

## A Medieval Iconographical Topic in the Jazira and in Southern Italy

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The Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin houses three stucco fragments belonging to an architectural frieze, coming from Jazīra (probably from Southeastern Anatolia), and dating back to the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century (inv. no. I.3764 a-c; H. 18 cm.; Fig. 1a-c). These fragments have been published in a Berliner Exhibition Catalogue devoted to the Jazīra.<sup>1</sup> A double strip, with cufic and cursive inscriptions respectively, is generated by circular knots, whose ribbons compose an upper and a lower band, framing a series of single quadrupeds; the knots enclose a Sagittarius. Two fragments (Fig. 1a-b) show a pseudo-cufic inscription in the upper and lower bands and a cursive inscription in the knots, as well as slender gryphons on a plain field, with small vegetal elements in the lower part; the gryphons faces are turned back, and their tails end in a dragon's head. The third fragment (Fig. 1c) bears an upper cursive band, while a pseudo-cufic inscription fills the lower band and the knot; the quadruped – a stag with its head turned back – stands out on a vegetal background. The knot shown on one of the three fragments (Fig. 1b), and, most probably, also on another one (Fig. 1c), encloses a bow-bending Sagittarius, turned back and shooting at the dragon's head in which its own horse's tail ends.

The cursive benedictory inscription (*naskhī* without diacritical dots, orthographic marks, and vowels) reads: “*al-‘izzwa\* l-dā’imwa [...] / [...] al-iqbālwa l-barak[a] / [...] al-iqbālwa l-bara[ka]*”, “Glory and<sup>2</sup> enduring and [...] / [...] success and blessing / [...] success and blessing”.

The fragmentary pseudo-kufic inscription wishes blessings, it is in foliated kufic writing, with triangular apices.<sup>3</sup> We can find the same connection between inscribed bands and quadrupeds on a vegetal background in some Islamic unglazed ceramic vessels coming from the Jazīra (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century), as well as in one specimen published by Sarre and Herzfeld in 1920.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Von Gladiss 2006, 92-93, cat. no. and colour ill. 37, entry by Jens Kröger.

<sup>2</sup> The conjunction *wāw* between *al-‘izz* and *l-dā’im* is frequent in the formula introducing the cursive benedictory inscriptions, although the right sentence is *al-‘izz al-dā’im*, “Enduring glory”.

<sup>3</sup> It reads sequences of *lakā* (a contraction of *al-baraka*, “blessing”), or *lisā* (an abbreviation of *li-sāhibi-hi*, “to its owner”). Reading and commentary of both the inscriptions by Roberta Giunta, whom I wish to thank here.

<sup>4</sup> Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, IV (1920), pl. CXV.6. See also *ibidem*, pl. CXV.1; a specimen in the Louvre Museum, Paris (inv. MAO 390; *L’Orient de Saladin* 2001, cat. no. and fig. 128); another one in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul (inv. no. 1828; *The Anatolian Civilizations* 1983, cat. no. and fig. D.80). Furthermore, there are similar iconographies of quadrupeds on a vegetal background (although without inscribed bands) both on other stucco reliefs coming from Anatolia and the Jazīra (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century; from the palace of Kılıç Arslan II at Konya, Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in Istanbul, inv. no. 2334, *The Anatolian Civilizations* 1983, cat. no. and fig. D.50; maybe from Konya, Musée des arts décoratifs in Paris, inv. no. 10952, *L’Islam dans les collections nationales* 1977, cat. no. and fig. 200), and on unglazed ceramics (from Shira’, Syria, National Museum in Damascus, inv. no. A/13597, *L’Orient de Saladin* 2001, cat. no. and fig. 130). Stags or other animals turned back and set on a vegetal background are a widespread topic of the Islamic art, we find them on some bone and wooden art crafts of the Fatimid period, 11<sup>th</sup> century (Cairo, Museum of Islamic Art, cf. Pauty 1931, cat. nos. 4784, pl. XXXV, 4793, pl. XXXI, 6341/2-3, pl. XXXVI; and Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst, cf. Rey-Delqué 1997, figs. on pp. 325-326, entries nos. 192-193, 197), on a Byzantine ceramic dish coming from the excavations of the Athenian Agora, of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, also bordered by a pseudo-cufic inscription (Athens, Museum of the Agora, inv. P 5026; Miles 1964, fig. 91), and on some Southern Italy ivories, as well as a beautiful deer on an oliphant, 11<sup>th</sup> century (Aachen, Domschatz, the so-called “horn of Charles the Great”, cf. Kühnel 1971, pl. XLIX.55c and 55e, detail), and five plaques, Sicily, 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century (St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum, inv. nos. AG.801, EG.802, EG.803, EG.804, and Ravenna, Museo Archeologico, cf. Kühnel 1971, 80, no. 132, pls. CVI-CVII).

Already in 1991, in occasion of a Congress devoted to S. Maria d'Anglona (Matera), an important Medieval church of Southern Italy, Xenia Muratova compared the Berlin stucco frieze (Muratova 1996, 120, and figs 324-325) with some terracotta tiles coming from that church and dating most probably to the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, illustrating peacocks, snake-eating stags with turned-back heads, lions and fishes (Figs 2a-b, and 3; also a gryphon, of which only the head and the upper part of the wing remain, is illustrated on a now dispersed Anglona tile fragment, Fig. 4).<sup>5</sup> Actually, the parallel was established only with regard to the frieze shape and the animal subject, but the very interesting parallel includes another, very important element, i.e. the pseudo inscriptions (in cufic), employed as frames in the Anglona tiles.<sup>6</sup>

Animals in the field, framed by inscribed bands (both pseudo cufic, and pseudo cursive), are recognizable also in other architectural elements coming from Southern Italian churches, such as the stucco panels from S. Maria di Terreti, now in the Archaeological Museum of Reggio Calabria.<sup>7</sup>

The Berlin stucco frieze is very interesting from an iconographical point of view. We can analyse the single figures, all of them with their heads turned back.

*The Sagittarius shooting back, the gryphon (both of them with a tail ending in a dragon head), and the stag on a vegetal background.*

The Sagittarius shooting at its own tail ending in a dragon head represents the descending moon node's exaltation in *Sagittarius*, the *jawzahar*.<sup>8</sup> A very interesting Jazīra parallel can be found on some Artuqid copper coins (from Mārdīn) in the name of Nāsir al-Dīn Artuq Arslān (1201-1239), dating to 599/1202-3;<sup>9</sup> the connection between this image and the solar eclipse observed in the Artuqid territory on the 27<sup>th</sup> November 1201 (Gierlich 1993, 121, 125) seems to be hardly casual.

A most probable 'separation' between the shooting Centaur and the dragon – this latter rising not from the horse's tail – can be found on one of the most famous images of a Sagittarius and a *jawzahar*, depicted on one of the eight reliefs sculpted on a pillar of the great Tigris bridge at Jazīrat ibn 'Umar (near Cizre, Syria, on the border line with Turkey), and dating back to the first years of the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 5). It was most probably realized by Jamal al-Dīn Muḥammad Iṣfahānī (d. 1164), visir of the Zanjid Quṭb al-Dīn Mawdūd of Mosul (1149-1169). The poor conditions of the relief do not allow a univocal interpretation of the subject, nevertheless the serpentine body of the dragon, twisted in the characteristic knot, seems not to be an "extension" of the tail of the Centaur, but rather a separate element, this hypothesis being further corroborated by the dimensions of the dragon, comparable to those of the Sagittarius (cf. Hartner 1938, especially 114, and Fontana 2003, note 12).

We can observe a Sagittarius shooting back sculpted on the wooden throne of the Shrine of Montevergine (Avellino), late 12<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 6),<sup>10</sup> in the mosaic floor of the Cathedral of Otranto, 1163-65 (Gianfreda 1996,

<sup>5</sup> On the Anglona tiles, see Whitehouse 1969, 68-71, pls. VI-VII.a, and fig. 20; Scerrato 1979, 356, 358, figs. 317-319; Muratova 1996.

<sup>6</sup> On the iconography of the eating-snake stag, cf. the very important studies by Puech 1949, and Ettinghausen 1955; see also Muratova 1996, 119, fig. 326. There are some Anglona tiles, showing a fish and some vegetal elements enclosed by a rectangular frame (cf. Whitehouse 1969, pl. VI.b and fig. 20.3; Scerrato 1979, figs. 318-319), that, according to the composition scheme, are not so far from some Islamic prototypes, as well as a Syrian underglazed and luster tile, 1200 ca., cf. Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1929, IV (1920), pl. XX.5.

<sup>7</sup> Orsi 1922; Scerrato 1979, figs 303-308. The Byzantine mediation is very evident in this case, cf. the marble slab of the sarcophagus of Anna Maliasinos at Episkopi above Volo, and now fixed to the wall of the west porch of the church (Miles 1964, fig. 53).

<sup>8</sup> See Fontana 2003, 347-349, notes 1-3, with related bibliography; many parallels are listed, concerning above all metalwork, but also some illustrated manuscripts (see, specifically, 350-351).

<sup>9</sup> We point out some exemplars to the reader's attention: two at the British Museum, London (Spengler/Sayles 1992, 122-126, type and ill. 38), one at the Biblioteca Comunale of Palermo (Bernardini 1993, with ill.), and two at the Münzkabinett of the Staatliche Museen, Berlin (von Gladiss 2006, cat. nos. 15 and 16).

<sup>10</sup> Volbach 1942, fig. 3; Grabar 1954; Jairazbhoy 1965, pl. 108; Scerrato 1979, figs 446-447, in the caption of fig. 447 we read: "un centauro rappresentato secondo la convenzionale iconografia zodiacale del Sagittario, che secondo l'astrologia islamica era in rapporto con la coda del 'pianeta delle eclissi', rappresentato da una testa di drago nella coda; qui l'aspetto 'oscuro' sembra trasferito nell'attributo delle corna sulla testa del centauro". On this throne another particular subject is illustrated, that we can find both in Islamic, and in Southern Italy milieu: a man on the back of an ostrich. On the topic of a man on the back of a great bird, cf. Grube 2005, ills on pp. 242-243; cf. also the planet Mercury on a sort of peacock (Carboni 1988-1989, colour pl. VI.A), and the subject depicted on the mosaic floor of the S. Michele church at Pavia (Barrali 1994, colour fig. 697).

fig. on p. 124), and in the bronze doors of the Cathedral of Monreale, work of Barisano da Trani, after 1186.<sup>11</sup> A Sagittarius shooting back and a turned back stag, both inserted in a vegetal scroll, are sculpted on the portal of the church of S. Leonardo at Siponto (Manfredonia, Foggia), last quarter of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Calò Mariani 1992, fig. 45).

Gryphons with their heads turned back are depicted in several illustrations of the gryphons carrying Alexander the Great to heaven, since the Byzantine period, beginning from the 10<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>12</sup> and up to the Islamic Jazīra – as we can observe on two Artuqid objects:<sup>13</sup> a bronze mirror of the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Museum of Art; Scerrato 1995, with ill.), and an enameled bronze basin, 1114(?)–1144 (Innsbruck, Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum; *Die Artuqiden-Schale* 1995) –, and are also widespread in Southern Italy of the medieval period (see Darkevic 1975, *passim*; and Grube 2005, ills on pp. 250–251).

Gryphons, with heads turned back, are illustrated on the limestone pulpit of S. Maria in valPorclaneta at Rosciolo (L'Aquila), 1150;<sup>14</sup> on a wooden panel coming from a *cassone*, or a throne, of Southern Italy manufacture, 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century;<sup>15</sup> on the mosaic of the pulpit of S. Giovanni in Toro, at Ravello (Salerno), 1272.<sup>16</sup>

As concerns the dragon-head ending tail of both the Sagittarius and the gryphon, it is appropriate to refer to Hartner, who correctly affirms: “[...] the original significance of the dragon [...] finally has fallen into oblivion in such a way that the artist adds it to the tails of all kinds of animals, or even to their wings”.<sup>17</sup> One of the most ancient examples are the gryphons with the tail ending not in a dragon, but in other animals’ heads, sculpted on some ivory oliphants and caskets most probably coming from Southern Italy, but of Islamic tradition, and dating to the 11<sup>th</sup> century (in a few cases showing both tail and wings ending in animal’s heads, see Fig. 7).<sup>18</sup>

A dragon-head is the ending part of the wing of a lion depicted on the mosaic coming from the Reggio Emilia Cathedral, now in the Civic Museum of that town, last decade of the 11<sup>th</sup> century–first five years of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Quintavalle 1991, colour fig. on p. 406, no. 28r).

Gryphons and stags illustrated together are a very frequent subject in the Southern Italy art of the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century, as it is possible to observe on ivory oliphants and caskets, 11<sup>th</sup> century – frequently the stag’s head is turned back (see previous note); on some elements of a stucco frieze coming from the excavations carried out in the church of S. Maria del Mastro, in Gerace (Reggio Calabria), end of the 11<sup>th</sup>-first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup>

Before I move on to my conclusion, resuming our first parallel between the Berlin stucco freeze and the Anglona terracotta tiles, it seems appropriate to dwell on two apparently different iconographical elements, which however quite likely had the same meaning. I’m referring to the dragon’s head in which the Berlin Sagittarius’ and gryphon’s tails end, and to the snake-eating stag of the Anglona tiles.

<sup>11</sup> Malignaggi 1983, figs 3, 21, 24. Some examples of turned back Sagittarius are featured also in the Northern Italian Medieval art, as well as in the small panels of the outer wall of the Baptistery of Parma, by Benedetto Antelami, first decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (cf. DUBY 1992, figs 14, 50–51, 67).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. a lead *bulla* in the Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg (Grabar 1968, 295–296, pl. 66a–b).

<sup>13</sup> On the relations between the Artuqids and Byzantium see Bär 1995, with related bibliography.

<sup>14</sup> Signed by Roberto (and Nicodemo) da Guardiagrele, cf. Bertaux 1903, 561–566, fig. 256; Moretti 1973, 86–97, ill. on p. 93; Scerrato 1979, fig. 373.

<sup>15</sup> Cambridge Mass., The Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, inv. no. 1936.129 (Rey-Delqué 1997, 399, entry no. 182, colour fig. on p. 296).

<sup>16</sup> Volbach 1942, fig. 10. Mosaic made of glass and fragments of Islamic ceramic vessels (Peduto *et al.* 1991, figs 20 and 27).

<sup>17</sup> Hartner 1938, 138, note 42. We can see a Centaur, with a dragon-head ending tail, on a Syrian underglazed painted dish (*fritware*), late 12<sup>th</sup> century, Copenhagen, The David Collection (inv. no. 54/1996; von Gladiss 2006, 55–56, no. and ill. 14).

<sup>18</sup> Kühnel 1971: oliphants on pls LVII.61c (Dublin, Collection Mr. John Hunt), LXV.67b and LXVI.67d (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 04.3.177), LXXV.77a and LXXVI.77c (Le Puy-en-Velay, Musée Crozatier, inv. M 359), XCV.23 (London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 7953–1862); caskets on pls LXXXIII.82d (Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst, inv. no. K 3101), LXXXV.84b (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 17.190.241). We can see also a turned back deer with an animal-head ending wing sculpted on a Fatimid wooden panel (Cairo, Museum of Islamic Art, inv. no. 12938, cf. *Trésors fatimides* 1998, cat. no. and ill. 7).

<sup>19</sup> Soprintendenza Archeologica della Calabria; Di Gangi 1995, figs 7 (a gryphon, not turned back), and 9 (a stag, or a deer, turned back).

Above all, it is necessary to point out that the Jazīra is the Islamic territory where the image of the dragon was particularly widespread, specifically between the late 11<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Giovanni Curatola (1989, 60-65 with related bibliography, and note 12), dealing with the iconographical and symbolical problem connected to the representation of the dragon/snake in the Jazīra, subdivides this subject into two morphological types, and reminds us that already Michael Rogers (1970-1971, 168) had observed how the area where the dragon/snake was spread coincides with the region most deeply influenced by the Hellenistic culture. The astrological and mythological meaning, in particular, of the Sagittarius/*jawzahar* illustrated on the Berlin frieze is strictly connected to the lunar eclipse. It is the same dark/lunar side of the snake, in its connection with the water – efficaciously argued by Richard Ettinghausen (1955) –, showed by the snake-eating stag of the Anglona tiles.

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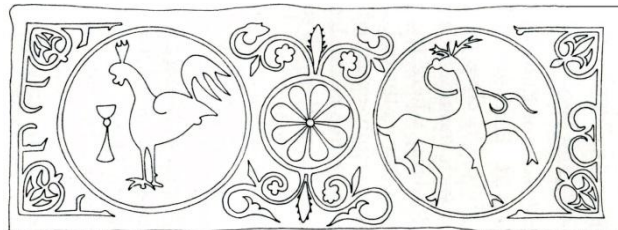
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Fig. 1a-c: Three stucco fragments of an architectural frieze, Jazīra, mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst, Inv. No. I.3764 a-c (after von Gladiss 2006, fig. 37).



a



b

Fig. 2a-b: A terracotta tile, S. Maria d'Anglona (Matera, Italy), second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, showing a peacock and a snake-eating stag (photo Author; drawing: after Whitehouse 1969, fig. 20.2).



Fig. 3: Drawing of a terracotta tile, S. Maria d'Anglona (Matera, Italy), second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, showing a lion (after Whitehouse 1969, fig. 20.1).

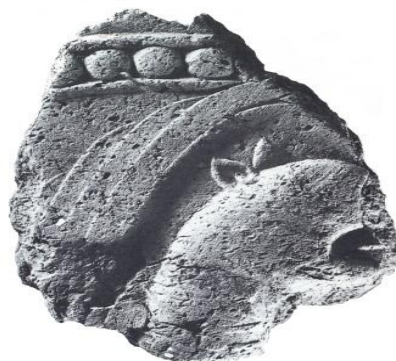


Fig. 4: A dispersed fragment of a terracotta tile, S. Maria d'Anglona (Matera, Italy), second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, showing a gryphon (after Fonseca/Pace 1996, fig. 35).



Fig. 5: A Sagittarius and a *jawzahar*, on a pillar of the Tigris bridge at Jazīrat ibn 'Umar (near Cizre, Syria), first years of the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (after Gierlichs 2001, ill. on p. 381).



Fig. 6: A horned Sagittarius shooting back, wooden throne of the Shrine of Montevergine (Avellino, Italy), late 12<sup>th</sup> century (after Scerrato 1979, fig. 447).

Fig. 7: A gryphon with both tail and wing ending in animals' head, from an ivory casket, Southern Italy, 11<sup>th</sup> century, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 17.190.241 (after Kühnel 1971, pl. LXXXV.84b, detail).