

MONSTERS WITH SNAKE TAILS in ROMANESQUE and PRE-ROMANESQUE ART with special reference to Islamic influence and influence on Islamic art

Saint Beatus of Liébana (c.730-800) was a monk, theologian and geographer from the Kingdom of Asturias, in Northern Spain. He lived and worked in the mountainous region of Liébana, now Cantabria. As confessor to Queen Adosinda, wife of Silo of Asturias, Beatus was influential; Alcuin was one of his pupils and a frequent correspondent.

He is best remembered today as the author of the “Commentary on the Apocalypse”, written in 776. Very popular in the Middle Ages, this commentary survives in over 30 copies from the IXc (Trier about 800) through to the XVIIc (Fanlo, a copy of a XIc version). So some show a Mozarab style, others a Romanesque style and finally a Gothic style.

Some of the illustrations have influenced Picasso, among other artists.

Here is a selection of pages illustrating monsters described in the Book of Revelations, some featuring a snake-tailed lion, others, snake-tailed horses. The description of the Beast as being, *like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion* comes from Revelations XIII, verse 2. There is no mention here of a snake tail.



Fig 1: the Beatus of Gerona, 957



Fig 2: the Beatus of Gerona, 957

The artists may have had the image of the Chimera, a hybrid monster from the Classical world at the back of their minds (if not consciously aware of it.)



Fig 3: Etruscan Chimera from Arezzo



Fig 4: Apulian Chimera

as these three-in-one monsters with snake tails and – in the middle – a goat – are echoed by the Whore of Babylon, like the Goat of the Chimera, astride a snake-tailed lion or horse.

The Chimera – first described in literature by Homer – has a long and ancient history.



Fig 5: Chimera, Ancient Greece, 6th century BC
Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Bleached stone; intaglio. 1.8x1.3 cm, Collection of Ludwig Ross, Hull. 1865

A chimera is a terrible monster with the head and body of a lion, a second head of a goat and a tail in the form of a snake. Such intaglios served not only as seals but also as protective amulets, the monsters depicted on them intended to frighten away evil forces.

Here is a Romanesque Chimera from the chapel of Civate near Como in Italy:



Fig 6: Romanesque Chimera from Civate



Fig 6a: Chimera textile from Asia Minor, 11th-12th century, Abegg Stiftung, Bern

On the North Portal of the Cathedral of Lund, in Sweden, we see Samson, (or is it David, as stated by the author of “Symboles” Editions Zodiaque)?, with his long hair, mastering the lion. The lion has his forepaws on his prey – a ram – but his tail is a snake, and he is attacking Samson’s hair.



Fig 7: Lund Cathedral, Sweden, tympanum on North portal

A more conventional Samson mastering a lion can be seen at the Cathedral of Le Mans.



Fig 8: Le Mans Cathedral, Samson mastering a lion

When you compare the two, it seems to me that the Swedish artist, in giving the lion a snake tail and introducing a goat at the front, was deliberately combining the Biblical story with the ancient legend of the Chimera.

An article from this site:

<http://www.moleiro.com/miniatura.v.php?p=123/en>

describes and explains the image of the Babylonian whore from the Beatus of Gerona:



Fig 9: the Beatus of Gerona, 957

This unframed image covers the entire folio and shows a woman in reddish garments as in most Beatus codices holding a gold goblet with three red dots aloft in her right hand whilst her left hand grasps the reins of an English red equine with a pointed muzzle, cloven hooves and a snake's tail. The woman has long hair, a veil and reddish and blue garments. Behind her is a pale bush with a large, highly decorative tree in front with a stylised trunk and crown with a red circle surrounded by golden leaves

and dark flowers. The word “mulier” can be read at the bottom on the left. In comparison with other Beatus manuscripts, the image of the woman upon the beast in the Gerona Beatus has suffered no damage as a result of the fear of the evil eye mentioned earlier or any anger unleashed against the one who represents the sum of all abominations, thereby demonstrating the power of images over the readers of certain manuscripts.

This painting is inspired by that of the Great Whore of Babylon (Rev. 17: 3) except that, in this instance, she is not riding a monster with seven heads and ten horns, as described in the text of the Revelation (Rev. 17: 3) and depicted later on folio 209r. The image of a woman riding a quadruped has had precedents since Antiquity, particularly in Roman art, in certain goddesses originating in the eastern Mediterranean riding animals that could have been used as a model, such as Isis, with a horn of plenty in one hand riding a dog called Sothis in Egypt, the symbol of Sirius, one noteworthy mention of which, due to its similarity with the image in the Gerona Beatus, is a relief dated c. 200 in the temple at Savaria, (in the Roman province of Panonnia, now Hungary) showing the goddess holding a sistrum and riding a dog. The author of the painting in the Gerona codex obviously never knew of this work but there are many very similar figures such as: a coin dated in the reign of Valentinianus I (364-375); Cybele, the Phrygian goddess of fertility who, amongst other attributes, held a recipient in her hand, and was sometimes depicted riding a lion; and Tanith, a Carthaginian goddess also known as Regina Coelestis, who is similar to Cybele and is shown upon a lion, particularly on early third-century coins. These goddesses are also depicted in association with a tree signifying the tree of life: Cybele in particular is linked, via her relationship with Attis, to pine trees. However, taking into account that the original meaning of the tree had been lost by the 10th century, the fact that it appeared next to the woman upon the beast may have to do with her being a sinner because in some of the Biblical texts quoted by Beatus the concept of fornication is, like idolatry, associated with the image of the leafy tree, as is the concept of power, which is in keeping with the image of Babylon to which the text from Daniel refers. Furthermore, bearing in mind the proximity of the image of the woman upon the beast to the great whore of Babylon, it must be remembered that there is a relationship between this wicked city and Cybele, since the former, in line with the Septuagint, used to have the title of “Great mother of gods and goddesses” upon her forehead, the same title the Romans used for Cybele, which would apparently explain why this goddess was used as the model for both the prostitute of Babylon and the woman upon the beast. It must also however be remembered that, as described in the explanation given on folios 63v-64r, “DE [MU]LIERE SVP[ER] BESTIA”, the woman upon the beast signifies “vice, evil deeds, pleasures, fornication, impurity, greed, jealousy, theft, envy, vanity, pride, gluttony [...] This is the wicked woman riding the beast whom we mentioned before” and is deemed to be an “anti-Church” as revealed by Beatus’ text: “And she gives one man a sip and another a draught from this cup of idolatry. The cup is of gold because they claim to be Christians but with the deeds we have summarised in the Synagogue they stray from Christ and the Church, for as just as Christ is the head of the Church, so is their leader the devil. And just as the Church forms a single body with Christ so do these form, together with the devil, a single, structured body.” As the “anti-Church”, she is depicted with a cup, a commonplace attribute for the personification of the Church which appeared for the first time in Bauit, holding a large chalice symbolising the New Covenant in front of her breast (Mt. 26: 28). Carolingian and Ottonian art make this image more specific by placing her at the foot of the cross. The snake’s tail alludes to the beast as a dragon, the snake that tempted Eve, whilst the red colour of the woman’s dress and the beast’s body may refer to the blood of the martyrs.

Reinterpreted, Muslim influence is clearly present not only in the circular crown of the tree but also in the composition: if the figure of the woman upon the beast was reversed and repeated, it would be the traditional Muslim motif of two riders raising their hand to the branches of a tree or a plant to pick fruit from them, as can be seen in the ivory, caliphal chest belonging to al-Mughira, the son of Abd al-Rahman III, made in 968 (Paris, Musée du Louvre).

Here is another interesting picture illustrating some verses from Revelations IX, 17-19, from this site:
<http://forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?p=4000213>



Fig 10: Escorial San Millan version of the Beatus, 950+

(The Escorial has two other versions of the Beatus)

And thus I saw the horses in the vision, and those sitting upon them, having breastplates of fiery-red and hyacinth and sulfur; and the heads of the horses were like heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, and smoke, and sulfur.

By these three plagues were a third part of mankind killed, by the fire and the smoke and the sulfur which came out of their mouths, for the power of the horses is in their mouth, and in their tails; for their tails are like serpents, having heads, and with them they do harm.

The Biblical origin of the snake-tailed horse is thus clearly indicated.

Here are some more Beatus Whore-on-a-horse images:



Fig 11: Beatus Liebana Urgell, 970



Fig 12: Beatus Valladolid, 970 - 975

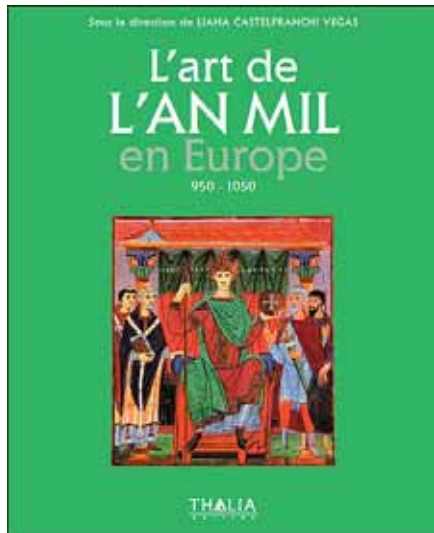


Fig 13: Beatus Facundus



Fig 14: Beatus Facundus (also known as the Beatus of Ferdinand and Sancho), 1047

Stéphane Mantoux has published a review of Liana Castelfranchi Vegas' book, "L'Art de l'an Mil en Europe 950-1050" published in Paris by Thalia, 2006:



The final chapter examines Apocalypses and Beati. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Beati are commentaries on the Apocalypse, taking texts by different authors starting with the monk Beatus of Liébana, abbot of the monastery of Saint-Martin de Tureno, who lived in the VIIIth century. Beatus wrote to combat the heresy of adoptionism in Spain, aided by Alcuin. He was inspired by a North African donatist, Ticonio, a near contemporary of Saint Augustine, who enjoyed a great reputation among orthodox theologians of the time. There was a renewal of interest for the text of Beatus in the Xth century, and many copies were made at that time.

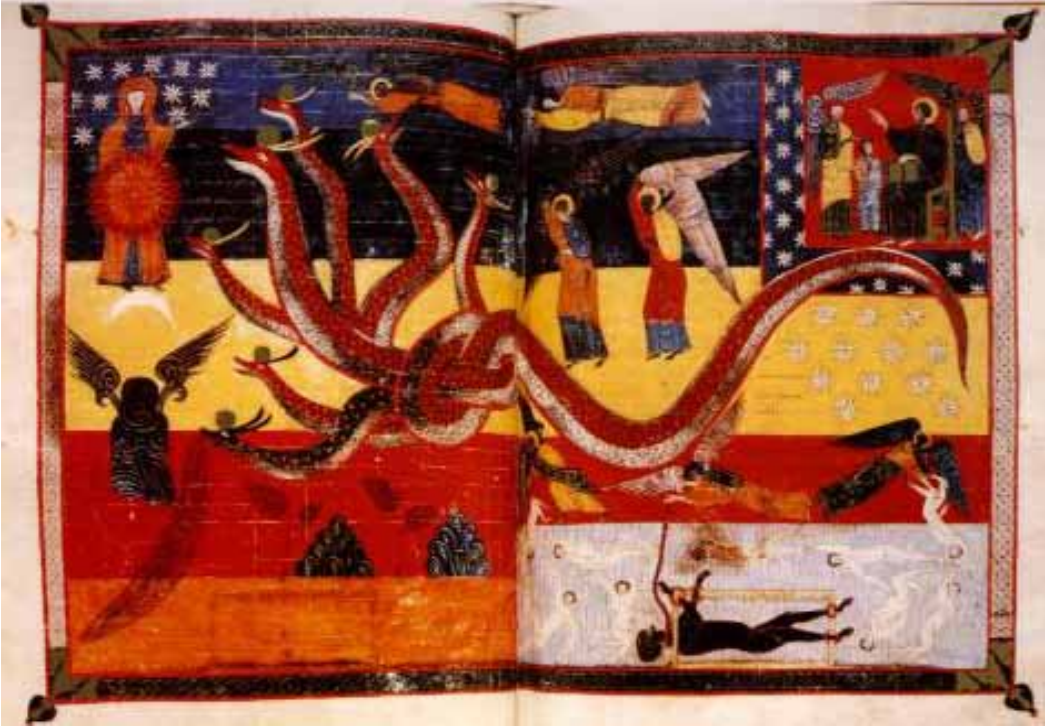


Fig 15: Beatus Facundus, 1047
The Scarlet Woman and the seven-headed monstrous snake

This picture illustrates Revelations XII verses 1-4: *a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars* (there seem to be only eleven here). The woman is heavily pregnant and about to give birth, while the monster stands before her, ready to devour the baby. It is described as: *a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads*. The artist has given the monster a single horn on seven of its heads but a pair on three of them to make up the number; the crowns are simply golden spheres.

In Greek, Drakon means snake. In Romanesque art, dragons and snakes are sometimes seen as interchangeable like these snake-dragons being killed by the Archangel Michael at Benet in the Vendée and at the Cathedral at Fidenza:



Fig 16: Benet, Vendée, St Michael and the Dragon Fig 17: Fidenza, St Michael and the Dragon

Beatus took liberties with the texts which inspired images quite distant from those found in the Apocalypse. . . One finds a strange metaphor of the Incarnation, in which Christ is represented by a bird, and the Devil by a snake. The Beatus of Gerona is inspired by apocryphal texts on the life of Jesus. The first extant Beatus came from the monastery of Silos, at the end of the IXth century.

Magio, priest and monk, who died in 968, lived at Tavera and was a great illuminator. The Beatus of Magio bears his name.



Fig 18: Beatus of Magio, c. 962, The Sixth Seal.

In July 975 one of the most exceptional codices of the Middle Ages was completed: the Beatus of Gerona, containing the greatest number of illustrations. In this, one sees that illumination in Léon in the Xth century is attached to several traditions: Classical Antiquity, Carolingian and Islamic. The production of these Beati seems to stop suddenly in the mid XIth century. Was this a consequence of the numerous raids of al-Andalus?

The copy of the Beatus of Facundus for Ferdinand Ist and Sancha, finished in 1047, is the most beautiful of all and the only one to have been commissioned by a king, not a monastery. A new phase of Hispanic illumination had begun.



Fig 19: Beatus of Facundus, 1047
The Dragon adds his strength to the Beast



Fig 20: Beatus of Facundus,
The Woman & the Dragon.

Here we see the monstrous snake with seven heads like the Hydra of Greek mythology. Perhaps the artist was inspired – maybe at several removes – by an image of Hercules confronting the Lernaean Hydra. This detail from a mosaic floor of his Twelve Labours was found in the province of Valencia and is now in the National Archaeological Museum, Madrid:



Fig 21: Hercules confronting the Lernaean Hydra, National Archaeological Museum, Madrid

A similar monster can be seen on a fresco in the church at Antigny, Vienne, though I seem to have cut off some of its heads:



Fig 22: Antigny, fresco of a multicephalic snake monster

This brooch found at Almasfuzito in the former Roman province of Panonnia (now Hungary):



Fig 23: Almasfuzito, Panonnia (now Hungary), snake-tailed monster
1st or 2nd century

It represents a dog-like monster whose hindquarters turn into a snake with a head that confronts the monster's head. Among Romanesque monsters answering to this description, possibly derived from pre-Romanesque models, are this snake-tailed monster on a voussoir on the entrance porch of Contré, in the Saintonge.

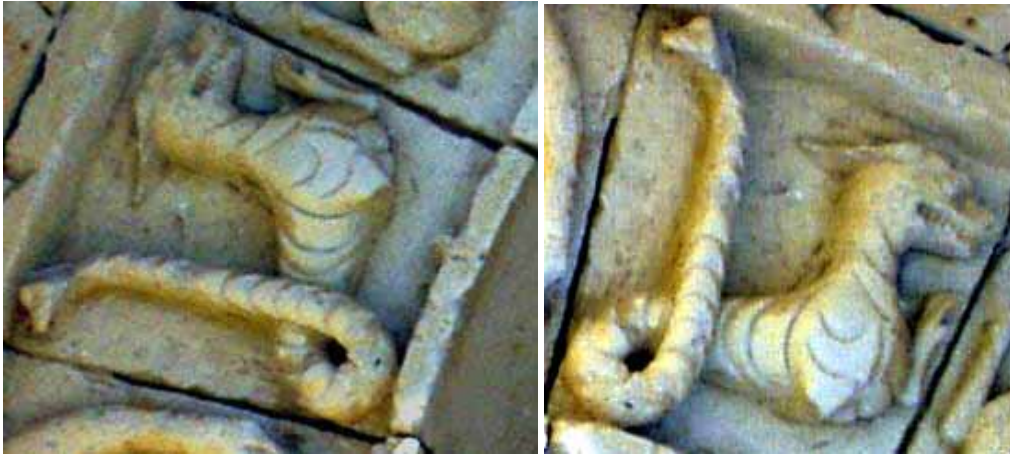


Fig 24: Snake-tailed monster on a voussoir, Contré, Saintonge.



Fig 25: Vilandry, Touraine, snake-tailed monster with a bearded, humanoid head

This one, from Vilandry in the Touraine has the added twist of a bearded male head, while a famous capital from St Pierre at Aulnay, not far from Contré, shows a pair of cynocephalic monsters linked by their snake tails:



Fig 26: St Pierre at Aulnay, cynocephalic monsters linked by their snake tails

At St Révérien, Burgundy, is this creature with a humanoid head like a harpy wearing a Phrygian cap:



Fig 27: St Révérien, Burgundy, harpy and snake-tailed monsters



Fig 28: Ste Marie du Mont, Normandy, snake-tailed monster

At first sight it appears to be another snake-tailed monster, but the snake does not seem to be attached to the creature. However, there is nothing unconnected about the very similar monsters from Ste Marie du Mont, Normandy. I suspect that the iconography for these images was proliferated through MS.

We see more hybrid humanoid snake-tailed monsters in the late Romanesque sculptures of Master Antelami at Piacenza Cathedral:



Fig 29: Piacenza Cathedral, snake-tailed humanoid monsters

While at Charlieu in Burgundy, there is a spiteful-looking snake-tailed harpy of similar iconography:



Fig 30: Charlieu, Burgundy, snake-tailed harpy

This Moorish box was probably made in Cordoba around the 12thc. It can now be seen in Venice:



Fig 31: Box with snake-tailed harpy, Cordoba, XII century

Also in Spain, not far from Jaca, the Romanesque church of San Juan de Busa with both Mozarab and Lombard influences has a very unusual feature over the entrance:



Fig 32: San Juan de Busa, arch over entrance, photograph by Batigolix

It has been alleged that the kufic lettering spells out “‘la ilaha illa Allah”, “there is no God but Allah”! A tiny snake can be seen coiled above the inscription, while a larger snake crawls along it to form a frame. Little snakes can be seen on several arches over entrances to churches near Nontron, in France, such as St Sulpice de Mareuil, St Martin le Pin, and St Martial de la Valette.



Fig 33: St Sulpice de Mareuil, Snake-tailed dragons on voussoirs over entrance



Fig 34: St Martial de la Valette, snakes on voussoirs over entrance

The transition from Islamic to Christian art work and vice versa happened in various ways and times. One of the earliest datable examples was via this VIIIc Aquamanile in the form of an Eagle from the Hermitage Museum:



Fig 35: Aquamanile in the form of an Eagle
Bronze, silver, copper H 38 cm, l 45 cm 796-797
Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

This vessel in the shape of a bird of prey was used for water and originally had a handle on the top. The whole of its surface was richly decorated and some of the silver and copper inlay has been preserved.

An Arabic inscription on the neck reads 'in the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate, Blessings/from/God'; it also contains the name of the craftsman, Master Suleiman, and the date, 180 AH. This is the oldest known precisely dated Iranian bronze object.

Or this Griffin aquamanile from the Victoria and Albert Museum, of European manufacture but Islamic design:



Fig 36: Aquamanile c.1130 Forged of silver, bronze, and niello

Aquamanile meaning water hand, they probably returned with the Crusaders. Muslims used such devices to rinse their hands at meals. In the west however, they made their ways into churches, where

priests poured water on their hands. The liturgical context states that the griffin symbolizes the dual nature of Christ.

Its shape resembles the fabulous beast known as a griffin, combining the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion. The form of griffins was influenced by Eastern senmurvs, images of which were woven into ancient Sassanid and Byzantine silks imported into Europe and preserved in cathedral treasuries. Since 1986 the ewer has been displayed at South Kensington in the Medieval Treasury, alongside a Sassanid textile with a depiction of this type of beast.

But for the most spectacular examples of Islamic snake-dragons on a large scale, look at these pictures of two famous gates from Aleppo and Baghdad, respectively:



Fig 37: Serpent Gate, Aleppo Citadel

This was constructed between 1186-1216. Picture from: <http://www.sonic.net/~tallen/palmtree/ayyarch/ch5.htm>

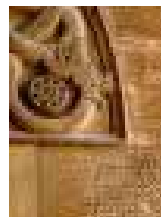


Fig 38: Details of central and right hand sections
details from: http://www.discoverislamicart.org/database_item.php?id=monument:ISL:sy:Mon01:1:en

The serpents and dragons curl backwards to bite themselves; they show the limits of the areas of a protected and controlled area.

Even more extraordinary is the Talisman Gate of Baghdad:



Fig 39: Talisman Gate of Baghdad

Photos and text from: http://www.archnet.org/library/sites/one-site.jsp?site_id=7824

The Talisman gate in Baghdad was destroyed by the Ottoman army in 1917 when they withdrew from the city. Its destruction was a great loss as it had some fine thirteenth century carving and distinguishing ornamentation.

The date of its construction is not clear but it was described by Ibn Jubayr in 1185 and is mentioned in the accounts of the Mongol siege. The inscription on the building reads that it was built and restored in 1221 by the Abbasid Caliph Nasser li-din-Allah as part of the construction of a large defensive wall intended to protect Baghdad from invaders and floods. It was named "Talisman" after the unusual inscriptions and figures carved on its upper walls and gate.

The inscription and the carvings are the most important features in the building. Despite the information it carries concerning the gate's construction, its sponsors and restoration by Nasser li-din-Allah, the high relief above the gate presents unfamiliar pictorial representations of human figures that must have roots in Mongol sculptural animation. The gate's arch is built of intersecting stone voussoirs set in a decorated frame. The decoration shows a pair of winged dragon-snakes and a human figure sitting cross-legged between them in a way to represent the glorious conqueror. They haven't been attributed to any sultan although they might be of a later addition carved to commemorate Sultan Murad IV entering Baghdad by. These figures are carved in stone and lie on an intricate background of floral interweaving patterns incised in stone.

Sources:

Langenegger F. 1911. Beitrage zur Kenntnis der Baukunst des Iraq, Dresden, 88-90.

Le Strange G. 1983. Baghdad During the Abbasid Caliphate. Greenwood Press. Connecticut, 291-292.

I suspect that in the case of these splendid gates of Islamic manufacture, the inspiration is drawn from Western Romanesque sculpture.

On the other hand, consider these door knockers (designed to be used in pairs):

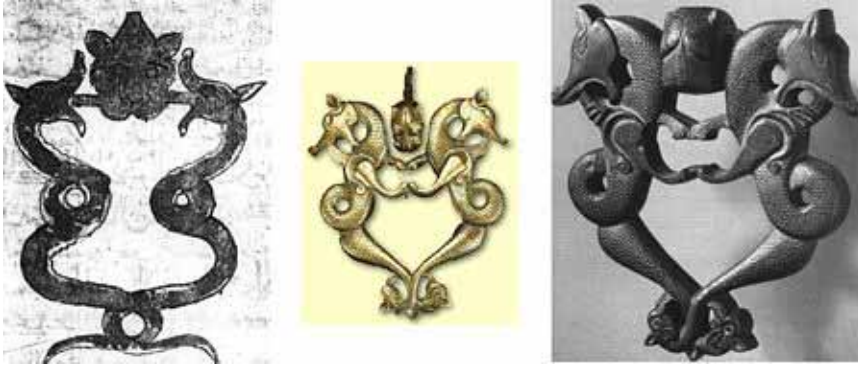


Fig 40: door knockers (designed to be used in pairs):

The first drawing is by the architect of the Diyarbakir Palace in Anatolia, for which they were intended – more snake than dragon. The subsequent artifacts have the heads and beaks of hawks, not snakes. The pictures are from an article by Dr Z Kenan Bilici, and it is worth reading the entire article here:

<http://www.transoxiana.org/Eran/Articles/bilici.html>

In Copenhagen, I took a picture of these snake-tailed dragons at the Islamic Museum (David Samling):



Fig 41: 12thc door knockers from the mosque at Cizre, Anatolia

They are one of the two pairs of 12thc door knockers from the mosque at Cizre, Anatolia, from where they were stolen!

There is a similar pair in Nasser Khalili's huge collection in London, which will be open to the public eventually:

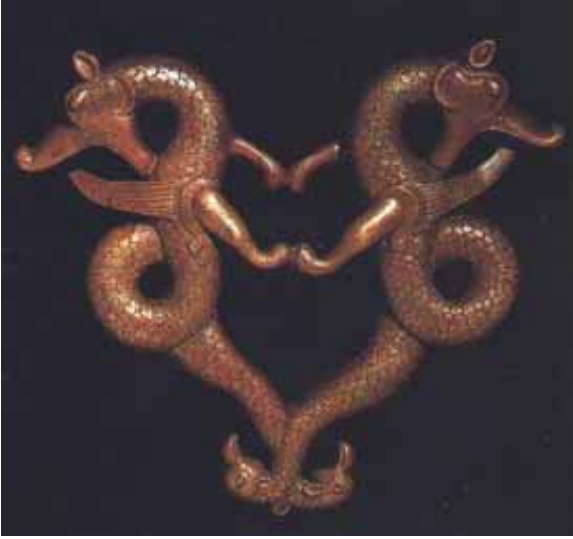


Fig 42: 12thc door knockers, Nasser Khalili collection, London

While these come from the Islamic Museum in Berlin:



Fig 43: 12thc door knockers, Islamic Museum, Berlin



Fig 44: Luristan finial, Copenhagen National Museum

Perhaps I was wrong in thinking the Muslim craftsmen were influenced by Romanesque. Perhaps this traditional form of dragon came from further East? There is a distinct “Silk Route” look about them.

The hawk heads remind me of a pair on a Luristan finial now in the Copenhagen National Museum.

See also, Peter Hubert’s article, From Visigothic to Gothic,
http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/from_visigoth_to_gothic.pdf

To be continued
Julianna Lees, Montagier 2009

