

Builders Marks (or Tacherons) on Romanesque Churches

In these notes the French word 'tacheron' is being used, rather than the English term 'builder's mark'. Most visitors looking at Romanesque churches very properly marvel at the solidity and grace of the architecture or the skills of the sculptors who have decorated so many of the doors, windows, modillions and capitals. Probably few spare a thought for the nameless individuals who quarried the stone and prepared (or dressed) them ready to be incorporated into the structure. But many of these anonymous people have left, not their names (except in a few rare occasions), but a distinctive mark that they could claim as 'their mark' These are tacherons. These tacherons provide today's visitors with a small visual and personal link to the men who toiled nearly a thousand years ago to help create the gems that are the Romanesque churches. Though this article discusses the marks only in the context of Romanesque churches, the use of tacherons pre-dates the Romanesque period. For example, many marks have been found on St Sophia, Istanbul.

Not every Romanesque church has tacherons; indeed most do not. Of the many thousands of Romanesque churches only a few hundred have tacherons.

The form of tacherons is very varied: most are letters of our alphabet; some are letters from the Greek alphabet; there are swirls, triangles, bows, spears, keys, crucifixes and many others.



Biron (17)



Sepulveda (Castille)



Mouchan (32)

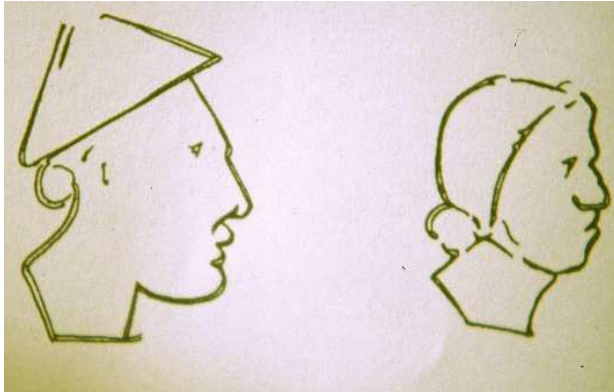


Villefranche de Queyran (47)



Montmajour (crypt) (13)

At Reims cathedral there are three small heads; these are thought to represent the profiles of stone masons.



Reims Cathedral (51)

Picture of heads

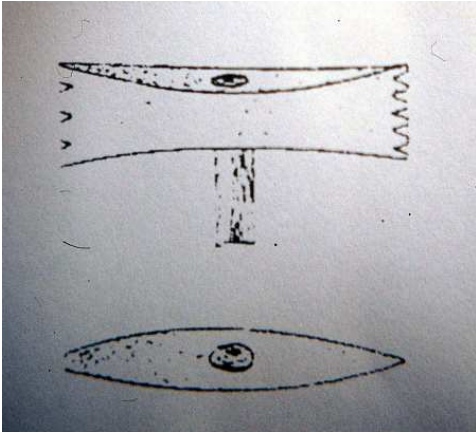
The symbol of the crucifix depicting Christ on the cross is an unlikely tacheron for a mason, but the signification is unclear today.



Ligneyrac (19)

The reasons for the use of tacherons are largely a matter of speculation. No record from that period has come down to explain their presence. It is thought that, at some quarries, the quarryman added his tacheron to the stone as it left the quarry. In this way he was able to seek payment for the work done; in those days payment was based on results; not on time spent at work. Some quarries had their own marks rather than each employee at the quarry having a mark. Before the stone was put onto the structure for which it was intended it was given a prepared surface, a process known as dressing. This was done using special stone axes.





Dressed stones at Portels-des-Corbieres (11) and stone axe.

The workman who dressed the stone would probably have removed the quarryman's mark and replaced it with his own tacheron, thus ensuring that he would be paid for his work. Some masons used a triangle as their mark. It has been suggested that the symbol represented the Trinity in this case; by using it the masons hoped that they would obtain greater protection.



Montblanc (34)

In the same way, a 'T' representing a T square, a common builder's tool then as today, also represented St Thomas. Surprisingly, it would appear that none of the symbols or emblems of the saints, that are considered as patrons of masons and builders, has been used – Saints Stephen, Blaise, Ambroise and Silvester – has been used as a tacheron. It is quite possible that a team rather than just one individual might use the same tacheron.

Some stones would have required shaping to fit window and door arches or to create pillars and columns. Stones for such locations would usually have been prepared and then laid out on the ground in the correct sequence. They might then have been marked to help

the team positioning them not only to get them in the correct order but also facing the correct direction. For windows and doors letters were the usual marks. For pillars Roman numerals I, II, III and IV were used. The art authorities in France tend to distinguish these marks from the more personal 'marque tacheron' by calling them 'marque lapidaire'.



Maurens (33)



Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne (19)



La Vallee (17) pillar

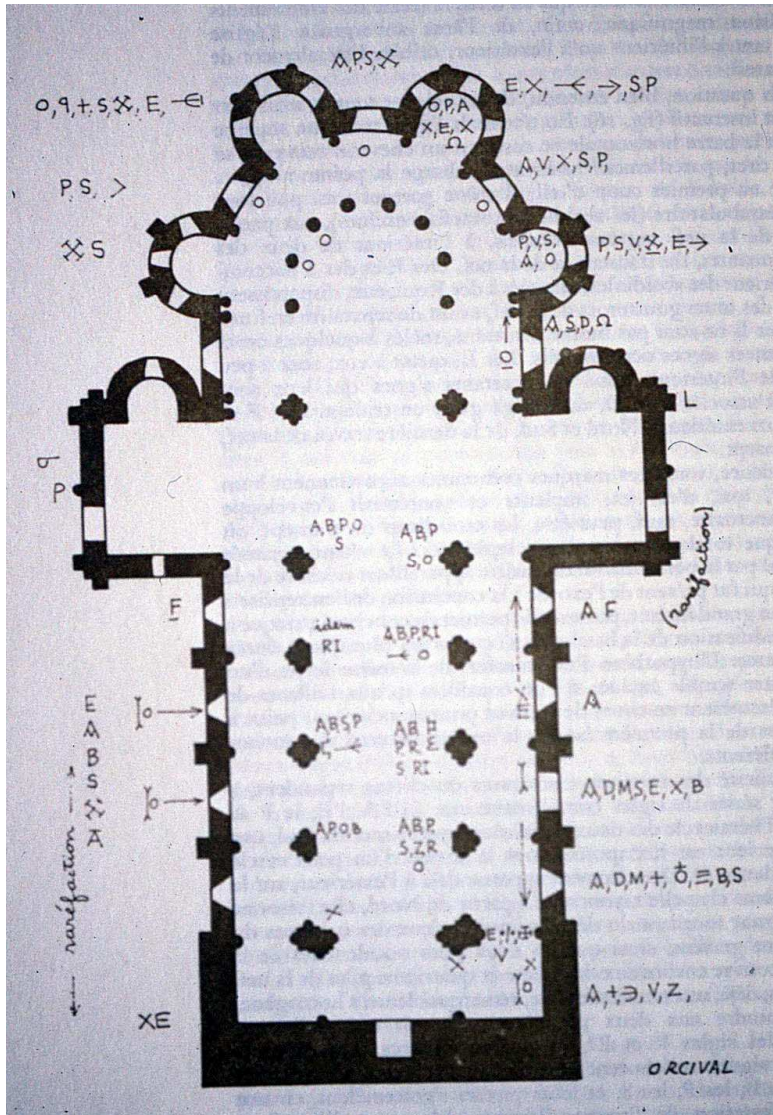
In those churches where there are many tacherons, they provide the researcher with a lot of information. It is possible to determine the sequence of construction of the church. The use of the 'A' was generally reserved for the master builder or foreman. At Orcival (63) this mark is to be seen throughout the interior of the church except in the two side chapels. It is almost as if the owner of that tacheron were saying: 'Look at this magnificent building and see my mark at every key point; it shows you that I, the master builder, supervised it all over and was responsible for the high standards that you see'.



Le Thor
(84) (left)



St Paul les
Trois
Chateaux
(26) (right)



Orcival (63) (from Zodiaque)

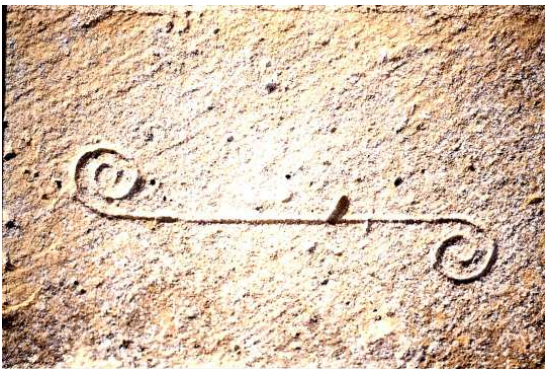
However, the presence of a particular mark in several places in the same building is not always a guarantee that that mark belonged to the same individual. Research at Le Puy en Velay cathedral (43), where there are a great many marks, has revealed that some marks reappear in locations where the date of construction for the various elements of the building is not compatible with the marking being used by only one individual or even by macons of the same generation. (1)

The XII century was a period of significant population movement across France from the north east towards the south west. Much of this movement was associated with the mediaeval pilgrimage to Santiago. As part of this general movement masons and sculptors were also 'on the road' following in the footsteps of the pilgrims, working as they moved from place to place. An example of tacherons providing a record of such movement may be seen at the abbey church of Sorde (40) and just short of the main crossing point of the western Pyrenees for pilgrims, St Jean le Vieux (64). At both churches the same tacheron, an unusual sign of a key, may be found.



Sorde (40)

Tacherons help towards identifying the workload of a 'school' or 'workshops' of craftsmen. For example, the appearance of the same group of tacherons at a group of churches in the Guyenne confirms the presence of a workshop. The churches concerned are those at Maurens, Le Puch, Abris and Castelvieil (all 33).



Castelvieil (33)

Similarly, the churches of Biron and Marignac along with the Pilgrim Hospice at Pons (all 17) have tacherons of common design.

The point has already been made in these notes that in only a small percentage of the surviving Romanesque churches are tacherons visible. This raises a number of questions: why are they visible in only some churches and why not in more? They are widely distributed across France and northern Spain. They appear to be more common in the Poitou-Charente, Aquitaine, the Auvergne and parts of Provence. They are largely absent from areas where granite is the main building stone: Brittany and most of the Limousin. This is because of the difficulty in incising a tacheron on granite. Destructive wars will have taken their toll; rebuilding will also have had an impact. No doubt many tacherons are on faces of stone that are hidden within the structure. But none of these causes provides a satisfactory explanation as to why more churches do not have them. Why were so many marks left visible especially in places where it could be said that they might detract from the general aesthetic effect of the main decoration? Whilst providing a puzzle, such questions cannot be answered.

The identification of individual craftsmen who were involved in the building and decoration of Romanesque structures is rare. There are some 50 sculptures from the period for which we know the sculptor because at least one of their works has a signature. But the names of the masons are far less common. The apse of the church at St Paul les Trois Chateaux (26) has, on one stone, STEFA, (for Stefanus). Similarly, the apse of the church of Paray le Monial (71) has a stone inscribed with: 'PHYLHRUS'; but whether he was a builder or what we do not know.



St Paul les Trois Chateaux (26)



Paray-le-Monial (71)

High in the tower of the church of St Vivien at Chevres de Cognac (16) is the following inscription alongside an incised fish-bone:

'IAQVE MARTNEAU
IEHN AVGIER
FABRIQVERS'

Whether he built the church or was responsible for its construction (as patron) is unclear.

The marks may not be a major feature of the churches, but they do provide a human dimension that can link today's viewer with the worker of so long ago.

Note 1. See 'Artistes, artisans et production artistique au Moyen Age' Ed X. Barrel i Altet. Picard 1987; pages 519 et sequ.