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The Zodiac on Church Portals: Astrology and the Medieval Cosmos

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Introduction

The fantastic signs of the classical zodiac materialize in medieval art across Europe in a variety of media, often paired with the Labors of the Month to comprise a compelling visual tradition. The seasonal activities matched with specific star-signs were visibly expressed in localized trends, as explored by James Webster, who delineated sign and labor partnerships by region and period.1 Carved prominently on church portals in the 12th and 13th centuries, where ecclesiastical liturgy and processions

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were linked, they were woven into the fabric of public life through visual art. Sculpted portal programs were more than simply backdrops to liturgy and ritual, for the themes and images performed as symbols that activated religious imagination.

Figure 1 Map charting locations of fifty ecclesiastical buildings featuring exterior sculpted zodiacal images built between 1050-1500 CE. See an interactive version here: medievalcosmos.net. Map data: © Google Imagery, © NASA TerraMetrics.

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of the zodiac in this religious imagination is echoed by at least 50 extant ecclesiastical buildings featuring exterior sculpted zodiac signs built between c. 1050-1500 across western Europe. (Figs. 1, 2) Thirty-nine cathedrals, basilicas, abbeys, and churches feature zodiacal sculptures on one or more portals, the majority from 12th-century France.\footnote{These zodiac and labor cycles have been corroborated by at least three sources, primarily drawing upon the Princeton Index of Medieval Art. Visit medievalcosmos.net for more information, including a map indicating church locations.} Despite the pervasive presence of this motif in medieval art, only about 10% of these zodiac portals have been studied extensively, particularly in relation to one
another. This elite 10% of zodiac portals, connected with wealthy urban or monastic centers, overseen by a powerful group of clergy and aristocrats, represent only an oblique, keyhole glimpse of this popular image cycle. It is only by taking a comprehensive stance including relatively minor churches that a new understanding emerges, specifically a deeper relationship between agriculture, zodiac signs, and church portals. Prefaced by the wide scope of the motif and its role in church decoration, it is beneficial to re-examine even the most studied zodiac portals. This study will therefore present new interpretations of zodiac portals by carefully defining medieval astrology and re-imagining the zodiac in its medieval context with a clearer view of astronomy, processions, and viewership.

The zodiac signs are an unusual medieval symbolic system, simultaneously comfortable on playful game pieces and decorating critical sacred spaces on cathedral portals. Scholars have wrestled with the categorization of zodiacal images: do they belong in the sacred realm, adopted onto church portals as a new design inspired by metaphysical scholastic texts, as suggested recently by Simona Cohen? Or possibly the opposite, a recycled system of symbols without special significance? Or are they

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6 Across publications, the five most studied zodiac portals are at the 12th-century churches in Vézelay, Aulnay, St-Denis in Paris, and Chartres Cathedral in France.  
8 M. W. Evans, *Personifications of the Artes from Martianus Capella up to the end of the Fourteenth Century* (Ph.D. Diss, University of London, 1970), pp. 112-117. Evans argued that the zodiac is not “necessarily the result of specific dogma…and these simply reflect the influence of Burgundian portal design.”
marginal *fabula*, the “noxious cartilage” of exterior decorations?9 The answer lies, I believe, in an inclusive approach rooted in medieval astrology, with its convoluted mixture of astronomy, folklore, and art. The categorization and delineation that has been applied to zodiac portals is an anachronistic projection of ideological borders dividing church (*ecclesia*) and astrology (*astrológia*), signaling a misunderstanding of medieval astrology. In the extensive art-historical literature on these 12th and 13th-century portals, there is a consensus that the zodiac and labor cycles are not actually astrological in intent or interpretation. Instead, I propose that the portal zodiacs are essentially astrological, depicting medieval cosmology. The twelve zodiacal emblems were multivalent signs whose interpretation varied by audience and context, often prefacing prayers and rituals either on a church or in the pages of a psalter, inextricably connected to their stars in the night sky and their folkloric astrology.

**Historiography and the Misconstruction of Medieval Astrology**

Art-historical literature addressing portal sculpture have studied the ecclesiastical, philosophical, and scholastic considerations which may have led to the unlikely choice of the inclusion of the zodiac, but they conclude that the zodiac and labors cycles on portals were not cognate to pseudo-scientific astrology, nor did they

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necessarily correspond to the constellations of the heavens. For instance, Simona Cohen argues that the emergence of the zodiac reflects the shifting metaphysical conceits of time among scholastic thinkers. She further proposes that the zodiac was an autonomous element representing time allotted to man, a “new” motif chosen without a direct connotation to the stars.

The primary reason for these arguments is an over-reliance on specific texts, particularly Isidore of Seville’s (c. 560-636) delineation between astrologia, astronomia, and ecclesia in his De natura rerum (612-615) and Augustine of Hippo’s (c. 354-430)

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11 Cohen, p. 44, 92. Focusing on 12th-century churches in Vézelay, Aulnay, St-Denis in Paris, and Chartres Cathedral, the exegetical and philosophical texts of monastic and cathedral schools in Burgundy and the Île-de-France cited, were concerned with the issue of time as a consequential philosophical and metaphysical issue.

12 Decades earlier, Chauncey Wood wrote that despite displaying the zodiac prominently in so many locations, medieval churches were “not at all astrologically oriented” in Chaucer and the Country of Stars (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 52-53.
condemnation of astrology before him. But the roles of astrology, astronomy, church infrastructure and everyday life were hardly determined by these two treatises, as evidenced by the resilience of astrological and astrometerological beliefs and practices across society. The signs of the zodiac in the revolving heavens, the purpose of the stars, fate, and God’s providence appear as consequential topics in nearly all principal 12th- and 13th-century scholastic works. The astral influences of the constellations were discussed as natural, divine signs, which influenced events on earth, without undermining humanity’s free will. Naturally, any pagan astrological notion that limited the divine power of the Christian God was denied, but that is not to say that all astrological notions were denied. Taken from Aristotelian cosmology, Peter Abelard (1079-1142), Albertus Magnus (c. 1200-1280), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and others described a universe in which superior forces exert influences on inferior beings, where the zodiac belongs to the incorruptible celestial sphere, affecting the earth though incomprehensibly distant in space. Astrological thinking followed the Ptolemaic, geocentric universe as the ultimate expression of a divinely ordered megacosm.

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13 Where Augustine of Hippo condemns astrology, all written circa 390-400: *De Doctrina Christiana*, II, c. 21; *Enarrationes in Psalms*, Ps. 58 and 140; *De diversis 83 quaestiones*, q. 45; *De Actibus cum Felice Manichaeo*, I.10 and Isidore of Seville, *De natura rerum*, 612-615. On Isidore: S.J. Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1987), p. 126: “There is here no suggestion that astrology is mistaken, that it does not work, that it is empty superstition: only that it is no longer allowed.” Isidore of Seville is also clear to define *astrologia naturalis*, “natural astrology.” Isidore of Seville, *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi Etymologiarum sive originum libri xx*, 3. 27, p. 148.

14 See also Nicholas Campion’s discussion in: *The Medieval and Modern Worlds: History of Western Astrology vol. II* (London: Continuum Books, 2009), particularly the introduction.

15 Tester, p. 10.
For example, Hugh of St. Victor (d.1141) writes in his Didascalicon:

Concerning the Term ‘Astronomy’: ‘Astronomy’ and ‘astrology’ differ in the former’s taking its name from the phrase ‘law of the stars,’ while the latter takes it’s from the phrase ‘discourse concerning the stars’ – for nomia means law, and logos, discourse. It is astronomy, then, which treats the law of the stars and the revolution of the heaven, and which investigates the regions, orbits, courses, risings, and setting of stars, and why each bears the name assigned it; it is astrology, however, which considers the stars in their bearing upon birth, death, and all other events, and is only partly natural, and for the rest, superstitious; natural as it concerns the temper of ‘complexion’ of physical things, like health, illness, storm, calm, productivity, and unproductivity, which vary with the mutual alignments of the astral bodies; but superstitious as it concerns chance happenings or things subject to free choice.\(^{16}\)

He defines astrology not as antithetical to Christian belief practices - he does not divide ecclesia and astrologia - instead he separates what is “natural” and what is “superstitious.” According to Hugh, astrological forces shape or govern bodily wellness, natural events like tides or storms, and the success of certain ventures or activities. What is condemned is pervasive folk superstitions related to fortune-telling or divination. Vitriolic animosity is aimed at those who would make a profit by selling fortunes and deliberately duping believers with quack astrology, as expressed in the writings of the Raymond of Marseilles (fl. 1150s).\(^{17}\) It is important to note however that he also condemned those who disregarded the magnificent organization of the heavens

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and the correspondence between zodiac signs and the changing seasons, warning that they “ignore God’s law.” It was the canons and clergy, schooled in the quadrivium, who determined the art programs of churches, reflecting this fundamentally astrological cosmology.

Indeed, from rabbinical centers in southern France to chilly monasteries in Britain, all kinds of astrology were experiencing an enthusiastic revival in the 12th and 13th centuries. The erection of at least 50 buildings featuring zodiacal decorations across western Europe coincided with the influx of astronomical and astrological texts from Islamic centers of learning via Spain. The astrolabe was the cutting-edge technology of the day, a practical aid for computing hours and distances, but it was also used to study the zodiac specifically for astrological readings and horoscopes. In fact, on most medieval astrolabes, the rete (or star-net) presents a reversed projection of star patterns from their actual configuration in the night sky. This is likely because the astrolabe not only aided in the navigation of the night sky but equally facilitated astrological readings without observation of the stars. For astrological purposes, the perceived arrangement of stars was less valuable than their location and revolutions with reference to other celestial objects. The surge in popularity of zodiacal motifs was one expression of this

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18 Raymond of Marseilles, p. 139.
underlying groundswell of interest in astrology; it is therefore illogical to assert that contemporaneous church decoration was not at all astrologically oriented.\textsuperscript{21}

Yet, to focus solely on the education and written evidence of the wealthy patrons and powerful clergymen responsible for the production of zodiac portals is to overlook the audience.\textsuperscript{22} The widespread familiarity with the zodiac enjoyed by the greater population, as evidenced by its depiction on commonplace domestic objects, has been largely neglected. Dozens of game pieces and draughtsmen decorated with zodiacal images reside in museums, saved due to their precious material substance (usually ivory) rather than their value as play objects. Much like the zodiac itself, table games came to Europe from the Arab world, via Italy or Spain.\textsuperscript{23} See for example a draughtsman from the British Museum, 12th century (\textbf{Fig. 3}). Carved of ivory and only 4.8 cm in diameter, the piece displays a man carrying a bundle of sticks through foliage, Aries the Ram on his right. The edges are inscribed with “+ GENVARIVS ARIETS,” erroneously assigning Aries to the month of January.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Page} Sophie Page, \textit{Astrology in Medieval Manuscripts} (London, The British Library, 2002), p. 7: “Flowing in full spate into Europe in the 12\textsuperscript{th} century, it aroused considerable interest among Christian scholars who saw it as part of a great treasure of knowledge preserved and augmented by their Arab neighbors.”
\bibitem{McAllister} Folk astrology may have influenced the elite astronomy studied by the clergy: Joseph Bernard McAllister, \textit{The Letter of Saint Thomas Aquinas De Occultis Operibus Naturae Ad Quemdam Militem Ultramontanum} (Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 1939), see author’s essay, esp. pp. 58-59.
\end{thebibliography}
This was probably a muddled mixture of Labors of the Month pictures. Circular and sometimes paired with labors like this one, zodiacal imagery on game pieces are small-scale echoes of roundels sculpted on church portals, lain in floor mosaics, and in stained glass windows. The appearance of the zodiac in temporal, worldly game pieces, suggests the flexibility and multivalent qualities of the twelve signs. While the zodiac portal at St-Denis may have been designed to reflect a metaphysical cosmos as theorized in the monastic halls and classrooms of urban education centers, their conjunction with images of manual labor kept them rooted in earthly reality.

**Figure 3** Ivory draught's-piece, provenance unknown (12th century). Currently in The British Museum, museum number 1853,0221.4. Photo: The Trustees of the British Museum, used under the Creative Commons license.
A Sympathetic, Ptolemaic Universe

The connection between stars and seasonal work is critical because tracking the movement of the stars was an essential timekeeping method for farmers. This connection is witnessed by the extensive history of written almanacs, beginning with Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (c. 700 BCE), and continuing with cultural variations to today. Naturally, it is difficult to ascertain the precise role the zodiac may have played in the daily life of farmers (and surely varied by individual, situation, location, and period), but the unification of zodiacal signs with the Labors of the Month conveys a close association. Indeed, depictions of agricultural work are limited in scope and number in medieval art, but the Labors of the Month cycle is a striking exception. Slaughtering pigs, warming by the fire, threshing wheat, grape-gathering and sowing seeds in spring are unusually quotidian pursuits relayed in some detail, joined with their starry signs.

Inherited by Mesopotamian and subsequent Greco-Roman traditions, the zodiac signs were propelled by folkloric astrology and the arts, modified for medieval paradigms. Astrological folklore appears in some of the world’s oldest records, but

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perhaps most consequently in the texts of Claudius Ptolemy (c. 100-170, Alexandria). Their geocentric model of the universe was fundamental to the astronomical understanding of western civilizations, and his cosmology ruled astronomy until it was undone by Copernicus (1473-1543). Ptolemy operated within a Platonic framework of *sympatheia*, in which the macrocosmos of the universe exerted influential powers over the events in the microcosmos of earth. In the *Almagest* and the *Tetrabiblos*, Ptolemy methodically described the “significance of the constellations” with an unacknowledged reliance on artistic conventions. He defined the zodiac as “natural characters” handed down by tradition, with “unmingled powers” inherent to the signs, which interacted with the movement of the sun, moon, and planets. The creatures and figures projected onto the constellations informed their dominion of influence.

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28 For consideration on how this philosophy may have informed daily life in the Middle Ages, see: Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), pp. 32-33.


According to Ptolemy, constellations associated with human forms, like Aquarius, impacted the fate of humanity. Domesticated beasts of burden, such as four-footed Aries and Taurus, held sway over terrestrial animals. Untamable beasts like Leo the lion guided the fate of wild animals, whereas the tame signs effected domesticated creatures. Water signs like Cancer and Capricorn governed aquatic events, and winged beings like Virgo affected flying fauna. There are no rationalizations offered for these correlations beyond visual coincidence, a robust and prominent example of folklore and illustrative conventions driving the prominence of the zodiac signs. Astrological influences were unquestionably at work in the Ptolemaic universe and by incorporating the classical zodiac into ecclesiastical thought and, by extension, church portal programs, legitimized pagan science in the realm of God’s universe. Deliberately including the classical zodiac in all manner of church decorations and book illuminations reconciled the known cosmos within the kingdom of Christian grace, with its timeworn folklore and agricultural roots intact. \(^{31}\)

**Portal Zodiaccs Great and Small**

Of the religious buildings featuring exterior sculpted zodiac signs, the most

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\(^{31}\) These ideas were influenced by conversations held in response to my presentation in the International Medieval Congress at Leeds with Dr. Tom McLeish, private email to the author, July 2020.
Figure 4.1 Notre-Dame-des-Miracles, Mauriac, France (1110-1149). Photo: public domain.
common locations for the cycles are in the curving archivolts above west portals entrances, followed by portal jambs, then in running friezes on western facades, with rare examples above doors in the lintel. The largest category consists of a series of zodiac and labors systems carved in little roundels or rectangles on the outermost archivolt, mostly in France, completed within the first half of the 12th century. As has been noted by scholars before, this group of churches are similar enough in style and placement to suggest a shared influence or inspiration. The churches of Saint-Lazare in Autun and Sainte-Marie-Madeleine in Vézelay particularly have a long pedigree of scholarly attention, but to illustrate the astrological influences of medieval cosmology on zodiacal decoration, consideration of smaller and lesser-known churches is beneficial. For example, two buildings with fascinating zodiacal motifs are the Churches of Notre-Dame-des-Miracles, in Mauriac, France (1110-1149), and Saint-Georges, Ydes, France (c. 1150) (Figs. 4, 5). Notre-Dame-des-Miracles was once in the heart of the medieval village, near the monastic church and cloister, a central hub of spiritual life for a small congregation. The west portal of this church is flanked by two fierce lions below the columns, with uninterrupted archivolts framing the tympanum featuring...
scenes of the second coming of Christ (Fig. 4.2). The zodiac without the labors is sculpted in the outermost archivolt like a punctuating, figural rib, beginning with Aries on the right (Fig. 4.3). The façade never included other sculpted decorations on the archivolts other than the zodiacal figures. The forms are thin and elongated, gracefully arching over the viewer’s head. The pinnacle features Libra in a long diagonal line, arm outstretched to raise his scales. The highly stylized signs are attenuated, but easily recognizable as a complete cycle. This style is mirrored in the rural church of Saint-Georges, Ydes, France (Fig. 5.1), whose zodiacal signs are sculpted as a framing decoration to the deep porch, several stones at the apex are missing. Even so, Sagittarius is delightfully distinctive, his head turned to peer down at the church visitor, the curve in his flank echoed in the curve of his bow, a delicate swirl adorning his thigh (Fig. 5.3). The sculptural program is so minimal in both churches that the choice of including the zodiac seems purposeful, and not simply imitations of renowned portals. They highlight the iconographic function of this kind of imagery on church portals in a way that the more highly decorated churches cannot. With little visual traffic to distract the viewer, the zodiacal signs are clearly elemental, singularly meaningful, and I suggest, they act as a device to recall the astrological sympathy of the universe with Christ

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34 Moulier, pp. 75-78. The style of the tympanum is like those seen at Saint-Chamant and Collonges (1150-1160) and Correze, Cahors (1140-1150). See Evelyne Proust, La sculpture romane en Bas-Limousin (Paris, 2004), pp. 56-58. The lions may be connected to the Old Testament prophet Daniel, or perhaps perform an apotropaic function drawing on older traditions, p. 78.

35 Moulier, p. 87-88.
Figure 4.2 Detail of tympanum sculpture over central portal, Notre-Dame-des-Miracles. Photo: public domain.

Figure 4.3 Pisces, Libra, & Capricorn, outer archivolt, central portal, Notre-Dame-des-Miracles. Photo: public domain.
Figure 5.1 Church of Saint-Georges, Ydes, France, c. 1150.
Photo: public domain.
Figure 5.2 Portal of Church of Saint-Georges, Ydes, France, c. 1150. Photo: public domain.
at the center. Celestial, divine powers affect the terrestrial and quotidian, accessed within the holy space of the church to which these zodiacal images act as a visual prologue. In the portal space the emphatic zodiacal designs conceptually united the viewer, the temporal rhythms of mortality, and the Church in God’s cosmos. The zodiac signs also dually referenced their age-old nocturnal signposts critical to agricultural life in an astrological sense. For a parish church, servicing local congregations like Saint-
Georges of Ydes, the decoration may draw intentionally from the folkloric authority of the zodiac signs to symbolically unite them with the greater movements of the Church.\textsuperscript{36}

Considering another contemporary church within the same stylistic milieu but featuring a sculpted zodiac cycle outside the portal space supports this idea. The church of Saint-Austremoine (c. 1130-1160) in Issoire, France, built in connection with a Benedictine Abbey, was once a grand monument with an ornate western façade and two bell towers (Fig. 6.1).\textsuperscript{37} It suffered greatly during religious wars and the French Revolution, but the zodiacal sculptures survive above the windows and beneath the cornices of the radiating chapels. These were likely sculpted c.1130 with all twelve signs.\textsuperscript{38} Some are labelled in Latin with stellate designs, such as that of Libra (Fig. 6.2). They are not physically joined in a sequence as other zodiac cycles but spaced across the walls of the church (Figs. 6.3). They are not well-integrated into the greater exterior structure nor do they appear to directly relate to other parts of the church to make a programmatic whole.\textsuperscript{39} Nonetheless, the three-dimensional placement of the zodiacal emblems around the building suggests that it might have played a role in processional circumambulations around the church.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{36} Jean-Baptiste Chabau, \textit{Le Trésor de Notre-Dame des Miracles a Mauriac} (Brive, 1895), with list of saint’s days celebrated at the church on p. 15.


\textsuperscript{38} Ranquet, p. 291.

\textsuperscript{39} Perhaps labor or zodiac symbols also adorned the church portal of the façade, but no records survive.

\textsuperscript{40} Margot E. Fassler, \textit{The Virgin of Chartres; Making History through Liturgy and the Art} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 316: “Spaces outside churches became the setting for liturgical drama in the
twelfth century, drawing texts and music out to the portals, where there may have been interaction between drama, music, and sculptural programs.” On the origins of liturgical processions and circumambulation in the European Middle Ages, see Roger E. Reynolds, “The Drama of Medieval Liturgical Processions,” *Revue de Musicologie* 86/1 (2000), pp. 127-142.

Figure 6.1 Church of Saint-Austremoine, Issoire, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, France (c. 1130-1160). Photo: public domain.
Figure 6.2 Zodiac signs on eastern apse (Libra, Scorpio, Aries, and Taurus), some partially restored, church of Saint-Austremoine, Issoire, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, France (c.1130-1160). Photo: public domain.
Figure 6.3 Details of Pisces, Aquarius, Virgo and Sagittarius medallions partially restored, exterior of the radiating apse chapels, Church of Saint-Austremoine. Photos: public domain.
The stars in the zodiac constellations themselves trail the sun in its ecliptic path in a predictable nocturnal and yearly procession, just as the pious trailed the clergy in liturgical processions toward church portals in annual rhythms. The signs also visually separated the whole of the church from the mundane world and placed it in a sacred sphere, likely as an allusion to the heavenly Jerusalem.⁴¹

The unfolding chapels with their zodiacal emblems beneath the cornice operate like unfolding calendar folios in contemporary manuscripts. Calendar folios often prefaced psalters or prayerbooks, sometimes with arches separated by thin colonettes. Listing important dates and feasts, these pages provide practical and sacred information to situate the viewer in time. Several contemporary manuscripts share an aesthetic formula with the exterior of St. Austremoine, in which calendar pages are adorned with architectural frames, complete with columns, arches and zodiacal medallions. Consider for example the Stammheim Missal, created at Saint Michael's Abbey at Hildesheim, c. 1170-1180 (Figs. 7.1, 7.2). This missal records the prayers and chants for the Mass and is prefaced by a gorgeously decorated calendarium. Each month occupies one side of a folio, listing the numerical dates, days of the week and religious feasts. The temporal information is framed by splendidly painted arches, highlighted by gold-leafed columns, and two illuminated circles. The wheels in the haut-de-page are diagrammatic.

sundials indicating the hours of daylight and darkness typical to the month, with various classically inspired figures beside. Masterfully illustrated zodiacal roundels below indicates the month. The folios for May and June have particularly wonderful architectural frames (Fig. 7.1), looking much like St. Austremoine with red-tiled roofs, and half domes covering radiating chapel structures. I am not implying any certain inspirational or causal links between them, only a shared
Figure 7.2 Details of Calendar page for May, fol. 5v: Stammheim Missal.

aesthetic design: in both the church and manuscript the zodiacal emblems appear beneath roofs, cornices, and arches with Latin inscriptions. On a greater thematic level, both zodiacal cycles prelude the prayers and chants of Mass, literally and figuratively. The calendrical pages of medieval manuscripts situated the viewer not only within their temporal timeframe, but within a spiritual frame as well with feasts and saints’ days. Visually these calendars unite the flux of earthly time with the celestial
eternity, especially by alluding to the unchanging star signs. The zodiac was therefore an astrological implement uniting the macrocosmos of God’s universe with the daily microcosmos of lived experience, both on the church and on the page.

In the *Psalter of St. Albans*, likely made at St. Albans Abbey, England in the early 12th century, zodiac signs and labors decorate the opening calendar pages in bright red, green, white, and blue. For the days of March, a seated figure in a decorated sphere
holds aloft a fresh green branch, indicating the return of spring (Fig. 8). Horned Aries twists his head toward the column of numerical dates, an identifying label beside. The text surrounding the drawing exemplifies how astronomy and religious activity were astrologically joined in the medieval world, amplified by zodiacal imagery. In the right column: “The earliest rising of the Easter moon. / The latest rising of the moon ·ii·-beginning·-xl· / ARIES. / The Equinox according to Bede. / The earliest date for easter and site of the epact. / Adam is created. / The place of the concurrent / The Equinox according to Roman usage.” This is helpful for dating Easter, while citing authorities like Bede and the Roman calendar to determine the vernal equinox. The pragmatic is at home amidst the mythic: the creation of Adam at the dawn of time and the zodiacal Ram. This snippet is exemplary of medieval astrology generally: mostly practical and based in scientific astronomy, but also mixed with lore and magical images. Because the zodiac is such an old symbol system and so closely tied to the earth’s seasons, publications that argue the zodiac on church portals is a new motif chosen by an elite group of clergymen to represent time is not accounting for the interplay of images with astrology so prevalent in medieval art, exemplified here in the Psalter of St. Albans.

Similarly, La Charité Psalter, Harley MS. 2895, 1175-1200, written for a nunnery related to the Cluniac monastery of La Charité-sur-Loire, north of Nevers, delineates

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42 Translation provided by a collaboration between History of Art and Historic Collections of University of Aberdeen, © 2003.
days and feasts according to the month, decorated with roundels with zodiac signs. Rather than the usual labors, the signs are connected to religious activities, like Aquarius and the blessing of the eucharist on fol. 1r (Fig. 9.1). Most interesting are the images of Aries (2r), Taurus (2v), Cancer (3v), Leo (4r), Virgo (5r), Scorpio (5v) and Sagittarius (6r) (Fig. 9.2-3). Each are finely illustrated in their typical forms on the left, overseeing their labor on the right, illuminated by gold foil and encased in colorful squares. Post-completion, though, someone scratched star decorations into the gold foil, and in some, indications of wheat or grass (Cancer and Leo Fig. 9.4). Someone felt the need to make the connection between the zodiac, the stars and farming labors more explicit by etching small stars into the zodiacal vignettes, particularly ones with outdoor labors.

I propose that similar connotations were promoted in manuscript decorations and church portals, as seen on the small churches of Notre-Dame-des-Miracles in Mauriac, and Saint-Georges in Ydes. Though minimally decorated, they include soaring zodiacal archivolts above their portals, illustrating the teleological function of zodiacal portals: to preface the prayers and actions inside the church by visually signalling to the viewer their temporal place in the Christian cosmos in an astrological sense. The star

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Figure 9.1 Calendar page for January (fol. 1r), La Charité Psalter, (c. 1175-1200). Now at The British Library [Harley MS. 2895]. Created at the Cluniac monastery of La Charité-sur-Loire, Nevers, France. Photos reproduced © The British Library Board, permission given by the Re-Use of Public Sector Information (amendment) Regulations 2015.

Figure 9.2 La Charité Psalte, fols. 2r-v.
Figure 9.2 La Charité Psalter (c. 1175-1200), the British Library, [Harley MS. 2895, fol. 5v-r, 6r.]

Figure 9.3 La Charité Psalter (c. 1175-1200), the British Library, [Harley MS. 2895], fol. 3v, 4r, 5v, 5r, 6r.
Signs were connoted as familiar nocturnal signposts represented by their mythological emblems. The zodiac revolves in the night sky following the sun in an ecliptic procession, the same way saints’ days and ritual processions revolved annually and entered the church. Unfurling across the exterior apse of Saint-Austremoine in Issoire, the zodiacal sculptures resemble calendar pages in manuscripts, both of which interact with processions and ritual actions.

Cathedral of Chartres and the Feast of Epiphany

But what of the most studied and famous of the zodiac portals? The zodiacal decorations at the cathedral of Chartres (Fig. 10.1) appear in three locations in the cathedral: in the portail royale of the west façade, in the sweeping archivolts of the deep

Figure 10.1 Cathedral of Notre-Dame of Chartres, France (c. 1136-1141, 1194-1220). Photo: public domain.
north porch, and in stained glass of the south choir bay.\textsuperscript{44} For purposes of this study, only the zodiac cycles on the west façade and the stained glass will be examined. The oldest zodiac is sculpted in the north portal of the west façade (c. 1136-1141),\textsuperscript{45} within the cordons of the archivolts (\textbf{Fig. 10.2}). Royal columnar figures of the Old Testament adorn the jambs, encased by vegetal designs and crowned with narrative column

\textbf{Figure 10.2} West façade, \textit{portail royale} Cathedral of Notre-Dame of Chartres, France (c. 1136-1141, 1194-1220). Photo: public domain.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} The zodiac specifically in Chartres: Adolf Katzenellenbogen, \textit{The Sculptural Programs of Chartres Cathedral} (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1959), pp. 20-25, p. 75; John James, \textit{In Search of the Unknown in Gothic Architecture} (London: Pindar Press, 2007), pp. 478-479
\item \textsuperscript{45} The cathedral’s \textit{portail royale} was likely commissioned by Geoffrey of Lèves, the donor and administrator. Fassler, \textit{The Virgin of Chartres}, p. 174
\item \textsuperscript{46} The sculpture of the west façade at the cathedral of Chartres was probably sculpted by four masters with five assistants, who completed their work in a span of six years: Whitney Stoddard, \textit{Sculptors of the West Portal of Chartres Cathedral: Their Origins in Romanesque and Their Role in the Chartrain Sculpture Including the West Portals of Saint Denis and Chartres} (New York: Norton, 1987), pp. 157-158. It is likely
\end{itemize}
capitals. Above them, the curving archivolts depict the seasonal planting, harvests and feasts that were pivotal junctures in the annual rhythms of everyday life, with their attending star signs. These embrace a tympanum with Christ as the central figure, heralded by angels beside and below, and the witnessing apostles beneath (Fig. 10.3).

Figure 10.3
Ascension tympanum, north portal, west facade (c. 1136-1141), cathedral of Chartres. Photo: Alison Stones, University of Pittsburgh, Digital Collections.

While commonly referred to as the “Ascension Tympanum,” as discussed by Margot Fassler, it may represent more themes, including imagery of the second coming of Christ (adventus Domini).47

there was a master plan, supervised by one person alongside with skilled workmen: Jean Wirth, La datation de la sculpture médiévale (Geneva: 2004), pp. 150-151.

47 Fassler, Virgin of Chartres, 278. She continues: “…I now believe that the northern tympanum of the west façade and its lintel present three interrelated groups of themes: those related to the Ascension and those referring to the first and second comings of Christ. The meanings of the north tympanum balance the appearance in the flesh depicted in the southern tympanum and advance the trope of seeing which is central to the meaning of the façade as a whole; the prominent cloud in which Christ appears, disappears,
Beginning with Aries on the left, the inner archivolts conclude with Capricorn’s bleating head turning toward the tympanum, his body obscured by a bush. Underneath its branches, Capricorn’s tail twists like a serpent’s, in a medieval harmonization of imagination and naturalism (Fig. 10.4). Below Capricorn, a small, sculpted, double-

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faced Janus leans out of his curved apsidal niche, his head tilted downward to engage with those below.\textsuperscript{49} Personifying January, this French Janus slices a round boule, or perhaps a \textit{galette des rois}, Three Kings’ Cake, an allusion to the feasts during the Christmas season.\textsuperscript{50} Around these two images huddles a cold, hooded man with the water-bearer Aquarius; Taurus and Aries overlook the toils of spring and summer; threshing and grape-gathering during the seasons of Virgo and Libra; and mystical Sagittarius with images of feasting and slaughtering hogs.

Much attention has been paid to this fantastic portal, and rightfully so. As Peter Kidson commented “The programme must have been regarded as of more than usual importance and worked out with more than usual thoroughness.”\textsuperscript{51} The manual labors in the north portal cleverly contrast with the intellectual labors in the archivolts of the south portal, dedicated to the Virgin (Fig. 10.5). Personifications of the liberal arts surround the \textit{sedes sapientiae} in the central register of the southern tympanum, accompanied by related narratives in the lower registers. In typical programmatic Marian cycles, the Adoration of the Magi are included, but the Magi do not appear in

\textsuperscript{49} For a description and explanation of why January prominently projects toward the viewer above the lintel, see John James, “An Examination of Some Anomalies in the Ascension and Incarnation Portals of Chartres Cathedral,” \textit{Gesta} 25/1 (1986), p. 106.

\textsuperscript{50} Scholars have debated whether this round object is indeed a \textit{galette des rois}. Richard C. Trexler in \textit{The Journey of the Magi: Meanings in History of a Christian Story} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 173, states the \textit{galette des rois} or \textit{gâteau des rois} first appears in records of the early 14\textsuperscript{th} century in France, and was later adopted in Germany. Therefore, the Chartres Janus may antedate the \textit{galette des rois}. See Peter Kidson’s chapter on the \textit{portail royale} in: \textit{Sculpture at Chartres} (London: Academy Editions, 1974), p. 14.

the Portal of the Virgin at Chartres. Instead, the Magi make their offerings to the Christ child directly under the signs of Capricorn and Janus in the north portal archivolts (Fig. 10.6). Gazing out to the viewer, the Magi parallel with Janus above, their journey and gift-giving curving on two column capitals, a case of a thematic rather than a narrative, chronological arrangement. The feast day celebrating the momentous arrival of the three kings was celebrated on January 6, the culmination of the Twelve Days of Christmas. This period occupies a liminal space, it is the darkest and coldest time of the year marked by merrymaking and feasts. The Twelve Days were also considered the most auspicious time to prognosticate future weather patterns or make omenological predictions. Indeed, the three Magi were the personification of not only kingship, but

52 Peter Kidson notes that “Oddly enough, the Adoration of the Magi is omitted.” p. 17.
53 Fassler, Virgin, p. 316.
56 Many Latin, Anglo-Saxon, and French manuscripts written between the 10th and 15th centuries record astrometeorological predictions according to the weather during this specific time of the year, or on which day the kalends of January fell. See also László Sándor Chardonnens, Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, 900-1100: Study and Texts (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 114-125; Marilina Cesario, “An English Source for a Latin Text? Wind Prognostication in Oxford, Bodleian, Hatton 115 and Ashmole 345,” Studies in Philology. 112/2 (Spring, 2015), pp. 213-233, esp. 216. Contemporary texts with predictions about the weather of the coming summer depending on the day of the week upon which Christmas falls and Lent begins, London, British Library, MS Harleian 3017, fols. 63r-64v (10th century); Munich, Latin MS 6382 Codex Latinus Monacensis fol. 42, Supputatio Esdrae (11th century); Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana MS 235 fol. 39 (10th-11th centuries); London, British Library, MS Egerton 821, fol. 1r. (12th century); Munich, Latin MS 9921, Codex Latinus Monacensis fol. 1 (12th century). Manuscripts which make predictions based
also of mysterious astrological magic, following a star to the nativity of the living God.\textsuperscript{57}

Together the Magi, Capricorn, and Janus create a visual nexus of the Feast Day of Epiphany on the cathedral façade, in which the stars themselves are an important element.\textsuperscript{58} The Star of Bethlehem leads the Magi, and the constellation Capricorn presides over the Twelve Days celebrations at the end of December and into January.


portrayed by feasting Janus. While it is not known if Epiphanic processions entered the cathedral through this portal on January 6, it is tempting to consider it. The significance of the signs for January situated directly above the journeying Magi has not been remarked upon before; it is only by reconstructing the medieval cosmos with its integration of astrological sympathy expressed in the signs of the zodiac that this visual nexus of Epiphany becomes clear.

The Feast of Epiphany and Twelve Days of Christmas had astrological dimensions from their inception into the Latin Christian calendar because they evolved from Roman solstitial celebrations, later influenced by Byzantine services. The story of the Magi may only appear in a handful of verses (Matthew 2), but the Feast of Epiphany became a star (so to speak) of the religious calendar, eclipsing Christmas in its splendor. The related liturgical rites, Officia Stellae, vary by location and period but share some similar festive structures in which the Star of Bethlehem was sometimes illustrated as painted stars hung in the church or as part of a procession. The popularity of Magian theater and Epiphanic processions and feasts grew exponentially in the 12th and 13th centuries, matched by the increased astrological interest in scholastic circles and

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60 Young: Christmas was “unexpectedly meagre,” and the plays of the Magi for Epiphany “decidedly more impressive,” p. 29.
Figure 10.5 South (Virgin) portal tympanum and archivolts, west façade (c. 1136-1141), Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Chartres. Photo: public domain.

zodiacal emblems in art. There is likely a synergistic correlation between these cultural movements, bringing astrology to the forefront of pertinent philosophical ideas and popular culture in the 12th century and beyond.

The stained-glass zodiacal cycle at Chartres glows in the second bay of the south choir aisle (c. 1217-1220) (Fig. 10.7). Christ as the Lord of Time (chronocrator) presides at
Figure 10.6 The journey of the Magi, north portal column capitals with details and added highlights, Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Chartres (c. 1136-1141, 1194-1220). Photo: public domain.

the apex of the immense window in allusion to Daniel 2:20-22. It is a vision of Christ as the omnipotent God that “changeth times and ages,“ expounded by the zodiac and labors below. Beneath the apex quatrefoil with Christ are the December and Capricorn windows, the start of the Labors of the Month cycle. The whole of a calendar year is presented sequentially top to bottom, encircled in roundels much like sister images in calendar pages. A spectrum of social classes is visible in these panels, from decorated nobility to toiling farmhands (Fig. 10.8). While this window appears to be unrelated iconographically to the other transept and ambulatory windows which display stories

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63 Compare with folio 2v of Cambridge University MS B.20, created in England in the 12th century.
Figure 10.7 Windows 42-45, second span of south choir aisle, Bay 28a, Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Chartres (c. 1217-1220). Photo: public domain
of the Prodigal Son, it may have been situated specifically to align with the earth’s solstitial lines, as Maria Cecilia Tomasini argues.⁶⁴ She describes how the precise relations of the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn to the structure of the cathedral were

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⁶⁴ Maria Cecilia Tomasini, “La orientación de la catedral de Chartres y su relación con los solsticios,” *Cuadernos Medievale* 18 (2015), pp 23-37, esp. p. 35, translated: “The solstitial lines unite three highly significant points on the floor: the altar, the labyrinth and the stained-glass window of the zodiac. The fact that these lines precisely cross the zodiacal window, and not another window, can hardly be considered a coincidence, especially considering the mastery of astronomy that the Chartrian masters possessed.”
calculated by churchmen to highlight exact areas at certain times, reflecting the “mastery of astronomy that the Chartrian masters possessed.” If this is accurate, then the entire structure of the cathedral can be understood as responding to astronomical understanding in an astrological universe.

The zodiac cycles at Chartres were certainly astrological in intent and interpretation, reflecting the cathedral’s status as a major intellectual center of the 12th century, which was absorbing astronomical and astrological knowledge from the east. The Labors of the Month in the north portal of the west façade embodied the flesh, while the liberal arts in the south portal embodied spiritual and intellectual wisdom, together representing mortal life as it relates to a greater divine plan. The zodiac was not without its mythological dimensions in each of the instances it was included in the

Figure 11.1 West façade, Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Amiens, 1220-1270. Photos: public domain.
cathedral. Together with the Magi on the *portail royale* the zodiac underscored the astrological mysteries of the Epiphany. Stars were signs that delivered divine messages at the cathedral of Chartres, both in scripture and to the living audience.

**High and Low Religion at the Cathedral of Amiens**

The zodiac portal at the cathedral of Amiens, France, built c. 1220-1270, also integrated complex imagery (Fig. 11.1). Each of the three deeply gabled portals feature tympana above the lintels depicting New Testament scenes and hagiography. The jamb figures of the north portal depict locally relevant saints, specifically saints Firmin and Honoré. The tympanum illustrates the invention and the transmission of the relics of St Firmin to Amiens, emphasizing themes of the miraculous nature of their entrance into the city (Fig. 11.2). According to legend, despite the procession ensuing on a frosty January morning, for a period of time a preternatural warmth descended on Amiens; it was so warm the trees grew inflorescent with blossoms and green leaves. The odor of “white lilies and live roses and other green plants and flowers” emanating from inside the tomb of St. Firmin, accompanied by a “boiling heat,” translated the cathedral to paradise if only for a few hours. Foliate moldings, curling vines and turgid leaves adorn

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the interior of the cathedral, sculptural allusions to this paradisical interval at the translation of St. Firmin’s relics. Another allusion is carved above the zodiacal medallions in the north portal, a male figure in the upper tympanum register wearing only a tunic and a leafy crown. His removed overcoat is a reminder of the unaccountable warmth that accompanied the relics’ translation, and the figure may reflect later processional practices on the Feast Day of St. Firmin (Fig. 11.3).

According to diocese and canons’ records, beginning in the 13th century at Amiens, on January 11 a church beadle costumed in green leaves and carrying a bouquet of artificial flowers made of colorful waxes would present floral coronets to each of the clergymen after vespers to commemorate the miracle. The beadle, dressed as l’homme vert (the Green Man), would also make appearances at royal visits to the cathedral. The miracle was even celebrated in local food culture. Amiens’ pâtisseries offered seasonal

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69 L’homme vert / Green Man is the term used by Charles Salmon (p. 155), L. P. Daire (vol. 2), p. 148, and Goze, (vol. 3), p. 199), but in the manuscript MS n. 120 Bibliothèque d’Amiens, as copied by J. de Court, the man is described: “le bedeau de la confrérie...étant revêtu d’un habillement couvert de feuilles vertes et tenant entre ses mains un gros bouquet de fleurs artificielles faites de cire de diverses couleurs / the beadle of the brotherhood...being dressed in clothing covered in green leaves and holding in his hands a large bouquet of artificial flowers made of wax of various colors.” (153).
“twenty-five loaves for a farthing,” pastries marked with twenty-five circles, because if the unseasonable warmth and foliation had continued, the ensuing harvest would have been so plentiful that twenty-five bread loaves could be purchased for the smallest coin, a liard (farthing).\(^7\) About the distinctive Green Man tradition at Amiens, Stephen

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\(^7\) These local traditions and festivities were abolished in Bishop Pierre Sabathier in 1727 under the pretext that it caused disorder and distraction in the cathedral.
Murray wrote it was “clearly a phenomenon rooted in the distant pre-Christian past,” and “should be understood as one of many such practices that bridged the potential gap between “high” and “low” religion in the Middle Ages.”

Of all the exterior decoration, it is only in the St. Firmin portal that something of the local, contemporary congregations were reflected. In the upper lintel, the townsfolk

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from surrounding areas join to welcome the relic, young and old, male and female, in charming detail (Fig. 11.4). It is in this portal, in the embrasures below the jamb figures, that the signs of the zodiac appear, matched with the Labors of the Month, attributed to the atelier of Robert de Luzarches or his successor Thomas de Cormont of the 13th century (Fig. 11.5). Beneath God and angels, prophets and messengers, the Labors of the Month and the signs of the zodiac are at the very lowest level of the façade program, running nearly parallel with the eye of the visitor. Separated by a stringcourse, the zodiac and labors are distinct in style and placement from the holy figures and theological scenes above (Fig. 11.6). The inviting quatrefoils are the only part of the exterior cathedral that one can experience closely and in best detail, because they are within the physical proximity of the viewer. They were also sculpted in low relief, as if anticipating human touch. The entire north portal thematically united the local church of Amiens with the universal Church, in part by displaying the explicitly parochial, familiar, and quotidian in relation divine eternity. Interactions between the present and the ultra-temporal are a central theme of the St. Firmin portal, and here the zodiac with the labors represent humanity’s temporal place in God’s creation. The zodiac signs do not appear in a more exalted position on the facade; they do not appear with

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73 Murray, Notre-Dame, p. 111.
the sun, moon, and stars in the central tympanum, or even in the soaring archivolts. They are at eye-level in the most provincial portal, linked with the toil of lived experience. The lowest row of quatrefoils on the left side of the north portal presents the viewer with vigorous movement, evoking the sweat and dirt involved in pruning, threshing, harvesting, crushing, and sowing (Fig. 11.7). These scenes would have been familiar to those whose lives depended on these labors, joined directly with their star signs above. I suggest that the zodiac on this portal is another device like the Green Man, imagery rooted in the distant pre-Christian past as a bridge between “high” and “low” religion and communities. The zodiac and the labors at Amiens are therefore the crucial visual space where time relates to the individual and the intended audience of the portals, aided by the stellar signs. At Amiens, the zodiac finely illustrates the significance of the constellations in the quotidian, placed within the visual construct of Christian creation in a cathedral portal. The north portal therefore portrays an imaginative mixture of age-old myths, local culture, and the divine Christian cosmos in vivacious detail.

Conclusion

The popularity of the zodiac motif manifest in at least 39 religious buildings demonstrates that the zodiac was a vital element of the ritualistic bricolage of portal
programs. It served as a locus of symbiotic artistic and ritual efficacy in the strategies of portal programs, where art and movement combined to create ritual in a performative space. The aim of this paper was to assert that the zodiac had astrological connotations in intent and design on church portals, an argument supported by offering a better definition of medieval astrology, broadening the scope to smaller churches and re-examining the grand ones. To better contextualize these important images, the zodiac should not be divorced from its complicated inheritance in scholarly considerations. Instead, the zodiac was utilized as an astrological device recalling divinely ordered time and the superior influences working on earth, recalling both the mythic signs and their nocturnal asterisms to evoke a season.

To mark strong ideological borders between ecclesia and astrologia as scholars have done limits a fuller understanding. These sculptures were embedded in an astrological construct, particularly as it related to a variety of medieval viewers. Contextualizing the Labors of the Month motif with its less-refined iterations like game pieces and small parish churches supports the argument that the zodiac was a ubiquitous symbol system familiar to all, and therefore should not only be contextualized with rarified scholastic texts. Accordingly, the surge of zodiacal church portals was not an exclusive product of 12th-century scholastic schools, but an

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Figure 11.4 (above) Invention of the relics of St. Firmin, middle register of the tympanum. North portal. Figure 11.5 (below) Procession of the relics of St. Firmin, left corner of top register in the tympanum, north portal. Both: Amiens Cathedral. Photo: Public domain.
an expression of the underlying astrological momentum evident in all parts of society.

With a clearer understanding of medieval astrology, portal zodiacs can be understood not as a new, autonomous motif or as recycled pagan imagery, but as an
intentional device to recall the sympathetic nature of God’s creation. The deep roots of the zodiac in the toil and folklore of farming, the inertia of magical zodiac imagery, and the movement of the stars are also essential to establish its rich cultural significance. Revolving movements are key to understanding the purpose of portal zodiacs: the zodiac revolved in the heavens following the sun the same way processions moved toward church portals in annual rituals following the clergy. Finally, C. S. Lewis wrote that “to look up at the towering medieval universe is [like] looking at a great building.”

Figure 11.7
Quatrefoil decorations on left embrasures, north portal, west façade, Amiens Cathedral. Photos: public domain.
or an immense cathedral.\textsuperscript{76} This may also work in reverse, that to look upon a great cathedral was to view the medieval universe, in which the zodiac represents a sympathetic unity of the macrocosmic and microcosmic in the most astrological sense. Indeed, when considered anew, zodiacal sculptures on church portals offer a glimpse into the machinations of the marvelous medieval cosmos.