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Justice and Judgment in the Romanesque Column-Bearing Lions of Northern Italy

This article examines the symbolism of the column-bearing lion from the Romanesque *protiri* (porch portals) of northern Italy. It seeks to explore the earliest surviving examples of *protiri* in Modena Cathedral, Ferrara Cathedral, San Zeno in Verona, and Verona Cathedral. These porch portals have a very distinctive design, consisting of one or two stories supported by columns resting on lions and other figures. Column-bearing lions in front of church porch portals acted as liminal markers of a performative space that served both sacred and secular purposes. In fact, the Romanesque *protiro* marked the main entrance to the church, but it was also used for a variety of secular activities, most notably juridical, economic, and administrative, which took place in the square, often in front of large audiences. My research seeks to demonstrate that these lions and the portals they embellish were associated with sacred and civic courts of law.

A long-standing tradition ranging from ancient Oriental religions to Christianity proves that the lion has always been a symbol for royal power and secular justice. Not only was the lion associated with secular rulership for its character traits and physical aspect, but by extension, it was often used as a symbol of justice. Among the most notable examples is a Romanesque lion from Bari, which marked the place of a medieval open-air law court. The animal was lying next to a column, and it still retains a collar with the inscription *custos iusticie* (justice keeper).

The association of the medieval lion with justice is also emphasized by the secular use of the porch portal. Before the birth of the town hall with its chambers of legal hearing, church porch portals often served as law courts, where law was enacted *inter leones* (between lions). An 1140 document pertaining to Ferrara Cathedral confirms that on the south entrance legal procedures were held *sub portico* (under the porch).

If the presence of the lion on Romanesque church porch portals had a juridical function in the context of the square, it also carried a deeper meaning when it was related to the holy. Both biblical and exegetical sources have attributed a variety of meanings to the lion, the two most contradictory ones being Christ, the impartial judge of the Last Judgment, and Satan, a symbol of infernal power and death. The evidence however suggests an association of the column-bearing lion with Christ. In the Medieval *Bestiary* it is reported that one of the lion's most distinctive characteristics is compassion: the beast spares the life of every creature that prostrates in front of it. According to this trait, it is possible associating the lion with Christ-judge, merciful with the repentant sinner. This interpretation can also be found in the visual arts. In fact, the tympanum of Jaca Cathedral, in Spain, displays an allegorical representation of the Last Judgment, where two confronted lions face the monogram of Christ. The lions from Jaca stand for Christ's judicial power and they provide an important link between Christ, the lion, and the theme of judgment.

Interestingly enough, during the Middle Ages, the iconography of the Last Judgment was a common motif of churches all over Europe. In France and in the regions north of the Alps it was located on the tympanum, above the portal, where Christ appeared in human form as judge surrounded by the ranks of apostles and saints. In Romanesque Aragon, the Last Judgment appeared on the tympanum, above the portal, but was rather an allegorical representation, where two lions symbolized Christ-judge in his two acts of sparing and condemning. Unlike the portals of France and Spain, Italian Romanesque church portals did not display Last Judgment scenes on the tympanum. It appears that in Italy the absence of the Last Judgment was offset by the presence of the column-bearing lion, which stood as a symbolic representation of the impartiality of the judge-Christ overpowering evil. The column-bearing lion can be read as a messenger of justice in stone.