

## **Silencing the Bells: A Statement of Power in Medieval Spain**

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**Abstract:**

The purpose of this research is to examine the meaning of Christian church bells in Medieval Spain. The research focuses on the bells of the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela that were stolen by Muslim armies in 997 A.D. and taken to Cordova as spoils of war where they were used as vessels for oil lamps. More than 200 years later they were recaptured by Christian armies and returned to Santiago de Compostela. To the Muslims, the bells were symbols of their oppression by Christians because the bells were rung to cover the call of the faithful to prayers by the Muezzins. The silencing of the bells by the Muslims had deep symbolic significance of the Christian community because the bells were used to regulate village life by alerting the people to the proper times to wake, to pray, and to sleep as well as informing them of deaths in their community.

## Introduction

Much scholarship has been devoted to researching and documenting the significance and metaphysical qualities of the ringing of the bells within Christian culture. Specific efforts have been made to capture bells from defeated cathedrals as symbols of victory throughout history. For example, the bells of the Catholic cathedral at Santiago de Compostela were captured and carried to Cordoba, an Islamic capital, as spoils of war, only to be reclaimed by a Christian king during the reconquest of Spain. Little research has been conducted to analyze the specificities and motives behind such an exchange. The problem presented by the bells of Santiago de Compostela is the question of their significance to the Christians and their captors, the Muslims. This paper will discuss the metaphysical impact and meaning of cathedral bells to the Christians and Muslims in Medieval Spain.

The destruction of the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela by the Muslims marked the overthrow of Christian oppression of Islamic in Medieval Spain. Driven by the resentment of Saint James and by the overwhelming sound and symbolism of the bells, the Muslims captured the bells from Compostela instead of letting them burn with the rest of the cathedral upon its defeat. The Christian traditions of spirituality associated with bells and the Christian view of Santiago de Compostela as an important pilgrimage location which competed with the notion of Muslim power in Cordoba, combined with the resentment of such traditions by Muslims, spurred the Muslims' desire to consecrate victory by capturing the main cathedral bells.

## The Power Struggle

The Muslims entered Spain through the Strait of Gibraltar in 711 A.D., and Islam began to spread with unprecedented speed and intensity. By the 990's, the Moorish warrior king, Muhammad Ibn Abi-Amir (known widely as al-Mansur, "the victorious") had made his way to the northern-most region of Spain. In 997, al-Mansur sacked the Christian cathedral at Santiago de Compostela (Palol and Hirmer 54).

The cathedral had been built by Alphonso II on the site where a peasant discovered the grave of Saint James the Greater in 813. In 899, Alphonso III ordered a much larger cathedral to be built on the site of the tomb of Saint James (Ceballos 16). Less than 100 years after the construction of a grand cathedral at Santiago de Compostela, al-Mansur's raid destroyed the church, burning the entire city to the ground. Evidence of the intensity of the defeat can be gathered from current excavations that reveal a layer of ash and rubble beneath the site of the cathedrals constructed by Alphonso II and III (Stokstad 9). The only portions of the city not left to burn were the shrine of Saint James and the cathedral bells which were taken captive and carried on the backs of Christian slaves to the Muslim hub city of Cordoba. In Cordoba, the bells were hung from the ceiling of the Great Mosque and used as oil lamps (Jayyusi 43). Over 200 years after the bells were captured from Compostela by al-Mansur and his armies, on June 29, 1236, Christian King Ferdinand III of Castile and Leon recaptured the bells from the Great Mosque at Cordoba and returned them to the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela. They were not hung to ring again but simply displayed in a courtyard as a spoil of war and symbol of triumph. In the year 1492, Granada fell to Christian armies and the reconquest came to an end, largely eradicating Islam from the Iberian Peninsula.

#### Legacy of Saint James

Saint James the Greater, son of Zebedee, was a disciple of Christ who spread the message of God throughout the Iberian Peninsula. After many years of missionary work in Spain, Saint James was called to return to the Holy Land in 44 AD. There, he was beheaded by King Herod, forever embedding his legend as a martyr of Christendom. Upon Saint James' death, a group of nine of his followers carried his remains to a boat and set sail for Spain. Legend records that the ship was miraculously propelled, with no oars, by wind and waves to the shore of Galicia, Spain. A peasant woman in Galicia offered to allow the apostles to bury James in her family's tomb.

For years following the burial, two of the apostles stayed to guard his sepulcher while the other seven traveled through Spain and spread the word of Christ. Upon the death of the two guardian

apostles, they were buried alongside Saint James. Years later, the relics began to be neglected and the tomb was forgotten. In 813 A.D., a shepherd watching his flock at night rediscovered the tomb of Saint James. Spanish legend holds that the shepherd saw an extraordinarily bright star; upon following the star, he found the tomb of Saint James the Greater. Excited by his discovery, the shepherd rushed to share the news with King Alphonso II, who hastened to build a church and shrine for Saint James on the site of the tomb (Gallichan 33). The miraculous transportation of the body of Saint James and the ceremonial shrine built on his tomb, have contributed to Spain's reverent claim of the grace of Saint James.

Less than half a century after the rediscovery of the tomb of Saint James, as Ramiro I charged into battle at Clavijo, Spain in 844 A.D., a mysterious horseman appeared and led the Christian armies to victory. The horseman has been venerated as Saint James the Greater on his white steed coming to defend his devout followers. After this miraculous intervention by Saint James on behalf of the Spanish Christians, the saint became known as “Santiago James Matamoros” or Saint James the Moor Killer. The Christian armies adopted a new battle cry in light of their new patron saint: “For Saint James and a united Spain!” (Ring 621). The image of Saint James as a warrior against Islam gave him the connotation of an “anti-Mohammad,” which brought about great resentment of the saint and of Santiago de Compostela (Gort 302).

These instances in which Saint James acted as a guardian to the Christians and an enemy to the Muslims caused great animosity toward the saint. The venerated status of Saint James to Spanish Christians would make his cathedral a logical target for a conqueror to defeat as the ultimate statement of power. Concurrently with the Christian adoration of the saint, the Muslims harbored a growing resentment toward Saint James for his aid in the slaughter of the Muslims at Clavijo.

#### Pilgrimage to the Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela

Beginning with Alphonso II, who is said to have made the first pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in 813 A.D., hundreds of pilgrims have since flooded the holy site each day. Throughout

the Middle Ages, Christians from all over Europe made the pilgrimage to the cathedral to gain penance and forgiveness for sins. Routes to Santiago de Compostela begin all over Europe and most join near the French-Spanish border. They continue across the northern region of Spain and culminate at Compostela. Pilgrims to Compostela received a pilgrimage badge bearing the symbol of Saint James, the scalloped shell. The shell is indicative of the journey by ship of the remains of Saint James being returned to the Iberian Peninsula. Of the badges collected that date before the twelfth century, Santiago de Compostela is the best-represented pilgrimage site (Stopford 68). Bold statements have been made that claim that Compostela overtook the popularity of Jerusalem as a pilgrim venue in the Middle Ages. More relevant to the power struggle of the cathedral bells is the notion of Santiago de Compostela being likened to the Muslim shrine at Mecca. Many scholars have compared the cult of Saint James with the cult of Muhammad, and thus Santiago de Compostela to the Muslim pilgrimage site of Mecca. Following this logic, the shrine of Saint James was equated with the Kaaba that is the focus of the Great Mosque in Mecca (Gort 302). The Muslims understood the cathedral at Compostela to be the “Christian Mecca,” and therefore of great significance to the Christian faith (Vale 22). Muslim leaders would have understood the great importance of an established pilgrimage location and would have known that the destruction of such a symbol could shake the foundations of the Christian church.

#### Significance of the Bells

To call the fold to church in time,

We chime.

When joy and mirth are on the wing,

We ring.

When we lament a departed soul,

We toll. (Coleman 96)

Prior to the fourth century A.D., ancient Romans used public bells to announce to the citizens that the baths were ready (Coleman 34). Logically progressing from this tradition, Christians began to

ring large church bells to summon believers. Around the year 400, a cathedral in Campania, Italy was the first to hang one large bell from a tower to call Christians to worship (Coleman 35). Until this point, bell ringers would have run through the streets ringing their bells at each corner. These bells served many functions which dictated the rhythm and flow of life for all citizens within earshot. Bells would ring several times each day for a number of different reasons; the Gabriel bell rang in the morning to wake the citizens, a Sermon bell was rung to announce a sermon would be held shortly, and the Pudding bell tolled immediately after the service in order to give the cook notice to begin preparing dinner. A Curfew bell would ring shortly after sundown to inform citizens it was time for sleep (Coleman 38, 97).

Aside from the bells dictating Christians' schedules, bells were believed to have metaphysical powers (Price 234). Known as the Death, or Passing, bell a toll was rung during a Christian's last living moments and for a short while after death. It was a popular belief in the Middle Ages that unsettled or evil spirits wandered around looking for souls about to depart so they could consume the dying person's soul (Knowlson 211). The ringing of the Passing bell was said to ward off evil spirits who were believed to be afraid of the noise, thus allowing the departed Christian's soul to move freely into Heaven; the evil spirits would stay away so long as these bells tolled. The function of the Passing bell is thought to be two-folded, as it would have also called the living Christians to pray for their comrade's fragile soul so that he might enter into Heaven. More practically, this tolling of the Passing bell triggered the Death knell, which would follow shortly after a Christian's death to indicate the person's age and sex. The number of bells corresponded with each demographic: three rings for a child, two times three for a woman, and three times three for a man (Coleman 101).

In a similar mindset as the Passing bell, Christians believed the bells were hung so high that they were able to affect the weather with their sound or silence. The bells retained special mysterious and mystical properties which were beyond simply time-telling tasks. While the ringing of the bells was always directed toward the Christian citizens in any particular city, their sounds carried for miles

in all directions. During the time of Christian dominance in Spain, the Muslim call to worship was merely as loud as the Muezzin's voice could carry (Gort 302). Church bells interfered with the Muslims' practices by muffling their summons to worship as well as serving as a constant reminder of their oppression through Christian presence in most of Spain. This domination over Muslim practice, accentuated by the church bells, was another source of resentment toward the Christians. It is the Christians' dependence on the bells' ringing that made the silencing of these bells by Muslim conquerors such a grand statement of dominance and power. Christians' political pride and sense of religious self, was restored when they reclaimed their lost bells hundreds of years later.

### Conclusion

The Muslim conquest of Spain was swift, strategic, and subtly powerful. In defeating the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela, Muslim armies symbolically dismantled the patron saint of Spain, Saint James the Greater. The loss of such an important site would strike fear and panic into the lives of Christians, because their guardian had been conquered. Saint James' status as a Moor Killer, "anti-Muhammad," and Christian symbol for Spain contributed to his being a target for Muslims seeking to conquer Spain.

The second aspect, which led to the success of the Muslim conquest, was the taking down of Compostela, particularly in light of its status as a "Christian Mecca." The Islamic notion of a pilgrimage to Mecca was an integral part of Muslim religious standards. It created a universal respect for a pilgrim's voyage. Relating the Christian pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela with Mecca helped the Muslims understand the striking impact of its destruction. In this light, perhaps the most powerful of the Muslims' actions was to silence the cathedral bells at Santiago de Compostela and defile them by using them as lamps in their holiest mosque, the Great Mosque at Cordoba. The silencing of the bells would have sent the Christian community at Compostela and throughout the Spanish kingdoms into frenzy; there would be no announcement of daylight, worship, death, or sundown. To take the bells from a cathedral was to emasculate the faith of the Christians. Al-Mansur did that when he took the

bells from Santiago de Compostela captive. The power statements made by the Muslims in Medieval Spain were many, and managed to shake Christian foundations, including symbolically defeating their patron saint, dismantling their holiest of sites, and silencing their lifeblood, the bells.

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