

Cabinet

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STYLE-EATING GRANITE

Alexander Nagel



One day around the year 1200, a carver in the busy workshop of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela halted work halfway through carving a frieze. The granite on the right side is still intact but for some shallow incisions, guidelines that would have been chipped away if the carver had followed their invitation to excavate the motif three more times. But he didn't. Why? Around 1200, the cathedral, flush with money, was undergoing major additions and renovations under the direction of the famed Maestro Mateo. It is not hard to imagine that at the hectic site plans were subject to sudden change. One can almost hear the tink-tink-tink of the chisel come to an abrupt stop at the moment the foreman said, "We're not going to have a lintel there anymore—stop carving." Or: "We're going to make the lintels bigger. Don't ask me why. Just stop." Or maybe: "Roundels are supposed to be round, not wobbly like pretzels! Just drop your tools. You're fired."

The greater mystery is why the half-finished block was kept at all. For eight hundred years it has remained on the cathedral site, even though it was never used in any construction and is hardly a distinguished piece of work. Now it is on display in the Cathedral Museum as a prize exhibit of Romanesque carving technique—a thoughtful gift from the past to art-history-loving moderns. Thoughtful, because past generations needed to have preserved it despite its uselessness for building purposes—they must have found other reasons to want to keep it. Perhaps

initially someone thought it could be put to use at some point, somehow. But before too long, other reasons had to be found to justify the trouble of preserving it. Perhaps it became valuable as a relic of the famous master's shop. Three centuries later, this piece would have stood as a reminder of a technique belonging to a time before paper was predominant, a time when any preliminary drawing would have been done directly on the block, followed by shallow incised lines that guided the work of carving.

The main reason it was preserved from then until now is that it became, fairly early on, an object of quiet, lasting fascination. It failed to fulfill its role in the construction project and decorative program, but it found another function, offering a visual statement of a more philosophical sort. Freed from function, the unfinished block became a demonstration of the artistic process itself, a subject with resonant implications. The block could then be read as follows: Here is a diagram of how a plan becomes reality. Or: Here is how it looks when reality falls short of a plan. Or: Here is a mute stone turning into significant form. Or rather: This shows you that those forms are there in the block, just waiting to be released. Or perhaps: A design was imposed on the stone but it didn't take, because it was inappropriate to this stone.

Above: Lintel, Santiago de Compostela Cathedral Museum, ca. 1200. Copyright Santiago de Compostela Cathedral Museum. Photo Ovidio Aldegunde.



Atlantic coast, near
La Coruña.

Of course, this lintel says no such thing, since no statement at this level was ever intended. Work had to be stopped, for whatever reason, and the result is this curious object, curious because it seems to offer a visually coherent statement, even a didactic one, despite its being motivated by no such purpose. The carving stops midway across the surface of the block, leaving it satisfyingly split between finished and unfinished—and reinforcing the conviction that the didactic statement “belongs” to the block. (Granite lintels are not made much longer than this, so it is unlikely that the block was only later cut down in order to position the divide right in the middle.) Right away and ever after, its unintended statement was taken as worthy of being read, as if it had such a message.

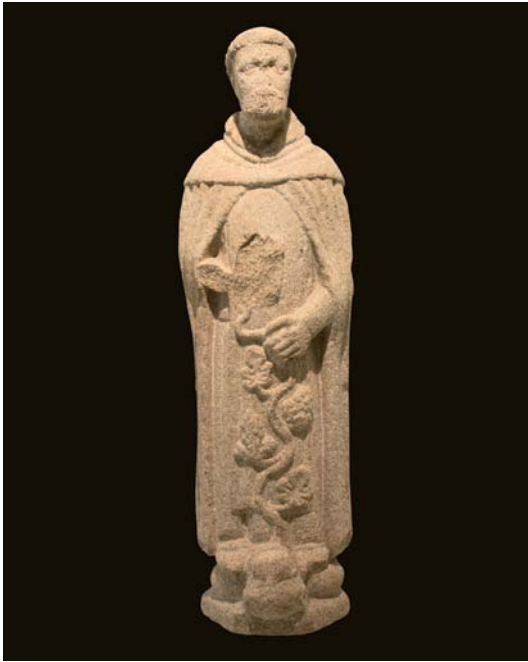
With no posited intention controlling them, the readings evoked by the block are unrestricted in logic and number. The focused chronological account—a working process has been interrupted, and we can see what was going to happen next—always lives in the company of other readings that work at a different scale and on a different logic. Carving work brought to a halt, that is the little drama, but a wider view sees a drama of art’s contention with the materials of the earth. The unfinished block reveals a past progression but

also a future regression, when the human markings will once again be erased from the stone. From left to right an incursion of human art attempts to introduce form into nature, suspending for a time the inexorable procession from right to left—nature consuming culture, form dissolving again into matter. Logic affirms that the worker left the central roundel in a semi-carved state, but to the eye it is indistinguishable from a weathered ruin. To lift the chisel just at this point is to offer an artful mimicry of the slower, smoothing chisel of nature.

This exhibit is a snapshot of a specific moment eight hundred years ago, but it also puts art face to face with geological time, and points to a future far beyond a lifetime. It was not far-fetched to think about beginnings and end-times at Santiago in 1200. The great portal of the cathedral, Maestro Mateo’s masterpiece, is a staging of the Apocalypse, a punctually observed visualization of the last moments of secular time, as the clock of the world runs out.

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Before it failed to become a lintel, this piece of granite had lived a long, dramatic life. Around two hundred million years ago, the rocky shelf of what is now northwestern Spain and northern Portugal separated itself from the only continent that existed



Unidentified Dominican saint with arms close to body, Pontevedra Museum, ca. 1350. Courtesy Pontevedra Museum. Photo Francisco Prado-Vilar.



Crucifix, broken at the main joins of the arms and elsewhere, then recomposed, Pontevedra Museum, ca. 1200. Courtesy Pontevedra Museum. Photo Francisco Prado-Vilar.

until then, so-called Pangaea. It remained an island for a very long time, 150 million years or so, until it collided with the Eurasian plate to the north and the African plate to the south. For that entire period, this small bit of land stood proud of the sea on all sides and so was especially exposed to the erosive forces of wind, water, and glacier. That is why the area remains today largely a shelf of exposed rock—mostly granites and slates—with almost no sediments covering it. Granites and slates contain a large quantity of silica, giving them their characteristic sparkle. The acid-releasing silica makes it hard for plants to grow and has also damaged the archaeological record irretrievably, because tools made of perishable materials decompose in such inhospitable land. Only tools made of stone remain, stone left on stone. This chip off the first, singular continent has always kept its Pangaeian granite and slate right up on its surface, allowing little else to remain.

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In the time they've been around, humans have made a few marks on these stone shields, and always it looks as if the carvers understood that their markings were an episode in the life of the stone. Carvers read the stone, following the prompts of its grain and glint.

The periods of art history, from Paleolithic to Renaissance, become indistinct on the face of the granite. The stone imposes stern rules that carvers have followed through the ages. Extremely hard, it is also brittle, impatient of any protuberant form, and so shoulders hunch and limbs hug bodies.

Style is the mark of the stylus, the scoring implement, in this case the chisel. It is punctual, leaving a trace that is specific, marked, unique. Style points back to a performance, an unrepeatable moment. It is the seismographic needle of history. But this granite eats style. The Neolithic carvers understood this, keeping their designs repetitive, both within each form and across a series of forms. Whenever later carvers tried to leave a stylistic mark in the stone, the granite corrected them, letting declamatory attributes fall away, renouncing overly subtle features, nudging once defined figures toward anonymity. The great workers of granite learned to make their statements using the large form and the repeated pattern.



Lid of a butcher's tomb, Pontevedra Museum, ca. 1500. Photo Alexander Nagel.

The extended limbs of the cross are pure heresy to the granite, and so the form must be reshaped. It is strutted with intersecting members, its arms flaring to reduce the span of the struts. It becomes a pattern of repeated curves and segments, an unconscious echo of the prehistoric petroglyphs. It concedes some of its religion. Even then the granite tolerates the form only for a century, or two or three, before it breaks down again into its native rectangles. The museum, an institution whose brief it is to focus attention on works of art as expressions of defined periods, has reversed the history of the granite's rejection, putting the pieces back into the form that the original maker tried to give the stone when it was still one piece. It is a touching gift from the present to the quixotic carver of ca. 1200, a gift that may last a century or two.

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In about 1500, a butcher had the lid of his tomb prepared. On it are incised three clearly delineated emblems—a cross, a cleaver, and a hatchet. The cross is treated no differently from the butcher's implements. Not only is it delineated in the same way, and at comparable scale, but it is emphatically shown

as an instrument, like the cutting tools. If the two blades are shown with their handles, meant to be grasped by the wielding hand, the cross, with four equal arms, is shown with its protruding tang, which was meant to fit into a stand or some other base so that the cross could be processed, offered to worshippers to kiss, or set up on an altar. (The monumental crucifix discussed above was not for processions, but it too is equipped with a tang protruding from the bottom vertical, which would have gone into a stable base.) The butcher lived by the knife, and he hoped to live beyond death by the cross, which was used ceremonially in the church where this tomb was meant to go. The cruciform liturgical implement remembers the cross on which Christ was crucified, an instrument of death, stained with blood, not so far from a cleaver after all.

The three instruments are not only shown together but are contiguous, stacked one on top of the other, forming one teetering composite emblem. The cross stands on a base of butcher's implements, one shown horizontal and one upright, as if they wanted to be arrayed in the shape of a cross. The shapes try to fit together in an effort to find lasting form, and they also know that they had better heed the graphic indications of the granite. The top edge of the cross aligns with a groove that begins at the corner of the block, and the cross's right edge also follows a seam, which continues as a light rivel passing through the cleaver blade until it is taken up again by the chisel, forming the incised edge of the hatchet's blade. A red vein begins at the block's left edge, reaching the butcher's implements at exactly the point where cleaver and hatchet meet. As soon as it makes contact with the hatchet blade the vein opens into a bloody stream, flowing out over the hatchet blade and across the block. The butcher saw his calling in the granite, and there he staked his hope to outlive the earth.