Chapter 1

The Church of the Nativity and “Crusader” Kingship

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Apart from the actual exercise of military might, ruling power expresses itself, and thereby exists, in two main modes: in the rituals, on the one hand, and in the works of art and architecture, on the other, that declare and sometimes justify dominion. Indeed, within the very first kingdoms known to history the latter mode has been identified in such well-known and well-studied objects as the Palette of Narmer (Egypt, c. 3200 BCE) and the Stele of Naram-Sin (Mesopotamian Akkad, c. 2250 BCE), both of which were clearly tasked with announcing who reigned where and by what right. These objects are useful not only because they so readily make manifest a long history of faith in the efficacy of pictorial material, but also because they so readily make manifest a subtending category distinction related to audience. The palette, which was buried in a temple to Horus, was aimed at a singular and restricted audience (Horus) while the stele, which seems to have been displayed above ground within the temple precinct of Shamash, was aimed at a decidedly less singular and less restricted audience (Shamash and all those who entered his precinct). 1

With the longstanding interdependence of rule and its material expression, and with the possibility of important differences in intended audience in mind, I would like to turn to the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. In general, the art and architecture made within its boundaries has long been analyzed in terms of its original artistic impulses, that is in terms of its debt to western Christian, eastern Christian, and Islamic traditions, and in terms of what these impulses indicate about taste, marketplace, workforce, and cultural assimilation or a lack of cultural assimilation. 2 In what follows, I privilege instead


the subsequent political impulses that likewise motivated the manufacture of Frankish art and architecture. What emerges are works in disparate media that were charged with the vital task of expressing rule and its basis to audiences small and large, restricted and unrestricted and, moreover, a single work whose participation in this campaign demonstrates just how important such expression was. It is, in truth, the latter that lies at the heart of this study, a no longer extant mosaic of the Tree of Jesse in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. But to get there, and to appreciate what it does and how it does it, it is necessary to begin by taking a wider view.

1 The Art of Ruling the Latin Kingdom

I am not the first to attend to the political impulses that lay behind Frankish visual culture, of course. Previous scholarship has found that private works or, at the very least, works of restricted audience especially yield political readings. To extend the dichotomy presented above, they are almost exclusively of the Palette of Narmer type. The ivory book covers of the Melisende Psalter (1131–1143), for example, picture the Judean king, David, as a ruler able to conquer outer and inner demons on the front and a generic king performing the Acts of Mercy from the Gospel of Matthew on the back. These covers and
