Signs in the Stones

Silvia Nilsen

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Signs in the Stones

Masons' marks were graphic symbols inscribed in the stones of a church. Their exact usage is a matter of scholarly debate, but the current consensus is that a mason, upon completing a portion of their work, cut their symbol into the block in order to tally up their labor and receive payment (sometimes the marks were referred to as a "banker's mark") for their work. How the symbol was connected to a particular mason is not known, but it is assumed that they would choose or be assigned one on obtaining journeyman status. The mason may have also adapted a symbol used by their father or uncle. Both stone carvers and cutters marked blocks. Scholars following a particular set of symbols have been able to establish chronological sequence of building blocks. Originally covered by polychrome, most of these marks were meant to be hidden, but now, with the passage of time and the wearing away of their original painted surface, more masons' marks have been discovered. Silvia Nilsen, freelance writer and editor of travel guides (and officer of the Confraternity of St. James, South Africa), during her research on the pilgrimage roads to Santiago de Compostela photographed some of the more striking masons' marks. For further reading on marks, signs, and symbols in stones see Firmado en la Piedra por los Maestros Canteros Medievales by Juan Luis Puente Lopez

Photographer: Silvia Nilsen

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Astorga, Spain is found at the crossroads of the French road to Santiago de Compostela and the Ruta de la Plata (Silver Road). The Cathedral was begun in the Romanesque period, substantially enlarged in the 15th century, and completed in the 18th century. Mark in the shape of a Patriarchal cross with an upside down triangle at the base

Astorga, Spain. Mark in the shape of a shepherd's crook.
Astorga, Spain. Mark in the shape of capital initials JF, perhaps pilgrim graffiti?

Astorga, Spain. Mason's mark in the shape of a backwards, curvilinear h.

Eunate, Church of St. Mary, mason's mark, Romanesque, 12th century, Navarre, Spain. Mark in the shape of shackles(?)
Eunate, Church of St. Mary, mason's mark, Romanesque, 12th century, Navarre, Spain. Mark in the shape of shackles. Note how the mark crosses over two stone blocks.

Eunate, Church of St. Mary, mason's mark, Romanesque, 12th century, Navarre, Spain. Mark in the shape of shackles near column.

Fromista, Church of St. Martin, Romanesque, 11th century, Palencia, Spain. On the road to Santiago de Compostela. Mark in the shape of a capital M.
León Cathedral, Church of Santa Marón a, León, Spain. Mark in the shape of a backwards shepherd's crook with a spiral handle.

León Cathedral, Church of Santa Marón a, León, Spain. Mark in the shape of a backwards shepherd's crook with a spiral handle, same as above, but on a different block.

León Cathedral, Church of Santa Marón a, León, Spain. Mark in the shape of a bird.
León Cathedral, Church of Santa Marñón a, León, Spain. Mark in the shape of an arrow or tripod placed horizontally.

León Cathedral, Church of Santa María, León, Spain. Mark in the form of a bow and arrow pointing downwards.

León Cathedral, Church of Santa Marñón a, León n, Spain. Mark in the shape of a column with a simple base and capital.
Lugo, Galicia, Spain, Cathedral of St. Froilán, built about 1129. Mark in the shape of a vertically-connected P and E.

Lugo, Galicia, Spain, Cathedral of St. Froilán, built about 1129. Mark in the shape of a capital A with serifs.

Pamplona, Navarre, Spain. Pamplona Cathedral. Mark in the shape of a Greek cross within a circle. Pilgrim graffiti?
Pamplona, Navarre, Spain. Pamplona Cathedral. Mark in the shape of the Patriarchal Cross (note double arms) surmounting the Christ's monogram HIS in capital letters with serifs. Pilgrim graffiti?

Roncesvalles, Navarre, Spain. Collegiate Church along the road to Santiago de Compostela. Romanesque. Mark in the shape of a Greek cross.

Roncesvalles, Navarre, Spain. Collegiate Church. Romanesque. Mark in the shape of a cross with circles extending from two arms.
Roncsvalles, Navarre, Spain. Collegiate Church. Romanesque. Mark in the shape of a footprint of a traveler wearing a fashionably pointy shoe.

Roncsvalles, Navarre, Spain. Collegiate Church. Romanesque. Mark in the shape of elaborate window tracery; a Jewish star (star of David) with interlocking trefoils forming a large sexfoil.

Real Monasterio de San Zoilo, Palencia, Spain. On the road to Santiago de Compostela. Mark in the shape of a left pointing arrow.
Real Monasterio de San Zoilo, Palencia, Spain. On the road to Santiago de Compostela. Marks in the shape of sideways triangles meeting in the center.

Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain. Romanesque Cathedral. Mark on column in the shape of a sideways capital B with serifs.

Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain. Romanesque Cathedral. Mark on column in the shape of four sideways half moon shapes.
Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain. Romanesque Cathedral. Mark on column in the shape of a backwards shepherd's crook.

Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain. Romanesque Cathedral. Mark on stone block in the shape of initials I and I placed in the shape of a decorative square. Pilgrim graffiti?

Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain. Romanesque Cathedral. Mark on stone block in the shape of the initial capital V, a Latin cross, and an indented circle surmounted by a backwards 5 (looking vaguely like a zodiac sign). Pilgrim graffiti?
Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain. Romanesque Cathedral.
Mark on stone block in the shape of the initial capitals X, V, and I (= 16?) with serifs and the X and V connected. Pilgrim graffiti?

Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain. Romanesque Cathedral.
Mark on stone block in the shape of a Greek cross. Note discoloration as evidence of many pilgrims touching the image. Pilgrim graffiti?

Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain. Romanesque Cathedral, cloister. Mark on stone block in the shape of a triangle (without a bottom) and a half moon.
Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain. Romanesque Cathedral, cloister. Mark on stone block in the shape of a capital A or an upside down V.

Real Monasterio de San Zoilo, Palencia, Spain. On the road to Santiago de Compostela. Mark in the shape of a capital N.

Santo Domingo de Silos Abbey (Monasterio de Santo Domingo de Silos), Burgos, Spain. 11th century, Romanesque. Mark in the shape of a crude cross. Pilgrim graffiti?

Santo Domingo de Silos Abbey (Monasterio de Santo Domingo de Silos), Burgos, Spain. 11th century, Romanesque. Mark in the shape of a St. Andrews cross composed of four propeller-shapes in a circle. Reminiscent of window tracery.

Torres del Rio, Church of the Holy Sepulcher (Sepulcher), 12th century, Romanesque, Navarre, Spain. Modeled on the church in Jerusalem by the Knights Templar. Mark in the shape of a Coptic anhk cross surmounted by a smaller Latin cross.