A Different Song: Schneider’s ‘Singede Steine’ as evidence of work practices in the late 12th century

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Abstract

In the mid 1940's, while walking in the cloister of the monastery at Ripoll in Catalonia, ethnomusicologist Marius Schneider noted that the carvings of the column capitals seemed familiar. On inspection of these and the ones at Sant Cugat del Valles he realized that they were the creatures comprising an Indian musical notation. On further study he realized that they "sang" the hymn of the patron saint of the region, St. Cucufate. He further extended his findings to include the Cathedral at Girona as well as the monasteries at Ripoll and Sant Cugat del Valles. While this is a fascinating notion, that a 12th century carver was "writing" music in the stones of cloisters in the region, it has a practical implication for economic history as well. Given that carvers must be familiar with the stone of a region, and that their skills were generally more locally than widely known, it is unlikely that more than one workshop was undertaking this particular style. By this signature skill, carving Indian musical notation, it is possible to trace the path of the work of this particular workshop, and its master carver.

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1 Introduction

Villard de Honnecourt; master of Kosice; Bleuet of Reims; Anthoine Colas of Troyes; Robert de Luzarches; Thomas and Renaud de Cormont of Amiens; Mathieu d’Arras of Laon; Arnolfo di Cambio and Filipo Brunelleschi of Florence; Heinrich Parler the younger of Ulm and Milan; Ulrich von Ensingen. The names ring down through history as a veritable who’s who of medieval master masons. These are the men responsible for the great cathedrals and monasteries of Europe. Tracing one, Villard de Honnecourt through his famous sketchbook, indicates that he traveled widely and was involved in many different projects. He likely began his apprenticeship when the Columban abbey at Honnecourt-sur-Escaut, razed by Hungarian in the tenth century, was rebuilt in the eleventh. In his sketchbook Villard indicates that he worked on, or at least visited Reims, Chartres, Meaux, Laon, Laussane and Kosice, where he was asked to build the cathedral. (Gimpel 1992) We have similar records for many (though nothing like all) the master masons of the eleventh through fourteenth centuries, the time of the cathedral crusade. For many we know of their education, their accomplishments and, for a few, of their home and personal lives.

But what of the sculptors, stonecutters, plasterers, mortar mixers, tilers, scaffolders, smiths, lead workers, glass cutters, carpenters, common laborers, and hundreds of others who toiled at the sites? We have virtually no record of them as individuals. How did they move about? Were they simply local farmers and tradesmen or were they traveling specialists who moved from job to job plying their speciality? The evidence seems to indicate that they were the latter in most part. While the common laborers were likely local peasants and farmers augmenting their income with a job at the local work site, working during the warmer building season and returning to their farms for planting, harvest, and the winter, the highly skilled craftsmen who apparently worked at a site until it was either completed or the money ran out and it was put on hold for an indefinite period. When faced with the completion of a work, or an extended work stoppage, these craftsmen resumed their traveling until finding a new work site. For example, according to Robert Scott, "at Vale Royal, only 5-10 percent of the masons were locals, whereas half the carpenters and smiths and 85-90 percent of the common laborers lived nearby." (Scott 2003)

The masons to whom Scott refers include many among the trades listed above; in particular the stone cutters and sculptors are included in this description. Can we find the path followed by a skilled craftsman of some ten centuries past? I believe it can be done, at least with respect to the case of one individual stone carver and his workshop.

What sort of range might we expect a carver to cover – how far is it reasonable to expect a carver to travel? Given that a carver must be familiar with the stone of a region, and that their skills were generally more locally than widely known, it is unlikely that the carvers ventured as far and wide as the master masons who were responsible for the great buildings of Medieval Christendom. as an example, for a carver from Catalonia, familiar with the Girona marble, to move to Northern England and work with
the native stone is unlikely. However, Girona marble, particularly the exquisite Rossa Girona, has been transported all over the world beginning in antiquity when the Roman mines were providing both granite and marble to the empire, so such movement in the 12th century is certainly not impossible. (Morbidelli, Tucci, Imperatori, Polvorinos, Martinez, Azzaro, and Hernandez 2007) (Williams-Thorpe 2008) It is, though, unlikely due to the regional nature of most carvers’ reputations and the local nature of the pre-14th century guild system. Additionally, the skill set of an individual stone carver is more easily replaced by another carver in another location than the skill set of a Master Mason (with the obvious exceptions of the truly great carvers in the class of (later) Michelangelo, Donatello, etc.). Thus the search for the path of a particular carver may not need to be so very far-ranging as it might have to be if we were trying to follow a master mason; likely only a few hundred miles at most.

What we need in order to track a particular carver and his workshop is a figurative fingerprint, a signal skill or style. The genesis of how we might find such a fingerprint comes from an odd source for an economist, Ethnomusicology.

2 Motivation

In the mid 1940’s the eminent ethnomusicologist, Marius Schneider, while walking in the cloister of the monastery at Ripoll in Catalonia, noticed that the carvings at the tops of the column capitals seemed familiar. On inspection he realized that they were the creatures comprising an Indian musical notation. On further study of similar carvings in the cloister at the Benedictine Abbey at Sant Cugat del Valles, he realized that they "sang" the hymn of the patron saint of the region, St. Cucufate. (Schneider 1975) (Bussagli 2004) He further extended his findings to include the Cathedral at Girona and interpreted the carvings at the monastery at Ripoll.

Schneider’s work has been the subject of controversy in the ethnomusicology community. The negative response has been of the sort put forth by Curt Sachs in his review of Singede Steine. After citing a list of specific points used by Schneider to make his case, Sachs goes on to say "These are a few details. They would not count but for the fact that they show how Schneiders’brand of mysticistic interpretation picks its evidences from here and there as they best fit the author’s needs. This time, I am very much afraid, the meritorious scholar has lost his way." (Sachs 1955) The favorable argument takes advantage of the fact that Spanish traders, both native and Muslim, have been traveling to India since well before the 11th century, (see, for example, (Goitein 1954) (Goitein 1987) (Labib 1969), and (Constable 1994)) so it is not too surprising that an early Indian musical notation might have made it to Spain before these capitals were carved. It is also the case that similar carvings occur in India, so there is no compelling reason why such work did not transfer to Spain.

However, for our purposes, the merits of Schneider’s proposition, that the carver was notating music, are not at question. While this is a fascinating
notion, that an 11th century carver was "writing" music in the stones of cloisters in the region, it has a practical implication for economic history whether or not that was actually the intention of the carver. By this signature skill, carving specific images indicating musical notation, it is possible to trace the work of this particular workshop, and its master carver. It is the intention of this paper to do exactly that; to find another place where this carver worked in similar fashion; thereby marking at least one of his movements through the Spanish region of Catalonia.

3 Methodology

The approach to finding this carver’s path is quite straight-forward. Since, as established above, he (or his workshop) are carving a unique set of capitals, detailed visual inspection of the capitals, combined with careful dating of the cloisters in question, should provide a clear (and hopefully unique) path of this work. The task unfolds in three steps. First, it must be established that the work of this workshop is truly unique. Second, we must find indicator marks, stylistic or otherwise, that capture the unique nature of the work, and third, search out other incidences of this style in cloisters constructed within the probable lifetime of a carver or workshop.

3.0.1 The nature of capitals in general

Most cloister capitals carved in the twelfth century were of four types. First there are the commonly occurring capitals that tell Biblical stories, or emphasize Biblical themes. These capitals tended to be carved in series and tell entire sections of the Bible. They might begin with the creation story and continue on through the fall, the expulsion, and end with Cain and Able. Or they might concentrate on particular themes. Kings, the Prophets, the Nativity, or the Passion seem to be particularly popular, for fairly obvious reasons. They are readily identifiable through the subject matter of the capital and the use of persons to tell the stories. The two capitals below, from the Benedictine Monastery at Sant Cugat del Valles are typical of this type.

It is likely that this skill was passed from one master carver to another as a workshop changed hands. Thus it is not essential that the construction dates be within the lifetime of an individual master. It is, however, unlikely that any particular workshop would remain vested in a particular style for more than two or three generations. Thus a maximum time-span of roughly 120-150 years seems appropriate.

The photographs included in the text are low resolution. To view the figures as higher resolution images point your browser to http://tinyurl.com/2t22az.
The second common type of capital is simply one adorned in the classical style with either one of the three classical capital types (Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian) or with a vegetative or graphical decoration. These serve no purpose other than to merely be decorative. The three below, from The Girona Cathedral and The Monastery of Sant Cugat del Valles, are typical of this type of capital.
The third common type of capital is one that tells a story of everyday life at the time it was created. These snapshots may be from the lives of the members of the order which oversaw the space in question, they might be simple activities of the common people of the day, or they might tell the story of some notable figure, either political or religious (for example, Kings and Saints). The two capitals below from Girona Cathedral and Sant Cugat del Valles are of this type.

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Figure 5. Both vegetative and graphical ornamentation combined (from Sant Cugat del Valles)

Figure 6. A Knight with a bow hunting a lion (the lion is on the right face of the capital) (from Girona Cathedral)

Figure 7. A carver working on a column capital, with a monk bringing him water. (from Sant Cugat del Valles cloister)
A fourth type of capital, less commonly encountered, but not particularly rare, is the depiction of various sorts of animals or nature scenes. The animals range from the most common to the most fanciful or the creatures of the Medieval bestiaries. The two capitals below, from the Girona Cathedral and Sant Cugat del Valles cloisters, are typical of this style.

![Figure 8. A rabbit and vegetation (from the Girona Cathedral cloister)](image)

![Figure 9. Griffins from the bestiary (Sant Cugat del Valle)](image)

Thus we can see that there are several styles of common cloister column capitals. It remains to be shown that the capitals carved by our carver are unique; different from these, and similar to one another across sites.

### 3.1 The uniqueness of the capitals in question

Upon entering the cloister at Girona Cathedral one is struck, on examination, by the nature of the capitals. The ones that tell the Biblical stories seem to be out of story order, with Genesis followed by Nativity followed by the Prophets. The order is puzzling. While you are attempting to figure out why the capitals are out of order, you are then struck by several which do not seem to belong at all. These are not Biblical stories, they do not show stories of everyday life, nor are they simply decorative. They involve men in knife-fights, strange birds with monkey-like faces from some source other than the Medieval bestiary, other birds devouring one another, and men holding gigantic creatures that resemble a cross between a snake and a bird, which is, in some cases, devouring either the man holding them or someone else. These creatures are the ones Schneider assigned notes and rests and asserted that he could "hear" the music as he walked through the cloister; the "Singede Steine" or Singing Stones of his title. It is these animals and odd scenes that are the basis of our signature capitals. The ones below are examples.
These capitals do not fit into any of the normal classifications of capital styles. Further, they are unique in their carving style, as well as the subject matter. They were quite likely carved by the same hand. However, we get ahead of ourselves. First we must see if there are similar subjects at Girona and Sant Cugat before we can rush headlong in to stipulating that these were the work of the same person. We do not want to end up with a review like the one Sachs gave Schneider!

4 Findings

In this paper it is merely my intention to show that the same carver who created the cloister capitals at the Monastery of Sant Cugat del Valles also created the cloister capitals at the Cathedral of Girona. The search for where else this particular carver might have worked will have to be held for another day.

4.1 Cadell’s work at Sant Cugat del Valles

Beginning our interpretation, as Schneider, with Sant Cugat del Valles, we can readily identify the Master Carver who was responsible for the cloister. He left his portrait and his name carved in a pier and the adjacent engaged column capital. This is the person in the image (Figure 7) above, Arnau Cadell. His inscription says that this is a portrait of the sculptor, Arnau Cadell, and that he built the cloister for posterity. Referring to Rafael Bofill i Fransi, "The artist must have been a layman, or at least he was not a monk when he did the work, for two reasons: when a monk signed his name he also placed his condition next
to it; moreover, in this inscription there is a certain pride which the Benedictine rule prohibited." (Bofill 1994) Art historians have determined that the work of Arnau is principally on the east side of the cloister, with additional work done on the north and west wings. (Bofill 1994) Examples of what is believed to be his work (other than the self-portrait above in Figure 7) are below.

Figure 12. Young eagles.  
Figure 13. Stylized peacocks.  
Figure 14. Eagle with a rabbit.  
Figure 15. Pheasant or other ground bird.
Notice the similarity of style; all (with exception of the eagle with the rabbit (Figure 14)) incorporate similar roping and similar vegetation in the background. The birds are quite similar (again with exception of Figure 14), and the base ring and top styling of the capital are identical in all six examples (contrast with the top treatment of the capitals in Figures 3-5). It is clear that these works were done by the same hand (again with the possible exception of Figure 14).

We know that this is the work of Arnau Cadell and his workshop; he signed the work. The cloisters were built beginning in the late 12th century but were not completely finished until the beginning of the 14th century. Arnau Cadell worked at the beginning of this time, starting, as usual for this type of construction, on the east side. Having established that this is emblematic of what Arnau’s work looks like, and the time period in which he worked on it, it is time to turn our attention to the Cathedral at Girona, some 100km to the north-northeast of Sant Cugat del Valles.

4.2 Candidates for Cadell’s work at Girona Cathedral

On entering the cloister at Girona you are immediately struck by the similarity with the cloister at Sant Cugat del Valles. This is not unexpected, as the cloisters built at this same time all over the Catalonia region have a similar feel. However, this is more powerful than the mere structural and spiritual similarities felt in all cloisters. When you begin to inspect the capitals of the columns you can see why the sense of the familiar runs so deep. In many cases they are nearly identical to those at Sant Cugat del Valles. The style of the carving is identical, and the subject matter is, in several cases, also identical. Many of these capitals could be exchanged with ones at Sant Cugat Gel Valles and no one would be the wiser (save the astute art historian). Below are several examples of capitals from the cloister at Girona.
Figure 18. Pheasant or other ground bird.

Figure 19. Long-beaked birds

Figure 20. Birds feeding on fruit

Figure 21. Eagles on the nest.
4.3 Bringing together Girona and Sant Cugat del Valles

Initial comparison of the birds from both sites leads to a working hypothesis that these may be carved by the same hand. The overall structure of the birds is quite similar, particularly the beak and feather shapes in Figures 13 and 19. There is also similarity in the body shapes of the birds in Figures 12 and 15 from Sant Cugat del Valles with the shape in Figures 18 and 20 from Girona. In particular, close examination of the Pheasant or other ground birds (Figures 15 and 18) reveals that the neck feathers are identical and the wings are nearly so. The leading edge of the wings follow exactly the same path (which is not a path followed by the wing of any living bird) and the placement and style of the wing’s flight feathers is nearly identical. The feet, though placed differently, are identical, with bulbous toes and simple conical claws, again unlike any living bird. The only significant difference is that the bird from Girona lacks the decorative feather embellishments of the bird from Sant Cugat del Valles. It is also the case that the bird from Girona is placed so that it is much more susceptible to weather damage than the bird from Sant Cugat del Valles, thus a smoother appearance is due to both a likely difference in carving and greater weathering (I have yet to examine the sculpture closely with this aspect in mind). Comparing the eagles yields a similar, though not a pronounced, conclusion. I am not certain that these were carved by Arnau, but I believe that they are similar enough to indicate that they were either carved by the same hand or one was carved as a copy of the other. This is a likely outcome, since the workshop would have had several journeymen and senior apprentices working with the master, any of whom might have been skilled enough to undertake carving these fairily simple capitals. The eagles from Sant Cugat del Valles are superior in the quality of craftsmanship to the ones from Girona, indicating that, if done by the same carver, the ones at Girona were done first, or, if done as an exercise in copying, the ones at Sant Cugat del Valles were done first by
the master, and the copy used at Girona was done by the apprentice. More on this below.

It is, however, in closely inspecting the fighters and comparing them to the self portrait that I am convinced these were done by the same person, and that the person was Arnau Cadell. The intertwining of the arms and the alto-relievo\(^3\) style indicate that this is a highly skilled carver, most likely the master of the workshop. When these two capitals are compared closely (Figures 16 and 17 with Figures 22 and 23) you find in Figures 16 and 22 that the faces are identical, even to the expressions, the positioning of the arms is very nearly identical\(^4\), the rings on the arms are very similar (differing in number only) and the grasping of the hair is identical. The only significant difference is that the individuals' heads at Sant Cugat del Valles are a bit further apart than the heads in Girona, which leads to the different stabbing positions. Again, the Girona capital is more weathered due to placement. When the sides of the capitals are compared it becomes even more obvious that these were done by the same person, or at least by the same workshop. The robes and the positions are identical, with the exception of the belt and additional tucking below the waist in Sant Cugat del Valles. Going further, the similarity between the robes, the body expression, and the general alto-relievo style between these fighters and Arnau's self portrait lead to one conclusion – Arnau Cadell worked in both places. This evidence has been more deeply explored by Immaculata Lorés in her Ph.D. Dissertation, arriving at the same conclusion – Arnau Cadell worked in both places. (Lorés 1990)

The timing of the completion of the cloister at Girona (1190) and the start of the cloister at Sant Cugat del Valles (c.1191) indicate that he moved from Girona to Sant Cugat del Valles. This is in keeping with the findings above; the work at Sant Cugat del Valles is a bit more refined and a bit more polished (the feathers of the ground bird are more heavily ornamented, the tucking in the cloak of the fighter is added, and the eagle is more sophisticated. The second was done by a more practiced carver, whether it was the same person gaining experience or another person in the same workshop cannot be told, but the evidence that this was done by members of the same workshop is solid - we know at least this portion of the path they followed.

5 Conclusions and further questions

The timing is right, the work matches beyond mere coincidence; Arnau Cadell worked at Girona before he moved in 1190/91 to Sant Cugat del Valles and won

\(^3\) Alto-relievo is when the object is cut nearly away from the face on which it is being carved. This continuing the sculpture beyond parallel with the background creates an illusion that the subject is not connected to the background; that the carving is actually three-dimensional. The difficulty is that the carving must be done in an extremely tight space and with very little ability to actually see what is being carved. This is work for a master carver.

\(^4\) The right hand of the fighter on the right on the capital from San Cugat (Figure 16) is held further back that the corresponding hand in Figure 22, giving the knife a slight vertical entry.
the contract to carve there. However, this does not leave us very satisfied; we know that Arnau moved roughly 100km. Was this his first move? Where did he work before coming to Girona to carve? Where did he go after completing Sant Cugat del Valles?

Using the fact that he carved a different subject matter (whether or not the birds represent the note "b") and that he carved in a unique style should allow his path to be determined. In the Catalonia/Languedoc region of Spain and France, within a 200km circle around Girona, there were perhaps 90 to 100 cloisters constructed in the 200 or so years from the roughly end of the tenth to near the beginning of the thirteenth centuries. Arnau Cadell was working in the middle of this time, in c.1180-1190 in Girona and c.1191-1210 in Sant Cugat del Valles, was he at the beginning of his career as a master, or was this the end of his career? Who was his master, and did he learn this style from him? Did he establish his workshop, or did he inherit it from his master? Was he succeeded in his workshop or did it end with his retirement and death? If his workshop outlived him, did the style in which he worked continue?

A thorough visual search of the cloisters in this area should provide us with a continuing path he followed as a master carver, and may provide us indications of his origins. Much remains to be done.

References


