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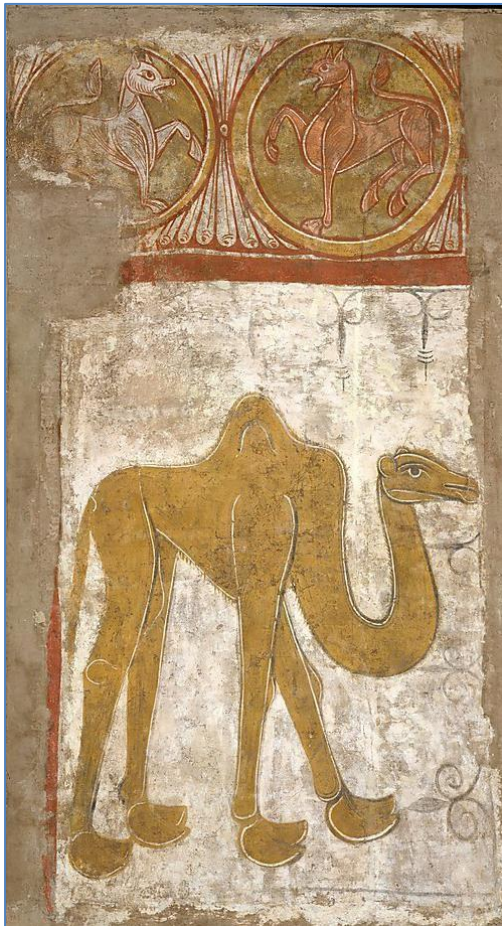


Figure 1 Fresco of the Camel, San Baudelio de Berlanga, first half of 12th century. The Cloisters, New York City, New York. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Through the Eye of a Needle: Deciphering the Dromedary from San Baudelio de Berlanga

By Annie Labatt, University of Texas, San Antonio

One of the objects at The Cloisters that consistently elicits a strong reaction — delight, curiosity, wonder — is the painting of the camel from San Baudelio de Berlanga (**Fig. 1**). Those elongated legs and knobby knees, that jaunty step forward, the elegantly sinuous neck, his patient and heavy-lidded gaze easily capture the imagination. White highlights suggest a weighty form, while delicate details like the small hairs that prick up along his back, belly, and brow encourage a reaction that is almost intimate. The camel fresco appears to be a stand-alone piece. An internal framing device encourages that reading.

The combination of the thick red border and black *fleur-de-lis*, which point inward towards the animal, suggests that the camel has always been unaccompanied and independent. In its original setting, however, one frame led to other frames with different scenes — some with animals, some

with stories — not unlike the structure of many great literary compilations. Just as the most famous medieval texts compiled shorter vignettes or stories within a larger corpus — *The Decameron*, *Canterbury Tales*, *A Thousand and One Nights*, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* — it is essential to read the camel and tell his story within the larger context from which he came.



Figure 2 Exterior, San Baudelio de Berlanga, beginning of the 11th century. Berlanga de Duero, Spain. Photo: Author.

San Baudelio de Berlanga is a small hermitage constructed at the beginning of the eleventh century in Soria, a northeastern province of Spain. The exterior of the building is remarkable in its simplicity and lack of grandeur (**Fig. 2**). It almost blends into its surrounding landscape. It is not immediately clear that the building is a hermitage. From its blocky appearance it seems like a large mausoleum or tomb. This austere façade is all the more striking when compared with the variegated and animated decorations that once covered the interior walls, a series of extensive frescoes dated to approximately 150 years after the construction of the building (**Fig. 3**). A lower zone was composed of scenes of animals and hunters while an upper zone showed a series of Christological stories. All the images encircled a large, central column commonly likened to a palm tree (**Fig. 4**).

One must use the past tense when speaking about the frescoes because a majority of the paintings were removed from the building in 1922. Accounts of their removal differ



Figure 3 Interior views, San Baudelio de Berlanga, 11th-12th centuries. Berlanga de Duero, Spain. Photo: Author.



according to the nationality of the author. American scholar Walter Cook argued that, without intervention, the frescoes were at risk of falling off the walls.¹ The rapid enactment of a law to prevent the removal of frescoes from the country, passed just after the paintings from San Baudelio left Spain, provides a tame indication of the Spanish reaction. It is not difficult to find vituperative accounts in Spanish literature of the events leading to the sale of the frescoes, including a poem bemoaning the impending export, by the Sorian poet Gerardo Diego.² A

¹ Walter Cook, "Romanesque Spanish Mural Painting (II) San Baudelio De Berlanga," *The Art Bulletin* 12/1 (1930): 21. "Removed from the walls of the small Spanish chapel, where, through neglect and lack of proper attention, they were gradually disintegrating and falling into a state of ruin, they have now been successfully transferred to canvas."

² Gerardo Diego, "San Baudelio de Berlanga" (1923), in Gerardo Diego, *Gerardo Diego para niños*, ed. Elena Diego (Madrid: Colección Alga y Mayo. Seria Poesía 10, 1996), 52-53.

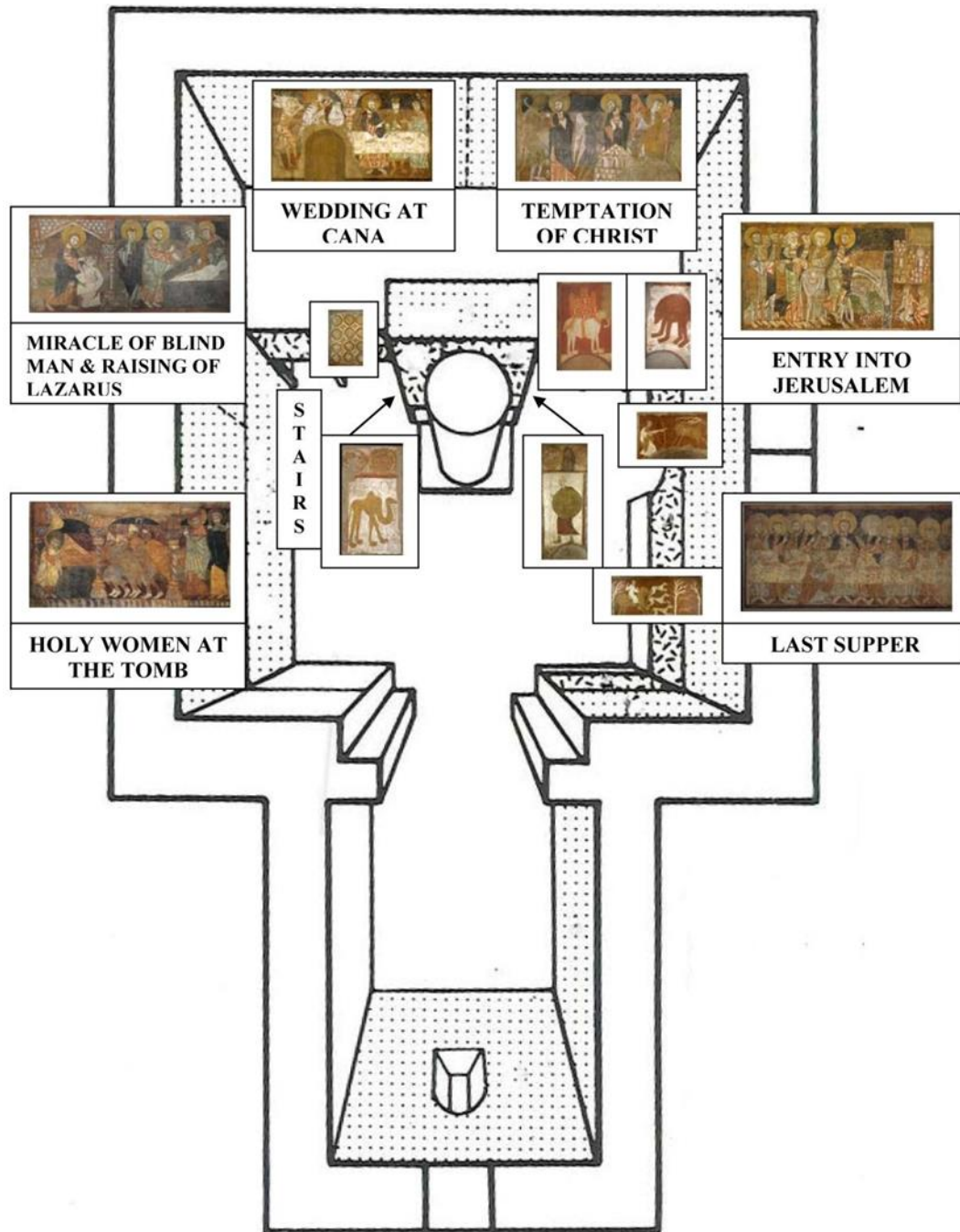


Figure 4 Reconstruction of the layout of the frescoes at San Baudelio de Berlanga. Diagram: author.

number of sections are now in the Prado,³ but many joined North American collections: The Falconer is in Cincinnati; The Three Maries at the Tomb and the Last Supper are on long-term loan from Boston to Dallas; and The Wedding of Cana and the Entry into Jerusalem are in Indianapolis. The Cloisters, in addition to the camel, has the Temptation of Christ and panels showing the Healing of a Blind Man and The Raising of Lazarus.⁴

Terms like Byzantine, Mozarabic, Islamic, Romanesque frequently appear in scholarship discussing the style of the frescoes from San Baudelio. This application of such a wide range of terms perhaps points to the limitations of art-historical categorizations. In 1908, the first art historians to describe the paintings, Manuel Aníbal Alvarez and Jose Ramón Mélida, determined that the frescoes had an eastern influence that was specifically pseudo-Byzantine.⁵ Cook, writing in 1930, decided that the frescoes were Romanesque but with “local Spanish features.”⁶ José Camón Aznar, writing in 1958, identified the upper Christological cycle as being of a Romanesque style and the lower as showing a specifically Mozarabic style. He argued that a Muslim painter was responsible for the lower paintings.⁷ In 1967, J. Zozaya linked the animals specifically to

³ The Hunt of the Stag, The Hunt of the Hares, The Elephant, The Warrior, and The Bear.

⁴ San Baudelio de Berlanga was deconsecrated in the 1830's and came into the possession of Casillas de Berlanga, the nearest village. The frescoes were brought to light by Manuel Gómez Moreno in 1884. Scholars started writing about the importance of the site as early as 1907 and it was declared a National Monument on August 24, 1917. Nevertheless, the proprietors of the hermitage sold the paintings to the dealer Leon Levi in 1922, a sale which was permitted and finalized in 1925. This acquisition followed lengthy negotiations with the Spanish government regarding the painted apse of the church of San Martín in Fuentidueña, Spain. In 1957, the Spanish Council of Ministers agreed to lend the apsidal fresco from Fuentidueña to The Cloisters. One of the conditions was that the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquire and deposit six fresco panels from San Baudelio de Berlanga in the Prado as a long-term loan. These included two scenes from the chase, the bear, the elephant, the decorative panel with eagles, and the warrior with the shield. The Camel fresco entered the collection at The Cloisters in 1961. See Margarita González Pascual, “San Baudelio de Berlanga (Soria): la reposición de las pinturas murales de la ‘palmera’” *Bienes culturales: Revista del Instituto del Patrimonio Histórico español* 6 (2006): 77-98; Mojmir S. Frinta, “The Frescoes from San Baudelio De Berlanga” *Gesta* 1/2 (1964): 9; James T. Rorimer, “The Apse from San Martin at Fuentidueña.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 19.10 (1961): 265-267.

⁵ See discussion in José Garnelo, “Descripción de las pinturas murales que decoran la ermita de San Baudelio en Casillas de Berlanga (Soria),” *Boletín de la Sociedad Española de Excursiones* 32 (Madrid: 1924): 96-98.

⁶ Cook, “Romanesque Spanish Mural Painting,” 42: “The frescoes themselves were executed in the fully developed Romanesque style and show strong French influence. Many details, nevertheless, show the persistence of native Spanish tradition.... Local Spanish features are also found in the architectural details, in the use of banded backgrounds, in color, technique, and ornament.”

⁷ J. Camón Aznar, “Pinturas mozárabes de San Baudelio de Berlanga,” *Goya* 26 (1958): 80.

Umayyad iconography, showing that every scene from the lower Berlanga cycle could be found on Islamic objects like eleventh-century hunting horns.⁸

Dividing the frescoes stylistically is of questionable accuracy and ultimately fails to explain what is actually on the walls. A similar methodological step, in that it creates divisions where there should be none, is the determination to separate the lower scenes from the Christological upper scenes. Jerrilynn Dodds and Joan Sureda have written about the ways in which earlier scholarship posited that the two zones were distinct, with the lower “profane” scenes being appropriate to secular interests, and the upper “sacred” episodes as part of a later campaign to convert the space into a religious one.⁹ Walter Cook originally argued that the two zones were done at different times, although he later determined that the paintings were done at the same time by three different artists.¹⁰ An important factor linking the two zones to the same artists was that the same technique was used in both zones – the use of *buon fresco* and *fresco secco* for the outlines of the composition and then the addition of details in tempera.¹¹

The attempt to establish conflicting styles and subject matters accords with the larger assumption that conflict is a definitive feature of the period and, in many ways, defines the monument. At the beginning of the eleventh century, the territory around the small hermitage was politically charged. Berlanga del Duero, three miles away, was the eastern anchor of a castled line supported by the authority of the Emirate of Zaragoza. Under the control of Al Mansur Billah, who was feared for having burned Santiago de Compostela and sacking

⁸ J. Zozaya, “Algunas observaciones en torno a la ermita de San Baudelio de Berlanga” *Cuadernos de la Alhambra* 12 (1976), 307-31.

⁹ Joan Sureda, *La pintura románica in España* (Madrid, 1985), 68; Jerrilynn Dodds, “Wall Paintings. Hermitage of San Baudelio de Berlanga (Soria)” in *The Art of Medieval Spain, A.D. 500-1200*, ed. Jerrilynn Dodds *et al.* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), 224-225.

¹⁰ Cook, “Las pinturas románicas de San Baudilio” *Goya* 7 (Madrid: 1955): 2-11.

¹¹ Dodds, 224-225. See also Luis A. Grau Lobo, *Pintura Románica en Castilla y León* (Junta de Castilla y León, Consejería de Educación y Cultura, 1996), 121- 127

Barcelona, this line of defense held firm against the Christian Reconquest until 1037, when the Kingdom of Leon-Castile took control of the valley. But these paintings date to a full 100 years after these conflicts. Is it quite right to argue, as Jerrilynn Dodds has done, that paintings for an isolated community of hermetic monks were meant to reject associations with the Great Mosque of Cordoba and turn the site into an homage to the Heavenly Jerusalem? Would these monks, who had chosen to live in isolation and in a veritable wilderness, have encouraged paintings meant to represent Islamic luxury and its subsequent appropriation by Christian power? Dodds proposes such a reading.¹² Are the painted walls really about “gestures of alienation” meant to reestablish “political frontiers” and enact a “ceremonial opposition” between the Nasrids and Castilians of Berlanga?¹³ Heavily polemical readings of this sort set up obfuscating lenses that direct our attention even further away from the paintings.

Yet these two fresco cycles were united technically, stylistically, and intellectually. Jerrilyn Dodds points out that scholars have tried without success to understand the lower paintings as worldly metaphors of the sacred scenes.¹⁴ There may not be a one-to-one correlation between the upper and lower cycles. But there is certainly a way in which the frescoes speak to each other, across the delineated painted zones, thereby providing meanings and messages that are not limited to slippery stylistic terms, pat categorizations such as secular

¹² Jerrilynn Dodds, “Hunting for Identity,” in *Imágenes y promotores en el arte medieval. Miscelánea en homenaje a Joaquín Yarza Luaces*, ed. María Luisa Melero Moneo (Bellaterra, Barcelona: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Servei de Publicacions, 2001), 98. “On one level, perhaps the hunting scenes at Berlanga further the allusion to the Christian appropriation of the land and Christian authority over the newly captured frontier on which Berlanga stood. If the animals can, on one level, allude to Islamic material culture taken on like booty, then the hunters provide the link to the newly conquered land by celebrating ownership in triumphant, monumental images. The hunting images thus provide a metaphorical, secular meaning that dovetails with the sacred appropriation of the Christological paintings.”

¹³ Dodds, “Hunting for Identity,” 100.

¹⁴ Dodds, “Wall paintings,” 226.

versus Christological, or charged political polemic.

Joan Sureda, writing in the 1980's, was the first scholar to argue that the painted animals were not simply meant as a contrast to the upper Christological zones.¹⁵ Sureda read these animals with an eye towards allegorical readings. As such, the camel represents obedience and humility.¹⁶ Sureda relied on the encyclopedia *Etymologie* compiled by Isidore of Seville in the seventh century.¹⁷ This work was an essential source for the popular bestiaries of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, compendia of legends describing the origin of animals, often with moralizing aspects. Nonetheless, the connection between San Baudelio and the bestiaries is not obvious. Isidore's description of the camel focuses on the etymology of "camel" and the shape of the animal. He does not associate the camel with any moral message. Other bestiaries might be a source of allegorical readings; however, any allegorical associations are by no means universal or consistent in the bestiaries. Certainly, some of the animals in Isidore's writings appear in San Baudelio. The camel, the bear, the elephant, and the ox -- all of which Isidore discusses -- are part of the menagerie depicted on the walls of San Baudelio. Turning away from the door is a brownish-red bear with long, flat feet and whose high-rounded back mirrors the shape of the arch in the arcade below.

He faces a white elephant with small round ears and a large castle on his back. (A second painted elephant with a castle appears in one of the vaults on the ceiling.)¹⁸ Two bulls at the base

¹⁵ Sureda, 68-73, 319-27.

¹⁶ Sureda, 72-73.

¹⁷ The current wall labels for the fragments at the Prado are heavily reliant on such allegorical readings from the bestiaries, with particular reference to *Physiologus*, the second-century Greek volume from which Isidore of Seville and other writers extrapolated Christian meanings of the animals. According to the Prado's website, it is the elephant, not the camel, which is associated with humility. Milagros Guardia considers only the two oxen to have possible iconographical significance among the animals of the "profane" level. Guardia attributes these images to the donor's desire to "put in evidence his status as noble, victor over the Muslim enemy, with the evocation of the *regalia* of the 'other.'" Milagros Guardia, *San Baudelio de Berlanga. Una encrucijada* (Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 2011), 387, 434, cf. also 359.

¹⁸ Guardia, *San Baudelio de Berlanga*, fig. 98.

of the steps butt heads, perhaps in confrontation, although there is something sympathetic and compassionate about the way they lock eyes in addition to horns.

It is important to go beyond simply associating the animals with a symbolical or moral interpretation. The camel participates in the meaning of the monument in a multitude of ways (**Fig. 5**). By drawing on biblical resonances of camels as a commentary on wealth and God's

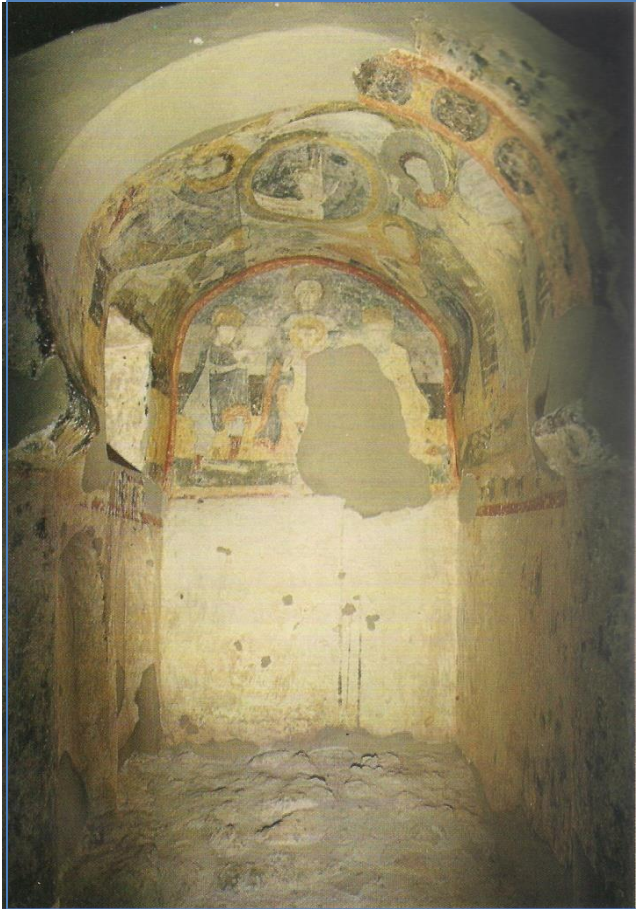


Figure 5 Chapel of the Magi, San Baudelio de Berlanga, first half of 12th century. Berlanga de Duero, Spain. Photo: author

sovereign power, it is possible to see the camel as an integral participant in the Christological message of the monument: a message tied to the capilla residing at the very apex of the monument, in which there are depictions of the Magi and the Madonna and Child.

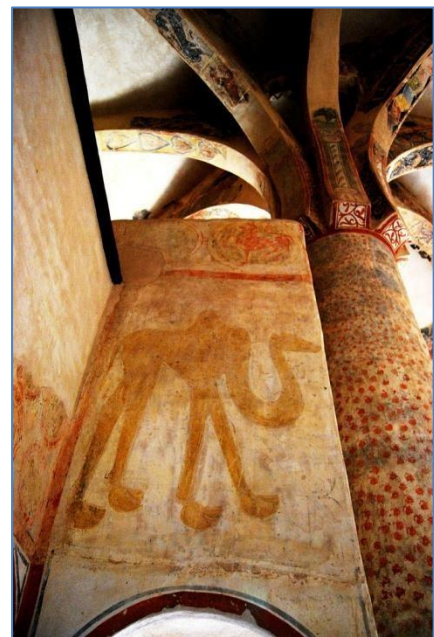
It is far from clear how many monks used the hermitage, what other buildings might have been on the site, or whether the earliest occupants really dwelt in the cave-like aperture under the building. It is also unclear how the monks entered the building — whether they customarily

moved from the capilla to the altar below or from the ground floor to the capilla above. In San Baudelio de Berlanga, Guardia suggests that the entire hermitage may have been architecturally intended to imitate the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, complete with its aedicule, and therefore meant to evoke the pilgrimage to the Holy Land.¹⁹ With regard to the interior pilgrimage or circulation within the building, however, Guardia considers only the possibility of monks traveling down the staircase toward the celebration of the mass, not up the staircase toward the tribunal chapel as a destination: “Stretching the interpretive cord, we might suggest that the movement of the Magi alludes to that of the monks who, leaving the tribune, moved down the staircase toward the space in which the offering and the sacrifice would happen.”²⁰ Guardia does not consider that an axis of pilgrimage leads into the tribune, rather than away from it.

But the original disposition of the paintings in the building imposes on the visitor a strong conceptual movement, an actual physical pilgrimage up the stairs and toward the upper chapel, a pilgrimage taken in tandem with a painted pilgrimage — the journey of the Magi toward their epiphany before the Christ Child in his manger in the San Baudelio *capilla*. Moving up the stairs along the southeastern wall, which lead from the lower level of the hermitage into the upper tribune, the visitor/pilgrim would inevitably see the ambling camel on his or her right (**Fig. 6**).

(This contradicts the ground plan featured

Figure 6 Under-drawing of the camel, San Baudelio de Berlanga, first half of 12th century. Berlanga de Duero, Spain. Photo: Author



¹⁹ Guardia, *San Baudelio de Berlanga*, 184, 200, 431.

²⁰ Guardia, *San Baudelio de Berlanga*, 304.

in most scholarly literature, which incorrectly places the camel on the southwestern wall, facing outwards towards the altar.)²¹ Moving along, the visitor, looking to the right still, would see, on the northwestern wall, another scene depicting a progression, that of the Entry into Jerusalem (**Fig. 7**). The placement of this scene over the doorway to the hermitage would naturally encourage the sense of movement, entries, and the progression into holy spaces. Turning left, the viewer would see two of the panels at The Cloisters, the Healing of the Blind Man and the Raising of Lazarus (**Fig. 8**). The visual equation of the blind man and the dead man is clear and meaningful: both are dressed in white and both have their heads tilted back. The composition of the blind man's dress is delineated such that it is suggestive of the wrappings around Lazarus. In addition to the fact that both men are being healed, there might be an equation between the lack of sight and spiritual death.²²

Taking that to heart, the viewer could turn upwards towards the canopy that emerges from the palm-tree-like column in the middle of the hermitage. Although some early twentieth-century scholars were keen to interpret this site as a new Sistine Chapel, ironically enough they never paid any attention to the ceiling. Perhaps this is because the paintings were not in good condition. As Cook wrote in 1930, “practically all that was worth saving has been

²¹ This diagram first appeared in Sureda, 70. The same diagram appears unaltered in subsequent scholarship; however, it does not appear in the monograph recently published by Guardia. Although accurate, the diagram in Cook is difficult to read. The drawing representing the southern wall shows the camel off to the side, floating in space, rather than on the interior of the central column. Cook, “Romanesque Spanish Mural Painting,” Fig. 3.

²² This was a common trope in the writings of the church fathers. In Tractate 44, Saint Augustine discusses John 9 and the lesson of the man born blind who is restored to sight by Christ. He explains that the blind man is the human race: “If we reflect, then, on what is signified by the deed here done, that blind man is the human race; for this blindness had place in the first man, through sin, from whom we all draw our origin, not only in respect of death, but also of unrighteousness. For if unbelief is blindness, and faith enlightenment, whom did Christ find a believer at His coming? ... If evil has so taken root with us, every man is born mentally blind. For if he sees, he has no need of a guide. If he does need one to guide and enlighten him, then is he blind from his birth.” St. Augustine. “Tractate 44 (John 9),” *NPNF* 1-07, Chapter 1. Rev. and ed. Kevin Knight: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701044.htm>



Figure 7 (top) Entry into Jerusalem, San Baudelio de Berlanga, first half of 12th century. Indianapolis Museum of Art. Photo: Indianapolis Museum of Art.



Figure 8 (bottom) Healing of the Blind Man and the Raising of Lazarus, San Baudelio de Berlanga, first half of 12th century. The Cloisters, New York City, New York. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

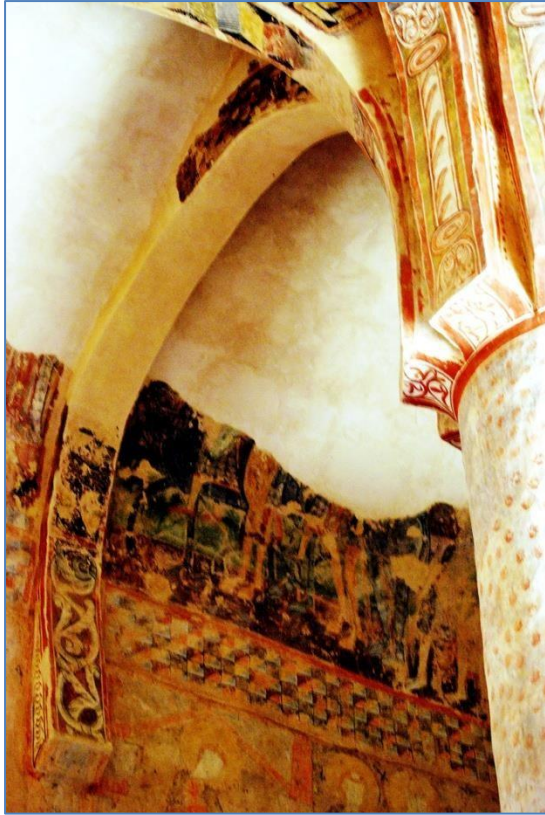


Figure 9 Adoration of the Magi, San Baudelio de Berlanga, first half of the twelfth century. Berlanga de Duero, Spain. Photo: Author.

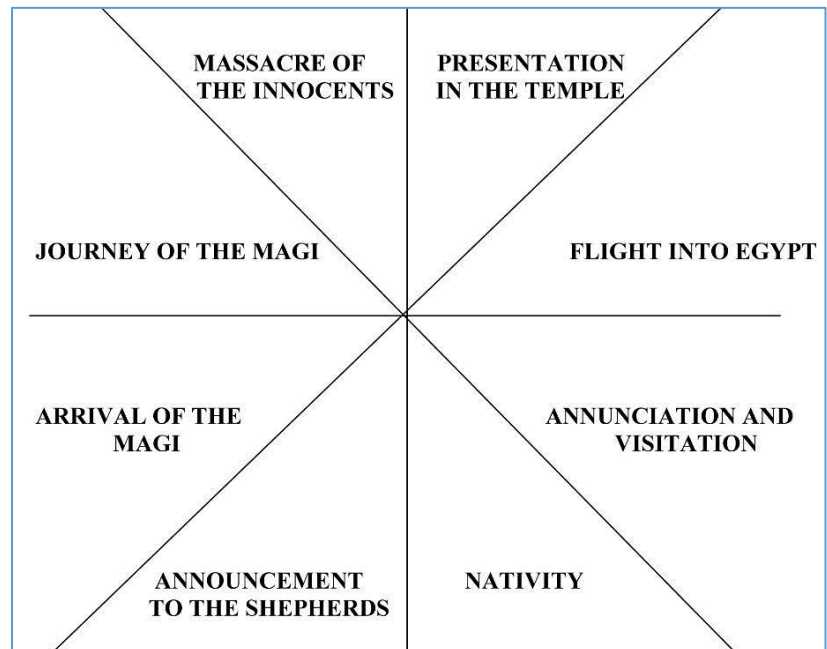
brought to this country, where their true value can be justly appreciated by art critics and scholars.”²³

But above the visitor ascending the stairs, on the upper left, is a second camel which appears in a representation of the Adoration of the Magi (**Fig. 9**). Thus, there is a direct spatial relationship between the position of the Adoration of the Magi in the canopy and the adjacent “Cloisters” camel

(Fig. 10).

The painting of the Adoration is abraded; only the lower half of the painting is legible, and even that portion is incomplete. Yet it is possible to assert that the

Figure 10 Division of the frescoes in the ceiling at San Baudelio de Berlanga. Image: author.



²³ Cook, “Romanesque Spanish Mural Painting,” 21

Magi appear in “sumptuous and exotic vestments”²⁴ and that all three ride different beasts. The first, a grey animal, is difficult to identify. The animal furthest to the back of the cavalcade is a dark brown steed. The final, centrally-placed animal is yellowish-brown with large, distinctive camel hooves — a natural companion to the camel in *The Cloisters*.

The process of traveling and movement comes to a climax when the viewer, now at the top of the stairs, visits the small chapel that abuts the large column, just at the place where the so-called palm fronds begin to effloresce. In the chapel is a second depiction of the Magi, now at the culmination of their journey, in the presence of the enthroned Madonna holding the Christ Child. Even though it is not possible to discern an actual throne, her symmetrical and solemn pose, mirrored by the posture of the Christ Child, indicates that she is of elevated and regal status; she is enthroned even if the throne is not obvious. The deference of the visiting Magi also alludes to her authoritative position. The Magus to her right bows his head slightly and appears to be bending his left knee. The Magus on her left is somewhat abraded, but appears to have already lowered himself to kneel at her feet. The third Magus appears in the soffit of the arch, to the upper right of the Madonna and above a small window. The result of this placement is that the third Magus hovers obliquely above the central, focal scene.²⁵ Opposite this floating Magus is the angel that indicates the direction of the journey, towards the Madonna and Child.

Thus, the visitor has witnessed a change in the Magi. Starting in elevated positions — placed overhead on the ceiling, riding upon horseback, not touching the ground, prominent figures in the court of Herod, dressed lavishly — they conclude their journey as submissive worshipers of the Madonna and Child. The visitor follows and participates in this physical and

²⁴ Guardia, *San Baudelio de Berlanga*, 304.

²⁵ Guardia argues that the artists utilized this composition because of limited space in the *capilla*. Guardia, *San Baudelio de Berlanga*, 343

spiritual change. He/she is virtually forced to enter and experience the *capilla* on bended knee, like the Magi. The experience is controlled and guided in a very specific way: both the paintings' content and their physical environment emphasize the majesty and authority of the moment. The camel now at The Cloisters would participate in the weighty import of this moment and space. Far from being a divertissement, or a worldly contrast to the scenes of the life of Christ, or even a symbol of one earthly virtue, the camel in his original painted place, to the right of the stairs in the hermitage, literally leads to the camels in the Christ narrative.

Any visitor, in taking these steps through the church and contemplating the paintings, is much like a latter-day Magus or pilgrim. Camels and pilgrims have a rich history of visual associations. Saint Menas, the patron saint of pilgrims and travelers, who appears on many pilgrim souvenir vessels,²⁶ is always accompanied by camels (**Fig. 11**).²⁷ Menas appears in one

Figure 11 St. Menas pilgrimage flask, 6th-8th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.



²⁶ For the exhibition catalog for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition*, Brandie Ratliff counted some 150 examples from Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria. The British Museum has 27.

²⁷ Camels played a significant role in the story of the miraculous burial of the saint. Menas was executed by soldiers during a period of persecution. When this period ended, an angel appeared to Pope Athanasius of Alexandria and told the pope to place the saint's body on a camel and head towards the Western Desert. When the camels stopped moving, the papal retinue buried Menas' body.

of the ivory panels associated with the Grado Chair, once in the Cathedral of Grado in northeastern Italy (**Fig. 12**).²⁸ William Anderson has shown that Menas flasks have been found throughout the Mediterranean, most notably in the Veneto and Friuli districts of north-eastern Italy, the Balkans, France, and Britain. As Anderson writes, the existence of these artifacts in the West is only partly the result of pilgrims returning from the East with commodities that they had purchased there.²⁹ The Menas vessels were also a part of trade and exchange networks that privileged the flasks as “highly esteemed objects, whose value derived from being both sacred and exotic.”³⁰ Thus the presence of camels in San Baudelio would have had associations with pilgrimages, holy sites, holy land, and the burial of holy bodies.



Figure 12 St. Menas ivory plaque, 6th-7th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Civiche Raccolte d’Arte Applicata — Castello Sforzesco, Milan.

²⁸ For bibliography on the complex issues surrounding the ivories, see Helen Evans and Brandie Ratliff, eds. *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012), esp. 45-50.

²⁹ The Saint Menas cult is centered on the shrine of St. Menas (Abu Mina) in north-west Egypt.

³⁰ William Anderson, “Menas Flasks in the West: Pilgrimage and trade at the end of antiquity” *Ancient West & East* 6 (2007): 221-243.

Early Christian sarcophagi also show an association between camels and pilgrims, most notably the Magi, in connection with a range of other biblical scenes. On many early Christian sarcophagi these animals participate in a whole economy of Christian stories, including those represented on the walls of San Baudelio. For example, on the fourth-century Spanish Layos sarcophagus, camels carved in a thin bas-relief appear as participants in the Adoration of the Magi scene, an episode which is intricately linked to other biblical scenes such as the Raising of Lazarus (**Fig. 13**). Camels appear in different combinations of the same scenes that are on the walls of San Baudelio (The Healing of the Blind Man, The Wedding at Cana, The Entry into



Figure 13 Layos Sarcophagus, San Domingo le Reya, Toledo, 4th century. Museu Frederic Marès, Barcelona, Spain and detail. Photo: Museu Frederic Marès, Barcelona, Spain.



Jerusalem) on numerous sarcophagi, such as one in the Cathedral of San Leopardo in Osimo, another resting in the cemetery of Marcus and Marcellinus in Rome, and two in Arles. The sarcophagi thus also provide a model for reading the frescoes. As on the early Christian sarcophagi, the scenes in the space of San Baudelio are meant to be read as part of a cohesive whole. The stories are meant to inform one another in a fluid way and are meant to be read beyond the distinct scenes and across the space of the building. This type of reading is encouraged by the sequence in the zone with the Christological scenes, in which the paintings do not follow a chronological order. Like the early Christian sarcophagi, the setting of the frescoes at San Baudelio promoted multivalent and nonlinear readings.

Exiting the chapel, the visitor would be confronted with a scene of the Massacre of the Innocents, which might stimulate a further consideration of the miraculous birth of the Christ Child, since even Herod's brutal killings could not stop the appearance of the Son of God. When descending the stairs, the visitor would be in step with the camels, literally and physically flanked by them, with the Cloisters camel on the left and the camel from the scene of the Massacre on the right. In this way, the visitor or possible pilgrim would be positioned just as St. Menas on the pilgrimage flasks, with camels on either side. The visitor might continue to visit the altar located on the northeastern wall or walk out of the hermitage back into the desolate wilderness of the Sorian hills. But if taking the latter route, the viewer might happen to turn to the left to see the Temptation painting on the southwestern wall and reflect on Christ's time in the wilderness, how Christ was able to reject the temptations of riches and kingdoms when they were proffered by Satan. Consequently, the visitor might reflect upon the wisdom that earthly rewards are transient and that a greater reward awaits those who follow the path of Christ.

Christ says in the synoptic gospels, “Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”³¹ Perhaps “some rich baron,” as Phillip Adams wrote in 1963, did commission the paintings.³² But the synthesis of the paintings encourages a message that the act of appreciating the riches of the frescoes, instead of literal riches, is a means of contemplating future reward and the astounding power of God. St. Augustine explained the biblical passage about the camel as an example that God can do anything, even allow the rich into heaven. Quoting Matthew 19:21, he wrote: “The things which are impossible with man are possible with God.”³³ Clement of Alexandria, writing in the third century, parsed the biblical aphorism in a way that would justify the life of the aesthetic, hermetic monk: “If one is able in the midst of wealth to turn from its mystique, to entertain moderate desires, to exercise self-control, to seek God alone, and to breathe God and walk with God, such a man submits to the commandments, being free, unsubdued, free of disease, unwounded by wealth.”³⁴

Trying to create a complete narrative for the ways in which the paintings operate in the hermitage might be as difficult as, say, a rich man entering heaven, or a camel going through the eye of a needle. Yet the effort seems worthwhile, because so many of the complex’s visual and intellectual riches are to be found in the fruitful connections between the painted zones.

³¹ Matthew 19:23-24, Mark 10:24-25, Luke 18:24-25. Cyril of Alexandria argued that the word camel had been mistranslated into Greek and was intended to mean “rope” or “cable.” Cyril of Alexandria, *Fragment 219*. Manlio Simonetti, ed, *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary, New Testament Ib* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 102. The main concern discussed by early church fathers refers to the difficulty of the camel’s task as a metaphor for the challenge of entering the heavenly kingdom. Writers like Hilary of Poitiers and Chrysostom explain that, through Christ, faith, and self-denial, the seemingly impossible becomes achievable. See Hilary of Poitiers, *The Metaphor of the Camel* and Chrysostom, *The Rich and the Kingdom*. Simonetti, 103.

³² Philip Adams, “Mural Paintings from the Hermitage of Saint Baudelio de Berlanga. Province of Soria, Spain,” *The Cincinnati Art Museum Bulletin* VII (1963): 4. Guardia argues at length for the patronage of Ramón II de Erill (1112-1142). Guardia, *San Baudelio de Berlanga*, esp. 166-174.

³³ St. Augustine, *NPNF* 1-05, Chapter 1

³⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *ANF* 2:598-99.

Dividing the church into distinctive styles is confusing because the terms are not entirely stable. What exactly does Mozarabic look like? What precisely is Romanesque? Even if these questions had clearer answers, they would not tell us much about what the paintings were doing or what they meant. Turning the painting program into a veritable battleground is similarly misleading. Rather than reliving conflicts of the past, the paintings speak to a shared and fluid culture. The analogue should be early twelfth-century Sicily, where mosaics in the Byzantine style under the patronage of the Norman kings coexisted with Arabic paintings — where Christological scenes like the Temptation of Christ, the Raising of Lazarus and painted camels work together harmoniously.

The jump to Sicily is not as farfetched as it might seem. Berlanga is relatively close to the border between Spain and France and was likely within the artistic sphere of the Normans. Jimenez Muñoz makes a compelling argument about the ties between the eleventh-century Bayeux tapestry (which famously details the Norman conquest of England) and the scenes of the hunt at San Baudelio.³⁵ With the visual associations tying Berlanga to the Bayeux tapestry, Muñoz is able to take a complex view of the sources for the paintings in the hermitage. He makes the important point that, although there is no doubt that Islamic art was influential, it was not necessarily a direct artistic source. Islamic influences were also being passed down through French and English works of art. In other words, the influences were European versions of eastern art.

Ties to Italy are also relevant. In the tiny *capilla*, in the curved barrel vault above an enthroned Madonna, is a large disembodied Hand of God (**Fig. 14**). The hand, with its long fingers, makes a gesture of benediction. A circular halo or ring encloses the hand, which

³⁵ Jose Miguel Muñoz Jimenez, “Las Pinturas de San Baudilio de Berlanga,” *Goya* 253-254 (1996): 12-17.



Figure 14 Hand of God, San Baudelio de Berlanga, first half of 12th century. Berlanga de Duero, Spain. Photo: Author.

has the churches, such as Sant Climent de Taüll. There are intriguing points of comparison with the hint of a sleeve at the wrist. This configuration of God's hand appears in a number of Spanish churches, such as Sant Climent de Taüll. There are intriguing points of comparison with the hand in the vault of the crypt of San Vincenzo al Volturno (**Fig. 15**). There the Hand of God opens with large, splayed

Figure 15 Hand of God, San Vincenzo al Volturno 826-43. Castel San Vincenzo, Italy. Photo: author.

fingers, hovering against a blue background without a halo and without a garment. At San Vincenzo, the Hand of God is associated with a seated Madonna who is accompanied by archangels, as at San Baudelio. San Vincenzo's paintings are from the ninth century. Could they have in any way influenced similar paintings in Spain? Interestingly, San Vincenzo was intricately tied to the nearby



Montecassino, which had a central role in facilitating the spread of artistic ideas throughout the medieval period. The eleventh-century Abbot Desiderius of Montecassino (later Pope Victor III) famously brought artists from Constantinople, thereby patronizing a renewed presence for Byzantine-inflected art in Italy. Montecassino was certainly positioned to propagate favored iconographies and images, such as the Hand of God, through satellite Benedictine houses into all of Europe. Whatever the exact lines of influence, the presence of common imageries is beyond dispute.

It is with an eye to a world characterized by sharing and fluidity, both culturally and artistically, that one must approach the twelfth-century paintings at San Baudelio de Berlanga. The camel should not be seen as an isolated unit, a framed painting on a wall. Without knowing where the camel stood and how it related to surrounding images, much of its meaning, and that of the monument, as a whole, is lost. The installation of the Berlanga frescoes at the Museo del Prado illuminates this very point. By recreating the shape of the hermitage, albeit on a smaller scale, the gallery provides a sense of the sightlines that are integral to understanding the monument as a space informed by a special progression. The focal point of the progression, the upper region of the hermitage with the *capilla*, is not part of the mock hermitage. Still, the gallery expresses the importance of the frescoes in relationship to each other, the architectural framework, and the viewer. A further resource, a video produced by Margarita Díaz Ramos, explains the space of San Baudelio de Berlanga, this time for the virtual pilgrim.³⁶ The video begins with an image of the frescoes in conserved form, or how they might have looked originally — bright colors, dark black outlines — and then sets those scenes within the body of the hermitage. Transitioning from the restored paintings to

³⁶ Margarita Díaz Ramos, “San Baudelio de Berlanga.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 28 June, 2009. Web. 21 August, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olgsGRHV890>

those on the current walls, from the vivid and decontextualized to the faded, yet properly situated, the video provides a complete sense of the ways in which these images surround and involve the viewer, and how spectacular they would have been before their spoliation in the twentieth century. A methodical progression through the space also shows the difficulty of explaining the story of the space of San Baudelio de Berlanga, and how without both iconography and setting the story is lost.³⁷ Considering how important it is to understand the context of the widely-dispersed fresco fragments of San Baudelio, it is worth exploring new ways of exhibiting these paintings as part of an ensemble, and as participants in an epiphanic progression which had the ability to transform the worshipers into participants as well. 🙏

³⁷ Ramos leads the viewer through the frescoes in the body of the hermitage, moves directly to the *capilla*, discusses the fragmented images within the ribs of the ceiling, and finishes the tour with the paintings in the altar area.