The figures of Ecclesia and Synagoga adorning the south façade of Strasbourg cathedral are perhaps the most celebrated exemplars of their genre (figs. 1–6). For over a century, tourist guide books, introductory art history texts and specialized studies alike have lavished praise on these female personifications of Church and Synagogue because the figures are so lifelike, dramatic and beautiful. While there is a wealth of scholarship on the style and iconography of these figures, both divorced from and in conjunction with their larger decorative context on Strasbourg south, there has been almost no consideration of the figures in relation to prevailing notions concerning Jews. Further, there has been only limited work on the political and social valences of the figures at the time of their creation.

The south porch at Strasbourg cathedral was completed during the reign of Bishop Berthold von Teck (r. 1223–1244). It seems that Berthold’s predecessor, Heinrich von Veringen (1202–1223), in conjunction with the cathedral chapter, had ordered the construction of a new southern transept arm and southern portal to be built on to an already-standing twelfth-century structure as part of a campaign to enhance the eastern end of the cathedral. Over the course of the thirteenth

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1 See for example, James Snyder, Art of the Middle Ages, 2nd edn. (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2006), 441–443.

2 On the building history, see the principal scholarly monograph on the cathedral, Hans Reinhardt, La Cathédrale de Strasbourg (Paris, 1972), 17–18 and 52–56; as well
century, Strasbourg cathedral’s Romanesque nave and west façade were replaced with the Gothic structure still standing today. The south portal was defaced during the French Revolution but an engraving of c. 1617 by Isaac Brunn records its pre-modern appearance (fig. 7).

In its original disposition the south façade of Strasbourg and the sculpture immediately inside it harnessed the theatrical power of stylistic realism to offer a vivid display of ecclesiastical might. On the south façade, at the left extreme is Ecclesia, the figure of the Church (figs. 1 and 3). Legs oriented outward and upper body turned to the right, she has just noticed Synagoga at the other end of the porch. The triumphant Queen Ecclesia thrusts her shoulders back and twists around to confront her predecessor. But she remains stable, the folds of her robe falling heavily, echoing the fluting of a column. Ecclesia’s upper body is sturdy as well. Her royal mantle unifies her torso, shoulders and arms into a coherent unit. With her right hand she grasps the staff of a labarum and with her left she cradles a chalice. Crown planted firmly on her head, Ecclesia extends her neck slightly outward so as to better her view across the portal complex. Her eyes are wide open and her lips are parted as if she has just called out.

Synagoga across the way is the subject of this direct address (figs. 2 and 4). Physically, she is the antithesis of the Church. While Ecclesia’s luxuriant robe provides stability, Synagoga’s diaphanous drapery falls in a tangle around her ankles. While Ecclesia’s mantle unifies her upper

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3 This engraving was created for Oseas Schadaeus, Summum Argentoratensium Tempelum, das ist Aussführliche und Eigentliche Beschreibung des viel künstlichen, sehr kostbaren und in aller Welt berühmten Münsters zu Straßburg (Strasbourg, 1617), pl. 6.

4 At some point Ecclesia’s round-cupped chalice was replaced with a fluted cup, as seen in figure 1, an archival image. I have found no source recording this alteration, but it is mentioned in the catalogue entry in Hartmut Krohm, ed., Meisterwerke mittelalterlicher Skulptur (Berlin, 1996), 503 n. 1. Now both the original sculpture, housed along with other cathedral sculptures in Strasbourg’s Musée de l’Œuvre de Notre-Dame, as well as the copy that now adorns Strasbourg south, hold round-cupped chalices.