Vagina dentata: The Woman with a Lion’s Head and its Context within the Romanesque Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela

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Resum

En un capitel del transepto de la catedral de Santiago de Compostela realizado entre 1100 y 1110 aparece una curiosa representación de una mujer con una cabeza de león entre sus piernas. Un detenido análisis de su iconografía, de su estilo y de los modelos de los que pudo haber echado mano el escultor, permite identificar en ella un tema poco frecuente en las artes figurativas del románico: la vagina dentata. Analizando también el contexto topográfico en el que se encuentra —inmediatamente detrás de la puerta de las Platerías—, su relación con los capiteles figurados que la acompañan en los pilares vecinos, así como otros aspectos como su audiencia o las posibles intenciones que subyacen tras la elección de esa iconografía comprenderemos como esta imagen es el centro de un programa iconográfico que glosa, en este espacio postliminar, el mensaje de la portada meridional de la basílica.

Paraules clau: Catedral de Santiago de Compostela, vagina dentata, metamorfosis, bestiario, sheela-na-gig, escultura románica

Abstract

In the transept of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, a capital carved between 1100 and 1110 features a curious representation of a woman with a lion’s head between her legs. A careful analysis of its iconography, its style, and the models that the sculptor may have used has allowed us to identify a theme that is unusual in the figurative arts of the Romanesque period: the vagina dentata. The analysis of its topographical context —it is located immediately behind the façade of Platerías— its relationship with the figurative capitals on the neighbouring pillars, as well as other aspects such as the audience for which it was meant, and the underlying causes for the choice of this iconography, will further our understanding of the importance of this image for an iconographic programme that glossed the message of the basilica’s southern portal in this liminal space.

Key Words: Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, vagina dentata, metamorphosis, bestiary, sheela-na-gig, Romanesque sculpture

1 This work falls within the framework of the research project “Voces, espacios y representaciones femeninas en la lírica gallego-portuguesa” (PID2019-108910GB-C22), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.
In the southern end of the great transept of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, on one of the pillars next to the counterfaçade of the southern gate —also known as Façade of Platerías— there is a capital that depicts a long-haired female figure holding open the jaws of a monstrous head that emerges between her legs. (Fig. 1)

The composition of the capital follows a pattern characteristic of the workshop of sculptors who worked on the transept of the cathedral in the first decade of the twelfth century. It is the typical foliate capital with large leaves decorated on the underside with relief palmettes and scrolls at the top, and featuring an animal or human figure on the front face of the basket. Within this space and time span —between 1100 and 1110— the closest parallel to the example in question that appears related to the same sculptural workshop is the foliate capital depicting the Apostle James on its front face, which is located on the opposite side of the transept, on the central pillar in front of the counterfaçade of the north door (NODAR 2016: 17-42).

Despite its privileged position, the capital on which this article focuses has received little attention, both in terms of the identification of the theme it depicts and of its interpretation. In his 1934 seminal essay, *El arte románico español. Esquema de un libro*, M. Gómez Moreno saw in this capital, which he attributed to the hand of the Master of Platerías, the “well-known Samson astride a lion, holding its jaws open” (GÓMEZ 1934: 129). In 1938, G. Gaillard simply mentions it among the capitals at the ends of the transept, which he acknowledges as particularly remarkable, stating that they “sont particuliérement soignés” and adding that “Entre les grandes feuilles décoratives on voit (...) une femme asise portant entre ses genoux écartés un tête de monstre” (GAILLARD, 1938: 181). In 1965, in his article on the church of Santiago de Taboada (Silleda) in Pontevedra, J. R. Fernández Oxea, who was familiar with the work of M. Gómez Moreno, identified this capital with the theme of the fight between Samson and the lion and presented it as a precedent for the tympanum of that temple (FERNÁNDEZ OXEA 1965: 16-17).

It was not until the last decades of the twentieth century that this capital began to arouse greater interest and became the subject of more attentive and documented stylistic and iconographic interpretations, albeit within the framework of general overviews. Thus, in his 1990 book, *La sculpture romane de la route de Saint-Jacques*, M. Durliat published the hitherto most comprehensive study of the sculpture of the Compostela transept. He agreed with Gaillard’s identification of the figure in the capital as a woman who “a relevé sa robe d’une manière provocante pour s’asseoir à califourchon sur le cou d’un lion.” Moreover, he rightly related the image of our capital to contemporary creations from the workshop of the *Porte Miégeville* at Saint-Sernin de Toulouse, specifically to the console depicting two women riding lions (DURLIAT 1990: 322). However, Durliat must not have been aware at the time of the article by S. Moralejo,
“Artistas, patronos y público en el arte del Camino de Santiago,” published only five years earlier, which ends, precisely, with a brief but intense study of this capital, in which the author clearly identified the representation of a woman who was not riding an animal but had “her lower belly turned into a monstrous lion’s head” (Moralejo 1985: 422).

Certainly, at first glance, and taking into account the height of the capital and the perspective of a viewer standing in front of the pillar, on the ground, it is easy to see a human figure riding an animal. Moreover, the fact that most of the authors mentioned above identified it in this way is not altogether surprising if we bear in mind that this was a ‘framing theme’ (Rahmenthemen) that formed part of the Iberian-Toulousan sculptural repertoire around 1100. In fact, the cathedral of Compostela features what is probably the best and most monumental example of this theme: the renowned acroterion of the chapel of Santa Fe, in the ambulatory (Castiñeiras 2020:74-81). Let us now look at the figurative and textual references that lie behind this suggestive female figure.

From sheela-na-gig to vagina dentata: Metamorphosis in the Woman’s Body

The depiction in this capital is indeed sparse in details, as only two elements have been used, the woman’s body and an animal’s head, which, when combined, have resulted in an original image that is full of content despite its schematic nature.

From the point of view of the figurative tradition, the framing theme of the representation is that of the sheela-na-gig, an Irish term applied since the nineteenth century to describe reliefs depicting women obscenely displaying their vagina (Fig. 2). These depictions, studied by Jorgen Andersen (Andersen 1977), are common in churches and castles in the British Isles (Freitag 2004: 52-57).

Their remarkable popularity in the insular British context has led some to seek an origin for this theme in the pre-Christian Celtic substratum (Dor 2003: 36), although, as A. Weir and J. Jerman argued, it is more likely that, like so many other representations in the Romanesque repertoire, the sheela-na-gigs had their models in the Greco-Roman iconographic tradition (Weir, Jerman 1986: 18-19). In fact, these authors propose the classical theme of the spinario as the likely closest reference. The profoundly misogynistic atmosphere of medieval ecclesiastical and particularly monastic thought would have favoured the interpretatio christiana of an originally masculine theme, which soon developed a female version: a naked squatting or cross-legged woman showing her vagina (Weir, Jerman 1986:20). According to the aforementioned authors,

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2 Scholars have proposed various interpretations for this theme, explaining these depictions as symbols of fertility or as having an apotropaic function of ancient origin (Castelli 1995: 203-204), which would justify their liminal position in sacred buildings and the aggressive gesture or simian features they sometimes display. On this regard, see Trivellone 2008: 220.
this iconographic type, an excellent example of which can be found in a corbel from the church of Saint-Maurice de Béceleuf (Aquitaine) (Fig. 3) —started at the beginning of the twelfth century— would have originated the different variants of the theme, with common traits such as their complicated postures, the coarseness of their attitude, sometimes dilating the vagina and, above all, exaggerated and visible sexual organs.

However, although the capital of the cathedral of Santiago analysed here is resonant with the theme of the sheela-na-gig to the extent that it depicts a woman lifting her skirt to show her lower abdomen, the motif is more sophisticated. Implicit in its conception is another theme typical of Iberian-Toulousan iconography, namely that of the seated woman with an allegorical element on her lap. The final composition results from the adaptation of this latter theme to the format of the Compostela foliate capital. In fact, the theme of the seated woman was widely used in the sculptural friezes of monumental slabs, and there are numerous extant examples not only in Saint-Sernin de Toulouse —Signum leonis, Signum arietis— but also in Santiago de Compostela itself, such as a woman with a skull, a woman with bunches of grapes, and a woman with a lion’s cub (Fig. 4), among others, as these were part of the Toulousan classicising repertoire (Milhau 1993: 390) (Valdez 1994: 205-206) (Nodar 2010: 314-319) (Castiñeiras 2013: 25-26).

It is in the Porte Miègeville of Saint-Sernin that we can find the closest sculptural reference for our capital. In a corbel under the portal’s eaves, a hybrid humanoid opens its legs to show its genitals, here also turned into a feline head with its jaws open showing its tongue (Cazes, Cazes 2008: 235 and 260) (Fig. 5). The figure is clearly a diabolic representation, as its features, including the webbed feet, look like those of the demons that accompany Simon Magus in the relief below the figure of St. Peter in this same portal (Cazes, Cazes 2008: 235). As in the case of the Compostela capital, the key to the originality of the representation featured in this corbel with respect to the sheela-na-gigs lies precisely in the animal, for it is the final element of a metamorphosis to which the female body is subjected in order to diametrically transform its interpretation. This recourse to the bestial is by no means exclusive to the capital we are analysing, but is quite frequent in Romanesque art, above all in demonic representations, and especially in Iberian-Languedocian sculpture, in which it is applied with the classicising mastery that characterised its sculptors. Thus, regarding the animal metamorphosis of the woman’s body, and in addition to the aforementioned corbel of the Porte Miègeville, it is worth noting the well-known ‘capital of the satyr’ in the cathedral of San Pedro de Jaca (Fig. 6), in which two naked women with dishevelled manes stand at the corners of the basket with their legs turned into birds’ feet with sharp claws resting on the astragal.\(^3\) A variation on the same theme is found in the cathedral of Santiago itself in a corbel

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\(^3\) This capital, originally located in the now disappeared cloister of the cathedral, was made around 1105-1110 by a sculptor from what is known as the second Jaca workshop, in which the already rich connection with the ancient sculptural art of the previous generation was further embellished thanks to the classicising contribution of the sculptors of the Porte Miègeville in Toulouse. On this subject see: (Moraledo 1979: 79-106), (Castiñeiras 2007: 387-396), (Ocón 2010: 300-301). On the classical connection of the second Jaca workshop, see (Simon 2011: 378-381), and on the iconography of this capital, see (Prado 2010: 32-46) (Prado 2017: 154-163).
in the chapel of Santa Fe (Fig. 7), in which a woman, also with dishevelled hair and obscenely showing her vagina, clings to her legs, transformed into animal claws below the knee (Nodar 2020: 167-169).

The resort to the animal mask on the lower abdomen suggests that the formulation of the image of our capital must also have been influenced by a long textual tradition related to the ancient sexual myth of the *vagina dentata*, an expression of men’s universal fear of the “castrating female” that materialised in legends and artistic representations from ancient times to the present day (Cariness 2007:14-15) in many regions of the world (Raitt 1980: 415-416) (Elwin, 1943: 447).

A good example of this motif can be found in the story of Alexander the Great, where the theme is personified by the young virgin that the queen of India sent to the Macedonian king as a gift, and who had been raised on a diet of snake venom so that any man would perish at the slightest carnal contact with her (Williams 1996: 165).

The myth made its way into Judeo-Christian culture through the Book of Tobit, which tells the story of Sarah, who was possessed by the demon Asmodeus and killed her husbands before they could even consummate their marriage:

> On the same day, at Ecbatan in Media, it also happened that Sarah, the daughter of Raguel, had to endure the insults of one of her father’s maids. For she had been married to seven husbands, but the wicked demon Asmodeus had slain each of them before the marriage had been consummated as is customary. The servant girl said to her, “You are the one who has slain your husbands! Behold, you have already been given in marriage seven times, but you have experienced no joy with any of your husbands (Tobit 3:7-8).

Its allegorical use found one of the most interesting examples in the work of the German mystic Hildegard of Bingen (d.1179). In her work *Scivias* (ca 1141) the vision of Ecclesia is disturbed by the appearance of the Antichrist who is described in the text, not as a separate figure, but as the very sex of the Church itself (Williams 1996:164-168):

> And I saw again the figure of a woman (...) And from her waist to the place that denotes the female, she had various scaly blemishes; and in that latter place was a black and monstrous head. It had fiery eyes, and ears like an ass’, and nostrils and mouth like a lion’s; it opened wide its jowls and terribly clashed its horrible iron-colored teeth (*Scivias*, III, 11).4

Following the text, the accompanying illustration depicts the underbelly of the Church as a monstrous face with sharp teeth (Fig. 8). In the same miniature, this *vagina dentata*, the Antichrist, appears already separated from the body and individualised as an excrement (McGinn 1979: 100-102).5 This image allows us to draw an interesting parallel regarding the use of the theme

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5 For an analysis of this image of the Antichrist in Hildegard’s work see also Emerson 2002: 95-110. The original manuscript, dating from around 1141, was lost during the Second World War, but the image illustrating this article
of the monstrous mask on a woman’s lower abdomen with the intention of endowing it with a negative meaning connected to sin and the infernal world. However, in the case of the capital under analysis, I do not believe we can infer an intention to depict some kind of vision of the Church and the Antichrist. The key is given by the woman’s attributes and gesture. On the one hand, she is not crowned, nor does she bear any attributes that would allow us to recognise her as a personification of the Church. On the other, opening the lion’s mouth with her hands, she draws our gaze precisely towards the lion’s mask, which is, in turn, what gives us the clue to grasp the meaning of the depiction by focusing attention on her sex. This physical metamorphosis thus presents to the eyes of the faithful an image of lust incarnated in a woman’s body and, more specifically, in her lower abdomen, as could be expected in the Middle Ages. This follows a long exegetical tradition (CASTELLI 1994: 28-31) (CASTELLI 1995: 206) originating in Proverbs 30:16 where hell is clearly associated with the os vulvae and insatiable sexual desire (ANDERSEN 1992: 715-716): Tria sunt insaturabilia et quartum quod nunquam dicit: Sufficit. Infernus et os vulvae, et terra quae non satiatur aqua; ignis vero nunquam dicit: Sufficit. St. Jerome takes up this idea and develops it in Adversus Jovinianum where he warns that the os vulvae can become the os inferni. In the same text the author again insists that amor mulieris... inferni comparatur, thereby anathematising the female body and, therefore, lustful sexual relations.6

The representation in our capital thus becomes almost a visual translation of these ideas by placing a ferocious lion’s head between the woman’s legs as an image of the mouth of hell. The textual origin of the lion’s head as the entrance to hell is also to be found in the Old Testament, specifically in Job 41, which describes in detail the monster Leviathan with its dreadful mouth full of teeth. The monster portrayed in this passage was interpreted in the Middle Ages as a reference to the gate of Hell, which thus acquired a concrete physical shape in religious imagination (SCHMIDT 1995: 46-57; BASCHET, 1993: 236-240). Gradually, this os inferni took on a more concrete feline form that was not unrelated to the aforementioned chapter of the Book of Job, as this book in fact ends by defining the monster Leviathan as “king over all wild beasts,” that is, the lion. The lion also embodies the forces of evil in Psalm 22:22, “Save me from the lion’s mouth” (DEONNA 1950: 487-488), and more specifically in the First Epistle of Peter (1 Peter 5:8): “Remain sober and alert, for your enemy the devil is on the prowl like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour” (KENAAR-KEDAR 1980: 74).

This textual tradition gave rise to a figurative tradition of the mouth of hell as a feline mask that devours the naked bodies of damned souls with its huge jaws. At first, its depictions were confined to the private sphere of manuscript illumination, especially in the Anglo-Saxon area, but they soon spread to the Iberian and French contexts moving on to the monumental format of sculpture both in church portals and, as in the present case, large capitals (BASCHET 1996: 354). This transition to


is taken from a faithful extant copy made between 1927-1933 (CAMPBELL, 2013: 2-4).
the public sphere of an originally devotional or meditative theme was related to the progressive dissemination—especially in the twelfth century—of texts of visionary literature and descents into hell, in which the detailed description of this mouth of hell, already characterised as a monster with feline features, became prevalent (Schmidt 1995: 84-99; Martínez 2021: 62-63).

In our capital, the artist reused this motif, which he obviously knew, for another sculptor from his own workshop had developed it extensively in a capital located at the opposite end of the transept (Nodar 2016: 34-35). The woman was thus turned from an object of desire—expressed by her long hair and bare legs—into an object of rejection due to the malignant, dangerous, and devouring character that her lower abdomen revealed, transformed into a ferocious feline head.

As if that were not enough, there is also the gesture of the woman who opens the lion’s mouth with her hands. This is significant, as it hints at the dilation of the vulva (Castelli 1995: 206), which the artist takes from the figurative tradition of the sheela-na-gigs (Fig. 2) adapting it to the new feline form.

**Audience, Purpose, Context, and Visibility of an Image within the Sacred Space**

Let us recall that this female representation is located in a capital on one of the pillars next to the renowned Façade of Platerías of the basilica of Compostela. This is particularly significant, and its study would not be complete without an analysis of its relationship with the space it occupied and its function. It is also necessary to consider other questions such as its visibility, its intended audience, and the reasons that led the sponsors of the figurative programme of the cathedral of Santiago to include there this and other representations which, as we shall see below, share the same space.

As is well known, the side naves of the transept of the cathedral also run along the ends of the transept, behind the façades of both the Porta Francigena and the south door. They form a sort of inner portico that acted as an interface between the exterior and the large central nave of the transept (Fig. 9). The proof that these spaces were perceived as differentiated areas by the twelfth-century audience can be found in the famous Pilgrim’s Guide of the Liber Sancti Iacobi, specifically in the passage entitled “De la medida de la Iglesia” [“Of the size of the Church”], which applies the term ciboria⁷ to them. In other words, they were perceived as a covered, differentiated and, in some way, privileged space. It is, in fact, the same word the author of the text also uses when referring to the archivolts of the Façade of Platerías and the baldachin that covered and highlighted the High Altar built by Archbishop Diego Gelmírez (1100-1140) as the

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most relevant space in the church (NODAR 2016: 22-26). Despite the fact that it has been greatly transformed, it is still possible to perceive this idea of an inner portico behind the Façade of Platerías, especially due to the presence of the enormous eighteenth-century barrier that occupies a large part of the space and prevents direct light from entering. In fact, this was originally a considerably more illuminated space, not only because of the light that entered directly through the doors, but also because of the light that must have shined through the two large windows in the side bays, one of which is now walled up while the other is not an exterior window anymore.

The other element that leads us to believe that these ciboria were considered authentic postliminal spaces is the special emphasis placed on the sculptural decoration of the capitals, where we find interesting and sometimes complex figurative themes of very high stylistic quality. This interest, however, seems to wane in the rest of the transept space, where serialized foliate models are prevalent (MATHEWS 1995: 145-147).

This deliberate concentration of figurative capitals in the sections immediately adjacent to the entrances is not exclusive to Santiago; on the contrary, it is rather common in buildings of a certain prestige where these images effectively act as focal points that demand the most attention and help to differentiate and magnify certain parts of the church (BASCHET, BONNE, y DI TTMAR, 2012b). Thus, in the French region of Auvergne —to which the initial project of the cathedral was closely related— we find the example of the church of Saint-Pierre de Mozac —started ca 1080— whose north door is the main entrance for the faithful. On its exterior portico, an inscription urges worshippers to raise their gaze when entering the church —INGREDIENS TEMPLUM REFERAT AD SUBLIMIA VULTUS INTRATURI AULAM VENERANSQUE LIMINA CHRISTI (May they who enter the church, raise their gaze to the heights venerating the threshold of Christ). Indeed, if we look upwards as we pass through the doorway, we find one of the sections of the north aisle richly decorated with eight figurative capitals, which are conveniently concentrated in this postliminal space with an obvious communicative purpose (BASCHET, BONNE, y DI TTMAR, 2012a). In the Iberian Peninsula, this same use of images on capitals to generate spaces for the reception of the faithful behind access doors can be found, for example, in San Isidoro de León and San Martín de Frómista, two churches geographically located on the Way of St. James and artistically situated in the same Iberian-Languedocian Romanesque milieu. In San Isidoro, a greater iconographic density can also be detected in the bays of the side naves immediately adjacent to the two side doorways, especially behind the one known as the Lamb’s Gate, while the longitudinal views of the transept and the central nave do not present any narrative perspective as its capitals are decorated with foliage (BOTO 2015: 224-230). In Frómista, in the third bay of the north nave, next to the side door, there is also a group of historiated capitals that continue the discourse initiated on the outside by the capitals of the portal archivolts (BOTO 2015: 232-233; PRADO 2008: 183 and note 54).8

8 S. Moralejo had already drawn attention to the topographical distribution of the historiated capitals in San Martín de Frómista (Palencia), which were organised in a series of “programmatic sequences” (MORALEJO 1990: 23). On the iconographic programme of the capitals in the interior, one of the earliest of Iberian Romanesque art, see SENRA 2008: 11-70.
Turning back to Santiago, in the interior portico of the south transept there are three other figurative capitals that share the space with the capital of the woman with a lion’s head between her legs (Fig. 11). On the same pillar, another capital depicts exhibitionist men, while on the central pillar, a capital shows three naked figurines trapped among plant vines and, finally, a capital on the eastern pillar features diabolical hybrid beings.

This location does not seem coincidental, as they are all carved on the faces of the pillars opposite the doors, so that they were perfectly visible to anyone entering through them (Fig. 10). The height at which they are placed—some four metres—is compensated first by the angle of view from the threshold of the doors; secondly, by the inverted truncated cone shape of the baskets, which favours this angle of view; and, finally, by the masterful way in which the compositions are carved with figures that separate from the basket and tilt their heads downwards as if seeking eye contact with the viewer (Fig. 11).

It is clear that these images were intended to be contemplated at the moment of entrance to the temple, but what audience were they meant for? Obviously, as in most Romanesque art, they were meant for the faithful as a whole, but in the specific case of this space attached to the Façade of Platerías of the basilica, the audience for the figurative representations in the pillar capitals were the countless inhabitants of Compostela who would use the doorway as an access from the city; a city that mostly spread to the south and that was organized around its main road, meaningfully known as rua do Vilar, which precisely ended before the south door of the cathedral (LÓPEZ 1995: 42-50).

Upon closer analysis, the figurative discourse of this façade, centred on the Redemption, finds an echo in the pillar capitals of the interior portico, as if these were a marginal gloss on it. Thus, if in the left tympanum, the faithful could contemplate the example of Christ rejecting temptations in front of three demons (CATEDRAL 2000: 69-75), once inside, they would find the same evil presence in the capital of the eastern pillar (Fig. 12). There, at the top of the pillar, two striking winged diabolical figures with simian faces are the perfect image of the temptation that lies in wait for the Christian. As if the two demons with phantasmagorical forms were not enough, they are associated with four bears, a redundancy that further adds to this ‘perverse’ interpretation, as the biblical tradition usually endowed bears with diabolical connotations. Thus, in the aforementioned Book of Proverbs, bears are identified with the oppressors of the Jewish people: “Like a roaring lion or a bear on the prowl is a wicked man who governs a powerless people” (Prov. 28:15). Moreover, the second beast of Daniel’s vision “looked like a bear” (Dan. 7:5), and the fearsome beast of the Apocalypse “resembled a leopard, but it had feet like those of a bear, and its mouth was like the mouth of a lion” (Rev. 13:2). Their intimate relationship with the two demons is visually materialised through the vines that function as ropes to bind the figures together by their necks.
The diabolical temptation, depicted generically in this capital, is given concrete form in the westernmost pillar precisely through the capital of the *vagina dentata* (Fig.13). As we mentioned above, the sculptor used the format of the capital to present an effective image of lust that would serve to persuade the audience of the dangers of the flesh and of how these could lead Christians to perdition, that is, to hell. In this regard, S. Moralejo drew attention to the text of the sermon *Veneranda Dies* from the *Liber Sancti Iacobi* in which the author warned pilgrims about the prostitutes who carried out their ‘pernicious activity’ between Portomarin and Palas de Rei (Moralejo 1985: 422):

> Las criadas de los hospedajes del camino de Santiago que por motivos vergonzosos y **para ganar dinero por instigación del diablo** se acercan al lecho de los peregrinos, son completamente dignas de condenación. Las meretrices que por estos mismos motivos entre Portomarin y Palas de Rei, en lugares montuosos, suelen ir al encuentro de los peregrinos, no solo deben ser excomulgadas, sino que además deben de ser despojadas, presas y avergonzadas, cortándoles las narices, exponiéndolas a la vergüenza pública. Solas suelen presentarse a solos. De cuantas maneras, hermanos, **el demonio tiende sus malvadas redes** y abre el antro de perdición a los peregrinos, me causa asco describirlo⁹.

[The maids of the inns along the Way of St. James who, for shameful reasons and **to earn money at the instigation of the devil**, approach pilgrims’ beds, are utterly worthy of condemnation. The prostitutes who, for the same reasons, accost pilgrims in mountainous places between Portomarin and Palas de Rei, should not only be excommunicated, but they should also be stripped, imprisoned and shamed, having their noses cut off, exposing them to public shame. Alone they usually appear to those who are alone. In how many ways, brethren, **the devil spreads his wicked nets** and opens the den of perdition to pilgrims, it makes me sick to describe it.]

This lewd discourse aimed at ridiculing the customs of the laity continues, in fact, in the adjoining capital of the same pillar.¹⁰ In the lower part of the basket, the heads of four men who can be identified as soldiers due to the helmets they wear on their heads emerge from the block (Menéndez 1986: 259-260) (Fig. 14).¹¹ Each of them holds, with one hand, the vegetal stems that envelop the figures and are so typical of the transept workshop, and with the other, the leg of another figure that stands astride their heads showing only their buttocks, testicles, and penis. Despite the order of the composition, which is symmetrical with respect to an imaginary central axis, the position of the figures, especially those who unashamedly display their private parts at the top, leaves no doubt as to the negative significance of the representation. Once again, this is a metaphor for the dangers of libidinous behaviour for Christian life. In this case, there seems to be an interest in portraying the characters in the composition as military men, so that the focus falls on this vice in the soldiery, and by extension, conveys a veiled critical allusion to the violence that surrounded the life of medieval society. An example of this association between

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¹⁰ G. Gaillard had already noted this capital for its lewdness, saying: “Les corps humains entremèlent leurs membres dans des contorsions obscènes” (Gaillard 1938: 181). See also the comments in Durliat 1990: 324.

the military, lust, and violence is provided by a quotation from the *Historia Compostelana*, the chronicle written in this same period by Archbishop Diego Gelmírez (1100-1140) in which the bands of armed warriors, supporters of King Alfonso the Battler, are described as “homicidas, fornicadores, malhechores y adúlteros” [murderers, fornicators, evil-doers, and adulterers].

The consequences for those who indulge in this worldly and licentious life are graphically expressed in the capital on the central pillar, facing the entrance, where the souls of the sinners, represented by the three naked figures, appear trapped, writhing among intricate and dry plant stems (Fig.15). These seem to be the visual translation of the theme of the wilderness drawn from the epic and moral background of classical literature (Curtius 1981 vol I: 286-289), which became the subject of an early interpretatio christiana by Saint Augustine (354-430). In his *Enarratio in psalmum*, in the gloss on Psalm 95, Augustine uses the idea of the *silva daemonum* to describe the wilderness where Christ sets out to build his house by extirpating the brambles, the seat of evil. This notion of an uncultivated and hostile nature was later used by medieval homiletic literature as a suggestive image of an earthly world full of temptations that lead man to fall into sin, and also as an image of hell itself. In the context of Compostela, we find this narrative in the sermon *Adest nobis*, from the *Liber Sancti Iacobi*, a text composed between 1105 and 1110 (López 2013: 333-334), that is, around the time of the construction and decoration of the transept. The author insists on the image of the human race surrounded by the brambles of vices —*vepribus viciorum*— among which the demons dwell. In the case of this capital, these demons are depicted as feline-like beasts that appear among the brambles at the corners of the basket.

The figurative context of the capital of the *vagina dentata* in the cathedral of Santiago is the usual one for this type of female sexual representations. Demonic figures displaying lewd gestures, beasts, acrobats and ‘megaphallic’ male exhibitionists tend to complement their negative reading, frequently forming iconographic programmes with a greater or lesser development and quality depending on the category of the construction and normally located in ‘marginal’ spaces of the temple (Weir, Jerman 1986: 17) (Castiñeiras 2002: 293-295).

**Conclusion**

The woman with a lion’s head is an elaborate example of *vagina dentata*. Its originality lies in its mastery in combining in the same image a complex textual exegetical and exemplifying

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12 *Historia Compostelana*, I, 73, (Falque, 1994: 182)
13 The use of this motif of plant stems as a symbolic image of a wild and untamed nature full of animals and dangers is not exclusive to Santiago, but was used in the same period in the capitals of the western door of Saint-Sernin de Toulouse, where they represent evil and paganism defeated by the patron saint of the sanctuary who was portrayed in the frieze of the same portal. Like in Santiago, they are a gloss on the main programme and, at the same time, its ‘antiphrase’ (Cazes y Cazes 2008: 299-300).
14 *Saint Augustine, Enarratio in psalmum*, XCV, MPL., Vol. 37, Col. 1230-1231.
background with models from the Iberian-Languedocian and Norman repertoire, which blend in a brilliant way to create a striking effect.

It would be interesting to further this study by tracing the success of this iconography in the Iberian Romanesque scene as, although the theme of the vagina dentata is not as frequent in sculpture as that of the sheela-na-gig, it shares the same function. The Church used them both conveniently in the Middle Ages to dissuade men from illicit or promiscuous carnal relations while anathematising women and rendering them a danger to men. We cannot forget that the condemnation of these “disorderly” sexual behaviours was one of the workhorses of the Gregorian Reformation (Wirth 2008: 171-172). Thus, the appearance of an image as shocking and even crude as this one in a sacred context such as that of the cathedral of Santiago is not strange and even less so at a time when the Compostelan see was in the midst of a process of self-affirmation. This process involved the implementation of the more romano in liturgical uses, but also in the customs of the laity and the religious.16

In this context, the vagina dentata of this capital, as well as the rest of the figurative elements present in this interior portico, could have had a wide intended audience. As we have already noted, these compositions would have served to anathematise the relaxed customs of urban society, thus targeting the people of Compostela who, let us recall, would have used the south door to access the basilica. But neither should we forget the pilgrims who, once they had visited the tomb of the apostle St. James, left the basilica through the same door towards a bustling city that was “not exempt from the dangers of lust that could compromise the fruits of their journey (Moralejo 1985: 422).17

16 On the subject of the Gregorian Reformation and its artistic implications, see the seminal study by by Weisbach 1949 and the more recent works by Castiñeiras 1996 and Franze 2012.

17 On the basis of the text of the sermon Veneranda Dies, from the Liber Sancti Iacobi, the author even goes so far as to argue that the broken nose of the woman in the capital in question was not accidental but meant to reflect the punishment that the author of the sermon proposed for the prostitutes who tempted pilgrims.
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Fig.1 Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Capital at the south end of the transept with a woman with a lion’s head between her legs. Photo: S. Vázquez.

Fig.2 Church of SS Mary and David, Kilpeck, Herefordshire, England. Corbel with the depiction of a sheela-na-gig.
Fig. 3 Church of Saint-Maurice de Béceleuf (Aquitaine), France. Corbel with a cross-legged woman showing her sex.

Fig. 4 Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Relief of the Façade of Platerías with a woman holding a lion cub on her lap. Photo by the author.
**Fig. 5** Basílica de Saint-Sernin en Tolosa. Corbela del Porte Miègeville con una figura diabólica con su sexo convertido en cabeza de león. Foto del autor.

**Fig. 6** Catedral de San Pedro de Jaca. Detalle de un capitel del antiguo claustro con figuras femeninas con sus extremidades inferiores convertidas en garras de animal. Foto: J. A. Olañeta.
Fig. 7 Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Corbels from the chapel of Santa Fe with a woman showing her vagina and feet turned into animal claws. Photo by the author.

Fig. 8 The Church depicted as a woman with her sex turned into a diabolical head in an illustration from Hildegard of Bingen’s Scivias (ca 1141). Wiesbaden Codex. Facsimile of 1927, Eibingen, Hessisches Landesbibliothek, MS 1, fol. 214v.
Fig. 9 Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. South end of the transept with the inner portico of the Façade of Platerías. Photo by the author.

Fig. 10 Location of the figurative capitals in the interior portico of the south transept of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela: no. 1, vagina dentata; no. 2, exhibitionist soldiers; no. 3, human figures among plant vines; no. 4, winged demons. Plan by the author.
Fig.11 Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Capital with the vagina dentata from the viewer’s point of view. Photo: S. Vázquez.

Fig.12 Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Capital with demons on the eastern pillar of the interior portico of the south transept. Photo: S. Vázquez.
Fig.13 Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Detail of the capital with the vagina dentata. Photo: P. Porral.

Fig.14 Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Capital with exhibitionist soldiers on the western pillar of the interior portico of the south transept. Photo: S. Vázquez.
Fig.15 Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Capital with nude figures trapped between plant vines on the central pillar of the interior portico of the south transept. Photo: S. Vázquez.