

On the Interpretation of the Crosses Carved on the External Walls of the Armenian Church in Famagusta

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The *Surb Astuacacin* (Holy Mother of God) Church of Famagusta, more commonly and simply known as the Armenian Church, represents an interesting example of medieval Armenian architecture outside the native Armenian lands. The frescoes inside the church, which in recent years have been at the center of scholarly attention, are, in turn, rightly considered to be one of the important manifestations of medieval Armenian mural paintings.¹

The exterior of the church is much less decorated than its interior, although slight traces of paint on the tympanum over the western entrance prove that it was once painted. It might be assumed that the tympana of the southern and northern (now closed from reconstruction) portals also had paintings at one time, but it is now no longer possible to say how they looked originally.

The modest exterior decorations contain the arched tympana, the hood molds over the windows, and the remains of a sundial on the southern

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Fig. 5.1 Sundial, Armenian Church, south wall, ©Photograph by Allan Langdale

facade, which is often encountered in Armenian architecture (Fig. 5.1). Beside these, on the church exterior walls, several carved crosses stand out, which have not yet been discussed, with the exception of a few concise observations.² The crosses, of different types, are carved on the southern and western facades of the church and sometimes are difficult to distinguish, as they blend with natural stone holes on the wall surfaces (Figs. 5.5 and 5.6). On the western facade, the following crosses are found (Fig. 5.2): to the left of the entrance, two crosses with equal-length arms within medallions, and two small, simple crosses without frames. To the right of the door, nine similar rounded crosses of different size are counted, and a cross within a rectangular frame. Among all the crosses carved on the Armenian Church, the latter is rather decorated: at each of the two tips of the flaring arms of the cross, a small bud is depicted resembling the shape of the so-called *budded cross*. On the southern facade, the following crosses are depicted (Fig. 5.3): to the left side of the entrance are three Latin crosses,³ carved on one stone, and obviously by one hand (Fig. 5.4). To the right of the southern portal, on the buttress, are four rounded crosses similar to those on the western wall, one simple Latin cross between two of the rounded crosses, two simple crosses without frames, depicted vertically

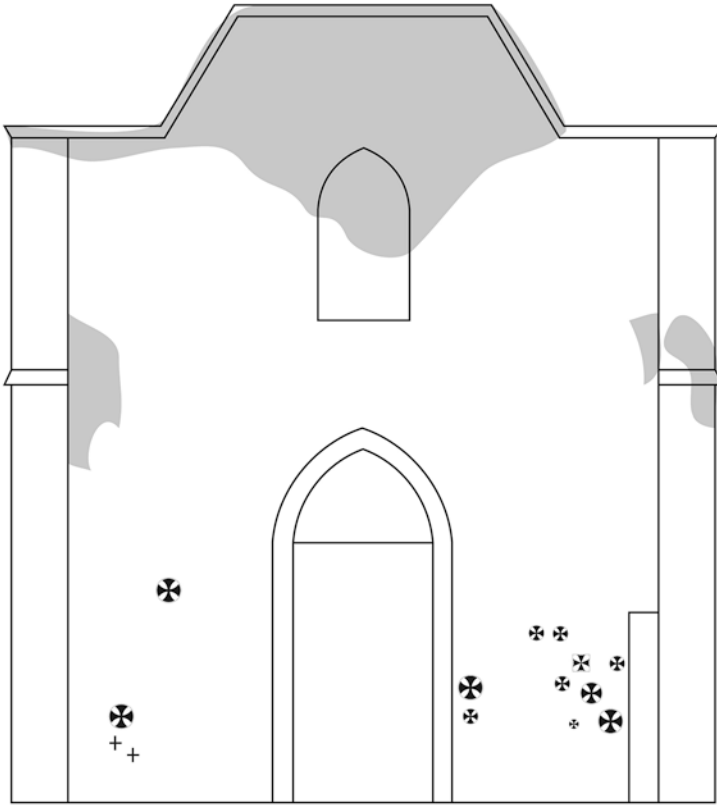


Fig. 5.2 Location of crosses, west wall, by Thomas Kaffenberger

one below the other, and a parted and fretted cross (or, probably two), whose form is difficult to fully discern. As can clearly be seen, the most common type of cross is the rounded cross with four equal arms (also called *consecration cross*),⁴ well known from the early Christian period and especially widespread during the High and Late Middle Ages as a heraldic symbol.

The simplicity of the crosses and the lack of compositional program do not allow us to consider them as *xač'k'ars* (cross-stones),⁵ but perhaps an imitation of *xač'k'ars* can be accepted. In medieval Armenian architecture, we find multiple examples where the internal and especially external surfaces

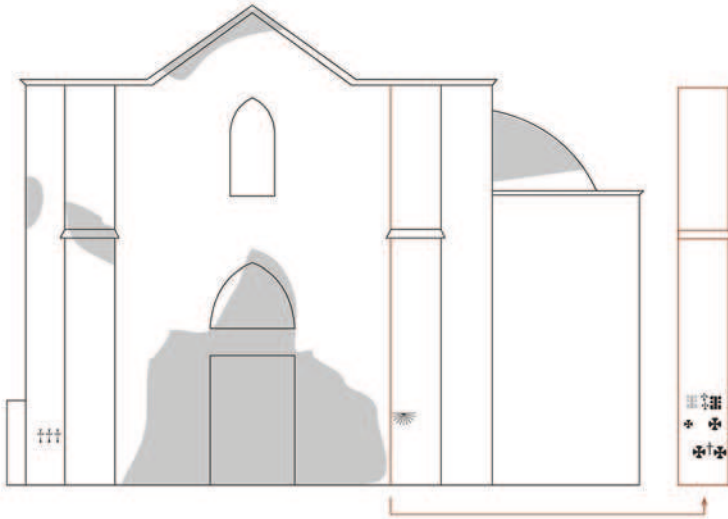


Fig. 5.3 Location of crosses, south wall, by Thomas Kaffenberger



Fig. 5.4 Latin crosses, south wall, ©Photograph by Allan Langdale

Fig. 5.5 Crosses carved on the eastern buttress, southern facade, ©Photograph by Michele Bacci



Fig. 5.6 Crosses carved on the western facade, ©Photograph by Michele Bacci

of buildings are decorated with cross-stones and engraved crosses. One of its best examples in Greater Armenian architecture is the western facade of the *matenadaran* (manuscript library) of the *Salmosavank'* monastery (thirteenth century).⁶ Some crosses can still be observed on the ruins of the neighboring Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, as, for example, the *xač'k'ar* set into the wall of Constable Smbat's Church in Paperon (now, Candır),⁷ the *xač'k'ar* of *Vasil of Kaṙkaṙ* from Hromkla (now, Runkale),⁸ two crosses (now scratched out) carved on the tower of Hromkla, a *xač'k'ar* and a decorated cross (Fig. 5.8), placed in the walls of the Koṙikos land castle (now, Kızkalesi), and so on. Two examples of crosses are also found in the ruins of the Church of Baron T'oros I in the fortress of Anavarza, one of which decorated a carved inscription, and the other a column capital.⁹

However, the crosses of the *Surb Astuacacin* Church in Famagusta are quite different from the abovementioned Cilician Armenian examples in their style and function. Being somewhat irregularly spread over the church facades, they seem to have been carved not by master artists but rather by ordinary believers who visited the church and were compelled to leave traces of their pilgrimage. Thus, these crosses do not belong to the initial decoration of the church exterior, though in the course of time they have become inseparable parts of it. With the existence of the splendid wall paintings inside, it seems less possible that the church, which apparently was commissioned by rich donors,¹⁰ would be decorated with simple irregular crosses and not with beautifully ornamented traditional *xač'k'ars*. The crosses might have appeared on the church shortly after its construction (or reconstruction), during the fourteenth century,¹¹ or perhaps in the course of the fifteenth century, when the number of Famagustan Armenians was still continuing to grow, as a result of the exodus of Armenians after the Mamluk invasion of the Armenian Kingdom in Cilicia in 1375 and the new immigration policy of the Genoese.¹²

The depiction of crosses and various cross compositions in Armenian arts is conditioned, first of all, by the special attitude toward the cross, formed in Armenian Church and culture in the early Christian period and developed during the following centuries. Against the background of the active iconoclastic movement in Byzantium, and perhaps even in response to it, in 726, Catholicos *Yovhannēs III Awjnec'i* established the *Canon of Blessing and Anointing of the Cross*,¹³ which by the end of the ninth century was included by Catholicos *Maštoc' I Elivardec'i* in

maštoc’, the book of the Armenian Church rituals.¹⁴ Notwithstanding that the use of religious images never gained great popularity in the Armenian Church, the latter, however, adopted a particular position on depictions of the cross, considering that one who “worships the cross of Christ and the image of it, also worships Christ” (Yovhannēs Awjnc’i, *Ynddēm Pawlikeanc’—Contra Paulicianos*).¹⁵ Moreover, among the Armenians, veneration of images was generally understood as veneration of the cross and its images,¹⁶ based on the foundation that, although images of saints are respected, one can only worship the image and the cross of Christ.¹⁷ As a generalization, for Armenian believers, a cross played the same role as an icon in Byzantine or other Orthodox churches.

The carved crosses of the *Surb Astuacacin* Church were once called “pilgrim’s crosses.”¹⁸ Although this designation was made without further discussion of the matter, it certainly makes sense to focus on it and to develop this concept, which fits well with the geographical, national, and social contexts of the church.¹⁹ The masters engaged in the construction of the church, who, according to Michele Bacci’s reasonable conjecture, likely were Palaiologan artists working in Famagusta for patrons of different nationalities,²⁰ could well have been unfamiliar with the Armenian tradition of decorating churches with carved crosses and cross-stones. If the crosses of the Armenian Church are in fact late medieval pilgrim graffiti, they seem to be represented as living signs of pilgrims, testifying their visitation and veneration of the church, and thereby also filling out the ornamental gap of the exterior walls of the church. Carving these crosses on the church, the pilgrims were consciously or unconsciously signaling to other “viewers that the place was an active and effective venue for Christian prayer.”²¹ That the Armenian Church was a pilgrimage site is manifested in Pope Clement V’s appeal from August 1311, by which he appeals to pilgrims to visit the Armenian Church of Famagusta, which, as a result, would reduce poverty of the local clergy.²² In order to incite pilgrims to visit the church, remission of penances was even promised them for one year and a hundred days.²³ The further circumstances show that the financial situation of the Armenian clergy did not improve much, but one thing is certain: if the (re)opening of the church increased pilgrim visitations, those could have resulted in the crosses observed on the outside walls. We must also pay attention to the locations of the crosses: they are engraved on the

western and southern walls of the church, where there are entrances. According to the Armenian ritual book *maštoc'*, during the anointment and consecration ceremony of a new church, the ritual of *Ďrnabac'ēk'* takes place, which, literally translated, means ritual of “opening of the doors.”²⁴ During this ceremony, which is manifested in the *Canon of Blessing and Anointing of a New Church*,²⁵ Psalm 118:19 is read: “Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.” The latter idea is in fact “realizable” only after the consecration of the church, since a church, which has not yet been anointed with the holy *miwron* (chrism), cannot have the same spiritual impact for prayers as an anointed and blessed church. It is, perhaps, not by accident that among the carved crosses of the Armenian Church, the *consecration cross* is the most widespread one. This type of cross is commonly used to consecrate a church: in particular, the anointing with chrism is carried out on these crosses of stone, from which, actually, the name “consecration cross” originates. Understandably, one cannot be sure whether the crosses of the Armenian Church, or some of them, were carved for the church’s consecration ceremony, but any crosses placed at that event could conceivably subsequently have inspired pilgrims to copy them in their proximity. Most probably, it was in the beginning of the fourteenth century that the church was (re)anointed and (re)vitalized by new Armenian visitors, who from the beginnings of the century had started to immigrate to Cyprus and especially to Famagusta as a consequence of Mamluk raids in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. Apparently, with the growth of the Armenian population in Famagusta, it became necessary to build, or more likely, to renovate the church, which in former times may have been part of a monastic complex.²⁶ One may suppose that the interior was decorated with mural paintings during the same period of the church’s revitalization.

The drawing or carving of different symbols on the walls of a holy place was, and still is, a typical custom and behavior of pilgrims. As the most important Christian symbol, the cross is very common among pilgrim graffiti, especially in an Armenian Church, where the depiction of crosses is first of all a significant ideological part of the church decoration. For the Armenians of Famagusta and its surroundings, as a national and religious minority, the *Surb Astuacacin* Church was indeed an important place in the multiethnic and multicultural town, where “each of the town’s ‘nations’ was accustomed to gather within its own

church and ... the latter functioned as symbol of interpersonal solidarity.”²⁷ The crosses in question may also have served as specific “identity” symbols, making the site recognizable for other Armenian believers.²⁸ However, the Armenian Church is not the only one in Famagusta on whose walls Armenian believers left traces of their presence. A carved cross, called “*une bizarre croix*” by Camille Enlart,²⁹ is found on the northern facade of the Church of St. Anne, also known as the Maronite Church, which is located together with the Armenian Church in the so-called Syrian quarter of the town (Fig. 5.7). Between the arms of the cross, there is an Armenian inscription which had been mistakenly read and transcribed as the Greek inscription—“Jesus Christ, Son of God.”³⁰



Fig. 5.7 Cross, St. Anne's Church, north wall, ©Photograph by Allan Langdale



Fig. 5.8 Cross, land castle of Kořikos (Kızkalesi), ©Photograph by Hrair Hawk Khatcherian

The correct transcription is: “Tēr Astuac, Yisus K’ristos,” or “Christ God, Jesus Christ.” The form of the cross resembles to some extent the aforementioned cross found in Kořikos, but the latter is simpler in its design (Fig. 5.8).

Finally, the crosses on the Church of the Holy Mother of God in Famagusta show an interesting parallel with the Armenian pilgrim graffiti carved on many walls and piers of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, especially on those of the Chapel of Saint Helena. These depict almost exclusively crosses, occasionally with accompanying inscriptions, sometimes covering entire wall surfaces (Fig. 5.9). As we can clearly see here, graffiti in sacred spaces can attract other graffiti, encouraging pilgrims to copy the gesture “of joining the ranks of those who had gone before in seeking divine assistance at that place.”³¹ If the Armenian Church in Famagusta had been active continuously, without the enforced pauses that frequently appeared in the course of its history, it might have attracted and gathered more pilgrims into its holy environs.



Fig. 5.9 Armenian graffiti carved on the stairway wall of the Chapel of St. Helena, Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, ©Photograph by Hrair Hawk Khatcherian

NOTES

1. On the frescoes of the church, see: Michele Bacci, “The Armenian Church in Famagusta and Its Mural Decoration: Some Iconographic Remarks,” in *Culture of Cilician Armenia*, proceedings of the international symposium (Antelias, Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, January 14–18, 2008); Antelias, Catholicosate of Cilicia, 2009 = *Hask hayagitakan taregirk’* 11 (2007–2008): 489–508, and in Chap. 4 in this volume; Dickran Kouymjian, “The Holy Mother of God Armenian Church in Famagusta,” in *Medieval and Renaissance Famagusta. Studies in Architecture, Art and History*, ed. Michael J. K. Walsh, Peter Edbury, and Nicholas Coureas (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 139–146, and in Chap. 3 in this volume.
2. Bacci, “Armenian Church,” 490; Idem., “La concepción del espacio sagrado en la Famagusta medieval,” *Studium Medievale. Revista de Cultura visual—Cultura escrita* 3 (2010): 92; Idem., “Patterns of Church Decoration in Famagusta (Fourteenth to Sixteenth Centuries),” in *Famagusta*, vol. 1, *Art and Architecture*, ed. Annemarie Weyl Carr (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 233, 246; and

- in Chap. 4 in this volume; Allan Langdale and Michael J.K. Walsh, “The Architecture, Conservation History, and Future of the Armenian Church of Famagusta, Cyprus,” *Chronos: Revue d’Histoire de l’Université de Balamand* 19 (2009): 20.
3. “Cross,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 1 (Michigan: Brill, 1999), 735–736 [734–738].
 4. Carl G. Liungman, *Symbols: Encyclopedia of Western Signs and Ideograms*, 3rd rev. and augmented English language edn. (Stockholm: HME Publishing, 2004), 238.
 5. On the origins, types, and functions of Armenian *xač’k’ars*, see: Levon Asarian, “Die Kunst der armenischen Kreuzsteine,” in *Armenien. Wiederentdeckung einer alten Kulturlandschaft*, Museum Bochum und das Institut für Armenische Studien, Bochum, January 14 – April 17, 1995 (Tübingen: Wasmuth Verlag, 1995), 109–113; Katharina van Loo, “Zur Ikonographie des armenischen Kreuzsteines,” in *Armenien*, 115–118; Hamlet Petrosyan, *Khachkar: The Origins, Functions, Iconography, Semantics* (Yerevan: Printinfo, 2007) [in Armenian with summaries in English and Russian]; Haroutioun Khatchadourian and Michel Basmadjian, *L’art des khachkars. Les pierres à croix arméniennes d’Ispahan et de Jérusalem* (Paris: Geuthner, 2014), 5–7, 41–45, etc.
 6. Hovhannes Xalp’axč’yan, “Dproc’nern u gratnerə mijnadaryan Hayastanum [Schools and Libraries in Medieval Armenia],” *Ĕjmiacin* 4 (1964): Fig. 11.
 7. Robert W. Edwards, “Ecclesiastical Architecture in the Fortifications of Armenian Cilicia,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 36 (1982): 161–164, esp. 162, Fig. 11.
 8. Claude Mutaftian, *L’Arménie du Levant (XI^e-XIV^e siècle)*, tome 2 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012), Fig. 131.
 9. See: Robert W. Edwards, *The Fortifications of Armenian Cilicia* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1987), 36, 67; Idem., “Ecclesiastical Architecture in the Fortifications of Armenian Cilicia: Second report,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 37 (1983): 129, Fig. 24.
 10. A kneeling female donor in a white dress is painted in the conch of the apse, very likely in front of the Theotokos (Fig. 4.1). About this image, see: Bacci, “Concepción del espacio sagrado,” 93; Idem., “Patterns of Church Decoration,” 233; Dickran Kouymjian,

- in Chap. 3 in this volume. It is also known that the church had been renovated with the financial support of the family of Gerard of Ayas, Armenian ambassador to Pope Clement V. See: Jean-Bernard de Vaivre and Philippe Plagnieux, eds., *L'art gothique en Chypre* (Paris: De Boccard, 2006), 258; Nicholas Coureas, *The Latin Church in Cyprus (1313–1378)*, Cyprus Research Centre (Nicosia: Theopress, 2010), 475; Dickran Kouymjian, in Chap. 3 in this volume.
11. The date of the church construction is given variously between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. See: Camille Enlart, *L'art gothique et la Renaissance en Chypre*, tome 1 (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1899), 365–366; George Jeffery, *A Description of the Historic Monuments of Cyprus. Studies in the Archaeology and Architecture of the Island* (Nicosia: Government Printing Office, 1918), 143; Robert B. Francis, *The Medieval Churches of Cyprus*, The Ecclesiological Society, Transactions, vol. 2 (New Series), Part 1 (London, 1948), 47; de Vaivre and Plagnieux, *L'art gothique*, 259; Bacci, “Armenian Church,” 491; Dickran Kouymjian, “The Holy Mother of God Armenian Church in Famagusta,” in *Medieval and Renaissance Famagusta. Studies in Architecture, Art and History*, ed. Michael J. K. Walsh, Peter Edbury, and Nicholas Coureas (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 138; and in Chap. 3 in this volume; Langdale and Walsh, “Architecture,” 15; Thomas Kaffenberger in Chap. 6 in this volume.
 12. David Jacoby, “Citoyens, sujets et protégés de Venise et de Gênes en Chypre du XIII^e au XV^e siècle,” *Byzantinische Forschungen* 5 (1977): 168, 172 (reprinted in D. Jacoby, *Recherches sur la Méditerranée orientale du XII^e au XV^e siècle: Peuples, sociétés, économies*, London: Variorum reprints, 1979, Study 6).
 13. *Tearn Yovhannu Imastasiri Awjnec’u Matenagrut’iwnk’* (Venice: Mekhitarist Publishing House, 1834), 72 (in Classical Armenian with Latin translation). See also: Hakob K’yoseyan, “Xorhrdanšanə Yovhan Ōjnec’u Matenagrut’ean mēĴ (Symbolism in the *Matenagrut’iwn* (bibliography) of Yovhan Ōjnec’i),” in *Drvagner hay miĴnadaryan arvesti astvacabanut’yan* (Issues in the Theology of Medieval Armenian Art) (ĔĴmiacin: Mother See of Holy ĔĴmiacin, 1995), 139; Hakob K’yoseyan and Artašes Łazaryan, “Xaç’ (Cross),” in *Christian Armenia. Encyclopedia* (Yerevan: Armenian Encyclopedia Publishing, 2002), 423.

14. For the Canon of Blessing and Anointing of the Cross, see: *Girk' Mec Maštoc' koč'ec'eal* (Constantinople: *i tparani Yōhannisean Pōlosi*, 1807), 204–213.
15. *Yovhannu Imastasiri Awjnec'u Matenagrut'iwnk'*, 102.
16. "...the Greeks and the Georgians mostly worship images, and the Armenians [worship] the cross" (Mxit'ar Goš, twelfth-thirteenth centuries). See: A. Sahakyan, "Miġnadaryan patkerapaštut'yan haykakan tarberakə (The Armenian Version of Image Veneration in the Middle Ages)," *Historical-Philological Journal* 2 (1987): 155; Hakob K'yoseyan, "Patkerapaštut'yun (Veneration of Images)," in *Christian Armenia. Encyclopedia* (Yerevan: Armenian Encyclopedia Publishing, 2002), 853–854.
17. Aršak Ter-Mikelyan, *Hayastanyayc' surb eketec'u k'ristoneakanə. Jėrnark davanabanut'yan* (S. ĔĴmiacin: Mother See of Holy ĔĴmiacin, 2007), 536, 540–542 (first published Tp'xis: *tparan M. Šarajėi*, 1900).
19. Langdale and Walsh, "Architecture," 20.
19. See also the contribution of Tomasz Borowski in this volume.
20. Bacci, "Armenian Church," 496–497; idem., "Patterns of Church Decoration," 249–250.
21. Ann Marie Yasin, "Prayers on Site: the Materiality of Devotional Graffiti and the Production of Early Christian Sacred Space," in *Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World*, ed. Antony Eastmond (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 41.
22. Nicholas Coureas, "Non-Chalcedonian Christians on Latin Cyprus," in *Dei gesta per Francos. Etudes sur les croisades dédiées à Jean Richard* (Crusade Studies in Honour of Jean Richard), ed. Michel Balard, Benjamin Z. Kedar, Jonathan Riley-Smith (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 353; idem., *The Latin Church*, 475.
23. Coureas, *The Latin Church*, 475.
24. The ritual of *Dřnabac'ėk'* also takes place during the celebration of Palm Sunday (Armenian *Caxkazard*).
25. For the canon, see: *Girk' Mec Maštoc'*, 166–189.
26. The existence of the monastic complex can be justified by an Armenian manuscript colophon dating from 1317 and with a nineteenth-century illustration of Camille Enlart, where one can still observe the remains of a building, continued from the north-eastern part of the main church. See: Kouymjian, "Armenian Church," 137–138, and in Chap. 3 in this volume; Enlart, *L'art*

- gothique*, 365, Fig. 237. See also: Langdale and Walsh, “Architecture,” 15–17; Thomas Kaffenberger, in Chap. 6 in this volume.
27. Bacci, “Patterns of Church Decoration,” 245.
 28. Ann Marie Yasin shows how the textual graffiti of Christian visitors “can render the site a recognizable space of prayer and communication,” which can be relevant for the crosses of the Armenian Church as well. See: Yasin, “Prayers on Site,” 51.
 29. Enlart, *L’art gothique*, 352. For the image, see: Enlart, *L’art gothique*, Fig. 231; de Vaivre and Plagnieux, *L’art gothique*, 263, Fig. 3.
 30. “Χρ. Ἰησοῦ (?) Θ. v. w.” See: Enlart, *L’art gothique*, 352; de Vaivre and Plagnieux, *L’art gothique*, 262.
 31. Yasin, “Prayers on Site,” 40, 45.

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