

SAINTS COSMAS AND DAMIAN

- **Subject matter:** Cosmas and Damian were the patron saints of doctors, surgeons, pharmacists, and barbers. They were invoked against the plague, the swelling of glands, ringworms, kidney problems, stones, inflammation of the tummy, and child urinary incontinence¹. They were also the patron saints of hospitals and many brotherhoods were created under their auspice.
- **Keywords:** Saints, Medicine, Cosmas, Damian, Hagiography
- **Summary:** Cosmas and Damian were born in the 3rd century A.D.² They were twin brothers and, alongside their other three brothers, they lost their father at a very early age. Their mother, a woman with great Christian virtues, educated them in the Christian faith. Their legend tells us that both of them became doctors in Syria and they practiced this noble profession in Egea, Cilicia.³ In this area, they applied their medical knowledge to anybody that needed it, including animals, and with great skill they cured every type of illness. Regardless, when everything else failed, their faith in God helped them perform miracles. This gift attracted a great number of people that wanted to heal, being themselves Christians or not. In fact, many patients that were non-believers became Christians themselves after they were healed.⁴ Cosmas and Damian were devoted to their profession and they rejected any type of monetary gain for their services.⁵ The brothers lived during the time of the Roman emperor Diocletian (283-305), one of the most vicious persecutors of Christians. In this time period, Lysias, the governor of Egea, was under strict orders from Diocletian to neutralize the Christians. The fame and reputation that surrounded the twin brothers could not be overlooked by the governor who asked them to present themselves to him alongside their other three brothers, Antimus, Leoncius and Euprepus. Following the Edict against Christians decreed by Diocletian, Lysias gave them the option to apostate or to die. Nevertheless, under the pretence to force them to reject their faith, all the brothers were subjected to all kinds of tortures, moral and physical. But neither the attempts to drown the brothers, nor burn them, nor tore them apart, nor crucify them or lapidate them had any effect since an angel always came to help them. In the end, they were decapitated. Nevertheless, even after their death they performed miracles, counting among the most famous ones the presence of a camel in their funeral to tell the people how they were supposed to be buried, or the transplant of a leg.
- **Attributes and types of representation:** One of the first representations that have survived of the saints Cosmas and Damian show the brothers with the crown of their martyrdom without any other attribute. Regardless, many medieval representations of these saints present them as practitioners of the art of medicine. As such, they were represented with the attributes that are representative of their profession. For example, in some instances they are represented holding a bowl that contains medicines, tubes, or

¹ Louis Réau (1997), *Iconografía del arte cristiano, Tomo I*. Ediciones del Serbal, Barcelona, p. 342.

² Santiago de la Vorágine (2004), *La Leyenda Dorada*, vol. 2. Alianza Forma, Madrid, pp. 615-618.

³ Julia López Campuzano (1996), "Iconografía de los Santos Sanadores (II): San Cosmas y Damián." *Anales de la Historia del Arte*, nº 6, pp. 255-266 p. 255.

⁴ Réau (1997), *Iconografía del arte cristiano*, p. 337.

⁵ *Ibid.*

surgical instruments.⁶ In other cases, they are holding a glass jar, filled with a patient's urine to analyze the color and the sediments. Moreover, they were also represented with a spatula, since this instrument was used to mix and apply medicines. Other attributes are a leather bag, an arrow, and a glass container.⁷ Their clothing could varied depending on whether they are presented as living in Roman times, with a tunic and *pallium*, or as contemporaries of the artists that were representing them.⁸ Sometimes they were depicted with a lined tunic or with cylindrical caps (an ancient way to impress patients).⁹ There is another way in which Cosmas and Damian were represented that was related to votive or devotional images that had a prophylactic or protective character against illnesses.¹⁰ In these images, the twin brothers usually appear next to the Virgin Mary, the baby Jesus and other saints that were also considered to be doctors or healers such as Saint Roque, Saint Sebastian, or Saint Panthaleon. This group becomes a “sacred conversation,” that is the representation of several saints that lived in different time periods but that are depicted together surrounding the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus.

- **Primary sources:** The main sources that tells us the life of the saints Cosmas and Damien appear in the following texts:
 - Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, vol. 2 (Madrid: Alianza Forma, 2004), pp. 615-618. (Link in PDF).
 - Procopius of Cesarea, *De Aedificis, Libro I* (Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1940): “At the far end of the bay, on the ground which rises steeply in a sharp slope, stands a sanctuary dedicated from ancient times to Saints Cosmas and Damian. When the Emperor himself once lay seriously ill, giving the appearance of being actually dead (in fact he had been given up by the physicians as being already numbered among the dead), these Saints came to him here in a vision, and saved him unexpectedly and contrary to all human reason and raised him up. In gratitude he gave them such requital as a mortal may, by changing entirely and remodelling the earlier building, which was unsightly and ignoble and not worthy to be dedicated to such powerful Saints, and he beautified and enlarged the church and flooded it with brilliant light and added many other things which it had not before. So when any persons find themselves assailed by illnesses which are beyond the control of physicians, in despair of human assistance they take refuge in the one hope left to them, and getting on flat-boats they are carried up the bay to this very church. And as they enter its mouth they straightway see the shrine as on an acropolis, priding itself in the gratitude of the Emperor and permitting them to enjoy the hope which the shrine affords.”
 - Gregory of Tours, *De gloria martyrium*, edited by R. Van Dam (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press) writes: “The twin brothers Cosmas and Damian, doctors by profession, after becoming Christians, frightened away all the illnesses by the sole

⁶ It is important to point out that the saints Cosmas and Damian were not only the patron saints of doctors, they were also the patrón saints of other brotherhoods and professional guilds such as the pharmacists, barbers, hairdressers, etc., and their attributes were also given to the Saints Cosmas and Damian. See López Campuzano, “Iconografía de los Santos Sanadores,” p. 258.

⁷ Ramón Jordi González (1973), *Iconografía de los Santos Cosmas y Damián*. Muy ilustre Colegio Oficial de Farmacéuticos de la provincia de Barcelona, Barcelona, pp. 7-8; Reáu (1997), *Iconografía del arte cristiano*, p. 342.

⁸ López Campuzano (1996), “Iconografía de los Santos Sanadores,” p. 258.

⁹ Reáu (1997), *Iconografía del arte cristiano*, p. 342.

¹⁰ López Campuzano (1996), “Iconografía de los Santos Sanadores,” p. 259.

merit of their virtues and the intervention of their prayers [...]. Crowned after their martyrdom, they met in Heaven and they still perform many miracles. Because, if any sick person seeks their help filled with faith and prays over their tomb, they are instantly healed. Many also mention that these saints appear to them in dreams telling them what they are supposed to do to get well, and after following their instructions they find themselves cured. Moreover, I have heard many other things that would be too long to tell here, but I believe that with what I have just said will suffice.”

- **Other sources, non-written sources:** In the liturgical calendar, the 27th of September is the day of the saints Cosmas and Damian. During this day, the priest usually prays for the sick making the gesture of the imposition of the hands. In the old Hispanic liturgy a prayer was recited: “¡Oh God, our doctor and eternal healer, that made Cosmas and Damian unshakable in their faith, invincible in their heroism, so that they could take good health in their martyrdom to human illnesses, may, thanks to the power that you have given them, cure our sickness, and that this sickness does not return once we have been healed.”¹¹
- **Geographical and chronological framework:** Saints Cosmas and Damian are two of the most popular saints of all Christian hagiography since their martyrdom in the 3rd century A.D. until our days. Their cult spread from the Byzantine Empire, under the patronage of Justinian and Theodosius II, to England passing through the entire European continent.¹² Their cult arrived to Rome in the 4th century, where a church was dedicated to them in the Forum.¹³ Later on, in Tuscany, these two saints became the patrons of the Medici family in Florence, since before they became bankers they were members of the medical and pharmaceutical guild.¹⁴ In France they became very popular in the 12th century, especially right after Jean de Beaumont brought with him the saints’ relics from Jerusalem.¹⁵ In addition, in Spain many monasteries and churches were dedicated to these two saints in Leon, Oviedo, Burgos and Valencia in the 9th century.¹⁶ It is said that saint Isidore of Seville, in the 7th century, placed two statues of the saints Cosmas and Damian in a prominent space in his pharmacy.¹⁷ Germany, especially Bremen and Bamberg, questioned the authenticity of the French relics since they claimed that it was them who had the real relics of these saints, which were later combined and placed in the church of Saint Michael in Munich.¹⁸ In Cologne there were also many monasteries dedicated to the twin brothers starting in the 9th century, especially in the abbeys of Essen, Renania, Liesborn, Westfalia, Kaufbeuren and Swabia.¹⁹ Their cult also spread to the Slavic countries, and even in Cracow a chapel was dedicated to them in the church of Our Lady. Their popularity justifies the abundant representations that have survived since the Middle Ages. It is interesting to point out that in the East they were usually represented in icons, while in the West more iconographical cycles of the life and work of Cosmas and Damian were depicted.

¹¹ Casimiro Sánchez Aliseda, “Santos Cosmas y Damián.” <http://www.mercaba.org/SANTORAL/Vida/09/09-26_S_Cosmas_Damian.htm> (Consulted on the 15th of January, 2010).

¹² Réau (1997), *Iconografía del arte cristiano*, pp. 340-341.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ López Campuzano (1996), “Iconografía de los Santos Sanadores,” pp. 257-258.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 257. López Campuzano quotes Fray Justo Pérez de Urbel as her source.

¹⁸ Réau (1997), *Iconografía del arte cristiano*, p. 341.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

- **Artistic media and techniques:** The iconography of the saints Cosmas and Damian appear in a wide variety of artistic manifestations: sculpture, painting, manuscript illumination, stained-glass and sumptuary objects.
- **Precedents, transformations, and projection:** According to Louis Réau, and quoting the mythologists Lucius and Deubner, the twin saints were not only equivalent to the Dioscurus, Castor and Polox, but their duplicates, which would explain their rapid popularity since they occupied the place left by the healing heroes from pagan mythology.²⁰ Even though this identification can be questionable, it is true that the Christian Church have used Cosmas and Damian as substitutes of the Dioscurus, and they even allowed from the 4th century onwards their veneration in temples dedicated to Aesculapius.²¹ In fact, the basilica dedicated to the twin brothers in Constantinople was surrounded day and night by the patients that practiced the ritual of *incubatio*, a ritual that also took place in the temples dedicated to Aesculapius.²² Therefore, Cosmas and Damian not only usurped the void that was left by the healing heroes and Aesculapius, but they also usurped the way in which these pagan “doctors” healed. It is possible to identify some churches dedicated to the twins where *incubatio* was practiced such as Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome. The practices were the same, but only the ones performed by the saints Cosmas and Damian were considered to be miraculous. In addition, many icons of Cosmas and Damian were used as amulets or as remedies against illnesses, two practices that were considered to be magical or superstitious if they had not been performed by using the images of these Christian saints.
- **Typology and related themes:** As medical saints, Cosmas and Damian could be related to other saints that have a similar function such as Saint Luke, Saint Panthaleon, Saint Sebastian, and Saint Roque.
- **Images:**
 - *Cosmas and Damian present their crown of martyrdom to Christ.* Mosaic. 6th century. Church of the saints Cosmas and Damian. Forum, Rome.
 - The Surgeons’ Chapel. Fresco in the western wall, Saint Maria Antiqua, Rome. 705-707 A.D.
 - Saints Cosmas y Damian. Cathedral of Salisbury. 1220. Salisbury, England.
 - Fra Angelico. *Saints Cosmas and Damian cure Paladia; Paladia offers three eggs to Damian.* 1438-1440. Tempera on wood (36,5 x 46,5 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington.
 - Fra Angelico. *Cosmas and Damian ante Lisias.* 1438-1440. Temple sobre tabla (38 x 45 cm). Alte Pinakothek, Munich.
 - Fra Angelico. *Cosmas and Damian saved from the waters.* 1438-1440. Tempera on wood (38 x 45 cm). Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p., 340.

²¹ López Campuzano (1996), “Iconografía de los Santos Sanadores,” p. 256.

²² Réau (1997), *Iconografía del arte cristiano*, p. 340.

- Fra Angelico. *Cosmas and Damian saved from the pire*. 1438-1440. Tempera on wood (37 x 46 cm). National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.
- Fra Angelico. *Cosmas and Damian crucified*. 1438-1440. Tempera on wood (38 x 46 cm) Alte Pinakothek, Munich.
- Fra Angelico. *Cosmas and Damian decapitated*. 1438-1440. Tempera on wood (36 x 46 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris.
- Fra Angelico. *The funeral of the saints Cosmas and Damian*. 1438-1440. Tempera on wood (37 x 45 cm). Museo di San Marco, Florence.
- Fra Angelico. *Cosmas and Damian transplant a leg*. 1438-1440. Tempera on Wood (37 x 45 cm). Museo di San Marco, Florence.
- Fra Angelico. *Sacred Converstation* (altarpiece of Annalena). 1438-1440. Tempera on wood. 180 x 202 cm. Museo di San Marco, Florence, Italy.
- *Cycle of the life and work of Saints Cosmas and Damian*. Altarpiece of the Saints Cosmas and Damian, Cathedral of Barcelona. 15th century.
- Master of Stettener. *Cosmas and Damian transplant a leg*. 16th century. Württembergisches Landesmuseum Stuttgart.
- Cosmas and Damian. Polish icon. 17th century. Historic Museum de Sanok, Poland.
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