Charlemagne in Architecture

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Starting at the end of the eleventh century, monumental works in a large number of churches represented Charlemagne. As a model pilgrim and crusader, the association of his cult with both medieval ideals was strong, and his reputation for acquiring many relics furthered the links between him and the cults that led pilgrims on their quests. Under his reign, numerous abbeys were established and posterity conserves his memory as a founder. As several texts attest, many churches created their foundational narratives around him, even when it was not true. Most sites associated with the cult of Charlemagne, scattered throughout Christendom, tried to obtain objects said to be 'of Charlemagne' (see Legendary Presents of Charlemagne) and represented him in their churches, whether in low relief, sculpture in the round or in stained glass windows or painting. His cult, which logically began at his primary capital at Aachen, sprawled especially throughout the German Empire, but also into France and the whole of Christendom.

Charlemagne was entombed at Aachen and was canonized there in 1165, enhancing its pilgrimage attraction, although the main focus of pilgrimage was ostensibly the cult of the Virgin there. As the most important center of his cult, both his physical remains and objects either belonging to or given by him were kept there. Furthermore, Charlemagne was and is honored as the founder of the town’s cathedral. On the famous golden reliquary shrine dating from 1215, he offers a model of this edifice to the Virgin (see Reliquaries of Charlemagne). The same iconography appears on a keystone in the choir of the cathedral (before 1414) and on a statue in the same place (about 1430). A statue of Charlemagne holding the model of the church (end of the eleventh century), appears in the choir of St John's church in Müstair, Switzerland. Originally, this statue was apparently on the pediment between the apses with the statue of St-John the Baptist, as it appeared on a drawing in 1394. The statue was moved during the restoration of 1488, at which time the church he held was replaced by a scepter and a globe. The town of Frankfurt used this iconography as well. The emperor appears holding
the model of the cathedral in several places: on a stall in the cathedral (1345), in a statue on the portal of the south transept (1352), in another statue at the Galgentor (about 1365), on an imperial coin stamped (1430), and on a miniature in a register of the collegiate church from 1462.

In Conques-en-Rouergue, he appears on the tympanum of the church of St-Foy, another important pilgrimage goal. The Vita Karoli Magni, written on the occasion of his canonization in the twelfth century, lists twenty-three monasteries founded by him. Each one received a letter of the alphabet, the A going to Conques. This tympanum, dating from the beginning of the twelfth century, portrays Charlemagne as a generous donor, allowing the faithful to view the legend of the church's foundation. The bearded emperor is crowned and holds a scepter. Two figures accompany him; one holding a reliquary and the other a diptych. Although the tympanum was created before the time of his canonization, Charlemagne is represented as holy, at the head of the cortege of the Elect.

Another widespread way to represent the emperor was to show him crowned holding a sword in one hand and the globe in the other, as he appears on the stained glass window in Strasbourg (around 1200). He appears in the same way in Bremen on the reliquary of the Saints Cosmas and Damian in contemporary c. 1400 clothing (since the Reformation this reliquary is in the church of St Michael in Munich), and on the wall of the council house (around 1410). In Halberstadt, Charlemagne appears in a tapestry of the cathedral dating from the first half of the thirteenth century with only the scepter, and in the south transept there is a statue (c. 1470) showing him holding scepter and globe. Besides this manner of expressing imperial power, the emperor is also seen with a sword, specifically in the cathedral of Zurich. On the south tower is a copy of a statue of Charlemagne with the sword on his knees, whose original, from 1450, is in the crypt. In the same cathedral, a capital from the second half of the twelfth century represents Charlemagne as a knight with St Felix and St Regula, patrons of the town.

The two main ways of representing Charlemagne in architectural decoration, as in goldworks, are as a founder and a wielder of imperial power. These examples are always majestic representations. There are two cases known of narrative cycles in architectural decoration: the magnificent stained glass window in the cathedral of Chartres with scenes referring to the legendary crusades of the emperor in Jerusalem and in Spain, which was inspired by a stained glass window, now destroyed, in St-Denis.

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