The Charlemagne window at Chartres is one of the best known and yet most mysterious stained glass compositions in existence. Despite much careful scholarship, many details in the window continue to puzzle us. We cannot be sure of having all the pertinent texts, nor should we always hold the artist responsible for those we have. The window is full of characters whose names we may never know: choir boys, councillors, spear carriers, truncated pagans in heaps—and the continuing debate on such identifications has reached the point of diminishing returns.

Research on visual lexicons should now be balanced by consideration of the syntax, the composition, and the rhetoric of the work as a whole. Following such an analysis, the remaining identification problems may assume a more answerable form. What, then, are the modes of organization to be observed in the window, and how do these condition its representation?

The simplest formal principle (and perhaps the most arbitrary as well) is the sequence of the narrative. As we "read" the window, we in effect remove the medallions from their constellated array, and relocate them through time in the order of the legend they illustrate. Familiar difficulties beset this way of seeing. Since the medallions are not numbered, we normally view them in a conventional pattern, say left-to-right, bottom-to-top. At Chartres, however, we will often need to depart from this pattern in order to follow the order of the narrative. Our reading will be further troubled by the very symmetry of the window, by its tendency to focus on the central diamonds and circles and to subordinate the periphery. This centripetal configuration is ideally suited to typological commentary such as that found in the Good Samaritan window at Sens, where each centrally-placed scene from the parable is interpreted in the medallions surrounding it. In other windows, where the presentation is more strictly narrational, the arrangement of shapes in groups may produce a highly arbitrary segmentation of the material, an exacting scansion to which the artist must happily or awkwardly conform.
The fact is that the Charlemagne window "conforms" remarkably well, and indeed comes to life within an intelligible geometry. Above the donors' panel, the window presents three homologous groups: each is composed of four quarter-round medallions clustered around a central diamond, and each is surmounted by a central, isolated roundel (see plates). The composition culminates in a fourth group whose uppermost panels are reduced to fit the curvature of the apex. This layout corresponds to clear divisions in the narrative. Let us examine each in turn.

The lowest group presents the delivery of Jerusalem from the pagans: on the lower right, Charlemagne appears to the sleeping emperor Constantine in a dream-vision prefiguring the Frankish emperor's arrival; on the lower left, the news of Constantine's dream reaches Charlemagne, who confers with two bishops; on the upper left we have the battle; in the center, Constantine receives the victorious Charlemagne, and, on the upper right, gives him a present of relics; finally, in the upper central roundel, Charles places these on the altar at Aix-la-Chapelle. The whole group of scenes is tightly bound together by the figure of Charles, who appears in all six medallions, and we have little difficulty in matching them to incidents related in the eleventh-century Latin narrative of Charlemagne's legendary Jerusalem pilgrimage.3 Visually, these six medallions constitute a first module that establishes an articulatory pattern to be followed throughout the composition.

The second group in the window abandons the Jerusalem pilgrimage and turns to the so-called Chronicle of Pseudo-Turpin.4 It relates a second story which is only tenuously connected to the first, and which occupies different legendary time and space. We understand in general terms that the Spanish expedition that is to be illustrated occurred at some vague period after the completion of the Jerusalem voyage, but the literature is not clear on the exact chronology and makes no real attempt to articulate the connection. The real relationship between them is analogous to that of two different poems in a chanson de geste cycle; they are equally centrifugal proliferations of the legend away from its core.
PLATE I: The Charlemagne Window at Chartres, lower portion.
PLATE II: The Charlemagne Window at Chartres, central portion.
PLATE III: The Charlemagne Window at Chartres, upper portion.
The geometry of the window does, however, encourage us to make comparisons between the narratives and to discover their points of correspondence. In the lower left medallion of the second group, Charles is talking to two followers, perhaps wise men, about the Milky Way visible above their heads, just as he has talked with two bishops in the corresponding frame of the first group. More striking still is the appearance of Saint James to the sleeping Charles, shown on the lower right; it is an exact parallel to the appearance of Charles to Constantine in the first group, which is also placed in the lower right. St. James announces to Charles that his mission is to deliver the saint's tomb. In the central diamond the expedition sets out; above left, Charles prays for victory; above right, the city of Pamplona falls; finally, in the upper circle, Charles oversees the construction of a church.

Several problems of identification arise. The upper two quarter-round medallions taken together reproduce the fall of a city thought to be Pamplona; on the Charlemagne reliquary at Aachen, this city is clearly identified by an inscription. At Aachen, however, the hand of God causes the city walls to fall miraculously; at Chartres the walls remain standing, and a mounted Christian pursues a pagan through an open gate. The Aachen reliquary faithfully illustrates the version given in Pseudo-Turpin, while the Charlemagne window apparently departs from it. Lejeune and Stiennon therefore argue that the city at Chartres is not Pamplona but Noble, "the subject of a chanson de geste now lost."  

No visual evidence confirms this supposition, which moreover "ignores the narrative sequence of the window" and the order of events as they are given in Pseudo-Turpin. What is clear is that the Chartres window adheres to the Aachen schema: in both representations, Charles's army with the banner is behind him on the left; on the right, a watchman in a tower above the city sounds his horn. It is true that at Aachen, following Pseudo-Turpin, the city falls by the hand of God, while at Chartres a Christian knight forces an entry; but in both cases, we perceive that the prayer of Charles is causally associated with the taking of the city, and in that understanding the images fulfill their didactic purpose.
We need to acknowledge at Chartres a capability of originality. The window is not bound to follow Pseudo-Turpin; and where the representation departs from Pseudo-Turpin, it is not simply bound over to another authority. The artist—individual or collective—referred to visual as well as literary traditions and has interpreted both with considerable freedom. He has achieved communication not solely by exact and recognizable reference to sources, but also by his composition, by placing images together in contexts within which each obtains its meaning and identity.

What has not been acknowledged in the criticism so well summarized by Clark Maines is that each context is defined in the window by a group of medallions, a spatial unity that corresponds to a segment of narrative. The first group presents, as we saw, the delivery of Jerusalem. The second is equally coherent: it narrates the expedition to Pamplona and forms a complete episode beginning with Charlemagne's vision of St. James on the lower right and ending with the construction of a church in the central roundel above. Within each group, "in context," we readily recognize the major events by their relationships to each other. The city being taken here is indeed Pamplona, not Noble; the victory is preceded by prayer and followed by the building of a church, as Pseudo-Turpin confirms it should be.8

It is perhaps in the third group that the visual organization most forcefully shapes the material presented within it. Here the artist has brought together three different sequences of events: the miracle of the flowering lances on the lower right is followed by a Christian victory in battle on the left; in the center and on the upper left, Roland duels with Ferragut; the battle of Roncevaux occupies the final pair of medallions, with Charles riding back to France on the upper right, while Roland blows his horn and breaks his sword in the upper central roundel.

The association between martyrdom and Christian victory unifies this complex group. In the first frame, the lances of those who are about to die burst into flower above the heads of the sleeping soldiers. Clark Maines has noted that this prefiguration is not immediately realized, since there is no representation of Christian dead in the battle
scene on the left. Yet the symbolism of the flowering lances has implicit pertinence to the battle scene, and also to the chivalric-theological joust with Ferragut. The promise is explicitly fulfilled at Roncevaux, where the figure of Roland stands above the bodies of the dead, as he blows his horn and so hastens his own death. This composition boldly foreshortens the data given in Pseudo-Turpin. The artist has brought together events which were originally widely separated, in the course of adapting the material to a newly meaningful design.

The final group at the apex presents, on the left, the figure of Baudouin giving water to Roland, and, on the right, his announcement to Charles of the hero's death. The central, final medallion shows the mass of Saint Giles. What is its meaning in this connection? According to the legend, the emperor had committed a sin which he refused to confess but which was revealed to Saint Giles in a letter brought by an angel during the celebration of the mass. Earlier sources, such as the Vita Sancti Aegidii and the twelfth-century Vie de saint Gilles of Guillaume de Berneville, leave that sin unspecified; the Icelandic Karlamagnús saga (1230-1250), composed after the making of the window at Chartres, identifies it however as incest, from which Roland was born. A fresco (ca. 1200) at Le Loroux-Bottereau shows the confession of Charles together with the subsequent marriage of his sister Gisela to Roland's "putative" father. It seems therefore likely that this part of the legend was known to the artist at Chartres, who has placed the scene of the Saint Giles mass in context with the news of Roland's death. Lejeune and Stiennon perceive in fact a direct allusion here:

Roland, by his martyrdom, redeems his shameful origin which is perhaps the reason for his dauntless lack of moderation, while Charlemagne, by his tears and his repentance, as well as his battles in defense of the faith, gains absolution for the sin of his youth.

This interpretation seems to me possible and consistent with the compositional method of the artist; it is however an abstract construction which is difficult to confirm in visual terms. More immediately clear is the relationship between Charles's bowed head—an attitude of grief as well as contrition—and the news he has received. Whether or not incest
is involved, the artist has chosen to link Charles's secret sin with the
disaster at Roncevaux. The emperor is to receive absolution, and his
acknowledgement dramatically focuses the final configuration.

Let us now step back to look at the window as a whole: what are
the principles of its organization? Narrative is the first, the sequencing
of images through a created temporal dimension, the order we normally
seek to follow. Inextricably involved in narrative is the process of recog-
nition, identification through evocation; here at least two different
literary sources come into play, together with oral and visual traditions.
Eclecticism is of the essence in this work. The artist has taken wide
liberties in the selection of his materials, and has imposed new structure
upon them.

Once liberated from its sources, the composition emerges in its own
coherence. The window divides into homologous groups of medallions,
corresponding to segments of narrative, each group functioning within
its own autonomy. This "strophic" articulation is highlighted by visual
rhymes: the sleeping Constantine dreams of Charlemagne in the lower
right panel of the first group; St. James appears to the sleeping
Charlemagne in the same position in the second group; and in the third,
the lower right panel figures the sleeping army and their flowering
lances in the same schema. Each of these three groups begins with a
miracle/dream prefiguration and proceeds through battle and victory to
fulfillment in the upper central roundel. Above Charles's head at the
altar, in the concluding scene of the first group, there hangs the sym-
bolic horn, to be sounded by Roland in the corresponding roundel of
the third group above. Through the center of the composition a theme
of offering or sacrifice emerges: relics are offered following Jerusalem, a
church is built following Pamplona, Roland is sacrificed at Roncevaux,
and Saint Giles consummates the development with the celebration of
mass in the apex.

One must of course avoid over-systematic interpretation of such
parallels, which contribute to the window an element of mystery rather
than a basis for rational elucidation. Within each group, the images
coalesce into contexts and form more immediate relationships. The
favorite technique is pairing: the upper left and right panels of the
second group portray together the fall of Pamplona, following the schema found at Aachen; the two Ferragut panels also combine to reproduce a traditional schema, as is confirmed by the bas-relief at San Zeno in Verona. Still more expressive is the pair of images representing the battle of Roncevaux. Charles rides over the mountains, returning to *douce France* with the army, while behind and above him, Roland strikes the rock and blows his horn. Two different moments are shown in one frame, and—equally remarkable—the same moment is shown in both frames. The two panels are not sequenced but simultaneous: Charles indeed hears the sound of the horn, and what separates him from Roland is not time, but space. In this context, even the interval between the two panels takes on figurative meaning; the arrangement of images becomes virtually an image in itself.

The Charlemagne window at Chartres communicates on the balance point between two modes of understanding: on the one hand its reference to external, identifiable sources; and on the other its composition, the internal economy within which images refer to each other and so identify themselves. Meaning is generated in both dimensions; to sense this reciprocity is to gain insight into the work as a whole.

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1 This study originated as a paper given at The Thirteenth Conference on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 6, 1978.


Ibid., p. 194.

Clark Maines, loc. cit., p. 811.


Clark Maines, loc. cit., p. 812-814. Maines would perceive here a "second Spanish expedition" comprised of panels 13-15, i.e., the church construction roundel, followed by the battle on the left, followed by the miracle of the flowering lances on the right.

The joust scene does not literally represent the Pseudo-Turpin account of their combat, which takes place mainly on foot, with swords and stones. The image conveys rather the whole of their encounter, which is a theological disputation as well as a passage of arms.


Ibid., p. 197.

Lejeune and Stiennon, vol. I, p. 72-75, vol. II, figs. 47-48; see also vol. I, p. 92-95, vol. II, figs. 61-67 for other examples in the same tradition. This evidence confirms completely the present placement of the joust panel in the window.