The Fresco Paintings of San Baudelio

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Abstract:

The fresco paintings of San Baudelio de Berlanga in central Spain have long puzzled art historians. These paintings are now dispersed in various museums around the world, but in their original context they present two seemingly different styles of painting and thus have been assumed to represent two separate painting phases—one Mozarabic, the other Romanesque. In this essay, I will argue that these two sets of paintings were executed simultaneously and are contemporary with the material of the building. This juxtaposition of two styles was designed to address the various spiritual needs of the small religious community on the frontier of the reconquest zone of central Iberia at a time when they were in flux.

Introduction

Emerging from a rocky outcropping on the side of a low hill, constructed of "local buff-colored stone" (Adams, 1963, p. 4), is the rural, Spanish hermitage church of San Baudelio de Berlanga de Duero. Built by Mozarabic artisans sometime between 1037 and 1050 (Dodds, 1990), the square structure topped with earthen red tiles was constructed in honor of St. Baudelius, a fourth-century martyr-missionary from Orleans in southern France. Moreno classified San Baudelio as Mozarabic (Kulp, 1984), dating the architectural components of the church to the early eleventh century. The artisans who built San Baudelio de Berlanga de Duero were therefore believed to be Mozarabs, which means "would be Arab." They were Christians who, after the conquest of Spain by the Muslims, continued to live in the land of the conquerors, maintaining their own municipal, judicial, and religious organizations while adopting the customs, language, and art of the Muslims. While scholars agree on the provenance of the building and do not hesitate in identifying its builders, the interior ornamentation—the elaborate cycles of fresco paintings of two seemingly different styles—continues to puzzle those who have studied this small church. According to Kulp (1984):

> During the time of the Romanesque period almost every exposed surface in the interior of this church—the ceilings, ribs, squinches, central column, oratory, floors and walls—were completely ornamented in *buon* and *secco fresco*. The mural scheme of the nave consisted of the paintings of the vault, a continuous frieze of religious paintings along the top of the walls, a lower register of secular paintings that also extended over the face of the tribune and oratory, a curtain motif at the lowest level of the walls and decorative bands that separated the various registers of paintings. (p. 25)

Among the many frescos the villagers of Berlanga sold to an art dealer named Leon Levi in 1927 were the two acquired by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Kulp, 1984), now on loan to the Meadows Museum at Southern Methodist University—*The Last Supper* and *The Three Marys at the Sepulchre*. These two paintings formed part of the Christological cycle depicted on the upper zone of the nave walls. Seven scenes from the life of Christ have been identified. In addition to the two at the Meadows, there are *The Entry into Jerusalem*, *The Healing of the Blind Man The Raising of Lazarus*, *The Marriage of Cana*, and *The Temptation of Christ*—all housed in various museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cincinnati Museum, and the Prado Museum. Other scenes existed, but are believed to have been destroyed by weather elements that entered the church through the northern door. The scheme of the paintings on the east apsidal wall was also Christological. Resembling a similar composition found in Santa Cruz de Madruelo (Cook, 1930, pp. 327–356), *Cain and Abel* are presenting their offerings to an *Angus Dei*supported by angels; in the center of the wall a descending dove above the singular window represents the *Holy Spirit*; and portrayals of *Saint Nicolas* and *Saint Baudelius* appear on either side of the *Dove*. A broad meandrous border separates the upper Christological cycle from the lower secular cycle. The juxtaposition of these two zones has generated the most controversy in terms of the dating of the frescos.

Of the frescoes from the lower cycle, three hunting scenes survive from the nave walls, although probably more existed. *The Hunter Pursuing Stag* and *Horseman with Hounds Chasing Hares* originally appeared on the northern wall under the murals of *The Entry into Jerusalem* and *The Last Supper*, respectively, while *The Falconer*, *Eagles in Tangent Medallions*, a *Camel*, *Two Rampant Lions*, a *Warrior*, an *Elephant*, and a *Bear* all appeared on the other sides of this lower zone. The lower zone of the apsidal wall contained an Ibis, which

according to Adams (1963), occupied the "most sacred position" in the apse directly above the altar.

In his study of Mozarabic churches, Moreno (1919),stated that he believed the mural schemes were produced at a later date than the building components. Comparing the frescos to those at Tahull and Maderuelo, which are firmly dated to the twelfth century, most scholars accept that the whole of the program at Baudelio was also painted during the twelfth century (Cook, 1930; Kulp, 1984). Garnelo published the only detailed account of the frescos while they were in situ (Kulp, 1984). Like Moreno before him, Garnelo did not discuss the differences in the upper and lower painting registers, nor did he attempt to interpret their meanings (Garnelo, 1924).

Almost 40 years later, Aznar (1958) became the first academic to question the theory that the two zones were painted at the same time. He classified the upper Christological cycle as exemplifying the Romanesque style and stressed the "Mozarabism" of the lower secular cycle, stating that a Muslim painted the cycle immediately after the construction of the church was completed. Zozaya (1967) supported Aznar's theory, but moving beyond the description and cataloging of the secular paintings, he contributed the first iconographic interpretation of the mysterious animal and hunting scenes, proposing that the pictorial and architectural elements of San Baudelio interacted to express Koranic imagery. According to Zozaya, the hunting scenes symbolize death and its triumph, a theme common to both classical and Umayyad iconography, while the animals represent "the fauna of Paradise" (p. 331).

Debate over a Romanesque or Mozarabic classification for the lower paintings has continued to the present time (Kulp, 1984). Pons (1982) has contributed the most complete study

of the lower register of frescos, concluding that the secular scenes were not of Mozarabic production, as argued by Aznar and Zozaya, rather that they suggest Romanesque production and were painted at the same time as the upper register. Tracing the images to Roman traditions that had undergone a continual evolution to the Romanesque period, Pons suggests that the hunting theme acquired significance to Christians as the fight of good against evil. Refuting Pons and advancing the studies of Aznar and Zozaya, Kulp provided evidence that the paintings of the lower register predated those of the upper register. She concluded that the secular lower paintings were intended to represent textiles, and contends that the secular cycle was a visual statement of royal power and wealth. Importantly, she does not attempt to reconcile the meaning of the upper and lower registers. I hold that we can augment current scholarship by reading both the religious and secular fresco panels in relation to their architectural surroundings. In order to be understood, I contend that we must view *The Last Supper* and *Three Marys at the Sepulchre* frescoes in conjunction with the other fresco cycles and in the context of the architectural framework of the church of San Baudelio. The integrated nature of the meaning of the Christological and secular fresco cycles will be clarified when they are analyzed in relation to one another, as the medieval viewer would have seen them. The incorporation of Islamic images allows the upper and lower cycles to work together in the narration of salvation history. Considering the influence of both Islam and the Romanesque as it was known in France at this time, I argue that the lower and upper cycles were painted together in order to reach beyond the walls of the church, thus bringing the power of the religious mass to the experience of everyday life. It is my conclusion that the Islamic theme of earthly paradise has been adopted and translated to represent the Garden of Eden or the heavenly paradise reached by Christians through the life and death of Jesus Christ.

The Historical and Architectural Context

Kulp wrote, "Historical information concerning the Berlanga area and the church is as ambiguous as the physical structure of the building itself" (1984, p. 8). In the tenth century, the Duero Valley was a much contested frontier zone between Christians and Muslims. Throughout the north, under the Umayyad regime, Al-Mansÿr Billah, the greatest of Moorish commanders, conquered Christian territories (Collins, 1983). Unable to fully control the territories, Al-Mansÿr built a chain of castles along the Duero River to serve as a northern boundary for the Caliphate (Adams, 1963). Thirty-two miles from San Baudelio, Medinaceli became his headquarters. Three miles from San Baudelio, Berlanga de Duero became the eastern defense along the castled border.

For another 100 years, the Moors would hold firm against the Christian reconquest. However, by 1037, the temporarily united kingdom of Leon-Castile had taken the Duero Valley. Because this was still frontier country with little population, several communities of Mozarabs, liberated from 400 years of Moorish domination in the south, were resettled there with other exiles. Jews and Muslims also remained in the area because of promised protection and exemption from taxes. Moreno (1919) judged that Mozarabic architects, possibly from Aragon, built San Baudelio in the first decades of the eleventh century. He based his opinion on the proximity of San Baudelio to the Muslim city of Aragon and to the advanced building techniques employed in the construction of the church. Moreno, along with Zozaya, believed that a large cave "which reaches over two hundred yards into the hill" (Adams, 1963, p. 4) was the main factor in the building of San Baudelio in its location (Kulp, 1984; Moreno, 1919). Zozaya (1967) related the church of San Baudelio to cave architecture. Discovering what he believed to be a small apsidal niche in the cave, he reasoned that the direction of the niche determined the

orientation of the church. Moreno (1919) and Zozaya (1967) conclude that San Baudelio, like San Milán de la Cogolla, had developed from a cave sanctuary occupied by a hermit.

On San Baudelio's north wall is the singular entrance, a double horseshoe arch. It leads into the splendor of the interior church. The portal "provides passage to a single space, wide and high, covered by one vast ribbed vault that grows from the center of the room like an enormous palm tree" (Dodds, 1990, p. 93). The central column supports the vault and helps buttress the tribune. From the column, eight ribbed arches emerge and descend in horseshoe curves to squinches in the four corners of the nave and to corbels in the middle of each side. A cylindrical enclosure occupies a space at the top of the column inside the radiating ribbed arches (Kulp, 1984). A tiny cupola tops the enclosure. The vaulting of the cupola has six traversing ribs that repeat a form that mirrors the vaults seen at the Great Mosque of Cordoba and Bÿb al-Mardÿm (Dodds, 1990). On the east side, a tribune is connected to a small barrel-vaulted oratory. Opposed to the tribune are five steps leading to a barrel-vaulted apse (Kulp, 1984). The entrance to this primary chapel has an impressive double horseshoe arch like that of the main door. Finally, an altar is located on the eastern wall beneath the only window, a horseshoe arched opening that illuminates the apse.

Because of the structural and aesthetic parallels, scholars such as Moreno (1919) classify the church of San Baudelio as Mozarabic. For example, the exterior of San Baudelio conforms to Mozarabic architecture traditions, especially its cubical apsidal attachment and absence of exterior decoration After measuring the building and analyzing the plans, Zozaya (1967) concluded that the forms within the church represented advanced mathematical systems not employed by Christians, but known to have been used by Muslims and Jews.

Thought to be the most Mohammedan example of Mozarabic architecture (Adams, 1963), the San Baudelio hermitage is unique within the Mozarabic classification. The presence of a tribune and the central column with radiating ribbed arches and enclosed cupola distinguish the structure from others in the same classification. “This ‘dream architecture,’” as Jacques Fontaine is quoted as describing Berlanga, has, in its “unruly brilliance, no conceivable single prototype in Islamic or Christian architectural traditions” (Dodds, 1990, p. 93). Hence, the unique architectural features combine with the two enigmatic painting styles to create a one-of-a-kind building.

The San Baudelio Frescos

Pons’ proposal that the upper and lower fresco cycles were painted at the same time, and therefore, constitute a singular Romanesque production, is central to my argument. At San Baudelio, a workshop of artists created no less than a dialogue between Christianity and Islam. It is my belief that this interaction represented a message that would have been recognized by all the dominant religious beliefs represented by individuals who used the church for religious purposes. While I do not dispute the Romanesque format of the Christological cycle, or the fact that the Christological and secular fresco cycles do differ in subject matter, it is interesting to note that the secular cycle has few known Romanesque parallels in Spanish churches (Cook, 1930). More important, this is where the question of simultaneous manufacture becomes significant.

Like the other paintings in the upper register, the *Last Supper* is painted in full Romanesque style “reflecting French and Italo-Byzantine influences” (Kulp, 1984, p. 49). Elements of both *The Last Supper* and *The Three Marys of the Sepulchre* can be seen in the

Romanesque rural church Vicq located in central France (Kupfer, 1993). As in Vicq, the upper cycle frescoes in San Baudelio use "already conventional narrative strategies implemented to recount events from Scripture and the lives of saints" (Kupfer, 1993, p. 60). *The Last Supper* depicts the scene of Jesus at the table with his closest followers. There is no background or foreground, leaving the impression that no other information is important here. The figures seated at the table have elongated faces with prominent almond eyes; their great dark pupils are visible under heavy symmetrical eyebrows. At San Baudelio, there is also a great emphasis on the drapery fold of the garments that resembles the paintings at Vicq. At both sites, the folds "reveal sweeping, swirling configurations edged with multiple lines to suggest shading and volume" (Kulp, 1984, p. 49). Under the table we see the men's "pendant feet" (Kulp, 1984, p. 49) making the figures seem weightless, suspended behind the table. Both *The Last Supper* and *The Three Marys at the Sepulchre* use "architectural motifs such as columns, arcades, and towers…to separate and isolate the groups of figures" (Kulp, 1984, p. 40). The artist who painted the upper fresco register of San Baudelio implements standard Romanesque colors found in the rural churches of central France and Spain. These are bright and inviting, "emphasizing red, green, yellow, orange, brown, blue, grey, violet, and white" (Kulp, 1984, p. 49). In contrast to the upper zone, the lower zone is flat and two-dimensional. The artist uses heavy outlines to achieve an emphasis on the silhouette (Kulp, 1984, p. 49). The drapery is treated as a "flat, solid mass of color with a few simple lines to indicate folds" (Kulp, 1984, p. 50). Rather than using a full palette of color, the flat figures of the animals and hunters are painted atop "solid red or ivory backgrounds" (Kulp, 1984, p. 50).

Despite some stylistic differences between the upper and lower registers, I agree with scholars that assign the lower register to the Romanesque period. In comparing the registers,

Pons observes many stylistic similarities, including the portrayal of the faces, drapery folds, and animal hairs in the secular scenes. Kulp (1984) attributes these similarities to retouching the lower register at the time the upper zone was painted (p. 50). For Pons, however, the similarities, for example, between the white donkey that *The Falconer* (lower cycle) rides and the one that Jesus rides in *The Entry to Jerusalem* (upper cycle), conform to Romanesque conventions (p. 31).

Taking a different point of view, Adams assigns the San Baudelio murals to two masters working side by side (1963, p. 11). He refers to the older painter of the lower secular register as the "Master of Baudelio." Adams believes that the younger painter of the upper zone is the older painter's assistant and collaborator. He credits the assistant with painting all the religious subjects: "Since the younger man journeyed westward down the Duero to paint the apse of the Ermita de la Cruz at Maderuelo with its unmistakable resemblances to San Baudelio, he is called the 'Master of Maderuelo'" (p. 11). Unlike Adams, Kupfer (1993) considers the composition of a painting program in a more integrated way. In relation to the French murals at Vicq, she explains:

> Wall painters, through their workshop routines, articulate the pictorial fabric in ways that shaped the patterns and rhythm of visual integration. They employed conventional methods of dividing one pictorial element for another at two compositional levels: laying out the ensemble as a whole and working up the mural surface itself. (Kupfer, 1993, p. 60)

Following Kupfer, I believe that the lower register and the apse painted by the Master of Baudelio would have been painted first, after the entire mural scheme had been decided:

“Assembling the pictorial program required painters to collect images into zones within the architectural structure and into registers along the wall” (Kupfer, 1993, p. 60). Although at San Baudelio the registers were painted at the same time, certainly the lower zone would have been executed first. Perhaps living under the Muslim regime longer accounts for the Moorish influence on the older painter’s use of Islamic themes. The younger painter might have been more versed in the Romanesque Christian iconography.

There is another question to consider. Why would the two painters work together as they did to produce murals of debatable meaning? One possibility is that together, the painters created images intended to address the needs of two different audiences, Christians and Moors. The secular register is borrowed from Islam, a representation of paradise on earth. Paradise in preparation for heaven is depicted by the scenes from the life of Christ appearing in the upper zone. The apsidal images represent the final salvation in Christ. When viewed like this, the narrative composition can begin to be understood.

Interpretation and Conclusion

It is my argument that at the San Baudelio church the lower fresco program constitutes a Romanesque attempt to deal with the Islamic themes of paradise. The hunting scenes located below the *Last Supper* and *Entry into Jerusalem* signify to the viewer the earthly paradise within the church as the “House of God” (Adams, 1963, p. 10). In addition, they represent the ability of good to conquer evil. The images, along with others in secular cycle borrowed from Islamic ivories and textiles (Kulp, 1984), have been abstracted from their original Islamic meaning and transposed into a Christian vocabulary. Even the *Ibis* depicted above the altar within the apse can be read to “symbolize the doctrine of kenosis, Jesus’ act of emptying himself to temporarily

become man" (Adams, 1963, p. 11). Adams argues that the ibis would not be placed in the most sacred position of the apse as a mere decoration. On the lower border of the mural the inscription reads, "This is the House of God." Adams contends that the most probable explanation comes from the climate of medieval theology in twelfth-century Spain and from the attributes assigned to the ibis by medieval science. Based on ancient authorities, repeated by St. Isidore of Seville in his famous *Etymologiarum*, which fathered all later medieval bestiaries, the ibis was said to cleanse Egypt of evil by devouring venomous reptiles and feeding the eggs of venomous snakes to its young. It was also said to purge itself with its curved beak. As for the theological aspect of the problem, the eleventh and twelfth centuries were still greatly agitated by the heresy of adoptionism, persistent especially in Mozarabic Spain. The adoptionists held that "the Man Jesus Christ" was wholly mortal until God the Father adopted Him as His Son by a process beginning with the Baptism and culminating in the Ascension. The orthodox contended that Jesus was divine at all times, having temporarily "emptied" himself of godhood to become man.

Kupfer (1993) asserts, "Taking thematic, as well as strictly temporal connectivity into account, all the pictorial elements are incorporated into the larger, still unfolding saga of humanity's fall, redemption through Christ, and ongoing efforts to attain the promised state of grace" (p. 13). Kupfer's statement can be applied to San Baudelio. The upper and lower fresco cycles, together with the architectural elements, provide the viewer with visual information about man, his fall from mercy, salvation offered through Christ, and the promised paradise found in the afterlife. The Christological scenes depict a story that "reveals its meaning through narrative action that literally embodies spiritual values" (Kupfer, 1993, p. 125). In *The Last Supper*, for example, the observer is physically identified with Judas who, like the viewer, is "separated from the other figures by the horizontal barrier of the table" (Kupfer, 1993, p. 125). The past story is

made alive to those walking to the apse to receive the Eucharist. Like Judas, the viewer is unworthy but able to partake of the Body of Christ. The "truth status of narrative images" (Kupfer, 1993, p. 11), such as*The Three Marys at the Sepulchre*, makes this fresco one that instructs "a particular vision (version) of history" (p. 11). In my opinion, it is a vision that is made present within the confines of the Mozarabic church.

What story does the mural scheme tell those who attended the church of San Baudelio? How can the biblical stories of Christ's life, such as *The Last Supper* and*The Three Marys at the Sepulchre*, be understood with the context of the Islamic images of paradise visible just below them? I believe that the stories of Christ's life are meant to lead to a message shared by the frescoes below—salvation in paradise. During the twelfth century, the painting of "the narrative of salvation history…performs a hermeneutic function, interpreting the collective life of communities in light of scriptural paradigms" (Kupfer, 1993, p. 120). It is my contention that the secular and religious fresco cycles were meant to be viewed together as a single narrative that makes "the past tangibly present to the viewer" (Kupfer, 1993, p. 124). Assimilating narratives from both Christian and Muslim origins, the artists not only accommodated the Christian's familiarity with Islamic images, they also spoke to Muslims entering the church. In this respect, the adoption of Moorish imagery can be read within the church as the earthly paradise before the fall of man or as a heavenly paradise. The theme of paradise achieved through Christ and found in the frescos resonates in the central architectural column. The column is an architectural form borrowed from Islam, but in its allusions to the Christian Tree of Life, it is a form that Christians would have understood. Through the synthesis of images and architectural forms comprehensible to both Mozarabic and Christian viewers, the artists' narrative achieves its hermeneutic goal. What we have is not only a visual representation of salvation history, but also a promise of the

paradise that is available to the viewer both within the confines of the church and in the heavenly world.

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