

PSYCHOSTASIS OR THE WEIGHING OF THE SOULS

Theme: The term psychostasis comes from the Greek and it means the weighing of the soul or the battle of the soul, that is, the process that decides salvation or condemnation of the soul. In Christianity this process will take place in the end of time, when the Final Judgment takes place and Saint Michael weighs the souls in a scale the good and bad deeds. In this process, the devil also intervenes by using trickery to make the scale fall on his side and take the soul to Hell.

Keywords: Psychostasis, Weighing of the Souls, Saint Michael and the Scales, Last Judgment.

Summary: The Psychostasis or Weighing of the Souls is part of the iconographical cycle of the Last Judgment. For Christians this is the belief that man will survive in substance after death, and his salvation or condemnation will depend on the way the scales are tilted after the end of time during the Last Judgment, when the earthly actions will be weighed.

Attributes and types of representation: In this scene Saint Michael appears as the psychopomp, that is, the one who leads the souls. Furthermore, he is in charge of weighing the souls' good or bad actions in a scale. The souls are usually personified by heads or by two little naked figures. Occasionally, the figure that embodies sin is more grotesque than the one that represents virtue. The devil intervenes trying to tilt the balance in his favor by using hooks, unbalancing them with his hands or with the help of small devils. The iconographical cycle that depicts different scenes of the Last Judgment is usually completed with the wait of the souls that are going to be judge in one side, while on the other side the just go to Heaven and the damn go to Hell where they are bolted down by the great mouth of the Leviathan.

A variant, that does not strictly take place in the psychostasis, is when the archangel holds the scales and at the same time fights the devil. This is a conflation of two of Saint Michael's story: the weighing of the souls and his fight against the Satan.

Usually it is Saint Michael who is holding the scales, but sometimes this action can be done by God, as it appears in the church of Saint Saint Révérien de Nièvre (Burgundy), where the scale is being held by the hand of God that comes out from a cloud¹. The Virgin can be present in the scene in her role as intercessor². Another iconographical variant can appear when the souls in the scales are substituted by the chalice, the Lamb or coins³.

Primary sources: There are not many passages in the Bible or ecclesiastical literature regarding the weighing of the soul being the clearest one the following:

- *Book of Job* 31: 6: "Let God weigh me in honest scales and he will know that I am blameless!"
- *Book of Daniel* 5: 27: "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting."

¹ Reau (1996), p. 765. For more details, see www.terres-romanes.lu/reverien.htm (last access 17/03/2010).

² That is the case of an English alabaster preserved at the Palace of Uriarte in Lekeitio, Vizcaya. See images.

³ Reau (1996), p. 765. For the first case, he quotes an illumination from the Gospel of Wolfenbüttel (1194) and the tympanum of the Cathedral of Bourges; for the second case, the tympanum of the Cathedral of Amiens. Another example come from the altarpiece of the Last Judgment of the church of Saint Albans in Köln, created by Colin de Coter (ca. 1455) Saint Michael holds the scales, one plate weights more than the another one due to the coins located on it: http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Colin_de_Coter-Retable_du_Jugment_Dernier_IMG_1393.JPG (last access on the 25/3/2010).

- *Apocalypsis of Ezra (Ezra IV)*, III, 34 “Now therefore weigh in a balance our iniquities and those of the inhabitants of the world; and so it will be found which way the turn of the scale will incline.”
- *Testament of Abraham*, XII, <http://mb-soft.com/believe/tsxm/abraham0.htm> (last access on the 25/03/2010).

Saint Gregory the Great in his *Moralia in Job* (Book XXI, chap. XI, 11) interprets the passage on the Book of Job as something that should be applied to the merits of Christ and not to a general judgment.

In Egyptian hermeneutic literature, the weighing of the souls is present since the Pyramid's Texts, where it was systematized -an idea that would influence early Christianity.

In Greek literature, the psychostasis is understood as the destiny that confronts two cities or two heroes, as it is manifested in the Iliad when the destiny of the Greeks and the Trojans is placed in the balance by Zeus (VIII, 68 and so on.) or in the battle between Hector and Achilles (XXII, 209 and so on).

Other sources, non-written sources: The psychostasis is a theme of Egyptian (Pharaonic) origin. It was a tradition of the old Egyptian rituals that was maintained in the Valley of the Nile and that was incorporated into the Christian rituals by the Egyptian Copts. This syncretism made possible the integration of the Pharaonic iconographical repertoire that in turn had already assimilated the Greco-Roman deities and the adaptation of that iconography to the new spiritual needs. It means that this scene was incorporated to the Christianity through images more than through textual references.

Geographical and chronological framework: It appears like the first artistic representations that can be connected to the Psychostasis in a Christian environment could have been the magical amulets in which Hermes was identified as Saint Michael, especially since in Greek mythology Hermes was the bearer of the scales⁴. Nevertheless, it is possible that many of these first images were destroyed as a result of their relation to Gnostic and hermetical believes.

Even though the cult to Saint Michel was widespread among the Christians from the Valley of the Nile and that it was possibly here that the iconography of the archangel was established, his representation in Coptic art with the scales is a later development, being more common a type of iconography that followed Byzantine prototypes for his icons⁵.

It is believed that the first representation of Saint Michael with the scales is the one found in the Alahan Monastir,⁶ even though the first images of the theme originated in Byzantine models, models that have not survived, it was not until the 10th century that we can find the first artistic manifestations. The two oldest examples are a relieve in Monte Gargano (9th -10th centuries), where an exaltation to Saint Michael is represented that is not part of the Last Judgment, and the Irish cross of Muiredach, where the psychostasis is part of a Last Judgment cycle.

After the second half of the 11th century, the psychostasis starts to appear more frequently in representations of the Last Judgment, being one of the first one the one in the church of Yilandi Kilisse (Irhala, Cappadocia). And after the end of the 11th century, this scene is incorporated not only in the Christian art from the East, but also in the Christian art from the West. An example of the former can be

⁴ Not only this attribute is linked to him in the Iliad and other Classical texts, but also the topic of the Psychostasis appears in the decoration of this vase. Moreover, in the Boston throne he is depicted holding the scales between two goddesses.

⁵ Cannuyer (2000), p. 88. Zibawy (2003), p. 212.

⁶ Yarza Luaces (1987), p. 126-127

found in the mosaics of the basilica of Torcello, while examples of the later can be found in many different depictions after the 12th century.⁷

Even though there are no Byzantine manuscripts that contain this iconography, in the Mozarabic tradition a folio from an antiphonary, known as Silo's Hell, has survived from the first half of the 12th century. This folio led scholars to think that there were unknown iconographical models, now lost to us, that were produced and distributed in monastic scriptoria.

During the Gothic period, the portals that held the Last Judgment cycle continued to depict the weighing of the souls, which in addition became a common theme in painting and manuscript illumination throughout the whole period. After the 16th century, the psychostasis as such does not intervene in the Last judgment cycles, where Saint Michael starts to appear with a sword throwing out the devil into the pits of hell. Regardless, the scales continued to be part of his attributes when he is depicted fighting the devil.

Artistic media and techniques: The psychostasis can be represented in manuscript illumination, mural painting, panel painting, mosaics and monumental sculpture. It can also be found in medals and amulets.

Precedents, transformations, and projection: The Weighing of the Souls as the process that would determine eternal salvation or condemnation has its origin in the Book of the Dead, whose creation dates to the New Empire in Pharaonic Egypt. The book systematizes the idea, already present in the Pyramids' Texts. In this text, the judgment of Osiris is narrated.⁸ The dead would be brought to judgment guided by Anubis -psychopomp-, not without having to overcome several obstacles and dangers in the land of the dead or *Duat*. There, in front of the god of resurrection, the heart of the deceased would be extracted, as a manifest of his conscience and morality, and it would be placed on the scales where it was weighed against a feather from *Maat*, goddess of truth and universal justice. Then the gods that formed the tribunal, presided over by the Thoth, god of wisdom, who acted as notary, could ask questions to the deceased regarding his past life and depending on the answers the scales will be tilted one way or the other. At the end of the judgment, Osiris will pass his verdict. If the sentence was positive, the *Ka* and *Ba* could be reunited with its mummy in eternal life. If the sentence was negative, the soul was thrown to the *Amit*, a hybrid creature with the head of a crocodile, the body and the hands of a lion and the legs of a hippopotamus which eats the soul and ends its immortal life.

The Greeks believed that Hermes was capable of using the scales. They assimilated Thoth to Hermes creating a new identity Hermes-Thoth, who in turn was identified with Hermes Trismegistus, considered to be the creator of Hermetism. In addition, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus was identified with the figure of Saint Michael in Christian circles, especially those of the esoteric Coptic Christians of Egypt where his cult was born. Saint Michael then carries out his function as psychopomp, just like his predecessors. His cult is considered to be a type of religious syncretism.⁹

In the Roman world, the scales are identified with Justice and so they become part of its characteristic attributes. This idea of divine justice will be the one that the Christian world will inherit.

After the iconoclast controversy in the Byzantine church, the psychostasis was represented in Last

⁷ See several examples in Spanish art in <http://www.lromanico.com/004/iconografias2.asp?codi=0000078> (last access on the 25/03/2010)

⁸ Papyri Ani, chapter 125, 19th dynasty, British Museum, London, number 10.470.

⁹ Yarza Luaces (1987), p. 124.

Judgment cycles that were located in the western part of the temples. After the Romanesque this representation would become commonplace in the Western art.

Typology and related themes: The weighing of the souls, as part of scatological iconography, is an allegory of the Christian belief in eternal salvation or condemnation. It is related to and forms part of the Last Judgment. In contemporary iconographical representations of Saint Michael, as the chief of the celestial army that battles the devil, the scales are sometimes incorporated as part of his attributes even though the weighing of the souls is not taking place.¹⁰ In a fresco from the church of Saint Laurence and saint Elisabeth in Aulzhausen (Germany), the archangel holds in one hand a flaming sword and with the other one the scales as his most representative attributes.¹¹

Images:

- *Cross of Muiredach*, “psychostasis,” early 10th century, stone, Monasterboice (Ireland).
- *Silos' Hell* “Saint Michael with the scales fights the devil Barabbas” 1109-1120, parchment, British Library, London (United Kingdom), Add. Mss. 695, folio 2.
- *Psychostasis*, ca. 1123, mural painting, western wall, church of Santa María de Taüll, Lérida (Spain).
- Gislebertus, *Last Judgment*, “Psychostasis”, 1130-1145, stone, tympanum of the western portal, Cathedral of Saint Lazare, Autun (France).
- Leodegarius, - *Last Judgment*, “Psychostasis”, last third of the 12th century, stone, tympanum of the south portal, Church of Santa María la Real in Sangüesa, Navarra (Spain).
- *Last Judgment*, “Psychostasis”, end of the 12th century, mosaic, church of Torcello (Italy).
- Master of Navasa, *Psychostasis*, ca. 1200, mural painting, northern crypt or the Archive or Treasure Room, Cathedral of Roda de Isábena, Huesca (Spain).
- *Psychostasis*, ca. 1200, stone, tympanum of the south portal, church of San Miguel, Biota, Zaragoza (Spain).
- *Last Judgment*, “Psychostasis”, 1163-1250, stone, tympanum of the western facade, cathedral of Notre-Dame, Paris (France).
- *Vall de Ribes Altarpiece*, “Psychostasis”, second half of the 13th century, panel painting, side panel of the altarpiece, Museo Episcopal de Vic, Barcelona (Spain).
- *Saint Michael with the scales and the Virgin*, end of the 14th century, polychrome alabaster, English production, Uriarte palace, Lekeitio, Vizcaya (Spain).
- Hans Memling, *The Last Judgment*, 1467-1471, oil painting, 306 x 222 cm., National Museum, Gdansk (Poland).

¹⁰ See, among other examples, the Archangel Saint Michael by Bronzino, (1540-1541) Eleonora chapel of Toledo, Vecchio palace, Florence, in http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Angelo_Bronzino_010.jpg (last access 24/03/2010)

¹¹ <http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Erzengel-Michael-1.jpg> (last access 24/03/2010)

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