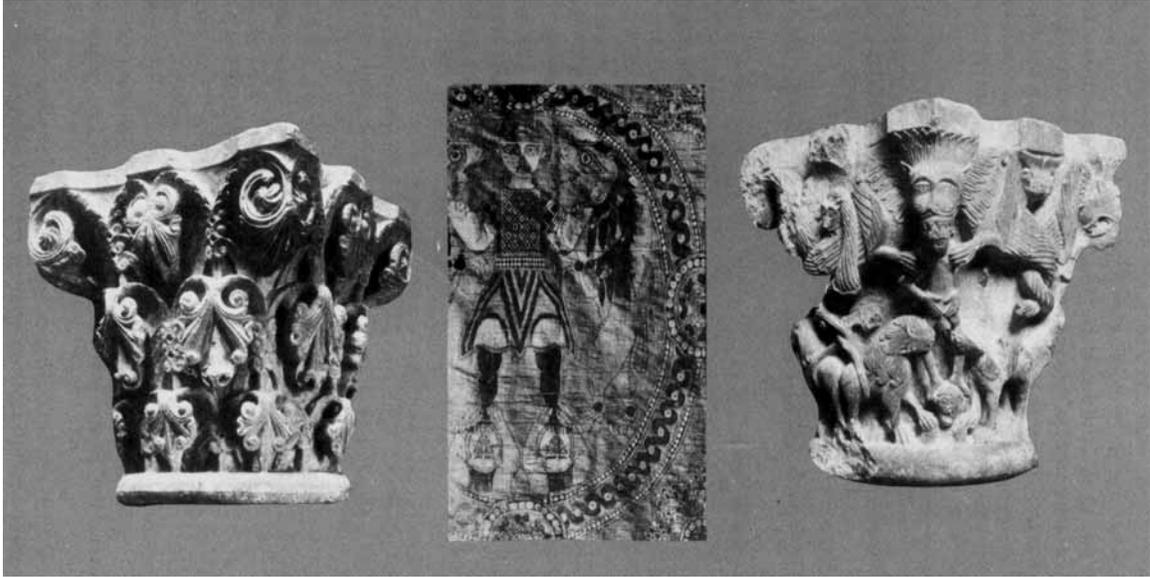


MEDIEVAL TEXTILES and ROMANESQUE SCULPTURE by FRANCIS HENRY TAYLOR, Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum no.23 vol 120, April 1928 Philadelphia Museum of Art pp17-21

Not often is the American public permitted to review the diverse influences which, fused one with another, made up the medieval mind; and in this connection the six great sculptured capitals lent by Mr. George Grey Barnard afford an unusually happy opportunity. Executed in the Romanesque style or manner, they were collected from central France and Burgundy and may be dated variously throughout the twelfth century. They may be considered among the finest monuments ever to have been brought to us from Europe both for the richness of their art and their archaeological importance.

During the early centuries of the church the art of sculpture was almost wholly neglected save for a few poor copies from the antique. Stone as a medium fell into disuse and even in Carolingian or Merovingian times, so richly endowed with works in metal, ivory, and wood, figure carving never assumed a monumental character. Suddenly at the end of the eleventh century a great new art appeared. The severity of Romanesque architecture, carried from Lombardy through western Europe upon trade routes connecting with the East, conspired with an oriental love for color and repetitive design to introduce new forms which had already established themselves in the Byzantine cities of north Italy. These forms and designs in turn were transmitted to the West not only through ivories and precious objects of the minor arts, but more often through the medium of manuscript illumination and antique textiles. The history of these miniatures copied in the scriptorium of an abbey school from still older copies of perhaps a Byzantine original, or books filled with borrowed scenes from Latin comedies and pagan legend, carried forward the traditions of the middle age and formed the back-bone of its art. Textiles too, because of the ease with which they were transported, found their way to the most remote monasteries as coverings for sacred relics and gifts from one abbot to another. Here they were copied by monks and oftentimes the manner of an entire province was governed by the presents of a coronation or the investiture of a wealthy prelate. The monks directed the masons at their work and infected them with the beauty of their newly acquired riches. And in doing so the sculptors created a new scale- a scale in which the architectural heritage of Rome demanded monumentality of fine Byzantine design. This may be considered the essence of the Romanesque style.

Sens, lying on the border of the Ile-de-France towards Burgundy, contains within its cathedral treasury one of the finest collections of textiles in Europe. According to tradition these silks and precious stuffs, some of which go back as far as the fifth century,



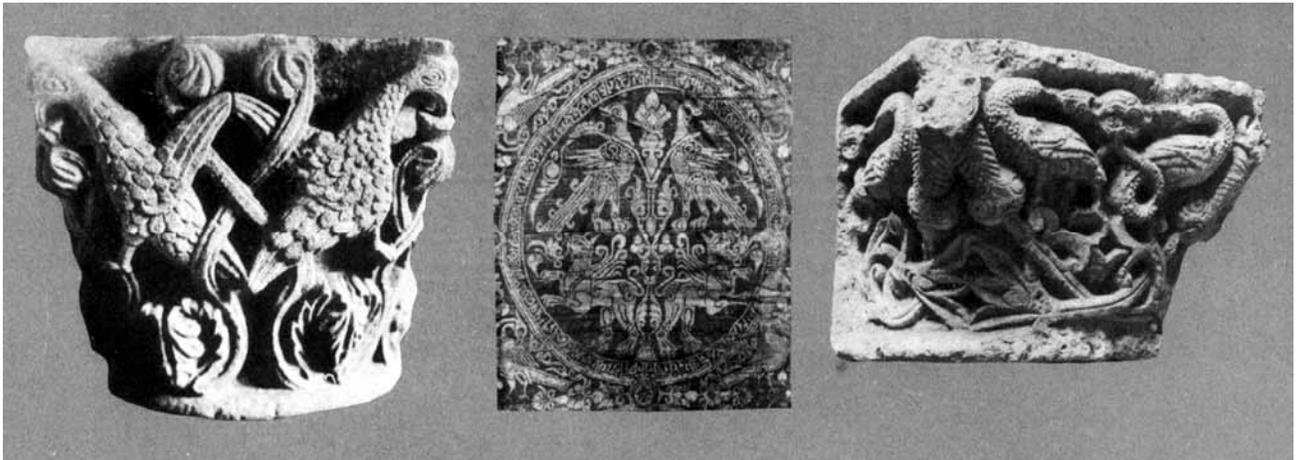
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 ROMANESQUE SCULPTURED CAPITALS

French twelfth century

were the gifts of Asiatic princes to the court of Charlemagne at Aix-la-Chapelle. Some of them are Coptic cloths from northern Egypt, others from Alexandria and the famous ateliers of Panopolis, some from farthest Asia, while the majority are products of Sassanian Persia where the ancient civilizations of the Tigris Valley and the Iranian plateau come together. As Monsieur Mâle observes' Chaldea and Assyria had produced the most dynamic decorative arts; for it was there that the hybrid monster had become most terrible, "It was there that affronted beasts symmetrically opposed to one another assumed religious grandeur. Heraldic art was born in Chaldea centuries before our middle ages."²

The sculptors of the eleventh century seldom succeeded in carving the human figure but in relief they proved themselves the possessors of a splendid decorative sense. At first they restricted their activities to the imitation of nature, simple leaves and vines, but soon borrowed motifs from Graeco-Roman and Byzantine art. They adopted the acanthus leaf and scroll-work and confused these with geometrical ornament and barbaric interlacing. Little by little at the beginning of the twelfth century a sculpture far richer and less crude arose with startling rapidity in which the human figure became the center of moral and symbolic illustration. On capitals and the tympana of doorways, in cloisters and churches, scenes from the Bible were portrayed, interpreted by teachings of the Church Fathers and flavored all too freely with anecdote from the ever popular Bestiaries and the allegories of medieval science. These moral and academic scenes were alternated with representations of pure fantasy suggested, as we have shown, by an oriental fabric or Byzantine ivory. A lion, a chimera, perhaps an horrific animal like the basilisk half-bird, half-snake, or mere conventional foliage distributed about badly articulated human figures - all these became subject to the mason's steel. Of the capitals now on exhibition at Fairmount none combine the elements of popular science and historic design so well as does the representation of the king, naked yet crowned, being devoured by lions and

griffins of the Asiatic tradition (fig. 3). A comparison of this capital with the textile in the Cathedral treasury of Sens (fig. 2.) proves that the sculptor had more than a chance acquaintance with eastern silks. He must have studied these designs closely and imitated them. It is not inconceivable that he may have seen this particular piece of stuff, for the capital resembles in many particulars the sculptures of Autun and Vezelay, both places were near Sens and it bears many characteristics of the Burgundian school, especially in the attenuation of the figures. But for all the predominance of oriental decorative quality, the capital retains the brutality and fear of hell-fire which was evident in French life of the twelfth century. A more classic mood is found in the extravagant though free interpretation of the Corinthian capital (fig. I).



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ROMANESQUE SCULPTURED CAPITALS

French twelfth century

Quite often this simple echo of the past is heard in the churches of the Ile-de-France. At Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire there are three capitals almost identical in treatment which speak for the persistence of Roman decoration. The other capitals gathered from various parts of France proclaim even more emphatically the relation between the chimeric beasts of Asia Minor and the stone carving of France during the Crusades. The symmetrical arrangements of the birds (figs. 4 and 6) follow again the pattern of a better known silk in the treasury at Sens (fig. 5). This is, of course, a very common Byzantine arrangement which, if occurring in Italy, would be scarcely worth mentioning, but here in France it is interesting to note their similarity. Two capitals composed exclusively of these hybrid forms (figs. 7 and 8) are perhaps the most terrific examples of this imaginative art. In the collection of Raymond Pitcairn at Bryn Athyn there is a famous capital from Saint-Michel- de-Cuxa³ in the Pyrenees, very close in spirit to both of these.



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ROMANESQUE SCULPTURED CAPITALS

French twelfth century

The composition follows that of the lion capital while the griffins themselves have much the character of the curious ox-like dragon in Mr. Barnard's collection. However, far apart geographically these stones may have been worked, it nevertheless follows that they were all inspired by common motives. The strength of medieval art is its tremendous unity and if we can succeed in thinking of them not as isolated works but as parts of a great whole we will succeed in seeing the relationship - absurd as it may seem on the surface - of silks and sculpture.

FRANCIS HENRY TAYLOR

L'Art Religieux en France au XII ième siècle, p.342..

² *Mâle*, op. cit.

³ A. Kingsley Porter: "Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Routes," V, plate 557a.