

Abstract

The foundation of the Spanish March and the wars that arose in the subsequent decades contributed to the population decline of the lands south of the eastern Pyrenees Mountains. By the outset of the tenth century, however, the marcher counts and bishops of Catalonia were reconstituting dioceses and establishing new village parishes across the landscape. In a surge of new construction, settlers and their lords built churches as spiritual fortresses, ensuring the salvation of their souls. Evidence of this campaign survives in hundreds of consecration records (*dotalia*) created at the time of a church's dedication. My paper argues that these sources reveal how villagers understood the nature of worship-centers and the ritual that sanctified them: The consecration rite removed the church from the material universe and transformed it into a literal gateway to heaven (*porta celi*). By worshiping there, and expressing sufficient contrition, Christians could summon saints back to Earth and entreat them to plead for their salvation in God's heavenly court. This conception of churches, works against the established view that the consecration rite was targeted to lay audiences and meant to instruct them in the fundamental principles of their faith, particularly baptism. Our predominant focus on liturgical and theological texts has belied that these buildings—by merit of the ritual that created them—were intrinsically sacred spaces and points of contact between humans and divine entities. They were places of direct interaction. By incorporating Catalan *dotalia* into broader discussions of early medieval liturgical practices and church studies, we can see that the lay worshipers and the clergy of the Spanish March were more interested in what these buildings did, rather than what they meant. As their use outside of the Mass attests in the region's documents, they were functional structures that were often used for non-liturgical purposes.