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. Many marks are within easy sight of the casual visitor. 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, Constantinople, other buildings and stones in that city and in Greece in buildings that date from the VI century (Note 1). Marble capitals produced in the IV to VI centuries in large numbers in the Eastern Mediterranean for export to Italy and Spain often had such marks. Examples may be seen in the Barcelona area; perhaps the most spectacular example is provided by the contents of a vessel that sank off the Sicilian coast at Marzamemi; here were found the contents for a pre-fabricated church with 24 columns, capitals and bases that had tacherons. Although not made of stone, a sculpture in the Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo of a boxer has a fine example of an early tacheron. The statue in bronze is Greek and it dates from the IIInd to ISt century BC. There is a mark on each foot; that on the right foot is an ‘A’ that was added later, perhaps as a control of some sort; on the left foot there is a faint ‘α’ on the middle toe; this mark is thought to identify the workshop that made the statue.

Museo Nazionale Romano – The Boxer

It was for a time suggested that the Comacini Masters, who were first recorded in 643 AD in connection with building in Lombardy and, particularly in the Como area, were to be identified by their Masons’ marks. The marks were to be found in many corners of Europe from Northern Spain, across France as far East as Hungary and North to England.
However more recent research confirms that the term Comacini refers simply to masons. (Note 2).

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) 
Vaison-la-Romaine (84)

Sepulveda (Castille) 
Vaison-la-Romaine (84)
At Reims cathedral, Lyon Cathedral of St Jean and St Etienne at Nevers there are small heads; these are thought to represent the profiles of stone masons. At Reims and Lyon there are several heads each with distinct and different features, suggesting that they were intended to represent specific individuals. (Note 3).
Reims Cathedral (51) (left) and St Etienne, Nevers (58) (right)

St Jean Cathedral, Lyon (69)

In the south of Catalonia there are a bewildering number and variety of tacherons; most use symbols that are widely used elsewhere – letters from both the Latin and Greek alphabets, letters used in reverse, triangles many of which have extended lines or are used in pairs, arrows and stars. But there are others: at Poblet a sickle, a mason’s hammer and a hand are on nave pillars along with more complicated groups of lines.
Four tacherons on pillars in the nave at Poblet, Catalonia

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

The use of the cross as part of a tacheron was common in the southern part of Catalonia; several variations on the basic theme are to be found: a small symbol is added to the base of the cross; these may be a loop or a star or some similar distinctive variation.
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.

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 who are considered 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. Furthermore, the same tacheron might be used (or ‘inherited’) by second mason or group of masons. (Note 4).

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’. By way of a small digression, it should be noted that marks have been found on timbers used for the roofing of mediaeval buildings. In this case the marks are to indicate the planned position of the timber(s). From early on in the Middle Ages there seems to have been a fairly uniform system of marks when used by roofers. It was possible to indicate numbers up to about 25 using multiples and also left or right and east or west (using a rising sun). (Note 5). Such marks are invisible to the casual observer below.
Maurens (33) - Door

Beaulieu sur Dordogne (19) - Door
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 Vallée (17) – Detail of a column
At Vézelay, recent research has identified a variety of builders’ marks that were used by masons in various parts of the structure. In particular, a plan of those used on the West façade showed that there was a remarkable density of such marks. It was hoped that a study of these would provide a useful tool in the interpretation of the construction process for the façade.
Vézelay – Selection of symbols used in the church (left) & plan of their distribution on the facade

However, the presence of a particular mark in several places in the same building is not always a guarantee that a particular 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 mark being used by only one individual or even by masons of the same generation. (Note 2).

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. At the foot of the main pass over the Pyrenees used by pilgrims to Santiago is the hospice of Roncesvalles and its church on which is the clear outline of a foot incised into a stone; perhaps this was the mark of a pilgrim mason.
There are capitals from antiquity, especially from marble quarries in the eastern Mediterranean, that had tacherons inscribed on them (Note 1). Such marks on Romanesque sculptures are rarer. By the doorway of the church at Gandesa, in Catalonia, there is one; two capitals in the XIII century the cloisters of St Génis des Fontaines (66) have a small tacheron mark.

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).

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? In the United Kingdom tacherons are less commonly seen than on the Continent, largely because there are fewer churches from the Romanesque period. Examples are to be seen at Selby and Fountains Abbey, in Yorkshire, at Blythburgh, in Suffolk and Peterborough Cathedral. 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. Two churches in France stand out for the number and the variety of tacherons to be found. Notre-Dame-du-Port, at Clermont Ferrand in the Auvergne, is one where the marks are almost all in the form of letters from the alphabet. This church, along with Orcival, which is mentioned earlier in this article, is one of a number in the Auvergne where tacherons are numerous; is another. At Sainte Foy de Conques, in the Aveyron, where more than 2,280 marks have been recorded, they are a mixture of letters, symbols and geometric forms; of these nearly 1,500 are letters, of which around 370 are of the letter ‘A’. The marks are to be found both on the exterior and the interior and on all parts of the building. (Note 6).

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.
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.

In Vienne there is a group of five churches, Bonnes, Saint Maurice la Cluère, Château Larcher, Marigny-Brizay and Usson du Poitou, at which some of the capitals have a small device sculptured on a boss at top of the face and in the centre. At Saint Léger de Montbrillais, also in Vienne, two capitals have blank bosses. The style of the capitals which mostly depict beasts is similar, suggesting that they are the products of the same workshop. It has been proposed that these bosses might be ‘sculptured tacherons’. (Note 7). However it is considered more likely that they are a decorative device used by members of the workshop. Marie-Thérèse Camus proposed that some of the capitals with animal motifs were output of a centralised workshop that used as models capitals set in the transepts of the church of St Jean de Montierneuf at Poitiers; however none of the capitals there show that boss. (Note 8).

Usson du Poitou (86) – Capital left of door (left), Bonnes (86) – Capital in nave (centre), St Maurice la Clouère (86) – Capital in nave (right)
Marignay-Brizay (86) – Capital in nave (left), St Léger de Montbrillais (86) – Capital by doorway (left)

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’ vol 2. Ed X. Barrel I Altet. Picard 1987; pages 503 to 511


Note 4. See ‘Artistes, artisans et production artistique au Moyen Age’ vol 2; pages 519 et sequ.

Note 5. See ‘Artistes, artisans et production artistique au Moyen Age’ vol 2; page 373.


Note 7. Correspondence from Chris Haslam, Australia.


NOTE. For a selection of builders marks see http://www.flickriver.com/groups/1119865@N24/pool/random/

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