More than eighty years ago, Henri Focillon (1931) compared the façade of the Puerta de Platerías to the walls of a *musée lapidaire*. With this insight, the visionary art historian identified what may be one of the most defining features of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. The Compostelan basilica is, without doubt, the most comprehensive museum of Romanesque sculpture that exists today. From the tentative figures on the first capitals of the east end (1075–1088) to the sure hand of Master Mateo (1168–1188) and the startling presence of his column statues in the Pórtico de la Gloria, the memory of over a century of experimentation and achievement in the conception and realization of Romanesque sculpture is imprinted throughout the elegant architecture of the cathedral. Moreover, few monuments in Europe can lay out the whole chronological span of Romanesque development with such a range of sculptural forms, artistic styles, and iconographic programs. Historiated capitals, spiraling columns, jamb figures, carved corbels and metopes, tympanum reliefs, sculpted friezes, and decorated pedestals run the gamut of architectural elements that artists animated with Romanesque sculpture.

This rich diversity attests to the cathedral’s role for more than a century as a privileged laboratory of experiments for the Romanesque art of Europe. Here, some of the most revolutionary innovations were tested, with more or less success: the fully sculpted façade, the integration of secular subjects into a sacred discourse, and the engagement of the cathedral and its sculpture with its urban surroundings. Such creativity can only be understood in the context of the great era of pilgrimage to Santiago, a veritable golden age for the city and for what has become known as the art of the pilgrimage roads. The building is not only clad with sculpture throughout, but its space is completely shaped—like few others—by its peculiar sacred and functional topography. The basilica rises on the slope of a hill above the supposed tomb of the apostle in the midst of a late antique/early medieval cemetery. There, the architecture of the Romanesque cathedral took shape to facilitate the circulation of pilgrims, the staging of the liturgy, and the representation of the power of the bishop and clergy, all within an emerging urban community.

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1 Focillon (1986), 46.
Many voices are heard within the cathedral. There are the monks of Antealtares who first served the apostle’s shrine from their abbey on the eastern side of the sacred site. There are the bishops of Compostela whose seat of power shifted from one side of the transept to the other. And, of course, there are the pilgrims for whom varied spaces were designed: the portal of the Via Sacra (Sacred Way), the confessio, the Paradisus (Paradise) and the Porta Francigena, and, finally, the promise of celestial glory, envisioned in the grand west porch demanded of a great pilgrimage shrine. All these parties became agents and privileged audiences for an extraordinary set of iconographic programs. While the cathedral evokes the renowned sites of Christendom, like Rome and Jerusalem, it also possesses its own undeniable idiosyncrasies. A martyrrial choir is pierced by doorways; a pair of lavishly ornamented transept portals, facing the camino francés and the town, are conceived as political and religious manifestos; and a west portal displays an utterly visionary eschatological program. One can say without hesitation that the cathedral of Santiago gathers together the aspirations, anxieties, and conflicts of the twelfth century like few other Romanesque monuments.

1 The Choir of Bishop Diego Peláez as Speculum Principis and Speculum Monachorum (1075–1088)

Although we have reliable documentary and epigraphic evidence on the commencement of the Romanesque cathedral, that first campaign remains plagued by uncertainties. Construction must have begun in 1075 when a great council (concilio magno) was convened in Compostela. King Alfonso VI was returning from a lucrative military campaign against the kingdom of Granada from which he would dedicate a portion of the spoils to the new architectural project. At that time, Diego Peláez was bishop of Iria and the works would advance under his rule until the king deposed him in 1088 at the Council of Husillos. Only the three easternmost chapels of the ambulatory—the chapel of the Savior and the flanking chapels of St. John and St. Peter—and the immediately adjacent walls can be assigned to this campaign. The construction of these chapels is already mentioned in 1077 in the so-called Concordia de Antealtares—the agreement between the monks of Antealtares and the bishop, but they were not completed until the second campaign, as one can determine from their exterior decoration.3