FURTHER NOTES ON A TWELFTH-CENTURY BISHOP'S MITRE IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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Another motive on the gold brow band of the bishop's mitre[1] in the Metropolitan Museum of Art presents the nude upper body of a human figure in frontal pose with upraised arms[2] and long hair falling on the shoulders (Fig. 1). The raised left arm and its less visible mate on the right where the mitre has been folded are in the position of piety found in some Roman work and common in the early Christian frescoes in the Catacombs. The breadth of the shoulders, the straight lines of the thick body indicate that a male figure is represented in contrast to the smaller and slimmer body of the mermaid. The delineation of the breasts suggests a woman but similar delineation is not unusual in male figures in this period.[3] The breasts of the double-tailed mermaid cannot be seen in the photograph but the delineation is much the same.

The body, woven in purple and gold threads outlined in pink threads stops at the waist where it is joined to a wide straight band in purple decorated with three small gold roundels with a narrow gold border at top and bottom. The unusual breadth of this band, its stiffness, for it does not conform to the shape of the body, suggest that it is not a belt but a rigid form of conveyance in which the body is seated. This band not only extends beyond the body, but at each end of the upper border there is a small upright post. Were this band a belt, surely the legs or a skirt would show below it, but here that area is filled with cloud-like forms difficult to decipher. At the left of the body there can be seen two profile animals, probably griffins, whose foreparts, heads, legs, chests and feet are outlined in pink threads while the bodies are in the gold threads of the ground (Fig. 2). The outlines of these animals are not as distinct as those of the body of the figure, but examination with a microscope clearly shows the pink threads that outline them. On the right, the silk and gold threads originally there have worn away from friction caused by folding the mitre flat along this part when it was not in use. There can be no doubt that the same motive must have been repeated on this side originally, for the animals' feet can be made out as well as part of the hand and arm of the figure. The frontal form of design common in this period would call for such a balance of motives. We often see profile animals of this kind used to form the supports for chairs or fold stools in this period; they are especially common in manuscript paintings where they form the seats for frontal representations of kings or saints (Fig. 3). In Sassanian art also we see bench-like seats for kings with profile animal supports (Fig. 4). It seems unlikely, however, that the profile animals of this motive of the mitre band are

supports of this sort; if it were so, the wide band would be a belt and as we have pointed out there are good reasons to reject that idea.

In fact, this motive presents a problem in identification, for no figure exactly comparable has come to light among the sculptures, frescoes, manuscripts and other arts of the period that have been available for comparison. The theme of a frontal figure with flanking animals is nevertheless common in early Christian and late Roman art where it seems to have been inspired by Near Eastern design. Subjects frequently represented in this way include the "Lion Strangler," associated with the epic of Gilgamesh, where the figure is frontal and grasps on either side a lion by head or tail.[4] Another usually found in sculptural reliefs shows Daniel in the lions' den. In an example on a capital from Moissac, Daniel's arms are raised vertically in almost the same position as the arms of the figure on the mitre (Fig. 5). A third subject with the same type of composition and commonly represented in medieval art is Alexander's Celestial Journey. Interestingly enough, in the Middle Ages Alexander represented the vice of Arrogance, while Daniel represented the virtue of Humility.[5]

The medieval examples in sculpture, mosaic and other arts of the time illustrating this absorbing tale of man's earliest investigations of the space around and above him appears to have reached the West from a Greek manuscript copied by Leo of Naples in the tenth century on a visit he made to Constantinople. This copy was translated by the Duke of Naples and was thus disseminated in Europe. It was then used as the subject for various kinds of works of art, especially in manuscripts, mosaics, ivories, textiles, enamels, and carvings in stone and wood. We quote from a translation of a medieval description of the story of Alexander's Celestial Journey.

> "I took counsel with my friends how I might fashion such a machine that I might ascend the heavens and see if they be the heavens which we behold. I made ready a machine wherein I might sit, and I caught griffins and bound them with chains, and held before them rods and meat on the tops thereof, and they began to ascend to heaven. Nevertheless, the Divine Power overshadowed and cast them down to earth more than ten days journey from my army, and I suffered no hurt, even in the iron throne. I rose to such height that the earth seemed like a threshing floor below me. The sea, moreover, seemed to me like a serpent writhed about it, and with great peril I was reunited to my soldiers."[6]

In connection with this translation there are two enamels on the Pala D'Oro, St. Mark's, Venice, which are of special interest. One shows the

head of Alexander with a griffin rising in flight on either side; the corresponding enamel shows a serpent coiled about a tree full of birds, symbolizing the earth with the sea around it.[7] Another author calls attention to some German accounts unparalleled elsewhere to the effect that Alexander was deterred from ascending further by a voice which warned him that no man might ascend to Heaven who has not deserved to do so by good works. It has been suggested that this literary evidence was adopted in Germany in support of theological attacks on Alexander.[8]

Most representations of Alexander's Celestial Journey are easy to identify; in general they show Alexander crowned, clothed, seated in a cart, chariot or basket and holding two baited sticks towards which the griffins (in some cases, eagles) with heads turned back strive to seize the meat at the top of the sticks (Figs. 6-9). A smaller group, usually accepted as representing Alexander's Journey, show variations; in such examples Alexander is not fully clothed, nor crowned, and sometimes he is standing, so that the conveyance is missing; instead of holding the baited sticks, his arms may encircle the necks of griffins or eagles, or their necks may be encircled by a leash which Alexander holds in his hands (Figs. 10, 11, 12). The figure on the mitre is certainly seated in a shallow stiff conveyance, in fact it is almost identical with the bottom part of the chariot in the representation of Alexander's Journey which forms the central medallion of the cloisonné plate at Innsbruck (Fig. 9). That our figure on the mitre is aloft is suggested by the wavy forms below the conveyance which probably depict cloud forms. The elements of the mitre figure which do not conform to other representations of the Celestial Journey include the profile animals which cannot be identified with certainty as either griffins or eagles because of the apparent lack of wings, and the arms and hands of the human figure raised in the position of prayer. Whereas some variations in the attributes in representations of Alexander's Journey are to be expected and can easily be explained, the orant position of the hands and arms cannot be accounted for in existing examples or in translations of the story, as far as we know. This orant position of the hands and arms is familiar in catacomb paintings in Rome.[9] It also occurs elsewhere, for example in representations of Daniel in the lions' den (Fig. 5); in the Alexander fable the hands held baited sticks which played an important role in luring the griffins or eagles to their upward flight. Although the baited sticks are lacking in some examples, as cited above, Alexander's relation to them is indicated by his grasping the griffins by the neck, as at Oloron-Ste.-Marie or Charney-Basset (Figs. 10, 11) or by the leashes attached to them, as at Conques (Fig. 12). The absence of wings on the animals on the mitre is another discrepancy which makes the identification of the figure with Alexander's Journey tenuous. It is of course possible that in twelfth-century Sicily, with its mixture of peoples, and literary and

artistic sources, the story of Alexander's Journey may have been misunderstood or confused with another fable.

There are other possibilities of identification of the mitre figure which are worth exploring, since a group of them shows frontal figures seated in chariots or carts flanked by profile animals. Moreover, some examples seem to represent ascensions. Among these are several Coptic textiles, one in Berlin which has been described as Alexander's Journey to the Heavens.[10] In general, however, they have been interpreted as representations of the Sun God, Helios, accompanied by symbolic attributes, such as the chariot and the flanking animals.[11] When described as Helios, they also represent ascensions. Several Coptic textiles of the fifth or sixth century of this type have come down to us. A Coptic roundel of the same composition as the Berlin piece mentioned above is in the Brooklyn Museum and has been identified simply as an Ascension (Fig. 14); more recently it has been called Christ-Helios because the nimbus around the head bears a cross. It seems probable that these designs were developed from Commemorative coins or plaques celebrating the apotheosis of a Roman emperor, as in the bracelet plaque at Dumbarton Oaks (Fig. 15) or that they were inspired by Sassanian designs of the apotheosis of a king (Fig. 4). The link to the mitre figure lies in their connection with an ascension and in the similarity of the designs, with a central figure in frontal pose, seated in a conveyance drawn by flanking, usually profile beasts. The absence of the nimbus in our mitre figure and the orant position of his arms seems to remove him from an identification with the Sun God.

From Biblical stories there are some representations in this period of Elijah being lifted to heaven in his fiery chariot,[12] but the extant examples are not more convincing than the suggestions above from Roman and Coptic sources.

A further suggestion is that this figure on the mitre-band is another reference to Scylla herself in her destructive mood, awash in the sea, the dogs emerging at her sides, and the head of another near the center of her belt, her arms raised to hurl a stone or an oar at a victim. Scylla, the beautiful woman who tempted man, who must resist, or suffer the attacks of the dogs at her waist and the force of her powerful tails.[13]

Another possibility remains, namely that the figure represents Charybdis, who with Scylla formed the rock and the whirlpool described by Homer and located between Sicily and Italy according to tradition.[14] Whereas references to their despicable attributes occur among writings of the Church Fathers, visual representations of Charybdis appear to be non-existant today, or else have not been recognized. The well-known later proverb, "Incidit in Scyllam qui vult vitare Charybdis,"[15] where there is no escape from a disastrous situation, suggests that the mermaid

herself[16] may represent the medieval Christian concept of the baneful effects of feminine charms and the other figure representing Charybdis, may exemplify the unhappy results of gluttony.

We return to the first possibility, Alexander's Celestial Journey, because not only is it the most logical visually, but the theological and literary evidence of the age supports it most strongly. In medieval times the fable of Alexander's Celestial Journey was used for moral purposes by the Church as an example of excessive arrogance and pride, an inheritance in thinking from the Roman writer, Seneca. The concept was enthusiastically developed by the Church Fathers, especially in Germany. The vices of which Alexander was accused included Pride, Ambition, Envy and Injustice. Alexander was said by Rupert of Deutz to be so proud that he lifted himself above the earth in his arrogance,[17] though as recent writers have pointed out, this concept was less common in medieval France because of the influence of two centuries of courtly tradition. Alexander was associated in many medieval minds with Antiochus, the all-conquering tyrant whose career was forseen by Daniel. Antiochus became the conventional type of Antichrist of whom Alexander was considered to be the historical precedent.[18] Other writers compared Alexander to Lucifer, the name given to Satan before his Fall. Lucifer's first sin that forever made him the symbol of evil was the sin of pride. In consequence, the importance of the representation of Alexander's Celestial Journey not only attracted people by its bold idea of the exploration of the heavens, but at the same time taught them to be wary of the sins of arrogance and pride.

Since the mitre figure does not correspond specifically to the conventional or usual representations of any of our present suggestions, however, it must remain for the time being a puzzle. If it does represent Alexander, as seems a strong possibility, then we have in it another illustration of arrogance and pride to add to the other mitre figures - the mermaid of lust, the centaur of diabolical duplicity and the lion of ambiguous kingly power whose figures also occur on this gold band of the mitre. At this point we can only quote from Robert Frost:

> "We go round in a ring and suppose.
> The secret sits in the middle and knows."

NOTES

1. See the BULLETIN OF THE NEEDLE AND BOBBIN CLUB (hereafter referred to as N AND B BULL.), 1978, fig. 19.

2. The pose appears to be an adaptation of the classical representations of PIETAS; see Leclerq, H., DICTIONNAIRE D'ARCHEOLOGIE CHRETIENNE ET DE LITURGIE, vol. 12, part 2, col. 2291, figs. 9075-9077; Graber, A., CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY, Bolligen series, Princeton, 1968, pp. 10-32, pls. 13, 15, 16, 59-61.

3. Swarzenski, H., MONUMENTS OF ROMANESQUE ART, Chicago, 1954, pl. 18, fig. 42: pl. 19, fig. 43; pl. 47, fig. 105; pl. 180, fig. 402.

4. "Gilgamesh." Von Falke, KUNSTGESCHICHTE DER SEIDENWEBEREI, Berlin, 1913, vol. I, Abb. 129 (opp. p. 94).

5. Carey, G., THE MEDIEVAL ALEXANDER, Ross edition, p. 158. In Germany Alexander's reputation as a man of bad character was used as a deterrent to others.

6. This is from Loomis who compiled 29 examples in art works showing Alexander's Journey (BURLINGTON MAGAZINE, vol. XXXII, 1918, pp. 136ff and 177-185). Later, Reau, L., (ICONOGRAPHIE DE L'ART CHRETIEN, 1956, vol. I, pp. 293-296) also made a list. In addition, several Russian examples are illustrated in Grabar, A., L'ART A LA FIN DE L'ANTIQUITE ET DU MOYEN AGE, Paris, 1968, vol. 3, pls. 65 a, b, and pl. 66 a, b, c, d and 64 a. More recently listed examples include the ring in the Stathatos Collection, Athens, illustrated in Coche de la Ferté, E., CATALOGUE HELENE STATHATOS, les objets Byzantin et post-Byzantin, no. 21; a ring at Dumbarton Oaks illustrated by Ross, M., CATALOGUE OF BYZANTINE AND EARLY MEDIEVAL ANTIQUITIES, Dumbarton Oaks, 1962, pl. LXII, no. 122. In addition, L'Orange identifies a relief at Castel Saint Angelo, Rome, and another at Thebes as examples of Alexander's Journey (see: L'Orange, H.P., STUDIES IN ICONOGRAPHY OF COSMIC KINGSHIP IN THE ANCIENT WORLD, Oslo, 1953, figs. 87, 88, p. 118). To these may also be added a Coptic textile at Montpezat (Picard, C., CAHIERS D'ARCHEOLOGIE, VII, 1954, p. 16, pl. IV, 1 and 2) and a thirteenth-century textile from Regensburg (Von Falke, OP. CIT., Band II, Abb. 307). See also Ross, D.J.A., ILLUSTRATED MEDIEVAL ALEXANDER-BOOKS IN GERMANY AND THE NETHERLANDS, Cambridge, 1971, fig. 428.

7. Illustrated in Supka, G., ZEITSCHRIFT FUR CHRISTLICHE KUNST, vol. XXIV, 1911, pp. 309-314, Abb. 4. A similar story is associated with Kai Kaus in Persia and with d'Akhikar among the Jews. The story itself is thought to go back to the second century B.C. The conveyance varies according to the country: in some places a basket, in others a rigid cart, throne or cage. Likewise, the birds are usually eagles in Eastern examples and griffins in the West. The fable is surely of Oriental origin but its form was established after it reached Greece. See also, Millet, G., "L'Ascension d'Alexandre" in SYRIA, IV, 1923, pp. 85ff.

8. G. Millet, OP. CIT., SYRIA IV, 1923, p. 135.

9. The arms of our figure rise almost vertically from the elbow and are closer to some examples from late Egyptian grave stelae than to the gentler, broader gesture of the arms in the figure paintings of the Catacombs. See Klauser, T., JAHRBUCH FUR ANTIKE UND CHRISTENTUM, 1959, p. 115, taf. 14.

10. Wulff-Volbach, SPATANTIKE UND KOPTISCHE STOFFE, Berlin, 1926, Vol. II, no. 4644, pl. 46.

11. Riefstahl, E., STUDIES IN HONOR OF W.E. CRUM, Byzantine Institute, Boston, 1950, p. 531ff. See also, Von Falke, OP. CIT., vol. I, Abb. 74; Weibel, E., OP. CIT., New York, 1952, no. 26; Thompson, D., COPTIC TEXTILES IN THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM, Wilbour Monographs II, Brooklyn Museum, 1971, no. 23, p. 56.

12. Elijah, Rhenish enamel. See Loomis, R., OP. CIT., plate II 1, pp. 178-179.

13. See N AND B BULL., vol. 61, 1978, fig. 19.

14. Waser, O., Scylla and Charybdis in DER LITERATUR UND KUNST DER GRIECHEN UND ROMER, Zurich, 1894, pp. 1-17 for origins of the legend and location of the rocks.

15. See ALEXANDREIR of Gautier de Lille, a 12th-century poet. The metaphor is said to be at least as old as St. Augustine.

16. See N AND B BULL., vol. 61, 1978, p. 3-.

17. Carey, G., OP. CIT., Ross ed., p. 100. The vices of which Alexander was accused in early times were Pride, Ambition, Envy and Injustice.

18. Carey, IBID., pp. 121, 124, 138-139.

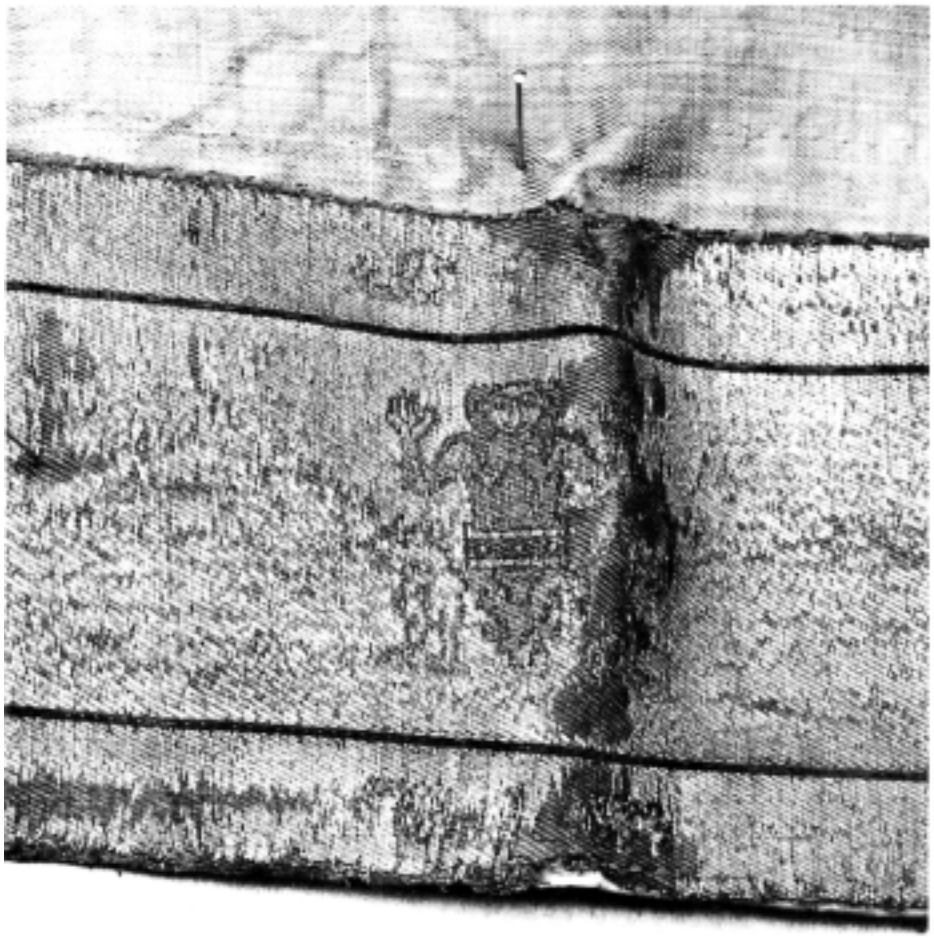

Figure 1. Figure from the brow-band of the mitre from the Convent of Neustift, Brixen (Bressanone), Italy, XII century. Height of the figure 3.8 centimeters. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

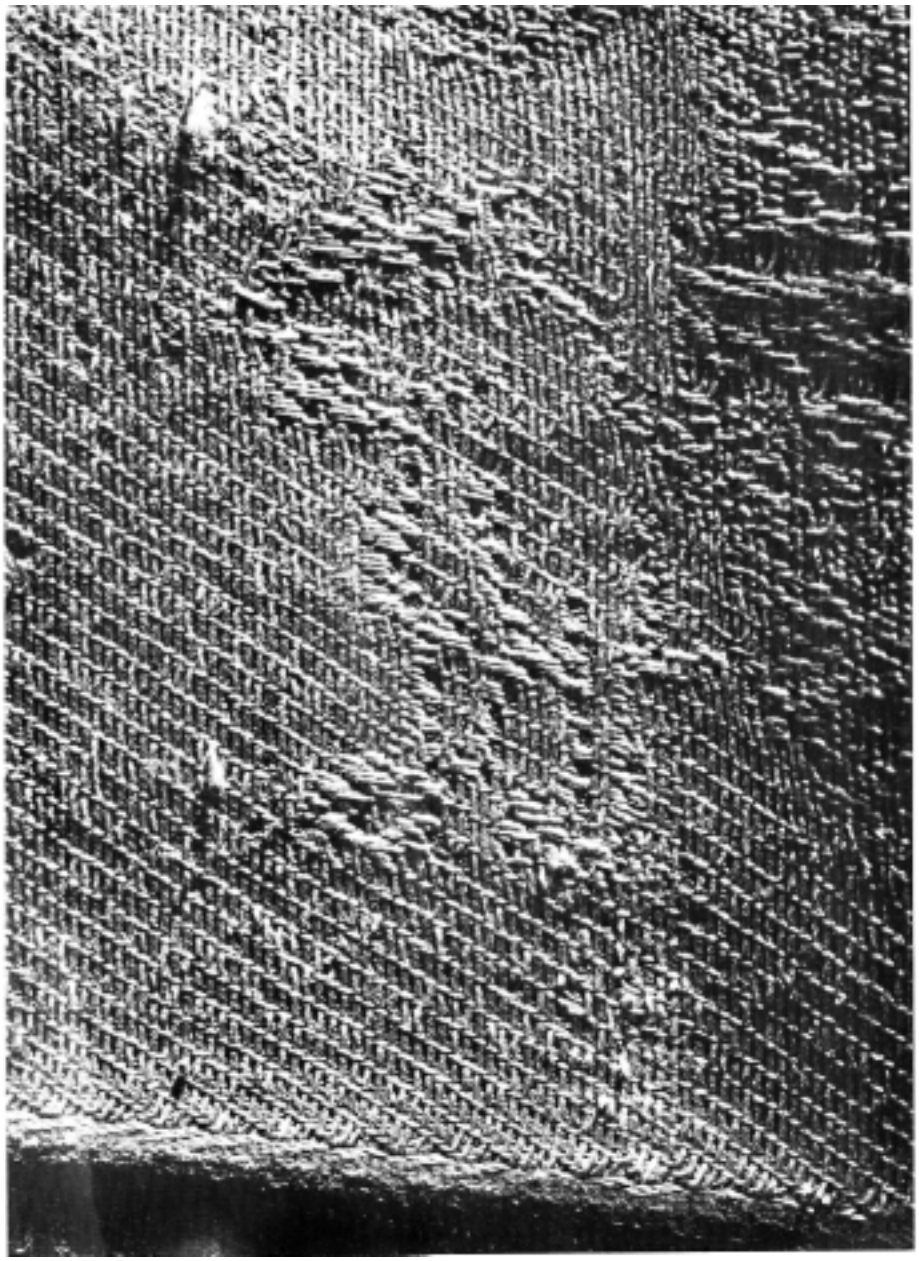

Figure 2. Enlarged photograph showing profile of heads, and front legs of two animals on left of the "Alexander" motive on the bishop's mitre from Brixen (Bressanone). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

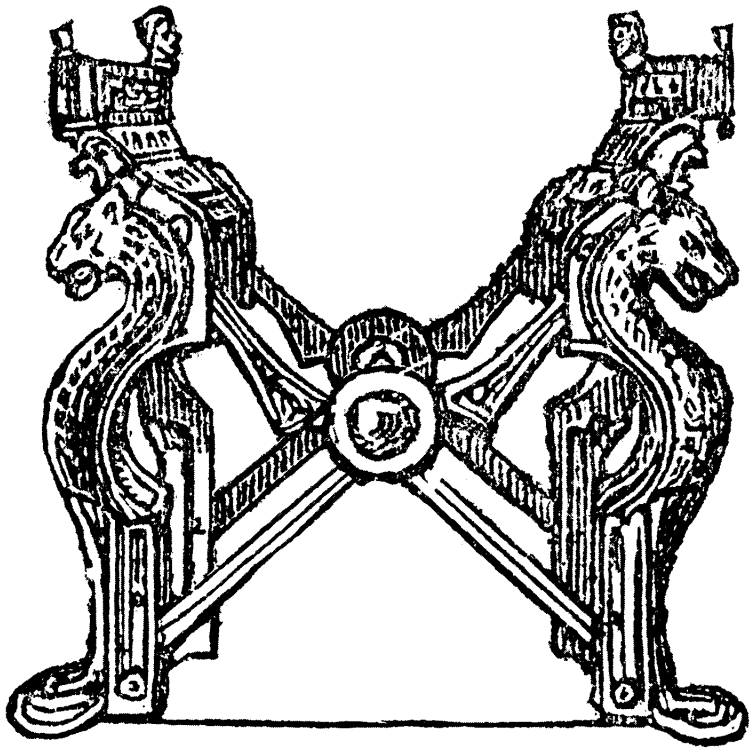

Figure 3. Chair of Dagobert, VII century, The Louvre, from Reusens, E., MANUEL D'ARCHEOLOGIE CHRETIENNE, 1886, p. 225.

Figure 4. Sassanian, VI-century bowl in setting of later date. Seated king in the center. Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.

Figure 5. Daniel with the lions on a capital on the north side at St. Pierre, Moissac. Photo James Austin, London.

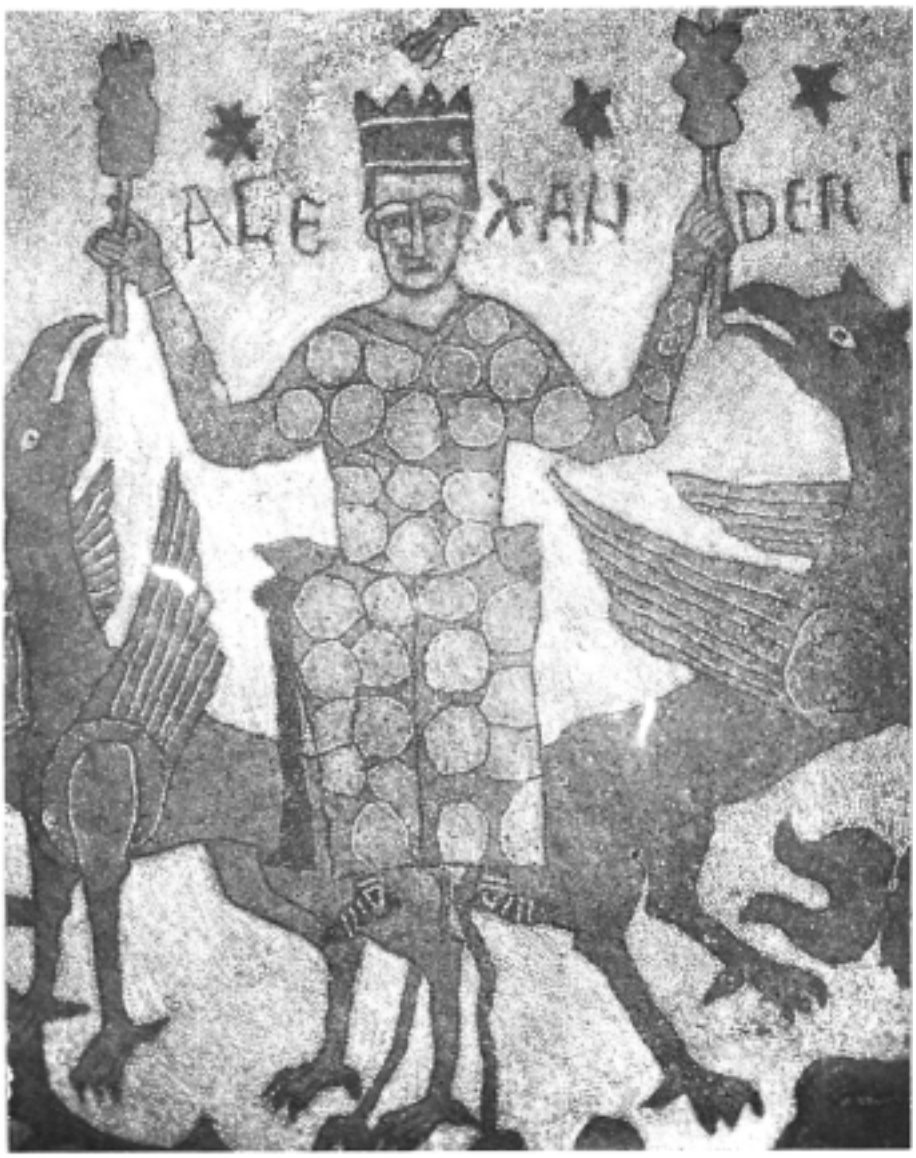

Figure 6. Detail of mosaic pavement showing Alexander's Celestial Journey, Otranto Cathedral, 1163-1166, Italy. Photo Alinari-Art Reference Bureau, Ancram, New York.

Figure 7. Marble relief showing Alexander's Celestial Journey, north elevation of St. Mark's, Venice. Photo Alinari-Art Reference, Ancram, New York.

Figure 8. Carved stone panel showing the Ascent of Alexander at Borgo San Donino, Fidenza, Italy.

Figure 9. Alexander's Celestial Journey. Detail from an enameled bowl with an Arabic inscription showing it was made for Mawud who reigned as a petty prince for the Seljuq Turks, XII century. Photo Ferdinandeum Museum, Innsbruck.

Figure 10. Tympanum showing Alexander's Celestial Journey, St. Peter's Church, Charney-Basset (Berks.), second half of XII century. Photo National Monuments Record, London.

Figure 11. Lunette over the west portal at Oloron-Ste.-Marie, France, showing Alexander with the griffins. Photo Fogg Art Museum, collection A.K. Porter.

Figure 12. Sculptured capital at Conques, France, showing Alexander holding the two eagles by a rope around their necks. From Jacques Bousquet, LA SCULPTURE A CONQUES AUX X^{e} et XII^{e} SIECLES.

Figure 13. Panel on a Byzantine ivory casket showing Alexander's Celestial Journey. Hessische Landesmuseum, Darmstadt.

Figure 14. Wool tapestry showing an ascension, Coptic, late VI to VII century. Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York.

Figure 15. Gold Medallion on a bracelet, Byzantine, second half of VI century. Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington, D.C.