

Article

Struggle as Image and Symbol in Spanish Romanesque Parish Porticoes

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Abstract: The extensive bibliography on medieval architecture highlights that parish church porticoes are one of the most singular features of the Spanish Romanesque tradition. These structures, which regulated the transition to the *Aula Dei*, provided villagers with a safe space for conducting liturgical ceremonies and rituals, administering sacraments, and burying the dead. However, parish porticoes soon took on other uses of a secular nature. Thanks to their social role and privileged location, they became ideal spaces for admonishing and instructing the faithful through well-chosen visual repertoires. This article explores these functional and iconographic aspects through the lens of struggle: on the one hand, the earthly confrontation between ecclesiastical authorities and village communities as to the functions of the porticoes, and on the other, the allegorical struggle depicted in their reliefs, whose admonitory motives can be linked to the attributes and meaning of the architectural framework.

Keywords: Romanesque art; porticoes; Christian architecture and function; episcopal authority; civic-liturgical spaces; images of struggle; admonitory iconography; *Psychomachia*; *Miles Christi*



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1. Introduction

The ‘door’ in all cultural traditions conveys profound and complex meanings. Its threshold embodies the entrance or exit to a specific place and serves to demarcate and hierarchise spaces, functions, and even behaviours. An opening in a dwelling serves to separate the public and the private, as well as the rules governing one and the other. Moreover, doors between the street and a place of worship assume a distinctive symbolism, as they act as boundaries between the profane and the sacred.

The self-proclamation of Christ as ‘the door’ (John 10: 9) in medieval theology led to identifying church entrances from the soteriological standpoint as points of access to salvation (Ocón Alonso 1989, p. 125). In this sense, from an early date, Christian architecture developed various solutions to proclaim and dignify these transcendental points. The most ostensible were applied to the organisation and visual elements of ecclesiastical portals often reflecting the profound implications of crossing this boundary. The combination of semicircular and quadrangular forms, as well as the ornamentation of each component, bearing cosmic, mystical, or admonitory content, are concrete examples (Hani [1962] 2000, pp. 75–77). In fact, *ante portas* features were at times raised to moderate such abrupt passages. This led to the design of basilica atria, monumental narthexes, and a variety of preliminary enclosures, including parish porticoes, which are the focus of the analysis in this study (Figure 1).

Dozens of researchers since the nineteenth century have shared their impressions of these porticoes. Yet it was André Michel (1905) who first defined them as ‘une création originale de l’art roman espagnol’. Gómez-Moreno (1919), Lampérez Romea (1930), Layna Serrano (1935), Taracena Aguirre (Taracena Aguirre 1931–1932), and Gaya Nuño (1946) subsequently also showed interest in their origin, even attempting to classify them according to formal and creative criteria. It is striking that such a significant aspect as their function

went almost unnoticed for decades until the question was finally addressed by [Bango Torviso \(1975\)](#). Knowledge of these architectural enclosures has increased since then due to catalogues drawn up by institutions (e.g., the Enciclopedia del Románico by the Fundación Santa María la Real) and provincial studies on medieval art.



Figure 1. Interior of the portico, Church of San Martín, Rejas de San Esteban (Soria). Early twelfth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

Equally (or even more valuable) is the research focusing on the physical, functional, and social dimensions of porticoes. Among the noteworthy analyses of this field are those by [Muñoz Párraga \(1986\)](#), [Herrera Casado \(1988\)](#), [Martínez Tejera \(2008\)](#), [Esteras Martínez et al. \(2009\)](#), [Salgado Pantoja \(2010a, Salgado Pantoja 2012–2013\)](#), [Esteras Martínez and Arribas \(2014\)](#), [Barrera Gordillo \(2015\)](#), [Lorenzo Arribas et al. \(2020\)](#), and [Antolín Minaya \(2023\)](#). The iconographic dimension of porticoes has likewise been the subject of investigation, with the key contributions by [Bango Torviso \(1977\)](#), [Quiñones Costa \(1984\)](#), [Palomero Aragón \(1990\)](#), [Abad Castro \(1991\)](#), [Salgado Pantoja \(2010b, 2012, 2016\)](#), and [Rodrigo Martín \(2018\)](#). With the goal of writing a comprehensive monograph on this topic, in 2014, I published a book on the porticoes, wherein I summed up most of the themes that I am developing in this essay ([Salgado Pantoja 2014](#)).

This unique type of structure was immensely popular for more than a century and a half, coinciding with a period of intense conflict in Iberia between the Christian and al-Andalus kingdoms. Eight out of every ten preserved structures are distributed throughout the eastern half of the historic Castilian Extremadura, that is, the present-day Provinces of Segovia, Soria, and Guadalajara, with occasional extensions into the Provinces of Ávila, Madrid, Burgos, and La Rioja, among others. Chronologically, the oldest example is that of the Church of San Miguel in San Esteban de Gormaz (Soria) dated by an inscription to 1081 ([Ortego Frías 1957](#)). The later cases, which could include some around Segovia and Sigüenza (Figure 2), bear stylistic features compatible with post-1200 dating ([Ruiz Montejo 1988](#), pp. 255–56; [Salgado Pantoja 2010b](#)).



Figure 2. Decor of the capitals, portico of the Church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Saúca (Guadalajara). First quarter of the thirteenth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

Eight centuries later, seventy complete or almost complete Romanesque porticoes, along with minor remains of several dozen more, survive in the aforementioned territory of Castile. Although a significant figure, records from archives and archaeological excavations reveal that many were transformed and even demolished to enlarge the churches or raise sacristies, chapels, barns, schools, or other annexes. Although this destructive process was particularly intense between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were later cases such as that of Alcuneza (Guadalajara) which was razed completely in the 1940s ([Salgado Pantoja 2010b](#)).

Researchers concur that porticoes are one of the most outstanding and genuine contributions of the Iberian Peninsula to the international Romanesque style. The mystery of why this typology had such a localised development has yet to be convincingly explained, although some authors have linked it to the intense Andalusian architectural heritage ([Gaya Nuño 1946](#), pp. 15–16) or to the development of a model already anticipated in early medieval Hispanic churches such as those of San Vicente del Valle (Burgos), San Salvador de Valdediós (Asturias), and, above all, San Miguel de Escalada (León) ([Martínez Tejera 2008](#), pp. 206–16).

Of the many and varied approaches to the analysis of Romanesque porticoes, this study intends to explore how they express the idea of struggle from two different perspectives, the first being totally mundane and the other of a symbolic and iconographic nature. To achieve this objective, this study has first examined the confrontation that took place between the ecclesiastical authorities and the villagers over the functions of parish porticoes, as well as the material outcomes stemming from this situation. On the other hand, this study also focuses on the role of porticoed structures as vehicles of the Church to instruct and moralise by evoking the everlasting struggle between Good and Evil. In this case, the Church employed visual means, mainly sculptural repertoires carved on capitals, walls, and cornices, to convey these notions.

2. The Earthly Dispute: Jurisdiction and Functions of the Porticoes

The crucial role played by parish porticoes in the life of Castilian villages and urban quarters was largely determined by their privileged physical and symbolic characteristics. A key factor was their prominent and strategic position, which served to separate the sacred precinct from the dwellings inhabited by the parishioners. To this must be added their robust and monumental appearance, most often built with well-worked and carefully arranged stone ashlars, or, less commonly, with different combinations of brick, wood, and masonry formwork (Bango Torviso 1992, p. 98). Examples include Tinieblas de la Sierra (Burgos) (Antolín Minaya 2023, p. 11), Paones (Soria) (Lorenzo Arribas et al. 2020, p. 65), and Pinarejos (Segovia) (Ruiz Hernando 1988, p. 32). In any case, all porticoes at the time were enriched with ornamental or iconographic features designed to attract attention and evoke emotions (Figure 3).



Figure 3. General view, Church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Pinarejos (Segovia). Thirteenth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

These structures were normally attached to a side of the church, most often to the south, along the main entrance. However, certain cases such as Andaluz (Soria), Orejana (Segovia), and Carabias (Guadalajara) (Figure 4) stretched along two or three walls forming extensive complexes. They were always covered by a roof that sheltered the interior and a variable number of semicircular arches along the main wall. Taracena Aguirre (Taracena Aguirre 1931–1932, p. 411) and Gaya Nuño (1946, pp. 14–15) have suggested that the ‘original model’ was porticoes with seven arches which they associated with early medieval Hispanic illuminated manuscripts. However, later research has revealed that the casuistry in terms of the number of openings varied widely (Esteras Martínez and Arribas 2014, pp. 218–19; Salgado Pantoja 2014, pp. 253–54). In any case, the main decorative and iconographic elements of the porticoes were concentrated in the archivolts, imposts, and columns of the arches, as well as on their upper cornices.



Figure 4. General view, Church of El Salvador, Carabias (Guadalajara). First quarter of the thirteenth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

The great effort involved in deploying the material and technical resources cited above, even in the humblest villages, is more than a mere coincidence and cannot be viewed as a frivolous whim. It is, in fact, the outcome of a plan directed by the local community to provide itself with a space suited to its daily needs. Along this line, the rapid spread of porticoes must relate to the multifunctional character that these types of structures attained between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, combining an extraordinary repertoire of official uses regulated in part by the Church with others of a more mundane and spontaneous nature, driven by their users themselves (Bango Torviso 1975; Salgado Pantoja 2014, pp. 268–78).

2.1. Porticoes and Their Official Functions

Every medieval parish church benefited from material and intangible assets that extended beyond its walls. Canonical discipline in the Iberian Peninsula required that temples be consecrated by the bishop and that they be assigned an adjacent piece of land designated as a *terminum* or *dextrum* (García-Gallo 1950, pp. 451–53). This cadastral possession extended from between 30 and 84 paces *in circuitu ecclesiae* and enjoyed episcopal protection (Figure 5). For this reason, the ecclesiastical authorities could intervene to eradicate abuses and crimes committed there, imposing severe penalties on offenders. This is recorded in Canon III of the Council of Oviedo (1115), which ruled that the penalty for violating the church or its porticoes would be four times greater than that for the remaining areas of the *dextrum* (Tejada y Ramiro 1851, p. 240).

This power over all the elements of the *dextrum* led the bishops, with the backing of synods and councils, to attempt to regulate the uses of parish porticoes. Although the documentation on this topic is scarce and most often from later records, it is likely that the preliminary stations of processions and certain rituals related to the liturgy and the administration of the sacraments were held in these enclosures. Their physical and symbolic protection also made them suitable spaces for the vigil of catechumens and the reconciliation of penitents serving, in both cases, as a waiting place *ante portam ecclesiae*

for integration into the Christian community (Bango Torviso 1975, pp. 183–85; Bango Torviso 1997, p. 76).



Figure 5. General view from the *dextrum*, Church of San Miguel Arcángel, Sotosalbos (Segovia). Late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

The porticoes also served as a place of rest and refuge due to the shelter provided by both their architecture and diocesan immunity. As recorded in the *Siete Partidas* of King Alfonso X ([c. 1265] 1807, pp. 371–75), these features were often legitimately exploited by parishioners as well as by travellers, pilgrims, and fugitives. It must be emphasised that they also allowed certain criminals to evade secular justice by profiting from the right of asylum and the prohibition of assault.

Funerary use of these structures and the adjacent cemetery since the Early Middle Ages was just as important, if not more, due to the prohibition of burials inside churches (Bango Torviso 1992, pp. 95–96). This issue is reflected in archives as well as through archaeological interventions unearthing numerous medieval graves. Examples include the excavations carried out in San Esteban de Gormaz (Soria) (Lorenzo Arribas and Yusta Bonilla 2019, pp. 71–72), Caracena (Soria) (Morales Hernández and Borobio Soto 1992), and Requijada (Segovia) (Izquierdo Bértiz 1977). Undoubtedly, the parishioners desired their place to be associated with areas of special symbolism, next to the church or under the portico preceding its door. However, it must be noted that these spaces were usually reserved for the more prominent members of the village community (Salgado Pantoja 2014, pp. 272–73).

It is important to mention, due to its structural similarity and its equally funerary use, the Portico of the Knights at the Monastery of Santa María la Real de las Huelgas (Burgos), although this structure, like others found in some medieval abbeys, such as the narthexes of monastic galilees, where certain liturgical ceremonies were also centred (Bango Torviso 1992, p. 108), never attained the extraordinary multifunctionality of Romanesque porticoes.

With the passage of time, the Castilian dioceses allowed burials within the parish churches. Nonetheless, this did not lead to a complete abandonment of the cemeteries outside the walls. Two synods celebrated in Avila (1384 and 1481) reflect this gradual change. While the first prohibited, with few exceptions, burial in the church, the second allowed the selection of burial places both in churches and in their cemeteries (García García 1993, pp. 26, 137–38). Parish records confirm the habitual use of the portico, and, in some cases, such as that identified by Salgado Pantoja (2014, p. 273) for Jaramillo de la Fuente (Burgos) dating from 1626, they offer an explicit narrative regarding the poor

condition of the floor slabs due to their constant dismantling and replacement for burials (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Interior of the portico, Church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Jaramillo de la Fuente (Burgos). Twelfth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

2.2. Porticoes and Their Profane Functions

The data presented so far evidence that porticoes played an essential role in the religious and funerary services of the parishioners. Yet it was precisely these habitual users who promoted the development of new functions. Although ecclesiastical power over the temple and its *dextrum* was indisputable, the arrangement of the door between the two also played a decisive role. Thus, while the sacredness of the sanctuary was never brought into question, that of the portico was conditioned by its location facing the threshold. This apparent inclination towards the earthly realm of the village attracted other activities that intensified its polyvalence and social value, as well as provoked the discontent of the ecclesiastical authorities (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Aerial view of Beleña de Sorbe (Guadalajara). Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

The prohibitions issued by the Church were of little use, at least during the Late Middle Ages, as the *dextrum*, originally conceived in the service of Christian praxis, quickly took on other functions arising spontaneously from the parishioners. One of the most notorious was the holding of council assemblies convened by ‘campana repicada’ or ‘tañida’ (i.e., when striking or tolling the bell). As if it were a sacred office, the village representatives gathered before the doors of their parish church to resolve local issues and neighbourly disputes (Corral García 1983, pp. 327–29). The records of synods such as that of Burgos (1503) (García García 1997, p. 278) indicate that these debates often led to shouts, insults, or armed clashes. These assemblies were in fact usually held on Sunday, which was not only the day of rest, but ‘the Lord’s Day’, meaning the quarrels frequently interfered with the liturgy (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Detail of the portico and *dextrum*, Church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Villasayas (Soria). Late twelfth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

Disorder was even greater during local festivities. The relaxation of rules, coupled with the consumption of alcohol, meant that the parish premises saw all sorts of reprehensible activities. The surroundings of the church on these days thus became the scene of banquets, bullfighting, and irreverent performances, often accompanied by profane music, sacrilegious songs, and even carnal encounters during nocturnal vigils (Arranz Guzmán 2003). All these acts are recorded, once again, by several pre-sixteenth-century Castilian synods (García García 1987, p. 310; 1993, p. 132; 1997, p. 259).

It is likely that the porticoes and the exterior circuit of the churches also witnessed ordeals, or trials by God, as these traditions, despite their reprobation, were still common in Castile (Terradas Saborit 2008, pp. 624–25). More notable was their use, despite being strictly forbidden, for leisure activities. The aforementioned Synod of Avila (1481) refers to

certain recreations such as the discus throw or the shooting of crossbows that at times led to injury or death, or to games such as pelota, dice, cards, and boards often involving gambling (García García 1993, p. 133). Close observation of the walls of these porticoed structures reveals traces of these pursuits (Figure 9), notably graffiti at Orejana (Segovia) and Pinilla de Jadraque (Guadalajara), and alquerque boards carved into stone at Fuentidueña and Perorrubio (Segovia) (Salgado Pantoja 2010a, pp. 44–46; Barrera Gordillo 2015).



Figure 9. Medieval board games, portico of the Church of San Pedro ad Vincula, Perorrubio (Segovia). Twelfth or thirteenth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

Disagreements between the villagers and the representatives of the bishopric over the use of the parish porticoes and cemeteries escalated as these spaces also came to serve as markets for foodstuffs or other products, contrary to the provisions of Title XXIII of the Council of Valladolid (1322) (Tejada y Ramiro 1851, p. 494). The link between the parish and commercial activity during the Middle Ages, also present in other parts of the Western Christian world, was intensified on Sundays and religious festivals (Sampedro López 2019, pp. 220–21). Predictably, the crowds attracted dancers, puppeteers, and minstrels while the noise and stench of raw produce and animals disgraced and disrupted the religious ceremonies.

The proliferation of these popular practices led bishops to exhort priests to expel or excommunicate those who broke episcopal regulations and even to order the construction of stone walls around temples to block access to the *dextrum*. Despite these restrictions, the spontaneity of the village communities redefined the original religious and funerary functions of parish porticoes. Thus, these *ante portas* enclosures during the Late Middle Ages took on more complex roles, yielding multifaceted scenarios marked by the coexistence of disparate and even antagonistic practices, further straining relations between village communities and the episcopal clergy.

The ‘death’ of the architectural type, as pointed out by Marías Franco (1974), took place around the sixteenth century, coinciding with the gradual disappearance of all the functional attributes that it had come to embody during the Middle Ages. The towns and villages of Castilian Extremadura then, in accordance with the order decreed by the Cortes of Toledo (1480), began to build town councils to hold neighbourhood assemblies. Commercial transactions and entertainment were also moved to more appropriate sites. At this time catechumenate and penances began to be carried out in more private settings, and processions extended their routes beyond the immediate surroundings of the parish

churches. However, the custom of burial in the *dextrum* survived into the nineteenth century despite it not being compulsory, as the faithful could opt for intramural interment (Salgado Pantoja 2014, pp. 283–84).

As a result, the porticoes became unnecessary and inconvenient as their high maintenance costs no longer benefited the parishioners. These structures soon suffered the effects of neglect and even a destructive tendency initiated in the sixteenth century coinciding with the expansion and refurbishment of numerous Castilian parish churches (Figure 10). Records in archives reveal that this process was often carried out by repurposing the space and even the materials of the old galleries, leading them to be transformed into secondary naves of the temple or into granaries, ossuaries, warehouses, sacristies, schools, or parish houses (Salgado Pantoja 2014, p. 284).



Figure 10. Portico transformed into a lateral nave, Church of San Andrés, Romanillos de Atienza (Guadalajara). Late twelfth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

3. The Struggle to Attain Eternity: Symbols and Images Carved in Stone

The accessible, protected, and prominent character of porticoes not only influenced the definition of their religious or civic functions but also had a significant impact on the configuration of their iconographic repertoires. Aware of the communicative power of imagery, the promoters of these features selected those elements most suitable to instruct and persuade the congregation, directing them towards salvation. The predominant medium was sculptural relief applied to relatively hard stone capitals, corbels, imposts, and metopes. However, certain churches such as San Martín de Arévalo (Ávila) resorted to polychrome fresco murals (Figure 11).

It must be noted that the iconographic schemes of porticoes are usually not as well defined and structured as those found on the most outstanding façades or cloisters of international Romanesque architecture. The construction of these structures required a considerable financial investment on behalf of their promoters, which meant that their decorative sculptural repertoires were often subjected to limitations imposed by the scarcity of resources. Sometimes, as seen in Vizcaínos de la Sierra and Jaramillo de la Fuente (Burgos), in Omeñaca and Villasayas (Soria), or in Orejana and Grado del Pico (Segovia),

the sculptors simply replicated, often quite randomly, the models used in major Castilian works of significant artistic importance, such as the monastic cloister of Santo Domingo de Silos (Boto Varela 2000, pp. 246–51). Added to this were other more relevant factors such as the degradation, transformation, and partial or total destruction suffered by many from the sixteenth century onwards. However, these circumstances do not prevent the identification of certain recurring themes or scenes that can be broken down into four categories: Biblical and Christological episodes, plant representations, events of medieval daily life, and finally, a vast repertoire of moralising images expressing, through a variety of means, the struggle between Good and Evil.



Figure 11. Interior of the portico of the Church of San Martín, Arévalo (Ávila). Late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

3.1. *Evil, a Terrifying Foe*

The concepts of Good and Evil, so deeply rooted in the theological and moral Christian worldview and expressed by a wide repertoire of literary and iconographic images, are a rich source of reflection. Good is typically associated with depictions of sacred beings, that is, angels and biblical or hagiographic episodes. Evil, in turn, is linked to images of the Devil, vices, and monstrous creatures. This dualistic vision is behind the tension between the two forces evidenced by Romanesque plastic representations through resources such as the opposition of allegories of virtue and sin, or by depicting the consequences of sin. In this sense, art became an exceptional visual vehicle illustrating the internal battle everyone had to wage in order to attain the longed-for eternity.

Depictions of the struggle against Evil found inspiration in a broad classical and patristic literary tradition. Moralised figures appear early in the *Physiologus* and later in other works by Christian authors such as the *Expositio in Psalmorum* by St. Ambrose and the *Psychomachia* by Aurelius Prudentius. The latter poem was copied with great frequency

during the Early Middle Ages (Katzenellenbogen [1939] 1964; Hourihane 2000). Versions of it from at least the ninth century were commonly accompanied by illustrations of warriors in the thick of battle personifying vices and virtues (Utz 2012, p. 35). At the outset of the twelfth century, this symbolic battle was transferred to monumental sculpture, a change of medium that entailed a transformation of the iconic language (Solivan Robles 2020, p. 112).

Illuminated manuscripts produced in the monasteries intended for the intellectual elite continued to reflect, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the humanised and contrived allegories directly inspired by the *Psychomachia*. However, the promoters of Romanesque churches preferred other, less sophisticated, visual means of depicting this moral battle which were more suitable for catechising ordinary people. Thus, while Bernard of Clairvaux in his *Apologia ad Guillelmum Abbatem* urged monks to read more in the codices than in the marbles, the common people complemented the teachings learned from sermons with images on the walls of their parish churches, replete with figures and creatures inciting conversion and penance (Weisbach 1949, p. 152).

Romanesque visual narratives generally identified Good as a well-equipped warrior who not only symbolises the defence of moral values but emphasises an active and essential role of the military in the struggle against the enemies of Christianity (Larrañaga Zulueta 2008b, pp. 163–65). Evil, on the contrary, was embodied by a terrifying aberrant creature or fantastic being stemming from bestiaries and physiological treatises. An example appears on a capital of Duratón (Segovia) depicting a dragon violently attacking a soldier who attempts to repel the assault with a shield while unsheathing his sword (Figure 12). The same motif, with variations, appears at Rebolledo de la Torre (Burgos). It features a winged serpent that bites the shield of a warrior who is armed with a sword, a coat of mail, and a chain mail cap. These scenes, and others like them, do not, in fact, depict victors or vanquished suggesting that they were intended to keep the faithful on constant alert to the danger of sin.

The iconographic representations of this allegorical struggle at times omitted the defenders of Good to focus their expressive force on the malignant creatures. The capitals of the portico of Vizcaínos de la Sierra (Burgos) bear pairs of monsters, notably harpies, lions, dragons, and griffins, which, in addition to decorating the monumental frame, direct their intimidating gaze towards the passers-by circulating in the vicinity of the temple. The mutilated arcade of Requijada (Segovia) also preserves the vestiges of a disturbing repertoire comprising six harpies bearing hypnotic gazes, four long-legged birds pecking at each other's feet, strange heads emerging from plant foliage, and centaurs shooting arrows at fork-tailed mermaids (Figure 13). Although it is not possible to reconstruct this portico's complete message, the preserved elements appear to be intended as a warning.

The grotesque *gloutons* that appear to devour the column shafts at Rebolledo de la Torre, the mascarons that vomit plant stems at Perorrubio (Segovia), and the demonic heads that crown the entrance to the gallery at Grado del Pico (Segovia), are other notable examples of these visual warnings deliberately placed before the doors. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to assemble an exhaustive inventory, images of monsters, hybrids, and malignant figures are common to most Spanish Romanesque porticoes. Moreover, even though they may often appear hackneyed, uncritical, and disconnected, they do not lack in communicative or suggestive capacity. In any case, the psychological impact seems to always be greater when the sculpted scenes depict conflict and violence.

Numerous examples demonstrate the relationship between aggressiveness and coercive capacity. A capital from Rebolledo de la Torre features two harpies with long serpentine tails gazing towards the interior of the portico, capturing the attention of two ferocious lions. These observe them while attacking each basilisk. One digs its claws into the body of its feline opponent, who twists around with the intention of biting its head. Another basilisk completes this infernal spectacle, which not only conveys an isolated visual message but is integrated, as referred to later, into an iconographic repertoire that encourages the faithful to fight sin (Salgado Pantoja 2016, p. 46).



Figure 12. Capital depicting a clash between a warrior and a dragon of the portico of the Church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Duratón (Segovia). Late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.



Figure 13. Detail of the sculptural decor of the portico, Hermitage of Nuestra Señora de las Vegas, Requijada (Segovia). Late twelfth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

For its part, a capital of Sotosalbos (Segovia) depicts an extremely aggressive confrontation between two snakes and two basilisks, while a pair of demonic faces look upon the terrifying spectacle from above (Figure 14). Ruiz Montejo (1988, p. 321) noted that the beings of this scene not only share the arcade with other depictions of Evil in the form of beasts or hybrids but also with the salvific message of the Epiphany before the Magi and the incitement to a moral struggle emanating from disputes between warriors or the slaying of the lion by Samson.



Figure 14. Capital depicting a clash between snakes and basilisks of the portico of the Church of San Miguel Arcángel, Sotosalbos (Segovia). Late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

The iconography of the portico of Omeñaca (Soria) depicts harpies, mermaids, dragons, and felines interspersed with simple scenes of vegetation. This roughly carved repertoire acquires relevance due to its association with two other images of profound symbolic charge: the medieval warrior battling a feline and, again, the hero Samson tearing apart the jaws of the Lion of Timna (Quiñones Costa 1984). The invocation of this Old Testament prefiguration of Christ, placed strategically at the doors of the temple, plays a crucial role in the apotropaic discourse (Figure 15). This explains why it is common to find it accompanied by other scenes of combat among the capitals, corbels, or metopes of certain porticoes. There are, apart from these two cases, analogous examples at Barca, Rejas de San Esteban and San Esteban de Gormaz (Soria), Duratón (Segovia), and Rebolledo de la Torre (Burgos).



Figure 15. Interior of the arcade of the portico of the Church of La Concepción de Nuestra Señora, Omeñaca (Soria). Late twelfth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

3.2. *The Combat Against the Deadly Sins*

As noted above, the iconography of the portico of Rebolledo de la Torre is extraordinarily rich, to the point that certain authors consider it a gigantic Psychomachia ([Cana García 1992](#), p. 757). The message represented by an exquisitely carved relief of the Original Sin begins in the large window dominating the western end of the structure where the Fall of Adam and Eve unfolds around the Tree of Knowledge, which acts as an axis dividing the scene. The theme is an archetype denoting the principles and consequences of Good and Evil (Figure 16). The southern arcade unfolds facing this powerful visual warning. Its capitals and corbels are arranged, from west to east, by various visual landmarks that represent a symbolic transition from the distressing consequences of Sin to the hopeful allegories of the fight against the forces of Evil ([Salgado Pantoja 2016](#)).

Placing this scene on the inner face of the portico, or even at the entrance to the church itself, rendered it particularly visible to those either preparing to enter the temple and to *ante portas* penitents waiting for reconciliation ([Vogel 1969](#), pp. 208–13; [Castiñeiras González 1995](#), pp. 310–11). The episode of the Expulsion from Paradise, also visible in other porticoes such as that of Andaluz (Soria), manifests the loss of the original gifts to humans and the beginning of sin. During the High Middle Ages, the Church determined seven deadly sins as a pedagogical mechanism to instil a greater fear of Hell among the population. The apocalyptic beast that decorates the side entrance to the portico of Caracena (Soria), as well as the capital of Tiermes (Soria) ([Salgado Pantoja 2014](#), p. 220), encapsulates the mortal vices blocking the path to salvation. Three (greed, pride, and lust) were in direct opposition to the monastic vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, and, therefore, considered the main causes of condemnation to hell. Envy, wrath, gluttony, and sloth completed the list ([Huerta Huerta 2006](#), p. 93).



Figure 16. Window depicting the scene of Original Sin, portico of the Church of San Julián y Santa Basilisa, Rebolledo de la Torre (Burgos). Dating: c. 1186. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

The instrumentalisation of fear is materialised in porticoes either through censored actions or various visual allegories. Among the most common are representations of lust by means of mermaids. These appear at Paones (Soria), Fuentemizarra (Segovia), and in the Church of San Martín of Segovia holding the ends of their forked tails in a provocative attitude. An alternate version at Pinilla de Jadraque (Guadalajara) features two mermaids and three individuals with long tunics clutching four fish (Figure 17). The hybrid nature of the former and the phallic connotations of the shared element serve as a warning of the consequences of succumbing to the pleasures of seduction (Ruiz Montejo et al. 1992, p. 235). Finally, the repertoires of the porticoes of San Esteban de Gormaz (Soria), bearing multiple allusions to the Muslim world, depict two mermaids dressed in Islamic fashion. These, according to Monteiro Arias (2012, pp. 440–41), were integrated into the scene with a clear anti-Islamic intention linked to the warlike climate the territory was experiencing at the end of the eleventh century. This notion will be explained in more detail in the following section.

Lust is also reflected in the figures of dancers who sway to the music, performing acrobatics similar to those executed by certain minstrels under the title of ‘the dance of Salome’. The presence of these representations on the cornices of Rebolledo de la Torre, Duratón, and Sotosalbos suggests a disapproval of the dances and other popular expressions that accompanied them, while also highlighting, by contrast, the solemnity of the events that take place in the church (Figure 18). An even more explicit way of reflecting and attempting to combat the deadly sin of lust is found in depictions of sex. A scene depicting an individual with a large phallus and a woman who gazes at him while bringing her hand to her genitals appears at the Church of San Millán (Segovia) accompanied by a mermaid shamelessly displaying her sex. Scenes of copulation, onanism, and even animals with erect phalluses appearing in various porticoes are visceral and effective criticisms of lasciviousness. Nuño González (2006, p. 219) notes that this is intentional, as the best way to reprove vices is to expose them morbidly.



Figure 17. Capital depicting fish-mermaids and individuals holding fishes, portico of the Church of La Anunciación, Pinilla de Jadraque (Guadalajara). Late twelfth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.



Figure 18. Corbels depicting dancers and musicians, portico of the Church of San Julián y Santa Basilisa, Rebolledo de la Torre (Burgos). Dating: c. 1186. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

The third capital of the portico of Rebolledo de la Torre, read from west to east, condemns greed through two scenes that could be inspired by the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19–31). The narrative begins with the wake of the miser in the presence of his grieving wife. Two lions bite the mattress of the deceased, while a third enchains his soul, which emerges from the mouth of the corpse in the form of a small human figure. Satan, with the help of his feline henchmen, then drags the miser's soul to hell, where it awaits eternal suffering (Figure 19).



Figure 19. Capital depicting the scene of the death of the miser, portico of the Church of San Julián and Santa Basilisa, Rebolledo de la Torre (Burgos). Dating: c. 1186. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

The opposite face of the capital illustrates the fatal destiny of the miser, who, even after death, must suffer from the weight of a bag full of coins hanging from his neck. This punishment is repeated on a metope at Duratón (Segovia). In this case, it takes on the form of a seated man surrounded by flames clinging to the handle of the bag to prevent it from suffocating him. In contrast to this concise version, that of Rebolledo de la Torre offers more details, notably an individual who undresses the condemned man while the demon that led him to hell clutches his arm. The latter is naked and has a terrifying appearance characterised by degrading and evil symbols, that is, a rooster's head crowned by a flaming crest. The miser raises his hands in contrition, although the remaining elements of the scene make it clear that his repentance has come too late. This dialogue between sin, death, and punishment also appears in other Romanesque works such as the choir of Santa María de Uncastillo (Zaragoza) and the façade of the French Abbey of Saint-Pierre de Moissac (Rodríguez Barral 2005, pp. 24–25; Dale 2009, 2019, pp. 47–88).

The condemned man then appears hauling a gigantic chunk of meat, probably pork, which is a symbol of the other great vice attributed to him by the parable: gluttony. This interpretation appears to be more coherent with the discourse than that offered by Hernando Garrido (1994, p. 201), who suggests that the individual is holding a fish like that in a scene in the Church of Lagraulière (France) (Martin-Bagnaud 1974, pp. 423–24). A capital of the portico of Orejana (Segovia) represents this sin in a similar way, although the punishment, a snake biting the glutton's mouth, is more explicit (Figure 20). The story continues with the depiction of the sinner riding a pig accompanied by a winged demon. This is complemented by two angels sharing a meal, a scene symbolising temperance, that is, a virtue opposite of gluttony that moderates impulses and the excessive desire to satisfy appetite.

The depiction of sin, accompanied by punishments consistent with the fault, serves to reflect on the perishable nature of material objects and their uselessness on the path to eternity. This resource, based on retributive biblical and an even more remote justice, reveals the exemplary tortures that dissuade spectators from immoral behaviour. Thus, the miser and the gluttonous face the pain caused by the respective weight of treasures and food. The lustful woman likewise suffers the painful bite of toads and snakes on her breasts and genitals. In this context, the depiction of the portico of Rebolledo de la Torre of

the weighing of the soul in the presence of Saint Michael and the trickster Satan serves as a reminder of the consequences of evil (Rodríguez Barral 2005, p. 26). The most surprising aspect, in this case, is that the judgment turns out to be negative for the sinner (Figure 21). Thus, two capitals sharing one character render it possible to convey the censure of human concupiscence with clarity, effectiveness, and a notable economy of means (Salgado Pantoja 2016, p. 44).



Figure 20. Capital depicting the allegory of gluttony, portico of the Church of San Juan Bautista, Orejana (Segovia). Early thirteenth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

Greed, gluttony, and lust appear repeatedly in Romanesque art not only to stress their condemnation by moralists but also because their physical manifestations were simple to represent. Furthermore, the profane use of porticoes for trade and leisure justified summoning these sins as these structures facilitated usurious, uncontrolled, and indecorous practices. By contrast, the other deadly sins (pride associated with vanity and arrogance, sloth with the neglect of moral duties, and envy with the desire to possess the qualities of others) were more abstract and difficult to depict iconographically. Their less obvious character prevents determining whether the tearing of the corners of the mouths of the mascarons by the stems of winding plants decorating a capital at Jaramillo de la Fuente embody the sins ‘of the mouth’ of the envious or the proud (Monteira Arias 2005a, pp. 163–65). The same applies to whether the donkey harpist of the Church of San Juan de los Caballeros (Segovia), next to a scene of harvest, intended to contrast laziness with the efforts of work and its rewards (Aragonés Estella 1993, p. 271).



Figure 21. Capital with a depiction of the *Psychostasis*, portico of the Church of San Julián and Santa Basilisa, Rebolledo de la Torre (Burgos), Dating: c. 1186. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

Wrath, in turn, is expressed in medieval exempla and medieval iconography through violence. Contenders in sculpture are often depicted unarmed, wearing similar clothing, thus underlining the equalising nature of an irrational struggle yielding no winner or loser. This symbolic engagement is seen in the corbels of various porticoes, and in a more developed form, in a capital at Canales de la Sierra (La Rioja) (Figure 22). The depiction in question presumably does not aim to express a generic image of a struggle against Evil (De las Heras Núñez 1984, p. 56) but the contrast between two wrathful men and Christ in Majesty. The former fight under a schematic flame and evoke the torments of Hell while, on the opposite side of the capital, two small arches above the Pantocrator allude to New Jerusalem. This game of opposites, juxtaposing sin and salvation, is completed by four apes occupying the vertices that reinforce the warnings against sin (Janson [1952] 1976, pp. 47–48).

The invective against wrath is repeated in a capital at Orejana (Segovia), where plants envelop several monsters with lion heads, horns, bird bodies, goat legs, and a young couple whose interaction appears more aggressive than amorous (Figure 23). The male grabs the female by the neck while she attempts to destabilise him by stomping on him. The swollen eyes and disoriented looks of the characters suggest a blind and irrational fight, while the untamed tangle of plants seizes and strangles them, a symbolic reflection of the loss of control associated with wrath (Ruiz Montejo 1988, p. 260). In the background, once again, are the repeated invectives against rackets and fights in the porticoes, expressed by various councils and synods.



Figure 22. Capital with the depiction of the deadly sin of wrath on the portico of the hermitage of San Cristóbal, Canales de la Sierra (La Rioja). Twelfth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.



Figure 23. Capital with the depiction of the deadly sin of wrath among plant stems, portico of the Church of San Juan Bautista, Orejana (Segovia). Early thirteenth century. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

3.3. *The Infidel as a Target*

The iconography of porticoes contains numerous references to the three medieval social classes with representatives of each carrying out their daily tasks. The peasants harvest the grain, pick grapes, collect fruit, tend to livestock, and slaughter swine. Others point to crafts such as woodcutters, potters, and blacksmiths, or to merchants, who devote their holidays to rest and leisure. The clergy, meanwhile, conducts their religious functions, reading and studying the *scriptoria*. Finally, the *bellatores* play an active and indispensable role in enforcing the laws and maintaining the social, political, and religious order. Their weapons and armour, and their struggle against the forces of Evil, are symbols not only of physical power and social status but of both earthly and divine missions.

Clashes between knights are one of the most common themes in both Spanish epic literature and Romanesque art and often form part of the visual repertoires of Castilian porticoes. This type of iconogram not only evidences the prominent function of the nobility in medieval society but also reflects the tense climate pervading the Iberian Peninsula between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. [Monteira Arias \(2005b, p. 82\)](#) indicates that the eschatological struggle between Good and Evil has an earthly parallel in this spatiotemporal framework, notably the Christian and Muslim conflict. Thus, this simple and understandable iconographic resource extrapolated to artistic language served both as a salvific and political message vindicating the figure of the knight as the leader of the struggle against the most perfidious and perverse forces.

These highly allegorical scenes of combat are quite common in Spanish Romanesque art since, as noted, this art emerged in a society committed to the (Re)conquest of al-Andalus. This military conflict established the Christian cavalry as guarantor of the defence of the binomial Church–God alliance, and turned to Holy War, a notion defended by [\(Bernardo de Claraval \[c. 1130\] 1994, p. 176\)](#) as the main tool to eradicate religious adversaries. As a result, the confrontation between virtue and sin was a role frequently assumed by *Miles Christi*, defenders of the true faith and against the Muslim infidel. This approach explains the presence of plastic depictions of combat in Romanesque porticoes that usually favour the Christian knight.

In order to identify and differentiate the contenders, the promoters of the works and their sculptors relied on a wide variety of visual resources. Particularly noteworthy are details regarding the portrayal of horses, clothing, weapons, and even the gestures conveyed by the warriors ([Ruiz Maldonado 1976, pp. 78–80](#); [García Flores 2001, p. 269](#)). These aspects are evidenced on a capital of the portico of Nieva (Segovia) where the scene of struggle is complemented by two dragons facing each other. The same can be observed at Tiermes and Caracena (Soria) (Figure 24), where two squires are equally distinguished by different features ([Palomero Aragón 1990, p. 357](#)).

The richness of the workmanship and composition of this type of scene is again highlighted at Rebolledo de la Torre (Figure 25) where a Muslim horseman, equipped with a buckler, butts his lance against the oblong shield of his adversary while suffering a fatal blow of a lance that pierces his helmet ([Monteira Arias 2012, p. 246](#)). The horse of the vanquished halts abruptly, while the virtuous soldier maintains his triumphant gallop, aware that exterminating an infidel or heretic is a moral duty in defence of God and the Church ([Larrañaga Zulueta 2008a, p. 134](#)). According to [Núñez Rodríguez \(1996, pp. 120–21\)](#), this capital depicts the profession of *milite* associated with three moral aspects leading to salvation: his penitential atonement, his baptism, and his position in the struggle as a man of faith.



Figure 24. Capital depicting the combat between knights, portico of the Church of San Pedro, Caracena (Soria). Dating: c. 1180–1190. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.



Figure 25. Capital depicting the combat between two knights of the portico of the Church of San Julián and Santa Basilisa, Rebolledo de la Torre (Burgos). Dating: c. 1186. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

As might be expected, the military and religious conflict that took place in Iberia during the Middle Ages resonates intensely in a vast number of porticoes, although the two of San Esteban de Gormaz (Soria) contain the greatest number of explicit references. These Romanesque galleries contain more than a dozen religious images dating to the moment of their construction, that is, the end of the eleventh century. On this occasion, the daily life of this borderland territory under dispute between the Christian and al-Andalus rulers is reflected in scenes featuring musicians, clerics, or peasants dressed in the fashion of the time, as well as numerous references to soldiers in armour, bearing helmets and lances, armed with crossbows, mounted on horseback, or sounding a horn as a warning signal (Gaya Nuño 1946, pp. 45–50).

Especially representative of all these images from the High Middle Ages, depicting the life of villages along the Christian and Muslim border, are those occupying the first two capitals of the southern arcade of the portico of San Miguel. The two contiguous and opposite pieces each reveal fortifications consisting of cylindrical drums and typical Hispano-Muslim horseshoe arches (Figure 26). The soldiers' heads project above the upper guardhouse between the battlements, while others in military attire walk around at street level. All are exceptional graphic evidence of the militarised panorama experienced in this Castilian territory during those decades (Monteira Arias 2005b, pp. 56–58; Salgado Pantoja 2012).



Figure 26. Capitals depicting fortifications and warriors on the portico of the Church of San Miguel, San Esteban de Gormaz (Soria). Dating: c. 1081. Photograph: J. A. Salgado.

4. Conclusions

The Spanish Romanesque parish porticoes, as intermediate features occupying the area between the unalterable grounds of sacred temples and the spaces serving a variety of functions in the villages, exemplify the clash between the terrestrial and celestial worlds that makes up a great part of medieval sensibility and imagination. Based on this premise, this article has explored their main formal, functional, symbolic, and iconographic aspects and concluded that the guiding thread of the discourse is the concept of struggle.

The first section of this study, based on material and textual evidence, delved into the tense relationship between the ecclesiastical authorities and the village communities about the functions assigned to these porticoes. The persistent condemnations expressed in the synodal and conciliar records even as late as the sixteenth century bear witness to

the coexistence of paraliturgical and funerary activities with other civic and recreational functions that arose spontaneously among the populace that were strictly reprobated by the authorities.

This analysis has likewise unveiled certain particularly relevant issues. One is that the success of this architectural type, particularly in the Castilian Extremadura territory during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, must be interpreted in the light of a plurality of functions and their adaptation to the spiritual and earthly needs of the parishioners. In fact, the dispute between the ecclesiastical power and the common populace had a significant impact as when the porticoes began to lose their official and supervening functions, especially from the sixteenth century onwards, they began, in general, to be shortened, transformed, or completely dismantled.

After addressing the structural and functional issues, the second section of this article focused on symbolic and iconographic dimensions by delving into the scenes where the underlying moral conflict translates into an allegorical confrontation between the forces of Good and Evil. Three broad categories were identified depending on the formula adopted to characterise the battle. These are the struggle of rational humans against irrational beasts and hybrids, the presentation of the consequences of sin, and armed clashes between knights. Although none of these themes common to the Romanesque are exclusive to porticoes, their reiteration suggests that they were deliberately incorporated to intensify the admonitory and salvific messages at the doors of temples.

These visual devices, combined with other biblical or symbolic scenes, yielded clear, accessible messages. Moreover, they did so from the walls of structures viewed by the parishioners not only before or after attending liturgical services but also during other daily ceremonies and events. This approach reinforces the notion that these porticoes also served as an important vehicle of communication and moral education for the populace. Future research should not only further explore the impact of these visual elements on the everyday life of medieval communities but also on their legacy surviving in contemporary culture.

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