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Depictions of the Arch in Medieval Books of Hours: Historic and Symbolic Origins

Caitlyn Au

The illuminated miniature of the Annunciation and its accompanying text from the Portland State University Book of Hours are framed by a golden arch (Fig. 4). The use of precious gold leaf indicates the relative importance of the arch frame to the composition, and possibly its symbolic significance. In the background of the miniature, an arched doorway and window are the main compositional elements. If you look closely, you will see that the illuminator has not depicted the wedge-shaped bricks, or voussoirs, needed to form arched structures. Instead, the doorway and window are simply cut out of the stylized brick of the wall. That the symbolic presence of the portal was made known seems to have been more important to the illuminator than its naturalistic depiction, as the arch could not have stood without voussoirs.

Depictions of the architectural arch are ubiquitous in illuminated Books of Hours, as pictorial elements as well as framing devices. In the PSU Book of Hours, three of the four large miniatures are set in an interior that includes arched windows and doors (Figs. 4, 5, and 13). Even in the fourth large miniature, which depicts an outdoors scene, an arch portal is shown in a building in the background (Fig. 7). Despite the minimal compositional scheme of the PSU Book of Hours, the relatively plain buildings are never depicted without some kind of portal or niche. That this holds true even when the image is crudely drawn or almost devoid of architectural detail is an indicator of the arch's prominence in the visual vocabulary of the time. The arch as pictorial frame is equally common, used to frame codices, calendars and tables as well as texts and miniature paintings. Why should this be the case, and why does the arch appear so frequently in religious Books of Hours?

The arch has a long and diffuse history. Ancient yet pervasive, early use of the arch as a sacred symbol can be traced over millennia. In the ancient Near East, around 2500 BC, Assyrian places of worship followed the layout of the common dwelling. The figure of the god was sheltered in its own house inside the temple--an arched recess, or niche, set directly across from the main entrance.¹ The religious icon literally had a house-within-a-house, for which the arch shape was an appropriate symbol, with its two vertical sides and upper roof.

Many examples of niches in religious architecture can be found in various traditions. The Bamiyan Buddhas, countless Islamic mihrab, and the niches of the Roman Pantheon are among the most memorable. Etruscan tombs, the most elaborate of which date from the 6th century BC, were underground houses built to resemble their

¹ Gunter Bandmann, *Early Medieval Architecture as Bearer of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 140

aboveground counterparts, and the tombs of royalty and nobility were copies of palaces.² This elaborate tomb-dwelling was signified by arched niche-tombs, both hollow and solid, for the common people.

The recessed, arched niche persisted as a popular way to display religious sculpture in the Roman Empire. The Roman house of the gods, however, ceased following conventions of domestic architecture.³ That way of thinking was no longer in the architectural vocabulary, and the Roman temple had largely cast off its connections to the home. The only vestiges of this earlier reality can be seen in surface elements that evolved from originally structural forms, such as the pediment.⁴ Despite this, the recessed niche retained its particular function.

Civic Roman architecture, on the other hand, was highly secularized and was primarily meant to reflect the glory of the state, so we see two divergent symbolic meanings for the arch. In addition to the use of the arched niche as a dwelling for religious statuary, the triumphal arch was loaded with meanings of a different kind. Built to memorialize Roman leaders, the triumphal arch was a potent symbol of the power of the empire.

The argument has been made that medieval illuminators imbued their religious images with symbolic connotations of glory and importance by emulating the Roman triumphal arch.⁵ Saints were honored by being enshrined under pictorial renditions of these arch monuments.⁶ It is no surprise that Medieval imagery was heavily influenced by the art and architecture of the Roman Empire, but I am inclined to think that there was a more complex explanation for the arch's ubiquity. Although a reasonable argument, this idea of conferring importance shouldn't be taken alone, or at face value.

Gunter Bandmann argues that God was thought to exist in every construction that accurately expressed the divine order. Every element in Gothic religious architecture was meant to not only reflect the symbolic order but to become a physical manifestation of the Kingdom of Heaven. The complex arrangements of columns, arcades, and vaults were far from arbitrary; a grouping of twelve columns, for example, symbolized the twelve apostles.⁷

If we take the ecclesiastical structure as a realization of the Heavenly City, the arch takes on great significance. The arch, being the element that led to the development of the flying buttress, was the root of innovation in Gothic architecture, and literally held up

² Larissa Bonfante, *Etruscan Life and Afterlife* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 183; Frederick E. Winter, *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 204

³ Bandmann, *Early Medieval Architecture as Bearer of Meaning*, 66

⁴ *Ibid.*, 145

⁵ Christine Sciacca, *Building the Medieval World* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010), 76

⁶ *Ibid.*, 78

⁷ Bandmann, *Early Medieval Architecture as Bearer of Meaning*, 62-66

the weight of the structure. In reference to the symbolic order, which linked the physical reality to the divine, the architectonic necessity of the arch made it a suitable location to place symbols of Christ himself. A carving of Christ was often depicted on the load-bearing central voussoir, or keystone, without which the arch could not function.⁸

It comes as no surprise that Medieval illuminators used the arch as stock imagery, given the ancient tradition of housing religious figures within niches and the arch's symbolic importance in contemporary architecture. It is likely that illuminators looked to holy architecture for reference, as it was a manifestation of the divine, resulting in the frequent appearance of the arch as both frame and background element in Books of Hours. It is also possible that the arch-frame draws influence from the tradition of the Byzantine ciborium, which was erected over sacred objects such as the altar. Ciboria evolved from the tent-like baldachin, which in turn originated in the prehistoric necessity of covering thrones and hearths.⁹ I would suggest that the ciborium does not separate the area beneath its canopy from the surrounding space as much as it covers and draws attention to it, thus having a quite different implication from the arched niche and free-standing arch, which provide a more sheltered enclosure.

The illuminations in PSU Book of Hours use the arch to frame sheltered, interior spaces that are separated from the surrounding page, which leads me to believe that arches depicted therein reflect the visual and symbolic traditions of the arch-niche rather than the baldachin-ciborium. The possible influence of the ciborium, however, should not be disregarded. This essay only begins to describe the intricate dialogue that likely unfolded between the niche, free-standing arch, stele, niche-tomb and ciborium. Further study is required to parse the complex dynamics and symbolic exchange between these forms, whose many manifestations have undergone a long evolution since ancient times.

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⁸ Ibid., 62

⁹ Ibid., 185