

SEDILIA ICONOGRAPHY

Some speculations by M W Tisdall

1. An older man, seated, right hand on a ball or sphere; he gazes upwards almost expectantly. I think this is ABRAHAM. The sphere in this case representing power and influence as was promised to Abraham and his seed for ever. The foliage is not specific.

2. Next, two ladies each seated on a tub chair or throne implying honour and seniority at the very least. I suspect that the left hand one of the two is Hagar, the handmaiden 'wife' given to Abraham when Sarah was barren. She produces Ishmael also called Israel in Douai bible. No particular foliage or attributes.

3. The next lady, slightly older and seated again on tub chair or throne is possibly Sarah. She who was barren until very late in life ultimately produces Isaac the next in line of the Patriarchs. Significantly at her feet are the seeds of White Bryony the northern European iconographic equivalent to Mandrake. Mandrake features prominently in the Bible story of Rachel and Leah and their fertility problems and I think that the carvers have transported the idea back a few centuries to be used here.

4. Next two ladies (a) with hands under fold of her garment and at her feet more seeds of White Bryony. (b) with right hand across chest and at her feet acorns. One of these is Leah and the other Rachel. Leah's son Reuben is the one who finds the mandrake, a powerful aphrodisiac and fertility agent. Since Jacob has rather gone off Leah, whom he never loved in the first place, and who has hit the 'change' Leah wants to use them to get back some of Jacob's attentions. They work a charm. So I think that probably the left hand lady is Leah. The right hand lady should therefore be Rachel. She is certainly prettier and less haughty. At her feet are acorns. She is taken pity on by the Lord, rather like Sarah, and produces Joseph. Joseph goes on to save his people. He is cast into a well; he is ransomed for silver and in general he is seen as an Old Testament Type of Christ. Although Mandrake features in her story, the mighty oak is a better lasting image of the power of God.

5. Next a lady half lying with a little figure approaching. The 'lying' lady is making a 'who me' gesture. I suspect that this is the Annunciation. Again an acorn at her feet. The other person is a man with a crutch and the little finger of his right hand half in his eye. This is a fairly classic way that Romanesque art uses to point out that to which one is supposed to be looking. So this should be Simeon and reference the Nunc Dimittis; "for mine eyes have seen thy salvation". He has his feet and staff resting on an Ox head, suggesting St Luke's gospel in which this episode occurs.

6. Next an Old Man in a cape. I find him the most difficult. I suggest Zacharias. He was the father of John the Baptist. No other attributes that I could see. It would be perfectly possible to swap the stories for these two men around and make this Simeon and the other Zacharias; but on balance I prefer it this way.

7. Finally Mary plus child plus a female attendant. I do not know who she is, maybe a midwife? There are maple seeds and maple leaves as attributes here and the next one which is the Flight into Egypt. At the end of the Flight into Egypt the exhausted family comes to a halt under a 'sycamore' tree and immediately a well of fresh water appears. For sycamore in N. European terms read Maple or even Plane. [The Egyptian sycamore is a fig of sorts]. There are endless carvings of maple in churches and one is led, or I think that one was supposed to be led, to think of all the benefits and associations of water in Biblical lore. It also became associated with 'good works' in Marian iconography.