

SANTA MARÍA TILTEPEC: A MASTERPIECE OF MIXTEC VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

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The "spiritual conquest" of Oaxaca was largely completed in the 16th century by the Dominicans originally as missionaries, later as friars in residence serving as parish priests. As of 1590 their conventos among the Mixtecs numbered 20; among the Zapotecs 22. Invariably the convento was located in a cabecera, the civil locus of jurisdiction and became, in the spiritual realm, a doctrina. Each cabecera normally had a dozen or so smaller pueblos under its control. The responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the latter was also assumed by the Dominican friars. In most of these smaller pueblos a church was built so that the friar could say Mass, baptize, and marry its citizens during his periodic visits. Both pueblo and church was called visita. For most of the 16th century the convento and visita were solely under the aegis of the Dominican Order. The process of assimilating them under the immediate control of the Bishop was well underway in the 17th century. Although the Dominicans in many instances continued their pastoral role, the doctrina was hereafter known as a parroquia.¹

Santa Maria Tiltepec is one of the many pueblos in the valley of Oaxaca (Mexico) which is bounded by Yanhuitlán on the north and by Nochistlán on the south. It is in the heart of the linguistic area known as the Mixteca.

For a visita, Santa Maria Tiltepec is unusually large and exceptionally well finished, entirely in ashlar as at nearby Yanhuitlán. Its overall dimensions of 42 × 13 meters approaches that of many a parroquia.

Among the pueblos under the jurisdiction of the Parroquia de Santo Domingo Yanhuitlán, the 1883 survey of the State had this to say about the visita, Santa María Tiltepec:

— the pueblo was founded in 1559 and officially recognized in 1565

¹ Robert J. Mullen, *Dominican Architecture in Sixteenth-Century Oaxaca* (Tempe Arizona, 1975, Chap. 2, 176, 239, 240.

- the church was constructed in 1689 of stone and mortar
- a tower with three bells was built in 1780
- a priest's house was built in 1844.²

(The 1883 measurements expressed in *varas* of $40 \times 14 \times 14$ translate into $33.5 \times 11.7 \times 11.7$ meters. A vara equals .838 meter.)

In plan (Fig. 1) Santa María Tiltepec is a single nave church with five bays, including the choir, and a raised sanctuary one bay deep terminating in a polygonal apse. Interior measurements are 40×11 meters, or a ratio of 1: 3.6. From portal to raised sanctuary the length is 30 meters, a close correlation to the 1883 measurements. Huge towers are set slightly ahead of the plane of the facade. Four steps ascend to the level of its portal. Other portals are located in the third bay of each nave wall. The original polygonal apse was subsequently strengthened by another wall with a single, massive off-center buttress. This wall continues to the south forming the rooms identified as sacristy and chapel. The priest's house was added to this extension in 1884. On the north wall another chapel was added with entrance from the sanctuary, similar to that leading into the south chapel. A stone in the north chapel wall is dated 1859. Although these additions give the church somewhat of a cruciform shape externally, the interior clearly remains a single unbroken volume.

The sanctuary is identified not only by its raised floor (four steps) but even more so by its tunnel-like barrel vault (Fig. 2). It is much lower, by at least a third, than the barrel vault of the nave. Light floods

² M. Martínez Gracida, *Colección de "Cuadros Sinópticos" de los pueblos, haciendas y ranchos del estado libre y soberano de Oaxaca* (Oaxaca, 1883). The *Cuadros Sinópticos* is a survey presented as a compilation of statistics. Regarding public buildings (edificios públicos) date of construction, type of construction, measurements and current value in pesos was required. Excerpted from "Distrito Teposcolula, Parroquia de Santo Domingo Yanhuitlán." Santa María Tiltepec is described as:

Edificios públicos

Un templo católico construido en el año de 1689, de cal y canto y techo de bóveda, que tiene 40 varas de longitud, 14 de latitud y altura y vale \$15,000.

Una torre del mismo material con tres campanas, construido en el año de 1780, en el valor de \$1,000.

Una sacristía de bóveda formada del mismo material y en la misma época que tiene 6 varas de longitud, 5 de latitud y 6 de altura; su valor es de \$850.

La casa curatal construida en el año de 1844, de adobe y techo de vigas, tiene 14 varas de longitud, 5 de latitud y 6 de altura; su valor es de \$850.

Historia

Este pueblo se fundó el año de 1559 por el cacique D. Agustín Carlos Pimentel y Guzmán y el año de 1565 adquirió sus títulos.

the interior from the open south portal while the thickness of wall construction is evident in the opposite, but closed, north door. The wall connecting the two vaults is adorned with rosettes. It is also heavily patched as is the nave vault itself.

Looking to the west end of the church with its choir (Fig. 3) the layered stones of the barrel vault are supported by transverse arches which, with their engaged piers, define the bays. The choir arch and spandrels are completely covered in relief sculpture. The area under the choir is raised some 20 inches. Within one of its balustered enclosures five patron saints solemnly and silently guard the baptismal font awaiting their processional day (Fig. 4). The small hanging spindles in the interstices of the balusters are trademarks of Oaxaca woodcraft. They can be found, for example, on the retablo seen in (Fig. 2). Four finely crafted gilt retablos, apparently 17th century, a splendid 18th-century organ and a 19th-century neo-classic retablo in the sanctuary are among its other treasures.

With its single portal, the facade reflects the single nave interior (Fig. 5). Roughly square, it is divided into three horizontal tiers and five vertical sections. The horizontals of the facade are clearly delineated by sharply profiled capitals and cornices; the vertical by heavy engaged columns. The almost square facade is set between, and slightly back from, the plane of the two towers, of which only the south has belfry.

Both nave walls have portals and each has a window set high near the towers (Fig. 6). The ashlar walls extend above the roof level concealing the barrel vault. The sanctuary begins where the nave wall is noticeably stepped. On the south nave the first and higher extension houses a chapel and the sacristy. The lower building is the priest's house (though none is resident), according to the elders. The original roof height of the priest's house is indicated by the lighter colored wall above the present, modern flat roof with its metal downspouts.

The apse, or east end, is flat and aligned in one piece with the first extension, the windowed sacristy (Fig. 7). Viewing this apse wall from the north side a junction with the original polygonally shaped apse is evident. Since this second apse wall and that of the sacristy are without a seam, it can be concluded that the sacristy and chapel were constructed during the same building campaign which apparently followed closely after the first. The 1883 survey describes the sacristy as of the same time frame ("*la misma época*") as the church. Similarity in size and color of

its stone with that of the south nave, for example, support this statement.³ The seam of the 1884 addition, the priest's house, is readily seen.

The area around the church is constricted. On three sides the ground falls away sharply. There is no atrio wall nor are there any posas. Arq. Octavio Flores Aguillón, attached to the Oaxaca Regional Office of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, observed that many of the ashlar are square and commented that these might well be pre-Hispanic. This observation complements the impression of a building atop a pyramid and its implication of this locale having been a sacred precinct before the arrival of the friars.

"It's a 16th-century structure..." was my immediate reaction upon first seeing Santa María Tiltepec. The experienced architectural historian respects such responses to the gestalt; but he also expects to be able to stipulate the detail which contributed to that all-over impression. Take the south portal (Fig. 8). With its plain arch and inset decoration, its successive stories tapering upward, it evokes many portals of the 16th-century. The columned opening, oversized capitals, niche, and repeated motifs is vintage 16th-century vernacular design-as frequently displayed by indigenous artists who acquired a new architectural vocabulary but were totally unfamiliar with its syntax.

All of this area shows clear evidence of re-handling, of actual rebuilding, as well as the resetting of motifs, especially in the upper areas. Ashlars are uneven, set in heavy mortar, patched with brick; the ornamented stones misaligned. Still, the only unusual element here is the rectangular slab directly above the hooded niche. On scrutiny, it proves to be here the date 1689 is inscribed.

The part above the large dentiled cornice (Fig. 9) has three elements: the hooded niche, the stone bearing the date 1689, and a triangular frame enclosing two rosettes, a cross with symbols of the Passion, and the risen Christ. The flanking rosettes (those on the wall connecting the two interior vaults are very similar), sun and moon (two remarkable pieces of vernacular sculpture) are surrounded by layers of brick bonded with thick and uneven courses of mortar.

The stone too is emplaced with brick and large amounts of mortar.

³ The protruding stone terminates in a "face", with eyes set deep under a heavy brow, nose with flaring nostrils, and an open mouth with prominent lips and protruding tongue. The mouth opening does not appear to be cut through to the upper part of the stone. There is some doubt whether the function of this stone is that of a *canal* (downspout).

Furthermore it was not cut square and, to appear level, had to be set on a bias. Workmanship is not of the same caliber as the stone with shell, crown and floral motifs. In the latter the "hoods" over the two figures bear an unusual design of undulating lines. The same undulations are to be seen in the lower parts of the band enframing the shell-hood. The design appears almost reptilian. Whatever the occasion for inserting the date stone, the visual evidence argues against it being one with the original building program. Removed, imaginatively, the whole design acquires an unexpected unity.

The cumulative impact of earthquakes over the past four hundred years has been such that it is a rare building in Oaxaca which does not bear witness to some repair. Such was certainly the case with Santa María Tiltepec. The evidence is visible in many places, but none so starkly as here in the area above the south portal. The evidences are quite clear-broken coursings, distinct coloration, stones of different sizes, inserted bricks and, above all, the "patch up" quality created by the lighter colored and much thicker mortar. The repairs were made with more determination than understanding. Was the date stone inserted upon their completion? Or perhaps upon transfer to diocesan control? Or for some other reason lost in time?

The north portal, above the major cornice, is quite similar in layout (Fig. 10) to that of the south portal, including the "space" between hood stone and the smaller dentiled cornice. So perhaps this disjunction was an original design - a phenomenon not unusual in 16th-century portals. The use of brick and thick mortar at this point, as well as alongside the carefully coursed ashlar of the rest of the north nave wall, implies a resetting here too. The rosettes are masterfully carved and are very much of the same flavor as those of the south portal. In resetting this portal the artists chose not to insert a date stone but rather the Sacred Chalice. Yet the occasion was dated, a fact hitherto overlooked by those who supplied the information for the 1883 survey and even to the present elders of the pueblos who were quite surprised when the date was pointed out to them.

Beneath the out-of-line dentiled cornice of the north door (Fig. 11) two rosettes pay tribute to the Spanish royal arms carved in a very local fashion, in low, flat relief. The keystone, identical to that the south portal, displays a floral design to either side of a rectangular projection, terminating in a scroll with a face. A raised tubular design is carved on the long axis of the scroll. Diagonal stripes separate three hollows (on

the south portal keystone there are four) but the place for a fourth hollow has apparently been chipped off. The face on the bottom of the scroll of each keystone is most expressive as if it were blowing. The half round object with hollows gives every appearance of a reed flute.

Initial detection of lettering on the voussoirs came about from telephoto shots (Figs. 12, 13). It is quite evident that the execution of the lettering on the two voussoirs to the left of the keystone differs considerably from the three to the right, the former being angular, the latter cursive. Counting from the keystone, the voussoirs to the left read:

first: V E 2 0.

second: V i T N A I V E ("N" is reversed)

Voussoirs to the right read:

first: d e f e b ("d" is reversed)

second: v e r o d e i 6 8 7

third: A b° (intended to be a "d"?)

Reading the "v" as "u" and the "T" as "J", a reconstruction reads:

left: uitna jueve 20.

right: de febrero de 1687 AD°

Dr. Mary Elizabeth Smith, University of New Mexico, a Mixtec scholar, deciphered the inscription on the first two voussoirs as *ViTNA*, the Mixtec word "uitna" for today, and the second word *IVEVE* as the Spanish word "jueves" for Thursday. She also commented that is was, to her knowledge (and mine), "the only example of Mixtec written in European letters graven in stone."⁴ What occasioned the inscription – by two artists, as if done hastily – proclaiming to the world: "Today, Thursday the 20th of February, 1687 AD"? (The coincidence of day and date is confirmed for the year 1687 in the ⁶perpetual calendar.)

As a visita, Santa María Tiltepec could have been built in the 16th century because the great complex at Yanhuítlán was essentially completed in the 1570's.⁵ Santa María echoes Yanhuítlán in its use of ashlar and in certain sculptural features. The urn-like multiple balusters of the two nave windows (south – Fig. 14; north – Fig. 15) are particularly evocative of the swellings of Yanhuítlán's north portal. (Fig. 16) That these windows belong to the original building program

⁴ Personal communication, 1979.

⁵ Mullen, *Dominican Architecture*, p. 139.

is particularly evident in the photo of the south nave window which, in spite of some repair, is undisturbed, snugly encased within its surrounding ashlar. It can be said with confidence that these sculptured windows are characteristic of 16th-century work. Can the same judgment be made of the elaborately sculpted west facade? Unquestionably!

One of the more notable characteristics of 16th-century architectural sculpture is the awkward assemblage of motifs. The indigenous artist only gradually absorbed the symbols, patterns and compositions of the nascent Renaissance in Spain. And while he learned some of its components rather quickly it would be another century or so before the harmony of its assembled parts would be mastered. Santa María Tiltepec's facade is replete with oddities; the whole more discordant than harmonious.

Set between the tower bases, the almost square facade (Fig. 5) is organized into three tiers and five vertical rows, the portal, niche and *oculo* being on the central axis. Even without statues, its ten niches give it a retablo-like appearance. In this regard it echoes another great 16th-century Dominican complex in the Mixteca — the facade of Coixtlahuaca, with its 32 statueless niches and whose frieze bears the date 1576.⁶

The engaged columns of the facade defy any standard classification even though their European origin is evident. Not very European, however, are their bushy (feathered?) tops surmounted with "Ionic" capitals. (Fig. 17) Even less European are the "dots" inserted in the flutings and the very interesting fact that in each fluting they appear to number 13. The niches are handsomely decorated, each terminating with a shell design much like those at Coixtlahuaca. The areas above them are filled with high, flat reliefs with floral designs. Yet there are noticeable variations in the two sides. The niches to the right are shorter. Design and execution of the floral designs on the two sides is so different that at least two sculptors must have been involved.

The arch of the whitewashed portal displays on its face, chamfer and soffitt coffered segments with raised interior, some with crossed bands or diagonals, others with floral motifs. The block above the keystone is transformed into what appears to be an owl. Counting the latter there are 13 elements in the arch itself. The outer frame of the supporting posts carry the same crossed-band motif which,

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129, 130, 138.

interestingly, also total 13. There are six on the left post, seven on the right. Unusual in Oaxaca are the exterior holy water fountains, here located on the chamfer of the posts (Fig. 18). Supported by bulbous urn-like elements the fountains are surmounted with crosses bearing the emblem INRI, a crown of thorns and three nails. Its pyramidal base also is sculpted with the crossed diagonals.

In the second tier a very large niche (Fig. 19), with traces of relief under its whitewashed interior, takes the place of the usual *oculo* providing light to the choir. A scalloped *mudejar* arch is supported by richly carved pilasters and is encased in a jumble of motifs, many misunderstood as, for example, the “winged” cherubs. It is a classic case of undirected, uninformed stonemasons working more from verbal description than from visual models — even while they display their mastery of cutting stone in the customary flat, two-dimensional manner. Though this is likely the last part of the building to have been completed, the facade of Santa María Tiltepec nevertheless bears all the trademarks of 16th-century work.

The third tier (Fig. 5) has several unusual aspects: its patched quality, the capital-less columns, the out-of-scale cross — another suspect area of earthquake repair. But most significant are the sculpted figures to either side of the oculo.

Carved from a single large block, the figure to the left of the oculo (Fig. 20) is a rearing feline with mane, a visage with jaguar-like ears, a long tail, raised front legs with paws, one rear leg on the “ground” the other, raised, ending in a large talon. A floral pattern fills the voids of the upper left and lower right corners. Immediately above is a rectangular block with three prancing animals. Attitude, head and ear configurations give them the appearance of deer.

To the right of the oculo the figure in relief (Fig. 21) is also a rearing animal, with a long tail, much thinner than the tail of the other animal. Its upper legs look like stumps with capped paws or hooves. Only one rear leg is shown also “capped” (now concealed by the growing plant). It has a strange head with an upper and lower more like a beak than a muzzle. The pointed ears are not easily relatable to a known animal. The top of its head and neck show an undulating “mane”. Ray-like elements project from its back. Are they meant to be floral or feathered? Floral designs fill the voids but the one just touching the uppermost leg is scarcely vegetal. This stone has been repaired, probably sealing a crack. Atop this block, in a position corres-

ponding to the stone with the three deer, is a rectangular piece with a (more or less) floral design. The central element, looking something like a daisy, has eight petals.

Several questions must now be asked.

— Why was the date 1689 used for the construction date in the 1883 survey instead of the earlier date of 1687?

— Are these “original construction” or “later repair” dates, or dates of some other event?

— How can the 16th-century quality of the church — its size, its ashlar, its “*tequitqui*-like” sculpture, its total gestalt as a visita of Yanhuitlán — be explained as the work of artists of the last quarter of the 17th-century?

— If indeed a 16th-century Mixtec structure, can any pre-Hispanic Mixtec symbols of the sacred be detected?

None of these questions can as yet be answered unequivocally. The data for the 1883 survey was in all likelihood obtained from the elders of Santa María Tiltepec. Their knowledge of their sacred templo was more likely to have been based on oral than recorded history. At that time the south portal was probably more important than the north portal and its 1689 date certainly more visible.

Dated architecture in colonial Oaxaca, or for that matter most of Mexico, is so rare that generalizations cannot be made. Among the three known instances in the State of Oaxaca of date stones which might imply completion of construction — Cuilapan, Coixtlahuaca, Santo Domingo in the city of Oaxaca — none is located above nave door. One would not expect to see a date stone there since standard construction methods would have the nave portals completed well before the facade.⁷ This, and the visible evidence of the resetting of stones in both nave portals of Santa María, argue for “later repair” dates.

The facade of Santa María Tiltepec is a masterpiece of *tequitqui* sculpture. Coined in the 1940's, the word applies to a vast body of 16th-century relief sculpture. It is seen as the work of a sculptor who, trained in the Mesoamerican, two-dimensional “cookie-cutter” technique of carving in low, flat relief, attempts to create the European, renaissance

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105, 113, 114.

three dimensional images which are entirely unfamiliar to him. Thus *tequitqui* is a blending, still largely unresolved, of two artistic cultures. It is also one of the strongest and surest indicators of 16th-century work. After reviewing a large body of photos of Santa María Tiltepec, Elizabeth Wilder Weismann, author of *Mexico in Sculpture: 1521-1821*, said about its sculptures – “Well, these certainly *could* be sixteenth-century pieces.”⁸ To take the year 1687 (or 1689) as the completion date for this church would mean placing all of its sculpture in the last quarter of the 17th century. This is difficult to accept both stylistically or from historical precedent. It is far easier and more plausible to accept these sculpture as the work of 16th-century indigenous artists who, only a generation removed from the new European culture, were still invested with the ancient mode of sculpting.

Our knowledge of colonial vernacular architecture and its attendant sculpture of the Mixteca is not extensive. We know considerably more about its painting from the mixtec codices. While the painter and sculptor would execute a sacred symbol differently, it should be recognizable as the same symbol whether painted or sculpted.

A review of current research on Mixtec codices was recently published by Nancy P. Troike.⁹ Considerable new information was presented on chronology, historical versus mythical events, and the natures and roles of supernatural beings. Several observations are pertinent to this article.

— Chronologies in the Mixtec codices are based on the universal Mesoamerican “52-year cycle”. (p. 553).¹⁰

— One of the codices is considered to be a creation scene in which eventually is born “the great Mixtec culture hero (male) 9 Wind, whose personal name Furst reads as ‘Mountain Lion/Serpent’ . . . (p. 555).

⁸ Personal communication, 1980.

⁹ *American Antiquity*, vol. 43, Number 4, October 1978, pp. 553-568. A codex is a pre-Hispanic illuminated manuscript. Symbols in Mixtec codices which a sculptor might have known and used are: small white circles; larger colored discs with the appearance of woven material; parrot heads; lines crossing in a diamond pattern.

¹⁰ If the people of Santa María Tiltepec continued to use the 52-year cycle as an important commemorative they might have been honoring the completion of two 52-year cycles in 1687. Then the completion of the templo (the *termination* of an event was observed in Mesoamerica) could be reckoned as 1583. Completion of so sacred a structure as the templo 18 years after official recognition as a pueblo is a more reasonable alternative than 122 years. Current research begins to reveal the continued existence of many ancient values and customs even today.

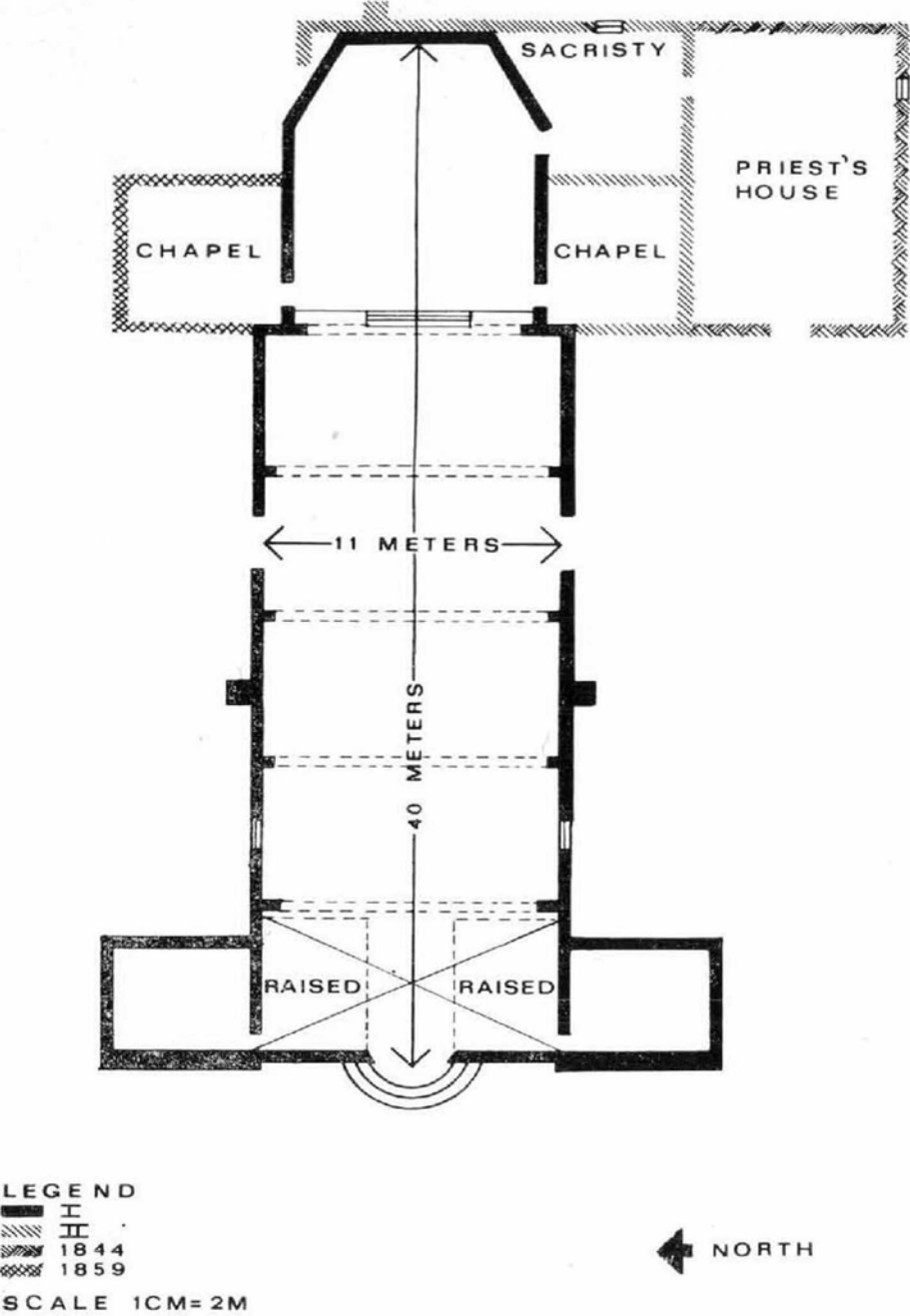


Figure 1. Santa María Tiltepec, Oax. Parrish. Floor plan.

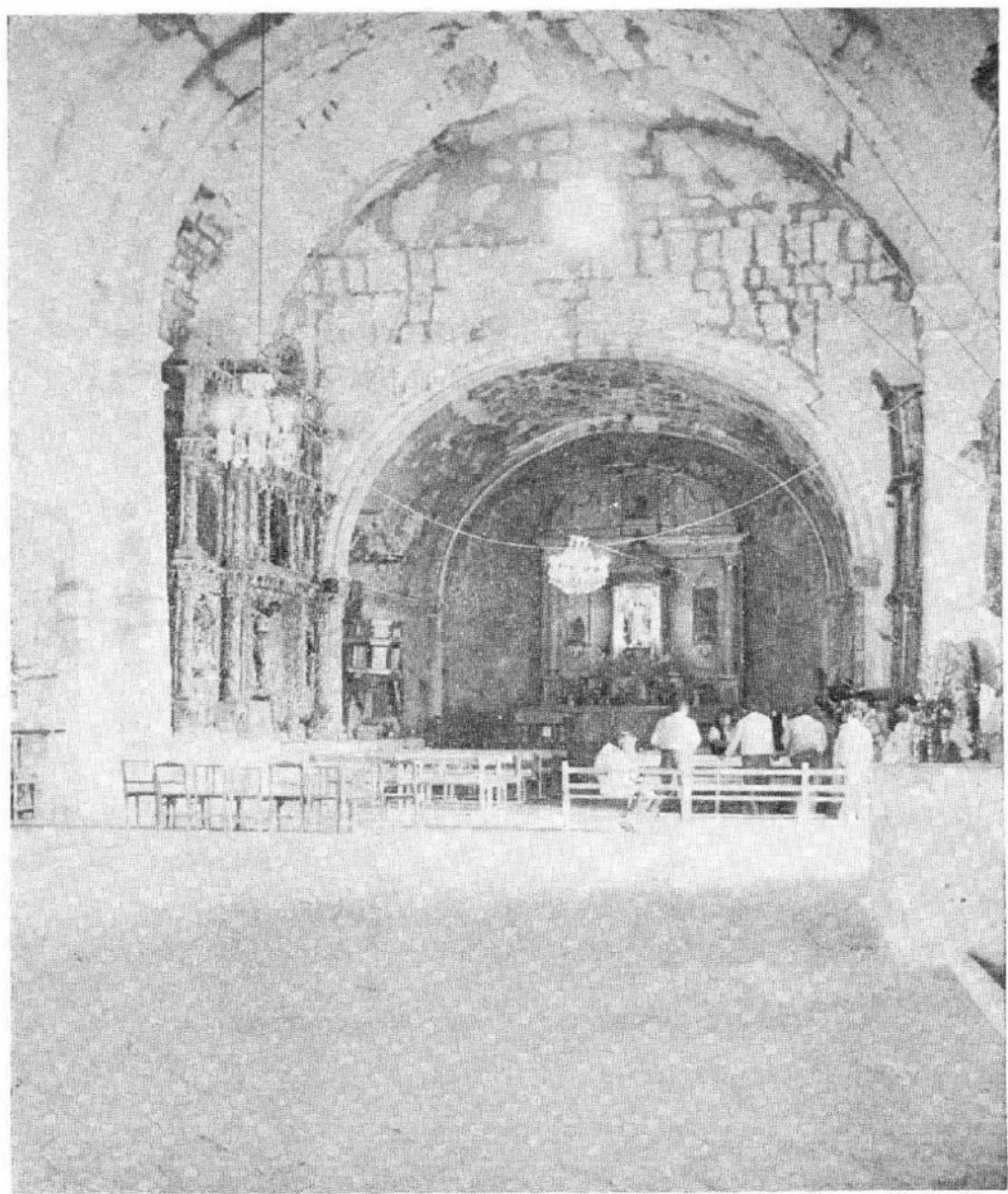


Figure 2. View of mayor altar.

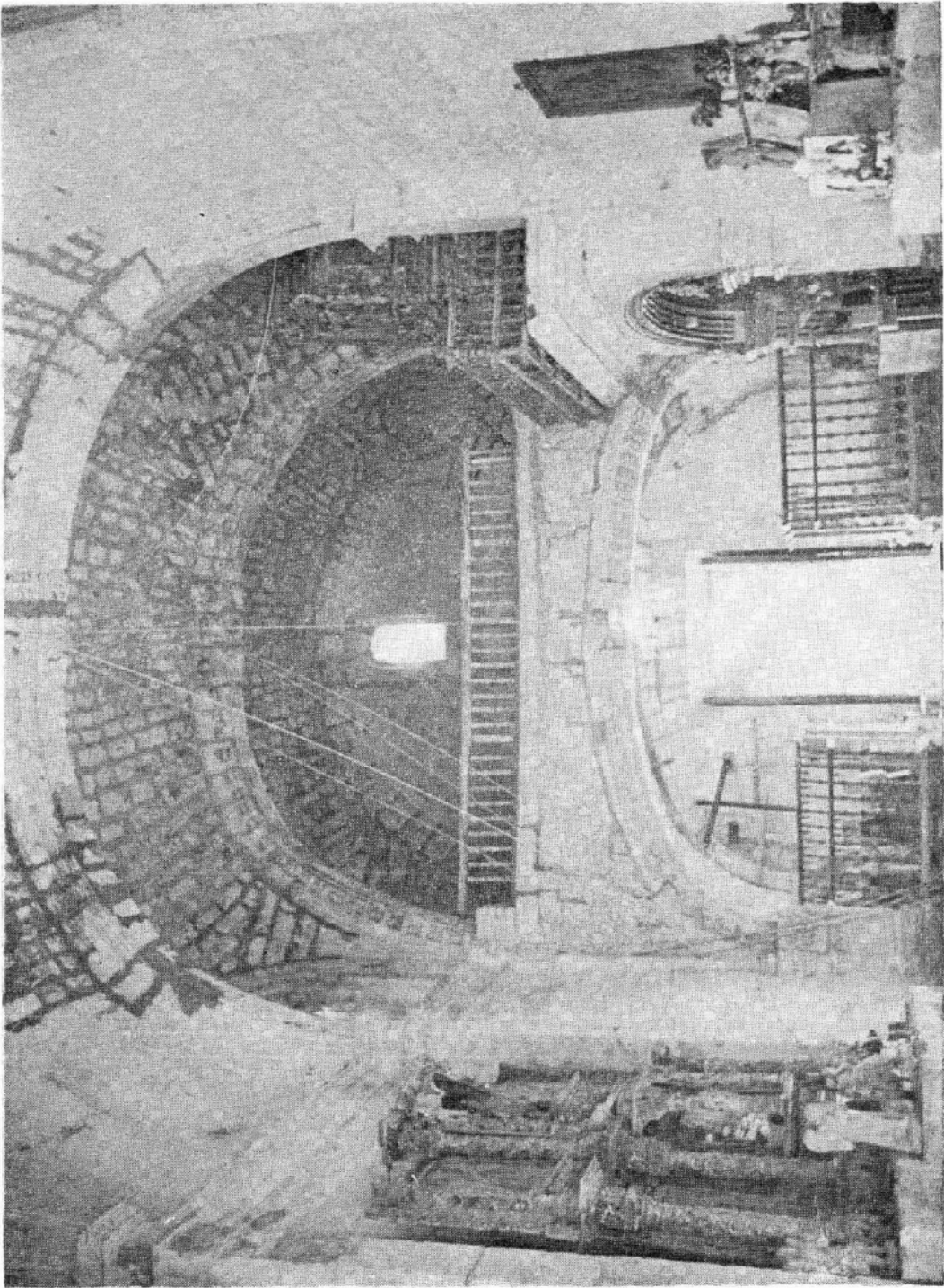


Figure 3. View of choir.

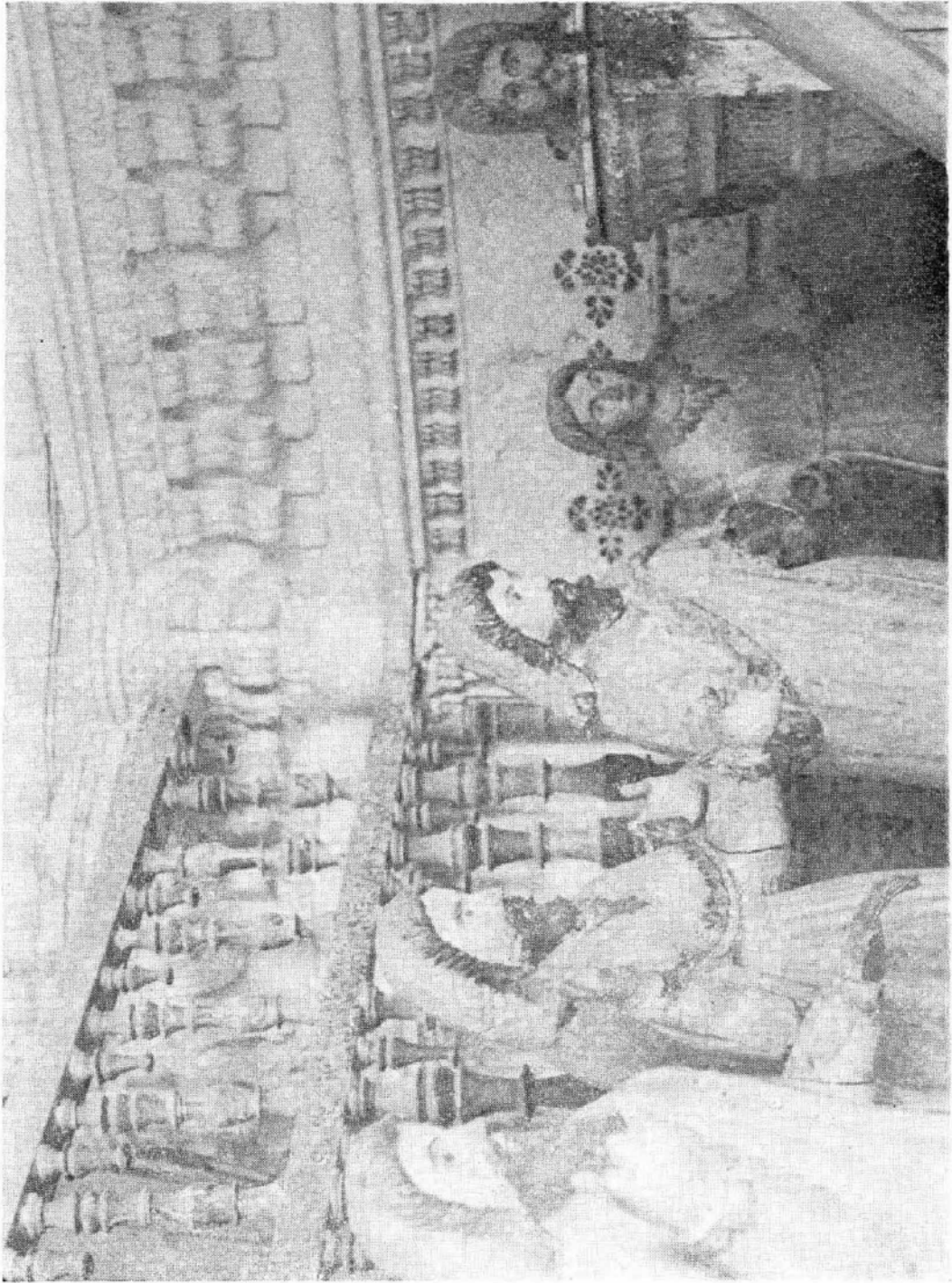


Figure 4. Baptistry. Polychromed sculptures.



Figure 5. Main portal of parrish.

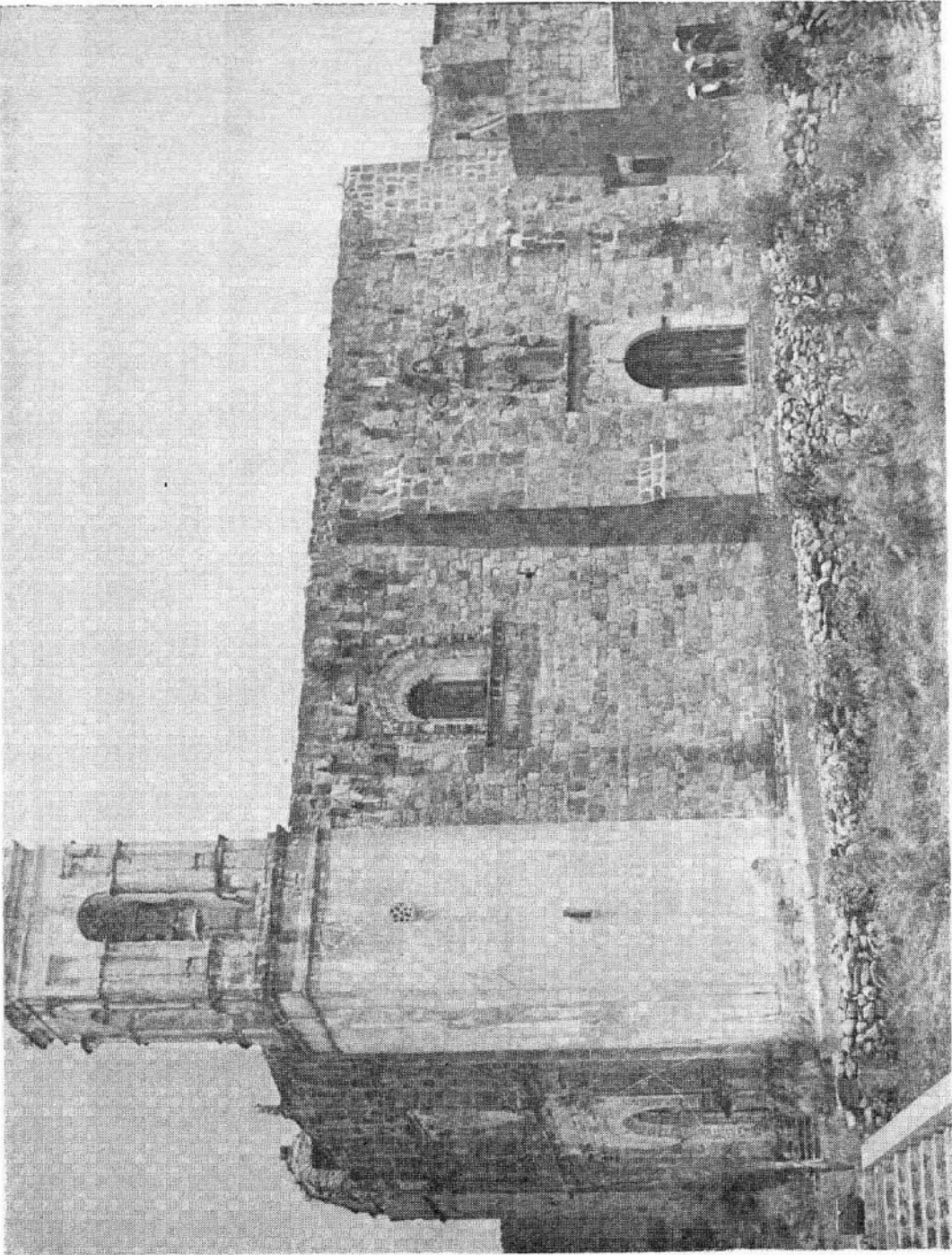


Figure 6. Lateral view of nave and towers

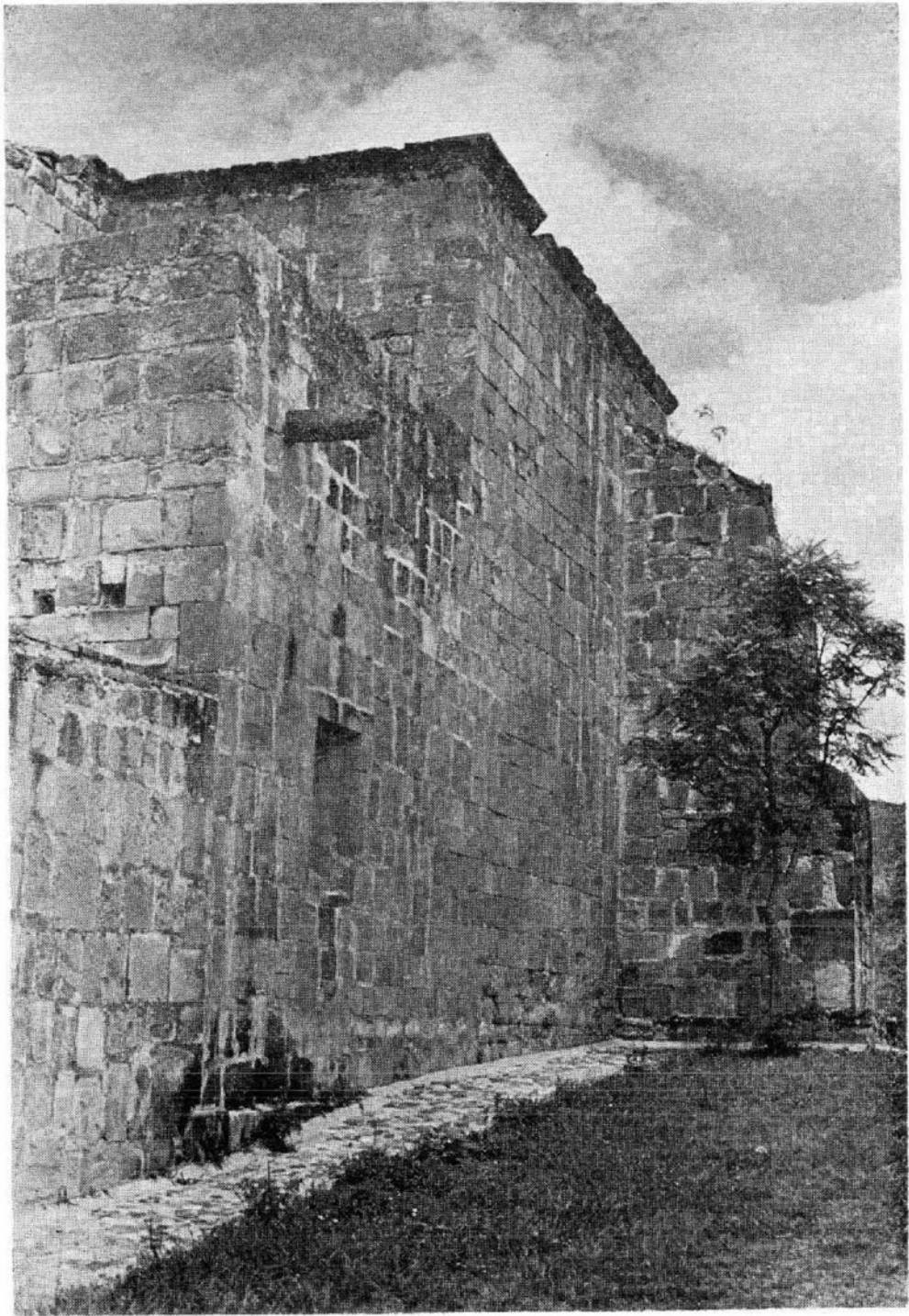


Figure 7. Walls of sacristy.



Figure 8. South lateral portal.

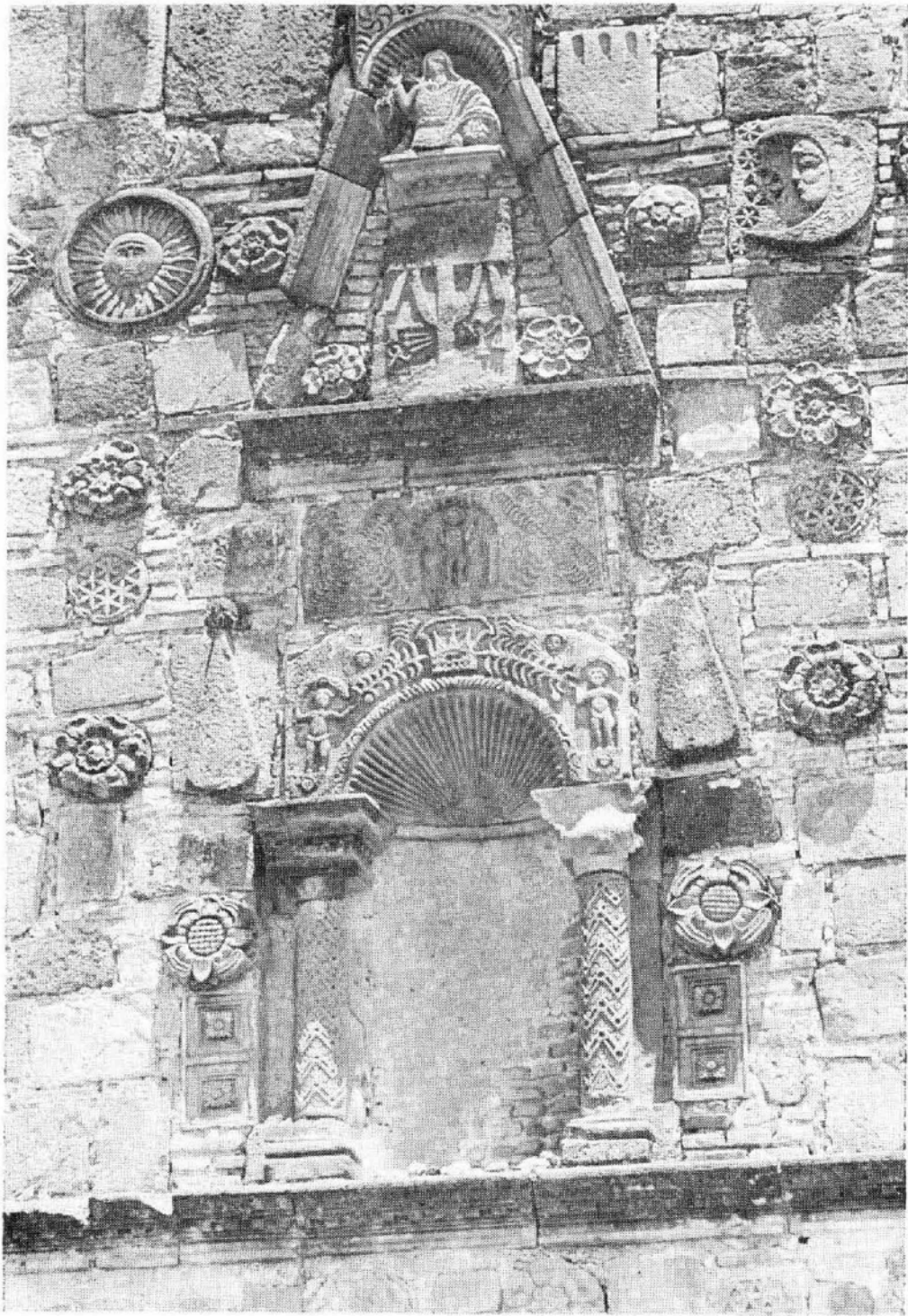


Figure 9. Detail of upper lateral southern portal.

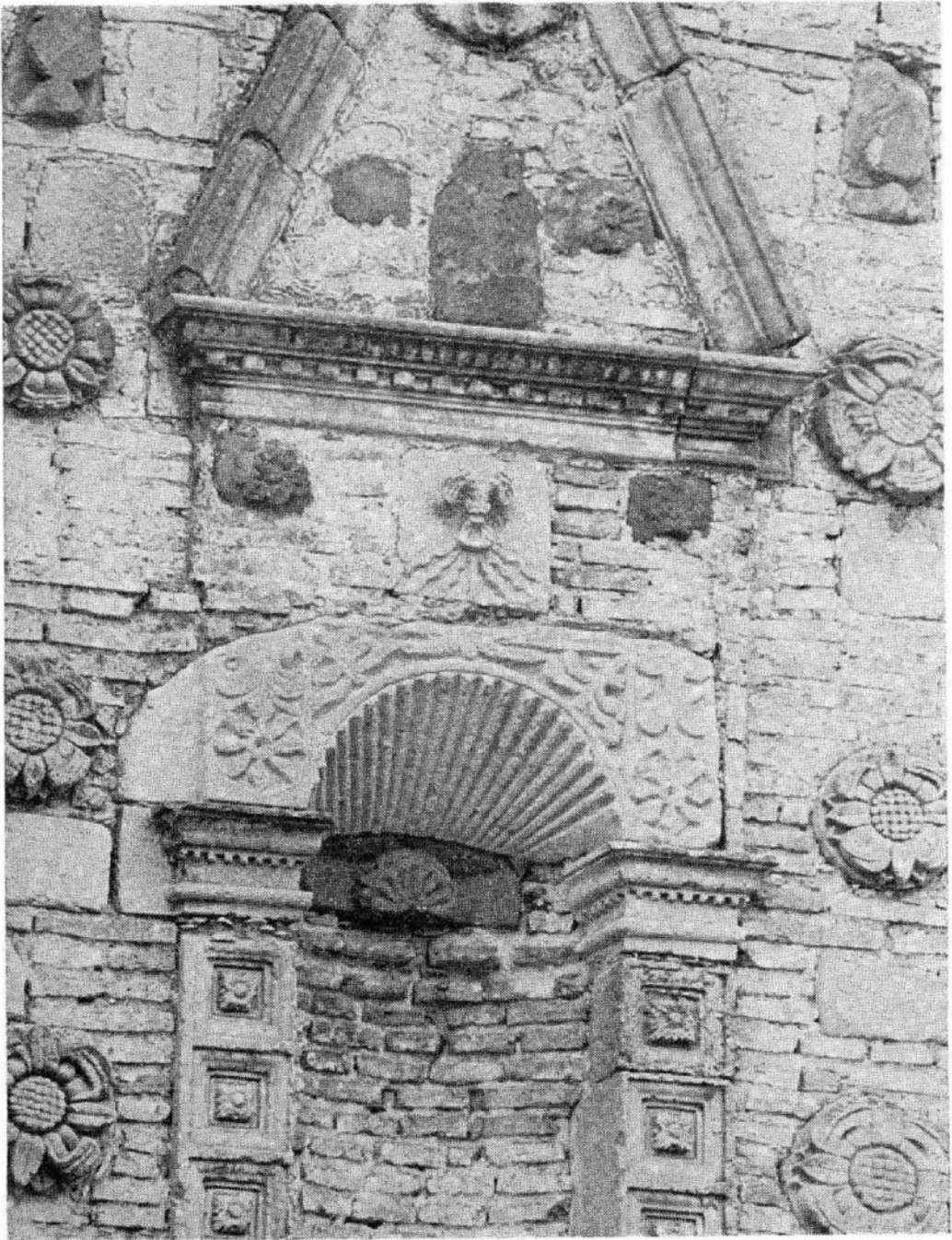


Figure 10. Northern lateral portal.

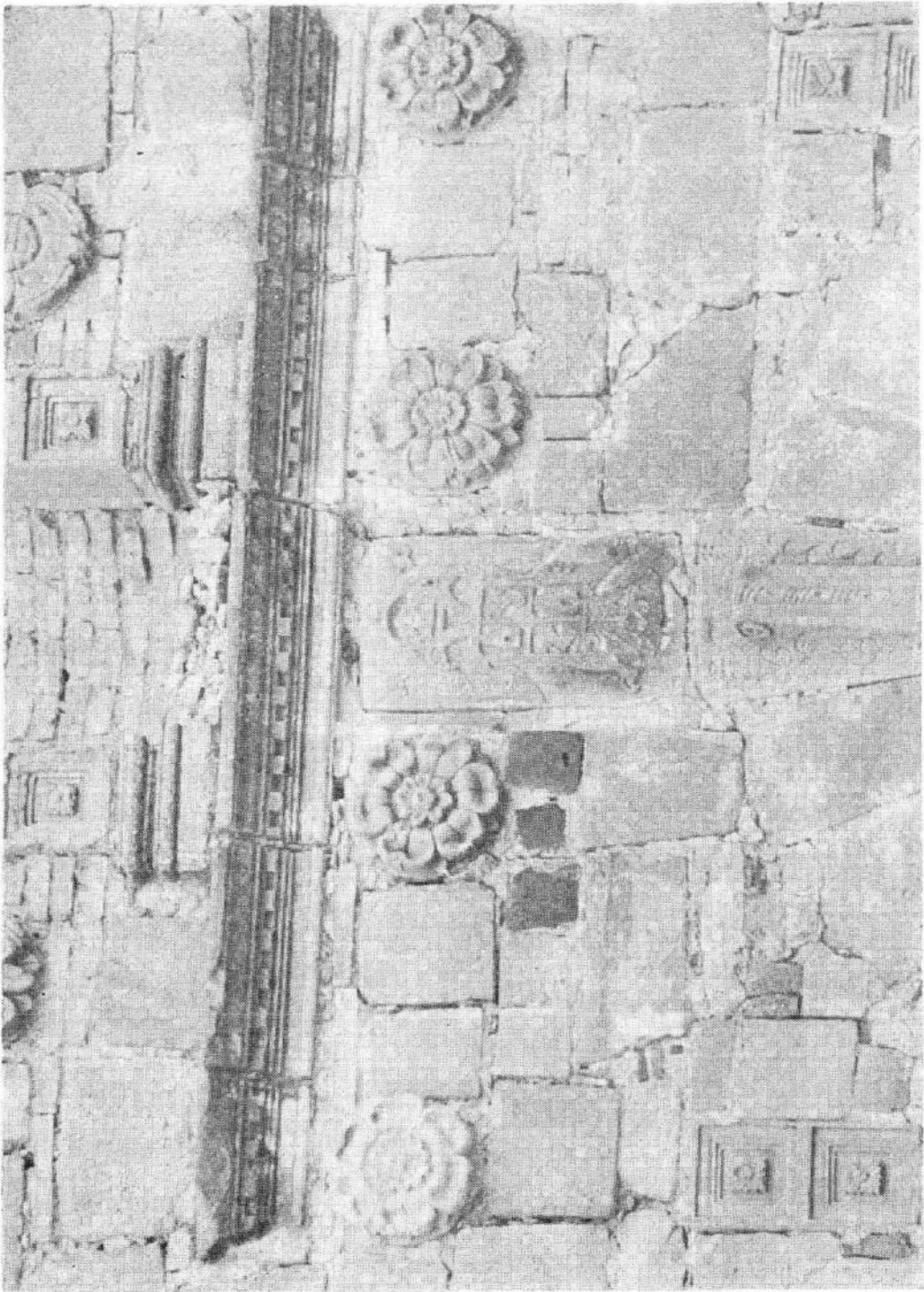


Figure 11. Northern lateral portal (detail) .



Figure 12. Northern lateral portal (detail).



Figure 13. Northern lateral portal, dated 1687.

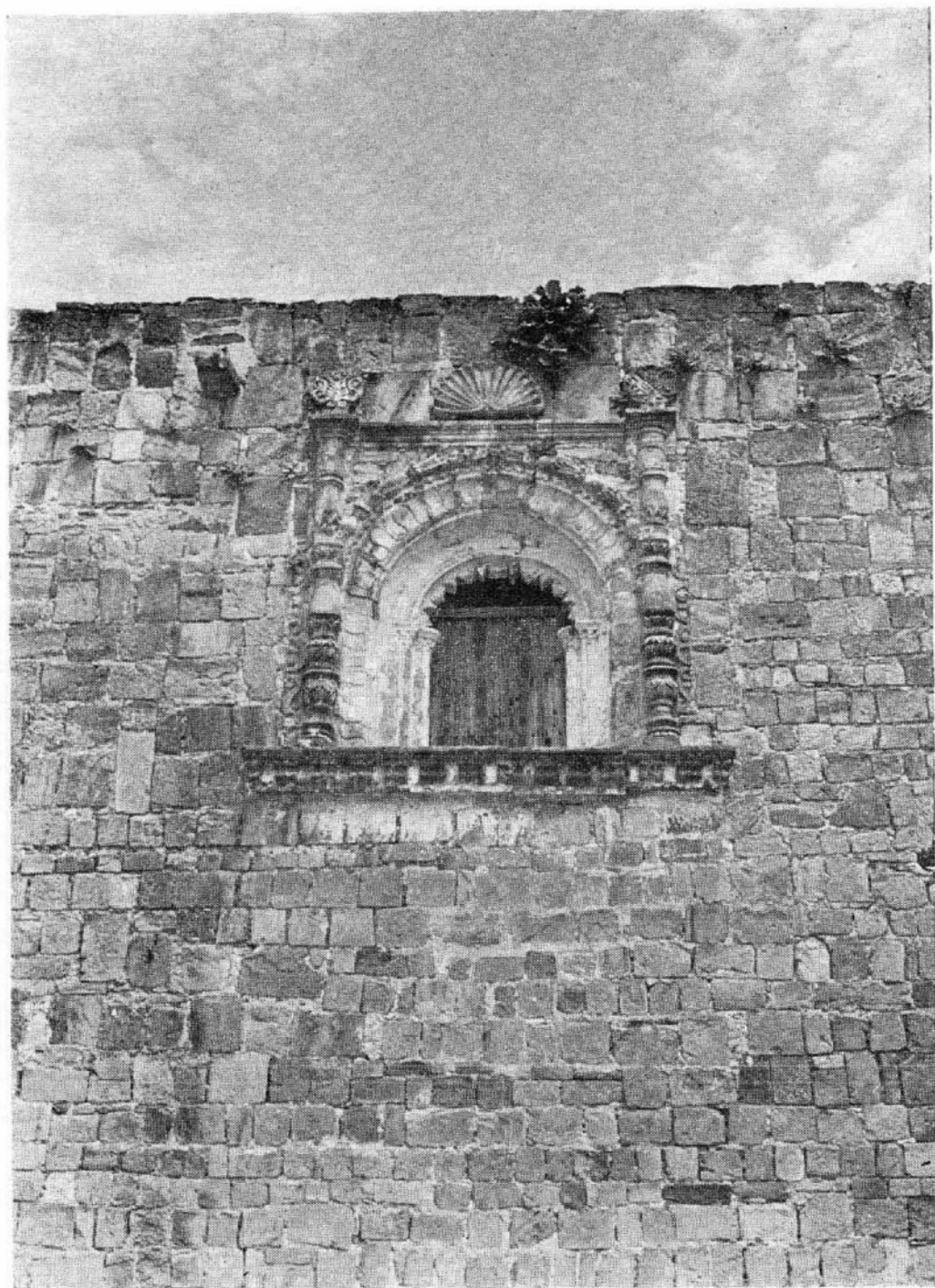


Figure 14. Yanhuitlán, Oax. Church of Dominican Convent. Window.

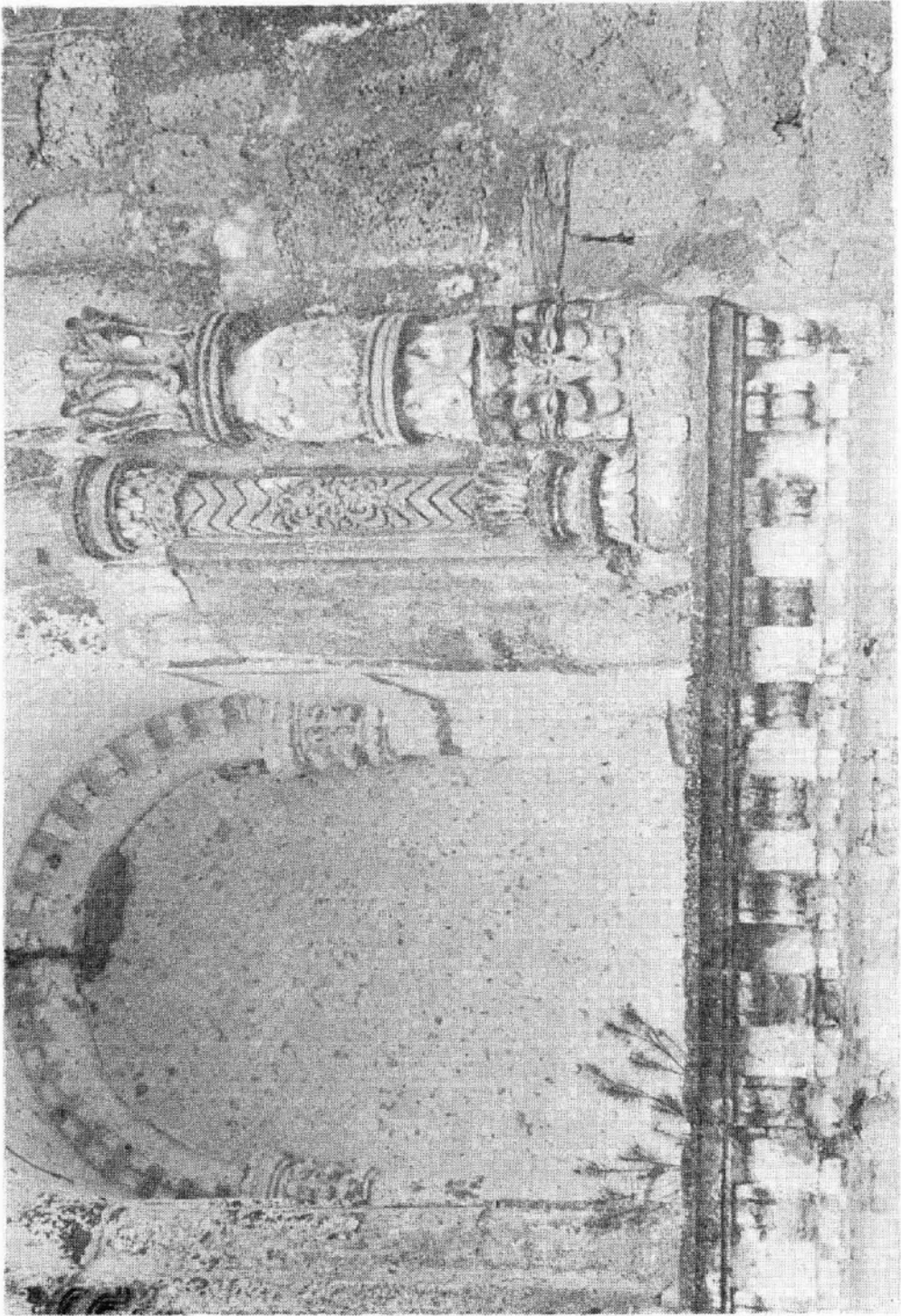


Figure 15. Yanhuilán, Oax. Detail of Window.



Figure 16. Yanhuatlán, Oax. Church of the Dominican Convent. Main portal.



Figure 17. Santa María Tiltepec, Oax. Parrish, main portal.

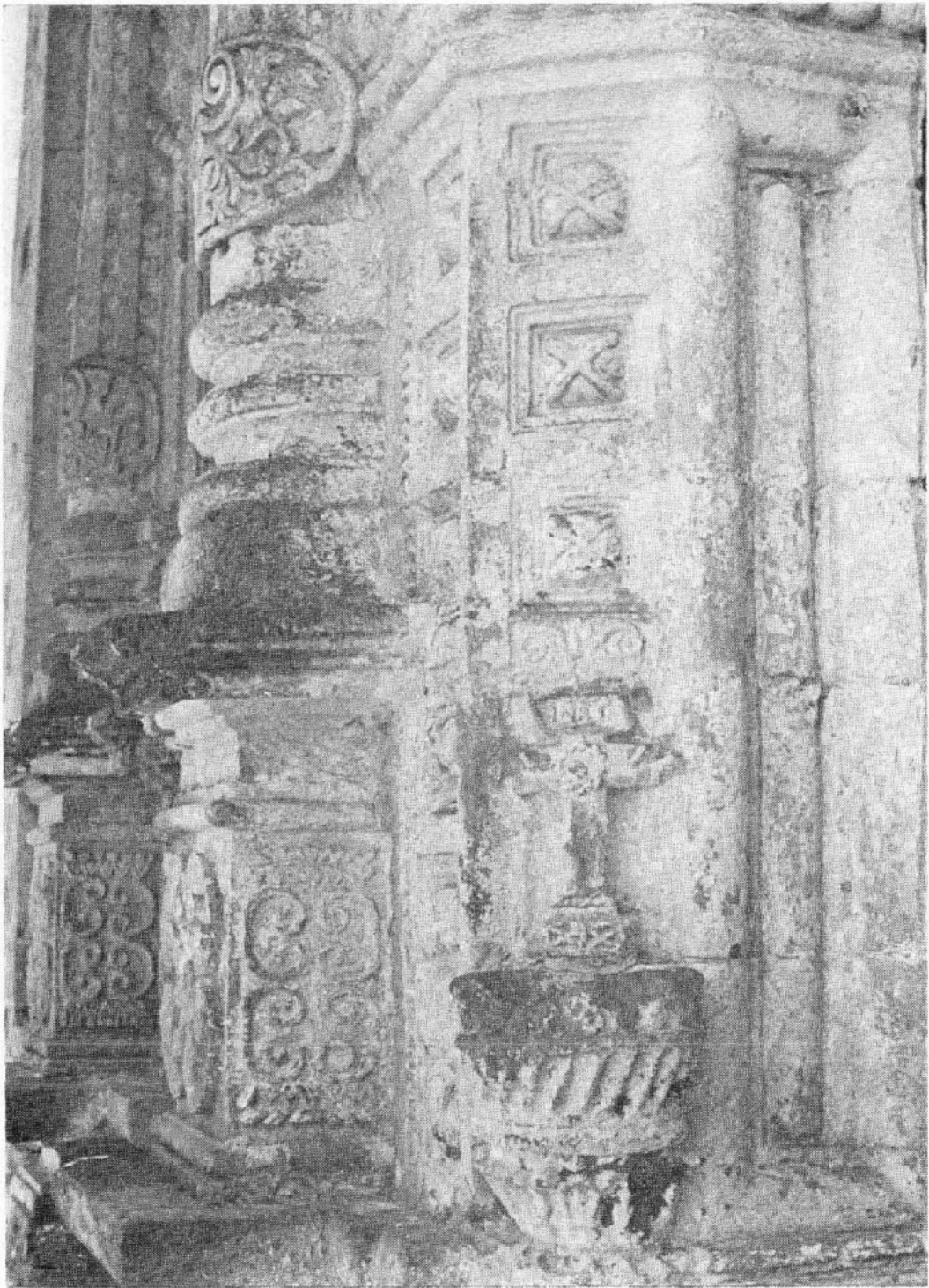


Figure 18. Detail of main portal.

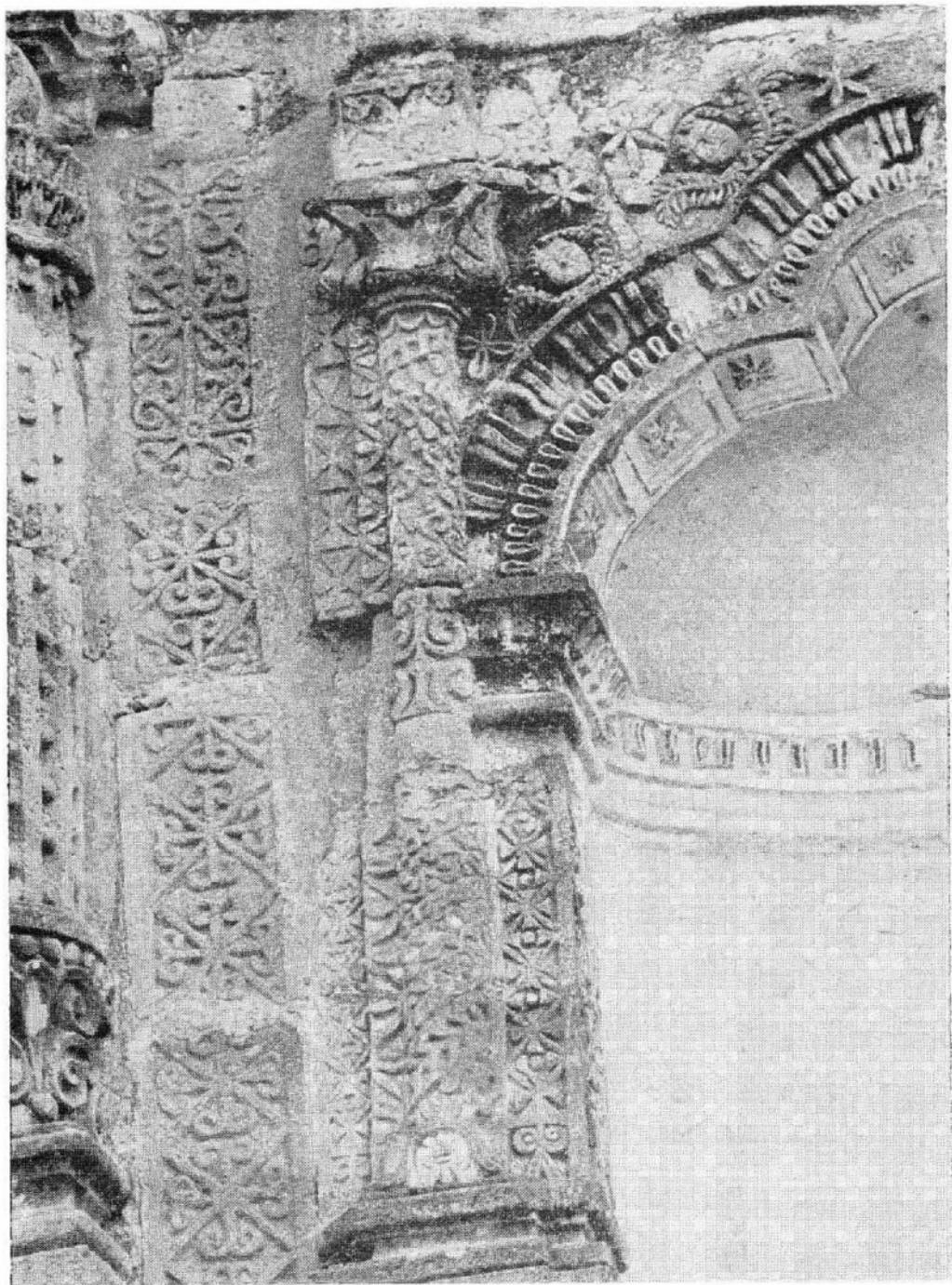


Figure 19. Detail of main portal.

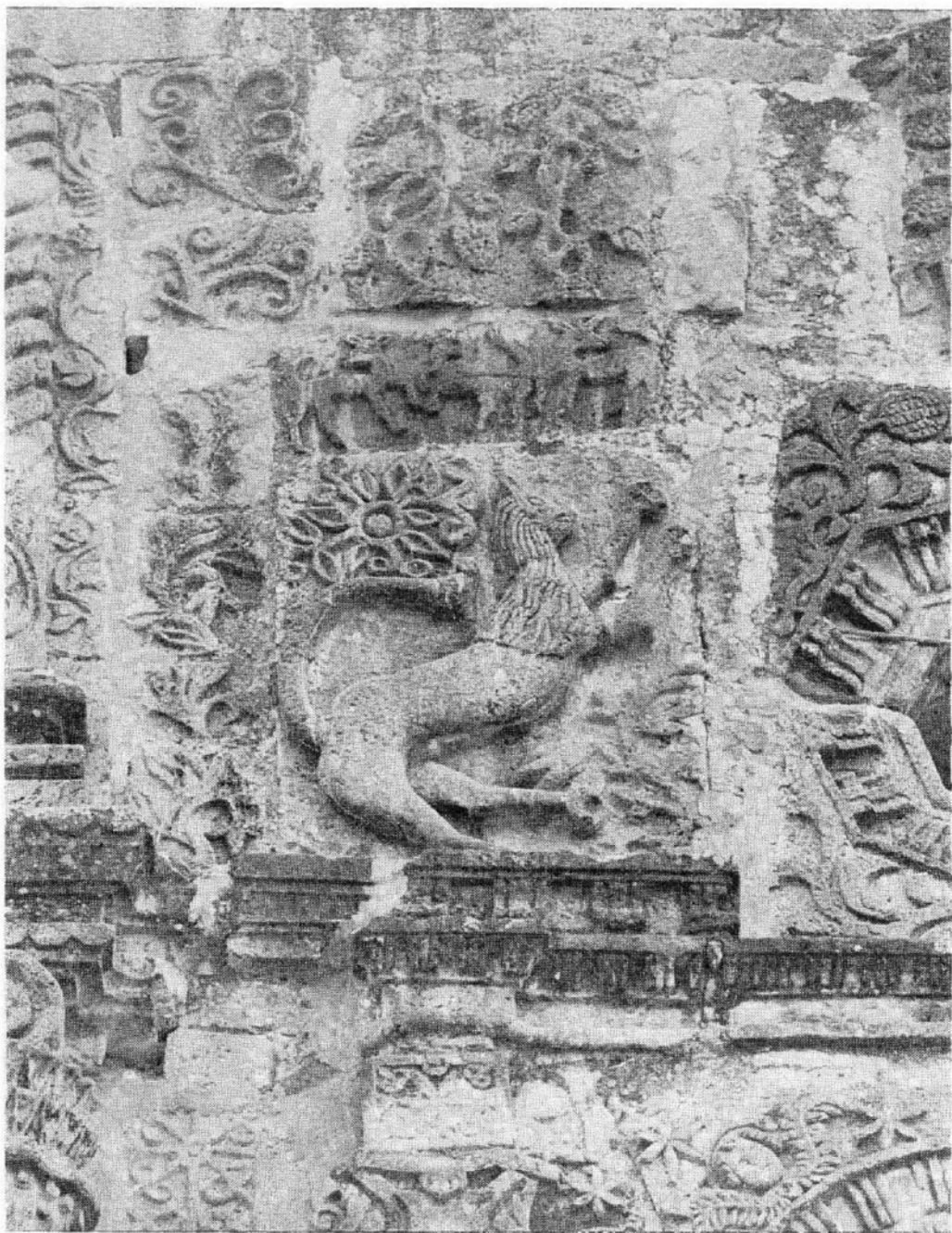


Figure 20. Detail of main portal.



Figure 21. Detail of main portal.

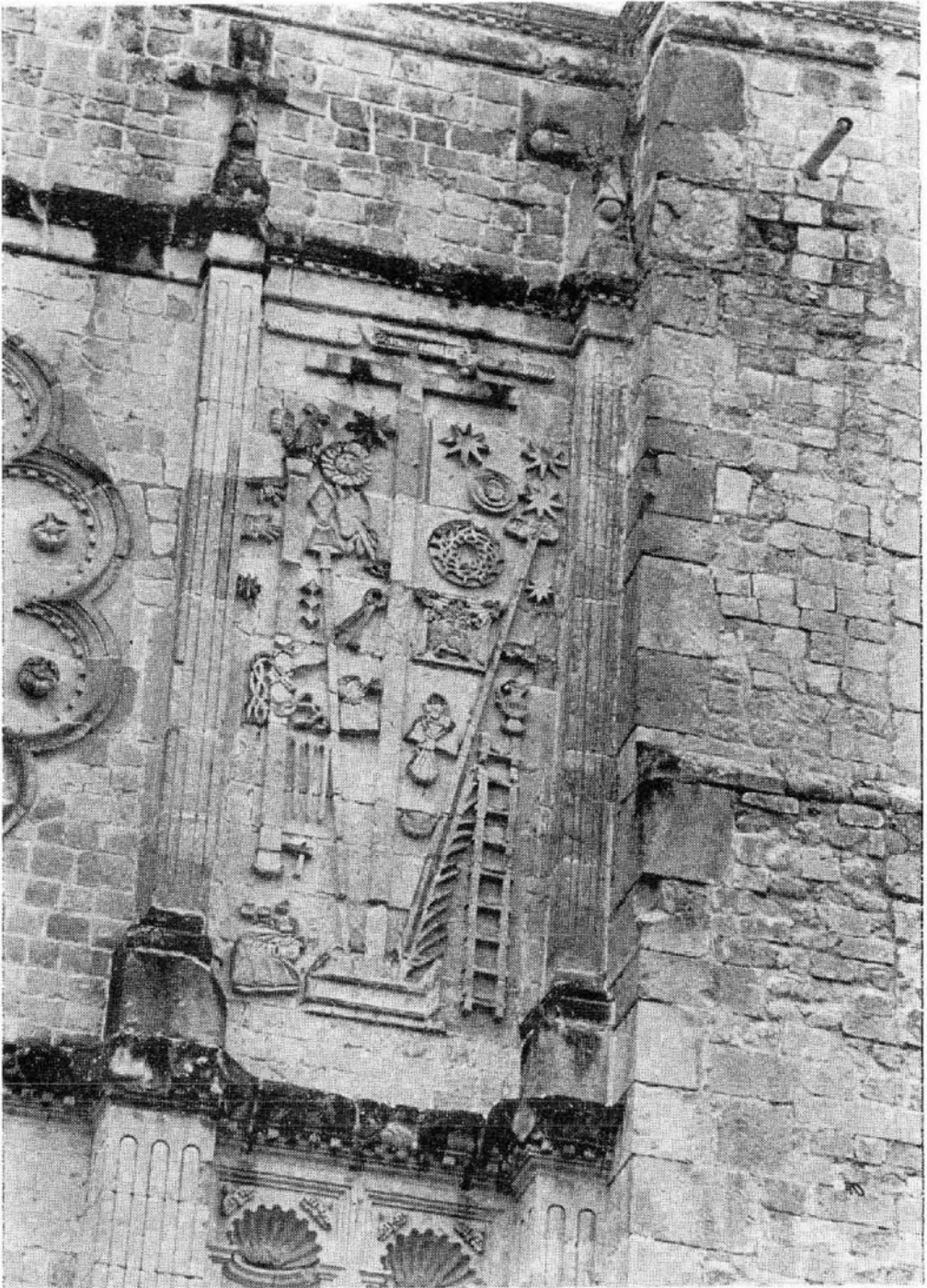


Figure 22. Coixtlahuaca, Oax. Church of dominican convent. Detail of main portal.

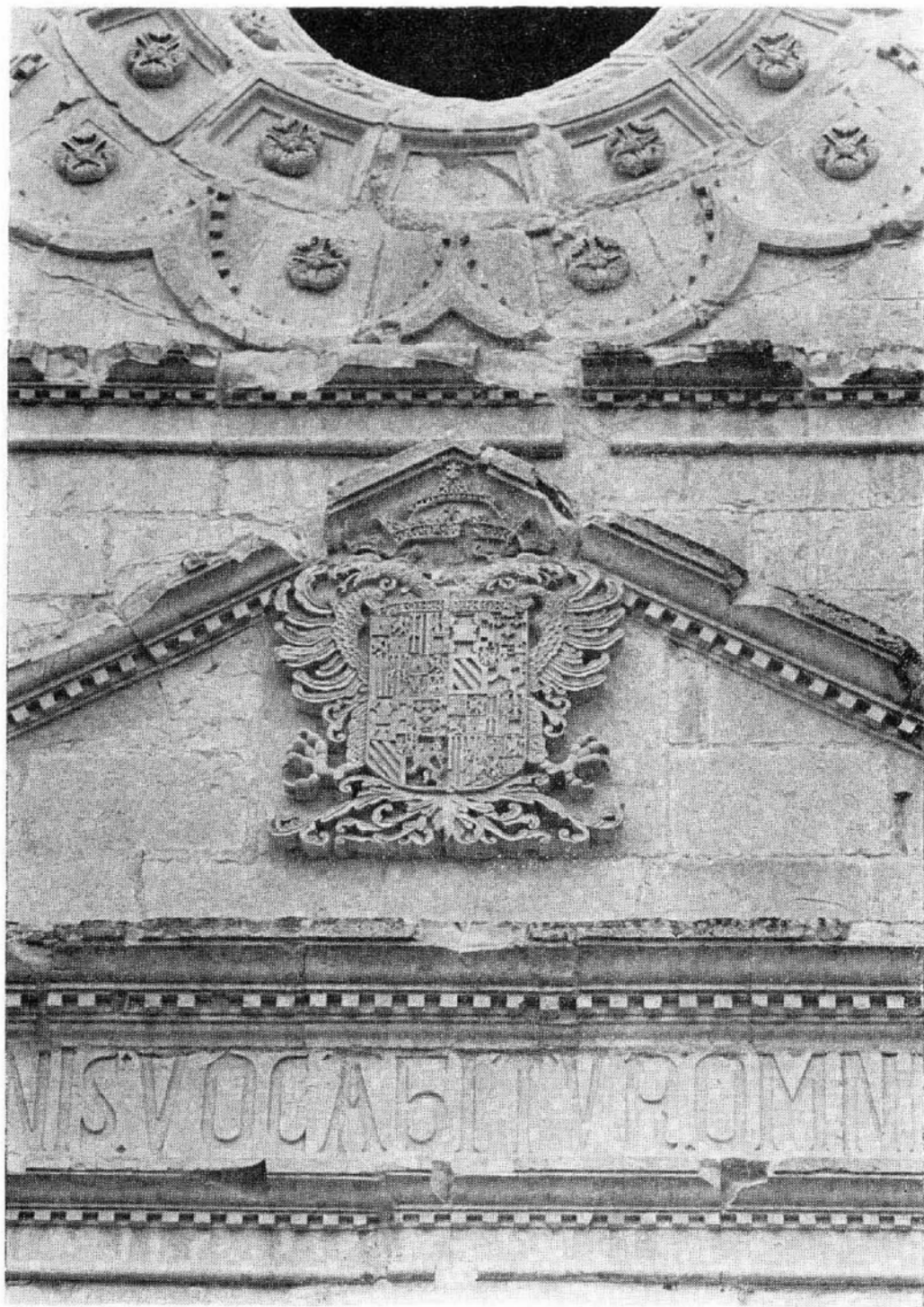


Figure 23. Coixtlahuaca, Oax. Detail of main portal.

— A good portion of the Mixtec codices contain human histories. “Most of the historical incidents shown in the lives of individuals occur during the era spanned by (male) 5 Alligator and his famous son (male) 8 Deer.” (p. 556).

— Some supernaturals are believed to “represent the personifications of important features in the Mixtec culture”. Such personifications are (female) 9 Reed for the sacred birth tree and (female) 11 Serpent for the maguey plant. (p. 558).

— In examining specific pictorial traits it has been discovered that the drawings of (male) 8 Deer are “characterized by definite patterns of apparel and decoration, indicating his superior status over all other persons in the scene with him”. (p. 563).

To this point this article has pursued essentially a pre-iconographic analysis in the standard mode of Western scholarship. But would it not be far more significant to try to understand what values were ascribed to this templo by the Mixtec people of Santa María Tiltepec as it was being built and adorned? Discovering another fine 16th-century building is exciting, but is there possibly more to it than that? Difficult as it may be, can one not try to “read” something of those values from the visual record presented us? To the *maestro cantero* —the master stone carver— were these sculpted pieces simply ornament, devoid of symbolism? Would it not be natural for one trained to sculpt the imagery of ancient sacred symbols to place some on the new templo? Let us transplant ourselves in time and space to that pueblo around 1580 and become the *maestro cantero* musing about his difficult role of being caught, as it were, between two worlds.

*

MAESTRO

On the site long held sacred by my people the new templo is almost finished. What an honor to have been in charge of carving the designs in stone a “sculptor”, the friars said I am. I like them. They tell me or show me what kind of design should be made. These are very nice but many I do not understand. I wonder what “three-dimensional” means? “Ionic capitals, flutings, angels, arch, keystone, dentils” —I never heard

these words before. I did my best using these pictures as guides —but they are so small— I think the friar called them woodcuts. Oh well, I did get some idea of what they meant when I visited the great Dominican conventos nearby—Yanhuitlán, Teposcolula and Coixtlahuaca.

Of course I know many signs which have always been sacred to my peoples, especially the diagonal band, sometime crossed, of the Sun God. Everyone knows that the Sun God each day travels through thirteen stages of the upper world and nine stages, during the night, of the underworld. Being a *maestro* I know that the Sun God is shown as a feathered serpent with diagonal bands, or sometimes just with bands.

The cross of the friars is so much like our tree of life. Since the cross is so sacred a sign to the friars I made it sit upon that most sacred of signs to us —the crossed band. And this piece they call the keystone. The friars laughed when they saw this “wise old owl,” but my people will know its special meaning. We smile too because the friars have never noticed —at least they have never said anything to me— the 13 parts in the arch of the portal, the 12 crossed bands and the “owl.” I wonder if they ever noticed the 13 crossed bands on the posts —six on one side, seven on the other. If they did notice they probably thought I was stupid, but were too kind to say anything. But they did admire these columns with their so-called flutings. I tried to carve 13 circles in each. The friars call them “circles”. I meant them to be jade disks —one of our most important symbols— which always means something sacred, especially on a templo. Our people are very pleased to see these important signs at the very entrance to our new templo.

When the friar told me he wanted a lion and a dog set up there around the *oculo* I was really surprised. I could understand the lion, but why a dog? We Mixtecs don'ts think much of a dog and don't use it as a sacred symbol. Then the friar told me why the Dominicans use the dog so much as a symbol —he said a dog always accompanied Santo Domingo. So I did my best to make the dog look like it should belong there. I tried to carve the jaws in the shape of a parrot's beak now there is a sacred symbol! And just to make sure my people will see that dog as sacred I gave it a feathered mane and a whole plume of feathers on its back. Everyone knows that the great god of creation is shown as the feathered serpent. Now about that lion —I have never seen one but I do know something about the jaguar— a symbol just as important as the feathered serpent. Sometimes we give the jaguar

the talons of an eagle. The friar sure was puzzled when he saw my lion and dog, but he didn't say anything. He probably thought —“Oh well, what can you expect from a local sculptor. And besides it is so high up there no one will really notice!” But neither do I want my people to be puzzled. To make sure they see that lion and dog as sacred I myself carved and put that stone with the deer over the lion and that stone with the flower with eight petals over the dog. In this way the symbol of our great hero, Eight Deer, makes the lion and dog sacred beyond any doubt. I wonder what the friar would say if he knew that!

When the friar asked us to carve some angels around that big niche in the center of the second row we didn't know what to do. We had no idea what they were supposed to look like. The friar admitted he had never actually seen one but, he said, in his land they are shown with just a face and then some wings. Since we seldom carved faces before these aren't very good. But we really showed our skill in carving feathers when we made those wings. Those on top of the columns don't look so bad either.

Before carving the Christ, cross and instruments of his death on the south portal, the friar said I should study the north door at Coixtlahuaca to see what such things look like. This I did. There they are much bigger (Fig. 22) but I got the idea. The story of the coming to life again of Christ reminded me so much of our great symbol of new life — 9 Reed and the sacred birth tree. That is why I put those two rosettes next to the cross within the triangle with nine petals, four on one, five on the other. I saw the south door as sort of an entrance to the underworld of the Nine Lords and put another group of nine stones to each side of the arch. True, you have to count the middle stones as belonging to each side — but I didn't want to be too obvious about it and besides there wasn't that much space. The friar especially liked those flat carvings. He said they looked like stars. I meant them to be like a woven mat with nine strands. I really enjoyed carving the Sun and the Moon. I am sure the friar knows what great deities these are to us but he said the sun and moon were also often shown by artists in his land and most always with a face. I couldn't resist making the face in the sun look like a Spanish “señor” with his mustache. When I carved the face in the moon I tried to make it look like a woman. On the middle stone of the arches of both side doors I carved

oud reed flute — don't they look real! — because I want my people to think of 9 Reed or 9 Wind.

Everyone is proud of the way I carved the coat-of-arms, as the friar calls it, on the north door. I did my very best, and if it is not as good as the one I saw in Coixtlahuaca (Fig. 23) my friends here will never know unless they go there — which isn't very likely.

We are very proud of our templo. We'll show those Yanhuitecos...

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The musings are an attempt to become an artisan in a small Mixtecan pueblo in mid 16th century and, in so doing, to try to understand the essential values of a Mesoamerican villager suddenly confronted with an alien culture. This new culture possessed religious rituals and symbols remarkably parallel to the ancient. The "sacred" meant much —perhaps everything— in Mesoamerica and it would have been natural enough to try to identify the "new sacred" with some of the symbols of the "old sacred". Scholars have been hesitant to enter this uncertain realm but it must be attempted if we are to understand the 16th-century "religious" sculpture of Mexico.¹¹ These musings have been attempted in a spirit of awe and reverence. Of all, that of Eight Deer may be the most difficult to accept. If accurate, it will constitute a most remarkable discovery. It is now well known that in the Nuttall Codex, a Mixtec post-Classic but pre-Conquest "manuscript", the great hero and demigod is none other than Eight Deer. In Santa María Tiltepec we have a Mixtec codex in stone.

¹¹ One of the most sensitive interpretations of the ancient belief world of Mesoamerica is the account by Peter T. Furst of religion and symbolism among the Huichol Indians of Western Mexico in *The Ninth Level: Funerary Art From Ancient Mesoamerica* (University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1978). He notes with astonishment how these peoples have managed to hold on to the ancient system of beliefs and rituals, including music, especially that of the flute. The characteristic Indian flute had a "cylindrical bore, four finger holes, and a whistle or fipple mouthpiece" (p. 12).