aesthetic role and, as M.F. Hearn suggests, 'if the column-statue was primarily formal in origin, then its development should have evolved in stages rather than appearing suddenly full-blown from the beginning'.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Abbot Suger at St. Denis was almost certainly one of the first medieval ecclesiastics to instruct his masons to produce such figures. The resulting aesthetic contribution of these figures to the design of portals forms the

<sup>8</sup> J-P. Bayard, 'Le Sacre des Rois', 1964, quoted in S.G. Nichols, Jr., *Romanesque Signs: Early Medieval Narrative and Iconography*, Yale, 1983, 92.

<sup>9</sup> According to W. Sauerländer, *Gothic Sculpture in France 1140–1270*, Thames and Hudson, 1970, 386.

<sup>10</sup> M.F. Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture*, Phaidon, 1981, 210.



(Photo: Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London)  
 Paris, St. Denis, figures from central portal of west front, c. 1130-40. Plate  
 from Montfaucon's *Les Monuments de la Monarchie Française*, 1729.



Chartres Cathedral, west front, column figures from left jamb of Royal Portal, c. 1140–50.

beginning of an artistic development which was to culminate in the later tendency for free-standing sculpture in façade niches, reaching their fullest expression at Rheims c. 1240.

The rarity of the use of column figures before their incorporation in the Rochester portal is a testament to the originality of the composition



(Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris)  
Corbeil, Notre Dame, west portal (destroyed 1793),  
King Solomon, c. 1140-50 (now in Louvre).



(Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris)  
Corbeil, Notre Dame, west portal (destroyed 1793),  
Queen of Sheba, c. 1140-50 (now in Louvre).

and to its remarkable preservation. Professor Zarnecki has identified important precedents at Lincoln Cathedral and two existed in a window at the Moot Hall, Colchester, until their destruction in the mid nineteenth century (Plate XIII).<sup>11</sup> The famous little standing Virgin and Child of c. 1170–80 from Minster-in-Sheppey and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Plate XIV) is also significant. Though probably once part of a screen and possibly a later work by the Rochester masons, Zarnecki considers that its form derives from Burgundian examples and Khan discusses the relationship between the figure's draperies and the schools of St. Denis and Chartres.<sup>12</sup> It is conceivable that the sources for these examples, including the Rochester figures, were transmitted via masons working at Canterbury which, at the time of the Rochester portal's production, were beginning to absorb the style from France. However, little surviving evidence in the form of sculpture now exists at Canterbury to support convincingly this view. Almost beyond question, though, is the fact that the seemingly advanced stylized elegance of the Rochester figures surpasses these other English examples and, indeed, they appear to compare very favourably with those from Suger's St. Denis. According to Professor Zarnecki, the earliest examples of the use of column figures in England occurred at Lincoln Cathedral under the patronage of Bishop Alexander (1141–48). These were recorded by the architect and antiquarian James Essex in 1775 and were possibly modelled on those at St. Denis.<sup>13</sup> Khan considers the source for the Rochester queen to be the equivalent figure from the left side of the central portal at Chartres. She also cites re-set figures from the west portal at Loches of c. 1165 as being closely related. The partial justification for this is based on the fact that the movements of Henry II (1154–89) were centred on this area.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned earlier, the accepted view of the sources for much of the Rochester sculpture is, as Khan writes, northern France: 'a crucible into which were drawn elements of Italy, western France and the Ile-de-France'.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For Lincoln, see G. Zarnecki, *Romanesque Sculpture at Lincoln Cathedral*, Lincoln Minster Pamphlets, 1970. The Colchester figures were reproduced in *J.B.A.A.*, i (1846).

<sup>12</sup> See G. Zarnecki, 'A 12th Century Column-Figure of the Standing Virgin and Child from Minster-in-Sheppey, Kent', in *Kunsthistorische Forschungen, Otto Pächt zu seinem 70 Geburtstag*, Salzburg, 1972. Also, D. Khan, *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture in Kent*, 139. The figure is fully described in P. Williamson, *Catalogue of Romanesque Sculpture*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1983, 92–3.

<sup>13</sup> See G. Zarnecki, *Romanesque Sculpture at Lincoln Cathedral*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> See D. Khan, *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture in Kent*, 126–7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.



Le Mans Cathedral, column figures from right jamb of south portal, before 1158. The beardless figure, second from left, is that of King Solomon.



(Photo: Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London)  
 Colchester, doorway from Moot Hall c. 1170-80 (destroyed). Drawing by  
 A.J. Sprague, 1846.

Strangely, few recent accounts of the Rochester figures place much emphasis on the figures from Notre Dame at Corbeil. Though recognised by William Lethaby as important in 1904, it is clear that these figures are, both stylistically and in their individual details, extremely close to those at Rochester. These two figures, dated before 1152 and also reputedly to be of Solomon and Sheba, owe their remarkable present condition to several quirks of fate. The foundation





*(Photo: Courtesy of the Board of the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum)*  
Minster-in-Sheppey, St. Mary and St. Sexburgha,  
Virgin and Child, c. 1170–80 (now Victoria and  
Albert Museum).

at Corbeil was suppressed in 1601 and the west portal destroyed in 1793. However, the figures were salvaged and made their way first to St. Denis (where they were restored in 1860 at the behest of Viollet-Le-Duc) and then to the Louvre.<sup>16</sup> Both figures have had facial features and other elements touched up or replaced. However, the restoration was not as extensive as one would initially think given their present condition. The figures appear to have a strong relationship with those of the central portal of Chartres and, indeed, Sauerländer has suggested that they possess greater delicacy and are even 'less austere' than the former examples, though they were possibly the products of the same school.<sup>17</sup> It is conceivable given their date that these figures could have been the direct model for those at Rochester.

It is interesting that, for many years, the two Rochester figures were believed to represent Henry I and Queen Matilda who had both been present at the consecration of the cathedral on 5 May, 1130. Indeed, published engravings of the figures by Thomas and George Hollis of 1840 show that this attribution had a considerable legacy.<sup>18</sup> Later, in 1898, W.H. St. John Hope provides us with a description of the portal which includes the same attribution:

'The great west doorway is a very rich work with five elaborately carved orders and hoodmould, wrought with leaf-work and monsters. The jamb shafts have sculpted capitals and medial bands, and out of two of them, one on each side, are carved figures of a king and queen, probably Henry I and his consort Matilda. These are among the most ancient statues now remaining in this country.'<sup>19</sup>

The Rev. William Benham provides us with another early suggestion as to the identity of the figures in his description of the portal published in 1900:

<sup>16</sup> The figures are discussed in W. Sauerländer, *Gothic Sculpture in France 1140-1270*, 397-8. Interestingly, the author here draws attention to the 'element of sentimentality' imparted to the figures by the 1860 restoration. However, he does not seriously doubt their authenticity.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>18</sup> See T. and G. Hollis, *The Monumental Effigies of Great Britain*, London, 1840, 1. Unfortunately, the first edition of this work consulted at the National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, is in a fragmentary state, which precludes more precise bibliographical information. Interestingly, in J. Carter, *Specimens of the Ancient Sculpture and Painting now Remaining in England*, London, 1838, 47, the author identifies the two large figures of Rochester's Decorated Chapter house door as, also, Henry and Matilda. These figures have now been identified as personifications of the Church and the Synagogue.

<sup>19</sup> W.H. St. John Hope, 'The Architectural History of the Cathedral Church and Monastery of St. Andrew at Rochester', in *Arch. Cant.*, xxiii (1899), 224.

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'It consists of five receding arches banded by shafts two of which are carved into figures apparently of Henry II and his Queen Eleanor.'<sup>20</sup>

Other than the fact that Henry was on the throne at the time of the door's production, as is now almost certain, and that Eleanor of Aquitaine was associated with a courtly revival of the arts in the late twelfth century, this view is very difficult to substantiate. Further, there is little evidence to suggest that any courtly contact with Rochester could have prompted such a choice of subject.

However, it would seem that the first successful attempt at a partially convincing re-attribution of the identity of the figures was put forward by William Lethaby in 1904, ironically as a postscript to a lengthy piece on the sculpture of Wells' west front by St. John Hope in which the former puts forward a case for the uniqueness of the column-figures at Rochester:

'The sculptures of Rochester are, I believe, the first examples of this sort of statuary in England, and the king and queen, instead of being named Henry I and Matilda, should be called Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. . . At Bourges, on the north porch, there is also a pair of figures which is very similar, and at St. Denys is a still more beautiful pair removed from Corbeil'.<sup>21</sup>

Lethaby's evidence rests largely on formal comparison referring, in particular, to examples from the south porch of Le Mans (see Plate XII) where 'one of the kings is young, and certainly Solomon, for on his scroll may still be read [SA]LOM. . .'.<sup>22</sup> As Sauerländer has pointed out, it is now accepted that the Le Mans figures were introduced into the south porch before 1158.

This new attribution was quickly taken up by Prior and Gardner in their still seminal '*Account of Medieval Figure Sculpture in England*' of 1912 but, as late as 1928, Rochester historian F.F. Smith still adhered to the view that the figures represented Henry I and Matilda in what was becoming an increasingly dated interpretation.<sup>23</sup> Later, authoritative work such as that by Boase had fully assimilated Lethaby's pioneering view.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Rev. W. Benham, *Rochester Cathedral*, Isbister and Co. Ltd., 1900, 39.

<sup>21</sup> W.H. St. John Hope, 'The Imagery and Sculptures on the West Front of Wells Cathedral Church, by W.H. St. John Hope, Esq. With Suggestions as to the Identification of Some of the Images by W.R. Lethaby, Esq.', in *Archaeologia*, lix (1904), 177.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>23</sup> F.F. Smith, *A History of Rochester*, Hallewell, 1928, 282. This attribution remains in the 1976 reprint.

<sup>24</sup> T.S.R. Boase, *English Art 1100-1216*, Oxford, 1953, 206. However, in H. Alexander and D. Hill, *Rochester Cathedral - West Door*, 39, a reference is made to 'a degree of surprise being evinced at the designation of Solomon and Sheba' in a Wells Conservation Centre press release issued during the period of conservation. As this took place in 1984, it is a testament to the enduring nature of the attribution question.

In portrayals of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba in medieval sculpture, it was often customary to include underneath them a small crouching figure. In effect, this drew attention to the status of the king and queen and represented, in contemporary terms, a kind of signification of courtly position. This is certainly true of the figures from the right portal of the north transept of Chartres (Plate XV). The Rochester statues both rest upon crouching figures. Though badly weathered and even if, as is likely, the figures were intended as grotesques there is good reason to suppose that they play a dual role as servants and as creatures over which, allegorically, both Christ and the Church have dominion. In the context of the rest of the Rochester scheme, with its incorporation of Poitevin *grotesquerie*, the inclusion of grotesques for courtly figures is less surprising and goes some way to identifying the Rochester composition as eclectic. Further, as Umberto Eco has pointed out, the revelation of both the formal and spiritual beauty of the world was often achieved through a contrast with ugliness.<sup>25</sup> If one accepts this view, then the meanings inherent in the composition of the Rochester portal become clearer.

Formal evidence is, of course, only half the story when one is attempting to uncover the meanings inherent in any work of art. For however important a composition or motif may be within the artistic development of a period, one is left to deal with the equally taxing problems associated with an interpretation of the chosen subject. In the case of any attempt at an explanation of the reasons for the depiction of Solomon and Sheba at Rochester, these problems may seem intractable within the context of a period when relatively few theologians and commentators were drawn into direct discussions of their choices of subject matter. With this in mind, a brief consideration of the possible use of these figures against a backdrop of twelfth-century theology and historiography can be made in order to stress their important relationship with the rest of the Rochester portal's iconographic scheme.

The eschatological nature of the apocalyptic vision and its portrayal has already been widely discussed within the development of medieval art.<sup>26</sup> Though important in this respect, the reasons for the choice of the allegory of Solomon and Sheba at Rochester are also inextricably

<sup>25</sup> U. Eco, *Art & Beauty in the Middle Ages*, Yale, 1988, 35.

<sup>26</sup> For instance T.S.R. Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages: Mortality, Judgement and Remembrance*, Thames and Hudson, 1972. Chapter 2 contains a useful, concise account of the significance of portrayals of the Last Judgement in medieval art. A similar discussion can be found in W. Sauerländer, *Gothic Sculpture in France 1140–1270*, 27–32.



*(Photo: Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London)*  
Chartres Cathedral, north transept, figures from left jamb of right portal, first quarter of thirteenth century.

linked to tendencies within twelfth-century artistic theory and practice and may, indeed, have peculiar significance for the locality of Rochester.

The biblical allegory associated with the story of Solomon and Sheba can be found in both Matthew (xii, 42) and, here, Luke:

'The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgement with the men of this generation and condemn them: for she came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here' (xi, 31)

Lawrence Stone considered the portrayal at Rochester to be 'a suitable explanation for the iconographical identification of the supreme lay power with both the Son of God and the organised spiritual authority'.<sup>27</sup> The central position of Christ within the composition of the portal points to the theological significance of the connection between the column figures and the rest of the iconography.

Biblically, the figure of Solomon is an ambivalent one. He is presented at the height of his powers as a wise ruler, supreme judge and builder of the Temple at Jerusalem. His inherent imperfections, however, were to eventually lead Solomon into idolatrous forms of worship and, ultimately, brought about the decline and division of the kingdom of Israel. To the medieval theologian, on the other hand, Solomon's achievements within the context of the Old Testament rested almost exclusively on the fact he prefigured aspects of the nature of Christ: The visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon was an early Adoration, Solomon's Judgement is related to the Last Judgement, the foundation of the Temple prefigures the later growth of church construction in the Christian period, his early wisdom analogous to that of Christ.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, the Queen of Sheba's role within the later development of Christian thought was profound. Her visit to Solomon was to satisfy her curiosity regarding his legendary wisdom, symbolic of the spiritual journey towards Christ and later expressed in the growth of pilgrimage. Medieval legend tells that Sheba, at the time of her visit to Solomon, knelt and worshipped the wood that was to be used for the true cross, its future being foretold her in a vision.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> L. Stone, *Sculpture in Britain: The Middle Ages*, Penguin, 1955, 85.

<sup>28</sup> For an extended account of the exegetical nature of the legend of Solomon and Sheba, see P.F. Watson, 'The Queen of Sheba in Christian Tradition', in (Ed.) J.B. Pritchard, *Solomon and Sheba*, Phaidon, 1974, 115-45. The author's account places great emphasis on the importance of Solomon and Sheba within the development of medieval theology.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Certainly, then, the example of Solomon in creating the Temple could be cited by many in the twelfth century as a signification of God's wishes that churches should be elaborately decorated. This could, perhaps, be seen to be problematical in view of both the exhortations of the Second Commandment (*Exodus*, xx, 4-5) and of *Deuteronomy* (xxvii, 15) that 'Cursed be the man that maketh any graven or molten image, an abomination to the Lord. . .'. However, it would seem that the precedent of Solomon's building campaigns carried much more weight in the circles of ecclesiastical patronage and *1 Kings* vii, 20-36 (the description of the extravagance of the Temple) could presumably be cited as a justification for elaborate decoration. Theophilus famously evoked Solomon's efforts in his 'Essay Upon Various Arts' written in the mid tenth century. Crucially, though, Theophilus says, it was the *piety* of Solomon when decorating the Temple that is the final justification, here expressed in the following advice to potential fellow craftsmen:

'Therefore, most beloved son, you will not doubt, but believe with an entire faith, that the spirit of God has filled your heart when you have adorned his temple with so much beauty, and with such variety of work; and that you may not chance to fear, I can prove, with clear reasoning, that whatsoever you may be able to learn, understand, or invent in the arts, is ministered to you as a gift of the sevenfold Spirit.'<sup>30</sup>

Theophilus' elevation of the principal of 'variety' to a state almost analogous to that of a virtue is significant for, if one can suppose that Theophilus' views (early as they are) represent a continuum of medieval artistic theory that stretched into the twelfth century, the Romanesque tendency to decorate at all costs is surely encapsulated here in theoretical precedent. St. Bernard and the Cistercians excepted, the 'clear reasoning' of Theophilus was, perhaps paradoxically, responsible for an outbreak of ostentation unknown since, though arguably formulated, in the Carolingian Renaissance. Thus the place of Solomon in canonising the growth of masonic expansion overseen by ecclesiastical patronage must have been assured and could provide us with an interesting insight with which to re-appraise the relationship between artistic theory and practice in the twelfth-century Renaissance. *1 Kings* vii, 21, describes Solomon's personifications of the columns of the porch of the Temple at Jerusalem. This could have been the biblical spark from which the idea of the column figure was kindled by Suger and others c. 1140 and, if so, at Rochester we find a unique double

<sup>30</sup> Theophilus, *Diversarium Artium Schedula*, quoted in E.G. Holt, *A Documentary History of Art*, I, Doubleday Anchor, 1957, 7.

parallel of imagery – biblical analogy and contemporary artistic precedent combined.

The growing economic importance of pilgrimage for ecclesiastical houses during the second half of the twelfth century (reaching a peak following the murder of Becket in 1170) suggests that the number of visitors to Rochester would have been increasing with its position on the Pilgrims' Way from Winchester – significantly, home of the 'antiquary' Henry of Blois.<sup>31</sup> Further, the Benedictine monks, installed at Rochester by Lanfranc c. 1082, were noted for their hospitality. Therefore, it could be speculated that the reference to pilgrimage in the story of Solomon and Sheba would have had a special meaning within the iconography of the Rochester portal for it related directly (and parochially) to its contemporary audience and may, indeed, have been substantially paid for with revenues collected from pilgrims. Thus the representations could also serve as a recognition of the economic importance of pilgrimage in an age of increasing church expansion and ecclesiastical patronage. Similarly, if the figures also serve as 'lay pillars' of the Church establishment, they may also have meant to signify the enduring nature of organised faith in the face of the vicissitudes of earthly existence. Gervase of Canterbury relates that two fires damaged Rochester Cathedral in 1138 and 1179 – though his reports of 'devastation' were probably exaggerated, particularly in the case of the second fire.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, read in this way, the two figures could also point to the importance of stability and steadfastness in times of great uncertainty. The column figures also perform an 'architectonic' function as visual and actual supports to the revelatory sculpture of the tympanum and represent a spiritual transition from old to new testament paralleling the exegetical nature of biblical texts. This is an important concept within the expression of faith in medieval art and, once again, recalls Solomon's precedent at Jerusalem.

In conclusion, it would be unrealistic to claim categorically that the figures of Solomon and Sheba at Rochester were put there for purely theological rather than for aesthetic reasons. However, the constructed fabric of medieval cathedrals (particularly the façades) provided the

<sup>31</sup> It is well known that Henry of Blois, made Bishop of Winchester in 1129, was reputed to have bought antique statues back to England from Rome c. 1149–51. It is possible, though difficult to prove, that a renewed interest in monumental sculpture was promoted by this event. For an extended discussion of Henry's Patronage, see G. Zarnecki, 'Henry of Blois as Patron of Sculpture', in (Eds.) S. Macready and F.H. Thompson, *Art and Patronage in the English Romanesque*, London, 1986, 159–72.

<sup>32</sup> Gervase's references to destruction at Rochester are reprinted in W.H. St. John Hope, 'The Architectural History of The Cathedral Church and Monastery of St. Andrew at Rochester', 227.



builder with an opportunity 'to impress the passing world with the importance of their particular church by the splendours of its facade'.<sup>33</sup> It is clear, though, that those splendours were intended to communicate with and even transport the viewer in an anagogical way. Abbot Suger's description of the new bronze doors for St. Denis of c. 1130 is an example of how the material aesthetics of the medieval period were employed to heighten the experience of faith. He writes that 'the dull mind rises to the truth through that which is material and, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former submersion'.<sup>34</sup> This is an important clue to an understanding of medieval aesthetics and, in view of the origins of the column figure at St. Denis and their eventual incorporation at Rochester, it is perhaps appropriate that Suger's own account of his energetic patronage best sums up what must have been foremost in the minds of many ecclesiastics when commissioning work such as that at Rochester. This particular blend of aesthetic invention generated by vigorous ecclesiastical patronage is a major characteristic of what has been termed the 'twelfth century renaissance'.<sup>35</sup> The formal uniqueness of the Rochester figures within the development of English Romanesque art should not blind us to the fact that they are part of a complex iconographic programme, which can be seen at the same time as being both universal and parochial.

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<sup>33</sup> J. Philip McAleer, *The Romanesque Church Facade in Britain*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> From 'The Book of Suger, Abbot of St. Denis', quoted in E.G. Holt, *A Documentary History of Art*, I, 25.

<sup>35</sup> For a general account of the nature of ecclesiastical patronage in this period, see C. Brooke, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance*, Thames and Hudson, 1969, 90–144.