

Patronage and Purpose:

A Study of the Basilica de San Isidoro, Leon.



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The tympanum above the southern entrance to the Collegiate Church of San Isidoro in Leon Spain, is a unique piece of Romanesque architectural decoration that has intrigued scholars since its creation. It defies the traditional trend of scenes of the Last Judgement or Christ in Majesty, which can often be found in other churches from this period.<sup>1</sup> Though the date for the tympanum has often been debated, the range falls between the late 11<sup>th</sup> and early 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

During this period, Spain was divided in the North under the control of Christian monarchs, and the South, largely under Muslim control.<sup>2</sup> It was during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries that the program of Reconquest was initiated putting the west on the offensive against Islam with the goal of recapturing substantial territories.<sup>3</sup> It was also during this period that the crusades began in 1096 with the objective of regaining control over holy places associated with Christ in Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> The crusaders succeeded in establishing four Christian states in the near east, Jerusalem, the principality of Antioch, the county of Edessa, and the County of Tripoli.<sup>5</sup> Because Jerusalem proved hard to retain two further crusades had to be launched in 1147 and 1189.<sup>6</sup>

The mentality that spurred the Reconquest and the crusades had been in place for a while. The recovery of these states and the redemption of the churches within them for the glory of Christianity was declared as a national aim in the *Epitome Oventense* in the ninth century.<sup>7</sup> It was not until 1123 that pope Calixtus made it clear that he regarded the Spanish wars as crusades and the prevailing mentality was only further supported by his declaration.<sup>8</sup> During this period

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Petzold, *Romanesque Art*, (London: Laurence King Publishing Limited, 1995), 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> R. A. Fletcher, "Reconquest and Crusade in Spain c.1050-1150," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 37, (1987): 33.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

the previous restraint shown in the past few decades was replaced by aggressive attitudes on both sides of the religious divide.<sup>9</sup> Previously, during the years between the fall of the caliphate in 1031 and the Almoravide invasion of Spain in the 1090's, many Christian rulers had exacted tributes from the principalities which Muslim Spain had divided into, Fernando I (1037-65) and his son, Alfonso VI (1065-1109) Of Leon-Castile were the most prominent among these. It was during this period that the prevailing mentality of intolerance was given a sharper edge with the notion of crusade<sup>10</sup>, and such a policy of exploitation was replaced with that of Reconquest.<sup>11</sup> For Alfonso VI tribute taking had become a way to deplete Muslim principalities in preparation for a Christian takeover of their territories.<sup>12</sup> It was in this atmosphere that the Lamb tympanum was created and its patronage and iconography reflects that accordingly.

Almost all rulers of this period used art to enhance their prestige and further their own political aims. Furthermore, because ecclesiastical and secular interests were so closely intertwined the influence of secular society is often found reflected in imagery and enterprises of the church.<sup>13</sup> Powerful feudal families played a crucial role in church politics of this period, and lay patronage was an important factor in the funding of church building and religious art.<sup>14</sup> The greatest expense, artifice, and skill were expended to reinforce the Christian view of the world as a vehicle for propaganda and as a commentary on contemporary issues.<sup>15</sup>

John Williams discusses such trends as these in his 1977 piece *Generaciones Abrahae: Reconquest Iconography in Leon*. Williams takes the stance that the iconography in the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Andreas Petzold, *Romanesque Art*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 46.

tympanum is representative of the views at that time, and was an affirmation for Christians in the capital of the Reconquest of the righteousness of their crusade and their assured ultimate victory.<sup>16</sup> San Isidoro was approached publically from the south making this the main entrance to the church, and the portal of the Lamb the focal point of this entrance.<sup>17</sup> San Isidoro was also one of the main stops on the pilgrimage route to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela one of the most revered pilgrimage sites in the Romanesque period, placing even greater importance on the Lamb portal.<sup>18</sup>

At the center of the composition is the Lamb, there is a cross behind it and it is surrounded by angels. The Lamb here is representative of Christ and his sacrifice. The correlation with Abraham sacrificing Isaac directly below is an example of typology, a belief that the Old testament is seen as prefiguring events in the new testament, designed to prove that the new testament is a fulfillment of the Old.<sup>19</sup> Here Abrahams sacrifice of Isaac is a prefiguration of the crucifixion, and as Williams argues represents a homogeneous expression of the theme of redemption.<sup>20</sup> To the right of Abraham is Sara, and Isaac in various stages on his way to Mount Moriah, which is allegorically related to the three ages of the Jewish people.<sup>21</sup> Sara is shown here in the moment when God reveals her role in the lineage of the chosen people, the bearing of Isaac.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> John Williams, "Generaciones Abrahæ: Reconquest Iconography in Leon." *Gesta* 16, no. 2 (1977): 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Andreas Petzold, *Romanesque Art*, 115.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>20</sup> John Williams, "Generaciones Abrahæ...", 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

The archer to the left of Abraham is Ishmael and the figure next to him is Hagar. They are shown here after being turned out to wander in the wilderness of Beer-sheba until God takes mercy on them.<sup>23</sup> “God was with the boy and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness and became an archer”.<sup>24</sup> Williams identifies Ishmael as the mounted archer, who has been turned into a warrior in a manner which would have been readily understood in Leon at the time, as horseman had come to make up the majority of the Muslim armies sent against the Christians.<sup>25</sup> With his shortened stirrups, the rider of the tympanum appears to employ the Muslim style of riding “a la jineta”, Muslim tactics are also suggested by the way in which the rider turns back to shoot, and finally, the carver has placed a turban on his head.<sup>26</sup> The arrow Ishmael prepares to fire is interestingly in line with the lamb of God, another suggestion of the prevailing view at the time of Muslims being combative toward the Christian faith.

Hagar also reveals a contemporary understanding of Muslim character for with her left hand she lifts her skirt in a gesture associated with licentious behavior, based on a longstanding and popular notion at the time that lust was an inherent part of Muslim character.<sup>27</sup> According to St. Paul Ishmael and Hagar were seen as standing for the Old covenant which was supplanted by the New.<sup>28</sup> Josephus, St. Paul’s contemporary, traced the descent of the Saracens from Hagar and Ishmael and others passed on this tradition, leading to medieval chroniclers calling the followers of Muhammad Ishmaelites and Agarenes.<sup>29</sup> In recognition of the climatic nature of Abraham’s offering, Muslim tradition held that it was really Ishmael, the first born, who accompanied

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>24</sup> Gen 21: 15-22 RSV

<sup>25</sup> John Williams, “Generaciones Abrahæ...”, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Abraham to Mt. Moriah, Williams argues that tradition is clearly denied here.<sup>30</sup> The five other figures in the tympanum expand the meaning of Abrahams offering from its traditional parallelism with Christs sacrifice to one in which Abraham's significance as a type for God the father is matched by his significance as patriarch.<sup>31</sup>

The antagonism between the two faiths is established in this moment when God recognized the genealogy of the chosen in Isaac, and Hagar and Ishmael were made refugees in the wilderness.<sup>32</sup> With this reading of the relief, the meaning develops bi-axially in the typological opposition of Sarah/Isaac and Hagar/Ishmael as personifications of the New and Old Testaments.<sup>33</sup> Williams argues this motif was specifically chosen because it could be uniquely exploited to create a new, public iconography suitable for the main entrance of the palatine church of the capital of the Reconquest.<sup>34</sup> In this way the themes depicted are fittingly social rather than sacral, meant to be perceived by the observer, which is further supported in the exchanging of the traditional values of left and right.<sup>35</sup> The art of this period is that of the church triumphant, which is evidenced in a tympanum such as this.<sup>36</sup> The new is shown superseding the old testament, reaffirming the relevancy of Christianity over Judaism, as well as the affirmation of the line of Isaac substantiating the church's claim to Christian holy sites and the preeminent place as Gods chosen faith.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>36</sup> Andreas Petzold, *Romanesque Art*, 15.

Williams dates the completion of the original church to 1063 when the shrine to St. Isidore of Seville was dedicated.<sup>37</sup> He then proposes an alternative date for the pantheon of the Kings, the mausoleum of the rulers of León-Castil, traditionally dated 1063 with the completion of the original church, to the reign of Alfonso VI because of his sister Urraca's of Zamora's epitaph from 1101 that states she amplified the church.<sup>38</sup> He states, "The testimony of Urraca's epitaph seems unequivocal: it is to her generosity and interest that we owe the addition of her father's church of the Pantheon, gallery, tribune and lower part of the tower, which must consequentially date to the end of the 11th century."<sup>39</sup> Urraca's mother Sancha was the last surviving descendent of Alfonso III, an Asturian king who with his predecessors formulated a tradition that they were the successors of the deposed Visigothic kings of Toledo.<sup>40</sup> When Leon replaced Oviedo as the capital of the kingdom of Astur-Leon, it became the focus of this "Neo-Gothic," imperial ideal, which is represent by the church building at San Isidoro.<sup>41</sup> However he does not attribute the Lamb portal to Alfonso's sister Urraca. During Williams time scholarship had previously dated the doorway to around 1100 but because political maneuvering and conflict between rival Christian factions preoccupied Alfonso's immediate successor, his daughter Urraca (1109-26), he argues it is within this reign and ideological climate that one can find the optimal atmosphere for the creation of the Abraham relief.<sup>42</sup> When it comes to the Lamb portal Williams dating is somewhat tentative and here one can look to Susan Havens Caldwell for a

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<sup>37</sup> John Williams, "San Isidoro in León: Evidence for a New History." *The Art Bulletin* 55, no. 2 (1973): 171.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, 178.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> John Williams, "Generaciones Abrahæ...", 10.

more comprehensive assertion of patronage in her work “Urraca of Zamora and San Isidoro in Leon: Fulfillment of a Legacy.”

Caldwell takes a different stance nominating Urraca of Zamora (c.1033-1101) the sister of Alfonso VI, instead of his daughter Urraca, who Williams suggested is the patron. Urraca of Zamora was one of many aristocratic women during this period who enjoyed greater power in political and religious affairs than usual for this time through the patronage of significant artworks.<sup>43</sup> Both her art patronage and political involvement were motivated by her interest in furthering the Visigothic/Asturian/Leonese heritage of her mother, Sancha of Leon.<sup>44</sup> Although she did not receive a kingdom as her brothers did, she and her sister came into possession of infantados, Urraca’s being San Isidoro, packets of monastic properties traditionally held by royal princesses, or infantas.<sup>45</sup> To keep these infantados the princesses traditionally could not marry, and vowed to remain virgins, consecrating themselves to God.<sup>46</sup> Caldwell argues that Urraca likely favored her brother Alfonso VI because he was the inheritor of Leon, and after the death of her brother Sancho, Urraca sent for her exiled brother Alfonso, who joined her in Zamora.<sup>47</sup> He again ruled, but conjunction with Urraca, who, at her request, was called queen.<sup>48</sup> With the reinstatement in 1072 of Alfonso VI as king, Urraca began the important task of enlarging San Isidoro.<sup>49</sup> Caldwell argues that it was during Urraca’s campaign (probably during the 1090s) that the Cordero portal was constructed on the south side of the nave.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Susan Havens Caldwell, “Urraca of Zamora and San Isidoro in Leon: Fulfillment of a Legacy.” *Woman’s Art Journal* 7, no. 1 (1986): 19.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

The opposition of a chosen and rejected son was a theme which would have seemed relevant at the time to Urraca and her ambitions. Caldwell concludes that the unusual iconography of the Cordero tympanum can be best understood as an attempt to explain and justify Urraca's decision to support one brother over the other for what she perceived as a greater cause.<sup>51</sup> From this viewpoint Urraca's actions and artworks were designed to further the ideals and intentions of her mother, the lamb portal amongst these, championing Leonese tradition against the rising power of Castile. I agree with Caldwell's choice of patronage for the portal being Urraca of Zamora (c.1033-1101) and through that assertion, I believe the Lamb portal reflects within that context the significance of lineage and the theme of a chosen people being both relevant to the Royal family, the ambitions of Leon, and Christian Spain as a whole.

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

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