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Virtual Tour #1: St. Gilles-du-Gard

Allan T. Kohl

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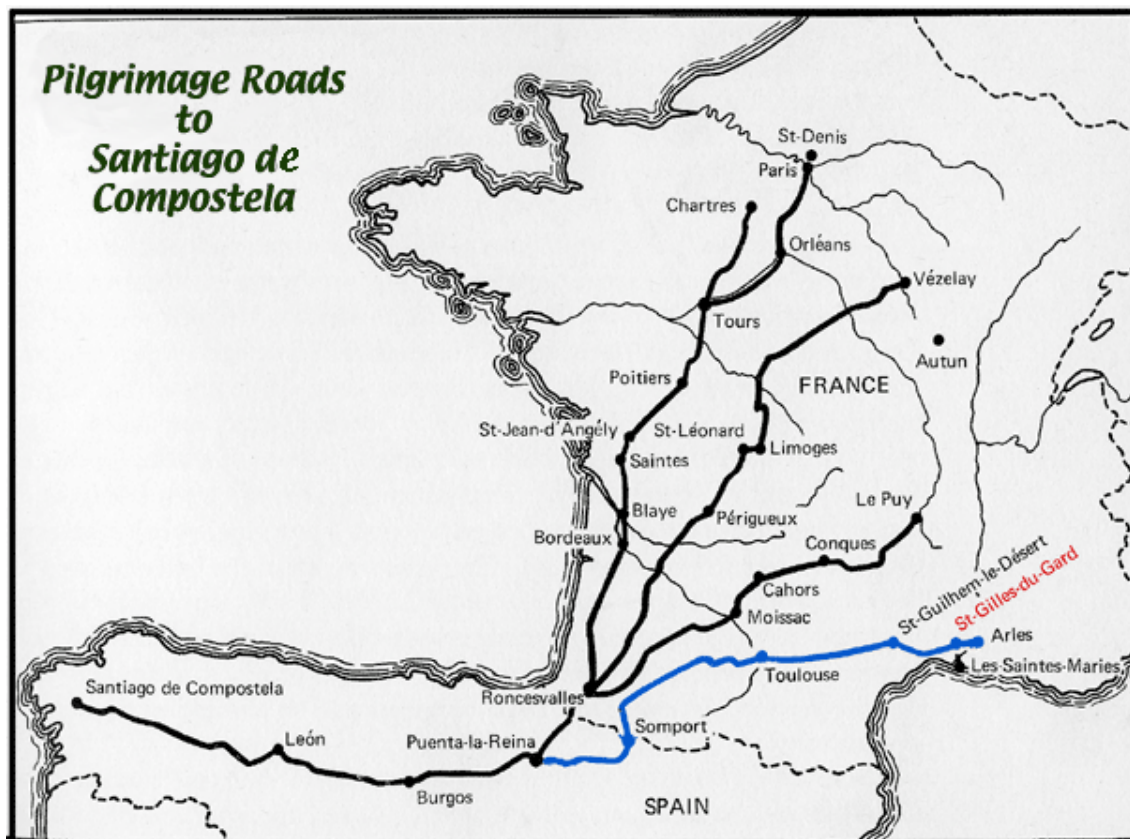
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VIRTUAL TOUR #1:

St. Gilles-du-Gard



Map of the four principal pilgrimage roads to Santiago de Compostela, showing the southernmost route and the location of St.-Gilles-du-Gard.

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the tomb of Saint James (Santiago) in northwestern Spain became the most important pilgrimage destination in Western Europe, eventually coming to rival even Rome and Jerusalem. Four main roads, winding through southern France from the population centers where groups of pilgrims initially gathered for their arduous journey, led across the passes of the Pyrenees before coming together at Puente La Reina and proceeding along the "Way of Saint James" to Galicia and the saint's shrine. Monasteries and abbeys located at regular intervals along these four routes provided shelter and sustenance for weary travelers, who often planned the stages of their journey according to advice found in pilgrims' guidebooks, such as the *Liber Sancti Jacobi* (or Book of Saint James) produced by the monks of Cluny. The most popular of these guides, written by the cleric Aymery Picaud, described the many holy sites and shrines the travelers would encounter along the way, and also counseled against various hardships and perils to avoid.

The "Via Tolosana," the southernmost of the four great pilgrimage roads, began at the Provençal town of Arles. Across the river Rhône, approximately one day's journey to the west, pilgrims would arrive at the abbey church of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, originally built above the shrine to the semi-legendary sixth- (or eighth-?) century abbot known in English as Saint Giles (Latin = Egidius). Constructed in its present form early in the twelfth century, the church itself has been repeatedly rebuilt over the years, surviving major damage during the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and again at the time of the French Revolution. For more than eight centuries, the splendid west facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard has excited the admiration of visitors ranging from medieval pilgrims to modern tourists. This article will introduce the reader to the overall form and iconographic program of the facade before taking a closer look at

details of selected sculptures, interpreting their narrative content, analyzing their compositional features, and suggesting possible links to Classical antecedents in this magnificent example of the southern French Romanesque style.



West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, completed in present form ca. 1180

The facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard appears to be a carefully conceived, but somewhat uneasy, synthesis of many disparate parts. It was probably completed incrementally over time, the work of as many as five different sculptors who may not have been contemporaneous (Porter, vol. I: 273ff.). For the sake of economy, the builders may have re-cycled existing elements, made from different types of stone: some features, such as the unequal columns (several set on Italianate lion bases mounted upon jamb pedestals), the Corinthian capitals carved in somewhat different styles, and fluted pilasters -- including one used as a trumeau for the central portal -- suggest re-use of these elements from earlier structures, some perhaps of ancient Roman origin.

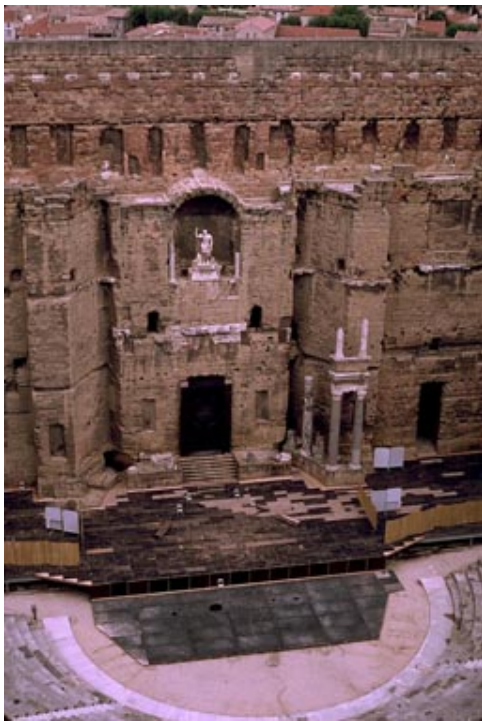
The facade is characterized by triple recessed portals, each surmounted by a carved tympanum framed by unadorned archivolt. The left (north) tympanum depicts the Adoration of the Magi, while the right (south) shows the Crucifixion; the central tympanum (a nineteenth century replica after the badly damaged original) presents Christ in Majesty surrounded by symbols of the Four Evangelists.

This motif, in the context of a triple portal, has led some scholars to propose stylistic affinities between St.-Gilles and northern French transitional facades,



such as the "Royal Portals" at Chartres. A more likely source of inspiration for the triple portal can be found in actual Roman monuments located throughout the region, especially the Roman Theater and the Arch of Tiberius, both in nearby Orange.

West front, "Royal Portals" of Chartres Cathedral, ca. 1145-1170



Roman theaters typically used three doorways in the *skena frons* (permanent set) to accommodate actors' entrances and exits. The *skena frons* of the theater at Orange incorporates non-supportive columns and pilasters, as well as decorative statues set into niches; these features are also evident on the facade of St.-Gilles.

Roman Theater, Orange, ca. late 1st century B.C.E. - 1st century C.E.



In its present form, the Arch of Tiberius dates from the first century; like St.-Gilles, it is probably a synthesized work incorporating portions of earlier monuments. Its triple arch, the center passage taller than the two flanking apertures, is also adorned by columns that appear decorative rather than functional.



West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard: detail, central portion, completed in present form ca. 1180

Visual continuity in the otherwise eclectic facade of St.-Gilles is provided by the noteworthy sculpted frieze depicting the events of Holy Week and the Passion of Christ, its sections running from left to right across the lintels above the triple portals and the colonnades connecting these to one another. The central section wraps at right angles into the recessed central portal. While some scholars have proposed that Byzantine ivory Passion diptych reliefs inspired individual scenes (Porter, vol. I: 283-4), the St.-Gilles frieze brings together a number of separate incidents into a clear linear chronological presentation, in which Jesus' "journey" towards the cross provides inspiration for the pilgrims' own travels.

Christ is the focal point of each scene as the narrative unfolds cinematically, one incident flowing into the next. Reduced scale representations of architectural settings, such as towers, portals, and arcades, act as framing devices to help establish context, or provide demarcations indicating the passage of time or change of location. As was true of many Romanesque pilgrimage churches, the sculptures of St.-Gilles may have originally been painted in bright colors, the better to be "read" by throngs of viewers standing below them at ground level. Specific events (the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem, the Road to Emmaus, along with the Washing of the Disciples' Feet and the sharing of a communal meal in the Last Supper) must have especially resonated with medieval men and women traveling on foot, looking forward to succor and nourishment at major stops along the Pilgrims' Way. The figures in the frieze have retained their detail despite the erosion caused by centuries of the strong seasonal winds blowing from the nearby Mediterranean; but heads, and especially faces, show frequent evidence of mutilation, much of this due to deliberate acts of iconoclasm carried out during the religious wars.



Entrance of Christ into Jerusalem: portion of frieze forming lintel of north portal, West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, ca. 1140s-1180

The Passion narrative begins with a scene of the Entrance of Christ into Jerusalem [Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:1-10,28-44; John 12:12-15] in the portion of frieze forming the lintel beneath the left (north) tympanum. Christ is shown riding on a donkey, followed by its foal. The figures of the Apostles exhibit strong dexter motion, accentuated by the carved folds of their garments. Several of the Apostles wave palm branches. Their heads are turned unnaturally towards one another in sharp profiles, an ancient convention used by medieval artists to indicate excited conversation. In front of a stylized palm tree to the far right, two onlookers spread their cloaks in Christ's path.



Christ Driving the Money-changers from the Temple: detail of frieze to left of central portal, West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, ca. 1140s-1180



Battle scene from the Trojan War (quadriga of Glaucos?): detail of East frieze from the Treasury of the Siphnians, Delphi, ca. 525 B.C.E.

The scene of Christ Driving the Money-changers from the Temple [Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-46; John 12:13-17] occupies the portion of the frieze between the north and central portals which, like several others, appears above a border of dogs and grotesque heads. Miniature (and wholly imaginary) representations of the Temple and an entrance pillar bracket the composition. Within a shallow arcaded space, cowering figures crowd together to escape from Christ's wrath.

The figure of the Money-changer closest to Christ uses part of his garment to hold a heap of coins as he flees; the man in front of him carries a pair of doves. The figure farthest to the right turns back in a leftward (sinister) direction to shake a moneybag mockingly at Christ, an action that may recall a stereotyped perception of Jews as moneylenders and usurers (Kraus, 155). Along with the fleeing Money-changers, pairs of sacrificial oxen and sheep appear to spill away towards the lower right, their forms overlapping like those in ancient reliefs of quadriga, or four-horse chariot

teams.



Christ Washing Peter's Feet: left detail of portion of frieze forming lintel of central portal, West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, ca. 1140s-1180

The frieze section forming the lintel under the central portal's tympanum uses this strategically focal position to combine two scenes often iconographically distinct: Christ washing the Disciples' Feet [John 13:1-20], and the Last Supper.

On the left portion of this continuous narrative, Peter is shown seated on a low stool as Christ washes his foot using water from a pottery basin. Peter's pose and gesture, conveying a mood of sadness and regret, are similar to those often found on Roman sarcophagi, in turn derived from Classical Greek grave stelae. The expressive faces of these two figures have survived nearly intact; each is framed by a halo, Christ's with a cross inscribed.

Above this scene, the viewer will notice examples of "egg-and-dart" and "bead-and-reel" borders used as framing devices. These are copied after antique prototypes common throughout southern France, examples of which can be seen today on Roman and Early Christian sarcophagi in the Musée Lapidaire Païen and Musée Lapidaire Chrétien in Arles.



*Christ Washing Peter's Feet; the Last Supper: portion of frieze forming lintel of central portal,
West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, ca. 1140s-1180*

The scene of the Last Supper [Matthew 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-23; John 13:21-30] shows Christ and the Disciples seated opposite the viewer along the length of a wide table covered with drapery. All figures here are represented with haloes, though these are often absent in other portions of the frieze. Most of their faces are severely damaged, the result of iconoclastic destruction. The far left and right edges of the table are occupied by Disciple figures seated in profile, acting as visual brackets to contain and focus the scene. The figure on the far left uses a knife to cut a round loaf of bread; the figure on the far right appears to hold the paschal lamb, symbolic of the Jewish ritual of Passover.



*The Arrest of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemene (The Betrayal):
detail of frieze on right inner angle of central portal,
West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, ca. 1140s-1180*

The sculptor of the Betrayal [Matthew 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-50; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:1-12] demonstrates particular skill in the central grouping of Christ and Judas, the latter claspng the shoulder of his Master to pull him closer into an embrace, while the taller Jesus inclines his head to submit to the traitor's kiss. Christ's head, skillfully worked in three-quarter profile, displays an expression of prescient understanding. The deeply carved drapery of these two pivotal figures accentuates their body lines. As is traditional for the iconography of this incident, Judas is oriented in a sinister (left-facing) direction; the tight curls of his hair are perhaps intended to emphasize his Jewish ethnicity.

Balancing Judas on the left, an arresting officer, his body lines echoing those of Jesus, lays a hand on his victim's shoulder. To the right of the scene, at the corner of this angle block, another guard prepares to draw his sword; the Phrygian-style forward-peaked helmet he wears underscores his Eastern, pagan, identity. The entire scene rests on a base border featuring the meander (Greek key) pattern, another motif derived from antique reliefs.



Christ Before Pilate; the Flagellation: detail of frieze to right of central portal, West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, ca. 1140s-1180

The section of the frieze located between the central and south portals includes the Judgment of Christ before Pilate [Matthew 27:1-2,11-26; Mark 15:1-15; Luke 23:1-25; John 18:28-40,19: 1-16] and the Flagellation [Matthew 27:27-31; Mark 15:16-20; John 19:1-7]. On the far left, as guards pull the bound Christ before Pilate, there is a suggestion of hieratic scale indicating the Roman governor's power: though seated, he appears larger than his attendants, an effect underscored by his arrogant, open pose. In the scene of the Flagellation, to the right, Christ is bound to a pillar, his arms unnaturally elongated to form an X-shaped suggestion of a cross (Chi), foreshadowing his coming sacrifice. His body buckles in pain under the force of the torturers' scourges. Images of dogs and grotesque faces again appear in the lower border; "egg-and-dart" and "bead-and-reel" motifs mark the top of the scene.

The sculptural program of the facade of St.-Gilles is completed by a series of frontal statues of Saints and Archangels set into niches behind the colonnade. Our photograph shows two of these figures from the north jamb of the central portal. On the left, Saint John the Evangelist, clad in simple garments, carries a codex bearing the Latin Vulgate text from the incipit of his Gospel. On the right, Saint Peter may be identified by his attribute of the key; he is attired in ecclesiastical vestments, a reminder of his status as the first Bishop of Rome. These two figures are typical of the formulaic, frontally posed high relief niche statues characteristic of the southern French Romanesque style. Their bodies appear slightly elongated in proportions, a feature which may optically correct



when viewed at an angle from below as the visitor passes through the portal. Both are posed above lion socles. Although details of the figures' garments and attributes are sharp even after the erosion of many centuries, here again the faces show the effects of wanton damage.

Saints John the Evangelist and Peter, jamb statues from left side of central portal, West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, ca. 1140s-1180



Although most of the iconographic program of the St.-Gilles West facade is based on New Testament subjects, several Old Testament scenes appear on the podium bases beneath the paired columns flanking the central portal. The Sacrifices of Cain and Abel [Genesis 4:1-7] is a bilaterally symmetrical composition set in a double-arched frame, a device perhaps inspired by the Moorish architectural device of the *ajimez* (paired windows with round-topped arches). This particular relief, however, is probably based on a manuscript illumination. The rival brothers are shown in stylized, attenuated poses, each raising his offerings towards

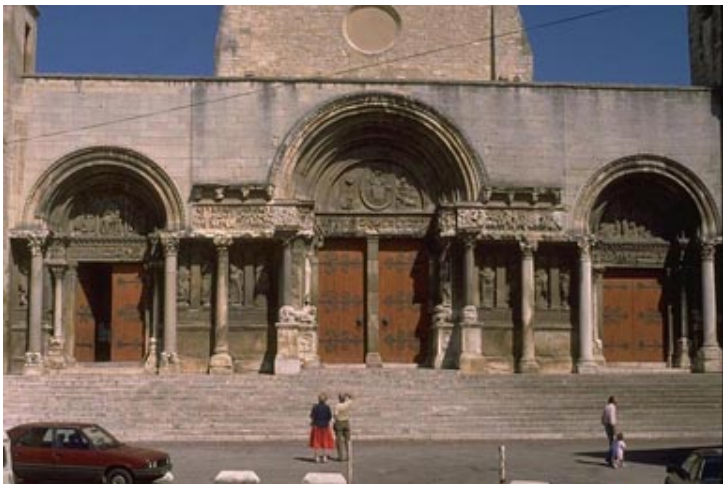
*Sacrifices of Cain and Abel; detail of podium relief to left of central portal,
West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, ca. 1140s-1180*

heaven. Their cloaks appear artificially suspended behind them, an awkwardness perhaps stemming from the translation of painted drapery forms from a two-dimensional page into carved stone. Abel faces dexterally (to the right), holding his gift of a lamb; above him, the Hand of God breaks the frame, signifying divine approval. Cain is oriented towards the left (sinister) as he holds up his gift of a grain sheaf; a demon crouches on the frame over his shoulder, implying evil thought or counsel.



In contrast, the relief of David Slaying Goliath [I Samuel 17:4-54] is a dynamic composition which appears tightly confined inside a rectangular space having a width nearly double its height. The body of the collapsing giant is dramatically compressed as he is doubled over by the force of David's dexterally-facing attack. Though wearing a corselet and armed with a spear and heavy Norman-style teardrop-shaped shield, Goliath is no match for the more agile young Israelite hero, who smites off the Philistine's head with his own oversized sword.

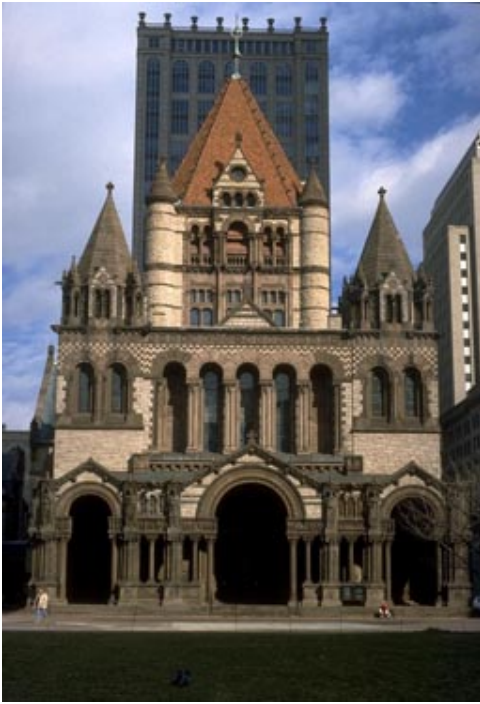
*David Slaying Goliath; detail of podium relief to right of central portal,
West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, ca. 1140s-1180*



West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, completed in present form ca. 1180



Main portal of St.-Trophime, Arles, ca. 1152-1190



Trinity Church, Boston: West facade, detail of triple portals, 1872-1877; 1897

Trinity Church, Boston: exterior, view from Copley Square, 1872-1877; 1897

Nearly seven centuries after its completion, the West facade of St.-Gilles-du-Gard, along with the entrance portal of St.-Trophime in nearby Arles, helped to inspire a major American religious structure. During the latter 1860s, architect Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-1886) began to incorporate stylistic features he had studied in French Romanesque churches of the Auvergne region into his designs for public buildings in the northeastern United States. His success helped to popularize a style known as Romanesque Revival (or simply as "Richardsonian Romanesque" after its best-known proponent).

In 1872, Richardson was awarded a major commission to design Trinity Church, Boston. For the main facade, fronting on Copley Square, he planned a triple portal with elaborately sculpted decoration, in which he carefully synthesized features of the St. Gilles-du-Gard facade with those of the main portal of St.-Trophime. Although he had never visited either of these medieval buildings, Richardson was aided in his work by access to a major publication by Henry Antoine Revoil, the *Architecture romane du midi de la France*, a copy of which was in the architect's professional library. This multi-volume reference work, issued between 1867 and 1873, was illustrated with detailed engravings based on measured drawings Revoil had made while supervising restoration projects funded by the French government. The plates included large fold-out elevations of the St.-Gilles and St.-Trophime west facades, along with numerous details of individual sculptures and decorative moldings. Today, many architectural historians believe that high public regard for Trinity Church, Boston was pivotal in popularizing the Romanesque Revival style over the next two decades.

The photographs of St.-Gilles-du-Gard used to illustrate this article were taken by the author in May, 1990. Readers may obtain source information regarding the photographs of other sites and works mentioned in this article through the "Image Resources" link following the bibliography below. All photographs are the copyrighted intellectual property of Allan T. Kohl; please read [Note on the "Virtual Tour" as a Resource for Teachers and Scholars](#) for information on availability and use conditions.

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Art historian Allan T. Kohl is Visual Resources Librarian at the Minneapolis College of Art & Design, where he has frequently taught courses in ancient, medieval, and Renaissance art history. He also teaches special topics art history courses for the University of Minnesota's College of Continuing Education. A member of the Visual Resources Association's Intellectual Property Rights Committee, he has a particular interest in legal issues relating to photographic reproductions of art works, and was principal author of the VRA's [Copy Photography Computator](#), an interactive decision-making guide intended to assist educators in assessing rights in images of art and architectural works.

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