

EURASIAN DECORATIVE ANIMAL FEATURES OF ‘THE LITTLE METROPOLIS CHURCH OF ATHENS’

The Byzantine Empire and Turkish states co-existed in Anatolia and the Mediterranean basin for a long period of time, during which the civilizations directly or indirectly influenced each other in culture and the arts.

‘The Little Metropolis Church of Athens’, also known as ‘*Hagios Eleutherios Church*’, has a cross-in-square plan and its structure is dated to the end of the 12th century.¹⁾ The building is characterised by the heavy use of spolia in its construction. Many of the materials used belong to antiquity and the early Christian era.²⁾ The building contains quite a rich variety of floral and figurative decorations thanks to the spolia materials used in the exterior. Reliefs depicting an antique festival, supernatural, fantastic, animal figures, one-on-one animal fight scenes and animal and human figures, decorate the entire outer surface of the structure. However, it is the symmetrical lion figures positioned on both sides of a cross, placed above the entrance door in the axis of the main apse, and a depiction of a lion-deer fight on the abscissa front, which are of significance for Turkish art.

A rectangular framed panel, bordered with geometric fittings, presumably made from spolia, on the left-hand side, in the direction of the church’s apse, contains a composition of a lion and deer struggle on a background decorated with floral motifs. The depiction shows the lion on the deer, with its claws sunk into the deer’s body, biting it from behind. The lion, seen in profile, has

¹⁾ Palagia (2008: 215).

²⁾ Kiilerich (2005: 95–114); Palagia (2008: 215).

a large body with its tail between its legs, arched towards its back; its legs are long and thin with paws which appear large in proportion to the legs. Its mane was, characteristic in Byzantine art, drawn using a screening technique, with braids around the animal's back and forehead. The lion's face is seen in frontal view with a narrow forehead, large eyes, a long nose, full cheeks, and whiskers; its mouth bites into the deer. The deer is depicted as having succumbed to the lion's charge, with its head turned back. The deer's head, seen in profile, does not have antlers; the animal has a large nose, large eyes and an open mouth. The hairs of the deer are roughly suggested by the use of dots, its muscles are drawn with simple lines and its legs kneel in parallel with the ground. In particular, the anthropomorphous face of the lion bears some similarity with Seljuk art. The fight scene in the composition is reminiscent of 'the Eurasian animal style' (Fig. 1).

The lions placed on both sides of the cross above the entrance door of the building are seen in profile, their faces in frontal view. Their bodies and fur were simply drawn, with short and lean legs, weak paws, similar to those of a cat and tails arched upwards. Their faces, when seen from the front, have small and erect ears, narrow foreheads, large eyes and small noses and mouths (Fig. 2). These figures of lions, stylized in a manner which is far from being the predatory one usually associated with cats, have parallels with examples frequently seen throughout the entire Mediterranean basin, including Anatolia, Mesopotamia and Egypt, such as the one in Diyarbakır- Dağkapı, dated circa 8th-9th centuries (Fig. 3).³⁾

Compositions with animal figures of one or more animals, inspired by natural scenes such as hunting and attacking, are the most definitive features of 'the Eurasian Animal Style'. Figures created in this style appear to be stylized with exciting and fast movements in a vigorous and dynamic manner, sometimes coalescing with each other (Fig. 4).⁴⁾ Lion figures in fights were generally depicted with beveled cuts, and can be identified by the characteristics of Seljuk art: faces with stylized small ears, narrow foreheads, large eyes, full cheeks and a non-predatory manner, representing something between a lion and a cat, similar to the lion statues found in the Kayseri Castle, dating from 1224 (Fig.5).⁵⁾ In some examples, the lion figures have anthropomorphous characters.

³⁾ Çelik (2008: 47).

⁴⁾ Öney (1969: 189).

⁵⁾ Karpuz (2008: 28).

The Karasuk culture, dated circa 12th-7th centuries BC., features the earliest Eurasian Animal Style. Subsequently, the style developed into the Tagar culture, expanding into Southern Russia, the countries of Pazyryk, Ordos and Lorestan, then reaching Central Asia with the Huns, the Pontic steppes with the Scythians, and Hungary with the Avar people (Fig. 4).⁶⁾ After the Turks converted to Islam, the style expanded towards significant centres such as: Western Asia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Anatolia following the Abbāsīd period (750–1258).⁷⁾ In time, this became a common style across the entire Mediterranean basin.

'The Eurasian Animal Style' has been observed in Anatolian Turkish art since its foundation. Lion figures displaying properties of this style and the characteristics of Seljuk art are seen in a large number of examples such as: the Grand Mosque of Diyarbakır (Fig. 6), which has a repair epitaph from 1091,⁸⁾ in the Great Seljuk Empire, and the Harput Citadel (Fig. 7), which dates from the 12th century.⁹⁾ Furthermore, examples that have parallels to this style, such as the Georgian İřhan Monastery Church in Artvin¹⁰⁾ (Fig. 8), dating from 1008, and the Armenian Akhtamar Church in Van,¹¹⁾ dated circa 915–921, (Fig. 9) were interpreted within the Mediterranean basin tradition.¹²⁾

Iconographically, the first identification of the struggle between lions and animals such as bulls and deer was in Iranian mythology, between the lion and the bull.¹³⁾ The fight between the lion, the animal of Mithra the Sun God, and the bull, the animal of Taurus the Moon God, represented the struggle between these two gods. From this perspective, compositions generally symbolized the fight between the sun and the moon, day and night, winter and spring, light and darkness and good and evil,¹⁴⁾ and sometimes represented a victory, such as the one found in the Grand Mosque of Diyarbakır.¹⁵⁾ From the perspective of Christian iconography, the animal fight scene in the Little

⁶⁾ Hančar (1952: 171–173), Bilici (1983: 19–27).

⁷⁾ Öney, (1969: 187).

⁸⁾ Baş (2013: 40).

⁹⁾ Sözen (1981: 195).

¹⁰⁾ Aytekin (1999: 53).

¹¹⁾ İpřirođlu (2003: 21–23).

¹²⁾ Grabar (1976: 15).

¹³⁾ Hartner and Ettinghausen (1964: 162).

¹⁴⁾ Yıldırım (2008: 664–665).

¹⁵⁾ Çaycı (2002: 38).

Metropolis Church of Athens (Fig. 1) represents the fight between good and evil; between God and Satan in other words. The heraldic lion figures on both sides of the cross positioned above the entrance door, (Fig. 2) bear familiar characteristics associated with protection.

Examples of this style and analogous works were carried to the Mediterranean basin by the Turks across Central Asia and Iran and influenced neighbouring civilizations such as the Byzantine, Georgian, Armenian and Arab. Accordingly, the influence of 'the Eurasian Animal Style', brought to the Mediterranean by the Turks, is clearly observed in the examples in the Little Metropolis Church of Athens. However, the quality of the spolia in the composition depicting the lion-deer fight brings the composition into question, which would determine whether the panel belongs to antiquity or the early Byzantine period. Considering the fact that the panel belongs either to antiquity or the early Byzantine period, it may be understood that this animal style was influenced by various neighbouring lands, by the Scythians from the north, and the Avars from Hungary, which in turn influenced Europe. However, similar examples to the figure of the lion, which had braids plaited around the back and forehead of the animal, and the facial and bodily details and composition of the deer, which are characteristic of Byzantine art, are seen in the ambon plate exhibited at the Byzantine Museum in Athens, dating from the 12th century (Fig. 10).¹⁶⁾ It has also been proposed that a part of the decorative examples in the structure bear the influence of the Mediterranean basin.¹⁷⁾

In conclusion, an interpretation of the lion-deer fight composition, in 'the Eurasian Animal Style', which originated in Central Asia, indicates that the composition was influential throughout the Mediterranean basin. Furthermore, the heraldic lion figures on the two sides of the cross above the entrance door, which have Seljuk characteristics, also exhibit Mediterranean influences.

¹⁶⁾ Öney (1971: 91–118).

¹⁷⁾ Grabar (1976: 15–17).

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Fig. 1. Athens The Little Metropolis Church, Tanman, 2006



Fig. 2. Athens The Little Metropolis Church, Tanman, 2006



Fig. 3. Diyarbakır Dağkapı, Gertrude Bell Archive, N_062



Fig. 4. Felt Saddle from 1st Pazyryk Cairn, Tekçe, 1993



Fig. 5. Lion Sculptures from Kayseri Castle, Parlak, 2007



Fig. 6. Diyarbakır Grand Mosque, Karpuz, 2008



Fig. 7. Harput Citadel, Süt Castle, Gertrude Bell's Archive N_124



Fig. 8. Artvin İřhan Monastery Church, Eđitim Biliřim Ađı 28.02.2015



Fig. 9. Ahdamar Church, Ipşiroğlu, 2003



Fig. 10. Detail, Athens Byzantine Museum, Lessing Archive, 2010