On a recent visit to Sainte-Foi at Conques, I took the opportunity to tour the galleries of the church to view the magnificent array of sculpted capitals that decorate this level of the building. Before entering the church, visitors were asked to gather in front of the west portal where a monk began to recount the story of the Last Judgment depicted in the sculptural program in the tympanum above the doorway. (fig. 16.1) While the monk pointed to relevant scenes from his narrative in the image above him, I wondered if my experience in any way mirrored that of a medieval pilgrim, who, after a long journey, was greeted by an intricate display of biblical history carved above the door. Would crowds of pilgrims have been assisted in their attempts to understand the images on these portals by an interlocutor who regaled them with Biblical narrative and cautionary tales all the while pointing to scenes on the tympanum?¹ Might they have attended a Mass in which a sermon was given that made reference to the images they had seen on their way in? Or, were they simply left to decipher the images using whatever textual knowledge they had and their own imaginations? If so, how might they have read them and, beyond that, interacted with them? Surely my 21st century appreciation for the carving above the door cannot have differed so much from that of the countless pilgrims who had preceded me, though their appreciation would certainly have gone beyond the aesthetic.

Fig. 16.1  Last Judgment (c. 1120), Saint-Foi, Conques. Photo: author.