

# ICMA Master Carvers Series

These are drafts for vols. 6 and 7 of *The Ark of God*.

*A resource for discussion and information.*

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## **27 Strapper the Intricate (1135-1182)**

**John James**

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The capitals discussed here may be examined in larger format in vols. 3-5 of *The Ark of God*, and when completed and professionally edited these studies will be published in volumes 6 and 7.

*This is number 27 of an on-going series describing Early Gothic carving masters for discussion and comment*

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Laon cathedral gallery Es10(g) by Strapper

### *Strapper the Intricate (1135-1182)*

The earliest work I can find by Strapper in the Paris Basin is a small capital in the entry to the north tower at Chartres, from 1135/36 [r1]. The two layers of straps are arranged to create levels of movement that enliven the form through the tension of opposing directions. Weaving two layers of straps was a difficult arrangement as one pair had to hold the corner terminal, while the other had to sit immediately underneath that terminal to support a smaller bud. These then had to be arranged so that they passed over and under each other in a tight manner. On a three-dimensional conoid this was a fairly complicated assignment.



Diagram of the weave in Strapper's template

On the straps of this capital he repeated the zig-zag motif the master mason had chosen for the imposts, and which was continued throughout much of the later imposts in the narthex. However, from here on he eschewed the use of additional decoration, and allowed the pure form of the straps to speak for themselves.

In the next year he carved a charming capital under the rib vaults of the WN room, which is nowadays the cathedral shop [b2]. The straps join along the bottom and, in a noticeable personal detail, those from the centre separate closer to the astragal than those continuing to the crockets. It is a mature and sophisticated design, and would have been evolved by a mature sculptor. I have not found him in any earlier work in the Paris Basin, and

1135

IRAFIT

1136



Chartres north tower entry WN(a-)



Chartres north tower room WNese(a)

so presume he would have travelled to Chartres from elsewhere. I have looked for him in the south, even as far as the Saintogne, and Burgundy without success.

In that room there are four other capitals with straps, by two carvers, maybe more. There are connections to a couple of capitals at the top of the south tower from over twenty years later, but that is all. With so few items in an *œuvre* I cannot ascribe them to any recognisable master.

The presence of other designs, all unique, poses a similar problem to that of the two major Cog Masters in the Laon gallery where I suggested the ‘copying’ was by associates working in the style of another.<sup>ICMA#21</sup> But, considering the pervasive individuality of the times, one asks “why would they?” Does my earlier argument on the Recognition Process provide an understanding of this situation?

As only the design of one of these five capitals can be found in other buildings in the Paris Basin, it looks like his coming out as in a Recognition, in this case for the man I have called Strapper who, almost thirty years later, worked on the Laon gallery.

Considering that the fire had been in 1134 and that work on the reconstruction commenced straight away, these capitals could be dated to shortly afterwards, say 1136.

1136



Chartres north tower room WNnen(a)



Chartres north tower room WNnw(a)



Chartres north tower room WNse(a)



Chartres north tower room WNsee(a)

When we look for antecedents they are extremely difficult to find. The most obvious are somewhat similar capitals in the crypt of Saint-Etienne in Caen [b]. They are not as intricate as Strapper’s, and present a frieze along the bottom instead of being joined to a common base. There are considerable similarities between the two, being plain straps in two intersecting layers simple terminals. From the style of the capitals Maylis Baylé placed the

DRAFT



Caen, La Trinité choir crypt



Caen, La Trinité choir crypt



Chartres north tower room WNsee(a)

crypt “antérieure à 1080 et même plutôt à 1090”. Baylé 1992, 125. This would be forty or more years before Strapper’s first at Chartres.

1137

I suggest that the similar arrangement in the replaced stones at Cauffry reflects a slightly later attempt to enrich that design [r1], though there is nothing to indicate how this might fit into his chronology. The connections between the other replaced capitals and identified carvers suggests that this date would be a not unreasonable time slot.

Similarly with one capital in the apse of Bèthisy-Saint-Pierre where the details are simple yet the arrangement is as complex as Chartres [b2].

1139



Cauffry crossing, replaced



Bèthisy-Saint-Pierre apse

Strapper returned for the second level of the north tower at Chartres. This was five years later, around 1140 [r,b]. Though the western portal sculpture was being carved at the same time, I have found no evidence of his presence there. This suggests, in a logical way, that the teams worked out of different sheds, or under different direction. This means that the men who carved the figurative work on the Royal Portal were formed into separate teams from those who were erecting the walls and vaults over and around it.



Chartres north tower WN(2)

1140



Chartres north tower WN(2)



Chartres north tower WN(2)



Chartres north tower WN(2)

The abbey church of Saint-André in the lower town at Chartres was badly burnt in 1861 and again when the Germans fired it in 1944. The two Strapper capitals were damaged [b]. Close attention is needed to confirm we are dealing with the one master, and that the straps are joined along the bottom. It seems reasonable to assume that Strapper while on the cathedral may have moonlighted to support the chapel in 1140 and the nave in 1144.

1140

1144



Chartres, Saint-André south chapel (a+)



Chartres, Saint-André WS8(c)

In the aisles of Saint-Laumer in Blois he employed three pairs of straps in three layers passing under and over each other [r]. In the smaller capital on the left the connecting band at the bottom is smaller, and there is less space between the straps so they lie close-pressed to each other. As a consequence the straps had to be bent so they could be woven. On the front face of the larger capital this was avoided by utilising the curves of the cone and the projection of the corner [b].

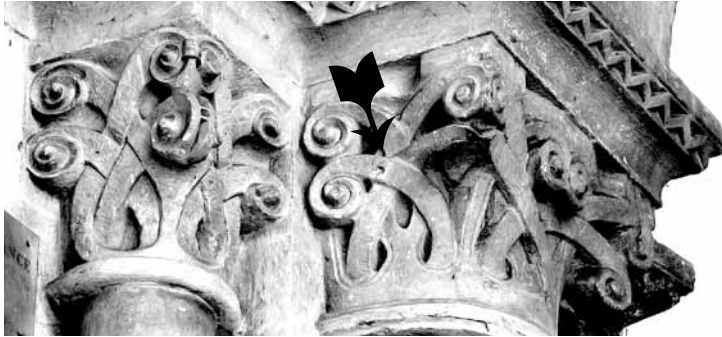
Though this was a workable arrangement on the face, it did not work well on the shorter side elevation where the straps under the corner terminals met with its supports only by implication, arrowed [b]. This disjunction is clearer in the detail [r]. There are obvious differences in the quality of carving and in the detailing in the crockets, with those on the smaller capital being more sharply finished, suggesting they were executed by two men.

The foundations of Saint-Laumer were begun in 1139, and work could easily have taken four years from the footings to the aisle capitals.



Blois, Saint-Laumer ambulatory As3(a)

1143



Blois, Saint-Laumer As3(a)



Blois, Saint-Laumer As3(a) detail

1142

While on the Loire he may have strayed into Candes-Saint-Martin, a day's journey downstream. These three are unique among the early Strapper capitals in having foliage inserted into the spaces [r].

Returning to Chartres he carved two capitals in the dark side of the western lancet windows, presumably to support a vault [b]. Excruciatingly difficult to photograph, they have foliate terminals as in Candes. They were carved with the windows and I have discussed the possibility that the glass in these windows survived the fire of 1194 because they were protected by a stone vault over this upper level.\*\*\*\* From my construction chronology for the cathedral they would have been carved in 1144.<sup>#08</sup>

The one on the north corner has thin flat straps terminating in small foliated tips rather than crockets. The one on the south corner has more elaborate and larger terminals that turn back and are tied with a collar. Both separate the intersecting straps into pairs that are divided by a thin gap that continues to the base. The designs are more competent than Blois.

Much of the future was to rest on the use of such contrapuntal layouts, a device one might call a polyphony in stone.



Candes-Saint-Martin choir

ID R A I E T 4



Chartres inside west lancets X-wS(c) south corner



Chartres inside west lancets X-wN(c) north corner

1146

In the nave aisles of Saint-Germer-de-Fly in the north-west corner of the Basin, one capital is readily recognisable [r]. It appears more complex only because the central tips point upwards and the terminals have been subdivided into fronds, not unlike those inside the Chartres west windows. The structure remains the same with two horizontal layers in which the lower pair (marked with an arrow) are small.

The other designs in Saint-Germer are more complicated. The intricacies include fresh twists and added elements, such as berries on stalks [b]. The intricate little pebble-like tips on the terminals bring further enrichment.

It is remarkable how simple most of Strapper's earlier capitals are compared to these. Other carvers joined in the game of enrichment as can be seen in some ambulatory wall capitals in *The Ark* where Lazare split a fairly common arrangement of plates into a fantastic multitude of terminals.

I have suggested from other evidence that construction on the abbey continued during the Crusade, albeit slowly, and that a number of men without other work were drawn here and spent the war years and a few afterwards on this site. It is as if there was no one in charge and men may have had more time at their disposal for play. With the loss of funds Strapper may have stayed on whiling away his time, as it were, until better years with more funds might return. Why else would he have complicated his work to such an extraordinary extent? I am guessing that the men responded to the heightened emotions of their times in a way that was similar to Raphael's Vatican stanza that reflected the sack of Rome. The passion and failure of the war found expression in extreme detailing, not dissimilar to the disintegration expressed in Mannerism and Fauvism.

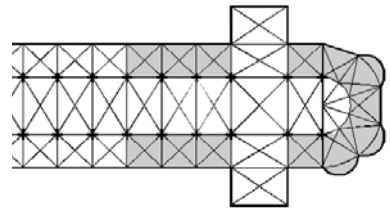
Having been born around 1115 he would have been in his early 30s when so many others decided to follow the Crusade.



Saint-Germer-de-Fly WN1nw(a)



Saint-Germer-de-Fly WN1n(a).



Saint-Germer-de-Fly, parts being built

1148



Saint-Germer-de-Fly WN1



Saint-Germer-de-Fly WN4(a)



Saint-Germer-de-Fly WN1(a)



Saint-Germer-de-Fly Ws4



Saint-Germer-de-Fly WN2(a)



Saint-Germer-de-Fly WS1(a)

In the gallery and clerestory at the next levels the capitals are completely different in design and feeling. None are like those in the aisles, whereas a number are in the manner of Son-of-SS from the later 1150s [r]. This date is determined from the *œuvres* of the other masons working on the upper levels. It is often remarked that the elements used in the layout of the gallery were derived from the gallery of Notre-Dame in Paris whereas, the Paris gallery being 1168-72, the 'influence' was the other way round.



Saint-Germer-de-Fly SE2(g)

IDIRAS7

### Strapper after the Crusade

There had been a pause in the construction of the south tower after the Crusade was called, from about 1146. The earlier plan was for a square tower possibly with a spire more in the manner of Morienvall than Gadancourt. It looks like there was a change in plan above the second level when the square was turned into an octagon.

1156

The precise location of the break is shown in the coursing of the external buttresses of level 2 [r1]. The termination of two corner columns with undecorated capitals, and their replacement with glacis is evidence that work stopped 4 courses above the cornice, marked by two angled arrows. There is also a change in coursing heights marked by a vertical arrow, showing that the stone on the left was carved at a different height to its neighbour, which is usually a fair indication of a joint in the construction.

Work at this level was probably halted by the financial needs of the Crusade. When construction was resumed the uppermost courses of the second stage had to be completed, and it was above that that the tower was transformed into an octagon. This and the spire were built together: a gigantic achievement of one long campaign, probably between 1155 and 1163.

Strapper himself produced only one capital on level 3, in the first stage of the octagon above the construction break [r2]. The band is continuous, as in Saint-Germer and Blois, so there is no split between the paired straps.

A curious situation presents itself here, discussed in more detail in #22 "A Recognition". There are altogether ten other strap-like capitals, but with utterly different terminals and different ways of handling the junctions along the bottom [b]. None of Strapper's other carving is like any of these. Further, I cannot find capitals in other buildings with straps carved in this manner. This situation was not exclusive to Chartres.

It seems to have been a common occurrence for a group of carvers to take on the template of another, usually more junior in experience, and celebrate some important event or stage in his life by integrating their favourite motifs into his template. This group, all on level 3, are displayed below. The reason I discuss in #23. There is a brittle hardness that comes from using the *lucastre* limestone from the Berchères-les-Pierres quarry.

1158

Two of the supporting carvers can be identified, Gamma and Léonard both from the Laonnais. Straps were Gamma's mode, and he is discussed in #25 [r3]. Léonard will be examined in Part 2 on the Laon gallery [r4,b+1].



Chartres level 2, arrows mark changes to the plan



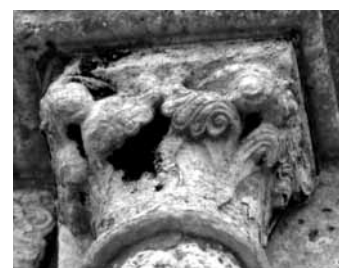
Chartres south octagon WS(3) by Strapper



Chartres south octagon WS-n(3) by Gamma



Chartres south octagon WS-n(3) by Léonard



Chartres cathedral, capitals from the WS tower octagon level (3) not by Strapper, but in his manner.

1154

There is a Strapper capital in Bromeilles in the same hard limestone region as Chartres and not far to the south-east, that continues with the hard-edged detailing found in the Chartres towers [b1]. I think, from the rigidity in the design, that it may have been carved before going to Chartres.

1159

From there it was a long way to Isse on the other side of the Paris Basin where one capital has the combination of density and openness that I ascribe to Strapper [b2]. There he worked alongside two other strap masters, Gamma and Fabrice. There is a marked change in his design, more in keeping with the octagon of the Chartres spire. The analysis of Gamma and Fabrice placed Isse before the gallery at Laon, around 1159.



Bromeilles apse



Isse apse eastern window

In the Laon gallery there is one genuine Strapper capital [b1]. It was almost lost. It is the leading stone on wall pier Es10n that had been moved in the extensions of the 80s. He may have carved all five capitals of an entire pier elsewhere in the ambulatory but, like some other wall piers, the adjoining capitals may have been damaged and thrown out when the ambulatory was demolished.

The weaving of the straps has become more complex than Isse, for the lower middle pair have been moved sideways to emerge from the far sides of the corners, rather than starting on each side of the centre. This makes them longer and enables a stronger pattern to emerge. It is like a return to the complexity at Blois, but twenty years later at a higher degree of maturity [b2].

1161



Laon gallery Es10(g)



Blois, Saint-Laumer As3(a)

His designs became richer and more intricate in the triforium without any change to the basic structure [b]. It is instructive to see that the design of the terminals varies far more than one might expect. From the range in the gallery some carvers seemed willing to share ideas on terminals without any proprietary concerns.

1163  
DIRAC



Laon triforium EN1b(t)



Laon triforium NE2(t)

could be Fabrice from upward tips, yet what of sGdF

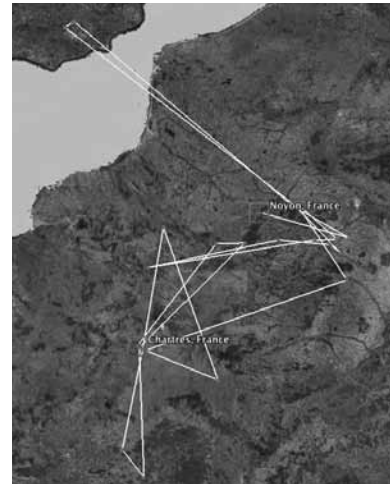


The capital in the triforium over the north east pier of the transept would have been the last at that level, from the tilt in construction. This may not have been until 1164, and with no other buildings with these capitals, even nearby, I would conclude that he had settled in Laon for some years, as he had at Chartres and Saint-Germer-de-Fly, and as he would again for maybe four years in Canterbury and, at the end of his career, a long return to Laon. It suggests he was a more general mason who turned his hand to whatever skilled craftsmanship was required, and that he was not a specialist who concentrated on decorative carving.

We should not lose sight of the fact that what might excite us in the intensely creative designing of capitals may not have been an issue for the men of that time. At least in the labours of Strapper there does not seem to have been any distinction between the mason who worked on fine-edged profiles and the carver who created these amazing capitals. After all, to work on a major site for four or five years, and in that time produce only a half dozen capitals, is indicative of perceived relative importance.

He carved elsewhere in the Laon area, and I wonder if he travelled from a home near the cathedral site, or stayed locally for short periods. It would have been logical to leave during the pause between campaigns or while work stopped at the clerestory level. There may have been a gap in time before it was decided to pull down the ambulatory, then only a few years old, and extend the choir into a longer and square-ended building. Depending on whether construction on the choir was halted after Gamma's capital in the clerestory windows or at the roof cornice, this pause could be dated between 1166/69 and 1170/72.<sup>#08</sup>

In the entry to Cernay-lès-Reims he threaded curiously formed elements between the straps, as he had in the Laon gallery [r1]. All the works of this period are in a somewhat simplified manner, perhaps in response to the simplifying trend of the last years of the 60s. He may have carved one in the Gournay-en-Bray clerestory with up-turned tips and flat straps, with the same complexity found in earlier works [r2]. There are also one uncompleted capital in the nave of Glennes, a church frequented by a number of other workmen from the Laon site, and two in the Hermonville porch, all from the same period at the end of the 1160s [b].



Map of travel by Strapper



Cernay west entry Ws4



Gournay-en-Brie apse ES1w(c)



Glennes WS1s unfinished



Glennes WN3



Hermonville porch



Hermonville porch

1164

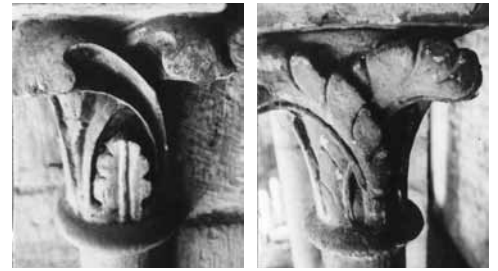
1165

1166

DRAFT 1169

1172

Construction of the abbey of Saint-Remi was begun by Pierre de Celle shortly after his appointment. The capitals from the transition of the 70s lock in the dates of the gallery, for “among some 150 formal capitals there are only ten naturals (indicating a date) between 1169 and 1172”.<sup>v.i.246</sup> The distribution of formals and naturals show that the capitals in the triforium and clerestory were only a couple of years later [r]. This was the first linked triforium-clerestory scheme. By 1180 the clerestory walls and the roof would have been completed. This fits neatly with the date for the two 1180 capitals in the choir aisle, and the re-consecration of the altar of Saint Pierre in 1180/82 that seems to have been for the demolition of the old apse.



Saint-Remi choir triforium

1174

Returning to Laon he created one of his many-layered capitals for the south aisle [r2]. It is a replacement, but lovely to discover the original in the gallery above, and a pleasant confirmation that in this case the restorers did their best to emulate what they were replacing. It also shows that the originals, at least in this case, were neither badly worn nor damaged.



Laon south transept aisle SW1s(a) original

The early campaigns led by William of Sens on Canterbury cathedral fit quite neatly into this sequence. There are two capitals that could have been by Strapper [b]. More simplified than intricate, as he was wont to do in this period, the semi-organic elements inserted into Cernay have become recognisable leaves in Saint-Remi, and even more so here in Canterbury. Combining the contemporary description by Gervais with the decadic analysis in volume 1 of *The Ark*, one on the wall of the western aisle would have been carved in 1176, and the one further to the east in 1178.<sup>v1:42</sup> Possibly inspired by some of the other carvers, the terminals have become quite elaborate with turned-back fronds and little rosettes.

1176



Canterbury aisle wall En5s(a)



Canterbury aisle wall Es9(a)

1178

1179

Afterwards he may have returned to Laon and worked on the cathedral for the next five or six years. His capitals are in the south gallery of the nave [b], some simpler and some more complex than others. The last at Laon were part of the movement everywhere in which strap-designs faded in popularity, but in his work did not disappear altogether, but continued for this carver for a few years to come.

He increasingly disclosed the shape of the cone that lies behind the curved straps by clearly marking the curve of the upper edge just below the abacus. In the same manner during these years he stopped using the *énchancre*, as it detracted from the purity of the cone.

1179



Laon cathedral south transept gallery Sw3e(g)



Laon cathedral nave gallery Ws4(g)



Laon cathedral nave gallery WN4n(g)

IDIRAT



Laon south transept gallery SW2n(g)



Laon nave south triforium WS7(t)



Laon south upper chapel clerestory (c+)

1179

His work included one of the gigantic capitals over the nave drums at the western end [r]. There is a plain plate-like leaf under the corners where the points of the straps meet, and the cross over one another in what is just an enlarged version of his standard design. He did not try to redesign his template in any way to take into account either the great size of his stone nor the added complexity that came from shaving the corner as if it were an octagon. Only the projections on the lower block align with the square of the impost. In the upper block they are alternated so that the terminals do not sit over one another. This has opened a gap just where we would most require support, on the corner. I think he fudged the issue rather than facing it head on and revising the design to accommodate this problem.

His two last works in the early years of the 1180s were in the quite intricate apse of Boulton-sur-Suippe not far from Guignicourt, and the uppermost works of Noyon cathedral, in the nave clerestory [b]. This would have been his first visit to Noyon. bottom LEAF??



Laon nave aisle pier WN10(a)

1181



Boulton-sur-Suippe apse



Noyon nave clerestory WN3(c)

1182



Boulton-sur-Suippe apse

### Conclusion and chronology

We have to credit this master with a long working life. His first capital was in the north tower at Chartres in 1135, and Noyon was his last over forty-five years later. A long life, but not impossible. He would have been in his late 50s, or even 60 years old, when he stopped. Over that time he worked in 34 campaigns in eighteen buildings and carved almost a hundred capitals that still exist today.

He was a man of considerable, if not long-lived, influence. Besides personality - about which we can know nothing - the one thing that may have drawn people to him was the clarity of his work, for he had developed a mature style of simple purity delineated by clear geometric arrangements of the elements.

The qualities of a successful master mason are organisational clarity, clear use of geometry and an ability to inspire men to follow his ideas and precepts. I have not investigated the possibility that in his later years he could have been employed more often as a master mason than a carver.

### Campaigns by Strapper the Intricate

1135	Chartres cathedral	entry WN-s(a-)
1135	Chartres, Saint-André	east (a)
1136	Chartres cathedral	WN(a)
1137	Cauffry	crossing
1139	Bèthisy-Saint-Pierre	east
1140	Chartres cathedral	WN(2)
1141	Chartres, Saint-André	nave (a)
1142	Candes-Saint-Martin	choir
1143	Blois, Saint-Laumer	choir (a)
1144	Chartres cathedral	X-w(cw)
1146	Saint-Germer-de-Fly	choir piers (a)
	<i>Second Crusade called</i>	
1147	Saint-Germer-de-Fly	choir wall (a)
1148	Saint-Germer-de-Fly	nave (a)
1154	Bromeilles	east
1156	Chartres cathedral	WS(2)
1157	Chartres cathedral	WS(3)
1159	Isse	east
1161	Laon cathedral	choir (g)
1163	Laon cathedral	choir (t)
1164	Cernay-lès-Reims	west door
1165	Glennes	south apse
1166	Gournay-en-Bray	choir south (c)
1167	Saconin	nave door
1169	Hermonville	porch
1172	Saint-Remi	choir triforium
1175	Laon cathedral	south (a)
1176	Canterbury cathedral	choir Es5(a)
1178	Canterbury cathedral	choir En9(a)
1179	Laon cathedral	south and east nave (g)
1180	Laon cathedral	nave 3-11(g)
1181	Laon cathedral	south (t)
1181	Boulton-sur-Suippe	apse
1182	Noyon cathedral	nave (c)