

Representations of the Fantastical Adventures of Alexander the Great in Romanesque and pre-Romanesque Art

Some years ago I came across the tympanum of Charney Basset in Gloucestershire:



Tympanum of Charney Basset, Gloucestershire

during researches into griffins:

http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/some_varieties_of_griffin.pdf

and was thus introduced to the subject of Alexander the Great's flight towards Heaven - in a chariot drawn by griffins. This was so unexpected and intriguing that I set out to learn more on the subject. The details of the journey are, in themselves, quite extraordinary: instead of a stick & a carrot, Alexander encouraged his winged steeds with a pair of puppies spitted on two long sticks. He could make his craft dirigible by twirling the puppies - and the griffins would pursue them vigorously - but in vain! The source of this fore-runner of Baron Munchausen or Jules Verne lived between the 2nd and 4th century AD and is known as "the Pseudo-Callisthenes" though he may not have been the inventor of the tale. The manuscript had widespread and enduring success, with later versions taking Alexander down to the depths of the ocean in a kind of bathysphere. I have confined my interest in the story as a source for the iconography of certain sculptures in stone, ivory, wood, precious metal, textile, mosaic and MS illustrations up to and including the Romanesque period. It will be seen that the motifs were much copied but went through frequent changes and deformations, moving from East to West. Examples are to be found in Persia, Greece, the Balkans, Russia, Italy, Germany, France, Spain and England.

Few themes have such an ancient pedigree or such a wide geography as the image of the “Master of Beasts” and the Griffin. In the iconography of the Fantastical Adventures of Alexander the Great we have both in combination.

The articles available on this site are firstly,

p. 3 by **F R Loomis** from the Burlington Magazine of 1918, then

p. 34 part of a dissertation by **V M Schmidt** of Groningen University, and thirdly

p. 42 a paper by **Tamar Khundadze** of L'institut de l'histoire de l'art de Tbilissi (Georgia) given during the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London. This was published on the Internet in French, and has been translated by Robin Lees.

The French edition including the footnotes may be accessed here:

<http://www.byzantinecongress.org.uk/com2/M.html>

Finally, on p.58, a supplement with additional material from various sources not included in the first three articles.

Where I have interspersed my own comments, these are in italics.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT'S CELESTIAL JOURNEY BY R. S. LOOMIS

Reproduced from *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, May 1918 (*NB – I have not reproduced the photographs from these two articles, but have tried to produce them from my own photographs or from the Internet. The latter have been acknowledged, where possible*).

I - EASTERN EXAMPLES

THE legend of a hero who embarked on the back of some monstrous bird, or contrived a cage or basket in which, borne up by winged creatures, he might voyage through the air, and after a survey of the heavenly regions was obliged to descend to earth, is of very ancient origin. It has branches in almost every literature, appearing in the pages of "The Arabian Nights," in the legend of Bellerophon, in Dante's "Purgatory," and in a matchless, humorous passage of Chaucer's "House of Fame". A study of the ramifications of the legend after it was attached to Alexander the Great would be of the highest interest; relating how it sprang out of the cradle of the East, mated with this great hero, ran a romantic career through the unscrupulous imaginations of Western Europe, was condemned with scowling brows by homilists and theologians, lived on despite this clerical anathema, enjoying the approval of the laity, till with the renaissance the plague of historical scepticism caused its quietus as a living tradition. Nevertheless, although references to literary testimony will illuminate the path which I shall follow in this paper, yet that path will lie, in the main, among the artistic representations of Alexander's Celestial Journey, which present a no less fascinating field.

This subject I hope to treat more comprehensively than has been done hitherto; yet were it not for the many previous discussions of archaeologists, to which I refer in the footnotes, this study would not have been possible. In what form was this story first told of Alexander the Great? It will not be found in that earliest body of romantic Alexander tradition which goes by the name of Pseudo-Callisthenes (though it is interpolated in two 15th and a 16th-century manuscript), nor in the 4th-century version of Julius Valerius. For several centuries, then, the figure of the great conqueror had been attracting to itself the marvellous tales of the East before that of the Celestial Journey fastened itself upon him. The first witness to the association of this episode with Alexander is a 9th-century abecedary poem in Latin. The stanzas beginning F and H speak of Alexander's determination to make an ascent in a basket of rushes borne up by gryphons, of the fear that overtook him in the heavens, of his prayer to return, and of the founding of a city on the spot where he descended.¹ We next find the story related in the "Historia de Proeliis" of the Archpresbyter Leo, who wrote at Naples between 951 and 969. It runs:

"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 gryphons and bound them with chains, and set 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 the earth in a meadow more than ten days journey from my army, and I suffered no hurt, even in the

iron throne. I rose to such a 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 ".2

This account was soon expanded and formed the basis for the many versions of the French, German, Italian, Spanish, and English romances of Alexander. At the same time apparently that the episode was attaining a vogue in the West as one of the exploits of Alexander, it was being related in a similar form by Oriental writers of other heroes. For the following references I am indebted to Budge and Pavlovskij. The Arabian chronicler Tabari and the Persian poet Firdusi, both writing in the 10th century, attribute to one of the mythical Persian kings, Kai Ka'fs, a celestial journey.³ The latter's account runs to the effect that at the suggestion of a demon the king was persuaded to extend his dominions and to ascend to the sky. Four eagles were attached to his throne, and, as in the case of Alexander, were lured upward by two lances baited with meat.⁴

In these examples from Persian miniatures, we see four eagles instead of two griffins, but there are still the bits of roasted meat on the lances. The legendary Kay Kavus was the son of the Emperor Keikobad (who later found his way into Richard Strauss' opera, "Die Frau Ohne Schatten).





Figs 1a, b & c - FLIGHT OF KAI KA'US, PERSIAN MINIATURES

Wearied at length, however, they began to flutter downwards, and Kai Ka'us was precipitated to the earth, alive but stung with remorse for his impious ambition. For a time he lived a penitent in the wood where he had fallen, but was at last restored to his throne and regained the favour of heaven. We see that, as in the case of Bellerophon's ascent to heaven on the winged steed, the story of Kai Ka'us's attempt is regarded as an instance of sinful pride.

The same interpretation of the story is found in an Arabian tradition told of Nimrod, who after a disastrous essay to reach heaven by building the tower of Babel, made an ascent in a chest borne by four huge birds, only to fall upon a mountain with such force that it shook with the impact.⁵ The tradition concerning Kai Ka'us is much older than the version of Firdusi, since it is the subject of a reference in the "Zend Avesta".⁶ This story must have been influenced by that of the Babylonian hero Etanna, which is preserved on a cuneiform inscription made for the Royal Library.

Alexander the Great's Celestial Journey at Nineveh between 668 and 626 B.C.⁷ In this version of the legend it seems that Etanna wished to ascend to the highest heaven, and an eagle said to him: "Rejoice, my friend, and let me carry thee to heaven. Lay thy breast on my breast, thy hands on my pinions, and let my side be as thy side." When the eagle had soared upwards for two hours with Etanna clasping him, he showed the hero the great ocean which surrounded the world, and the earth's surface, which appeared like a mountain projecting from it. After another two hours the eagle showed him that the

ocean clasped the land like a girdle, and after the third two hours they saw that the sea had become like a little pool of water. They finally rest at the door of the gods Anu, Ea, and Bel. After a gap in the text the eagle and Etanna appear soaring to the abode of the goddess Ishtar. Presently the eagle's strength seems to fail, and down he falls till at length Etanna is dashed to pieces on the earth. Wallis Budge, from whom I quote this account, adds:

"There is little doubt that the story was also fastened on to Gilgamish, a famous Accadian and Assyrian hero: in fact, it seems as if we had here one of the stories with which men amused themselves in a primitive period . Given a brave, fearless soldier, marching with an army through a certain country for conquest and pleasure, it seems that the same stories must be told of his progress and exploits, whether he be Etanna, Gilgamish, Nimrod, or Alexander. With the advance of time the first tolerably accurate description of his life will be first distorted and then enlarged, and when he has become a mere memory his name will be made a peg on which to hang stories, legends, and myths ".⁸

Having, then, traced back to its origin in the cloudland of oriental myth the story of Alexander's Celestial Journey, let me turn to the main subject of this paper, the remarkable vogue of this motif and its wide diffusion, isolated from the other incidents of the Alexander legend, throughout mediaeval art. Since the first published identification of the subject in a bas-relief on the exterior of S. Mark's by Julien Durand in 1865, archaeologists have added gradually other examples to our knowledge, so that at present I can point to twenty-nine unmistakable illustrations of this subject extant outside of illuminated manuscripts. From Mesopotamia to the English West Country, and from Otranto in the heel of Italy to Remagen on the Rhine the design of the crowned Alexander flanked by his gryphon team seems to have caught the fancy of medieval craftsmen. In the case of most of these illustrations it is not easy to date them with precision, and in enumerating them I shall follow only roughly a chronological order.

In view of the fact that we find the legend of Kai Ka'us and his ascent flourishing in Persia between the 3rd and 10th centuries, it is almost certain that the episode was illustrated in contemporary Persian art. Yet though illuminated manuscripts of Firdusi's "Shah Nameh" of the 16th or 17th centuries usually contain an illustration of the episode, no portrayal dating from the period in question is known to me. Yet the symmetrical placing of the gryphons in all the earlier illustrations which we are presently to examine may have been influenced by the very common oriental motif of tree worship, in which two animals, frequently gryphons, stand on each side of a conventionalised tree.⁹ Moreover, a king standing between two gryphons appears on a pre-Christian Persian seal.¹⁰ Accordingly, while no direct evidence is available, the motif of the gryphon flight probably began to take shape under the influence of these familiar designs.

Since the legend of the Celestial Journey, transferred from Kai Kaus to Alexander, reappears in the 6th-century Latin poem, we must conclude that the literary tradition had passed from Persia to the Latin speaking West through the territories where the romantic tales of Alexander were still in the process of formation. Such a track would lead us

through the Byzantine Empire. It is natural enough, then, that we should find the earliest artistic treatments of the episode Byzantine in provenance or treatment.

In Greece itself two crude sculptures occur, one at the monastery of Dochiariu on Mt. Athos," the other in the monastery of the Peribleptos at Mistra.



Fig 2 - PERIBLETOS MISTRA RELIEF, X century

(Photograph kindly supplied by **Tamar Khundadze**)

The latter, according to Strzygowski, shows in the arabesque lines and other details traces of Moslem influence, such as were at work in Greece about the year 1000.¹² The vehicle here seems to be the basket referred to in the Latin abecedary poem. The relief on the north elevation of S. Mark's,



Fig 3 - GREEK MARBLE RELIEF ON THE NORTH ELEVATION OF S. MARKS, VENICE

which, as I have noted, was the starting point for the discussion of Alexander's Celestial Journey in art, is of Greek marble, 13 and without question is one of the spoils brought by the Venetians from other lands for the decoration of their cathedral. Although the date of the carving, on the authority of M. Bertaux, is as early as the 10th century,¹⁴ we see already signs of that corruption through misunderstanding which is the lot of every traditional motif in art. Alexander is represented as standing in a quadriga, a vehicle chosen by the artist apparently on his own initiative, without regard for its unfitness for a skyward course. It is most interesting to see how this first corruption has led another craftsman, who was ignorant of the story, into other perversions of the motif. The carver of a Byzantine ivory casket ¹⁵ has introduced on one of the panels a design much like that of the S. Mark's relief, with the addition of certain features from the design of a victorious chariot driver.

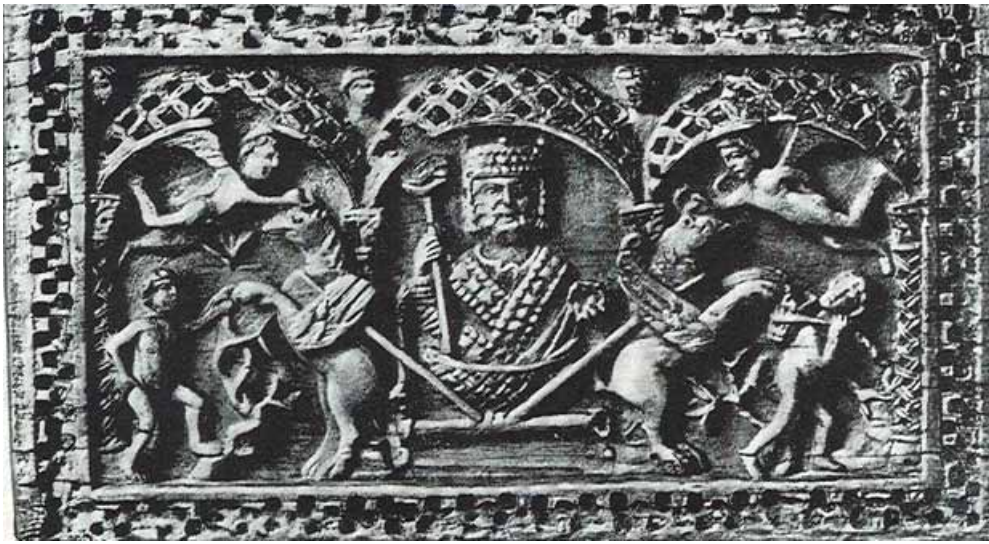


Fig 4 - DARMSTADT, BYZANTINE IVORY CASKET

(Photograph kindly supplied by **Tamar Khundadze**)

This mingling will be at once apparent if one compares the panel with an Alexandrian textile fabric of the 7th-century figured by Migeon, *Les Arts du Tissu*, p.17. In the panel the king with his tiara, the chariot and the gryphons appear as in the Venice relief, though the gryphons no longer have any appetite, for a ball and a sceptre ending in a beast's head have taken the place of the baited spears in the hero's hands. And here the chariot has suggested the introduction of the genii of victory which flutter round the chariot in the Alexandrian textile design.

I have noted that according to the original Persian legend of Kai Kaus he was borne up by eagles. We have seen that when the adventure was attributed to Alexander, the common tradition transformed the eagles into gryphons, and Western versions of the Alexander romance uniformly preserve the gryphons. But Eastern traditions concerning

Alexander's Celestial Journey, notably that preserved in the Ethiopian version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes ¹⁶ and that which was added in certain late MSS. of the Pseudo-Callisthenes itself, ¹⁷ describe him as carried by two huge birds, and these birds are also found in two illustrations of the episode. The first is a Byzantine embroidery, dating probably from about the year 1000, and strangely preserved since it was made up as a part of a triumphal banner by the people of Würzburg in 1266, and has been in the possession of the Historical Society of the town for a number of years.¹⁸ This textile, although of so early a date, appears to be a corruption of an earlier design, for Alexander bears two sceptres in his hands, and the two eagles seem to have merged into a sort of aquiline Siamese twin.



Fig 5 –ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND TWO EAGLES, MAINFRÄNKISCHES MUSEUM, WÜRZBURG

Note the similarity between the Würzburg eagles, and those on the silk fragment at St Germain, Auxerre, also from 10th century Byzantium.

The birds appear also on a 12th-century embroidery of German workmanship preserved in S. Patroclus's Church, at Soest. ¹⁹ With this one exception all the illustrations I have so far mentioned seem to have had their origin in the late Byzantine Empire. Let us now begin to trace the spreading of the motif outward from that centre. One of the most interesting illustrations is that on an enamelled bowl from Western Asia.²⁰ An Arabic inscription (not shown in the reproduction) indicates that it was made for Mawud, one of the petty princes whom the conquests of the Seljukian Turks established in Syria and Mesopotamia. This Mawud reigned between 1114 and 1144. The design, in which the wheels of the quadriga appear as meaningless flower-like circles at some distance from Alexander and the gryphons, is certainly based on the Byzantine tradition represented by the S. Mark's relief. But Strzygowski believes that the artist came from Persia or Transoxania, and Migeon recognizes in his work the influence of Chinese technique. ²¹

The motif seems to have spread, as was natural, also up into Russia, and appears on a carving at the Church of S. Demetrius, Vladimir, 22

(Detail below right, kindly supplied by **Tamar Khundadze**)



Fig 6 - VLADIMIR – St DIMITRI – *first picture is taken from:*
<http://www.virtvladimir.ru/page/vladimirinfo/oldtouns/vladimir/pamyatniki/cathedraldmitri/reznoiubor/>
a quotation from the site appears in the supplement, below

and on a gold diadem in the Collection Khanenko at Kieff. 23
Of these I have been able to learn nothing.

Luckily for us, the Internet site,
http://www.wumag.kiev.ua/wumag_old/archiv/1_97/klad.htm
shows us this beautiful head band:



Fig 7 - ALEXANDER JEWELLED HEADBAND found in 1800 at SAKHNOVKA, HERMITAGE MUSEUM *The treasure, dating from the 12th-13th was probably buried around 1240 to preserve it from the invading Mongols.*

(Detail below kindly supplied by **Tamar Khundadze**)



Fig 8 – detail of the central enamel

If we turn westward from our centre at Byzantium, we find at the Cathedral of Otranto, in the heel of Italy, the subject forming part of a huge design in the mosaic pavement covering the nave.²⁴

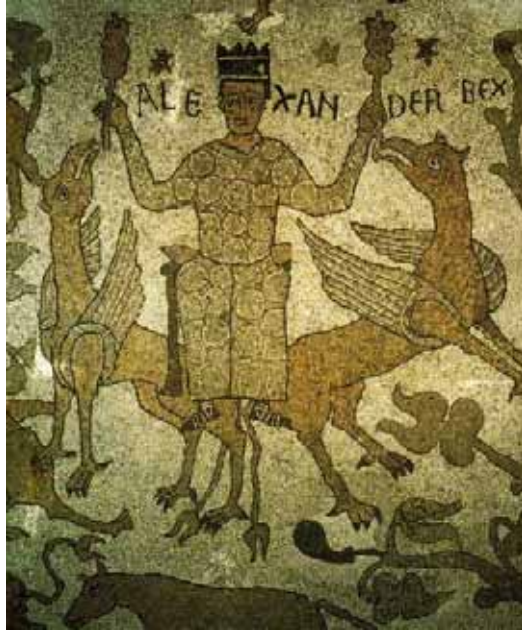


Fig 9 - DETAIL OF MOSAIC PAVEMENT, 1165, OTRANTO CATHEDRAL

(Compare this with a similar mosaic fragment from the Cathedral of Trani)



Fig 10 – DETAIL OF MOSAIC PAVEMENT, NARNI CATHEDRAL

from: <http://www.castelliecattedrali.net/sez1/Trani.htm>

Significantly enough the records tell us that the pavement was laid down in 1165 by a Greek artist, Pantaleone, and the style is still markedly Byzantine. The king is seated on a stool placed on the backs of two gryphons, but that the artist knew his subject is clear from the legend, "ALEXANDER", over the king's head. At San Domenico, Narni,²⁵ and at the Cathedral of Borgo San Donnino the Celestial Journey is carved on the façade. ²⁶



Fig 11 - BORGO SAN DONNINO (now FIDENZA) Alexander's Celestial Journey on the façade

In the year 1303 the inventory of Anagni Cathedral records:

"Item j dalmatica de samito viridi cum paraturis in fimbriis historia Alexandri elevati per grifos in aerem".²⁷ An Italian poem of the 14th century, the "Intelligenza," in describing an imaginary chamber adorned with mural paintings of subjects from the romances, says that there was portrayed in good colours and cunning shapes how Alexander was carried into the air by the gryphons, and how he surveyed all regions.²⁸

NOTES

1 Bericht der Sachsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, phil. hist. cl., 1877, pp. 67, 69.

2 The original version of Leo, as preserved in the Bamberg MS., is published by F. Pfister, *Der Alexanderroman des Archipresbyters Leo*. Quotation from p. 26. Other versions that have been published as Leo's make considerable amplifications.

3 *Chronique de Tabari*, tr. H. Zotenberg, I, p. 465. F. Spiegel, *Iranische Alterthumskunde*, I, p. 595.

4 [A Persian version is illustrated [PLATE, I, F] which has not been seen by the author, who is therefore not responsible for its inclusion.-ED.]

- 5 E. A. Wallis Budge, *Life and Exploits of Alexander*, p. 33.
- 6 *Sacred Books of the East*, xxIII, pp. 241, 242, 11. I,
- 7 E. A. W. Budge, *op. cit.*, p. xxxviii.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. xl, xliii.
- 9 Seesselberg, *Frühmittelalterliche Kunst des Germanischen Volkes*, figs. 18a, 3I, 32.
- 10 O. von Falke, *Geschichte der Seidenweberei*, I, fig. 132.
- 11 Figured by Strzygowski, *Amida*, p. 352.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 352.
- 13 Boito and Scott, *Basilica of St. Mark's*, p. 537. A case for the Oriental, not Byzantine, derivation of this carving has been made in *Zeitschrift für christliche Kunst*, xxiv, p. 307.
- 14 E. Bertaux, *L'Art dans l'Italie Meridionale*, I, p. 490.
- 15 Preserved in the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt. Described by Graeven in *Bonner Jahrbücher*, vol. 108/9, p. 266.
- 16 E. A. W. Budge, *op. cit.*, pp. 277 ff.
- 17 Pseudo-Callisthenes, ed. Meusel, p. 767.
- 18 Described in Hefner - Alteneck, ed. 2, I, p. 17. Figured *ibid.*, pl. 29, and in K. G. Stephani, *Altteste Deutsche Wohnbau*, II, p. 662.
- 19 Described in *Zeitschrift für Christliche Kunst*, 1902, p. 177.
- 20 Preserved at Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck. Described in Strzygowski, *Amida*, p. 353, and in *Monatshefte für Kunstwissenschaft*, 1909, p. 234.
- 21 Strzygowski, *Amida*, p. 353. *Monatshefte für Kunstwissenschaft*, 1909, p. 235.
- 22 *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 1893, II, p. 400, and *Freiburger Münsterblätter*, II, [The example here given is from the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, to which the author had not access.-ED.]
- 23 Collection Khanenko, *Croix et Images*, 1899-1900. *l'poque Slave*, 1902, pi. xxvii.
- 24 Described by Garufi in *Studi Medievali*, 1906/7, II, p. 507.

25 J. R. Rahn, Geschichte der bildenden Künste in der Schweiz,
p. 218, n. 3.

26 Porter, Lombard Architecture, IV, pi. xxix, fig. 3. [This
example is so much more Western than Eastern in treatment
that it will be illustrated in the continuation.-ED.]

27 Annales Archeologiques, xviii, p. 26.

28 Intelligenza, ed. Gellrich, st. 216.

NB – I am still looking for illustrations of:

A 12TH CENTURY GERMAN EMBROIDERY IN S.PATROCLUS CHURCH, SOEST

DETAIL OF AN ENAMELLED BOWL FROM WESTERN ASIA

2 - WESTERN EXAMPLES

Meanwhile the motif had crossed the great barrier of the Alps, and we find it early scattered along the natural highway of the Rhine. On the portal of the church at Remagen one of the most grotesque treatments is found [FIG. I] Alexander, a little mannikin seated in a bowl, stretches out his short arms to hold two rods baited with puppies; two creatures with bodies like weasels and wings like insects are emulating the feat of lifting one's self by one's bootstraps by crawling up the ropes by which they are supporting the bowl.



FIG 12 - PORTAL OF THE CHURCH AT REMAGEN

http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanisches_Pfarrhoftor

At Freiburg cathedral



FIG 13 - CAPITAL AT FREIBOURG CATHEDRAL

<http://www.zum.de/Faecher/G/BW/Landeskunde/rhein/freiburg/nikolauskapelle2.htm>

a capital shows Alexander sitting in a basket swung from the necks of two gryphons and holding rods, on which the bodies of two small animals are spitted.²⁹ A capital at Bale cathedral:



FIG 14 - CAPITAL AT BALE CATHEDRAL

repeats the subject, though the inevitable corruption of the rods into sceptres has taken place. Of Rhenish workmanship, too, is an enamel of the middle of the 12th century, which is singular in representing Alexander in profile, drawn along in a wheeled chariot by a gryphon team.³⁰ It shows a characteristic Teuton touch in the long, pink sausage used to lure the gryphons onward.



FIG 15 - Alexander the Great in a chariot drawn by griffins, ca. 1160, enamel, 10.2 cm square Victoria & Albert Museum

One of a group known as the Llangattock or Rolls Plaques which is of outstanding interest both technically and iconographically. Made of copper gilt with champlevé and cloisonné enamel by an anonymous craftsman in Mosan, it is a brilliant example of the art of enamelling as practised in the 12th century in the area around the Meuse valley (now in Belgium), centred on the bishopric of Liège. The boldly engraved figures are enriched by a subtle range of enamel colours, often blended to emphasise figure contours or drapery folds. Prominent features such as heads and hands are not enamelled but engraved and gilded. Mosan enamellers were amongst the most

skilled craftsmen of their time, and produced items for liturgical use – crosses, altars, reliquaries and candlesticks – numbers of which survive. (adapted from the on-line entry, V&A web site)

In this image we see Alexander with only one stick, not the traditional two, and it is baited with a snake instead of a small roasted animal, so resembles a caduceus. The appearance of water against a sandy shore may be deceptive: in icon painting a gold background represents heaven, a feature adopted by early Italian artists, so here we may be seeing Alexander already air-bound, and the sea below with brown earth beyond.

I have appended this image and the description from the Victoria & Albert Museum in the belief that this is the object described by Loomis as “Rhenish”. If it is, indeed, the same object, was Loomis wrong about the “long, pink sausage”? It looks more like a snake to me. I am indebted to this site for some of the information in the following italicized paragraphs:

http://www.langantiques.com/university/index.php/Enamels_on_jewelry

The Rheno-Mosan area lies in the valleys of the Meuse and the Rhine rivers, roughly in the Cologne-Trier-Liège triangle, and comprised two schools with various workshops in this region. The first was the Rhineland school with its main ambassador Nicolas of Verdun and the Mosan school in the area that is now Belgium's province Liège.

The Meuse valley lay in the heart of Charlemagne's empire and Mosan art is influenced both by classical and Carolingian elements in manuscript illumination, metalwork and especially the enameling for which it is particularly famous.

Champlevé enamel (from French: champ = "field" and lever = "to raise") is a technique which blossomed during the 12th century in the Rheno-Mosan area and Limoges (although already known to the Celts in the Early-Christian period). It is generally thought that these artists were influenced by the splendour of the Byzantine cloisonné enamels, knowledge brought back from the crusades.

Limoges enamel developed at about the same time but continued to be produced over a longer period and a greater volume of work was produced (or survived) resulting in the fame of Limoges extending beyond that of the Rheno-Mosan schools.

In the German museums are preserved at least two native textiles depicting the subject: one at the Kunstgewerbe Museum, Berlin; the other at the Gewebesammlung, Crefeld, a woven silk of Ratisbon workmanship, belonging to the 13th century.

The fact that France affords no clear illustration of Alexander's adventure in the skies is strange and hard to explain.

NB – Loomis did not know of the capital at Chalon-sur-Saône:



FIG 16 – *Chalon-sur-Saône – capital of the ascent of Alexander*

Peter Hubert has also directed me to an article of 1930 by M. Gouron:

<http://www.nimausensis.com/Nimes/Diaporama/Cathedrale/CathedraleNimes.htm>

where we see the remains of an Ascent of Alexander frieze:



FIG 17 – *Nîmes Cathedral – remains of a frieze of the Ascent of Alexander*

and a 17thc drawing by Anne Rulman, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, showing the sculpture before it was destroyed in 1823:

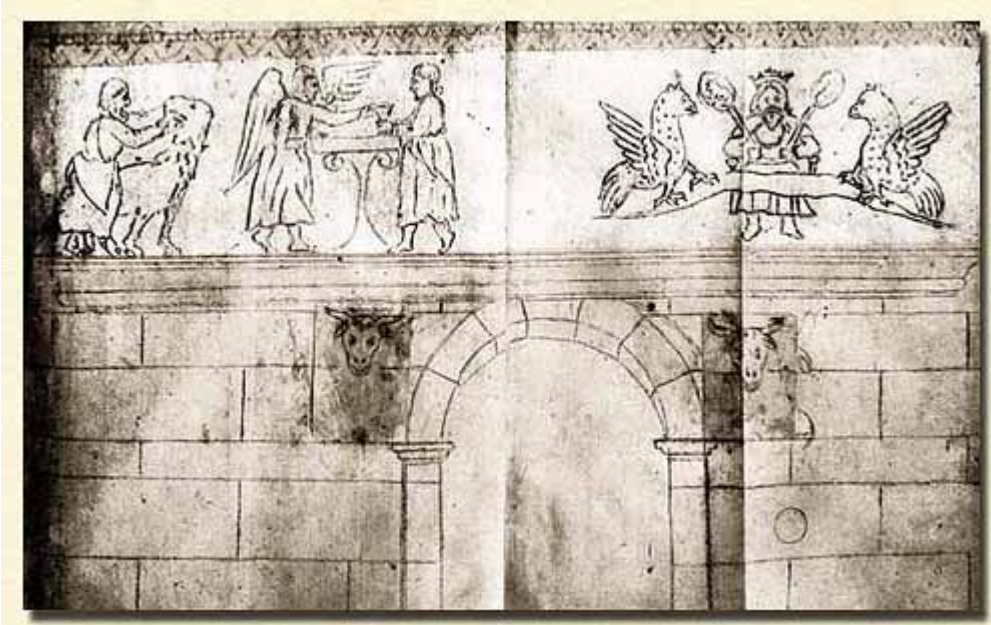


FIG 18 – sketch of the frieze before it was destroyed in 1823 –by Anne Rulman, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris

Another early drawing of this scene from the Bibliothèque Nationale, is this South Italian Ascent of Alexander:



FIG 19 – South Italian Ascent of Alexander now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, reproduced from Renzo Dionigi:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/renzodionigi/3501444219/>

There are also capitals at Moissac and Conques which are thought to be simplified illustrations of this story:



FIG 20 – *Moissac and Conques simplified illustrations of the Ascent of Alexander story, perhaps*

Only a sculpture at Le Mans cathedral, bearing a remote resemblance to the Freiburg capital, may be a derivative from that source.³¹



FIG 21 – Le Mans Cathedral Freiburg Cathedral

Image from:

<http://www.art-roman.net/lemanscath/lemanscath2.htm>

In view of this dearth, it is surprising to find across the Channel carvings of the Celestial Journey of various dates and widely scattered. At the little church of Charney Bassett in Berkshire 32 a tympanum of the second half of the 12th century shows the king seated between two amiable gryphons;



FIG 22 - TYMPANUM of the church at CHARNEY BASSETT, Berks;

but the absence of the vehicle and the rods, and the intrusion of other features give evidence of corruption. This corruption is due to the influence of a variation on the Sacred Tree motif, an example of which may be seen in an illumination in a book of hours made at Limoges. Here two lions place their forepaws against the trunk and bite at the branches.³³

In marked contrast to the rough workmanship of the Norman tympanum is the delicate carving on a misericord of about 1330 at Wells cathedral. ³⁴



FIG 23 - WELLS CATHEDRAL MISERICORD

This piece is imbued with a feeling which renders it not unworthy of a place in a building which bears on its front the finest series of sculptured figures in England. Unfortunately in this case, as in several others that follow, the shaft of the spear has been broken.

Gloucester cathedral, not far away, affords two misericords of this subject, which are to be dated about 1345.³⁵

In one Alexander stands in a basket formed of many coils, and carries two boars' heads on the tips of his spear.



FIG 24 - GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL

In the other



FIG 25 - GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL

he sits on a throne attached by chains to the necks of the gryphons, and offers them as bait the two shanks of some hooved animal.

NB- except where otherwise stated, the photos of misericords come from this site: <http://www.misericords.co.uk> . The second of the Gloucester Cathedral photos is not the one in Loomis' description.

At Lincoln about 1370



FIG 26 - LINCOLN CATHEDRAL MISERICORD – by Churchcat, Flickr

and at Chester about 1390-36 the subject was again carved on the misericords of the respective cathedrals.

At Cartmel Priory church in Lancashire a striking variation is to be seen on a misericord dating from the close of the 14th century.



FIG 27 - MISERICORD, CARTMEL PRIORY, LANCS.- Flickr

Here sits a crowned figure with a hideous face, wearing as his only garment a tippet over the shoulders. His hands and feet are clawed, and in his left hand he grasps a short mace. Beside him two dragons crouch. In view of the interpretation which presently we shall see was put upon the episode, this treatment is significant.

The Darlington misericord, to be dated about 1430, comes next in order, and exhibits Alexander sitting huddled between two handsomely collared gryphons and holding two sceptres.



FIG 28 - MISERICORD S. CUTHBERT'S CHURCH, DARLINGTON
– photograph by Emily Rawlins-Graham

My thanks to Mrs Joan Gilmore for giving us access to St Cuthbert's church, and to Mrs Ann Ducker for her lecture on St Cuthbert.

In the slightly later misericord from Whalley, Lancashire,



FIG 29 - MISERICORD WHALLEY CHURCH LANCS.

we have a return to the baited spears and also to some likeness of the basket.

The last of this series of misericords was carved about 1445, and is preserved at S. Mary's church, Beverley, Yorkshire.



FIG 30 - BEVERLEY MINSTER MISERICORD

In it we note the recurrence of the sceptres and the introduction of two extra dragons. While it is impossible to trace any connexion between these carvings, yet it is noteworthy that the motif seems to rise in the southwest and to move, with occasional deviations and retirements, toward the north-east, and that the three northernmost examples, at Cartmel, Darlington, and Beverley, all display the perverted treatment of the baited spears.

In a fine series of tapestries illustrating the romance of Alexander, made at Tournai about 1450 and now adorning the Palazzo Doria at Rome, the episode of the Celestial Journey occurs.



FIG 31 - FLEMISH TAPESTRY, XVc, photograph by Richard FitzSimmons

Above the magnificent cage of wrought ironwork in which Alexander is seated, God the Father appears in clouds, mournfully deprecating Alexander's presumption. A glance at the 15th-century illumination reproduced in *The Burlington Magazine*, vi, p. 395,

demonstrates that the tapestry designer was inspired, not by the independent artistic tradition which we have been tracing, but by the illuminators of manuscripts of the Alexander romance. A woodcut of the first half of the 16th century by Schaiifelein, kept at the British Museum, seems also independent and is characterized by freshness and spirit.³⁷

After this survey, the question inevitably arises: how came it that to this one episode out of a whole cycle such marked favour was shown by the medieval craftsman? Why was it so often used in the decoration of sacred buildings? Did some recondite significance lurk beneath the hard surface of enamel or mosaic, the smooth texture of silk, or the rough modelling of wood or stone? Now it is clear that in certain cases such as the Doria palace tapestry and the imaginary painted room of the "Intelligenza", where the scene is found among many others from the same romance, it was introduced without thought of any interest other than the strangeness and ingenuity of the mode of ascent. Likewise in the enamelled bowl of Mawud [c] and the Schaufelein woodcut, whose designers would not have been in touch with the mediaeval ecclesiastical tradition, no symbolical meaning was probably attached to the figure. Let us turn, then, to the examples from ecclesiastical art. Have we any reason to suppose that Alexander's Celestial Journey stood for some good or evil experience, or typified some good or evil personage? The most telling piece of evidence in favour of a good interpretation is the embroidery at Soest, which, together with another embroidery of the Agnus Dei in exactly the same style, forms a cushion for relics. It is hardly conceivable that for this use or for the decoration of an ecclesiastical vestment such as that mentioned in the Anagni inventory, a symbol of evil would have been deliberately chosen. Evidence, however, of a convincing sort that any general and authoritative tradition set a favourable interpretation on Alexander's exploit, is lacking. To be sure, certain early Ethiopian romances of Alexander paint his career as that of an exemplary and somewhat ascetic Christian, but they seem to have had no influence upon Western tradition. The highly interesting quotation from the "Cy Nous Dit" given by Julien Durand seems at first sight to put an end to the discussion, since it shows that the author of a fairly well known mediaeval book regarded Alexander as displaying a laudable curiosity to know concerning heavenly things. Translated the quotation runs thus:

Certain histories say that at the time of Mardocheus reigned Alexander, the which Alexander caused himself to be borne into the air in a chair with four gryphons, and turned a piece of flesh upon a lance whithersoever he wished to go, for they were anhungered . . . So may we learn that it behoves us all to aim and desire to have everlastingly the beauty of the heaven, even as Alexander put himself in such peril to behold the earth and the sea.³⁸

But an examination of the book shows that the compiler, selecting popular motifs from art, arbitrarily without any general sanction placed upon each any moral that would fit. While, therefore, some such moral as he gives may have obtained for the Soest embroidery and the Anagni dalmatic, yet we cannot regard him as the mouthpiece of the prevailing mediaeval tradition, a tradition which, as we have seen, was particularly weak in France. On the other hand, there is testimony from early times that Alexander, the hero

of popular romance, was looked upon with grave disapprobation by the scholarly, and especially the clerical world. He presents in this respect a striking resemblance to Dietrich of Bern, who at the same time was idolised by the world of German chivalry and consigned to hell by monkish historians. In the 3rd century Dion Cassius wrote that in the reign of Heliogabalus there appeared on the banks of the Danube a demon resembling Alexander, who with a company of bacchic revellers passed through Thrace, receiving divine honours, and finally disappeared after a sacrifice offered to him.³⁹ Valerius Maximus, who had much authority in the Middle Ages, spoke after this fashion: The valor and good fortune of King Alexander resulted in three very manifest stages of insolence. In contempt of Philip, he assumed Juppiter Ammon for his father; in weariness of the manners and dress of Macedon, he took to himself Persian clothing and customs; and despising mortal estate, he imitated that of a god.⁴⁰

The character for pride borne by Alexander among medieval moralists is attested by the fact that in the Middle English "Alphabet of Tales", translated from Etienne de Besançon, Alexander is the chosen example of Ambitio and Superbia.⁴¹

Since Alexander enjoyed such a reputation, and since the accounts of the Celestial Journey frequently hint that his ascent was terminated by the divine displeasure, was it not natural that the attempt to reach the heavens should have been regarded, as it was in the cases of Kai Ka'as and Nimrod, as an act of impious audacity? Now have we any warrant for believing that such was the mediaeval interpretation? Goldschmidt has called attention to some lines accompanying an illumination of the Celestial Journey in a manuscript of Rudolf von Ems' "Weltchronik", which furnish the warrant needed.⁴²

They may be translated as follows: Alexander, whither wilt thou? Thou hast verily no good intent. Wilt thou strive against the Godhead? Thou wilt suffer for it. No one enters heaven save he can deserve it. Such an attitude is indicated also in the Otranto mosaic.



FIG 32 - OTRANTO MOSAIC

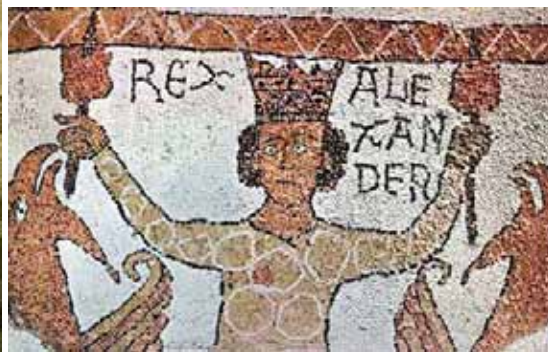


FIG 33 - TRANI MOSAIC



FIG 34 – SAN MARCO, VENICE, RELIEF, XII century

The pavement of which it forms a part covers the nave, and the general design consists of two huge trees on the backs of two elephants. One, apparently, is the Tree of Good and enfolds in its branches men and animals symbolic of the virtues; the other is the Tree of Evil, and among its branches are the impious king and his gryphons. It had been noticed, furthermore, by Father Cahier that at Bale cathedral the capital that is carved on one side with the Celestial Journey [FIG. 2] is decorated on the others with the Fall and Expulsion of Adam and Eve. Was a connection possible and what was that connection? Father Cahier suggested that the resumption of the first man was typified or paralleled by the pride of Alexander. But I believe that an obscure passage from a 12th-century writer gives us our best clue to a complete interpretation: namely, that the pride and fall, not of Adam, but of the Devil is here typified in the Celestial Journey. The Venerable Godfrey, Abbot of Admont, in his "Homiliae in Scripturam" in commenting on the first chapter of the "Macchabees" first explains that by the name Alexander we are to understand not unfittingly the dragon, the old serpent, who is called the Devil or Satan.⁴³ Again later, commenting on the words "egressus de terra Cethim", he ejaculates: Cethim means fear. He departed, alas, from fear when, despising the fear of God, he was exalted to such arrogance of mind that he chose to be under his own rather than God's dominion, saying in his heart, "I will set my throne in the North, I will be like the Most High". We learn further that Darius stands for our father Adam. Finally, summing up the whole, Godfrey says:

Alexander after leaving the land of Cethim, that is, the Evil Angel after falling from heaven, slew this King Darius when out of envy he persuaded him to eat the forbidden apple, and by this means cast him down miserably to death. It scarcely seems to me possible that the venerable homilist should have struggled to foist such an awkward interpretation on the verse unless he had been accustomed to associate Alexander the Great with the rebellion and fall of Lucifer. The Bale capital [FIG. 2] tends to show that the particular episode of the Celestial Journey was a special point of resemblance. The

identification of Alexander with the devil is confirmed by the Cartmel misericord, which depicts the king with the monstrous features proper to Satan. We may then say with some assurance that although in some exceptional cases the Celestial Journey was understood as a type of laudable striving heavenward, the authoritative tradition of the Church, stated by Rudolf von Ems and the Venerable Godfrey, and reflected in the Otranto mosaic [H], the Bale capital, and the Cartmel misericord, found in the episode an instance of overweening pride, and even a type of Lucifer's supreme attempt against the throne of God. 44 The question naturally arises: how did such a motif perpetuate itself and pass from town to town, from country to country, across mountains and seas? Sometimes, doubtless, the artist saw the motif at one place, then travelled on and reproduced it at another.

But we may imagine that more often it was the design itself that travelled to the artist. Carved on a casket, or woven in a web, it followed the great merchant routes westward and northward, to delight the eye not only of noble dame or wealthy burgess but also of the craftsmen in their employ. Probably, too, the craftsmen themselves compiled and passed around sketch-books of stock designs, somewhat like that of Villard de Honnecourt, though of a humbler variety. Sometimes the design would stand unexplained, mysterious, with the result that the copy made from it would show manifest distortions; sometimes the single word Alexander would give the clue to an artist who was well versed in his romances; sometimes, perhaps, the figure would be explained as a symbol of pride; sometimes, as a type of Satan, he would be depicted with the paws and face of a monster; sometimes, in association with the Temptation and Fall of Adam, the scene would be expounded at length as an allegory of Lucifer's impious ambition to sit upon the throne of the Most High. With the design before him, one craftsman would follow the lines with the skill of a master, another with a bungling stroke: one would emphasise the moral, another would have appreciation for nothing but the symmetry of the design. Much may yet be added to our knowledge of the history of this episode, and the day has yet to come when we can point to a passage which explicitly states that Alexander's Celestial Journey was a type of the rebellion of Lucifer. Yet I think we are in a position to say that the episode is an excellent example of the changes, minglings, misunderstandings, interpretations, which allure and baffle and still allure us in the study of mediaeval literature and art. [The carved tablet on the front of the Duomo, Borgo-San-Donino, is illustrated from a photograph kindly supplied by Mr. Arthur Kingsley Porter, the author of the sumptuous work "Lombard Architecture". (Not!)]



FIG 35 - CARVED SLAB, FRONT OF DUOMO, BORGO SAN DONNINO
Borgo-San-Donino, (now known as "FIDENZA"), my photograph

He records the local designation of the figure, "Berta che filava", Vol. II, p. 191, where he gives the legend of Berta, but, as Professor R. S. Loomis and Sir Martin Conway have independently observed, the tablet evidently represents Alexander's Celestial Journey, and not Berta. We also, with the author, have to thank Mr. G. C. Druce, F.S.A., for the use of many photographs besides those of the misericords, which have allowed reproduction on a larger scale, and for much advice and research; and Mr. A. F. Kendrick, Keeper of the Department of Textiles in the Victoria and Albert Museum, for valuable suggestions and additional references.- ED.]

NOTES

29 Figured F. X. Kraus, *Christliche Kunst*, II, I, p. 402. Described in *Freiburger Miinsterbltder*, II.

30 In 1897 it was owned by Lord Llangattock.

31 Cahier and Martin, *Nouveaux Melanges d'Archeologie*, *Curiosites mysterieuses*, p. I71.

32 C. E. Keyser. *Norman Tympana*, p. 70.

33 A. Michel. *Histoire de l'Art*, I, 2, p. 885.

34 For the dates of the misericords I am indebted to F. Bond's work on that subject, *Misericords*, pp. 226 f.

35 Figured by F. Bond, *op. cit.*, p. 80, upper figure. The lower figure on the same page depicts a modern work.

36 Figured *ibid.*, pp. 78, 79.

37 Figured Burlington Magazine, VI, p. 400. I have not included several carvings cited by various authors as illustrations of the Celestial Journey, since to my mind it seems rash to assume that a man placed between two monsters is necessarily a corruption of that particular motif. The following seem to me examples of rash identifications: at Urzel cited by Martin, *Nouveaux Mdlanges d'Archeologie, Curiosités Mysterieux*; at Rouen cited by F. X. Kraus, *Christliche Kunst*, II, I, p. 403; at Pavia and at Parma cited by Boito and Scott, *Basilica of St. Mark's*, p. 542; at Bitonto cited by Gabelentz, *Mittelalterliche Plastik in Venedig*, p.127. The third misericord at Gloucester cathedral described by Meissner in *Archiv für Neueren Sprachen*, LXVIII, p. 184, as showing the gryphons whispering temptation in Alexander's ear is a modern work, probably suggested by the similar misericord at Chester. Meissner's whole theory of such a scene, distinct from the scene of the actual flight, has no authority in literature and has no other basis in art than this modern carving. The citation of a mosaic at Taranto by O. M. Dalton, *Ivory Carvings in the British Museum*, pp. 75 f., is probably an error for Otranto.

41 Early English Text Society, O.S., vol. 126/7, Nos. 49, 737.

42 A. Goldschmidt, *Albani Psalter*, p.72.

43 Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 174, p. 1130. 184

44 Meissner's identification of Alexander with Antichrist in *Archiv für Neueren Sprachen*, LxvIII, is not there supported, by a shred of evidence, and no facts in confirmation of it have come to my notice.

NB – I am Still looking for pictures of:

DETAIL OF 13TH CENTURY RATISBON TEXTILE - & other textiles mentioned, especially the cope from ANAGNI in the Duomo Treasury - BITONTO

PART TWO, Extract from the SUMMARY of a dissertation by Victor Michael Schmidt, of Groningen University, written in 1988

http://dissertations.ub.rug.nl/FILES/faculties/arts/1988/v.m.schmidt/luchtvaart_alexander_de_grote.pdf

Subsequently published in book form as:

“A Legend and Its Image: The Aerial Flight of Alexander the Great in Medieval Art”

by Victor Michael Schmidt, 1995 published by E Forsten, Groningen

NB, this extract did not include illustrations but I have supplied some.

SUMMARY

The story of Alexander the Great's Aerial Flight holds a special position among the manifold legendary traditions around the famous world conqueror that were known during the Middle Ages, since no other legend of his miraculous life was represented so often in art as this one. According to the legend Alexander had travelled through the sky in a vehicle drawn by griffins, which he had lured upward by holding meat in front of them.

A review of the existing literature on the subject, notably the monograph by Chiara Settis-Frugoni (Settis-Frugoni, 1973), reveals that we still need a study of the origin, meaning and development of the various visual traditions in Western Medieval art, based upon a corpus of all the images that are known at present. Especially the images of the Flight in the manuscripts of Latin and French works about Alexander need to be studied in full. The Alexander imagery in illustrated manuscripts and incunabula from Germany and the Low Countries has been dealt with by D.J.A. Ross (Ross 1971). Whereas his main object is the study of picture cycles, I will focus on the pictorial types of the Flight. Other items which particularly need to be discussed are the relation between the visual type of the Flight in Romanesque art to that in Byzantine art; the relation between the former type to similar images of a figure between two animals; and the meaning of this type.

The method followed to study the meaning of the images of the Flight partly depends on the nature of the material discussed, and will be explained in its proper place. Throughout the book, however, I use the following notions. To clarify the origin of a certain visual type I use the concept of the 'encompassing theme' or Rahmenthema (see Bialostocki, espec. 144-149), and to analyze the visual types themselves and the differences between them I employ the distinction made by Schapiro between a 'theme of state' and a 'theme of action' (Schapiro 1973). The first chapter deals with the images in Romanesque art. First a short outline of the literary transmission of the story is given (p.7-12), The most important work in this respect is a Latin translation, made by an archpriest Leo of Naples, probably between 951 and 959, of the (lost) *-redaction of a

Greek Alexander Romance known to scholarship as Pseudo-Callisthenes there are, however, clear indications that the legend was already known in the West by the 9th c., and probably even earlier.

The Flight is the only episode in Alexander's life that was also represented outside the context of Alexander cycles in illustrated manuscripts. As such the image is predominantly found in Romanesque art (12th-early13th cs.), especially in architectural sculpture and mosaic pavements of churches and monasteries. Representations are known from the Meuse valley (cat.no. 83), England (cat.no. 5), Germany (cat.nos. 10,21, 81, 86-87), Switzerland(cat.no.1), Italy (cat.nos 3-4, 9, 14, 16-17, 19, 24-25, 90) and France (cat.nos. 6, 15, 18, 20, 23). In Spain the story was apparently not represented, and the so-called images of the Flight in Scandinavia have been rightly dismissed as highly dubious. As an independent image the Flight also occurs in the art of the Byzantine Empire and limitrophe areas such as Russia (10th-14th cs.). In Romanesque art the Flight is usually represented according to a fixed and simple scheme: Alexander sits frontally in or on a vehicle (often a throne, sometimes a basket or hammock) and holds a stick with bait in each hand. Two griffins are symmetrically arranged to his left and right (p.12-17).

The image of the Flight in the East has a similar symmetrical composition, but with one important difference: Alexander is sitting in a frontally rendered chariot with a deployed team of griffins. It is in fact an iconographic variant of the encompassing theme of a 'frontal figure in a chariot with a deployed team'. As this encompassing theme rarely occurs in Western Medieval lit, it is likely that the Western image of the Flight derives from other sources. Indeed, one can think of the image as that of an enthroned ruler to whom two griffins were attached on either side. It was probably due to imaginative artists who wanted to make Alexander's means of transport more plausible that he was sometimes represented as sitting in a basket-like vehicle (p.17-25).

Thus considered, the Western image of the Flight is historically speaking, a late variant of the encompassing theme of a 'figure between two animals', or the so-called 'master of animals'.



“Master of Animals” finial from Luristan, c1500 BC, Smithsonian Institute, Washington

This scheme is one of the oldest in the history of art,



Luristan quiver plaque of about 1000-650BC Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Master of Lions or Master of Goats, these depictions of Masters of Beasts were photographed by Mary Harrsch.

and 'masters of animals' can still be found in early Medieval and Romanesque art.



Master of Beasts jewel found at Tillya Tepe, Museum of Kabul, 1c BC – 1c AD

The Kourgan of Tillya Tepe (“Hill of Gold”) was excavated by an Afghan/Russian team in 1978. The hoard of treasure found there is known as the Bactrian Hoard. It dates from around the time of Jesus – give or take a century either way. Alexander the Great came here with his army in the 4thc BC, and, according to Marco Polo, the people of Bactria (a fine city at that time) said he took a wife here, Stateira, the daughter of Darius, King of Persia. Stateira, also known as Barsine, was murdered by Alexander’s wife, Roxana.



Byzantine silk representing Gilgamesh as Master of Lions, 8th-11thc, known as the "Suaire de St Victor", Sens Cathedral Treasury

When the animals are griffins or eagles the similarities with Alexander's Flight are great indeed, and many a representation that in the literature goes under the name of Alexander's Flight is in fact a 'master of animals'.



Trevières, Normandy, Master of Griffins, XIIc



Charney Bassett, Gloucestershire, Master of Griffins, XIIIc

Despite the similarities the two should not be confused: the 'master of animals' tames the creatures by holding them by the neck; he does not offer them bait, and a vehicle is lacking (p.25-27). As to the meaning of the image of the Flight, the most widespread opinion is that it was regarded as an example of pride. The evidence for this, however, is problematic.

If one sets out to find a confirmation of this view in contemporary religious writing one is bound to be disappointed. Fair enough, Alexander is regarded as presumptuous, and even as a type of the devil, in some 12th c. Bible commentaries. It is striking indeed that the vocabulary employed to show Alexander's pride could remind one of flying. Similar vocabulary is used in some 13th c. sermons, where Alexander is equally condemned as an example of pride. An explicit reference to the Flight, however, is lacking, and it is even highly doubtful if all these writers wanted to allude to it (p.31-34). The story does turn up in some collections of examples where it is used to illustrate various moral lessons- but not pride (p.35-37). The first explicit connection between Alexander's pride and the Flight is made not in a religious, but in a secular work, viz. the world chronicle of Jans Enikel (written after 1272). It is doubtful, however, whether this text can be used for the interpretation of images that date from a much earlier time (p.30-31).

Moreover, the image itself does not provide any clues to support the assumption that Alexander's Flight was to be condemned (compare the far more outspoken representations of pride, common during the 12th-13thc s., symbolized by a knight falling from his horse, or the illustrations of the Flight in the manuscripts of the world chronicle of Jans Enikel).

The absence of such elements in the image suggests that other interpretations are possible. Some scholars have in fact suggested that the Flight symbolizes the ascension of the soul to heaven. One should not forget, however, that Alexander's adventure is a journey through the air, and not a journey to heaven or the upper world. Although it cannot be excluded that in certain contexts the Flight was regarded as a symbol of the soul's ascension, there is, as far as I know, no literary evidence for this assumption(p.38-

39). Settis-Frugoni, the latest author to treat the theme of Alexander's Flight extensively, puts forward the most nuanced hypothesis, arguing that the Flight was regarded in France in a positive way, whereas in Germany, and partly in Italy too, it was considered as an example of pride. The main problem here is, however, that the images in France do not basically differ from those in Germany, which suggests that all of them had a similar meaning (p.39).

Before attempting a new interpretation it is necessary to look at the story again. It is argued here that there was a clear connection between Alexander and *mirabilia*, because of the marvellous things he was supposed to have seen and done. Already by the end of the 10th c. these wonder stories must have been very popular, and the legend of the Flight was very likely one of the most popular of these. If one assumes that, it becomes at least understandable why this particular story was represented so often as an independent image during the following centuries(p.40-46). A basic feature of this image is, as said above, the frontality of the Alexander figure. It is likely that the frontality is used here as an artistic mode of presenting a transcendent figure or a sacred theme of state (Schapiro 1973, 32). This implies that Alexander is not only being elevated, but also being exalted. The representation of the Flight is, in other words, an apotheosis-like image. One can imagine that such a global meaning befits a secular work as the embroidery in Wirtzburg (cat.no. 87). But the same pictorial form is maintained in representations of the Flight in churches and monasteries. This suggests that the image in both a secular and a religious context had a similar meaning (p.47).

With these considerations in mind it is tempting to deduce the intended meaning of the images from their visual context. That is to say, not only from their purely iconographical context, but from their total context, since one should take such factors as the location of the images and the image carrier into account as well. From this, more functionalist rather than purely iconographic, approach it follows that the material is arranged according to architectural sculpture in cloisters (p.49-52); tympana (p.52-58); floor mosaics (p.58-67); and architectural sculpture in church interiors (p.67-72). As a matter of course fragments, and images of which their original context has been greatly altered or of which their present location is doubtful, are not discussed in full (cat.nos. 3, 9, 18, 20, 23, 81, 83). Likewise little ink is spilt on those images of which it seems a priori doubtful whether they had any clear meaning at all, although they are still in situ (cat.nos. 4-6, 16-17).

The result of this discussion is that the image of the Flight can be interpreted as the expression of a longing for heaven and hence as a reference to the heavenly bliss enjoyed by the faithful in the hereafter. Conclusive evidence for this hypothesis is admittedly lacking. There are only hints which, when taken together, make this interpretation more probable than the common opinion that the Flight was regarded as an example of pride.

It would be wrong, though, to suppose that the secular aspects did not play a role at all when the image was depicted in a religious context. There was, as was argued above, a great deal of interest in wonder stories such as that of the Flight. The image agrees with this popularity and is an expression of it. The reasons for this interest, however, are

difficult to grasp. The age-old dream of flight may have been a factor, the fact that Alexander's Flight was a dangerous adventure, another. Griffins were thought of as ferocious animals, and the sheer fact that Alexander succeeded in taming them may have heightened the interest in the story. Alexander has something of a 'master of animals' indeed. Such aspects may have played an important role, even with those images of which it may be doubted, judging by their visual context, whether they had a clear, that is to say religious meaning. The alternatives are not, as is often supposed, religious meaning or no meaning, but religious or secular meanings, both laden with affect (Schapiro 1980, 179-181).

In the course of the 13th c. the Flight, as an independent image, was represented more and more rarely. Its disappearance can be explained by the rise of the new order of Gothic architecture and the gradual emergence of a more fixed and systematic iconography of church decoration. For a single image like the Flight there was apparently no room any more (p.74-76). But an image, once invented, dies hard. During the 14th and 15th cs. the Flight made its reappearance on misericords, which surprisingly enough are all located in England (cat.nos. 2, 7-8, 11-13, 22, 26-27). It is a true survival of the old image, as the representations still follow the old scheme of composition, unlike the contemporary manuscript illustrations, for which new types had been created in the meantime. On these stalls Alexander was never to take a soaring flight again; under the seats of numerous English canons he finally found a truly humble end.

NB – I have stopped the quotation at this point as I am not looking beyond the Romanesque period, but the entire dissertation can be read online here:

http://dissertations.ub.rug.nl/FILES/faculties/arts/1988/v.m.schmidt/luchtvaart_alexander_de_grote.pdf

PART THREE

L'Ascension d'Alexandre le Grand sur le relief de l'église de Xaxuli*

by

Tamar Khundadze

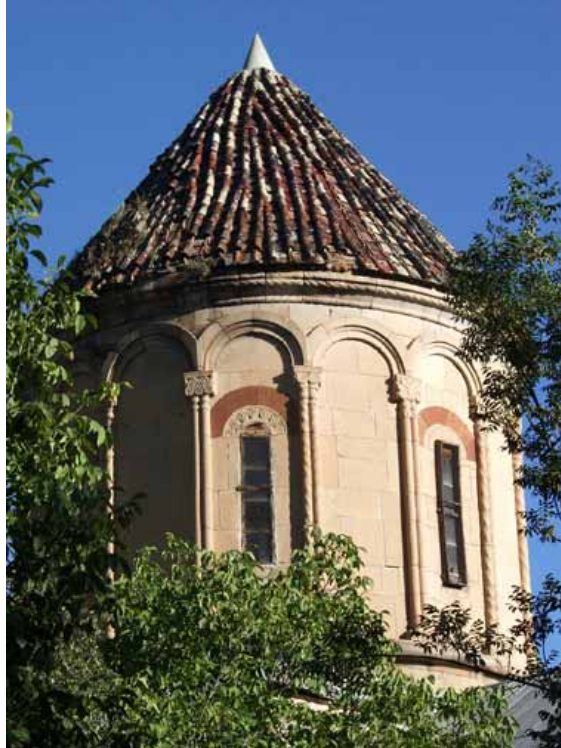
L'institut de l'histoire de l'art de Tbilissi (Géorgie)

21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London

Communication (VIII.7 Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus)

** The 10thc monastery of Xaxuli is also known as Khakhuli, Hahuli and even as Haho. Located in southern Georgia, on the territory of Turkey at the present time, the monastery was founded by King David Kuropalati. All the photographs were kindly sent by **Tamar Khundadze**, apart from those where a web site origin is indicated.*





Xaxuli – in Turkish Georgia East of Erzurum

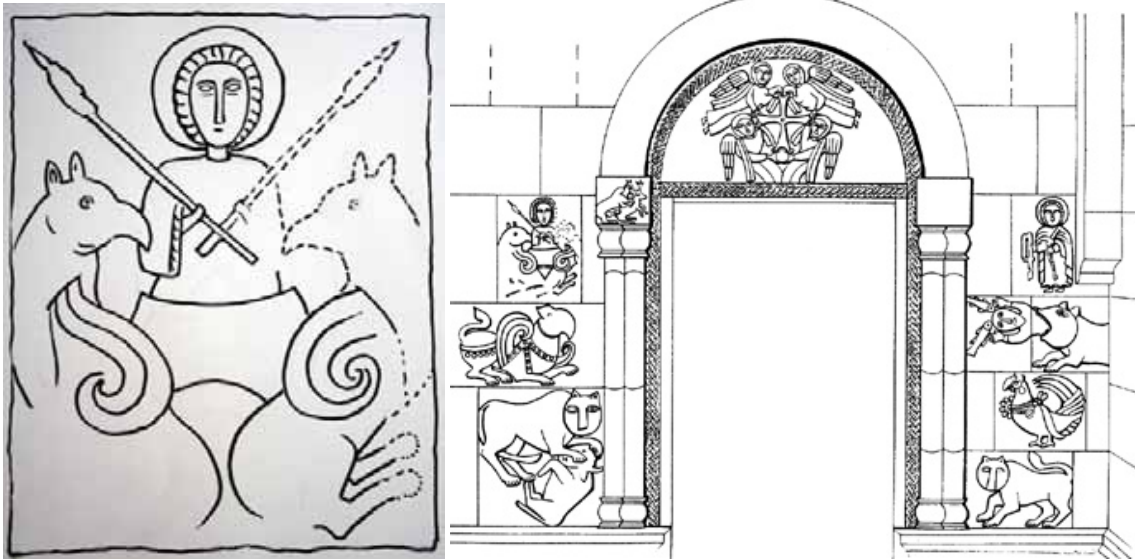
Among the reliefs on the south doorway of the 10th century church of Xaxuli 1, one notes the composition of the Ascension of Alexander the Great (fig.1), a subject well known in Byzantine and Romanesque art.² This church of historic Tao is today in Turkey, east of Erzurum.



XAXULI, part of Alexander the Great and Griffins relief, Xc

Unfortunately these reliefs are half covered by the columns of the gallery added on to the facade in the 14th century ³. The composition of the Ascension of Alexander the Great is hidden by the massive capital of the column of the annexe, and the impost leaning against it completely covers one griffin and Alexander's left shoulder. This makes it difficult to inspect it and to take photos, and has provoked different opinions on its identification. It was described as the representation of St George⁴, but since the 1970s it has been definitively regarded as the composition of the Ascension of Alexander the Great ⁵.

Despite the hidden part of the composition, one can recognise the well-established design



Sketches of the Xaxuli Ascension of Alexander the Great and the schema of the façade

of the Ascension of Alexander the Great, in a symmetrical and heraldic composition in which Alexander is habitually shown on a chariot, throne or nacelle, drawn into the sky by two griffins. The hero is waving lances bearing pieces of game which are bait for the griffins.

This subject was inspired by the story of the Pseudo-Callisthène (3rd century) and later versions 6, and has appeared in Byzantine art since the Macedonian period (843-1056) and are still extant in the 12th-13th centuries. It comes from the imperial Roman tradition and represents the symbol of the power of the Emperor. This is more often a feature on royal churches and in minor art.

The oldest examples, eastern and western, apparently date from the 10th century, 7 for instance: the ivory cabinet in the Darmstadt museum 8,



Byzantine ivory cabinet in the Darmstadt museum, X century

the Peribleptos Mistra relief 9,



Peribleptos Mistra relief, X century

the enamelled diadem of Preslav, (Bulgaria),¹⁰



Preslav diadem, “The Ascension of Alexander the Great” – *this picture is taken from:*

<http://www.museum-preslav.com/index.html>

a quotation from the site appears in the supplement, below

the seal of the 10th century hermitage,¹¹ the Pala Doro enamel,



the Pala Doro enamel of the head of Alexander between two rampant griffins

the Würzburg silk flag 12.



Würzburg silk flag, X Century

And also on 12th-13th century monuments, for example: the reliefs on the façade of Saint-Mark's in Venice, 13 and at San Domenico di Narni, 14



Alexander and Griffins relief on the church of San Domenico di Narni

of the cathedral of Borgo San Donnino (*now Fidenza*), ¹⁵ of the capital at Basel cathedral, ¹⁶ of the tiling in Otranto cathedral ¹⁷, etc. This theme is also seen often in Russian art. We can give examples here of the reliefs in the Saint-Dimitri churches ¹⁸ at Vladimir and at Juriev-Polsky,



VLADIMIR – St DIMITRI – *this picture is taken from:*

<http://www.virtvladimir.ru/page/vladimirinfo/oldtouns/vladimir/pamyatniki/cathedraldmitri/reznoiubor/>

a quotation from the site appears in the supplement, below



Detail of the relief on the Saint-Dimitri church at Vladimir

the golden diadem of the Hermitage museum 19.



Golden diadem of the Hermitage museum



detail of the central enamel

This beautiful plate showing a typical Byzantine Alexander's Ascent of the 12th-13th is also in the Hermitage:



The Yamalo-Nenets dish – 12th-13th Byzantine Crusader dish (brought to Siberia by Alanos a Georgian)? Now in the Hermitage Museum. Silver, chased engraved and gilded. – this picture is taken from:

<http://www.segabg.com/fixe/vrpl.asp?id=1895420>

a quotation from the site appears in the supplement, below



detail of the central motif:

THE HERMITAGE MUSEUM – Alexander the Great’s ascent, from :
<http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/museums/shm/shmbyz.html>

How can we explain the representation of the image of Alexander the Great in Xaxuli church, and in what context is it to be considered in the programme for the church decoration ?

The Georgian Chronicles tell us that the donor of the Xaxuli monastery was the king of Tao, David III (961-1001) ²⁰, called The Great, who had close links with Byzantium. He had even received Byzantine titles, firstly that of Magistros, and later (in 987) that of Curopalate, for having helped the Emperor to put down the revolt of Bardas Scléros. At the same time he received lands in the neighbouring Byzantine regions (in the valleys of the Euphrates and the Araxe) ²¹.

David Curopalate's domestic policy was particularly remarkable - as his heir he took the son of the king of Quartli, Gourgen the Great Bagrat who was his adopted son and who was to reign under the name of Bagrat III (975 - 1014), king of Georgia, David's will having permitted the unification of the kingdom. ²²

The presentation in Xaxuli church of the image of Alexander the Great may be explained by the influence of imperial Byzantine iconographic themes, and of their symbolism. In this way the idea of the power and of the unity of the Georgian kingdom is emphasised. The parallel theme is obvious to us.

In this context the image of Alexander the Great appears in much later literary sources (11th -13th centuries); the king of Georgia, David the Builder ²³ (1089-1125) was named

in this way as a "new Alexander". The life of Alexander the Great is found in Georgian folklore 24.

It is remarkable to find the personage more than once in the Georgian Chronicles 25, published in the 10th-12th centuries, in accordance with more ancient sources. In these chronicles Alexander's activity and above all his arrival in Georgia (Quartli) are considered as the preparation for Christianity. In addition, in the official source of Georgia - "the life of the Georgian kings" (by Leon Mroveli), Alexander is judged to be the conqueror of paganism and pantheism and the creator of monotheism. The Chronicle says: "Alexander charged Azon to adore the Sun, the Moon and the five Stars,



National Museum, Kabul, "Alexander the Great in a chariot drawn by lions?" from <http://arthistory.blogspot.com/2008/06/afganistan-hidden-treasures-from.html>

This mysterious object, from among the few remaining treasures of the Museum at Kabul, is said to represent Alexander the Great by some authorities, the Goddess Kybele in her lion-drawn chariot by others

and to serve the unseen God who was the creator of all things. As at this time there was no prophet, nor doctor of the true religion for the education and correction of men, he had invented this cult for all the lands under his authority. After imposing this religion he leftAlexander then being dead, Azon gave up the cult which had been imposed on him, and began to adore Idols. 26

The composition of "The Ascension of Alexander the Great" at Xaxuli is original for a few details of iconography. For instance, Alexander's halo. Most of the known

examples show the hero with a crown or a diadem; at Xaxuli, there is a halo in place of the crown, a detail which highlights in particular Alexander's divine origin. As the Georgian Chronicles considered Alexander the Great to be one of the Old Testament prophets, preparing the way for the "true religion", his representation can also be explained from this fact.

It is interesting that, on the Xaxuli relief, Alexander resembles the image of St George: beardless and with curly hair, this could explain how Alexander could have been confused with this saint ²⁷. It is possible as well that the sculptor may have been inspired by this saint who was specially venerated in Georgia and thought to be a figure of the victory over paganism. According to the Georgian Chronicles, Alexander was also charged with such a mission during the pagan epoch.

The relief is part of the sculpted grouping of the gate treated entirely in a single plane. The style is very simplified; thus one cannot tell if Alexander is in a carriage or a cart for the wheels are not marked. Together with sculpture in a single plane, common in the 10th century, high relief has also been used, such as the monumental figure of the eagle on the south window, which is well modelled.

The solemn composition representing the Ascension of Alexander forms part of the programme of the reliefs in Xaxuli church, which convey the idea of the triumph of the Christian religion, of the Resurrection, of the Ascension:



Xaxuli church, the Ascension

and of the liberation of the soul 28. On the door, the elevation of the cross is seen, carried by angels. On the right, from top to bottom: St Peter holding the key of Paradise,



Xaxuli church, St Peter holding the key of Paradise

then Jonas emerging from the whale, and further down, a cock and a lion.



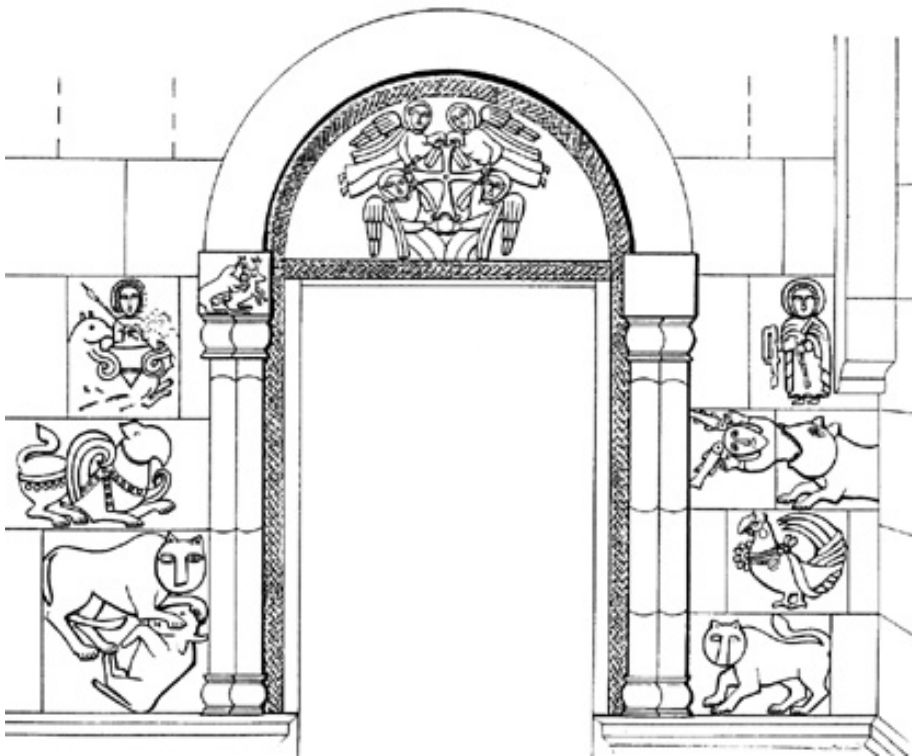
Xaxuli church, a cock and a lion

Symmetrically to the left, there is the Ascension of Alexander, a griffin, and the contest between the lion and the bull.



Xaxuli church, a battle between a lion and a bull

On the gate reliefs, three representative figures can be seen: from the ancient world Alexander the Great, from the Old Testament the prophet Jonas, and finally St Peter from the New Testament.



Xaxuli church, the schéma

One could think that this selection is scarcely fortuitous: Alexander the Great has for the first time in the world overthrown the tradition of Greek superiority over the Barbarians²⁹. His aim was to bring about a cohabitation between Greeks and Barbarians. The same idea appears in the book of Jonas, God is described as benevolent not only towards the Chosen People but also towards the pagans led astray in sin, thus he requires the prophet Jonas, after emerging from the whale, to preach to the Ninivites (IV-11). This aspect of the history of Alexander and of Jonas, both from different worlds, foreshadows the Christian way of thinking.

Furthermore, one can find analogies in the lives of the prophet Jonas and of St Peter. Namely, their human weaknesses: Jonas refusing to go to Niniveh (Jonas 1,3), and Peter denying his God three times when Jesus was arrested (Matthew 26, 69, 75, Mark 14, 66, 72, Luke 22, 55, 61, John 18, 26-27).

Also, one sees the synthesis of cultures in the Xaxuli reliefs: Alexander the king / ancient hero, Jonas the Old Testament prophet, St Peter representing the New Testament saints, and in a lateral niche the Virgin, all participating in glorifying the cross being carried by the angels. This ascension of the Cross is a Paleo-Christian image which is to become characteristic of Georgian iconography.

The life and history of Xaxuli monastery are equally interesting: the Christian church has been turned into a mosque, and the gallery (closed) has become a local school. Thus the house of God has been preserved³⁰. The local Moslems respect the sacred images carved on the walls of the church. At Xaxuli the faces of the saints have not been desecrated. The Moslem women adore in particular the icon of the Virgin and Child and they ask for help from her. At the Festival of Bayram, coloured eggs and candles are brought to her. This fact is interesting in regard to the composition of Alexander the Great, whose image is accepted and appreciated in the Moslem world. In witness to this are literary examples such as the "Esquander Name; "The book of Alexander" by Nizami (12th-13th centuries) and miniatures³¹. And works of art such as the enamelled cup in the Innsbruck museum (12th century)



Enamelled cup in the Innsbruck museum (12th century)

32, the fresco on the ceiling of the Palatine Chapel at Palermo (12th century) 33, etc.



Fresco on the ceiling of the Palatine Chapel at Palermo (12th century)



Xaxuli – in Turkish Georgia East of Erzurum – Alexander relief

At Xaxuli one sees a spontaneous cohabitation between the Christian past and the Moslem population, a cohabitation manifestly born of the existence of the monument. The situation is found elsewhere, in the village of Ohan in particular. The Xaxuli church continues its life. I believe that one may think of a project involving the local population and archeologists for the satisfactory maintenance of this beautiful monument.

*End of the quotation from Tamar Khundadze
L'institut de l'histoire de l'art de Tbilissi*

The French edition of this paper including the footnotes may be accessed here:

<http://www.byzantinecongress.org.uk/com2/M.html>

For an article about Monumental Sculpture and bas-reliefs of the V–XI centuries in Georgia by Dr Natela Aladashvili, please click here:

http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/georgian_churches.pdf

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

Peter Ackermann kindly drew my attention to this representation of Alexander's flight over the entrance to the church of Sta Maria della Strada, Matrice Molise, in Abruzzi, Italy:



Tympanum showing Alexander's flight over the entrance to the church of Sta Maria della Strada, Matrice Molise, in Abruzzi, Italy

from: <http://www.francovalente.it/?p=1206>

Note the "Senmurv"-style monsters on each side of the griffins; these may have been influenced by those on the tomb of Theodote in Pavia, see:

http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/some_varieties_of_griffin.pdf

In Spain there is an Ascent of Alexander capital at Revilla de Collazos, Palencia:



Revilla de Collazos, Palencia, Ascent of Alexander capital

From:

<http://www.amigosdelromanico.org/phpBB/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=949>

by Antonio Garcia Omedes.

While at the little church of San Gil de Luna, between Tudela & Huesca – not far from Agüero in Zaragoza, there is this lovely “shorthand version” thought to be an early work by the Agüero Master:



San Gil de Luna, Zaragoza, “Master of Griffins” capital

There is also, this (similarly vestigial) capital from S Pedro, Soria:



S Pedro, Soria, “Master of Griffins” capital

These are what I have called “Master of Griffins” sculptures, comparable to the ones at Trevières, Moissac and Conques, probably influenced by the more detailed Alexander and griffins images. The capital at Chalon-sur-Saône, where Alexander is seen with the griffins, but his bait on sticks is also shown, is an example of a transitional stage in the simplification of the image. By the time this sculpture was made at Blasimon Abbey:



Blasimon Abbey, Gironde, “Master of Griffins” capital

the elements indicating a connection with the Ascent of Alexander had all but disappeared.

Further fantastical adventures of Alexander the Great

At the beginning of this exploration of Alexander the Great's fantastical adventures, I mentioned that in later additions to the story, Alexander is said to have explored the depths of the ocean. Here are a few illustrations from late medieval and Renaissance manuscripts:

This is a page from Jan Enikel's Regensburg MS, c 1410:



Jan Enikel's Regensburg MS, c 1410, Getty Institute, Los Angeles, from:

<http://www.atopia.tk/index.php/terra8/AlexandersIndia-terraincognitaaspropaganda.html>

Here we learn that Alexander also explored the sea in a glass "submarine".



<http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=2276>



This MS is from Flanders



This one, dated 1320 is from Berlin

And this one from



PARIS, Bibliothèque Nationale, Alexander under the sea

This MS illustration appears on the cover of “Alexander the Great, a life in Legend”



By Richard Stoneman – Yale University Press, 2008



VLADIMIR – St DIMITRI – *this picture is taken from:*

<http://www.virtvladimir.ru/page/vladimirinfo/oldtouns/vladimir/pamyatniki/cathedraldmitri/reznoiubor/>

I quote a short extract from the site:

This world of wild beasts and strange monsters, such as winged lions and two-headed creatures, which no doubt fascinated the townspeople, was particularly familiar and comprehensible to the feudal nobility. In early Russian literature the heroic princes were often compared to lions, panthers, crocodiles and eagles, and there were many precious objects to be found in the churches and rich households decorated with fantastic animals, the work of both Russian and foreign craftsmen, as well as rich apparel made of cloth from Byzantine and the east and embroidered with strange beasts. The cathedral must have looked like a powerful ruler clad in sumptuous apparel decorated with mythical creatures.

The stately rhythm of the cathedral's architecture differs from the soaring quality of the original Cathedral of the Assumption. In the Cathedral of St. Dmitri we see a slow, majestic "ascent", like the great Vsevolod himself in his heavy, sumptuous robes mounting the steps to his throne. This analogy was reinforced by the cathedral's stone ornament. The main purpose of the ornamentation was to emphasise the power and majesty of the ruler. First and foremost, it reflects the tastes of the feudal nobility, cleverly fused with elements of church symbolism. It is highly probable that the religious chronicler neglected to record the construction of Vsevolod III's royal cathedral precisely because the secular element appeared so strongly in its ornamentation and the exuberant

sculpture distinguished the building so sharply from the severe episcopal Cathedral of the Assumption.

There are two large sculptural compositions particularly worthy of note. The first is to be found on the eastern *zakomara* (*apse*) of the south wall and shows Alexander the Great ascending into heaven. Alexander is sitting in a wicker chariot to which winged griffins are harnessed. In his raised hands he is holding lion cubs, a bait for the griffins, who are straining after them and thus carrying the emperor up to heaven. Above Alexander's head there are two beautifully carved birds in flight who are watching the scene with amazement. In early times this fantastic theme was understood as a symbol glorifying a mighty ruler's power and, as such, fitted in well with the general intention of Vsevolod's cathedral.

Contrasting styles of carving, which we first saw in the Cathedral of the Assumption of 1158-1160, are much more evident in the sculptured decoration of the Cathedral of St. Dmitri. The high relief carving is remarkable for its plasticity and is clearly the work of craftsmen who were past masters at the art of carving in stone and were aware of the material's plastic potential. The other type of carving, which is particularly abundant in the west section of the south wall, is in extremely low relief with a wealth of ornamental detail. This is obviously the work of craftsmen who were more used to working in wood than stone. One gets the feeling that they were haunted by the fear of breaking through the wood with their chisel and this is why their carving is almost graphic in quality. This latter style is felt in all the cathedral's carving, which is highly ornamental in character. The Russian craftsmen drew their subject matter from precious objects belonging to the church and the nobility. They were able to interpret and mould these motifs in their own way, because the world of strange beasts and monsters was also an integral part of Russian myths and folk tales. This explains why the cathedral's mass of carved ornament was infused with strong poetic feeling and genuine inspiration giving it a magical quality. Due to the ornamental nature of the carving, the wild beasts and monsters cease to be frightening and appear rather as engaging, intricate motifs in a stone tapestry. The arrangement of the carving in lines is strongly reminiscent of folk art; we find the same principle of linear arrangement of figures and patterns in embroidery, weaving and the wood carving on peasants' huts. At the same time, instead of concealing the masonry, it emphasises each line of blocks and accentuates the formidable massive quality of the royal cathedral.

The close link between the cathedral's architecture and carving, and the latter's linear arrangement and ornamental quality, are characteristic of the building's decoration and in sharp contrast with Romanesque sculpture where three-dimensional carving predominates, usually without any particular overall design, and where the figures of wild beasts are cruel and ferocious. Certain stylistic features of the Vladimir sculptures show that the craftsmen refashioned their models to create a beautiful, specifically Russian type of exterior ornamental sculpture. The cathedral's ornament was an amplification and reinforcement of the theme of Vsevolod III's power and the might of the Vladimir lands, already expressed in the architecture of the building.

"Veliki Preslav" National Historical-Archaeological Reserve and Museum
BULGARIA

<http://www.museum-preslav.com/index.html>

TREASURE

The golden treasure is a brilliant illustration of life in the Preslavian palaces. Discovered in 1978 in Castana, an area near the ancient town, during agricultural work, the excavations that followed revealed more than 170 golden, silver and bronze objects, decorated with cloisonné (cellular) enamel, precious stones, and pearls. A thorough analysis of the find showed its collective nature. It consists of 10th century ladies' jewelry made in Constantinople and Preslav, but it also includes artifacts dating to between the 3rd and 7th centuries. The latter suggests their owners' taste in old and luxurious articles.

The excavations helped explain some curious and important facts. First, there was an old-Bulgarian settlement in Castana, which was a suburb of the capital, Preslav. Second, there are signs of the town being destroyed by fire for which we find proof in Byzantine records contemporary to the conquest of Preslav in 972. Third, the most valuable articles from the treasure were hidden in a mason furnace of a humble poor man's hut in the village.

Judging from the rich nature of the finding and the 15 Byzantine coins belonging to Constantine VII and Roman II (945 and 959) which were found in the treasure, archaeologists assume that the luxurious jewelry somehow got there in the turbulent events between 969 and 972. This was the time when Preslav was besieged and conquered first by Kiev royal prince, Sviatoslav and two years later by the Byzantine Emperor, John Tzimisce. It is left to conjecture as to whether the treasure was hidden by a faithful servant of the ruler or was plundered during the attack on the Palace.

DIADEM PLATES (?) - gold, cloisonné enamel - 10th c.



The scene “The Ascension of Alexander the Great”, which is traditionally related to the cult of the Emperor, as well as the portrayed senmurves (‘flying dogs’), eagle-headed and lion-headed griffons are a symbol of mighty power. Thus, all these images on the Preslavian diadem unconditionally prove their royal connections. Additionally, this proves the connection between the treasure and Bulgarian royal family.

The Yamalo-Nenets dish – a 12th-13th Byzantine Crusader dish (brought to Siberia by Alanos a Georgian)? Now in the Hermitage. Silver, chased engraved and gilded.





From:

<http://www.segabg.com/fixed/vrpl.asp?id=1895420>

NB, the following extract is adapted from a piece comparing it to the notorious “Stanford Place” dish which was recently on sale at Christie’s in London, despite having been allegedly looted from Bulgaria.

The Apotheosis of Alexander dish formerly at the Yamalo-Nenetz District Museum, Siberia, but currently on view at the Hermitage Museum, is a silver-gilt dish that was discovered in the early 20th century near Muzhi, western Siberia, depicting the Apotheosis of Alexander the Great. Dating to 1208-16, it . . . represents an impressive synthesis of stylistic traits, secular iconography and construction. . . It is embellished with an unusual raised outer rim framing an inner band of ten, regular, repeating intertwining circles with scrolling vines and containing engraved images of mythological and hunting scenes. Among them is a young male on a rearing horse raising his sword. To the centre, the raised-relief figure of Alexander sits on a chariot that is drawn by two griffins. . . Almost certainly originally made in Constantinople but discovered in a Byzantine outpost, the Alexander Dish demonstrates the trade in, or more generally the movement of, prized objects.

The Alexander Dish . . . has always been considered to be the product of the 'Crusader period' from a Constantinopolitan workshop. This would almost certainly have been due to its indefinable Byzantine and Islamic hybrid facture during the time of the early Crusades.

Broadly speaking, the sequence of events that resulted in the first Crusade began with Emperor Alexis I Komnenos' pleas to Pope Urban II to protect Constantinople from the repeating attacks by the Seljuk Turks in Asia Minor and the Serbs in the west. On 27th November 1095 the Pope called together a council of bishops and clergy in Clermont, France, and urged all those present to take up arms under the banner of the Cross and launch a holy war to recover Jerusalem and the east from the 'infidel' Muslims. Enticed by the offer of eternal salvation, they determined to carry out the Pope's command. The first Crusade was followed by a second and third with the fourth, ironically, leading to the sacking of Constantinople by the crusading forces in 1204. Thus the presence of Crusaders in eastern Europe, and their interaction with the Byzantines and the Muslims, catalysed the already existing cultural exchanges taking place through trading, the giving of gifts, and looting, and also had the additional benefit of introducing Islamic and Byzantine artefacts to the western world.

Luxury objects, weapons and ceramics were at the centre of the cultural and ideological exchanges that took place in the early part of the second millennium, however, the transmission of imagery, crafts and skills between Byzantines and Muslims occurred long before the first Crusaders even stepped foot in western Anatolia.

To be continued . . .

Julianna Lees, Montagrier, October 2010.

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Prince François de Polignac has a paper here:

<http://www.tau.ac.il/humanities/cmc/mhr/141mhr01.pdf>

which is not focused on works of art but makes the point that Alexander created and perpetuated some of the myths surrounding his life himself.