

Short Article

A MEDIEVAL SCULPTURE OF LEPROSY IN THE CISTERCIAN ABBAYE DE CADOUIN

by

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ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT

The Abbaye de Cadouin belonged to the Cistercian order, and is situated in the Dordogne Valley, twenty miles or so east of Bergerac, to the south of the River Dordogne, near its junction with the River Vézère. It was founded in 1115 by Géraud de Sales, and in 1117 a small group commenced the building of the church. In 1119 the monastic community became affiliated to Cîteaux, and in 1145 the church was consecrated. The monastic buildings were ruined during the Hundred Years War, but during the fifteenth century a general restoration took place. A new cloister was constructed in flamboyant Gothic style, with a profusion of fine sculptures around its walls.

In the east gallery of the cloister there is, on a late fifteenth-century pillar, a carving of the parable of Lazarus (Plate 1). Its total height from base to the crenellations is 59 cm. The carving is of a bearded rich man seated and flanked on his right by a female figure, and on his left by a standing figure of Lazarus, 40 cm in height. The three figures are portrayed outside a corbelled and crenellated round or apsidal building. Between the rich man and Lazarus there is a square window in the building with a face looking out (Plate 2). The rich man, holding a bowl in his left hand, is seated at a draped table, under which is a dog. Although now lost, the head of the dog, when carved, would have extended to the left foot of Lazarus, who wears a tunic and cloak, and a close-fitting bonnet and hat. In his left hand he carries a small barrel, and in his right a clapper, which is held forward in the position of use. His left leg is covered by a rumpled toeless stocking or, more likely in view of the disease portrayed, a wound bandage extending from the mid-foot to beneath the tunic.

CLINICAL FEATURES OF THE LAZARUS FIGURE

There are several physical signs of disease portrayed in the Lazarus figure:

Face (Plate 3): The nasal profile indicates that the bridge of the nose was collapsed. There appears to be some central infranasal depression of the upper jaw. There are regular small circular nodules above the left eyebrow and on the left cheek. There is a crescentic everted depression of both lower eyelids, most marked on the right.

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Plate 1: Sculpture of the parable of Lazarus



Plate 2: Sculpture showing the square window with a figure looking out, and Lazarus holding a clapper in his right hand.



Plate 3: Sculpture of Lazarus. (1) Collapse of the bridge of the nose. (2) Lepromatous nodule on the forehead.



Plate 4: (1) Swollen foot with clawed toes.

A medieval sculpture of leprosy

Foot (Plate 4): The right lower limb is not carved because it is incorporated into the substance of the pillar. The left foot, which protrudes beyond the leg covering, is swollen and the toes are clawed in flexion.

DIAGNOSIS

Even in the absence of iconographic association and the portrayed leper clapper, these clinical signs are almost pathognomonic of lepromatous leprosy. The facial nodules represent lepromas, and the lower eyelid deformity is indicative of lagophthalmos. The nasal deformity and the depression of the infranasal zone are compatible with *facies leprosa* and an underlying rhinomaxillary bone syndrome. The clawed toes indicate extensor muscle paralysis consequent upon leprosy motor neuropathy. The swollen foot is suggestive of deep tissue sepsis, and the bandage probably indicates ulceration and ascending infection into the lower leg. Thus Lazarus is portrayed as a man suffering from advanced lepromatous or near-lepromatous leprosy.

ICONOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Until the sixteenth century the clinical manifestations of leprosy sufferers in medieval paintings are almost solely dermatological, and as pathognomonic diagnostic features are vague.¹ The anatomical distribution and the pigmentation characteristics of the skin lesions are, in most instances, inaccurate. Frequently it is the religious context of the painting which suggests that leprosy is portrayed, yet as is well known, the relationship between clinical leprosy and Biblical leprosy is doubtful.²

It was the early Renaissance artists who first portrayed the peripheral deformities of limbs and face in leprosy.³ Although medieval and later paintings of leprosy are numerous,⁴ sufferers of leprosy have rarely been represented in sculpture. A figurine included in the fifteenth-century sculpture of St Elizabeth of Hungary in the Chapel of Châteaudun in France has been considered leprosy, but several researchers doubt the diagnosis.⁵ A majolica discovered in Seville in an old cloister that served as a leprosarium depicts a sufferer with a crutch and carrying a clapper. A statue of the “roi lepreux” in Angkor, Cambodia, previously considered a portrayal of leprosy, is little more than a figurine damaged “through the ravages of time”.⁶ The “Leper Terra-Cotta” of Athens described by Hoggan⁷ depicts a huddled figure suggesting the ostracism and dejection associated with leprosy, but there are no physical signs of the disease here portrayed. The

¹ K. Gron, ‘Leprosy in literature and art’, *Int. J. Leprosy*, 1973, **441** (2): 249–83.

² S. G. Browne, *Leprosy in the Bible*, London Christian Medical Fellowship Publication, 1979; R. G. Cochrane, *Biblical leprosy. A suggested interpretation*, London, The Tyndale Press, 1961; N. L. Davies and T. A. Davies, ‘Biblical leprosy: a comedy of errors’, *J. R. Soc. Med.*, 1898, pp. 622–3; E. V. Hulse, ‘The nature of Biblical “leprosy” and the use of alternative medical terms in modern translations of the Bible’, *Med. Hist.*, 1976, **20**: 203.

³ E. Hollander, *Die Medizin in der klassischen Malerei*, Stuttgart, F. Enke, 1913.

⁴ Gron, *op. cit.*, note 1 above; A. Martin, ‘The representation of leprosy and of lepers in minor art, particularly in Germany’, *The urological and cutaneous Review*, 1921, 445–53; O. K. Skinsnes, ‘Travelogue of leprosy related art’, *Int. J. Leprosy*, 1972, **40** (4): 414–16; J. H. Wolf, *Aussatz Lepra Hansen-Krankheit*, Teil II Aufsätze, Verlegt von Deutschen Aussätzigen-Hilfswert e. v. Würzburg, 1986, p. 251.

⁵ Wolf, *ibid.*; Skinsnes, *ibid.*; Gron, *op. cit.*, note 1 above.

⁶ Gron, *ibid.*

⁷ F. E. Hoggan, ‘The Leper Terra-Cotta of Athens’, *J. Hellenistic Stud.*, 1892, **13**: 101–3.

Canaanite jar from Beth-Shan described as a representation of leprosy⁸ is not now considered to be so.

Only one sculpture of the medieval period illustrating the clinical features of leprosy, a carved head with the *facies leprosa*, has been described in the literature.⁹ The present carving of Lazarus from Cadouin shows a full-length individual with several of the cardinal and pathognomonic clinical signs of lepromatous leprosy. It is suggested, therefore, that the sculptor must have been personally familiar with sufferers of the disease in its advanced stages, and must have been acutely aware of the less obvious features such as lagophthalmos. Indeed, the sculpture may represent an actual individual sufferer of the disease. As the only recorded specimen displaying the peripheral limb and facial features of advanced lepromatous leprosy within the Biblical context of the parable of Lazarus, it is one of the most significant, clinically accurate, and best preserved objects in the art history of leprosy.

⁸ M. Yoeli, 'A "facies leontina" of leprosy on an ancient Canaanite jar', *J. Hist. Med.*, 1955, **10**: 331–3.

⁹ D. Marcombe and K. Manchester, 'The Melton Mowbray "leper head": an historical and medical investigation', *Med. Hist.*, 1990, **34**: 86–91.