

Apocalypse

(This Catholic history is from the on-line source: <https://compostela.co/apocalypse-and-eschatology/> and has been slightly edited for greater clarity by the editor: Franz Berg)

THE MEDIEVAL WORLD WAS HIGHLY CONSCIOUS OF A NOTION OF TIME WHICH TENDED TOWARDS AN END. NATURE AND SOCIETY WERE FOUNDED ON THIS PRINCIPLE AND MEN COULD ONLY PREPARE FOR THIS ULTIMATE EVENTUALITY

APOCALYPSE AND ESCHATOLOGY

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1-The concept of eschatological time: The World will End in 6000 years

All along the pilgrimage roads to Santiago de Compostela one sees reflected in the stone carvings of the churches a deep preoccupation with the Apocalypse and the Last Judgment.

Although since the eighth century a new chronology had been devised which dated the calendar from the Anno Domini, the earlier dating from the Annus Mundi continued to coexist. This dated from the Creation and used a



combination of Biblical and historical material to calculate the year. Most chronologers and historians placed the birth of Christ somewhere in the fifth millennium. The subtext to Annus Mundi was the concept of eschatological time. Saint Augustine had written warning against attempts to calculate the timing of the Apocalypse and that the prophecies of the Bible should be taken as having symbolic value.

However literal interpretations continued to hold their grasp, even within the official church. According to these ideas Time was structured according to seven millennia. The end of the fifth millennium would bring the Apocalypse. This would be followed by the thousand year rule of Christ and the saints on Earth at the end of which Christ would return for the Day of Judgment.

Many early Christians had believed that these events would occur in their lifetime and for medieval man they seemed equally imminent.

2-The Age of the World: The gifts of nature have not entirely rotted away



To understand the mindset of the medieval pilgrim one should take account of the eschatological world view which was universally accepted at the time.

In the twelfth century, men could not help but notice that all around them lay the ruins of a great civilisation.

Temples, civic buildings, great bridges and roads had crumbled and fallen into disrepair through neglect. What remained spoke of a glorious past, of a society whose organisational and technological capabilities were far beyond those of the present time.

And yet in the early twelfth century a monk, abbot of a northern French monastery wrote criticising those who praised the achievements of the ancients over those of his own day. In doing so he revealed an attitude prevalent in his time. Men believed that their world was quite literally growing old, that its period of greatness was now in the long distant past and that the Roman Empire had constituted a golden age.

What lay ahead was the Apocalypse and the task of society was to prepare the way for the inevitable: “Although pure strength was pre-eminent among the ancients, yet among us, though the end of time has come upon us, the gifts of nature have not entirely rotted away”, so wrote the abbot.

“Certain mortals” he continued, ”have developed the foul habit of praising previous times and attacking what modern men do ... However, no discerning individual could prefer in any way the temporal prosperity of the ancients to any of the strengths of our own day.”

3-Pilgrimage and Apocalypse: Comets in the sky appeared and countless went in pilgrimage

The Pilgrimage Roads to Compostela



Christian pilgrimages were grafted onto older Pagan ones. The sacred grove or magical dolmen



now became a Christian shrine with a miraculous relic to attract Christian pilgrims.

“Comets in the sky appeared and countless went in pilgrimage. Their numbers were greater than the past age had ever heard of”.

So wrote Radulfus Glaber, Benedictine monk of the abbey of Cluny in his account of his own time in the mid eleventh century, observing an increase in travel to holy places.

In the tripartite feudal order, the pilgrim – temporarily at least, wore the same mantle of sanctity as the monk and cleric. The knightly and labouring castes who



lacked the spiritual benefits which were the privilege of the monastic vocation were fearful for their soul's eternal destiny. As millennial Apocalyptic fears grew, spiritual rewards could be obtained by travelling ever greater distances to the important shrines, which offered the possibility of redemption and a place in Heaven.

As Glaber concluded, "many consulted in these matters about the meaning of this concourse. They were answered that it portended no other than the advent of that corrupt Jew the Antichrist, whose coming at the end of this world is prophesied in Holy Scripture".

Bridge at Saint Savin



4-Relics and the End of Time: We venerate the saints in their bodies or better in their relics

In the Book of Revelation, after the breaking of the fifth seal, the author declares, "I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held"



From early Christianity, it was the practice to venerate the relics of the saints. Relics were the bodies, that part that was left behind on earth when the soul had ascended to heaven. It was said that these were in many cases perfectly preserved and that rather than smell of decomposition they emitted an attractive perfume, hence the expression “to die in the odour of sanctity”. In reality it was the skeleton or a part thereof.

Men would have to wait until the End of Time to enter Paradise, but the saint ascended directly into the presence of God. Out of this arose the notion of their mortal remains being a conduit between Heaven and Earth. Prayers said before relics carried much greater weight.

The Christian cult of the saints held that they were of two orders: the martyrs and the confessors. That is, those who were killed for their faith and those who were celebrated for upholding and spreading it. The wave of persecutions of Christians which spread through Gaul in the early fourth century produced no shortage of martyrs and a canon of the Council of Carthage in 401, taking its lead from Revelation, stated that the bones of saints should be placed under all church altars.

The popularity of relics grew as more and more Pagans were converted. Their cults were transformed from the magical to the miraculous. Secondary relics, such as cloth worn by the saint also became widespread.

In the East an alternative cult had developed, that of icons – pictures of saints which held the same miraculous properties as relics. In about 790, the Frankish ruler Charlemagne issued a lengthy text to Pope Adrian on the question of icons. Charlemagne insisted on the cult of relics: “The Greeks place almost all the hope

of their credulity in images but it remains firm that we venerate the saints in their bodies or better in their relics”.

5-The Scallop Shell: It is not without reason that the pilgrims returning from the threshold of Saint James bear shells

Although the scallop shell was adopted as an emblem by pilgrims to several shrines such as Mont Saint Michel, it was to become uniquely associated with the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. The Liber Sancti Iacobi declares that “It is not without reason that the pilgrims returning from the threshold of Saint James bear shells”.

They were plentiful on the coast of Galicia where, presumably, pilgrims originally continued as far as the western sea shore as the final act of their journey to collect their emblem.

The Pilgrim’s Guide tells us that they were sold at the entrance to the cathedral by the middle of the twelfth century and by the year 1200 the selling of the scallop shell was regulated so that we know that one hundred scallop shell vendors were licensed at Santiago.

Archeological evidence for the association of the scallop shell with the Compostelan pilgrimage exists in the form of a shell which was discovered inside a tomb along the northern nave of the cathedral of Santiago.



Due to its location it is dated no later than 1120. The first written evidence for the scallop shell as an emblem of the pilgrimage is in one of the miracles included in Book Two of the *Liber Sancti Iacobi* which is dated 1106. Thus we can be certain that the scallop was used as a symbol of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela at the very start of the twelfth century and it seems plausible to conclude that a tradition had been established for some time before then.

In Antiquity depictions of the scallop shell in funerary imagery were intended to denote the heavenly afterlife and its use was appropriated into the symbolism of the early Church. The interior of the aedicule of Constantine's church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem featured the form of a scallop shell carved into the niche.



It has also been noted that from prehistoric times, shells were placed around the bodies of the dead as part of funerary rites.

In Spain there seems to have been a particular association between the scallop shell and Christian imagery, going back to the Visigothic period. Examples are to be found at Merida and the church of San Tolme at Toledo.

These replicate very closely the image on the silver and gold repoussé cover of the Sion Gospel. The similarity extends to the flanking palm trees which refer to Paradise. A notable difference however is the substitution of the Cross of the Sion Gospel with a Chrismon on the version found at Merida and Toledo.

The Chrismon is a particularly Hispanic image and there is a suggestion that it may have been especially important to the Visigoths with its reference to the Book of Revelation, a text which took on a more prominent function in the Visigothic church.



The Sion Gospel is considered to be the work of Byzantine craftsmen at Constantinople and to be dated to the 570's. It is known that the Visigoths looked to Byzantium for cultural influences, unsurprising when one considers that they shared the Hispanic peninsula for a time in the sixth century after the Emperor Justinian conquered the Roman province of Baetica.

The Visigothic images of the scallop shell repeated the Antique representation which always portrayed the scallop as a concave form, reflecting its most common placement in a niche. The Compostelan scallop shell is distinctive however, in that it is always presented on its convex side and its orientation reversed, so that the narrow end of the shell is at the top. Now resembling a shield rather than a receptacle this may simply be a matter of the change in usage from a sculptural architectural element into an emblematic form worn on clothing especially the *scarcella*, the purse or bag which became of one the attributes in depictions of Compostelan pilgrims.

The seashore to which Compostelan pilgrims directed themselves to collect their maritime pilgrim's badge was not any seashore. It was in fact the



point of land known as Finisterra, the end of the earth and one may speculate further as to what significance this may hold. This was the edge of the known world beyond which lay the western horizon, whose mythological connotations include ideas of the Land of the Dead and the resurrection symbolism of the sun's decline and subsequent rising.

To this day, the coastline remains known as the Costa da Muerte and the numerous Celtic remnants still found in Galicia have given rise to suggestions that there was at the headland a cultic site, the Ara de Solis.

The proposition that rituals involving a ceremonial journey of the dead were performed there, prompts the question of whether the pilgrimage to Compostela was an adaption of an earlier cult associated with the passage to the afterlife, of which the scallop shell as a vessel of transportation over the sea to a Paradisaical realm, remains an evocative vestige. This may be the source of one of the Apostle of Compostela's legendary miracles, when a drowned knight was brought up out of the sea by the saint, covered in scallop shells and restored to life.

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6-Monasteries and the Feudal Order: There are those who pray



As society moved inexorably towards the End Times a mutually supporting division developed, a caste system imported from the East. This was the Tripartite division: those who prayed, those who fought and those who laboured. In other words, the monks, the knights and the feudal serfs. Each performed a vital service towards the greater good in a mutually interdependent structure whose sole purpose was the preparation of man for Judgment. These were the moral underpinnings of the feudal order.

Those who worked the land provided the necessary food, the knightly aristocracy protected the other two divisions and fought to defend Christendom. It was the monks and clerics however, who provided the most vital function: prayer.



For it was considered that humanity was too sinful to be redeemed without constant prayer and so around the relics of saints an ever more elaborate liturgical ritual evolved. And so the monasteries were reformed, they received great donations from kings and the wealthy aristocracy for the provision of foundations and endowments. By the eleventh century European Christendom contained a network of thousands of abbeys and priories.

Santo Domingo de Silos



7-Compostela and the Mission of the Apostles: The End of the World

The Pilgrimage Roads to Compostela



Santiago de Compostela lies only twenty miles inland from the Atlantic ocean at the far western extremity of the European landmass, known by the Romans as *Finis Terra*, the end of the earth. For them the ocean was the *Mare Tenebrosum*, the dark sea. Since ancient times this coastline, known as the *Costa da Muerte*, the coast of death, had been



used by traders who sailed along it towards the tin mines of the Scilly Isles and Cornwall. It was an important trade route linking the classical Mediterranean world with the Celtic.

It was via these old trade routes that cultural and religious ideas were transmitted. For the Greeks the far west was considered the mythical Land of the Dead and they dubbed the inhabitants the Keltoi after Caillaech, their mother goddess.

Galicia, a remote land bordered by the sea to the north and west and the mountains to the south and east retained her Celtic heritage long after the surrounding area had been Christianised. Still today, the landscape contains occasional druidic dolmens.

At Finisterra the Celts had a major pilgrimage site, the Ara de Solis, the altar of the Sun. The cardinal points had symbolic meaning too. The East with birth and resurrection, the West with Death and the Afterlife.

Combined, these elements indicate that the area around Compostela had from prehistoric times been a significant place of pilgrimage associated with funeral rites.



Medieval maps depict a circular area surrounded by water with Jerusalem at its centre and Galicia at its western point. Christian conceptions of the world also regarded the west coast of Spain as the limit of the earth. Considered in the context of the Mission of the Apostles it was a significant location. According to widely held belief the End of the World could only happen when the Apostolic Mission had been accomplished, that is the Gospel had been spread to the furthest reaches of the world.

The Arab invasion of Spain at the beginning of the eighth century seemed to fulfil the prophecy of the Book of Daniel concerning the fourth empire of the World.

The Asturian abbot Beatus of Liebana was a refugee from Islamic Andalusia and the illustration of the Earth in his celebrated Commentary on the Apocalypse confirms the Apostle James as evangeliser of Spain. A number of prophetic ideas were now coming together.

Had the Mission of the Apostles been completed? Was the perceived threat to Christendom posed by the Arab invasion that prelude to Apocalypse prophesied in Daniel and Revelations? If so, what more fitting place to go in pilgrimage than that remote corner of the world.

The discovery of the tomb of the Apostle at Compostela a generation after Beatus seemed an inevitability.

As the Book of Saint James tells us with Apocalyptic foreboding: “As the Eastern Apostolic See was established by St. John at Ephesus, so was the Western established by St. James. And those Sees are undoubtedly the true Sees. Ephesus on the right hand of Christ’s earthly kingdom, and Compostela on the left, both which fell to the share of the sons of Zebedee”.

8-Constantine, Charlemagne and the Book of Daniel: As the knowledge of one God was imparted to all men, a single sovereign arose for the entire Roman empire and a deep peace took hold of all



Along the pilgrimage roads to Santiago de Compostela a recurrent sculpted image can be seen on the facades of the churches – a victorious rider. Invariably, beneath is a cowering figure being trampled upon. Who is this mysterious horseman? Commentators have long agreed that it represents an archetypal Christian monarch triumphing over the Jews but it seems impossible to distinguish which of the two most likely historical figures it might be: Constantine or Charlemagne, for both emperors developed legendary features fitting the same mythological purpose.



By the Edict of Milan in 313 the Roman Emperor Constantine had granted Christianity freedom from persecution after a lengthy period of oppression at the hands of his predecessor Diocletian. Constantine was responsible for Christianity becoming the state religion of the Empire even though it is often questioned whether he was a believer himself. Nevertheless, he ordered the construction of the first church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem and Saint Peter's in Rome. He called the Council of Nicaea in 325 at which the Nicene Creed, the expression of the Christian Trinitarian doctrine, was devised.

His reputation grew in the Christian imagination during the middle ages largely because of Eusebius' history. According to this, when Constantine was planning to fight the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 against the army of Maxentius, his rival for control of the empire, he experienced a vision which persuaded him to order his forces to fight under a Christian banner. His authority as a Christian ruler was further revered due to the document known as the Donation of Constantine, an early medieval forgery, which granted temporal power to the Pope.



The Franks were the first Christianised Germanic tribe and their ruler, Charlemagne was seen as Constantine's successor, acquiring a vast empire the size of which had not been seen since the decline of Rome itself. Charlemagne was a conquering Christian monarch who, although he fought mainly against pagans in the Germanic lands, was conflated in legend with his father Charles Martel who had defeated the Arabs at the battle of Poitiers in 732. This halt to the Arab march through Europe was a legendary victory, the wishful prototype of later encounters with the Saracens of the Crusader era.

Charlemagne did much to restore a declining monastic culture in Europe and the Benedictine order of the eleventh and twelfth centuries looked to Charlemagne as their secular champion. Monasteries attributed their foundation to him as a way of asserting their power and autonomy and, at a time when the Papacy was threatened, Charlemagne was its protector.

On Christmas Day 800 Charlemagne revived the memory of Rome when he had himself anointed the first Holy Roman Emperor.



In referring to himself as emperor, Charlemagne may not have been thinking solely of his secular role. The notion of empire had been embedded in Apocalyptic prophecy since the time of the Book of Daniel and continued through the Book of Revelation and into the middle ages. These prophecies defined the span of earthly time in terms of four empires. They were either the Greek, Persian, Roman or Arab depending on the contemporaneous setting, but they were agreed that there would be a final evil empire which would precede the End of the World.

According to legend, Charlemagne was the first pilgrim to Compostela and liberator of the shrine of the Apostle James

Oloron-Sainte-Marie (with commentary)



The Legend of the Last Roman Emperor and the Prophecies of Daniel on the Pilgrimage Roads to Compostela



9-Arab Invasion and Apocalypse: Beatus of Liebana

After the Arab invasion, Christian Spain was restricted to a small kingdom north of the Cantabrian mountains called Asturias. It was from here that the origins of the Reconquest were born and that an abbot, Beatus of Liebana composed a famous commentary on the Apocalypse in the late eighth century.

The Christians of Asturias found significance in their defeat at the hands of the Saracens. These were events long prophesied.



It was reckoned that the Antichrist was now come and the End Times were unfolding. Beatus was one of the first to claim that Saint James had fulfilled his Apostolic Mission in Spain following the Pentecost and prior to his martyrdom at Jerusalem in A.D. 44.

It was not long after, in the early years of the ninth century, that the miraculous discovery of his tomb was made by a shepherd at Compostela. The location of the most important shrine of Western Europe at such a significant site as the frontier between Christendom and the Caliphate on the very edge of the known world, may not have been mere coincidence but it certainly had a great pull on contemporary imaginations. How the body had reached Spain from Jerusalem was the subject of an elaborate legend.

The manuscript of Beatus' Commentary on the Apocalypse was copied in the monasteries which lined the pilgrim road, for a long time the front line of the war between Christians and Arabs.

10-Iconography: Elders of the Apocalypse: Having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of the saints

Saint Pierre de la Tour Aulnay de Saintonge



Depictions of the Twenty-Four Elders are a recurrent feature of Romanesque sculpture in the twelfth century. Enthroned and crowned they variously bear musical instruments and bowls, goblets or phials. Numerous examples are to be found along the pilgrimage roads, most notably at Aulnay de Saintonge, Oloron-Sainte-Marie, Saintes, Compostela itself and most striking of all at Moissac.

The Biblical reference is from the Book of Revelation 4.4 *And around the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold.* Along with the Four Beasts they surround in attitudes of worship and reverence an anonymous enthroned figure.

In Chapter 5.8 the Elders are described as: *having every one of them harps and golden vials full of odours which are the prayers of the saints.*



This is the scene which is represented at Aulnay de Saintonge and Oloron-Sainte-Marie.

At Oloron the tympanum of the western porch features the Descent from the Cross surrounded on the outer arch by the assembly of the Elders, twelve on each side of an apex featuring the Lamb bearing the Cross.

The south porch at Aulnay has four registers of voussoirs. An outer one of a phantasmagorical bestiary, a second of prophets and saints and a third of enthroned and crowned figures with their appropriate attributes of vials and musical



instruments identifying them clearly as the Elders, their penetrating gaze fastened on the Apocalyptic scene before them. Curiously they number thirty-one whereas the number of saints and prophets is twenty-four and several of the saints and prophets of the inner register bear also vials very similar to those held by the Elders. At the crown of the inner register is the Lamb.

The emblems which these figures share are the vials, instruments, crowns and perhaps significantly that they are all enthroned. In Revelation 4.10 the Elders fall down and cast off their crowns before the One.

That the most common Romanesque sculptural depictions of the Elders show them as enthroned when the text mentions also that they fall down in attitude of reverence, may be due to their conflation, by several medieval writers, with the thrones of Chapter 20.4: *And I saw thrones and they sat upon them and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus and for the Word of God and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.*

This passage follows on from the angel binding and



casting down Satan into the abyss for a thousand years and thereby associates the enthroned figures with the martyred saints and their millennial rule as judges.

This seems to explain the sculptural programme of the western porch at the Abbaye-aux-Dames at Saintes.

On the outer arch the voussoirs present the Elders and the inner arch the Massacre of the Innocents, identifiable by the Egyptian garb of the executioners.

The emphasis on decapitation and the adult proportions of the victims suggests that the Massacre of the Innocents is here seen as a prefiguration of the martyrdom of the saints.



The association of the two iconographic elements would imply a reference to Revelation 20.4 and evidence of the identification of the Elders with the anonymous Thrones.

This is given further weight by the inclusion, as in other programmes which refer to the Elders, of the Apocalyptic Lamb at the crown of the penultimate arch.

The Augustinian eschatological position was that the millennium signified the period from the Incarnation to the Final Judgment and that the millennial reign of Christ and the Saints on earth actually represented the present time of the Church. Thus the anonymous enthroned figures of Revelation 20.4 were a combination of Elders, Saints, Prophets and prelates of the church: the celestial and terrestrial churches combined.

Out of these elements of ambiguity the question arises of whether depictions of the Twenty-Four Elders refer to the Apocalypse or the Last Judgment or perhaps a combined image of both.

The ninth century Frankish Benedictine Rabanus Maurus included the Four Beasts and the Twenty-Four Elders in his text on the vision of the Second Coming in Matthew's Gospel



At Moissac's southern porch, among the most perfect of Romanesque sculptural ensembles, the tympanum presents the Twenty-Four Elders and the Tetramorph of the Four Beasts or Living Creatures as described in Revelation 4.4 but seated on the central throne in the place of the anonymous One, usually represented by the Lamb, is Christ in Majesty.



The Elders all have their heads turned towards the theophanic vision. Their postures are relaxed in the cross legged positions commonly reserved for regal subjects such as King David: a reference to their complementary roles as judges.

The surprising prominence given to Twenty-Four Elders in Romanesque sculpture along the pilgrimage roads is, in view of their relatively insignificant textual presence, perhaps explained by their most important attribute: the vials containing the prayers of the saints.



In that era when the cult of saintly relics was at its height, the Elders represented the culmination of the intercessory structure underpinning the Christian world.

At the crucial moment of Apocalypse and Judgment, those prayers made by the faithful to the saints via the mediation of the guardians of the relics, monks and clerics, were present.

The ultimate expression of this is at Compostela. The trumeau of the Portico de la Gloria



bearing the relief image of the Apostle James rises up to support the Apocalyptic image of the tympanum where Christ in Majesty is surrounded by the Twenty-Four Elders. The Apostle is presented as a conduit between Earth and Heaven, prayers and pilgrimage at his shrine will be transmitted through his intercessory aspect and held in the vials of the Elders.

Saint-Pierre-de-Moissac



11-The Legend of the Last Roman Emperor: This will be the end and the consummation of the Empire of the Romans and the Christians

Much of Christian eschatological thought was predicated on the notion of the four empires of the world from the Old Testament Book of Daniel, an important text in the medieval period. This dictated that the span of earthly time was to be divided into the dominion of four empires, the last of which would be a tyrannical and evil power. Its ultimate destruction in a great battle would inaugurate the Apocalypse.

These empires variously consisted of The Greek, Persian, Babylonian, Roman. The advent of the Babylonian and Roman empires caused much



stirring of Apocalyptic pronouncements for Hebrews as they were oppressed by each in turn. The Book of Revelation carries an implicit idea that it is the first century Edomite Herodian Jerusalem which is the final evil empire. Then, with the conversion of Constantine and the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the empire, Indo-European Rome was clearly identified as the New Jerusalem.

The sack of Rome by the Goths and the barbarian invasions of the early fifth century brought fresh prophetic proclamations. However it was with the Arab invasions of the Eastern Roman Empire in the seventh century that the notion of a Last Roman Emperor took root.

Originating initially in a text attributed to a Bishop Methodius, writing in a Byzantine empire then suffering the first wave of Arab conquests, the prophecy identified in dramatic terms the contemporaneous upheavals with the arrival of the last evil empire. It told of a sleeping emperor who would awake and lead an army against the forces of the Antichrist. As the victor in a great battle which brought an end to the strife endured under the evil empire, the Last Emperor would go to the New Jerusalem and place his crown



on top of the Cross at the Roman Golgotha. By this act he would surrender his temporal authority, thereby ushering in the events of the Apocalypse and the millennial rule of Christ and the Saints on earth.

These beliefs concerning Apocalyptic prophecy were translated to the West as the Arab invasions progressed across the Mediterranean and, it can be reasonably speculated, partly informed the attitude of the medieval Christian church towards Islam and the Saracen presence in the Holy Land and Spain.

With Charlemagne's coronation as Holy Roman Emperor in the year 800, the torch of responsibility for fulfilling these predictions seemed to be passed on to the Franks. Around the year 950, Abbot Adso of the Cluniac monastery at Montier-en-Der, wrote a text in the form of a letter to the Frankish queen Gerberga on the subject of the Origin and Life of the Jew Antichrist. Adso was an important writer of the tenth century and his manuscript made full use of the prophecies concerning a Last Emperor.



“Even though we see that the Empire of the Romans is for the most part destroyed, nevertheless, as long as the kings of the Franks, who possess the Roman Empire by right, survive, the dignity of the Roman Empire will not perish altogether”, wrote Adso, clearly identifying the Carolignian Germanic Frankish kings as the inheritors of the Roman Imperial authority.



In Romanesque sculpture a recurrent theme is that of the Victorious Rider. There are numerous examples along the pilgrimage roads to Compostela. The horseman, always presented riding over a cowed figure beneath, represents the military strength of the temporal champion of Christianity with which the legends of Constantine and Charlemagne are endowed and which is assumed into eschatological thinking by the prophecy of the Last Roman Emperor, all of which fed into the Crusader mentality of the medieval world.

Notable examples of the Victorious Rider are to be seen at Oloron-Sainte-Marie and Parthenay-le-Vieux.

The Legend of the Last Roman Emperor and the Prophecies of Daniel on the
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Parthenay-le-Vieux



12-Oloron-Sainte-Marie: At the foot of the mountain on the Gascon side

Oloron-Sainte-Marie (with commentary)



Situated on the French Béarnais side of the Pyrenees, Oloron-Sainte-Marie, a cathedral town since the sixth century was a major pilgrimage station on the way to Compostela because of its strategic position at the bottom of the Aspe river valley which led up to to the 1,600 metre high Somport Pass.

This was the preferred entry point over the mountains for pilgrims travelling the Toulouse Road.

Making use of an old Roman road which had connected the city of Illoronensium in the province of Novempopulania with the



Hispano-Roman city of Saragossa, the town of Oloron benefitted from the traffic in pilgrims and trade with its counterpart Jaca, on the Spanish Aragonese side of the peaks.

After suffering at the hands of Norman raiders in the tenth century, the town's fortunes were revived by the growth of the Compostelan pilgrimage in the eleventh century. Close links with Aragon led to a repopulating policy that was current in the Spanish Christian kingdoms of the north following the reclamation of lands from Saracen domination.

After 1080 when the Viscount of Béarn conferred the status of free men on its



inhabitants and restricted the powers of the church and lord, a merchant class developed which took advantage of natural surroundings rich in the salmon rivers and pork farming depicted graphically on the porch sculpture of the cathedral of Sainte-Marie.

The building of the town's two major Romanesque churches, the cathedral and the church of Sainte-Croix coincided with the return from the Holy Land in 1104 of the Viscount Gaston of Béarn. Gaston had been one of the key figures of the first Crusade having devised the moving towers which had proved decisive in the successful outcome of the siege of Jerusalem.

Soon after his return from Crusading in the East, Gaston joined forces with one of the most prominent figures of the Spanish Reconquista, Alfonso El Batallor of Aragon. Their joint campaigns against the Moors culminated with the conquest of Saragossa in 1118.



Its proximity to the ongoing war of Reconquest in Spain, meant that Oloron was both a pilgrimage centre on the Compostelan road as well as a vital point of departure for Crusaders heading to fight for Christendom in the Holy War against the infidel.

This militant Christianity is reflected in the design of the porch sculpture of the town's cathedral. Giant atlante figures at the base of the trumeau are clearly identifiable as Saracen prisoners.

A Victorious Rider sculpted unusually in the round, at the top of the right side jamb reinforces a Crusader conception. This figure of a horseman riding roughshod over a man trampled beneath is one of the great themes of Romanesque sculpture.

It appears all over France and northern Spain most notably on the pilgrimage roads to Compostela. It is most frequent on the Tours Road. Appearing in the Poitou region at Parthenay-le-Vieux, Airvault, Aulnay, Melle, Saint-Jouin-de-Marne, and Poitiers. In the Saintonge examples are to be found at Saintes, Chadenac and Pons among others and in Spain on the Camino Francès at Sangüesa, Carrión de los Condés, León and Compostela itself.

Whether the figure represents the emperors Constantine or Charlemagne



or simply an archetypal militant temporal leader, the cowed figure below seems to imply **the triumph of Christian might over the Jews.**

This recalls the Crusader spirit of the times but perhaps also the legendary prophecy of the Last Roman Emperor, who it was predicted would awake from a long sleep and make war against the forces of the Jew Antichrist. Having successfully defeated his foe, the emperor would ascend to the Roman Golgotha, placing his temporal crown on top of the Cross which had been erected there by the emperor Theodosius in the fifth century.

This symbolic act relinquishing temporal authority was the necessary prelude to the Apocalypse and the millennial rule of Christ and the Saints on Earth. The eschatological implications of the porch sculpture are reinforced by the Twenty-Four Elders carved onto the outer archivolt.