

Book Review: Elizabeth Valdez del Álamo, *Palace of the Mind: The Cloister of Silos and Spanish Sculpture of the Twelfth Century* (Brepols, Turnhout, 2012), 532pgs, 139 plates, 176 images (ISBN# 978-2-503-51711-7).

By Mickey Abel, University of North Texas

Elizabeth Valdez del Álamo's much anticipated study of the cloister at Santo Domingo de Silos is a tour de force in the grand monograph tradition. Large in format at approximately 10 x 12 inches and richly illustrated with over 300 images and plates, one might at first glance confuse it with a "coffee table" edition. The reading of its 400 pages of dense text, coupled with the 20 pages of bibliography, proves otherwise. While it is clear that the writing of this *opus magmas* was a labor of love, years in the making, the vast and thoughtfully organized material contained within its binding reaches far beyond what one might expect of a monograph, seeking, as the title suggests, to contextualize the sculptural production at Silos within the larger landscape of Spain in the twelfth century. Anyone familiar with the historiography of Romanesque architectural sculpture knows how contentious and politically fraught a terrain this is, with volumes written on just the "Spain or Toulouse" issue. Undeterred, however, by the weight of the field's heavy-hitters—the likes of Porter, Mâle, Berenson, Whitehill, Schapiro, Werkmeister, and Williams--each having staked their claims of authority over this well-worn territory, Valdez del Álamo demonstrates quite amply her own credentials in the grand tradition

of stylistic “connoisseurship.” Importantly, however, she takes us deeper than this broad, visually comparative approach to ground her innovative iconographic reading of the sculptural program in an equally impressive knowledge of the supporting texts, to include the ancient sources, those of the early church, as well as those contemporary and local found in the monastery’s own library. Thus building a solid textual foundation, Valdez del Álamo goes about the work of contextualizing the visual and textual readings within both the liturgical practice of the monastery and the greater political and ecclesiastical histories of the region, most significantly the period of reform surrounding the transition from the Old Hispanic rite to that sanctioned by Rome.

What makes this complex historical tapestry comprehensible is Valdez del Álamo’s insightful positioning of the reader within the physical parameters of the architecture. Staging her interpretation of the iconography through the monastic community’s ritual movements, as well as their perceptions of the significant political and ecclesiastical changes occurring around them, she facilitates our “seeing” the sculpture through the eyes of the monks with whom it would have been the most familiar. Proceeding incrementally, she moves the reader in a systematic manner through the cloister and church, developing her analysis chronologically in tandem with the building’s phased production.

Key in this process are del Álamo’s beautifully rich descriptions, which in and of themselves make this book a great teaching tool. Seemingly a lost art, the tonalities and expressive color conveyed in this work is reflective of the many years of patient looking and detailed recording that can only be accomplished on site. Also indicative of this on-site familiarity is the fruitful recognition of the connective sightlines and visual correlations linking various imagery, which serve to multiply the avenues for meaning. Complicit in this

multivalency of meaning is del Álamo's convincing argument that because the patron saint and early abbot, Santo Domingo, was originally buried in the north gallery—today marked with a raised cenotaph-- the cloister was most likely open to lay pilgrims. It is therefore with the addition of this audience that she employs the corner pier reliefs as her iconographic guideposts, illustrating that although there appears to have been no “prescribed lines of perambulation,” the pier reliefs are “thematically related to accommodate a cloister that was passed through in a variety of directions,” by a greater variety of people than generally believed.

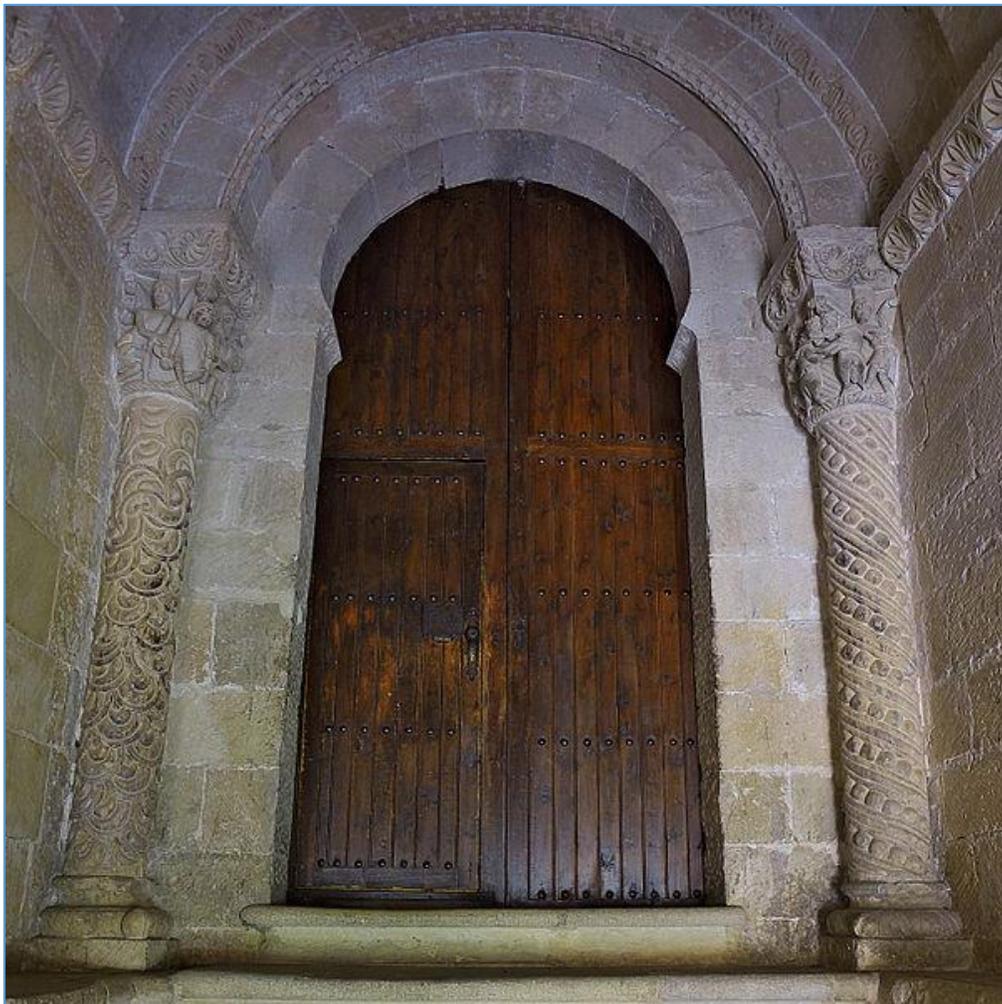
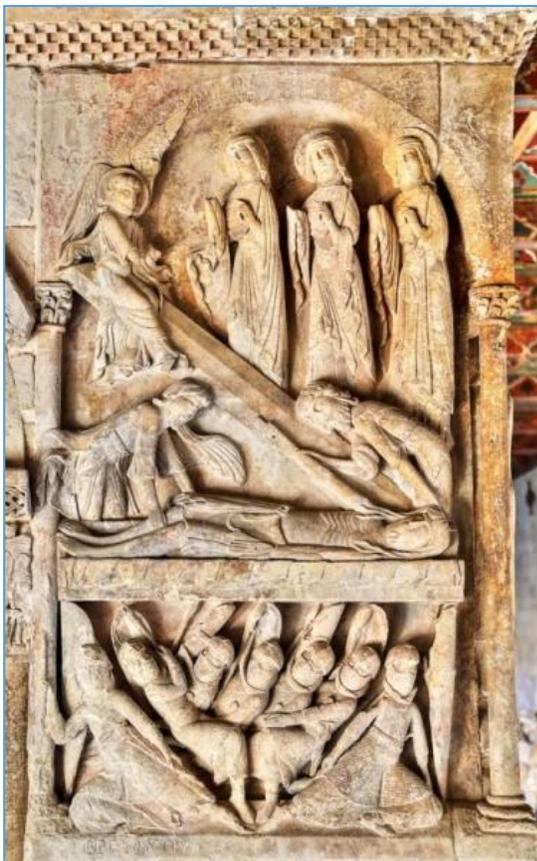


Figure 1 Puerta de las Vírgenes. Monasterio de Santo Domingo de Silos.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

The direction of the guided tour provided by our author begins with the East gallery, moving to the north, past the Chapter Room, toward the “hub” of activity at the much-debated Puerta de las Vírgenes, (**Figure 1**) located under the arm of the church’s north transept at the northeast corner of the cloister. Arguing that the capitals along this alley, with their various animals and knotted interlace, would have reminded the monks of the price one pays for misbehavior, del Álamo suggests that these sculptural images would have signaled the virtues of self-control and discipline, no doubt a hallmark of the lessons reiterated within the chapter meetings. Appropriately, this northward journey brought the monk to the northeast set of pier reliefs depicting The Descent from the Cross, and then The Entombment as one turns the corner. Linking these images to themes of Resurrection and Triumph over Death, del Álamo brings the pilgrim into the picture, noting the correlation between these themes and the pilgrim’s destination--Domingo’s original burial site just to the west on the north gallery. Indicative of the



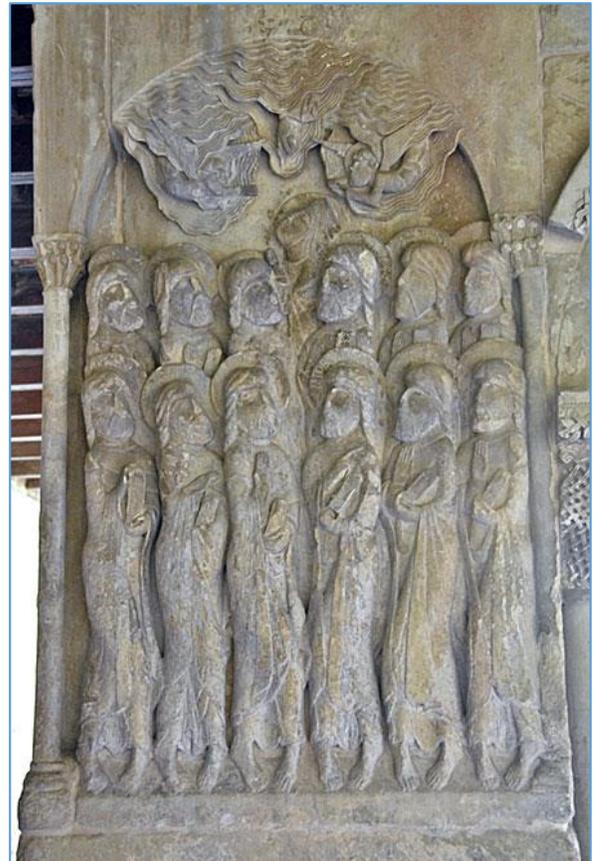
level of detail found throughout the book is her intriguing analysis of the Three Marys in The Entombment relief. (**Figure 2**) She compares this imagery to the description of the liturgical

Figure 2 The Entombment Relief. Monasterio de Santo Domingo de Silos. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

office for Easter found in a Breviary and an Antiphony, both of which were rubricated for liturgical performance, and both produced at Silos

shortly after the instigation of Reform in 1080. Of particular interest is that this may be one of the earliest performances of the *Quem Quaeritis* dialogue between the angel Gabriel and the Marys, indicating the significance of this ritual in Silo's liturgical calendar, particularly as it relates to the tomb of Domingo. Finding precedent for the sculpted imagery in an illustrated Homiliarium, also produced at the monastery, del Álamo's analysis serves to highlight the rich resources available to the author. If only all monastic libraries were so well preserved!!

Similarly multivalent are the next set of reliefs at the northwest corner pier, where del Álamo stresses the miraculous nature of the confirmation that comes through Christ's return, which she sees in both the Journey to Emmaus and Doubting Thomas imagery. Calling these episodes "Appearances," she shows them to be representative of the dialogues on faith and



spiritual pilgrimage that characterized the monastic enterprise at Silos, and suggests that they introduce a sequence of sculpted capitals that stress the Apostles' sensory experience of Christ after resurrection. This series culminates in the southeast corner reliefs, which depict the Pentecost (**Figure 3**) and Ascension. Summarizing the monastic point of view, del Álamo sees this track as embodying "the promise of resurrection by means of contact with the sacred...and an emphasis on communal, apostolic

Figure 3 Pentecost Relief. Monasterio de Santo Domingo de Silos. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

experience,” where the “various elements operate to transform the entire cloister into a symbolic Jerusalem.”

What is missing in this tour is, of course, the pier reliefs of the southwest corner, which fall into a slightly later building phase, and a wholly different sculptural style. In this second atelier we are to understand a purposeful, post-reform joining of the old with the new. Bucking the long-held notion that these later sculptures represented a resistance to the new Roman rite, del Álamo makes the case that the imagery of these reliefs—the Annunciation-Coronation and the Tree of Jesse with its explicit Trinitarian depiction--were meant to signal a harmonious unity. Her treatment of these two topics is complex and richly documented—it is undoubtedly where del Álamo is at her best. Sadly, one fears that few will tread deep enough into the book to find these gems of analysis. While some of it has been previously published in article form, the benefit of reading this work in conjunction with the analysis of the other cloister reliefs is the sense of how it worked as whole. Bringing it all together, del Álamo states that “rather than being ordered in a linear narrative...the Christological reliefs have a reciprocal relationship with their locations...so that ritual and daily actions taking place there are magnified by a corresponding visual reference to God.”

While I have covered only the highlights, leaving much to be discovered, the book's final chapter seeks to place Silos and its sculptural program chronologically and stylistically in relation to other Spanish Romanesque sites. After the exquisite climax of the contextualized iconography of the previous chapters, this feels like a reversion to a previous era of art-historical scholarship. Almost as if our author cannot resist showing-up the old authorities at their own game, this seems like connoisseurship at its best, and unfortunately feels like an unnecessary

appendage begging the next scholar to come along and reshuffle the chronological deck. Despite this minor setback, the reading of Elizabeth Valdez del Álamo's weighty *Palace of the Mind* is as a cloister might be described--that is, a place fit for contemplation and mental digestion.

There is much here to be consumed with great pleasure. 🍷