

‘Gates of Heaven’: Significance of the Signs of Cancer and Leo on French Medieval Portals

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Abstract: Images of the Zodiac adorn numerous portals of medieval churches, often together with representations of the Labours of the Months. It has been noted that among the Signs, Cancer and Leo occupy prominent positions, particularly in churches in modern-day France, where they can be seen at the summits of archivolts or at the top of door jambs. This occurrence has mostly been regarded as a reference to the summer solstice, taking place in the sign of Cancer, which was seen as an appropriate symbol for Christ, who was often depicted on the tympana below. According to Macrobius’s *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, during their incarnation, souls pass from the sign of Cancer into Leo, on their journey to Earth. Considering the popularity of this text throughout the Middle Ages, I argue that the notion of the ‘portal of men’, influenced the decision to provide the images of the crab and lion with conspicuous positions within sculptural programs of French portals. By considering these signs within the context of the surrounding decorative scheme, as well as providing relevant passages from contemporary theological texts, I aim to demonstrate how their depictions participated and contributed to the complex symbolism of church portals.

Starting from the eleventh century, the Signs of the Zodiac could be seen on façades of churches throughout the Latin West. With only few exceptions, the Signs adorn the western fronts of the buildings, or the one where the main entrance was located.¹ During the twelfth century, they are most often positioned around the church doors – either surmounting them, being included among the reliefs of the archivolts, or flanking them, being carved on the jambs. At the same time, they start to be paired with the Labours of the Months, with which they began to be frequently depicted together. Although the Signs are encountered in sculptural

¹ It is in St. Austremoine, Issoire that we find them on the chevet of the church. Reliefs with some of the signs are inserted on the outer wall of the central apse of San Pedro Cathedral in Jaca, however, it is doubtful that is their original place.

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decoration of numerous medieval churches across Western and Central Europe, the greatest number of preserved examples can be found in the territories of the modern-day France. It is there that this motif is continuously employed in decoration of portals of churches built during both the High and Late Middle Ages, whilst in other countries, it is only present sporadically, during certain periods of time.²



Fig. 1. Archivolts of the west portal of Saint-Pierre, Aulnay. by GFreihalter - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0.³

Throughout the entire medieval period, the Zodiac was used in monumental decoration of church interiors, present in different parts of the building and rendered in various media – in sculpture, mural painting,

² For a survey and overview of these examples, see Marjorie Jean Hall Panadero, 'The Labors of the months and the signs of the zodiac in twelfth-century French facades' (PhD Thesis, University of Michigan, 1984) [Panadero, thesis]; Teresa Pérez Higuera, *Medieval Calendars* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998); Dieter Blume, *Regenten des Himmels. Astrologische Bilder in Mittelalter und Renaissance* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000); Colum Hourihane (ed.), *Time in the Medieval World: Occupations of the Months & Signs of the Zodiac in the Index of Christian Art* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2007) [Hourihane, *Time in the Medieval World*]; Simona Cohen, *Transformations of Time and Temporality in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), [Cohen, *Transformations of Time*], pp. 87–114.

³ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=69057396>.

and pavement decoration. Zodiacal imagery is also profuse in manuscript illumination, and noticeable in different forms of applied arts. While there are some shared characteristics among all these instances of the Zodiac in the art of the Middle Ages, the focus of this paper will be on its role in sculptural programs of church portals of medieval France, particularly of the two signs placed in prominent positions – the signs of Cancer and Leo.



Fig. 2. Upper archivolts of the west portal of Notre-Dame at Fenioux, detail. By Jochen Jahnke, CC BY-SA 3.0.⁴



Fig. 3. Central voussoirs of the upper archivolt of the west portal of St-Nicholas in Civray. Photo: JLPC / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.⁵

These two signs are often placed around the vertical axes of archivolts, most commonly the outermost ones, on the portals of many churches of the historical regions of Aquitaine and Burgundy. Such is the case with

⁴ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=12239237>.

⁵ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=26304520>.

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the western portal of Saint-Pierre-de-la-Tour at Aulnay (Fig. 1), Notre-Dame at Fenioux (Fig. 2), Saint-Nicholas in Civray (Fig. 3), and Sainte-Croix in Bordeaux (Fig. 4), as well as the central portal of the narthex of Sainte-Madeleine in Vézelay (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Archivolt of the western portal of Sainte-Croix, Bordeaux, detail. By Sarah Wattouat - Imported from 500px (archived version) by the Archive Team. (detail page), CC BY 3.0.⁶



Fig. 5. Central portal of the narthex of Sainte-Madeleine, Vézelay, detail, tympanum and archivolt. By Gaudry Daniel - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0.⁷

While all of these examples are dated to the twelfth century, a similar tendency can be observed in the first decades of the thirteenth century. On the Portal of the Virgin on the western façade of the Notre-Dame in Paris, the Signs of the Zodiac are carved within rectangular frames on the

⁶ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=71703576>.

⁷ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=21199729>

frontal sides of the outer jambs of the portal, with the signs of Cancer and Leo being placed at the top, albeit in reverse order (Fig. 6).⁸ Design of this portal and the arrangement of the Signs may have been influenced by an earlier Gothic prototype- the north portal of the west façade of Saint-Denis. There, the Signs are also placed within rectangular squares on the frontal sides of the jambs. Yet, since the signs of Cancer and Leo are missing, it has been suggested that they were carved on the corbels at the top of each doorpost.⁹



Fig. 6. Virgin portal, Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris. By Cornell University Library - Flickr: Notre Dame de Paris. Entrance, Public Domain.¹⁰

⁸ The sign of the Virgo, seems to have been originally represented by the sculpture of the Virgin on the trumeau, as concluded by William M. Hinkle, 'The Cosmic and Terrestrial Cycles on the Virgin Portal of Notre-Dame', *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 49, no. 4 (1967): pp. 287-296, p. 291, 294-295. Whilst the author of this paper consider the inversion of the signs of Cancer and Leo as a mere mistake made by the masons, I am more inclined to see it as a deliberate intent, meant to put emphasis on the figure of Virgin, placed between these signs, since the sign of Virgo comes after Leo in the zodiac.

⁹ Paula Gerson, 'The West Façade of St. Denis: An Iconographic Study' (PhD Thesis, Columbia University, 1970), pp. 48-9, in Panadero, thesis, p. 64.

¹⁰ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=22297876>.

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In some cases, it is only the sign of Cancer that is given a conspicuous place. Sometimes, it is placed on the very axis of the portal, as in Saint-Lazare Cathedral of Autun (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. West portal of Saint-Lazare, Autun. By PMRMaeyaert - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0.¹¹

In the church of Saint-André in Bourg-Argental, the signs are arranged on the outer archivolt, beginning with Leo all the way to the Capricorn; the middle of the arch is occupied by seven figures of musicians and angels, after which the Zodiac sequence continues in reverse order, beginning with the sign of Cancer and ending with the sign of Aquarius (Fig. 8). The sign of Cancer is also the first sign on the left side of the north portal of west façade of Chartres Cathedral (Fig. 9).



Fig. 8. West portal of Saint-André, Bourg-Argental. By Véronique PAGNIER - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0.¹²

¹¹ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=48403991>



Fig. 9. Detail of archivolts and tympanum of the north doorway of the west portal of Chartres Cathedral. By Vassil - Own work, Public Domain.¹³

It is with the sign of Cancer that the sequence of the Zodiac signs in quatrefoil medallions on the socle of the north portal of the west façade of Amiens Cathedral begins (Fig. 10).

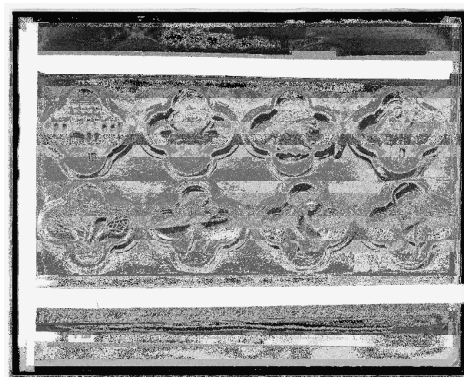


Fig. 10. Socle of the left jamb, north portal of west façade, Amiens Cathedral. Retrieved from the Library of Congress.¹⁴

¹² <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15875055>.

¹³ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6348441>.

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The prominent place of the Cancer within zodiacal cycles can also be observed in other artistic media: in fresco painting at St. Michael's church in Copford, England, the Zodiac is painted on the soffit of the triumphal arch, with the sign of Cancer placed on the crown of the arch (Fig. 11); on the marble zodiac in the western end of the nave of San Miniato church in Florence, the sign of Cancer is aligned with the axis of the entire building and is the only sign that is encircled (Fig. 12).



Fig. 11. Apse of St. Michael and All Angels Church, Copford. cc-by-sa/2.0 - © Michael Garlick - geograph.org.uk/p/5881459.



Fig. 12. Pavement of San Miniato, Florence. By I, Sailko, CC BY 2.5.¹⁵

¹⁴ <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016826290/>.

¹⁵ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5325151>.

The central position of Cancer within decorative programs of medieval churches has been noted in earlier scholarship. It has usually been attributed to the fact that the summer solstice takes place in the sign of Cancer. The relevance of this astronomical event for the overall symbolism of these iconographic ensembles is perceived in its allusion to renewal or to the Christ himself.¹⁶ Since Christ is often depicted below the signs, these solstitial connotations could be considered as a part of solar aspects of Christological symbolism. However, if the sign of Cancer indeed alludes to the summer solstice, why is the sign of Leo so often represented close to it, sharing the central position on the vertical axis of the portal? The date of the solstice is closer to the moment the sun moves from Gemini to Cancer than when it transitions into Leo. Even though the sign of Leo can be brought into correlation with Christ on account of its regal attributes, then again, so can almost all of the other signs, as can be discerned from numerous Christian allegorisations of the zodiac in medieval literature.¹⁷ The centrality of Cancer and Leo has also been explained by the fact that these are the only two signs ruled by the luminaries – the Sun and the Moon – unlike the rest of the signs of the zodiac, which are placed under the rulership of the planets.¹⁸ While all of these connotations may have influenced the decision to provide the signs of Cancer and Leo with a more prominent place among the other signs, there may have been another one, one that brought to a medieval

¹⁶ Cohen, *Transformation of Time*, p. 110; 'Cancer is the high point of the solar year, the moment of perfection when time brushes eternity, the temporal analogue of Christ'; Calvin B. Kendall, *The Allegory of the Church. Romanesque Portals and Their Verse Inscriptions* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1998), [Kendall, *Allegory of the Church*], p. 144.

¹⁷ In his sermon to the newly baptized, St. Zeno of Verona identifies Christ with the sign of Aries as standing for the Lamb of God, but also with Taurus, Leo, and Libra. Zeno of Verona, *Tractatus*, 1.38.1.1. In the ninth-century treatise *De astronomia more christiano*, the anonymous author compares Christ to the Sun, but also to the sign of Aries. Hubert Le Bourdellès, 'De Astronomia more christiano', *Studi Medievali*, Vol. 32, no. 1 (1991): pp. 385–444. In the eleventh century, Philip de Thaun, in his computus written in Anglo-Norman, assigns each of the signs to one of the persons of the Holy Trinity, thus relating Christ to Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Virgo, Capricorn, and Pisces. Philippe de Thaün, *Li Cumpoz*, 1465–1850.

¹⁸ Although for examples in Mithraic art, see Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire, Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 219.

viewer's mind cosmological associations of the signs and their connection to portals even more directly.

The sign of Cancer is designated as one of the portals of the sun in Macrobius' *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. As the fourth-century author explains, it is at the two tropical signs – Cancer and Capricorn – that the Milky Way crosses the zodiac.¹⁹ He mentions natural philosophers who named them thus on account of solstices on the either side of the ecliptic which retrace the course of the sun, stopping it from further progress.²⁰ He further claims:

Souls are believed to pass through these portals when going from the sky to the earth and returning from the earth to the sky. For this reason one is called the portal of men and the other the portal of gods: Cancer, the portal of men, because through it descent is made to the infernal regions; Capricorn, the portal of gods, because through it souls return to their rightful abode of immortality, to be reckoned among the gods.

After recounting elements of this notion as expressed by Homer and Pythagoras, he continues: 'So long as the souls heading downwards still remain in Cancer they are considered in the company of the gods, since in that position they have not yet left the Milky Way. But when in their descent they have reached Leo, they enter upon the first stages of their future condition.'²¹

The natural philosophers Macrobius is referring to are most likely Numenius and Cronius, who are mentioned by Porphyry in his *De antro nympharum*.²² In this work, he quotes their interpretation of the nymphs' cave in Homer's *Odyssey* as an image and symbol of the world, according to which there are two extremities in the heavens – winter and summer

¹⁹ It is in fact, in the signs of Gemini and Sagittarius that the Milky Way intersects the zodiac, and this was known even in the Early Middle Ages, as it is mentioned in Bede, *On the Nature of Things*, 18, trans. Calvin B. Kendall and Faith Wallis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010).

²⁰ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, I, XII, I, trans. W. H. Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952) [Macrobius, *Commentary*].

²¹ Macrobius, *Commentary*, I, XII, 4.

²² Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs in the Thirteenth Book of the Odyssey*, 10, trans. T. Taylor (London: John M. Watkins, 1917) [Porphyry, *On the Cave*].

tropic, as there are two gates Cancer and Capricorn, which are called entrances by Plato.²³

And of these, theologists say, that Cancer is the gate through which souls descend; but Capricorn that through which they ascend. Cancer is indeed northern, and adapted to descent; but Capricorn is southern, and adapted to ascent. The northern parts, likewise, pertain to souls descending into generation. And the gates of the cavern which are turned to the north are rightly said to be pervious to the descent of men; but the southern gates are not the avenues of the Gods, but of souls ascending to the Gods. On this account, the poet does not say that they are the avenues of the Gods, but of immortals; this appellation being also common to our souls, which are *per se*, or essentially, immortal.²⁴

Porphyry also claims that Parmenides mentions these gates in his treatise 'On the nature of things', and that they are known to Egyptians and Romans; Romans celebrated their Saturnalia when the Sun was in Capricorn and turned its course north to *Januanus*, January, a month which derives its name from *janua*, meaning gate. For the Egyptians, the beginning of the year was in Cancer, because the star Sothis is closer to this sign, whose rising was perceived as the principle of generation to the world.²⁵

Proclus Diadochus also mentions Numenius and his theories; he mentions the vision of Empedotimus of Syracuse as well, recorded in a lost dialogue of Heraclides of Pontus.²⁶ In this vision, in which Empedotimus was given 'the whole truth concerning souls', he saw three gates, located between Cancer and Leo, Aquarius and Pisces, and in the

²³ Porphyry, *On the Cave*, 11.

²⁴ Porphyry, *On the Cave*, 11.

²⁵ Porphyry, *On the Cave*, 11.

²⁶ Proclus Diadochus, *In Platonis Rem Publicam Commentarii*, 2.128.26–129.13.

sign of Scorpio.²⁷ Servius in his commentary on Virgil's *Georgic* quotes Varro who also mentions the vision of Empedotimus.²⁸

The notion of soul's passage through the gates located on the zodiac was very common during Classical Antiquity, as we can see from these texts, but also from the art of the period. In scenes of Apotheoses, showing divinized heroes or emperors ascending to heavens, the Signs of the Zodiac are often depicted, which later will also be included on several sarcophagi, displaying portraits of the departed within the Zodiac circle.²⁹ As it has been surmised, belief in the migration of souls through the gates of Cancer and Capricorn was also expressed on some monuments of the Mithraic cult.³⁰ That their adherents accepted this notion is also relayed by Porphyry in *De antro*, which is among few textual sources on the mysteries of Mithras.

However, for the medieval reader, Macrobius' *Commentary* was the most relevant and most probably the only source for the concept of the heavenly gates. This text enjoyed great popularity during the Middle Ages, as can be discerned from the fact that there are around 230 surviving manuscripts containing it.³¹ The appeal of this work for the intellectuals of the Latin West was manifold. On the one hand, it was valuable because it preserved an excerpt of Cicero's *De republica*, the closing portion of which was a commentary. This section, focused on the dream vision of the structure of cosmos and the afterlife, was inspired by the Myth of Er from Plato's *Republic*, just as the rest of Cicero's book

²⁷ Harald A. T. Reiche, 'Heraclides' Three Soul-Gates: Plato Revised', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 123 (1993): pp. 161–180; Inna Kupreeva, 'Heraclides' *On Soul* (?) and Its Ancient Readers', in William W. Fortenbaugh, Elizabeth Pender (eds), *Heraclides of Pontus: Discussion* (New Brunswick NJ, London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 93–139.

²⁸ Maurus Servius Honoratus, *In Vergilii carmina comentarii*, 1.34.

²⁹ For a discussion of some of these examples and the function of the Zodiac motif within their compositions, see Ciro Parodo, 'Il cammino degli immortali. Il sarcofago con ritratto di defunta entro cerchio astrologico del Museo Nazionale "G.A. Sanna" di Sassari e lo zodiaco come porta di ingresso nell'eternità', *Quaderni della Soprintendenza Archeologia della Sardegna* 26 (2015): pp. 407–431.

³⁰ Roger Beck, *Planetary gods and planetary orders in the mysteries of Mithras* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp. 35–42.

³¹ B. C. Barker-Benfield, 'The Manuscripts of Macrobius' *Commentary on the Somnium Scipionis*' (PhD Thesis, Corpus Christi College, University of London, 1975), p. i.

was largely modelled upon this work. Platonic ideas present in Macrobius's thought were another element which garnered popularity for his *Commentary* in the Latin West. Also, the lengthy cosmographical section, which comprised almost half of the work, was one of the reasons that the *Commentary* was so often copied in medieval scriptoria. This section was sometimes bound separately, and there are manuscripts which preserve only this portion of the text. In other manuscripts, where the *Commentary* was copied in its entirety, there are often glosses or markings showing where this cosmographic section begins and ends. Interest in these topics was great in the Latin West, and until the middle of the twelfth century, the work of Macrobius was among the few works preserved in Latin which transmitted pieces of Classical cosmology and astronomy.³²

The text was particularly popular in the twelfth century, as many of its manuscripts can be dated to that time; just as the greatest number of the afore-mentioned portals with the signs of Cancer and Leo in prominent positions. That for a well-educated viewer of the time the sight of these two signs above the church entrance brought to mind the 'portal of men' seems highly likely, considering that Macrobius's discourse on the matter was well-known and quoted in the works of several medieval authors.³³

The concept of the 'portals of the sun' even found visual expression in manuscript illumination, as we can see from the illustration of the calendar in the twelfth-century Lunel Psalter. On the pages for the

³² On the role of Macrobius's *Commentary* in transmission of astronomical knowledge in Early Medieval Europe, see Stephen McCluskey, *Astronomies and Cultures in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 117–119, 133, 151–3; Bruce S. Eastwood, *Ordering the Heavens, Roman Astronomy and Cosmology in the Carolingian Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 31–94.

³³ Among them, Helpericus of Auxerre in his tenth-century *Computus*; Bernard Silvestris in *Cosmographia*; an anonymous author of the text appended to Adelard of Bath's *Questiones Naturales*; in the thirteenth century by Albert the Great. Helpericus, *Liber de computo*, PL 137, col. 25; Bernardus Silvestris, *Cosmographia*, *Microcosmos* 3, trans. Winthrop Wetherbee (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973); Charles Burnett, 'Omnibus convenit Platonis', an appendix to Adelard of Bath's *Questiones Naturales*, in Haijo J. Westra (ed.), *From Athens to Chartres: Neoplatonism and Medieval Thought, Studies in Honour of Edouard Jeuneau* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 259–282 [Burnett, *Omnibus convenit Platonis*]; Albertus Magnus, *Summae Theologiae*, II, XII, quaest. 72, mem. IV, artic. III, 9–10.

months of June and December, we find almost identical depictions: a dark-skinned male holding the lock on the bolt of the door next to the images of the sun and the sign of Cancer on fol. 3 and the sign of Capricorn on fol. 5. Christian Heck rightfully identified these as images of 'the gates of the sun'.³⁴ In his paper, he denies the possibility that any Platonic and Pythagorean speculations on the migrations of the souls were present in either visual nor literary allusions to this cosmological concept; he posits that medieval authors intentionally avoided these speculations by applying the term gates of the sun instead of gates of heaven, thus focusing solely on their astronomical and solstitial character.³⁵ In doing so, he quotes the writing of Helpericus of Auxerre and Albert the Great; yet he omits to mention Bernard Silvestris, who speaks of 'numberless throng of souls clustered about the abode of Cancer', or the author of the short text, known by its opening words *Omnibus convenit Platonis*.³⁶ In this text, he expounds on how 'All the Platonists agree' that the souls migrate from Milky Way to the Zodiac and pass through different stages while traversing through each of the signs. As Charles Burnett commented in his translation of the aforementioned text, the author thinks of the descent in a figurative way only, and the entire text should be read as 'an allegory of the successive stages of depravity that a human soul may go through before eventually reaching a turning point and progressing toward virtue'.³⁷ The tradition of using zodiacal symbolism for the purpose of creating a soteriological allegory is a long one, and goes all the way back to the fourth century when Zeno of Verona composed his sermon to the newly-baptized, in which he presents them with a mock horoscope in order to introduce them to Christian doctrines.³⁸

If the zodiac signs could be used metaphorically in medieval literature, it is not inconceivable they would be used in a similar manner in elaborate sculptural programs of church portals. As Calvin B. Kendall had pointed in his seminal study on verse inscriptions of Romanesque

³⁴ Christian Heck, 'Iconographie médiévale et héritage antique: la représentation des « Portes du Soleil » dans le calendrier du psautier de Lunel', *Scriptorium* Vol. 35, no. 2 (1981): pp. 241–261, [Heck, *la représentation des « Portes du Soleil »*]

³⁵ Heck, *la représentation des « Portes du Soleil »*, pp. 260–261.

³⁶ Bernard Silvestris, *Cosmographia*, Microcosmos 3; Burnett, *Omnibus convenit Platonis*, pp. 263–265.

³⁷ Burnett, *Omnibus convenit Platonis*, p. 266.

³⁸ Zeno of Verona, *Tractatus*.

portals, the church itself was perceived allegorically on multiple levels.³⁹ According to the fourfold scheme set forth by Bede, the church could be understood on the literal level as the image of the Temple of Solomon; typologically, as the body of Christ; tropologically, as each of the faithful; and anagogically, as the Heavenly Jerusalem.⁴⁰ The portal, as the point of entry and the boundary between secular and sacred space, was particularly symbolically charged. On the typological level, it could be seen as representative of Christ himself, as revealed by numerous inscriptions and iconography of portal tympana, but also by Christ's own words as conveyed in John 10:9: 'I am the door. By me, if any men enter in, he shall be saved.'⁴¹ It was through His Incarnation and sacrificial death on the Cross that the doors of the heaven were made accessible to the faithful. Anagogically, the portal was the gate of heaven, since the church was perceived as the heavenly city, as it is referred to in numerous inscriptions listed by Kendall.⁴² In the remainder of this paper, I will proceed to analyze and demonstrate how the Zodiac and the signs of Cancer and Leo performed a particular role in expression of these ideas on church portals.

The Signs of the Zodiac represent the sphere of the fixed stars, as the outermost sphere in most Classical cosmologies. This can be inferred from numerous diagrams found in medieval manuscripts, but is most clearly recognized from *The Mystic Ark* of Hugh of Saint Victor, a text containing the description of the painting of the same title, a highly complex cosmological and theological composition meant to visually encompass 'all time, all space, all matter, all human history, and all spiritual striving'.⁴³ The painting was most likely executed on a wall in the cloister of the Parisian abbey of Saint Victor, where it served as the basis of a series of lectures given by Hugh, one of the leading theologians of his time, during the course of the third and fourth decade of the twelfth

³⁹ Kendall, *The Allegory of the Church*, passim.

⁴⁰ Kendall, *The Allegory of the Church*, pp. 11–13. Parallels with the Heavenly Jerusalem can be found in liturgical texts from the tenth century, as well as in twelfth and thirteenth-century allegorical interpretations of the church as those written by abbots Suger and Durandus. For these sources, see L. Hull Stookey, 'The Gothic Cathedral as the Heavenly Jerusalem: Liturgical and Theological Sources', *Gesta* Vol. 8, no. 1 (1969): pp. 35–41.

⁴¹ Kendall, *The Allegory of the Church*, pp. 44–68, 80–91.

⁴² Kendall, *The Allegory of the Church*, pp. 109–119.

⁴³ Conrad Rudolph, *The Mystic Ark, Hugh of Saint Victor, Art, and Thought in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 344.

century.⁴⁴ As we learn from this ekphrasis, the figure of Christ, surrounded by seraphim and angels, holds a schematically represented cosmos divided into three zones of earth, air, and ether. The outer zone of ether is comprised of two concentric circles, that of the zodiac and of the twelve months: 'the Months are so arranged that the Signs revolving above seem to stand or walk in the *aplanes* [that part of the ether in which the fixed stars are found], while the Months after them or under them appear to be standing in the ether'.⁴⁵ Hugh uses the term *aplanes*, just like Macrobius before him, and later Bernard Silvestris uses the term *aplanon* to designate the space of the sphere of the fixed stars.⁴⁶ This sphere was considered as the outermost, starting with Anaximenes in the sixth century BCE, and later by Pythagorean thinkers as well as by Plato and Aristotle.⁴⁷ Elements of Aristotle's cosmology were taken by Ptolemy, whose system of seven planetary spheres and the eight sphere of the fixed stars remained the dominant one until the sixteenth century. While medieval writers diverged in some matters, they generally accepted the sphere of the fixed stars as the limit of the Universe, beyond which lay the ethereal realm as the abode of the Divine.⁴⁸ Thus, we can conclude that the representations of the Signs on the church portals serve as markers of the sacred topography of the space that physically lay behind them, the space of the church as the Heavenly Jerusalem and the House of God. As the church door stands between the secular and the sacred, so the Zodiac adorning it denotes the qualitative difference between the two modes of reality and existence.⁴⁹ Just as the physical portal provides

⁴⁴ Rudolph, *The Mystic Ark*, pp. xiii, 16–17.

⁴⁵ Hugh of Saint Victor, *Mystic Ark* 11, trans. Conrad Rudolph, in Rudolph, *The Mystic Ark*.

⁴⁶ Macrobius, *Commentary* I, XI, 8; Bernardus Silvestris, *Cosmographia*, Microcosmos 3.

⁴⁷ J. Edgar Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 99–102.

⁴⁸ Edward Grant, 'Cosmology', in David C. Lindberg (ed.), *Science in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 265–302, 275–6; Edward Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs: The Medieval Cosmos, 1200–1687* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 372–382.

⁴⁹ '...we may conclude that the portal of the church symbolized the spiritual transition from a temporal state on earth to an eternal one in heaven'. Cohen, *Transformations of Time*, p. 108. Whilst some researchers have recognized the liminal position of the Zodiac within church decoration, as Margaret Stokes, 'Christian Iconography in Ireland', *Archaeological Journal* Vol. 57, no. 1

communication between these two modes, so the portals of the sun on the Zodiac allow transition from one realm to the other. The idea of heavenly gates is not foreign to Christian thought- in Revelation 4:1, we read: 'After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven'. In the Old Testament, the gate of heaven is mentioned by Jacob after his dream in Gen. 28:17: 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' These words are also sung at the beginning of the mass for the annual dedication of churches and can also be found among several Italian twelfth-century texts of consecration rites for cathedrals.⁵⁰ Vertical arrangement and the rectangular shape of the fields in which the Zodiac signs are carved on

(1900): pp. 270-286; Phila Calder Nye, 'The Romanesque Signs of the Zodiac', *Art Bulletin* Vol. 5, no. 3 (1923): pp. 55-57; M. Q. Smith, 'Anagni: An Example of Medieval Typological Decoration', *Papers of the British School at Rome* Vol. 33 (1965): pp. 1-47, p. 13; and some have interpreted its meaning in relation to its architectural context, as Simona Cohen did, implications of the position of this motif have not been fully explored. Although, Cohen recognizes the Zodiac as representative of the sphere of the fixed stars, she maintains to perceive it as a temporal symbol, as most scholars have, usually basing their conclusion on the joint depictions of the Signs with the Labours of the Months, Cohen, *Transformations of Time*, pp. 106, 111; Hourihane, *Time in the Medieval World*; Panadero, thesis. In this paper, as I have done in my previous research, I consider the Zodiac as primarily a spatial motif, distinct from the Labours which connote the passing of time. My conclusion is based on the written sources, such as the above-mentioned descriptions of the *Mystic Ark* by Hugh of Saint-Victor, and also on the assumption that if the Labours already express the temporal aspect, depiction of the Signs as symbols of time would have been redundant. Ivana Lemcool, 'Appropriation and Christianization of the Zodiac Motif in the Art of the Middle Ages' (PhD Thesis, University of Belgrade, 2017), pp. 353-368.

⁵⁰ The *Roman Missal*, trans. Rev. Dr. England (Philadelphia, PA: Eugene Cumiskey, 1843), p. 504; Brian Møller Jensen, *Medieval Liturgical Texts in Italian Manuscripts* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Meller Press, 2006), pp. 217-221. 'The theological purpose of this rite was to delineate and ritualize the boundaries that separated the sacred space from that of the secular world. Ritualistically, however, the process was meant to circumscribe, and thus contain, the spiritual reality of the sacred place within the material form of the physical building'. Mickey Abel, *Open Access: Contextualizing the Archivolted Portals of Northern Spain and Western France within the Theology and Politics of Entry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), [Abel, *Open Access*], p. 116.

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the portals of Saint-Denis (Fig. 13) and Notre-Dame in Paris resemble the form of a ladder.⁵¹



Fig. 13. North portal of west façade of Saint-Denis Abbey. By Berit Wallenberg - Berit Wallenberg / Kulturmiljöbild, Riksantikvarieämbetet. This file was provided to Wikimedia Commons by the Swedish National Heritage Board as part of the cooperation project Connected Open Heritage with Wikimedia Sverige. This file was made available by Riksantikvarieämbetet as part of the Connected Open Heritage project. The project is led by Wikimedia Sverige in cooperation with UNESCO, Wikimedia Italia and Cultural Heritage without Borders and is financed by a project grant from the Culture Foundation of the Swedish Postcode Lottery., Public Domain.⁵²

⁵¹ Ladder associations are present in Latin zodiacal terminology. The word for grade of zodiac is *gradus*, which is the same word for a step. On its use by Manilius in his *Astronomica*, and Latin writers before him, see Katharina Volk, '“HeavenlySteps”: Manilius 4.119–121 and Its Background', in Ra'anan S. Bustan, Anette Yoshiko Reed (eds) *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 34–46.

⁵² <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=63166278>.

Representations of actual gates precede the Zodiac signs carved on jambs of two portals: at the top of outer pilasters of Prior's door of Ely Cathedral we can see towered city gates placed above the foliage scrolls in which the Zodiac signs are placed (Fig. 14); on the western façade of Amiens cathedral, a similar fortified gate is positioned before the sign of Cancer with which the Zodiac cycle on the socle of the north portal begins (Fig. 11).



Fig. 14. Prior's doorway, Ely Cathedral. cc-by-sa/2.0 - © Michael Garlick - geograph.org.uk/p/4480147.

In some instances, certain figures were inserted between the signs of Cancer and Leo, as on the outer archivolt of the portal of Civray (Fig. 3), where a mask-like face with exposed teeth and flames above its head is carved between these signs, or in Bordeaux (Fig. 4) and Cognac, where a leaf-shaped ornament fills the space between.⁵³

On the central portal of the narthex of Sainte-Madeleine in Vézelay, three and a half medallions are carved on the central voussoirs between Cancer and Leo (Fig. 15). There has been much debate in art historical literature on what the images in these medallions represent; for now, we can only note that they show a siren holding her tail, a contorted male gripping his feet, a dog who is similarly bent with his head reaching

⁵³ While the portal of Saint-Leger church in Cognac is badly damaged, the portal of Sainte-Croix in Bordeaux has been heavily restored, thus we cannot be certain if the ornament was a part of the original design of the archivolt.

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his tail, and in the segment of a circle, what seem to be bird's feet and a beak.⁵⁴



Fig. 15. Detail of the outer archivolt of the central portal of the narthex Sainte-Madeleine, Vézelay. By Ibex73 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0.⁵⁵

On the central portal of the cathedral in Autun (Fig.7), ornamental rosettes are placed on both ends of the archivolt with the Signs and Labours, along with additional roundels that do not belong to the cycle, yet the sign of Cancer still remains at the apex of the arch. From these examples, we can conclude that its central position was not a random effect of the sequence of the Zodiac and the Months, but a result of a deliberate intent and preconceived design.

In the churches of Aquitaine, the topmost voussoirs are, as a rule, occupied by figures of the crab and lion. Doorways of churches of this region are decorated with multiple stepped archivolts bearing intricate sculpted reliefs. Characteristic of this group of twelfth-century portals is the absence of tympana. While in earlier scholarship, this lack has been perceived as a kind of anomaly, sculptural programs of these portals in fact allow us to perceive how their imagery is in direct semiotic relation to the entrance below.⁵⁶ A limited number of themes and cycles is

⁵⁴ For a detailed description of these medallions and overview of hypotheses concerning their meaning, see Véronique Frandon, 'Du multiple à l'Un. Approche iconographique du calendrier et des saisons du portail de l'église abbatiale de Vézelay', *Gesta* Vol. 37, no. 1 (1998): pp. 74–87.

⁵⁵ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=82599524>.

⁵⁶ The most comprehensive analyses of this group of portals is given in Linda Seidel, *Songs of Glory: The Romanesque Façades of Aquitaine* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981) [Seidel, *Songs of Glory*]; see also, Abel, *Open Access*.

repeatedly encountered on these portals, partly due to the fact that the choice of figures displayed on them is constricted by the narrow width of the archivolts. It has been noted that the images positioned on the axes of these archivolts carry a particular visual and signficatory prominence, forming a vertical 'optical allegorical chain'.⁵⁷ Their overlay and meaning have been analyzed in accordance with allegorical method of interpretation, and in the following lines we will be able to see how the signs of Cancer and Leo contributed to the message conveyed by these portals.⁵⁸ For that purpose, we will investigate the sculptural decoration of the west portal of Aulnay, as a paradigmatic example whose influence may have been far-reaching considering that the church is situated on the Via Turonensis to Santiago de Compostela (Fig. 1). Although the outermost archivolt of this portal has been badly damaged, and some of the voussoirs have been re-arranged, we can clearly recognize the sign of Cancer at its summit, and to its left a figure which can be inferred to be that of Leo.⁵⁹ On the archivolt below, directly underneath the Cancer, is Christ as the bridegroom from the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt. 25:1–12). He is standing beside a bolted door, shown in half figure, enclosed in a mandorla, above the clouds, as indicated by a curved undulating surface beneath him. The archway with the bolted door reproduces some of the architectural features characteristic for the façade types of the Aquitaine region, particularly resembling the west façade of Saint-Jouin.⁶⁰ The five Wise Virgins are carved on the left side of the archivolt with their lamps upright, while the five Foolish Virgins are placed behind the closed door with their lamps upside down indicating they are empty. Also positioned circumferentially, personifications of Virtues fill the archivolt below, with Vices underneath their feet. Loosely based on Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, the personifications are marked by inscriptions. In the middle, two of them, Humility and Generosity, hold a crown carved in deep relief, appearing almost to be suspended above the worshiper entering the portal. Closest to the entrance is the archivolt on which the angels are holding the Lamb of God in a medallion at the apex.

We can see how a particular prominence has been given to the images placed on the vertical axis of the portal. From the top to the bottom, this vertical chain is formed by Cancer, Christ standing at the

⁵⁷ Seidel, *Songs of Glory*, p. 52.

⁵⁸ Seidel, *Songs of Glory*, pp. 53–54; Kendall, *Allegory of the Church*, pp. 142–144.

⁵⁹ Panadero, *Thesis*, p. 56.

⁶⁰ Seidel, *Songs of Glory*, p. 52.

gate, the Crown held by Virtues, and the Lamb of God. Interpretations of the previous researchers of the three innermost archivolts of the Aulnay's central portal can be summarized as follows: the Lamb of God represents Christ in Heavenly Jerusalem and the goal of every pious Christian; the Crown of Virtues is a reward for overcoming weaknesses and vices as the means for attaining the heavenly city; and Christ at the door as the only way to salvation which is taken by those who have prepared their souls as the Wise virgins have prepared their lamps.⁶¹ On this archivolt we find, as Linda Seidel concluded, an 'overt identification of the celestial portal with a material one' which 'provides a visible analogue to the anagogical thinking that permeates religious literature of the time'.⁶² Even though she views the Lamb of God as 'the central, the innermost, the key element in this triumphant, celestial hierarchy' and the entire sculptural program of the archivolts as 'a precise, material visualization of the triumphant Christian's reception in the heavenly city', her view of the outermost archivolt with the Labours and the Signs remains static, as being a kind of encasement for the images represented underneath them.⁶³ In their resemblance to the circular maps of the Universe, Seidel also sees these cosmological images as a reference to the 'geographical localization of Jerusalem'.⁶⁴

Yet, if we accept that images of the Months and the Zodiac represent the outermost sphere of the Universe, beyond which is the realm of the Divine, we can observe how the archivolt on which they are carved precedes the inner concentric archivolts, both physically and semiotically. Since the parable of the Ten Virgins and the figures of Virtues and Vices convey the message of how a Christian soul needs to be prepared to gain entrance into the heavenly city, we can regard the keystone images of these archivolts as the visual expression the rewards that soul is expected to receive in the afterlife. The souls of those which kept their piety and conquered their vices will be admitted through the Gate of Heaven by Christ, they will receive the Crown of Virtues and will be honoured to face the Lamb of God in Heavenly Jerusalem. If we accept this interpretation, then we can regard the reliefs in the first and

⁶¹ Kendall, *Allegory of the Church*, p. 142–147; Seidel, *Songs of Glory*, p. 51–54.

⁶² Seidel, *Songs of Glory*, p. 51. At Chadenac, as at Corme-Royal, on the archivolts bearing illustration of the same parable, the figure of Christ is placed directly beneath the arched opening.

⁶³ Seidel, *Songs of Glory*, p. 53, 54.

⁶⁴ Seidel, *Songs of Glory*, p. 53.

last archivolt as topographical markers of the anagogical reading of the entire sculptural program of the portal – the Labours and Signs as signifiers of the zone of ether to which the soul enters upon death and the Heavenly Jerusalem as its final destination.

We may wonder if the sign of Capricorn would not have been a more appropriate figure to place at the apex of the arch, being the Gate of Gods through which the souls ascend, according to Macrobius and Porphyry's writing. However, that would have been a more overt allusion to the idea of migration of the souls, a more literal depiction of neo-platonic ideas. Also, the sign of Cancer as the 'portal of men' provides further soteriological and Christological implications for the allegorical interpretation of the program of the archivolt. Being the gate of incarnation, i.e. birth, it can bring to mind a passage from the Gospel of John containing the dialogue of Christ with Nicodemus and Christ's words: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God' (John 3:3). The Greek is purposely ambiguous here, and 'born again' can also be translated as 'born from above', as it is rendered in some editions of the Bible.⁶⁵ Thus, in the placement of Cancer at the summit of the archivolt, we can also see another precondition for the entrance of a soul into heaven.

To further clarify His words and answer Nicodemus' question, Jesus says: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.' (John 3:5). By making an overt reference to baptism, He is dismissing any notion of heavenly journeys as those present in Merkabah and Hekhaloth literature, as well as in Hermetic and other ancient traditions.⁶⁶ In the light of those words, we can understand the entire outermost archivolt as the zone of ether, belonging entirely to the spiritual world distinct from the corporeal, into which a soul must pass if it wishes to reach the Heavenly Kingdom.

In continuation of the dialogue, Jesus tells Nicodemus: 'No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man'. (John 3:13). As He was believed to be the only one who came 'from above', until His advent and the death on the Cross no man had been able to gain access to the heaven. In the words of Remigius of Auxerre in his Commentary on the Psalm 33: 'God became a man so that

⁶⁵ William C. Grese, "'Unless One Is Born Again': The Use of a Heavenly Journey in John 3", *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 107, no. 4 (1988): pp. 677–693, p. 678, 691 [Grese, "Unless One is Born Again"].

⁶⁶ Grese, "Unless One Is Born Again", p. 679 sq.

man might be God. The Immortal took on mortal form so that mortal beings might receive immortality: He descended so that we might ascend'.⁶⁷ The notion of descent and ascent between the earthly and celestial spheres must have brought passages on the portals of the sun from Macrobius's *Commentary* to the mind of a medieval intellectual. Since the concept of the pre-existence of souls was condemned as heresy by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, along with other teachings of Origen, the gate between Cancer and Leo as the portal of incarnation could thus be considered to apply to the person of Christ as the Son of God, who is coeval with the Father.

If we apply a Christological level of interpretation to the reading of the western portal of Aulnay, then the axial figures on the archivolts can also be considered as pertaining to Christ. The Lamb is the obvious and conventional symbol of Christ as He is described in the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation (John 1: 29, 36; Rev. 5:1–7; 21:14); the crown can be an etymological reference to *Christos*, meaning 'anointed one', the word used in the Greek Septagint as a translation of Hebrew messiah and the practice of anointing as reserved for kings; Christ himself is depicted above as the Heavenly Bridegroom and as the one opening the door of Heaven. Accordingly, we can interpret the figure of Cancer as the portal of men, being symbolical of Christ's incarnation and descent into this world as a prerequisite of the salvation of the entire humankind and their admission through the Gates of Heaven and into the Kingdom of God. That He came down from heaven, as is stated in the Nicene Creed, is visually indicated by the Labours of Months and Zodiac signs on portal archivolts. '*Descendit ab etherei stellato sui solio regni*'- 'He descended from the starry heaven to the throne of His kingdom', with these words begins the introit antiphone preserved in a twelfth-century manuscript from the Chartres Cathedral.⁶⁸ On the Royal portal of the western facade of the cathedral, ten of the Zodiac signs are carved on

⁶⁷ '...., factus est Deus homo, ut homo fieret Deus. Immortalis formam mortalem induit, ut mortalis assumeret immortalem: descendit ille, ut nos ascenderemus.' Remigius Antissiodorensis, *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, Psalmus XXXIII; translation according to Herbert L. Kessler, 'Medietas / Mediator and the Geometry of Incarnation', in Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (eds), *Image and Incarnation, The Early Modern Doctrine of the Pictorial Image* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015), pp. 17–75, p. 63.

⁶⁸ Margot Fassler, 'Liturgy and Sacred History in the Twelfth-Century Tympana at Chartres', *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 75, no. 3 (1993): pp. 499–520, p. 506 [Fassler, 'Liturgy and Sacred History'].

archivolts of the north door, corresponding to the number of male figures represented on the lintel below Christ in the tympanum. As Margot Fassler concluded, this composition is not Ascension, as was generally accepted in earlier literature, but a depiction of 'Christ-to-come, eternally begotten', not seen by people, but foretold by the prophets who are shown on the lintel below.⁶⁹

All of the examples of portals with prominent placements of Cancer and Leo mentioned in this paper are located in France, and it is only there that this peculiarity within decorative schemes is encountered. In Italy, where a certain number of portals with zodiacal decoration is preserved, we do not find any similar occurrences. On the cathedrals of Piacenza and Foligno, the Zodiac sequence is interrupted at the signs of Libra and Virgo. The idea of 'portal of men' as participating in the message conveyed by the sculptural programs, as any idea of such complexity, could only have circulated within near-by monastic centres. However, it may have reached Venice by the middle of the thirteenth century, when we find it on the *Portale Maggiore* of Basilica San Marco (Fig. 16).



Fig. 16. Portale Maggiore, San Marco Basilica, Venice, detail. By Nino Barbieri - Own work, CC BY-SA 2.5.⁷⁰

On the intrados of the second archivolt, miniature Signs are included in scenes of Labours of the Months carved within the vined scroll. At the vertex, a medallion with a youthful Christ is placed. Beneath Him, small figures of a crab and lion are carved, accompanying the months of June and July, while above Him, small heads in medallions are placed, most probably personifications of the sun and moon.⁷¹ The youthful appearance of Christ may imply the Christ as the Word Incarnate, pre-

⁶⁹ Fassler, 'Liturgy and Sacred History', pp. 508–509.

⁷⁰ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1815974>.

⁷¹ The female head, most likely representing the moon, since her head seems to be framed by a crescent, is not placed above Cancer, the sign that it rules, but above Leo.

existent *Logos*, created by God before all time, as do the images of Christ Emmanuel in Byzantine art.⁷²

While further research needs to be conducted to investigate more fully how the idea of 'gate of men' participated in sculptural programs of individual portals, I hope that this paper brings insight into conspicuous placements of the signs of Cancer and Leo and their significance as bearers of that idea.

⁷² Kallirroe Linardou, 'Depicting the Salvation: Typological Images of Mary in the Kokkinobaphos Manuscripts', in Leslie Brubaker and Mary B. Cunningham, (eds.), *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images* (Surrey: Aldershot, 2011), pp. 133–149, p. 141, 142.