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Member of the research project, Violencia y transformaciones sociales en el nordeste de la Corona de Castilla (1200-1525) PID 2021-124356NB-i00, University of the Basque Country

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Between Heaven and Hell: Salvific murals to transform a Pre-Romanesque parish church into a noble funerary pantheon in 14th-century Navarre

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Painted decorations in medieval rural churches have often been dismissed by scholars as second-rate artwork, derivative of other decorations in more significant monastic and urban centers.¹ Yet when rural medieval murals are contextualized in their immediate setting, they can reveal significant ways to understand medieval mentality. This article presents a detailed explanation of how the mural paintings that decorate the chancel and apse in the small rural church of San Juan Bautista de Eristain (St. John the Baptist of Eristain) in the ancient kingdom of Navarre, gave meaning to the funerary space of the noble family buried there, the Solchagas.

First, I will first describe the funerary context of the church, as well as the history of the Solchagas based on medieval documents. Then I will discuss part of the technique used in the painting, speculate on certain similarities found in its style, and offer a possible identification of the painters' workshop. The

¹ Kupfer, *Romanesque Wall Painting in Central France*, 7.

central and most extensive part of the paper will analyze the scenes' iconography and interpret their salvific narrative. That supported the specific function of these murals.

The kingdom of Navarre was located in the northern part of the Iberian Peninsula and southern area of what is today France, straddling the Pyrenees Mountains. Due to this unique position, Navarre played the role of a bridge territory between peninsular and continental Europe. After 1234, royal houses of French origin inherited the throne of Navarre. The population of the kingdom was diverse: native Basque speakers inhabited rural areas, while urban settlements were populated by local Navarrese and many French immigrants, and, in the southern part of the kingdom, lived Jewish and Muslim minorities. In 14th-century arts and culture, Navarre was influenced predominantly by continental Europe to the north, rather than the peninsula to the south. European international trends were thus influential on local Navarrese art, such as the linear Gothic style. During the second half of this same century, moreover, Italian innovations would bring new minor refinements to the art of painting, such as hesitant and rudimentary designs in linear perspective.² Consequently, the surviving mural paintings of Navarre

² The entire body of work by M.C. Lacarra Ducay is essential when it comes to understanding medieval mural painting in Navarre and Aragon. Here, by means of an introduction, I will just cite her dissertation and latest article on the topic: *Aportación a la Pintura Mural Gótica Navarra* and "Pintura mural gótica en Navarra."

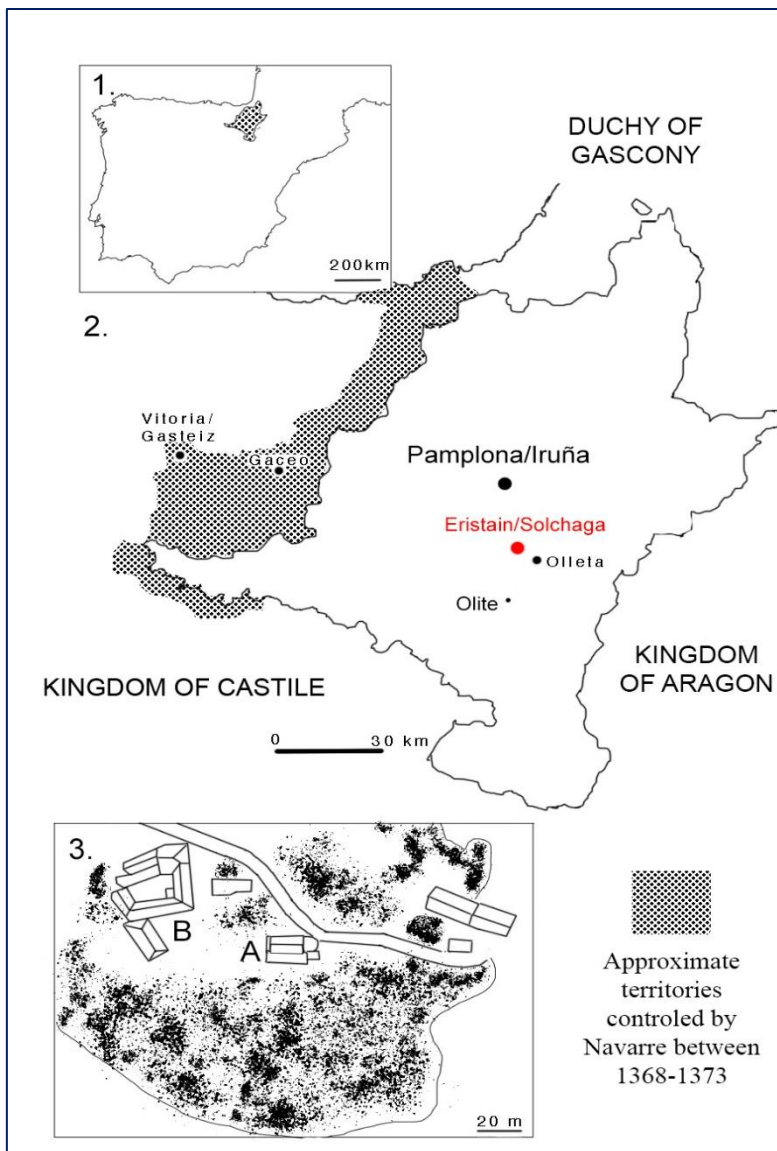


Figure 1 1. The kingdom of Navarre in the fourteenth-century Iberian Peninsula. 2. The location of the places mentioned in this paper. 3. The farmhouse of Eristain with A: the church and B: the *Palacio de armeria*. Image: author.

demonstrate an interesting catalog of European stylistic trends and iconography, reflecting influences from France, England, and even Italy.³

The "Palacio" of Eristain and its Church

The church of Eristain is located a few meters away from a farmhouse in the rural village of Solchaga, 20 kilometers south of Pamplona, Navarre, in

³ Lacarra Ducaý, "Pintura mural gótica en Navarra."

northern Spain (**Fig. 1**). The contemporary farmhouse is, in fact, an old converted "palace." The word "palace" here is a bit of a misnomer, as it refers to the Castilian term *Palacio de cabo de armería*, which is not exactly the equivalent of the English concept of "palace." Instead, it implies a relatively large stone building, home to and the original dwelling of a noble family, which was built in the Late Middle Ages or early modern period.⁴ These *Palacios* were also defensive structures that formed the nucleus of small estates, with the lands surrounding them were used for agricultural purposes. During the Late Middle Ages, the church in Eristain did not just serve the parish but was also used as the mausoleum of the family living in the *Palacio*.

The church has a single nave (measuring 18 meters long by 6 wide) that is finished with a semicircular apse covered by a long half-dome (**Fig. 2**). The entrance to this apse contains important architectural elements: namely, two different-sized arches. Looking from the nave to the apse, the first and biggest arch is almost pointed. The second arch, located at the very entrance to the apse, is less pointed. The space created between these two arches is similar to a small chancel, covered by a barrel vault. The rest of the building is covered by a modern wooden roof. The altar is located under the half-dome of the apse beyond the second triumphal arch.

⁴ Martinena Ruiz "Palacios Cabo de Armería, una peculiaridad de Navarra," 42.

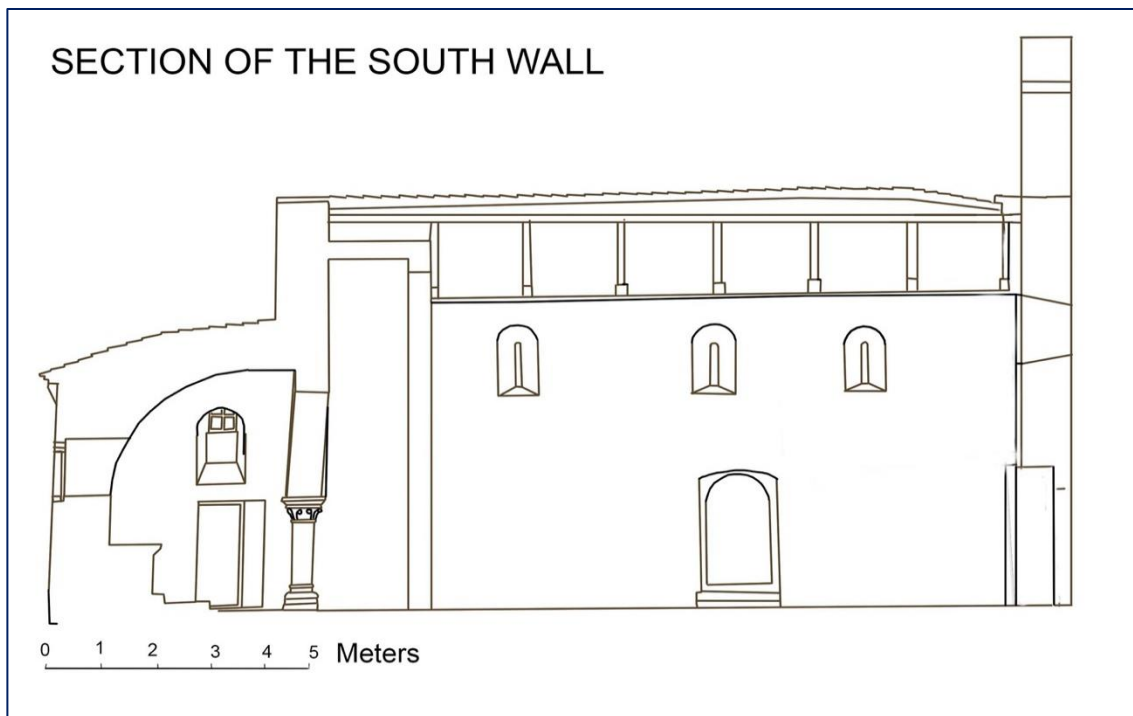


Figure 2 South section of the church. Based on the plans of Javier Sancho Domingo and A. Nieves from the Principe de Viana archives. Image: author.

This church is among the few surviving pre-Romanesque churches in what are today Navarre and Aragon, once the kingdom of Pamplona.⁵ Several elements on the exterior walls of Eristain are dated to the Mozarabic period but the apse and chancel with the two arches, in which the paintings were found, were added later, probably from the 12th or even early 13th century.

The mural paintings were hidden under a layer of whitewash until 1992, when they were discovered during part of a restoration project to transform the church interior.⁶ They were in a terrible condition. Some paintings were

⁵ Uranga and Iñiguez, *Arte medieval navarro*, 126.

⁶ Gil Cornet, "Restauración de la iglesia de San Juan Bautista de Eristain."

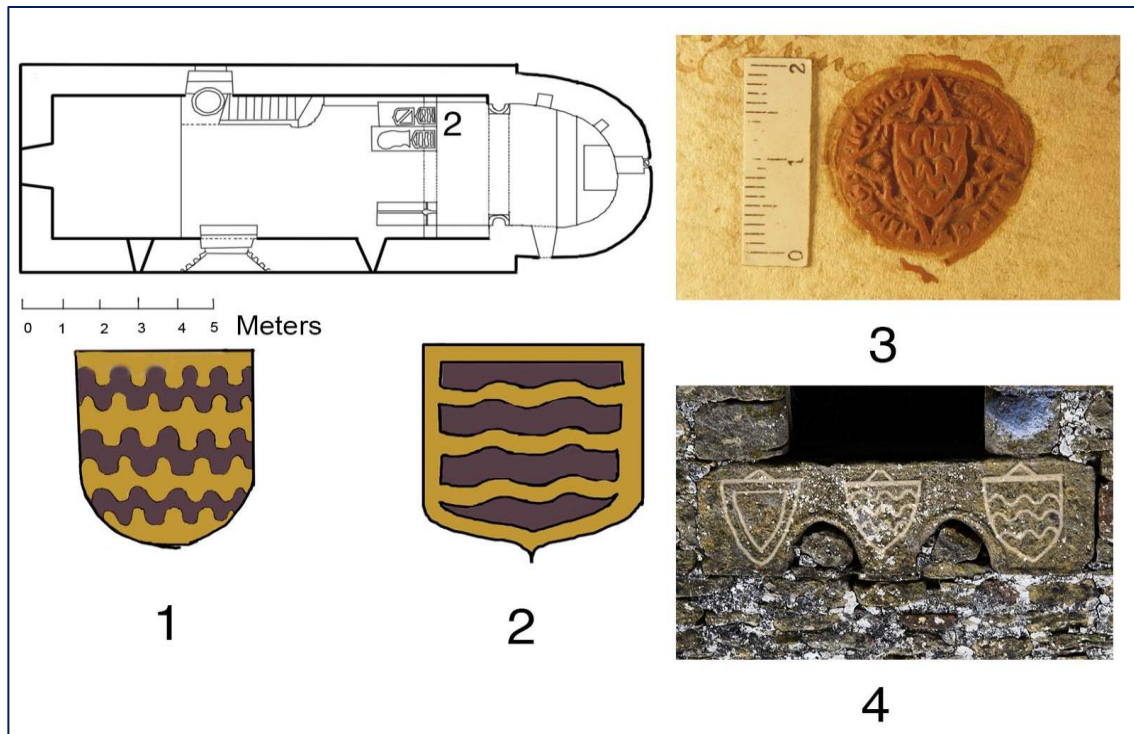


Figure 3 Church plan with the heraldic emblems of the *Palacio de Solchaga* and *Palacio de Eristain*. Based on plans of Javier Sancho Domingo and A. Nieves. Principe de Viana archives. 1: The *Palacio de Eristain* heraldic emblem, 16th-century Royal Armory book of Navarre. 2: Same emblem from 16th-17th centuries in the church, with Purple over Orange based those from the armory book. 3: Seal of Martin Perez de Solchaga, Mayor of the Court, 1363 (AGN, Comptos Caj. 42, n. 7.). 4: Lintel, Palacio of Eristain, with emblems of Eristain and Solchaga, c. 1420. Except figure 3. Images/photos: author, except 3.3, photo Archivo General de Navarra.

damaged by alterations to the church walls, but they were especially damaged by the deterioration of the pigments as a result of humidity and leaks.

Some of the few studies that examine these murals compare the paintings with the similar figures in the church of San Martin de Gaceo, province Alava, also in the north of Spain.⁷ Others mention the vivid scenes that

⁷ Sáenz Pascual, *La pintura gótica en Álava*, 23–39.

portray Hell.⁸ Another author contends that these paintings are a rural example of the so-called school of Pamplona, painters in the cathedral and main churches of the kingdom of Navarre. This would imply that they were painted in the mid-14th century.⁹ However, there is no monographic study of the church or the painting nor has anyone attempted a full identification of all the scenes a contextualization the murals within a historical dimension of what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz terms as the "thick context" that the church, the *Palacio*, and the period documentation can provide.¹⁰

The Church Utilized as a Funerary chapel/mausoleum? during the Late Middle

Ages In 1993, during an archeological excavation, three graves with many corpses were found inside the church itself, at the entrance of the chancel.¹¹ Covered by sepulchral stones dating from between the 16th and 18th centuries, the graves were decorated with three different heraldic emblems (**Fig. 3**).¹² Two coins were found inside the graves, one dating from the reign of King Theobald II (r. 1253–1270) and the other from that of Catherine and John of Navarre (r. 1483–1517), indicating that the burials chambers were used during the Late Middle Ages. The use of stones to build the burial space also points to a time frame that ranges between the 12th and 14th centuries. More graves were

⁸ Aragonés, "El mal imaginado por el gótico," 71.

⁹ Martínez Álava, "El gótico radiante," 396.

¹⁰ See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

¹¹ Ramos and Gabinete Trama, "Erístain: Seguimiento arqueológico," 131–136.

¹² García-Gainza et al., *Catálogo monumental de Navarra III*, 368.

found outside the church. The archeologists that undertook the excavation determined that the interior of the church was used to bury the owners of the *Palacio* and the exterior, with more simple burials, was for the common folk working on the estate.¹³

That Eristain and the site of church was used as a place for family burial or family worship for centuries is confirmed by the discovery of a foundational stone of the church from the Roman period (1st or 2nd century A.D.) inscribed with an epitaph (**Fig. 4**).¹⁴ This epitaph contains a typical funerary text, offered to the *Manibus* gods, by a man called *Aemilio* and his family, a family determined by archaeologists to be a local indigenous family, but Romanized at a certain level.¹⁵



Figure 4 Roman epitaph stone used as a foundational stone in the north wall. The inscription is dedicated to the *Manibus* gods: D(is) i(nferis) M(anibus) lunia Materna C.f. Aemiliano m(arito) ân(norum) LXX êt Âemilio Mater no filio ân(norum) XXV. Photo: author.

¹³ Ramos and Gabinete Trama, "Eristain: Seguimiento arqueológico," 135.

¹⁴ This observation was done by the local expert on the church, Javier Intxusta.

¹⁵ Castillo and Unzu, "Eristain: Seguimiento arqueológico," 132.

In a lintel of the *Palacio* dated around 1420,¹⁶ there are carved three heraldic emblems, two of them the same as those inside the church. Before the restoration, there was a wooden coat of arms with the same motifs as the *Palacio* emblems hanging over the main arch of the church.¹⁷ These multiple heraldic emblems, some as old as *circa* 1420 and the latest dating from the 18th century, offer the evidence of the use of the church by the family that owned the *Palacio*, as noted by the archeologist Mikel Ramos (**Fig. 3**).

In the religious and funerary context of Eristain, these heraldic emblems may also signify a need to perpetuate the family lineage in Christian eternity through prayers and the veneration of God an "apparatus to achieve permanence."¹⁸ Moreover, the patronage of religious paintings by the local noble family, identified by the heraldic emblems, would be a way to contribute to an "accountability of the afterlife."¹⁹ I would argue that this funerary context determines the meaning of the mural paintings that cover the chancel and the apse.

The Solchaga Family

As noted, the 16th and 18th-century sepulcher stones that cover the graves are decorated with three coats of arms, that also appear in the *Palacio*, these

¹⁶ The third one is so damaged that it has not been possible to identify it. Martínez de Aguirre and Menéndez Pidal, *Emblemas heráldicos en el arte medieval navarro*, 143.

¹⁷ García-Gainza *et al.*, *Catálogo monumental de Navarra III*, 368.

¹⁸ Rodríguez Velasco, *Order and Chivalry*, 2.

¹⁹ In the words of Martínez de Aguirre, quoting Jacques Chiffolleau. Martínez de Aguirre and Menéndez Pidal, *Emblemas heráldicos en el arte medieval navarro*, 24.

which are dated *circa* 1420. Two that are almost identical represent the *Palacio de Solchaga* and *Palacio de Eriztain*.²⁰ They prove a clear relationship between the Solchaga family and the site of Eristain: the emblems of Solchaga and Eristain are almost identical and both of them always appear together, despite being two separate emblems. This is confirmed by a search of Navarrese medieval archives, of the names "Solchaga" and "Eristain" reflecting the relationship between the local, nobility Solchaga family and the site of Eristain.

The earliest document, dating from the 11th century, concerns a woman named Sancha from Solchaga, who donated her property in Eristain to Pamplona Cathedral.²¹ Much later, a 1349 document from a *notario de cort*, a notary of the court, is connected by the name of Martin Periz de Solchaga.²² In 1364, the same individual is recorded as the *alcalde de cort*, mayor of the court, a position similar to that of a contemporary judge. In the same year, he was named one of the counselors of king.²³ Another document of Martin is sealed with a stamp identical with the coat of arms of the emblem of the *Palacio*.²⁴ Serving as judge position until his death *circa* 1405, Martin Periz de Solchaga was a member of the royal court in Pamplona close to the king.²⁵

²⁰ Menéndez Pidal and Martinena, *Libro de armería del reino de Navarra*, p. 341, Fol. 43.

²¹ Goñi Gaztambide, *Catálogo del Archivo Catedral de Pamplona*, I:15.

²² AGN, Comptos, Caj. 34, N.11, 49.

²³ Francisco Javier Zabalo, *La administración del Reino de Navarra en el siglo XIV* (Pamplona/Iruña: Universidad de Navarra, 1973), 95.

²⁴ AGN, Comptos, Caj. 15, N. 92, 23.

²⁵ Caj. 92, N.6, 39.

Other family members also reached positions of power. In 1362, his brother, Pedro Aibar Periz de Solchaga, was a knight fighting in a war against Aragon.²⁶ By 1366, the son of Pedro Aibar, Pedro Gil de Solchaga, was in charge of three knights in Vitoria-Gasteiz, near the already mentioned village of Gaceo.²⁷ Also he was documented as being the beneficiary of tax in kind in the village of Olleta as well as Sargent of Arms of the king (a body guard of the king).²⁸ Later, in 1412, a document notes that a Martín Periz de Solchaga, the young — therefore a son with the same name as his father — was being paid by the king to maintain a *mesnada*, a small group of semi-professional soldiers.²⁹ This same document records Martin Periz as being a resident of Eristain, and a document of 1420 shows a García de Solchaga, a descendant of Martin, overseeing the *mesnada* and being a resident of Eristain.³⁰

A 1366 census reveals the exact names and the numbers of inhabitants in Eristain and Solchaga.³¹ A single peasant and eight *hidalgos* — lower nobility — lived in the location. Judging by their patronymic last names, seven of these

²⁶ AGN, Comptos, Doc., Caj. 15, N. 97, 11.

²⁷ Caj. 23, N. 81, 16 y 100. Pedro Gil is documented as nephew of Martin Periz and son of Pedro Aibar.

²⁸ AGN, Comptos, Caj. 47, N. 57. 1 and Caj. 35, N.35, 8.

²⁹ AGN, Comptos, Caj. 101, N.50, 40.

³⁰ AGN, Comptos, Caj. 119, N.4, 3.

³¹ The only peasant (*labrador*) is called Per Yuaynes. Those listed as nobles (*hidalgos*) are: Don Martin Periz, Gil Periz, Per Ayuarr, Garcia Periz, Johan Periz, Maria Lopiz, Pero Garcia, Pero Xemeniz. In addition, there are two women named Sancha Miguel et Gracia d' Eristain. The first it is said to be deaf and the second had a physical disability. Juan Carrasco, *La población navarra en el siglo XIV*, Colección histórica de la Universidad de Navarra 29 (Pamplona/Iruña: Ediciones de la Universidad de Navarra, 1973), 493.

noblemen were familiars.³² Among those was one called "Don Martin Periz," the Martin Periz referred to before. The census confirms that the Solchagas were the only family living in Eristain by 1366, and therefore the church would have almost a private use for them.

In short, since the late 11th century, there is consistent documented evidence of a strong relationship between the site of Eristain (the *Palacio* and the church) and the Solchaga family. Currently, the village in which Eristain is located is called Solchaga. As the documentation reveals,³³ the Solchagas resided in Eristain and Solchag, explaining why the emblem of the *Palacio de Eristain* is identical to that of the Solchaga family. As noted, the archaeological evidence points to the owners of the *Palacio* of Eristain using the church itself as a burial space, while members of the local farming community were buried outside in the church yard. In the second half of the 14th century, the documentation records that Martin Periz de Solchaga reached a powerful position in the royal court of Pamplona (1364), belonging to a group of local nobles in bureaucratic roles close to the king. Other members of the family, Pedro Aibar de Solchaga and his son, were men-at-arms, serving the king directly. The documents also reveal that the Solchagas (as *hidalgos*) enjoyed

³² Don Martin Periz, Gil Periz, Garcia Periz, Johan Periz, Gracia Periz, Theresa Sancho Periz, and Martin "sobrino." Another census on Eristain from two years on bring us a slightly different list of names of this family. Still, Don Martin Periz appears, leading the list. AGN, Comptos. Registros, primera serie, num. 127, fol. 196.

³³ "Conforme de pago de Martin Pérez de Solchaga, residente en Eristain." Signed by Martin de Solchaga 28-10-1412. AGN, Comptos, Caj. 101, N.50, 40.

several sources of income. These involved among others collecting the tax in kind from the village of Olleta in 1385. By 1412, the Solchagas, residents of Eristain, were paid to maintain *mesnadas*, which probably indicates a reward by the king for the loyalty of the family over several decades of service.³⁴

This would be common among the rural secondary-level Navarrese nobility.³⁵ Owners of small estates, looking to climb up the kingdom's social structure, maintained an active loyalty to the king (**Fig. 5**).³⁶ In this social climbing, one way to demonstrate nobility was to use new ideas associated with and visual formulas of chivalry, as in the case of a coat of arms in order to "achieve permanence both in space and time."³⁷ As was common during the Late Middle Ages, mural paintings in private funerary spaces like those of a chapel reflected the particular faith and fears of the owners of the space in question.³⁸ In Eristain, the church mural paintings would be another opportunity for the Solchagas to demonstrate publicly their presence as faithful Christians in their own pantheon.

For all these reasons, I would contend that the Solchaga family were the patrons of the murals. A member of this family like Martin Periz would have had the resources to promote the paintings after he reached the position of

³⁴ Ramírez Vaquero "La nobleza bajomedieval navarra," 655.

³⁵ Javier Martínez de Aguirre, "La capilla funeraria en la Navarra medieval," in *Correspondencia e integración de las Artes*, vol. 3 (XIV Congreso nacional de Historia del Arte, Malaga: Departamento de Historia del Arte, 2006), 119–120.

³⁶ Mugueta Moreno "La nobleza en Navarra (siglos XIII-XIV)," 223.

³⁷ Rodríguez Velasco, *Order and Chivalry*, 2.

³⁸ Nuñez Morcillo, *La pintura mural tardogótica en Castilla y León*, 1:95, 96.

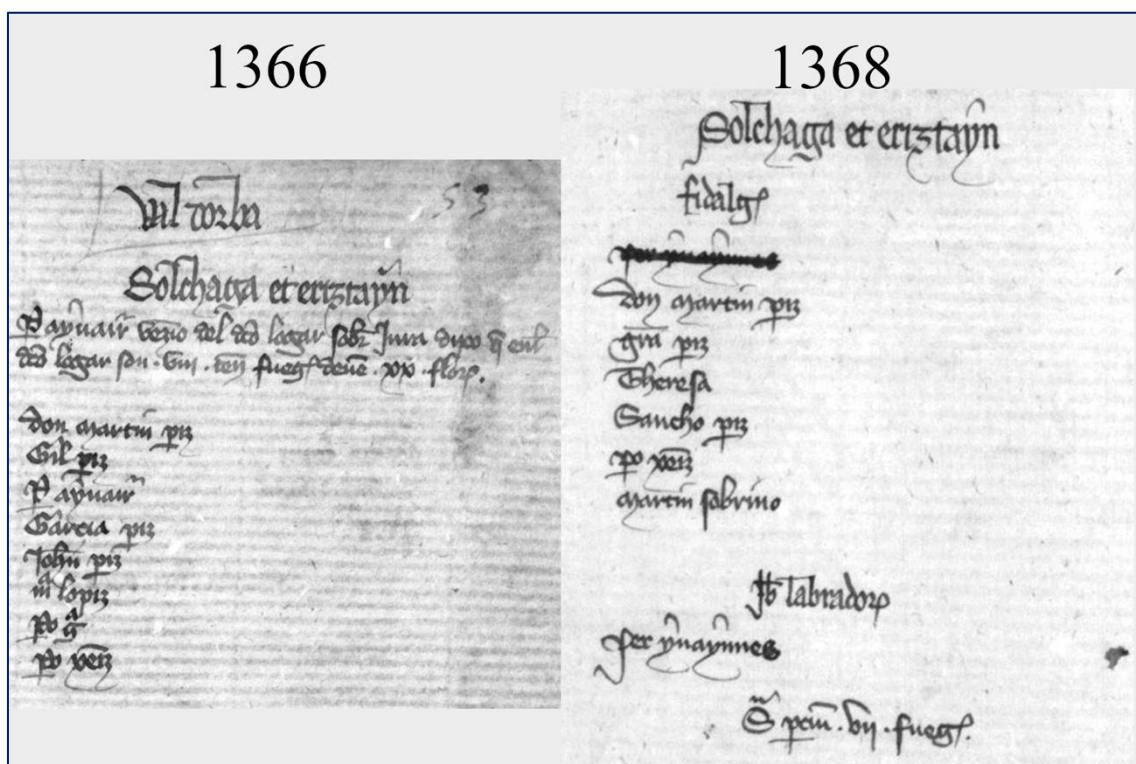
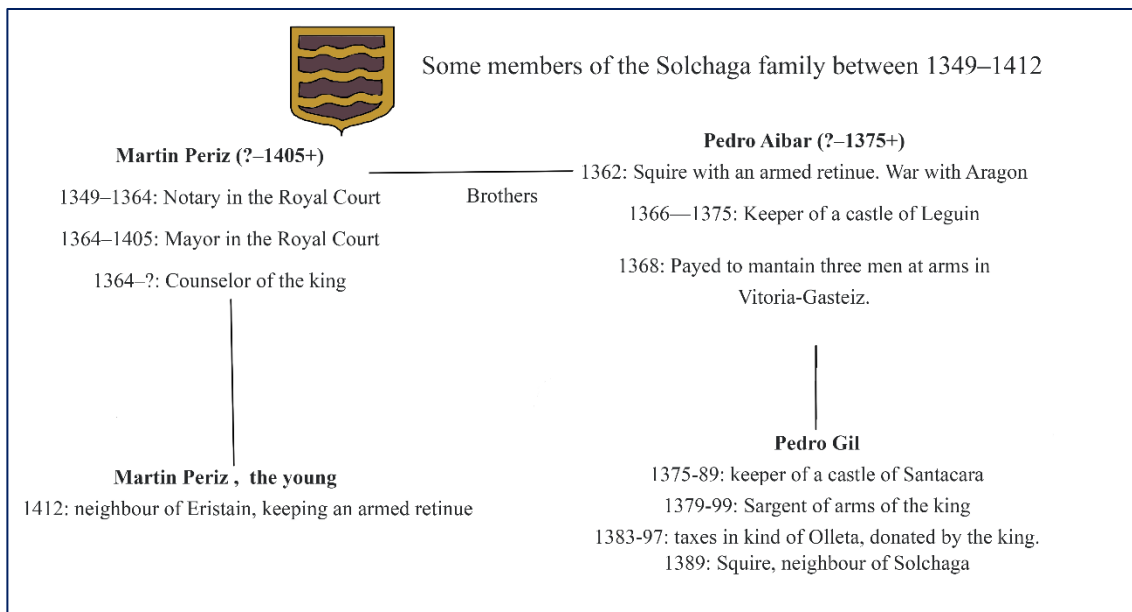


Figure 5a, 5b (Left) Family tree of the Solchagas and political and military positions held by this family between 1349-1412. (Right) Documented members living in Eristain in censuses from 1366 and 1368. Both of the documents start with the name of "Don Martin Periz." AGN, Comptos, Fuegos, n. 1 and Registros, 1 S., N. 127, fol. 196.

court notary (1349), or more likely still during his time as mayor of the court (1364-1405), with the purpose of decorating his familiar pantheon. The use of azurite in the paintings, an expensive pigment at that time,³⁹ also indicates a patron who had at least a certain amount of wealth or influence in the court.

The Paintings: Location, Technique, Style, and Artist

The murals of San Juan Bautista de Eristain have been dated by Carlos Martínez Álava to the third quarter of the 14th century, and categorized within the group of rural, popular paintings in the Navarrese Gothic linear style.⁴⁰ As is common in such rural churches, no trace of documentation has been discovered so far about the authorship or the commissioning of the paintings.

The paintings are located in the apse all around the walls and the vault of the chancel (**Fig. 6**) and the two arches that define the chancel (**Figs. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3**). These arches are fully painted in the tympanum, spandrels, and intrados. Most of the painting in the apse vault has been lost because of humidity. Part of the apse walls were demolished in modern times to build an entrance to the new sacristy, a window, and a niche for liturgical purposes. But, most importantly, the north and south side walls of the nave were removed of all the layers of whitewash and consequently destroying the paintings under these

³⁹ Thompson, *The Materials and Techniques of Medieval Painting*, 134.

⁴⁰ Martínez Álava, "El gótico radiante," 396.



Figure 6 The church paintings in the chancel and apse. Photo: author.

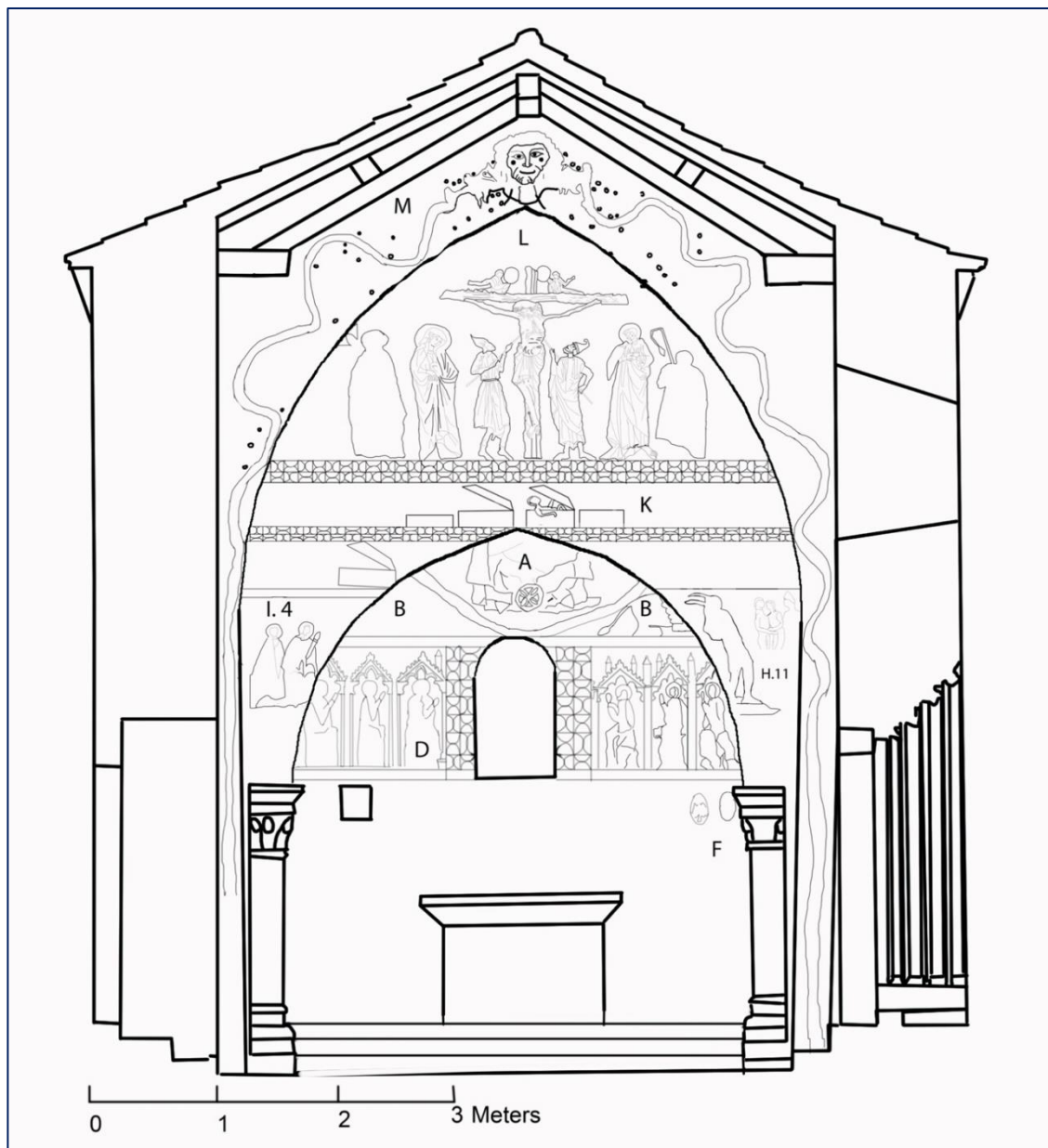


Figure 7.1 Apse. Location of the scenes: A. Maiestas Domini B. Thetramorph. C. Celestial Court D. Apostles E. Kings and Sibyls. F. Medallions with emblematic decoration G. Angels and Martyrs H. Hell scenes. I. Virgins J. Cycle of Joachim and Saint Anne. K. Resurrection of the Dead L. Crucifixion M. Bearded face with garlands. Architecture based on the plans of Javier Sancho Domingo and A. Nieves. Principe de Viana archives. Image: author.

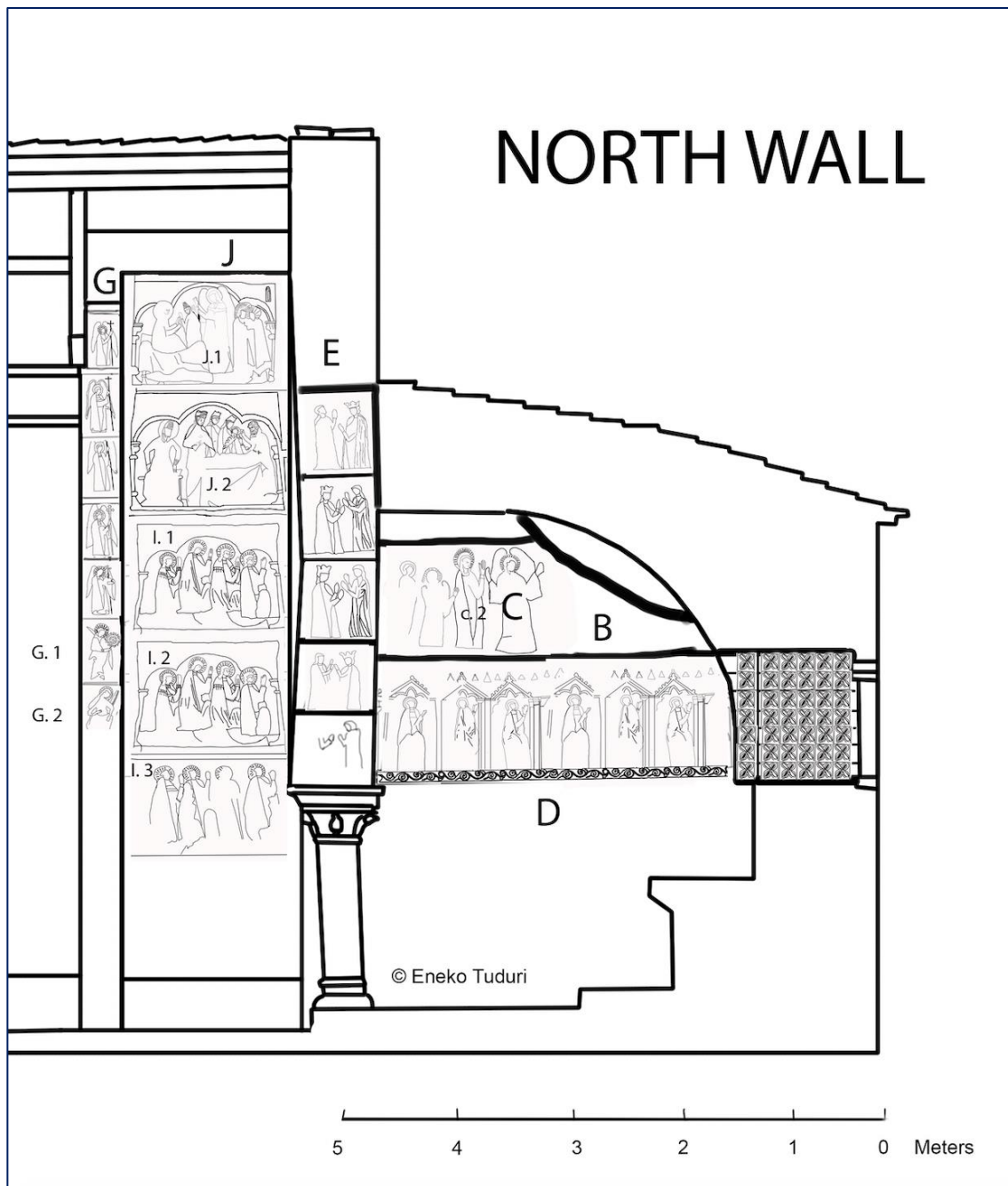


Figure 7.2 North Wall. Location of the scenes: B. Thetetramorph. C. Celestial Court D. Apostles E. Kings and Sibyls. F. Medallions with emblematic decoration G. Angels and Martyrs H. Hell scenes. I. Virgins J. Cycle of Joachim and Saint Anne. K. Resurrection of the Dead L. Crucifixion M. Bearded face with garlands. Architecture based on the plans of Javier Sancho Domingo and A. Nieves. Principe de Viana archives. Image: author.

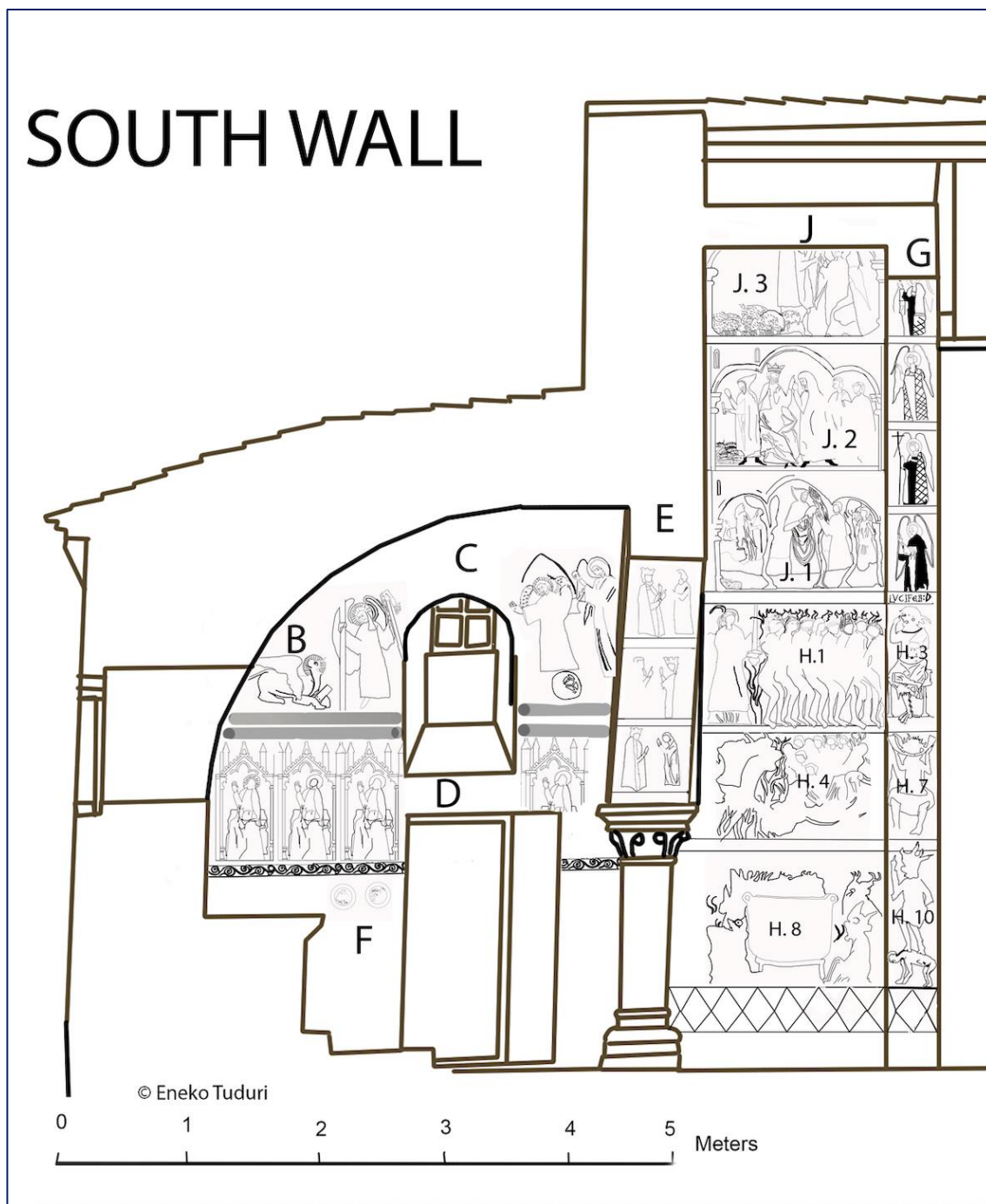


Figure 7.2 South Wall. Location of the scenes: B. The Tetramorph. C. Celestial Court D. Apostles E. Kings and Sibyls. F. Medallions with emblematic decoration G. Angels and Martyrs H. Hell scenes. J. Cycle of Joachim and Saint Anne. K. Resurrection of the Dead. Architecture based on the plans of Javier Sancho Domingo and A. Nieves. Principe de Viana archives. Image: author.

layers of whitewash. This happened sometime during the 1980s, in a renovation of the church not controlled by the local authorities.⁴¹

Today, only a small section of the paintings in the nave has survived; it's on the north wall, but it is too damaged to recognize anything. It was customary for all church interiors to be fully painted. As Roger Rosewell points out, "Wall paintings helped to define, differentiate and 'map' different liturgical spaces within the churches as well as enriching and supporting them."⁴² It is impossible to know, but painted heraldic emblems may have decorated the nave walls, as a reference to the patron or realm.⁴³ The surviving paintings in Eristain only covers the space referred to, that is, the chancel and apse, but these images retain a unitary sense of coherence, there is no feeling of any scenes missing. It is the same case in the church of San Martin de Gaceo, in which the paintings cover a very similar space to that of Eristain, the apse and chancel, the most sacred area of the church.⁴⁴

Technique

A restoration team determined that the technique used was a *fresco* base with *secco* additions.⁴⁵ Unfortunately most of the metallic-base colors have

⁴¹ Ramos and Gabinete Trama, "Eristain: Seguimiento arqueológico," 133.

⁴² Rosewell, *Medieval Wall Paintings*, 17.

⁴³ Something that happens in the corbels of the church of San Martin de Ardanaz, Navarre. Eneko Tuduri, "Buttressing Our Souls for the Last Judgment: Female Artistic Patronage in a Navarrese Parish Church after 1348", 128.

⁴⁴ Portilla, ed., *Catálogo monumental, diócesis de Vitoria*, 180.

⁴⁵ Arteclio S.A., "Eristain -Pintura Mural- Informe de Restauración."

degraded due to oxidation of the mineral pigments, probably because they were used in combination with incorrect binders. The blue backgrounds made out of azurite have turned green, while the whites made out of white lead have turned black.⁴⁶ Thus, the paintings today resemble more a photographic negative than their original colorful Gothic linear style.

This is undeniably discouraging for anyone who wants to study them, yet the application of digital image software which enhances the colors, textures, and profiles of the paintings has proved most helpful. Through this process, I was able to make out figures such as the Leviathan in the H.4 scene. Too, recognizing the pigments used can help us understand the resources available to the workshop responsible for painting Eristain. For example, azurite used in Eristain, came from silver mines and it was therefore an expensive pigment in Europe.⁴⁷

On the stylistic characteristics, most of the black outlines of the figures are now gone. Only those outlines in the face of the crucified Christ and a few other figures remains. These lines show that the painter had sufficient skill to draw small delicate lines, used to create a realistic beard and hair of Christ. Comparing the face of Christ in Eristain with the same figure in San Martin de Gaceo, the former demonstrates finer work of the aforementioned features. The

⁴⁶ On the degradation of azurite and white lead, see Cennini, *Il libro dell'arte*, chapters LIX and LX.

⁴⁷ Azurite was detected in Eristain by Marius Vendrel and Sarah Boularand, members of the restoration team from the University of Barcelona. "La iglesia de Eristain," *Noticias de Navarra*.

facial features in Eristain are also more proportionate, with a larger and more naturalistic face that closely resembles Pamplona's cathedral Gothic linear styles (Fig. 8).



Figure 8 Crucified Christ heads. From the left to the right. Pamplona's cathedral refectory crucifixion, Gaceo's mural crucified, and Eristain's crucified. Photos: author.

The naturalistic drawing ability of the painter and the use of azurite in great quantities for the background leads me to affirm that the Eristain paintings were not representative of lower quality artwork because of their rural location or their deteriorated appearance today. The workshop must have had access to certain resources, even if the combination of materials and binders diminished the murals. In the dark Romanesque environment of the church, these murals would have looked bright under candlelight, with their saturated red and blue colors and golden halos, as well as elegant black lines demarcating the figures. For their time, it is clear that the patrons invested a significant amount of resources in these paintings, which is apparent when compared to other nearby rural examples, such as Olleta's church.

Style and Artistic Authorship

These images were clearly painted in the Franco-Gothic or linear Gothic style. There are almost identical scenes, in terms of composition and iconography, in the already-mentioned early 14th-century paintings in the church of San Martín de Gaceo in the nearby province of Álava. Fernández Ladreda made the initial connection between the two churches and it was confirmed by Sáenz Pascual, who compares similar scenes like the crucifixion.⁴⁸ Both crucifixions are almost identical in the composition, using the same figures (**Fig. 14**). Other figures, such as Christian Virgins, appear to be identical in both composition and style. In Gaceo all the scenes are identified with painted texts over the scenes, but at Eristain most of these texts are lost. Despite their similarities, both Fernández Ladreda and Sáenz Pascual reject the idea that the same artist was responsible for both paintings due to differences in the style of the figures.

There are also big similarities with another wall painting ensemble in the same valley. Some figures in Eristain, such as the kings and prophets in the intrados of the apse arch, are identical to those of La Asunción de Olleta (**Fig. 9**).⁴⁹ The manner of depicting heads in Olleta is also very similar to the stylistic features of the Eristain figures.⁵⁰ Likewise, the same *stucco* technique seems to

⁴⁸ Fernández Ladreda "Catalain y Eristain," and Sáenz Pascual, *La pintura gótica en Álava*, 23–24, 26, 34, 39.

⁴⁹ Olleta is four miles away from Eristain. These paintings were studied first by Lacarra Ducay, *Aportación*, 231–238.

⁵⁰ Lacarra Ducay, *Aportación*, Fig. 48, b.



Figure 9 Comparisons between the paintings of Olleta in the Museo de Navarra (O.) and Eristain (E.) Photos: author.

be used in both churches to decorate the halos. The reason for this may be because the Solchaga family received tax in kind from Olleta in 1385, which may indicate a relationship between the two ensembles of paintings and our protagonist family.⁵¹ Indeed, there are more similarities between Olleta and Eristain than between Gaceo and Eristain.

Regarding a shared use of a particular workshop, there is a clear geographical and stylistic connection between the paintings in Eristain and Olleta, and they may even have shared the same patron, the Solchagas. Yet the

⁵¹ AGN, Comptos, Caj. 45, N. 28, 46. 10-09-1385.

details in regard to style and technique in Gaceo are noticeably different. As such, the latter work was probably done earlier, in the 14th century, and it could have served as a model for Eristain. It is also possible that some disciple of the Gaceo master or workshop painted his own works in Navarre.

Pedro Gil de Solchaga was in Vitoria-Gasteiz in 1368,⁵² a time in which the king of Navarre ruled over the province of Álava—traditionally under the rule of Castille since 1200—for a few years.⁵³ The church of Gaceo is next to Salvatierra, a town in Álava that swore loyalty, by means of renewed charters, to the king of Navarre in the same year.⁵⁴ It is plausible to think that Pedro Gil de Solchaga, who was in charge of an armed retinue, may have seen the then recently-finished paintings of San Martín de Gaceo (dated after 1325).⁵⁵ Pedro Gil may have wanted to imitate the decoration there in his own family chapel in Eristain, because the composition of some scenes like the Crucifixion and that of the Virgins appear to have been copied directly from the Gaceo model. The difference, though, was that the Eristain murals seem to have been created by a local Navarrese workshop that also worked on the church of Olleta in the same valley. If we follow the dates of the documentation, all this took place in the last quarter of the 14th century.

⁵² AGN, Comptos, Caj. 23, N. 81, 16 and 100.

⁵³ Herreros, “La intervención de Carlos II en Álava (1368)”, I:471–81.

⁵⁴ Sánchez Aranaz, *Carlos II de Navarra*, 88.

⁵⁵ The art historian Josep Gudiol dated the paintings of Gaceo after 1325, compared with other paintings of the peninsula. Micaela Portilla, postulate Portilla, ed., *Catálogo monumental, diócesis de Vitoria*, 190 and 444.

The Paintings: Iconography and Narratives

Analysis of the iconography, too, brings up many intriguing questions. First, is a need to identify all the unidentified scenes and figures. Using the evidence presented by Sáenz Pascual and Aragonés, I follow their iconographic reading of the scene of the Crucifixion and the major demons of the cycle of Hell.⁵⁶ Then once each individual scene has been identified, it is important to relate it to the narrative structure in order to unlock the holistic sense of the pictorial program in its specific context.

One general rule, that applies to most Christian medieval art, is that the image of God placed in the main chapel, facing towards the nave of the church, serves as a center point to set up all the rest of the images. It is then, from the point of view of this theophanie, when the rest of the images are placed between the right side and left side of the nave. Generally speaking, the right side (*Dextera Domini*) is usually kept for those righteous scenes and the left side for those evil (*Ad sinistram*). As usual, Eristain's paintings follows this rule to set their scenes.

The Celestial Court and the Crucifixion

Starting with the apse shell and following the religious hierarchy of the figures represented, first, there is the *Pantocrator* or *Maiestas Domini*, Christ in

⁵⁶ Sáenz Pascual, *La pintura gótica en Álava*, 39 and Aragonés, "El mal imaginado por el gótico," 39, 74.

Majesty and part of the vision of John in the Apocalypse (John, Revelations 4) (Figs. 7.1. A; 10). As usual, the *Maiestas* is seated on a throne, surrounded by the mandorla.⁵⁷ While today it has almost been lost, this *Maiestas* must have been an impressive figure when it was painted.

As is common, the figure of the *Maiestas* is surrounded by Tetramorphous (Fig. 10; Fig. 7.1, B). This group is placed in the center of the iconographic program, indicating the main message of Christian dogma: The Last Judgment of God the Father, in which God is escorted by a cohort of angels, saints, and martyrs imploring him, through the favor of the Virgin, for the souls buried in the church.



Figure 10 Around the *Maiestas* (A), three of the *Tetramorph* (B) creatures are completely gone today. The only surviving figure is the bull of Lucas, located in the lower left-hand corner of the spandrel created by the Mandorla. Photo: author.

⁵⁷ Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, 3. Tome II**, 688.

Flanking the apse are two scenes depicting the celestial court adoring and escorting the *Maiestas* (Figs. 7.2; 6.3, C), the figures of which are, as yet, unidentified: On the right side there are two figures without wings, one of them female with raised hands as in the form of an orant. The other resembles the figure of John the Evangelist in the Crucifixion scene. I would venture that these are Mary and John, are worshiping God as part of the celestial court (Fig. 11; 7.3, c. 2). This could be a Western iconographic depiction of the *Deesis*, with John the Baptist replaced by the Evangelist.⁵⁸ The same figures praying to



Figure 11 Under digital filters, the intercessor virgin of Eristain in the right and the intercessor virgin of Santa Lucia chapel in Sos del Rey Católico. (Fig. 7.2, C. c.2). Photo: author.

⁵⁸ Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, 3. Tome II**, 3: 732.

the Christ-Judge image appear on the north wall of the church of Santa Lucia, Sos del Rey Catolico.⁵⁹ John and Mary were, for the western medieval mind, the only intercessors to change the harsh judgment of the God-Judge.⁶⁰ Hence, these two figures were important in a church used for funerary purposes. On the south wall there are several angels, two of which are seraphs adoring the image of God and another angel carrying the column and the whip of the *Arma Christi*.⁶¹

Below these figures, the twelve apostles are divided under a painted frieze decorated with vegetation. Two of the figures have been lost, but there is no doubt that there were twelve originally, even if today they are very damaged. The apostles are located inside an arch that may represent the New Jerusalem of John's vision (Revelation 21:2). Again, all the apostles are also worshipping the *Maiestas Domini*.

The most important iconographical element in the apse after the *Maiestas Domini* is not a painting. It is the Romanesque sculpture of a *Sedes Sapientiae*, a seat or throne of wisdom, located today in the central niche, behind the altar, and just below the representation of the *Maiestas* (**Fig. 12**).⁶² Known as *Nuestra*

⁵⁹ Lacarra Ducay, *Pinturas murales góticas en las iglesias de Sos del Rey Católico*, 38–40.

⁶⁰ For example, the *Speculum Humanae salvationis*, chaps. XXXVIII–XXXIX, treats Mary as a defender and mediator of the faithful before God's harsh judgment Anon. *Speculum humanae salvationis*, 296. Cited in Fernández Ladreda, "Dos conjuntos funerarios episcopales de la catedral de Pamplona en el siglo XIV," 229.

⁶¹ The first chapter of the Golden Legend narrates how the symbols of the Passion will appear in the Last Judgment. See Voragine, *The Golden Legend*.

⁶² The original image is kept the Diocesan Museum in Pamplona, while that in Eristain is a restored copy. Fernández Ladreda, *Imagineria Medieval Mariana en Navarra*, 94.



Figure 12 Reproduction of the *Sedes Sapientiae* in the very center of the apse. Photo: author.

Señora de Eristain (Our Lady of Eristain), it is been dated to the last decades of the 12th century. The worship of Mary was particularly strong during the Middle Ages in Navarre, and it is likely that this Romanesque sculpture was placed in the apse, and venerated in Eristain, before the Gothic period paintings were created.⁶³

The next scene is the Crucifixion, which is the richest depiction, ichnographically speaking, in Eristain (**Figs. 7.1, L; 13**). It has been compared to

⁶³ According to the *Catálogo Monumental de Navarra*, the Romanesque image was venerated inside the *Palacio* of Eristain. However, this veneration reflects the modern age, when the church was covered in whitewash and the apse presided over by a 18th-century altar. García-Gainza et al., *Catálogo monumental de Navarra III*, 368–369. I believe that, during the Middle Ages, images of the Virgin and Child were located on the church altar, their most logical placement.

the same scene in San Martin de Gaceo, which shares the same composition and almost the same figures.⁶⁴ It occupies the tympanum of the smallest arch in the chancel and, therefore, the main surface in the chancel, a space that has its own meaning, and at the same time, it is related to the apse iconography.

The scene depicts the Crucifixion of Christ in the center, surrounded by three characters on each side. Christ is portrayed in death, punctured by three nails, with his backbone appearing through his chest (**Fig. 13**). The cross is the *Lignum Vitae*, the Tree of Life, a descendant of the tree in the Garden of Eden.⁶⁵

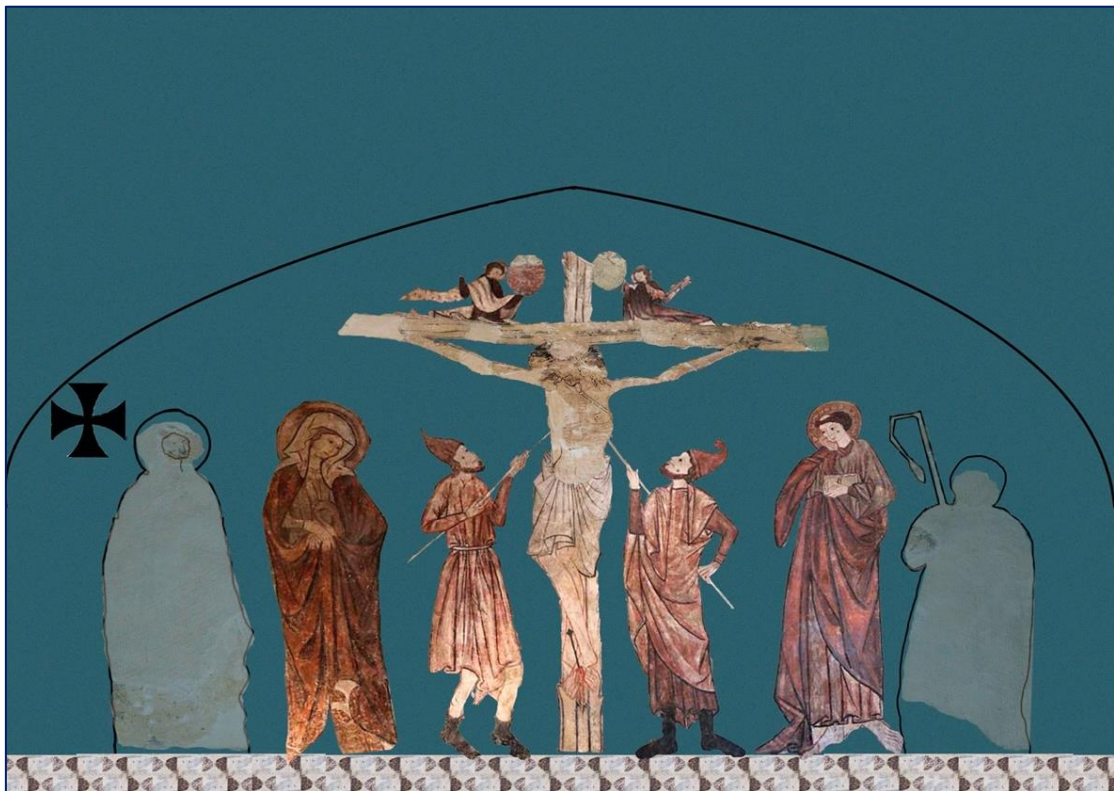


Figure 13 Reconstruction of the Crucifixion (**Fig. 7.1. L**) in Eristain, taking the same but better conserved figures from Gaceo church. From left to right: the allegory of the church, Mary, Longinus, Christ, Stepaton, John, and the allegory of the Synagogue. Photo: author.

⁶⁴ Sáenz Pascual, *La pintura gótica en Álava*, 39.

⁶⁵ Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien 3. Tome II***, 3:438 and Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, II, 134.

A popular element in 14th-century Navarrese representations, the *Lignum Vitae* can be found in other murals of the area.⁶⁶

Longinus and Stephaton appear either side of Christ, to the left and right respectively. Stephaton is represented in Gaceo and Eristain with a Phrygian hat, as a Jew, committing an act of torture by offering Christ a sponge soaked in vinegar.⁶⁷ The next two figures on the left and right are, once again, the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist. In Eristain, they are all but lost, but in Gaceo they appear as elegant figures displaying profoundly grief-stricken gestures. After Mary and John, right in the corners, are Ecclesia and Synagogue, allegories on the right and left side of Christ, respectively. This emplacement is not by chance but follows Christian conceptions of the right and the left side mentioned earlier. As such, Ecclesia is placed in the right side of Christ and carries a standard with the cross (in Eristain it is a Greek cross), while Synagogue, only a broken spear survives to identify her.⁶⁸ According to Martínez Álava, these allegories make complete sense in the context of the Crucifixion scene: "Jesus Christ with his passion saves mankind and creates the Church, defeating the Synagogue and abolishing its powers."⁶⁹ This scene

⁶⁶ For example, there is a whole cycle dedicated to the Tree in Puente de la Reina. Martínez Álava "El gótico radiante," 378, 381–382.

⁶⁷ The sources are Saint John (19: 33–34) and Saint Mathew (27: 48) as well as the Golden Legend, chap. 47, Saint Longinus. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, II, 93.

⁶⁸ Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien 3. Tome II**, 3:488.

⁶⁹ Martínez Álava, "Escultura," 319.

would also be related to the Eucharist liturgy that was celebrated on the altar, in which the Passion and Resurrection of Christ is renewed.⁷⁰

Below the Crucifixion, on the spandrels of the arch, is the scene of the Resurrection of the Dead on the day of the Last Judgment (**Fig. 7.1, K**). It mostly gone, but five sepulchers with small resurrection figures rising from therein can still be made out. The scene, based on the Apocalypse of St. John (20:12) and Matthew (27, 52-53), makes complete sense in this funerary context. This scene is also related to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, which allowed for his resurrection in body and soul, the central dogma of all Christians.⁷¹ In this funerary space, this scene reveals as the main hope of the Solchaga family buried in here: to be resurrected in flesh and bone during the Final Judgment.

The South Wall and the cycle of Hell

On the south wall of the chancel, in clear contrast to the rest of the paintings, there is a depiction of the ten-scene cycle of Hell (**Fig. 7.2, H**). Esperanza Aragonés, when studying the most striking demons in “El mal imaginado por el gótico,”⁷² analyzed the iconography of the demons in the intrados by comparing them with other examples in Navarrese medieval art. Following her iconographic interpretation of these creatures elsewhere, I will

⁷⁰ Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, part III, question 83, art. 1.

⁷¹ Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, part III, question 56, art. 1.

⁷² Aragonés, “El mal imaginado por el gótico,” 39, 74.

examine in more depth those scenes that have not been studied, and attempt to decipher the cycle of Hell in order and show its coherence as an evil reflection in opposition to the rest of the paintings.

The representation of Hell in Eristain is formed by three main scenes, accompanied by six major demons positioned near the condemned in the different corners of the pilasters and on the south side of the spandrel. Most of these figures have been reduced to black and white forms on a red surface today, but they can still be distinguished with adequate digital software.

The narrative moves from top to bottom (**Fig. 7.2, H**). At the top the archangel Raphael --identified by the text above him: "...AGI RAFAEL" pushes a group of seven condemned figures (including a king, several women, and two priests) with his large sword (**Fig. 14**). In the church of San Martin de Ecay, which displays very similar iconography to that of Eristain, there is likewise a depiction of an angel pushing a group of people condemned to Hell.⁷³

Traditionally, demons are portrayed as pushing or dragging the sinful to the mouth of Leviathan,⁷⁴ yet here the protagonist is Gabriel.

Inside the pilaster, there is a naked and almost bald woman who is covering her pubis with shame while a snake bites at her leg. She represents

⁷³ See Lacarra Ducay, "La iglesia parroquial de Ecay y sus pinturas murales."

⁷⁴ As in the famous scene on the tympanum of Conques. Baschet, *Les justices de l'au-delà*, 146-149 and Le Don, "Structures et significations de l'imagerie médiévale de l'enfer."



Figure 14 Hell Scenes: Rafael pushing the condemned to Hell (fig. 7.3. H1), and Lucifer welcoming them (**Fig. 7.3. H3**). Photo: author.

lust, and she appears just before the impressive figure of Lucifer.⁷⁵ Therefore, she will be the first figure entering Hell and welcomed by Lucifer himself.

Represented on the intrados of the biggest arch and identified as “LVCIFER:D” (Lucifer Demon), this figure is seated on a grotesque throne decorated with a dragon’s head and is raising his left hand in a sign of authority, as a parody of the iconography of the *Maiestas Domini*⁷⁶ (**Fig. 7.2, H.3**). He has big horns and a goat’s beard, resembling a goat-like demon.

Farther down, on the second line, is a scene on the spandrels of the

⁷⁵ This is the most common type of lust iconography in the Hispanic cycles of Hell. Rodríguez Barral, “Los lugares penales del más allá,” 4.

⁷⁶ Aragonés, “El mal imaginado por el gótico,” 74.

smaller arch (**Fig. 7.1, H.11**) of a demon watches a couple embracing, perhaps representing lust again. There is a figure that looks like he is wearing a Phrygian hat, which may be another representation of a Jew, like that of Stephaton.⁷⁷



Figure 15 Hell Scenes: Two demons painted in the pillar (**Fig. 7.3. H.7**) and the group of the Condemned marches towards the Leviathan or the mouth of Hell (**Fig. 7.3. H4**). Photo: author.

In the next scene, at the same level, a group of doomed figures continue their descent into Hell, going directly to be swallowed by a now-lost Leviathan, who is as yet unrecognized (**Figs. 15; 7.2, H.4**). At this level, on the intrados of the arch and after another demon, there is a large demon with huge horns,

⁷⁷ Intxusta, "Iglesia de Santa Maria de Eristain," 8.

blowing two big hunting horns (**Fig. 7.2, H.7**). This demon has been related to a parody of the Angels blowing the horns to announce the Last Judgment.⁷⁸

Again, Hell appears as a mockery of the rest of scenes represented elsewhere in the church.

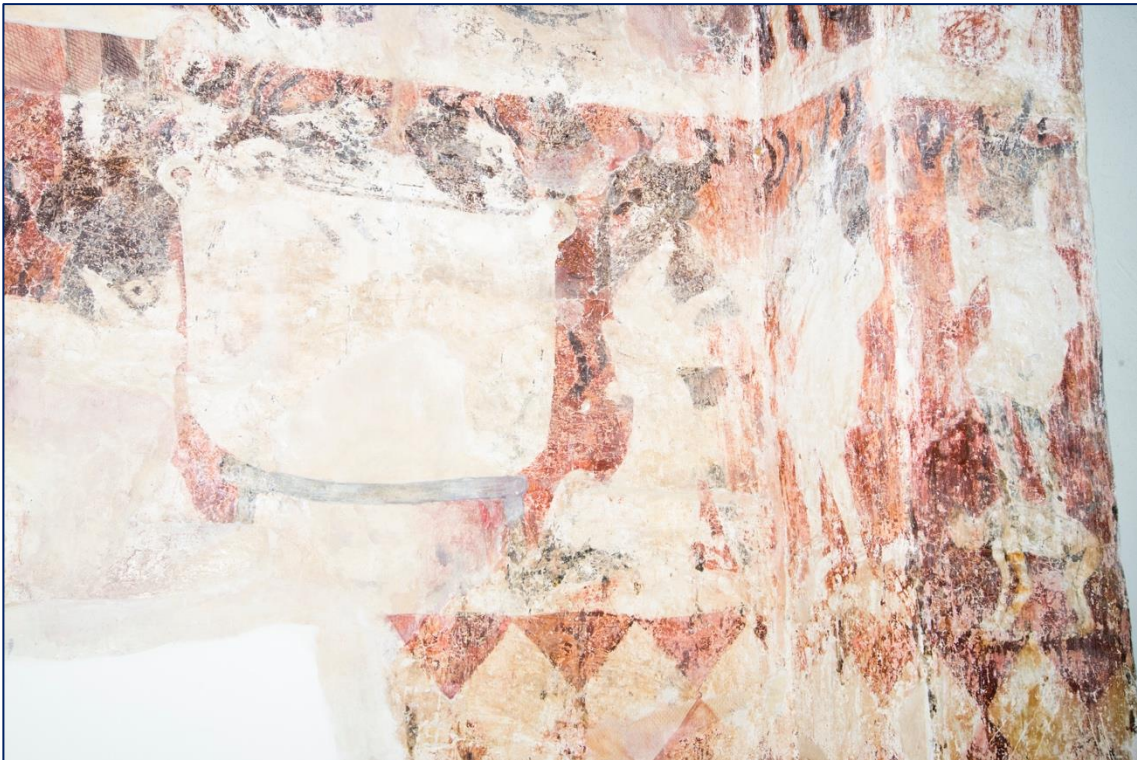


Figure 16 Hell Scenes: the condemns burn in the cauldron of Hell with demons around it (**Fig. 7.3. H.8**) A major demon sits on the top of kneeling man (**Fig. 7.3. H.10**). Photo: author.

On the last line of three scenes, is a big cauldron surrounded by four demons (**Figs. 16; 7.2, H.8**). Flames emerge from inside the cauldron, and there are some black stains, probably the remnants of the condemned figures marching in the last two scenes. A depiction of condemned people burning in

⁷⁸ Aragonés, "El mal imaginado por el gótico," 39.

the cauldron is common in late-medieval art, found, for example, on the tympanum of Saint Saturnine of Pamplona, dating from the first half of the 14th century, which possibly inspired the artists at Eristain.

There are two more demons in the intrados of the arch, one of whom is sitting on a kneeling man. This represents punishment for sloth and was a kind of torture that typically depicted in the Italian and French cycle of Hell (**Fig. 7.2, H. 10**).⁷⁹

Following the scenes, the narrative is apparent. At the top, the condemned are pushed by Raphael and march into Hell, where they are welcomed by Lucifer himself. In the central scene, the same group enters Hell through the mouth of the Leviathan. Finally, they end up in the cauldron and are tortured by demons, *ad eternum*. Different types of sinners and sins are represented. Aragonés has noted lust, pride, and sloth. I would add greed to that list because one of the condemned in the first group seems to be carrying a bag with coins hanging from his neck. Notice that there is no representation of purgatory, an idea introduced in the arts after the 13th century.⁸⁰ However, there is a rich representation of demons and sins showing innovative iconographical influences. In Eristain, these sins stand in clear contrast to the virtues presented

⁷⁹ Baschet, *Les justices de l'au-delà*, 373.

⁸⁰ Rodríguez Barral, "Los lugares penales del más allá," 9-14.

on the opposite wall. This Hell and its demons represent the negative *alter ego* of God's creation.⁸¹



Figure 17 Cycle of Joachim: Joachim (center) marches to the temple of Jerusalem with two young herders and sheep (**Fig. 7.3. J1**). Photo: author.

The cycle of Saint Joachim and the north wall

In contrast to the grim scenes on the arch, a hagiographical cycle dedicated to St. Joachim and St. Anne, Mary's parents begin above the first scene of Hell (**Fig. 7.2, J**). To date, some of these scenes have been wrongly identified as the Annunciation to the Shepherds and the Nativity of Jesus.

⁸¹ Aragonés, "El mal imaginado por el gótico," 80.

Actually, all three scenes on the north wall depict a rich Vita of Joachim inspired by the *Golden Legend*.⁸² First, the future father of Mary, a shepherd, brings lambs to the temple of Jerusalem in order to sacrifice them in honor of God (**Figs. 17; 7.2, J.1**): "then Joachim went unto Jerusalem with his kindred, in the feast of Encenia, that was the dedication of the temple, and came to the altar with the others and would have offered his offering."



Figure 18 Joachim (with a beard and hood in the very center) is expelled from the temple of Jerusalem by the high priest (depicted with a crown) (**Fig. 7.3. J2**). Photo: author.

⁸² Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, chap. XXXIX. The three scenes are described by Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien Tome II***, 3:157 and are also present in Giotto's painting in Padua.

Then Joachim is rejected by the high priest of the temple—here portrayed with a crown⁸³—because he is sterile and unworthy of God (**Fig. 18; Fig. 7.2, J.2**):

"And when the priest saw him, he put him apart by great despise, and reprov'd him because . . . he that had none to the increase of the people of God."



Figure 19 Joachim and the angel (**Fig. 7.3. J3**). Photo: author.

Finally, Joachim, shamed into exile in the solitude of the desert, receives an annunciation from an angel that he will be the father of the Virgin Mary

⁸³ This portrayal is extremely confusing. Due to the nature of the rest of the figures (herders and not kings), this cannot be Herod with the Magi. For some reason, the painter represented the high priest as a temporal ruler (king or prince).

(Figs. 19; fig. 6.2, J.3), as a reward by God for his faith:⁸⁴ "And then he went to his herdsmen, and was there long, and then the angel appeared to him only and said . . . And therefore, Anne thy wife shall have a daughter, and thou shalt call her Mary."

In the Pamplona Cathedral cloisters is also a mural painting depicting the life of Joachim, but it contains only a scene, the Annunciation to Joachim, perhaps an iconographic source for the Eristain scenes.⁸⁵ However, in Eristain there are three such scenes, something unique in Navarre and rare in the Iberian Peninsula as a whole.⁸⁶ There is an emphasis on Joachim bringing the lambs to temple of Jerusalem, where his generosity would be rejected by the high priest (because of an act of pride on his part), but he would ultimately be rewarded by God himself in the last scene. Thus, in the context of Eristain, viewers reading these scenes would be reminded that the faithful and generous Christian will be rewarded, and that pride will be punished in Hell.

Such sentiments were widespread, but they likely held special meaning to Martin Periz de Solchaga, who served forty years as judge. The choice of this particular hagiography and the representation of the scene of the wrong

⁸⁴ Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 375.

⁸⁵ These were first examined by Lacarra Ducay in a 1974 publication and she continued with the study in a work published in 1994. The paintings have been dated to the second half of the 14th century, more specifically to some point between 1350 and 1370. Lacarra Ducay, *Aportación*, 299–305 and "Pintura," 365.

⁸⁶ There is a depiction of the complete cycle of Joachim in the Scrovegni Chapel of Padua painted by Giotto with one scene more than that of Eristain, namely, Joachim's Sacrificial Offering.

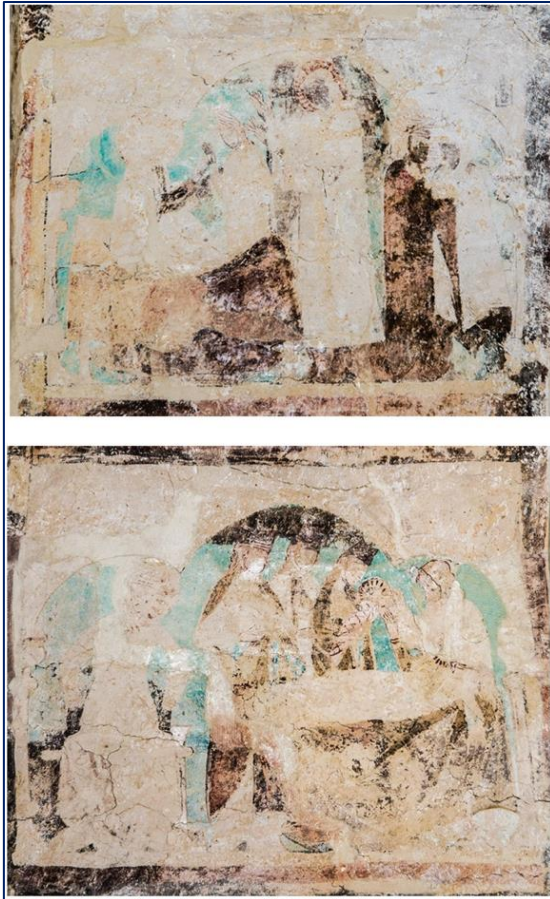


Figure 20 Three scenes from the life of Saint Anne. Top, *The Annunciation of Saint Anne and the Embrace on the Golden Door*. Bottom, *Nativity of Mary*. Photos: author.

judgment by the high priest of temple of Jerusalem might serve as a warning to himself of the dangers that his profession could rise, dangers that, if misunderstood, might condemn his soul.

The cycle continues on the north wall with three scenes portraying the life of St. Anne, Joachim's wife (**Figs. 20; 7.3, J**): The Annunciation to St. Anne (**J.1**), the Meeting at the Golden Gate (**J.1**), and the Nativity of Mary (**J.2**). The same scenes are represented in the above-mentioned mural in Pamplona Cathedral. They are all apocryphal scenes and are from the Infancy Gospel of James, I, 6, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, I, VI, and the Armenian book of

Childhood, I, 1–9. Thus, logically and on the basis of female iconography,⁸⁷ the last scene is the birth of Mary, not Jesus, as has been mistakenly interpreted.



Figure 21 Scenes of the Virgin Saints. On the left, four virgin-saints turn and pray towards the *Maiestas Domini*. On the right two "VIRGINAS" of Gaceo kneel and pray towards the image of God. Photos: author.

The next three scenes are again identical: four female figures in each scene are kneeling and praying to the image of God in the apse (**Figs. 21; 7.2, I.1, I.2 I.3; 7.1, I.4**). These figures are very close to the better-preserved figures of the "VIRGINAS" in St. Martin de Gaceo. It is likely that these are generic Christian Virgins without any specific identification as to the Gaceo depiction, and should therefore not be connected to the legend of Saint Ursula and the eleven thousand martyrs, which had at that time not yet been represented in Navarrese iconography.⁸⁸ These virgins appear to represent a clear contrast

⁸⁷ In Eristain, three midwives give the newborn Mary to Joachim, while on the other side of the scene, Saint Anne is represented as resting after the birth, together making up a female version of the nativity of Christ. Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien 3. Tome II***, 3:158.

⁸⁸ There are no iconographic elements related to Ursula, because both the arrows and (according to Réau) the earliest cycles in Spain date from the late 15th century. See Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien 6. Tome III****, 6:1301, 1497.

with the allegory of lust on the south wall, showing Christian virtues such as chastity and faith, even if are not represented as personifications or allegories of these virtues.



Figure 22 (Left) Funerary procession for a knight in a Pamplona convent, *c.* 1339. (Right) One of the figures carrying crosses in Eristain (**Fig. 6.2. G**) Photos: author.

On the intrados of the largest arch on the south and north walls there are several identical figures of angels carrying crosses (**Figs. 7.2; 7.3, G**). These figures may be related to the medieval funerary procession in which the clergymen opening the parade carried silver or metallic crosses.⁸⁹ Indeed, another Navarrese 14th-century mural displays this very scene (**Fig. 22**).⁹⁰ This iconography is a further indication of the funerary function of the church, as

⁸⁹ Pavón Benito and García de Paredes, *Morir en la Edad Media*, 107. On funerary services in medieval Navarre, see Baldó Alcoz, “Segunt a Mi Estado Fazer Pertenesce.”

⁹⁰ This is the painting of San Pedro de Ribas. Martínez Álava, “El gótico radiante,” 378, 385–386.

shown in a visual procession of angels to guide the souls of the buried to God the Father and his court on the day of Final Judgement.



Figure 23 Saint Catherine with her wheel and Saint Mary Magdalene in the desert. Photos: author.

Below these angels, there are two figures that have remained unidentified until now (**Fig. 23**). These are the figures of two martyrs, St. Katherine of Alexandria, with a wheel (**Fig. 7.3, G.1**), and Magdalene (**Fig. 7.3, G.2**), with long hair and a palm leaf. These figures were two popular saints in the Late Middle Ages and should be included with the rest of the virgins in the murals.⁹¹

⁹¹ Voragine, *The Golden Legend*. Saint Katherine, chap. CLXXII and Saint Magdalene, chap. XCVI.

The Bearded Face of the Triumphal Arch

The last figure in the set of paintings is a mysterious face with huge garlands on the tympanum of the triumphal arch (**Figs. 6; 7.1, M**). Even if it is tentative way to try to decipher its meaning, I will frame my analysis within the objectives of this article.⁹² Just as has already been discussed are the similarities to the designs of the paintings in Eristain and Gaceo, so too do we find very similar painted faces with garlands adorning the intrados of the pillars in the Gaceo chevet, in a comparable position to that occupied in Eristain (**Fig. 24**).

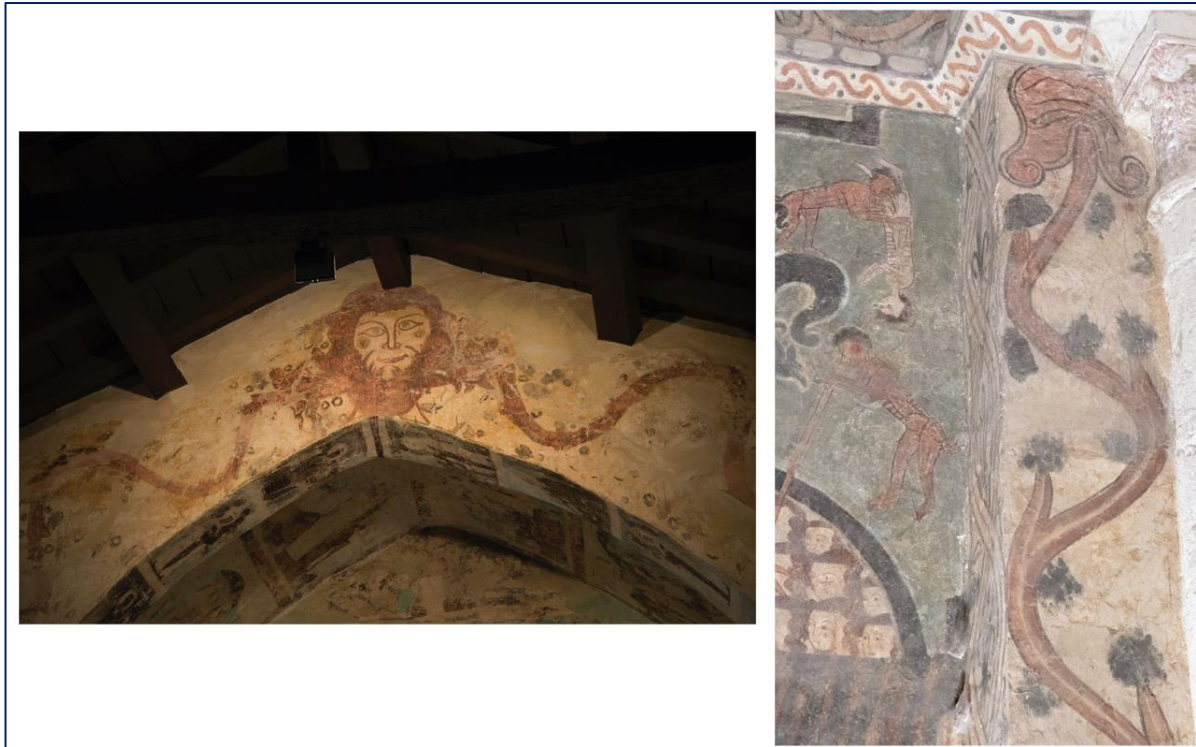


Figure 24 Bearded face with garlands in the Eristain's main arch and a similar figure in Gaceo's church. Photos: author.

⁹² The University of Barcelona group dubbed the face *Basajaun*, or "Lord of the forest" in Basque, while the local expert on the church, Javier Intxusta, argued that this figure is a local representation of St. John the Baptist. See Intxusta, "Iglesia de Santa Maria de Eristain." More recently, it has been identified just as "a smiling Green Man" by Martínez Álava, *El gótico radiante*, 396.

The similarities can also be found in the black circles and dots that sprout around the garlands. As in Gaceo, these seem to be fruits that are growing from the roots that these garlands represent. The significance of these fruits may, once again, be apparent in the immediate medieval context of Eristain.

The area around Eristain was until the 1940s rich in olive groves. Indeed, an ancient olive press was discovered as close as 600 meters from the church. By the late 16th century, the nearby Palace of Solchaga had “three thousand feet of olives in several villages in the valley . . . whose perimeters were planted with olive trees, and inside this perimeter vines.”⁹³ This description coincides with the Little Ice Age in Europe (a time of regional cooling) and, according to Cazorla, there is archeological evidence of olive groves in Navarre from the Roman period onward.⁹⁴ Therefore, during the High Middle Ages, and taking into consideration the Medieval Warm Period (c. 950–1200) predating the aforementioned Little Ice Age, these olive groves and vineyards could have been more extensive and may have been central in the economy and life of Eristain at that time.

At the entrance to the church of Santa Maria de Olite, some 9 miles away from Eristain, there is a mask of a green man on the central key stone of an archivolt. The surrounding archivolts of this façade are, moreover, decorated

⁹³ Cazorla “Aproximación al trujal rupestre de Solchaga (Navarra),” 172, quoting AGN, box 10109, October 1587.

⁹⁴ Cazorla “Aproximación al trujal rupestre de Solchaga (Navarra),” 169.

with an incredibly rich representation of a medieval vineyard.⁹⁵ Dated to 1330 and probably commissioned by the city council of Olite,⁹⁶ this façade depicts the central economic resource of the town: the vineyards and the wine they produced.

Consequently, and following nearby example of Olite, I suggest that this particular Green Man in Eristain is linked to the importance of the local harvest of the Solchaga estate's riches, namely its vineyards and olives groves. At this point, we may speculate that in order to occupy such a predominant space in the church, the face must have represented a sense of renewal associated with the annual harvest, and in turn related to concept of the Resurrection in the Christian sense.⁹⁷

Conclusion: Transforming a Romanesque parish church into a noble funerary pantheon

The archeological remains that have been examined reveal that the Eristain church was used during the Late Middle Ages as a funerary chapel by the owners of the *Palacio*, the Solchaga family. We can also deduce that the painter or workshop responsible for the Olleta church decoration also painted Eristain's church at some point in the last quarter of the 14th century, following some scenes of the Gaceo church as well as certain iconographic innovations in Pamplona Cathedral. From the remaining documental evidence, the patrons of

⁹⁵ Corcín Ortigosa, "Las Arquivoltas, una viña medieval."

⁹⁶ Martínez Álava, "Una fachada Pintada," 91.

⁹⁷ Anderson, *Green Man*.

churches murals in Eristain and Olleta were probably the Solchaga family, who possessed financial resources because several family members occupied important administrative and military positions inside the kingdom of Navarre. Moreover, there is documented evidence that, in 1368, Pedro Gil de Solchaga was in Vitoria-Gasteiz, near Gaceo. It is likely that he may have seen the recently-finished murals in Gaceo and arranged to have copied the referred scenes, where they were adapted to decorate Eristain's apse and chancel architecture.

A close iconographic reading of the Eristain murals highlights new unidentified scenes: an orans virgin with seraphs and cherubs, a complete cycle of Joachim and Saint Anne, numerous praying Virgins, a retinue of angels with crosses, two female martyrs, and, finally, the narrative of a rich cycle of Hell, with three main scenes and up to six major demons.

The scenes, some common, some not, are related to their funerary and social context. An iconographical analysis of the scenes shows three patterns: first, there is an adoration of the image of the *Maiestas Domini* in the apse vault and most probably a veneration of the local *Sede Sapientae*. Second, there is a vivid contrast between the scenes of hagiographies, angels, and Virgins, all symbolizing Christian virtues, and the scenes of Hell as a vivid representation of the sinful ways of the Late Middle Ages. Third, there are no typical visual elements related directly to the nobility, like a coat of arms or donors praying on the sides of the Crucified.

The adoration of the image of the *Maiestas* includes a common message based on the Resurrection of the Dead through the redemption of Christ in the Crucifixion. This is an eschatological message that originates in Revelations 11–15 and is central to Christian dogma, namely, the belief in the Resurrection, the Final Judgment, and redemption through the sacrifice on the cross.⁹⁸

If we bear in mind the use of the church as a funerary space, this message makes more sense: namely, by means of the murals on the north side, the path to salvation through Christian virtues; and, in direct opposition on the south wall (the left side of the *Maiestas*), eternal punishment in Hell. The tombs were located precisely, before the chancel, under the triumphal arch between a painted Heaven and Hell, waiting for the Last Judgment. This same message was present in the testaments of Navarrese Christians; "we and our two Christians [bodies] are in this holy place designated for us, as we might be led toward the joy of the celestial kingdom to escape from the power of hell."⁹⁹

In the context of the medieval mentality and Christian dogma, the central figure for the salvation of the souls was the Virgin Mary. Images of the Virgin as an intercessor for souls during the Last Judgment are very common in medieval art. Indeed, within the tradition of Navarrese mural painting, there is

⁹⁸ Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, part III, question 56, art. 1.

⁹⁹ "Pro anima mea et senioris mei Iohannis Lopiz, et pro animabus filiorum meorum tam vivorum quam mortuorum, ut habeamus partem in omnibus binis que fiunt in prenominate loco sancto a binis christianis, et erepi de potestate inferni perducamur ad gaudia celestis regni." Medieval documentation in the monastery of Leire (dating from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries). In Pavón Benito and García de Paredes, *Morir en la Edad Media*, 248.

an exceptional example of the Virgin's dual intercession on the tomb of Bishop Sanchez de Asiain, a depiction that was a contemporary of the Eristain murals.¹⁰⁰ In Eristain, the iconography of the intercessor, although not so innovative, is redundant: first of all, the cycle of Joachim ends up with the scene of the nativity of Mary, and there are moreover 16 figures of female Virgins praying. Then in the apse, by the *Maiestas*, the Virgin is depicted as an orans, and most probably the Romanesque image of Our Lady of Eristain was venerated in the church, as an intercessor before the God Judge.

The 15th-century poem *Ballade pour prier Notre-Dame* (Ballad to pray to Our Lady), by François Villon refers to a very similar painted program to that in Eristain, from a popular perspective:

I am a pitiful poor old woman,
illiterate and uneducated;
In the monastery of which I am a parishioner I see,
A painted paradise with harps and lutes:
And a hell where the damned are boiling:
One brings me fear, the other joy;
Great Goddess, you bring me that joy,
You who all the sinners have to appeal,
Full of faith, without feign or laziness:
For in this faith I choose to live and die.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Fernández Ladreda, "Dos conjuntos funerarios episcopales de la catedral de Pamplona en el siglo XIV," 209–240.

¹⁰¹ Femme je suis pauvrete et ancienne
Qui rien ne sais, onques lettre ne lus;
Au mortier vois, dont suis paroissienne,
Paradis peint, où sont harpes et luths:
Et un enfer où damnés sont boullus:
L'un me fait peur, l'autre joie et liesse;
La joie avoir me fais, haute Déesse,
A qui pécheurs doivant tous recourir,
Comblés de foi, sans sans feinte ni paresse:
En cette foi je veux vivre et mourir.

As in Eristain, the painted program in this ballad includes a paradise that is contrasted with a hell. The former creates joy among the faithful, while the latter raises fear. The clear reference to the Virgin, and in the form of an intercessor, reveals her importance as the main and only way to achieve salvation for the souls of the faithful, that is, salvation from, literally "*un enfer où damnés sont boullus*," a hell where the damned are boiling. This maybe a direct reference to a scene that depicts the cauldron in Hell as represented in our paintings.

The Eristain church is known by locals as that of "San Juan Bautista," St. John the Baptist, but in some sources it is dubbed "Santa Maria" or Saint Mary.¹⁰² Even if in the historical documentation there is no clarification of the advocation, the redundant Marian iconography and the existence of the Romanesque image, plus the lack of any medieval tradition in Navarre to advocate churches dedicated to the Baptist in comparison to the many churches dedicated to the Virgin in the Navarrese Middle Ages,¹⁰³ convince me that the second advocation would have been a more logical choice for the Eristain church. The advocation to the Baptist is more likely a later addition and linked to the 18th-century altar, which incorporates a central image of the cousin of

Lagarde and Michard Moyen Age. *Les Grands Auteurs Francais, Anthologie et histoire littéraire*, 219. Translation by Elisabete Zubillaga, Professor of Medieval French and Literature.

¹⁰² García-Gainza et al., *Catalogó monumental de Navarra III*, 368.

¹⁰³ In 11th-century Navarre, out of 18 known churches, 10 were named after the Virgin. Fernández Ladreda, *Imagineria Medieval Mariana en Navarra*, 26.

Jesus. As such, the Solchagas would not only have chosen a church close to the *Palacio*, but they would have also selected a Marian shrine with an emphasis on her intercession of souls.

Then, why is there an absence of donors and heraldic emblems in the paintings? It is important to understand that the surviving paintings are just a fragment covering the most important and sacred space, that is, the chancel and the apse. From the fragments on the north wall of the nave, we know that the lateral walls were also painted until the 1980s. Originally, these side walls may have included a representation of donors praying toward the apse, or a heraldic emblem of the family, as in the paintings of Bishop Sanchez de Asiáin in Pamplona or a mural in Santa María de Ujué.¹⁰⁴ The chancel and the altar space would have been reserved for the most sacred figures and important narratives, as in Gaceo. Therefore, we could speculate that, in consonance with the Christian virtue of humility, the patrons would not have considered themselves worthy of being represented visually in such a sacred space.

The numerous links to the Gaceo church, establishes a strong connection with Eristain, particularly as a source of inspiration and as a model of some depicted scenes. If compared to the decoration of other Navarrese mural paintings in funerary spaces, like that of Bishop Sanchez de Asiáin's monumental sepulcher in Pamplona, or the mural in Santa María de Ujué, the

¹⁰⁴ Fernández Ladreda, "Artes figurativas medievales," 156-164.

Eristain paintings share an emphasis on the figure of the Virgin and the topic of the intercession. However, the rural church lacks the unique iconography represented in the cathedral. The paintings in the niche of the San Pedro *extramuros* convent, attributed to the tomb of a local knight, share some similarities with those of Eristain with regard to the presence of funerary crosses, but in this case, the Pamplona convent mural does not show any emphasis on the intercession of the Virgin. Yet this convent's painting displays a rich funeral scene (**Fig. 13**) that includes the soul of the knight being carried by angels to God. Thus, through iconographic comparison, the Eristain paintings do not appear to be dedicated to any individual in particular, but rather to the Christians buried there, revealed as the owners of the nearby *Palacio* by the archeology report in the 1990s and in the 1366 referred census.

My interrelated arguments lead me to contend that to decorate their funerary chapel, the Solchagas chose an iconographic program¹⁰⁵ (**Fig. 25**) with an emphasis on the veneration and intercession of the Virgin. This, if not exceptional or unique in the artistic context of the period, reflects the fervor of devotion to the Virgin common after the High Middle Ages as well as her importance as an intercessor before salvation or damnation of Christian souls. Still, because the Solchagas introduced innovative scenes, as a complete

¹⁰⁵ For **Figure 25**, inspired by **Fig. 22** which displays the burial of a knight c. 1340 in Pamplona. The side walls of the nave of Eristain may have been decorated with wall paintings from the nearby Ecay and Ardanaz churches. The moment imagined represents the burial of Pedro, attended by two priests, Martin Periz de Solchaga, Pedro Gil, Pedro Xemeniz, Sancho, Martin, and Gracia and Theresa, mentioned in the 1366 and 1368 census.

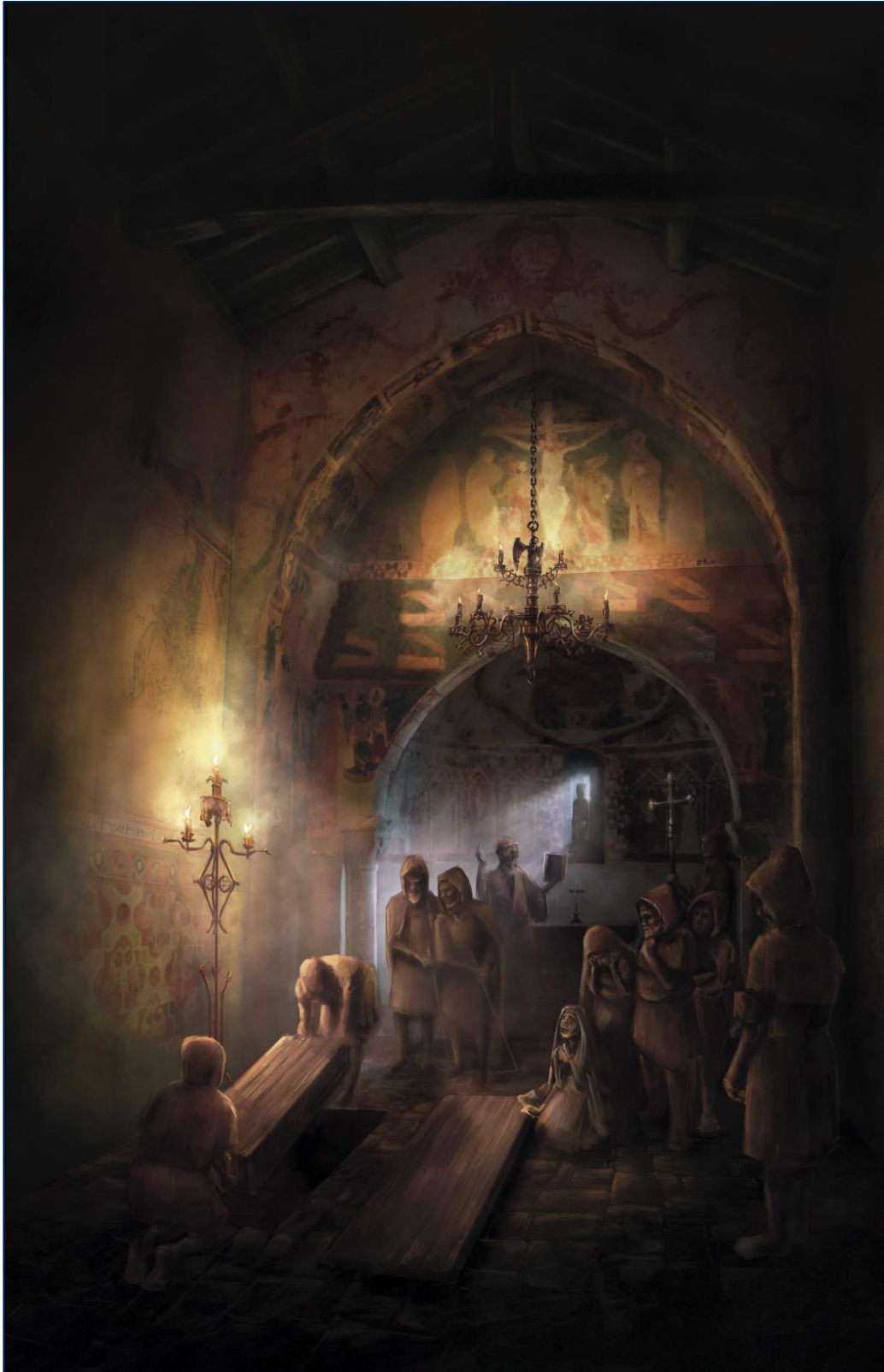


Figure 25 Sketch of a hypothetical reconstruction of the church of Eristain with the paintings just finished for the hypothetical funeral of Pedro Aibar Periz de Solchaga, dead by 1375. The moment imagined represents the burial of Pedro. Image: created by Amaia Torres and funded by the Medieval Academy of America via a 2022 dissertation grants.

cycle of Saint Joachim, unique in the region, it proves that they were aware of iconographic innovations from the Cathedral of Pamplona and beyond, while still being able to deviate from it in the form of the strange bearded face in the main arch, a Hell without a purgatory, and a Tetramorphous instead of a more modern theophany, common in Navarre.

Thus, the Solchagas chose a painted gallery that reflected an aesthetic meeting point between the innovative iconographic sources of the period and its most popular motifs. This may reflect their standing as that of the rural nobility, situated socially between the royal court in Pamplona and their estate in Eristain. As such, the murals in Eristain mirror the artistic taste and beliefs of a rural elite in search of upward social mobility during the last decades of the 14th century. While adorning Eristain's church in this manner, the Solchagas transformed the interior of the old Pre-Romanesque parish church into a mausoleum for their family with hopes of a certain resurrection. 🐼

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