

The Iconography of the Ascension



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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE ASCENSION

THE purpose of this paper is two fold: first to trace the development of the iconography of the Ascension from its earliest type through to the Gothic form; and second, to illustrate by means of this development the evolution of Christian art up to the Gothic period, and to show in particular the manner in which the ever-present Oriental influence modified in various ways the types current in western art.

The Feast of the Ascension was not among the earliest established by the Church, nor was it celebrated at first as an independent feast, but generally in conjunction with Pentecost. Early writers such as Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian mention only Easter and Pentecost. It is only from the end of the fourth century that we find positive reference to the Ascension either as a separate feast-day, or as a part of the Pentecostal celebration. The separate feast-day of the Ascension must have been established between 380 and 430 A.D. The year 380 is the date of the *Peregrinatio Etheriae* in which a very interesting account of Ascension and Pentecostal celebrations is given; we read in it of the vigils held at Bethlehem forty days after Easter, and of the celebration of Pentecost at Jerusalem on the *dies quinquagesimarum*, with a separate celebration of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives the afternoon of the same day. The other date, 430, marks the death of Saint Augustine, who describes the Ascension as among the feasts universally observed: "sicut quod Domini passio et resurrectio et ascensio et adventus de caelo Spiritus Sancti anniversaria solemnitate celebrantur et si quid aliud tale occurrerit quod servatur ab universa quacumque se diffundit ecclesia."¹ Roughly speaking then, the end of the fourth century or the beginning of the fifth may be regarded as the time when the Ascension assumed independent significance.

The canonical references to the Ascension are few and brief.

¹ *Ep. CXVIII, i; P. L. XXXIII, col. 200.*