

Jesus and the Emmaus in the Silos Monastery Reliefs

Essay

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Figure 1. Jesus and the Emmaus (photo Cefepé)

https://www.flickr.com/photos/cefepe_/36295188812/in/album-72157686379693913/

This essay is part of a study into the origin and meaning of rods and sticks in medieval iconography of Saint James. Here I analyze a late 11th century relief inspired by the Biblical text (Luke 24: 13-35) in which, on route to Emmaus, two sad disciples meet with the risen Jesus without recognizing him.

The relief is part of a group in the Santo Domingo monastery of Silos, about 60 km south of the Spanish city of Burgos (Figure 1).



Figure 2. Detail of Jesus with stick

Within the Saint James movement it is thought that this scene of Jesus with a travel bag, shells and stick, represents the oldest prototype of a pilgrim "whose example must be followed by every Christian" (van Herwaarden 1985).

These characteristics of a pilgrim deviate somewhat from the traditional attributes of a St James pilgrim. For example, here Jesus does not wear the well-known pilgrim hat with a stored brim, but a kippah, while the short stick with the regular fine notches does not resemble a pilgrim's staff.

In the context of my research into the origin and meaning of sticks and staffs in the St James iconography, my interest mainly focusses on the stick that Jesus holds in his hand (Figure 2).

Stick /Palm (1)

The St James iconography is rich in images of staffs and canes that can have different meanings. They can represent a good travel friend who may be useful in many situations along the way, or as a symbol of a pilgrim whose origin can be found in legendary texts from the 12th century *Liber Sancti Jacobi*.

So far there is no known example in either the St James iconography, or in other Christian iconography, of a short stick such as shown in the Silos representation.

Speculation

I observe that the stick has a flat end. With its regular pattern of fine oblique notches, it suggests a palm branch with cut leaves. This association is interesting, but from an iconographical perspective its form was not a medieval prototype of a palm branch, but at best a stylized version or an incomplete representation of a palm branch.

Shells

In the Middle Ages, as well as being a distinctive attribute of a Saint James pilgrim invoking the protection of St James, the shell was known as a general symbol indicating the bearer's pilgrim status. I think that the shells on the bag of Christ in the Silos relief do not refer to the St James pilgrim but rather to a general pilgrim symbol that has its roots in Greek and Roman times when the shell was a symbol for birth and rebirth. Seen in this light, there is a clear link with the rebirth (resurrection) of Jesus.

Headgear

In the Silos relief, the hat of Jesus resembles a 'kippah', which, in the Jewish tradition, gives an indication of the movement to which the wearer belongs and also a sign that only God stands above its wearer.

The question then becomes: How can this be interpreted in the Jesus figure in the Silos relief?

The headdress looks identical to that of the mysterious Old Testament figure, Melchizedek, who is depicted as a columnar statue in the central part of the north portal of the Chartres cathedral (13th century) (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Headgear of Jesus (Silos) and Melchizedek (Chartres 13th portal)

Coincidence? Or is the Silos headgear that resembles a kippah meant as an indication that Jesus and Melchizedek are both tied to the highest God in the same way? Hebrews 6:20 answers this by mentioning that Jesus, through his victory over death, has become an eternal high priest in the manner of Melchizedek; this would mean that Jesus, like Melchizedek, is entitled to the salutations of "king of righteousness", "king of Salem" (peace), and "priest of the highest God who resembles the son of God" (Hebrews 7: 2-3, Genesis 14:18, Psalms 110: 4).

In this light, the relief is not primarily about the portrayal of Jesus as a prototype of a pilgrim, but about his status of high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

That the relief portraying Jesus and his disciples on their way to Emmaus is related to rebirth and resurrection is supported by the fact that all the surrounding reliefs are related to events that took place immediately after the death of Jesus, including 'Descent from the cross', 'Tomb', 'Ascension Day', 'Pentecost', 'Doubting Thomas', and 'Emmaus'.

Stick/Palm (2)

So far, these attributes of Jesus - the kippah and shells - represent the idea of victory over death. It would be logical to consider the meaning of the stick in this light.

I have already speculated that it may represent a stylized or incomplete palm branch (a close look at the stick shows that there is damage just where leaves of a palm might be expected). That this is indeed an appropriate interpretation when one considers that in Christian iconography the palm branch symbolizes martyrdom and victory over death. Both meanings fit exactly with the other symbols in this relief of Jesus.

Conclusion

In summary, it can be said that the attributes of Jesus on the reliefs of Silos are in a particularly artistic and harmonious way representations of his martyrdom, his resurrection, his kingship and his high priesthood for eternity.

Finally, the pilgrim who on his way to Santiago de Compostela makes an effort to visit the monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos near Burgos will be able to experience interesting examples of the refined stone-carved medieval biblical devotion.