Depictions of Damnation in the Beatus Manuscripts: Painting Adoptionism as Heresy

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Depictions of Damnation in the Beatus Manuscripts:

Painting Adoptionism as Heresy

Kristin Rawlings

ARTH 383: Hell, Damnation, and Romanesque Art

Prof. Beth Woodward
Depictions of Damnation in the Beatus Manuscripts: Painting Adoptionism as Heresy

Early scholarship on the Beatus manuscripts can best be classified as orientalist. Believed\(^1\) to be created first\(^2\) in medieval Spain by Beatus of Liébana, a monk at the Abbey of Santo Toribio, the Beatus manuscript (also *Commentary on the Apocalypse* or *Apocalypse Commentary*) is an illuminated manuscript comprised of biblical texts which are correspondingly presented with explanatory excerpts taken from respected exegetes such as Jerome, Augustine, and Irenaeus.\(^{3}\) What has confounded scholars interested in the Beatus manuscripts is the Arabicized appearance of some of the illustrations.\(^4\) The seeming discrepancy between the Christian authorship of these texts and the non-Latin-Christian characteristics of the illustrations is not unfounded, as a large portion of Spain during the time when these manuscripts were being created was under the rule of the Islamic Umayyad Dynasty.\(^5\) However, this association was problematic in early art historical approaches to the Beatus manuscripts, as scholars in the early twentieth century assumed that these manuscripts originated in al-Andalus (Muslim-occupied Spain) based on reductive orientalist analyses of the illustrations within the manuscripts. Since these scholars felt that

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\(^1\) See John Williams, *The Illustrated Beatus: A Corpus of the Illustrations of the Commentary on the Apocalypse*, vol. 1 (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1994), 13. Beatus is not named in these manuscripts, but scholars have taken the contents of the dedication as well as similarities between the *Apocalypse Commentary* and the later manuscript by Beatus, *Adversus Elipandum*, to be indications that Beatus was the original author.

\(^2\) See Kenneth B. Steinhauser, “Narrative and Illumination in the Beatus Apocalypse,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (1995): 185. There are thirty-two surviving copies of the Beatus manuscript. The original is lost, if not destroyed.


the Beatus images were less refined than the later Christian Romanesque art forms, they concluded that the manuscripts must have been created by Mozarabs (Christians living in al-Andalus) who had been influenced by the purportedly less sophisticated artistic culture of the Muslims who ruled over them. Later scholars have shown this assumed origin to be false. Although copies of the original Beatus manuscript were created in different places throughout Spain, Beatus would have written the original at his abbey in Liébana, which is located near Cangas de Onís—well outside of the territory of al-Andalus (map 1).

While we cannot know for sure to what extent the original Beatus manuscript incorporated Islamic artistic styles, the question remains as to why the later copyists of the Apocalypse Commentary incorporated these so extensively into their illustrations. In this paper, I will discuss the problematic classification of the Beatus manuscripts as Mozarabic, explore some of the attempts that previous scholars have made to explain the presence of Islamic artistic forms in these Christian manuscripts, and offer some conclusions of my own on why Beatus copyists incorporated these styles. Ultimately, I aim to show that the reasoning for this artistic choice was threefold. First, medieval Christian art was heavily based on precedent, so a copyist might incorporate Islamic artistic styles into their version of the Beatus manuscript because an earlier copyist did so. Second, especially as medieval Christian art shifted from public sphere to that of private devotional practice, artists would create images that were personalized to their viewer. This was intended to increase the

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6 Hilsdale, 272–75.
7 Ibid, 273.
8 Most of these copyists are anonymous. As such, I may substitute Beatus’s name to designate the autonomous artist making specific decisions in the manuscripts.
didactic impact of the art on the viewer.\(^9\) Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the Beatus copyists may have adopted Islamic artistic styles to achieve a similar effect. Finally, in some manuscripts, scenes depicting damnation, such as the burning of Babylon, have especially strong parallels to Islamic architecture and culture. Following from scholarship demonstrating Beatus’s anti-adoptionistic views, I argue that these scenes can be cautiously interpreted as a similar critique on both Muslims and the Spanish Christians who accepted adoptionist beliefs—condemning these heretics to damnation.

The publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978 marked a shift in post-Enlightenment scholarly thinking toward non-Western cultures.\(^10\) Contributing to what Tijana Krstić has termed “post-Orientalist literature,”\(^11\) Cecily Hilsdale published an article in 1999 titled “Towards a Social History of Art: Defining ‘Mozarabic’.”\(^12\) In it, she points out the problems of using the term Mozarabic in relation to Spanish art. Her primary concerns are, first, that early art historians used the term ambiguously. She specifically criticizes one of these scholars, Meyer Schapiro, for applying Mozarabic to the Beatus manuscripts and other works without being explicit in qualifying his use of the term. Hilsdale observes that Schapiro’s only definition of Mozarabic appears in note 34 to his essay “From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos” (1939), where he explains that he uses Mozarabic to “designate the pre-Romanesque Christian arts and culture of León, Castille [sic], and the South of Spain after the

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\(^12\) Original spelling retained.
Moorish invasion, and works produced outside these regions but showing the qualities or types of the later.” However, the lack of clarity caused by Schapiro’s placement of this definition, in association with the reductive usage of the term by his contemporaries makes it problematic. Mozarab is a term that emerged out of the culture of al-Andalus to describe Spanish Christians living under Umayyad rule, and therefore has cultural associations that cannot be clearly removed when the term is ambiguously placed in the alternate context of art history. Second, Hilsdale complains that early use of the term was pejorative because art classified as Mozarabic was only formally studied in comparison to more refined styles, like the slightly later Romanesque. While Mozarabic has become a more neutral word used simply to refer to a specific style of art, the question of what that style of art is, or what works should be categorized as Mozarabic, remains. Hilsdale identifies “chromatic brilliance and non-illusionistic space” as primary qualities of Mozarabic art. However, we will see later in this essay that these attributes are not present in all versions of the Beatus manuscripts. For example, Hilsdale’s “chromatic brilliance” is missing from the Liébana Apocalypse (fig. 7), which is especially evident when compared with the Morgan (fig. 19) and Las Huelgas (fig. 8) Apocalypses. Though the term Mozarabic remains problematic and its usage is in need of further attention, I will use it out of necessity in this essay to describe the Beatus manuscripts.

15 For example, Schapiro contrasts Mozarabic art with the slightly later Romanesque, describing the former with terms like “immobilized,” “detached,” and “simpler” than the “richly juxtaposed” style of Romanesque art. Meyer Schapiro, “From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos,” in Romanesque Art: Selected Papers (New York: George Braziller, 1993), 31–4.
16 Hilsdale, 272.
In light of the apparent discrepancy between the Islamic qualities of the Beatus illustrations and scholarship indicating that the Beatus manuscripts did not, as previously assumed, originate in al-Andalus, many recent scholars have attempted to explain the presence of these outwardly Arabicized images. Kenneth Steinhauser in his article “Narrative and Illumination in the Beatus Apocalypse” (1995) reads the Morgan and Girona Beatus manuscripts in tandem with a manuscript Beatus co-authored called *Adversus Elipandum*. Beatus wrote *Adversus Elipandum* to criticize the Archbishop of Toledo, Elipandus, for supporting adoptionism. Adoptionism was a sect of Christianity that emerged out of al-Andalus which contended that Jesus was the adopted son of God, not God’s actual son. This teaching was developed as a political move to reconcile some of the differences between the theologies of the Christians in al-Andalus and the Muslims who ruled over them. Steinhauser delineates Beatus’s argument for comparing Elipandus to the Antichrist:

> When describing Jesus as the son of God, Beatus insists: *Non est allegoria*. With rather facile logic, he presents his argument to demonstrate that Elipandus is the antichrist. Elipandus believes that Christ is merely the adopted son of God. The adopted son is not the real son. Elipandus denies that Christ is the real son of God. “But also the antichrist is he who denies that Jesus Christ is God.”

It was not uncommon for medieval Christian artists to make political statements like these through their art. For example, an inscription for the block-book Apocalypse 13 identifies some of the martyrs and beasts depicted as contemporary historical figures. Similar to

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17 Steinhauser, 186.
19 Steinhauser, 199–200.
Steinhauser’s correlation of the Beatus manuscripts to Beatus’s *Adversus Elipandum*, Ambrosio de Morales also observed that Beatus’s *Commentary on the Apocalypse* was dedicated to the Bishop of Osma, Etherius, who endorsed Beatus’s position against adoptionism. With these associations in mind, it is fair to approach the Islamic illustrations in the Beatus manuscripts as a possible critique on adoptionism.

The architecture depicted in certain Beatus illustrations is the most striking as having Islamic qualities. As a point of reference, we can look at the Great Mosque of Córdoba, which is one of the most culturally significant Islamic monuments from the medieval period. Prior to the building of the Córdoba mosque (first renovation completed 786–87 CE), the Umayyads living in al-Andalus were a minority population with no formal worship space of their own. The Great Mosque of Córdoba as it stands today reflects a unique compilation of traditional Syrian architecture and Spanish Visigothic architecture. The façade of the Córdoba mosque (fig. 1) shows several distinct architectural forms that should be noted. At the top of the building, you will see that the merlons (raised sections) of the crenellation are trapezoidal in shape (fig. 2). This is distinct from Latin Christian crenellations, which typically have quadrilateral merlons. Directly above the doorway, you will see a blind arcade,

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22 The Córdoba mosque underwent several expansions in the following centuries. While modern photos do not capture the image of the Córdoba mosque as it stood in the eighth century, it still serves as a unique and important representation of Umayyad identity.
24 Prior to the arrival of the Umayyads in the eighth century, Spain was under the rule of the Visigoths, a Germanic Christian kingdom. Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain* (London: V&A Publishing, 2010), 16.
a series of decorative arches formed out of a shallow indentation in the wall, which comprises of five overlapping horseshoe arches (fig. 3). To the left and right of the door, there are also cinqfoil (five-lobed) blind arches (fig. 4). Another important architectural feature of any mosque is the minaret, which is the tower from which the call to prayer is made (fig. 5). The minaret is the tallest point on the Great Mosque of Córdoba. Finally, what is recognized as a hallmark of Islamic architecture is the horseshoe arch doorway (fig. 6). It is the horseshoe arch that is both revealing and problematic in our analysis of the Beatus manuscripts. Since the horseshoe arch is so distinct, it is the feature that scholars often point to as indicating Islamic influence. However, it is important to note that the horseshoe arch is also characteristic of Visigothic architecture, thus complicating a viewer’s assumptions about which culture a copyist may have been representing in their Beatus manuscript.

The architectural forms seen at the Córdoba mosque are modeled in depictions of the burning of Babylon in, for example, the Liébana Apocalypse (fig. 7) and the Las Huelgas Apocalypse (fig. 8). The Liébana Babylon closely resembles the Córdoba mosque with its large, pale brick; horseshoe arches; and stretching minaret-like towers. The Las Huelgas Babylon reflects Islamic architecture in different ways. Like the Liébana Babylon, the Las Huelgas features tall towers with roofs that round into a tip. The horseshoe arches are here less obvious but are suggested with the placement of the capitals (decorative dividers separating, in this case, the columns from the arch) within the arch. Additionally, the walls of Babylon in the Las Huelgas illustration are richly embellished with engravings, which are

27 Glossary of Medieval Art and Architecture, s.v. “blind arcade.”
30 Glossary of Medieval Art and Architecture, s.v. “capital.”
similarly seen on the façade of the Córdoba mosque. The story of Babylon and its implications would have been well-known to a Christian readership (Mozarab or not). Visually, these illustrations from the Beatus differ from other medieval Christian images depicting damnation.

Damnation scenes like that of the Last Judgment Tympanum at Conques (fig. 9) depict a contrast between the saved and the damned. The Conques Tympanum shows Christ at the center. To Christ’s right, the saved souls file in an orderly fashion through the gates of Heaven. On his left, the damned exist in chaos. The contrast between order and disorder is amplified in the symmetrical construction of the image. The takeaway here is that artists in the medieval period often used chaos in order to represent the fate of the damned. We see this principle modeled in the unfinished image of Babylon in the English *Douce Apocalypse* (fig. 10). Even the destroyed Babylon in this image is telling. Here, you will find the quadrilateral crenellation that is characteristic of Latin Christian building, as well as the tall cone-shaped spires that became especially popular in Gothic architecture. These styles resemble, for example, the Church of St. Pierre in Aulnay, France (fig. 11).

Outside of the context of a region like al-Andalus where there were active concerns toward a specific heresy—both the Umayyad Muslims and the adoptionist Christians—using architecture to convey a political critique was unlikely. Thus the *Douce Apocalypse* serves for us as a point of comparison for a more traditional Latin Christian style of architecture, as well as an alternate manner of showing damnation. Babylon in the Beatus manuscripts remains standing for the specific illustrative purpose of clearly showing the city’s features.

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31 Babylon was later used for a different kind of political critique toward women as images of Babylon in illuminated manuscripts shifted from depicting the city to emphasizing the Whore of Babylon. See Wright, 199.
Whereas in the *Douce Apocalypse* the point of the image of Babylon is to show the nondescript city destroyed for its many nonspecific sins, in the Beatus manuscripts, the purpose of showing Babylon burning, but still standing, is to represent the clearly identifiable city being destroyed for the sins of heresy and Islamic associations.

In addition to images of Babylon, there are several other images from the Beatus manuscripts where Islamic architecture is modeled. For example, a detail from the Liébana Apocalypse (fig. 12) closely resembles a mosque in Toledo (fig. 13) which had been built nearly two hundred years prior to the creation of this particular *Apocalypse Commentary*. Most distinctive here is the overlapping horseshoe arch. A variation on this architectural design was also on the façade of the Córdoba mosque (fig. 3) and is a regular feature of Islamic architecture.32

More interesting than minor congruencies like this one, however, are images where the possible implications of a copyist’s use of Islamic styles are varied. For example, compare the illustration of St. John at the gate of the Roman-pagan city Ephesus in the Silos Beatus (fig. 14) to the mihrab33 in the Córdoba mosque (fig. 15). There are several striking parallels between these two works. In addition to the central horseshoe arch, which in both the Silos illustration and the mihrab includes supporting columns that are independent of the rest of the wall, both works incorporate a blend of floral and geometric forms for the intricate and abundant surface designs. Additionally, the towers in the Silos illustration are inlaid with a cinqfoil detail (fig. 16). These can be compared to the trefoil blind arcade (fig. 17) at the top

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33 The mihrab is a decorative niche in the wall of a mosque closest to Mecca. It indicates the direction the congregation should face during prayer. See Doğan Kuban, *Muslim Religious Architecture* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 3.
of the mihrab. The trefoil and the cinqfoil are framed by striped rays\textsuperscript{34} and lead into a floral design. In contrast, none of these features are present on the historical gate of Ephesus (fig. 18). This gate, which has three entrances (as opposed to one, as in the Silos illustration), is notably lacking in any surface decoration, and is overall stylistically more utilitarian than the gate depicted in the Silos Beatus or the Córdoba mihrab.

It is possible that the copyist who illustrated the Silos Beatus did not know what Ephesus looked like, and therefore had to draw from more familiar architecture. Leaving this possibility aside, however, we can interpret the similarities between the Silos Ephesus and the Córdoba mihrab in a number of interesting ways. Ephesus was one of several Roman-pagan cities that St. John shared the Revelation with, “encouraging Christians [living there] to remain faithful in the face of potent opposition and \textit{warning against any relapse into various heresies},” (my emphasis).\textsuperscript{35} Thus in this image, we may have St. John entering a mimetic al-Andalus, reminding the Christians there of the coming Final Judgment through the \textit{Commentary on the Apocalypse}, which explicitly explains the meaning of the Revelation John preached at Ephesus.

Still, these similarities should not go unquestioned. Jerrilynn Dodds has convincingly drawn parallels between the culture of al-Andalus and two images from the Morgan Beatus, which is known to have been created by the artist Maius.\textsuperscript{36} One of the pages Dodds discusses is the already-familiar destruction of Babylon (fig. 19). She notes the floral and geometric patterns decorating the city, as well as the presence of numerous artifacts, like vases, within

\textsuperscript{34} The striped cinqfoil is also on the façade of the Great Mosque of Córdoba (fig. 4).
the horseshoe arches. She ties the artifacts to the rich material culture of al-Andalus in order to solidify Babylon’s connection in this illustration to the Umayyads.\textsuperscript{37} The more striking illustration she discusses is an illustration from the Book of Daniel depicting the Feast of Belshazzar (fig. 20).\textsuperscript{38} The story of Belshazzar is one of many cautionary tales in the Old Testament in which a ruler or kingdom is destroyed for being impious.\textsuperscript{39} Dodds, following from other scholars, compares Maius’s depiction of the Feast of Belshazzar to the polychromatic arches on the interior of the Great Mosque of Córdoba (fig. 21).\textsuperscript{40} Based on this comparison, she claims that “Maius was able to make this political point through a representation of architecture: he and his audience understood that polychrome masonry distinguished this horseshoe arch—\textit{from all the others in the manuscript}—as Islamic,” (my emphasis).\textsuperscript{41} The problem here is that Dodds specifically isolates the Belshazzar horseshoe arch as Islamic due to its red and white stripes, yet she uses the horseshoe arches on the image of Babylon to characterize that illustration as having anti-Islamic political undertones as well. This would not be problematic if not for the fact that the Morgan Beatus is rife with horseshoe arches, even on images that do not suggest damnation. In fact, Maius’s illustration of Heavenly Jerusalem (fig. 22), which is soteriological in meaning, also shares some characteristic features of Islamic architecture, including the distinctive horseshoe arch and the trapezoidal crenellation seen on the Córdoba mosque (fig. 2). Dodds’s treatment of the images of Babylon and the Feast of Belshazzar as being unique in their political critique of

\textsuperscript{37} Dodds, “The Problem of Religious Art,” 30.
\textsuperscript{38} Dodds, “The Problem of Religious Art,” 29.
\textsuperscript{39} See Daniel 5.
\textsuperscript{40} Dodds, “The Problem of Religious Art,” 29.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 30.
Islam suggests that she is willfully ignoring evidence that contradicts her argument. It is possible that the horseshoe arches on soteriological scenes were intended to reflect Visigothic, rather than Andalusian, horseshoe arches. However, I do not think it is possible to objectively characterize horseshoe arches in one illustration as Islamic and horseshoe arches in another as Visigothic. Given the nuanced complication of Islamic versus Visigothic horseshoe arches, it necessary to be cautious when using architectural imagery in the Beatus manuscripts to make any claims about Beatus’s (or one of his copyist’s) political intentions in using architecture in illustrations.

At the same time, the parallels cannot be ignored. Luther Link and O. K. Werckmeister have turned to specific figures in the Beatus manuscripts to indicate how Beatus copyists Arabicized characters to depict certain meanings. Werckmeister analyzes a singularly unique figure that appears only in the Girona Beatus (fig. 23). Werckmeister discusses the Islamic costuming of the figure, including the horse’s equipment and the rider’s garment—specifically the headscarf. Werckmeister ultimately concludes that the rider shown here represents “Herod, persecutor of martyrs, in Muslim attire, that is, as a Biblical allegory of Muslim oppression as perceived by the militant ninth-century community of Córdoba.” Link also briefly mentions the Whore of Babylon from the Morgan Beatus (fig. 24). The Great Whore, who is often represented as a guardian of the city of Babylon, is widely associated with the Devil’s workings. Link points out the crescent on her crown and the fact that she

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42 As noted previously, Visigothic architecture was also characterized by horseshoe arches. Stalley, 32.
44 Ibid.
45 Werckmeister, 105.
46 Wright, 191–92.
is seated on a Muslim divan, as opposed to a throne.\textsuperscript{47} In contrast, Christ is pictured seated on a throne multiple times throughout the manuscript (fig. 25). This dissimilarity makes the Muslim characterization of the Whore of Babylon more likely to be a political critique than an assimilation of familiar cultures. The examples given by Werckmeister and Link are unmistakable as social commentaries toward al-Andalus, and Beatus’s anti-adoptionist stance as discussed above makes it likely that such commentaries are directed with didactic intentions toward Christians in al-Andalus, who would have been reading these manuscripts.

Thus, the presence of Islamic architectural and cultural themes in the Beatus manuscripts can be attributed to three things. First, while Beatus created this manuscript in a monastery in Liébana, which never directly experienced Islamic occupation, Arab presence in Spain was highly influential, even outside of al-Andalus. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to see influences of Islamic art and architecture in a Christian manuscript, especially if a copyist included them based on the precedent set by an earlier artist. Second, the purpose of Christian art (especially that of the medieval period) is didactic. Accordingly, artists often created images that viewers would be able to visually identify with. (This is evident especially in the later medieval period, when art shifted from the public sphere to that of private devotional practice.) Beatus and later copyists may have treated the \textit{Commentary on the Apocalypse} similarly, incorporating Islamic architectural forms in order to make the setting more familiar to the viewer. Finally, Islamic forms are most prominent in illustrations in the Beatus manuscripts that depict damnation (notably Babylon). While the precedent of Visigothic architecture and the use of seemingly Islamic styles on soteriological scenes

complicates a political analysis of the Beatus illustrations, evidence toward Beatus's prejudice against adoptionism makes it possible to interpret the Islamic themes in damnation illustrations in Beatus manuscripts, generally, as a warning against heresy, and specifically as a critique on adoptionism.
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Depictions of Damnation in the Beatus Manuscripts


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Fig. 25. Maius. Last Judgment and Resurrection. Morgan Beatus, 940–945 CE, Spain. Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.644, fol. 219v.