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ΔΕΛΤΙΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΗΣ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΗΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ

An Early Christian Marble Relief at Kavala

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Introduction

In June of 1952 an Early Christian marble was discovered built into the apse of the church of the Panaghia on the peninsula of Kavala, where it had been immured in the seventeenth or eighteenth century (Figs. 1-7). The relief was taken to the Archaeological Museum in Kavala by Demetrios Lazarides, at that time the Ephor of Classical Antiquities, and there it still resides¹. The purpose of this paper is to provide a first publication of the piece, attempting to determine its date and original function, as well as the meanings of the singular motifs of its carving.

Description

The marble, which is now broken into two pieces, has total dimensions of 103.5 cm height, 61 cm width, and 25.5 cm depth. The stone is white, with bluish veins and a relatively coarse and crumbly texture. It was probably quarried on Thassos. The block is polygonal, with three carved facets. The central facet preserves the greater part of a shell-headed niche, which was flanked by engaged columns and framed an elaborate composition of an eagle standing over a handled vase (Fig. 1). The left-hand facet adjoins the central facet at an angle of approximately 144 degrees (Fig. 2). It also contained a niche, but only the extreme right-hand edge of this niche, containing a plant stem, is preserved. The right-hand facet also adjoins the central facet at an angle of about 144 degrees. It, too, framed a niche, from the filling of which a few tips of acanthus leaves are preserved at the extreme left-hand border (Fig. 5).

The width of the central facet, measured at the plinth, is approximately 40 cm. Within it is carved a niche 30 cm wide, which was headed by a scallop shell with deeply cut lobes and a very pronounced scroll at its base. Only the left-hand half of the shell is now preserved. The total height of the niche was approximately 73 cm. On the floor of the niche stands a vase with a flaring foot, a fluted body, a scalloped rim, and two scrolling handles (Fig. 3). Above the vase is an eagle, standing frontally with its wings outspread. The eagle is

relatively well preserved, except for its head, which is lost, and the upper parts of its wings, which are abraded. The lower feathers of its wings are indicated by four vertical bands, and its leg feathers are strongly puffed out. The bird holds in its claws a small four-footed animal, which is now too damaged to be identified, since it has lost its head (Fig. 4). To judge from the shape of the body and legs, the prey was not a rabbit or a hare, but a creature such as a lamb or a young deer. The rim of the vase beneath the eagle is tilted forward to provide an effective frame for the bird's prey. A series of three drill holes on the right-hand side of the upper body of the eagle indicate that its head, which is now lost, was probably turned to the right. In its beak it originally held a snake, whose body can be seen dangling down between the legs of the bird and wrapping around its right foot before terminating in two loops in front of the body of the prey (Fig. 1).

The central niche is flanked by columns, which rest on podia set flush with the adjoining facets of the polygon. The columns rest on high bases, each comprising a lower torus, a fillet, a scotia, a fillet, and a flattened upper torus. The columns have necking bands and their tops. They are crowned by Ionic capitals, which have two small palmettes between the volutes (Fig. 6). Above the capitals is a two stage impost made up of two bands, the lower one being recessed. The total height of the base, column, capital, and impost is 58 cm.

Of the niche in the left-hand facet, all that survives are the tips of two lobes of its shell-head, and the roll moulding which framed the shell on the right-hand side (Fig. 2). Of the interior decoration of the niche, only a fragment remains, at the top of the extreme left edge, where a scrolling plant-stem can be seen (Fig. 7). At its top the plant bears a pomegranate with a prominent calix. The right-hand facet is as badly preserved as the left-hand one (Fig. 5). However, in this case a portion of the base of the niche is preserved, rather than of its top.

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1. Inventory number Λ. 55.



Fig. 1. Kavala, Archaeological Museum. Fragment from an ambo. (Photo: Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Kavala).

Enough survives to show that on this facet the floor of the niche was at a higher level than of the central niche. Whereas the floor of the central niche is at the same level as the bases of the columns (9.5 cm above the bottom of the block), on the right-hand facet the floor of the niche was higher than the tops of the column bases, about 20 cm above the bottom of the block. This indicates that the niche in the right-hand facet was smaller than the central one, and less important in the overall composition to which our block belonged. Like the left-hand niche, the niche on the right side preserves foliage at its left-hand edge. In this case the character of the plant is different, for instead of a twisting stem, we find the fleshy tips of acanthus leaves set against the curving wall of the niche.



Fig. 2. Kavala, Archaeological Museum. Fragment from an ambo, left-hand facet. (Photo: author).

The features above the niches are very difficult to read on account of damage to the marble. In the spandrel between the arches of the central and the left-hand niches are possibly the remains of vertical leaves, and at the top of the block, 25 cm above the impost of the left-hand column, there are traces of two steps of a moulding (Figs. 1 and 2).

Provenance

Due to the marble's circumstances of discovery, as a spoil built into a post-medieval building, it is no longer possible to determine its original provenance. However, there are reasons for believing that another marble reused in the construction of the apse of the church of the Panaghia, a table-support of the fourth century B.C.,

came from the nearby sanctuary of the Parthenos on the peninsula of Kavala². One would expect that our marble, too, would have been taken from a local site, rather than imported from somewhere more distant, since it also was reemployed casually as building material. On the other hand, it must be said that the discovered remains of Early Christian Neapolis, the landing place of St. Paul, are extremely scant, and there is at present no known Early Christian building in the city from which a marble fragment as fine as this one could have been taken³.

Reconstruction and Function

At first sight the marble in Kavala bears a resemblance to a small group of relief carvings, all of which show symbolic motifs framed by arches supported on columns. The best-known of these reliefs is a somewhat larger sculpture in the Staatliche Museen of Berlin, which depicts two lambs in front of a "prepared" throne⁴. Two related reliefs survive in Nicosia, one showing a sheep in front of three palm trees⁵, and the other, which is only a fragment, depicting a palm tree, a spring, and two birds⁶. Hugo Brandenburg has suggested that the Berlin panel, and others like it, could have been made to occupy focal positions in schemes of revetment, especially in sanctuaries⁷. However, there are two essential differences between this group of panels and the marble at Kavala. First, the arches over the Berlin relief and its relatives spring from the *outside* edges of the abaci over the capitals, and not, as is the case with the Kavala relief, from the inside edge of the abacus. This demonstrates that the Berlin relief was never part of a series of arches, as was the case with our sculpture. Secondly, the Berlin relief and other members of its group do not have faceted sides; they are not polygonal. For these reasons, the marble at Kavala cannot have formed part of a revetment.

It is very much more likely that our marble originally formed part of the base of a polygonal ambo. Several ambos are known to have incorporated marbles similar to the one in Kavala, which enclosed a whole niche, shell-head and all, within a single block of stone. Such monolithic shell-headed niches formed part of the construction of ambos in the following churches: Basilica A at Amphipolis⁸; Basilica A at Nea Anchialos⁹; St. George (Fig. 8)¹⁰, St. Menas¹¹, and St. Sophia at Thessaloniki¹²; and a church at Selçikler in Anatolia¹³. The dimensions of the relief at Kavala fall within the range given by these examples. In the Kavala relief, the central niche is 30 cm wide and was approximately 73 cm high. The dimensions of the niches on the other ambos cited

above vary greatly; the closest comparisons for our example are a width of 35 cm for a niche from the ambo of Basilica A at Amphipolis, and a height of around 70 cm for the niches of the ambo of St. Menas at Thessaloniki.

Given the small size of the marble in Kavala, it is difficult to reconstruct the appearance of the ambo when it was complete. However, some clues are given by the angles at which the facets join, each about 144 degrees. Such angles would have been appropriate for an octagonal ambo, such as the first ambo of St. Demetrius in Thessaloniki¹⁴, or the small ambo of Basilica C at Philippi¹⁵. Alternatively, the ambo to which our relief be-

2. G. Bakalakis, *Νεάπολις - Χριστούπολις - Καβάλα*, AE 1936, pp. 1-48, esp. p. 28, nt. 2, fig. 54; *idem*, *Τραπεζοφόρο από τό ιερό της Παρθένου*, *Ἑλληνικά* 15 (1957), pp. 324-29, pl. 8.

3. On Early Christian Kavala, see Bakalakis, *op.cit.*, pp. 6, 47-48. K. Χιόνης, *Ἱστορία τῆς Καβάλας*, Kavala 1968, pp. 25-26. Δ. Λαζαρίδης, *Νεάπολις - Χριστούπολις - Καβάλα. Ὁδηγός Μουσείου Καβάλας*, Athens 1969, p. 27. Ch. Bakirtzis, *Byzantine Kavala: Archaeological Survey*, Α΄ Τοπικό Συμπόσιο «Ἡ Καβάλα καί ἡ περιοχή της», Kavala 18-20 April 1977, Thessaloniki 1980, pp. 527-28.

4. H. Brandenburg, *Ein frühchristliches Relief in Berlin*, RM 79 (1972), pp. 123-54, figs. 66-71. The dimensions are: 167 cm high, 86 cm wide, and 11 cm deep.

5. A. H. S. Megaw, *Byzantine Architecture and Decoration in Cyprus: Metropolitan or Provincial?*, DOP 28 (1974), p. 69, fig. 11.

6. A. H. S. Megaw, *Some Medieval Acquisitions of the Cyprus Museum*, RDAC, 1937-1939, Nicosia 1951, p. 205, pl. 45, 4.

7. *Op. cit.*, pp. 153-154.

8. *Ἔργον* 1967, pp. 59-60, figs. 57-58; E. Stikas, *Ἀνασκαφή παλαιοχριστιανικῶν βασιλικῶν Ἀμφιπόλεως*, ΠΑΕ 1970, pp. 50-54; J. P. Sodini, *L'ambon de la rotonde Saint-Georges: remarques sur la typologie et le décor*, BCH 100 (1976), pp. 493-510, esp. p. 502, nt. 40; P. H. F. Jakobs, *Die frühchristlichen Ambone Griechenlands*, Bonn 1987, p. 227, pl. 1c.

9. G. A. Soteriou, *Αἱ Χριστιανικαί Θῆβαι τῆς Θεσσαλίας*, AE 1929, esp. pp. 87-96, figs. 106-26; Jakobs, *op.cit.*, pp. 281-82, pl. 17d.

10. A. K. Orlandos, *Ἡ ξυλόστεγος παλαιοχριστιανική βασιλική*, II, Athens 1954, pp. 552-54, figs. 517-19; Sodini, *op.cit.*; Jakobs, *op.cit.*, pp. 330-34, pls. 36-37, figs. 120-25.

11. Orlandos, *op.cit.*, p. 547, fig. 512; Sodini, *op.cit.*, p. 502, nt. 37; E. Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, *Les ambons paléochrétiens à Thessalonique et à Philippos*, CorsiRav XXXI (1984), pp. 255-75, esp. pp. 257-58, fig. 6; Jakobs, *op.cit.*, pp. 334-35, pl. 38b, figs. 126-27.

12. Orlandos, *op.cit.*, p. 546, fig. 511; Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, *op.cit.*, p. 257, fig. 5; Jakobs, *op.cit.*, pp. 336-38, pl. 39, figs. 130-32.

13. M. Mellink, *Archaeology in Asia Minor*, AJA 79 (1975), pp. 221-22, ill. 2, pl. 46, fig. 37.

14. G. A. Soteriou, *Αἱ παλαιοχριστιανικαί βασιλικαί τῆς Ἑλλάδος*, AE 1929, p. 245, figs. 78-79; Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, *op.cit.*, p. 258, fig. 7; Jakobs, pp. 329-30, pl. 35b-c, fig. 119.

15. G. Gounaris, *Le problème de l'existence de deux ambons dans l'Octagone de Philippos*, Actes du Xe Congrès International d'archéologie chrétienne, II, Rome 1984, pp. 133-40, esp. pp. 137-38; E. Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, *Les deux ambons de la basilique du*

longed could have been heptagonal, like the ambo of St. Menas in Thessaloniki¹⁶.

To some extent, the decoration of our piece can also be matched on surviving ambos from the Early Christian period. Several other pulpits are decorated with eagles, including those of St. George, Thessaloniki (Fig. 8), of Basilica B at Amphipolis¹⁷, and of Basilica D at Nea Anchialos¹⁸. On these examples, however, the birds are placed in the spandrels between the arches of the shell-headed niches, rather than in the niches themselves. For the leaves that may have decorated the spandrels of our pulpit, a possible parallel would be the leaves which grow up between the arches of the ambo in the church of St. Menas¹⁹.

Iconography

The most striking feature of the carving on the relief at Kavala is the eagle which simultaneously grasps a small mammal and attacks a snake with its beak and claws. While there are a few parallels in early Byzantine art for the motif of the eagle attacking a snake with its beak, and many for the eagle with a small mammal or bird in its claws, it is relatively rare for the two themes to be combined into one image. The closest parallels for the motif carved on our fragment are to be found on a group of two zone capitals which have ram protomes in their upper zones and finely serrated "Theodosian" acanthus leaves in their lower zones. These capitals can broadly be dated between the middle of the fifth and the middle of the sixth centuries²⁰. On several of them small eagles are carved between the protomes, against the central boss underneath the abacus. Sometimes the eagle will simultaneously bite a snake with its beak and clutch a small four-footed animal in its talons. On one example, now in the Archaeological Museum at Istanbul, each eagle stands frontally, except for its head which is turned to one side (Fig. 9)²¹. From its beak dangles a snake which falls between the legs of the bird. In its claws the eagle grasps a small animal with long ears, perhaps a rabbit or a hare, which is turned upon its back, so that its head looks upward. Similar carvings of eagles that simultaneously hold snakes in their beaks and grasp other prey in their claws can be found on two capitals now in the Old Metropolis at Edessa²², and in the Museum at Veria²³. Like the example in Istanbul, these are both two-zone protome capitals with "Theodosian" leaves.

While the combined motif, of the eagle both attacking a serpent and grasping another animal, is comparatively rare, it is not unusual to find the eagle in association with just one other creature. The image of the eagle with



Fig. 3. Kavala, Archaeological Museum. Fragment from an ambo, detail. Eagle and vase. (Photo: author).

a small mammal or bird in its talons was especially common on the Early Byzantine period, occurring in a variety of contexts and media. The Byzantines had inherited the motif from Roman art; an eagle clutching a hare appeared, for example, as a reference to victory on the lappets of Flavian cuirassed statues²⁴, as well as on Late Roman funerary sculpture²⁵. In Early Byzantine times the motif of the eagle holding a small animal appeared in sculpture, mosaics, and textiles. Most frequently the bird clutches a rabbit or a hare in its talons, but sometimes the victim, where it can be identified, is some other creature, such as a goat, a small deer, a gazelle, or a little bird. The motif is found on two-zone protome capitals (of the type discussed above)²⁶, on a



Fig. 4. Kavala, Archaeological Museum. Fragment from an ambo, detail. Eagle's prey. (Photo: author).

Musée à Philippos, Ἀφιέρωμα στὴ μνήμη Στυλιανοῦ Πελεκανίδη, Thessaloniki 1983, pp. 197-212, esp. p. 210, figs. 9-11; Kourkoutidou-Nikolaïdou, *op.cit.* (as in note 11), p. 267, figs. 19-20.

16. See note 11, above.

17. E.G. Stikas, Ἀνασκαφὴ παλαιοχριστιανικῶν βασιλικῶν Ἀμφιπόλεως, ΠΑΕ 1973, p. 36, pls. 37b, 38a; Sodini, *op.cit.*, p. 502, nt. 40; Jakobs, *op.cit.*, p. 229, pl. 2c.

18. G.A. Soteriou, Ἀνασκαφαὶ Νέας Ἀγχιάλου, ΠΑΕ 1934, pp. 58-66, esp. pp. 62-63, fig. 6; P. Lazaridis, Ἀνασκαφὴ Νέας Ἀγχιάλου, ΠΑΕ 1972, pp. 12-48, esp. p. 27, fig. 5; Sodini, *op.cit.*, p. 502, nt. 41; Jakobs, pp. 284-85, pl. 18b-d.

19. Jakobs, *op.cit.*, pl. 38b, figs. 126-27.

20. E. Kitzinger, The Horse and Lion Tapestry at Dumbarton Oaks, DOP 3 (1946), pp. 1-72, esp. p. 49; F. W. Deichmann, Zur Entstehung der spätantiken Zweizonen-Tierkapitelle, Χαριστήριον εἰς Ἀναστάσιον Κ. Ὀρλάνδον, I, Athens 1965, pp. 136-44, esp. p. 143.

21. G. Mendel, Catalogue des sculptures grecques, romaines et byzantines, Constantinople, III, 1914, p. 448, no. 1210; R. Kautzsch, Kapitellstudien, Berlin 1936, p. 157, pl. 30, no. 496. N. Firatli, La sculpture byzantine figurée au Musée Archéologique d'Istanbul, Paris 1990, p. 111, no. 201.

22. M. Panayotidi, Βυζαντινὰ κιονόκρανα μὲ ἀνάγλυφα ζῶα, ΔΧΑΕ Δ', ΣΤ' (1972), pp. 82-129, esp. pp. 82-83, pl. 27a-b.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 113-14, pl. 31d.

24. R.A. Gergel, The Eagle Vanquishing a Hare: A Flavian Victory Motif, AJA 91 (1987), p. 303.

25. E. Pfuhl, H. Möbius, Die ostgriechischen Grabreliefs, Mainz 1979, p. 534, no. 2220, pl. 316 (relief from Kotiaecion).

26. Mendel, *op.cit.*, II, pp. 540-41, no. 744 and Firatli, *op.cit.*, p. 110, no. 199 (capital from Constantinople); P. Lemerle, Chapiteaux chrétiens à protomes de béliers, AE 1937, I, pp. 292-99, esp. p. 294, fig. 2 (capital in the katholikon of the Iviron Monastery, Mount Athos).

panel from a marble screen²⁷, and in several floor mosaics²⁸. It also occurs on clothing²⁹.

The motif of the eagle killing the serpent was less frequent in Early Byzantine art than that of the eagle with a small mammal or bird in its claws; the image of eagle and serpent became more popular in the Byzantine art of the later middle ages³⁰. Like the eagle with hare, the eagle and serpent motif had antecedents as an emblem of victory in both official and private sculptures of the Roman period, being found in state reliefs³¹, as well as on funerary monuments³². In the Early Byzantine period the best known example of the motif is the mosaic from the floor of the Great Palace in Constantinople³³, but it also occurred in less exalted settings, for example serving as the finial of a bronze incense burner from Egypt, now in the Louvre³⁴.

Date

Since the marble at Kavala does not have a provenance, the only guide to its dating is its style. In this regard, the best indications are given by the foliage carved in the two side niches of the piece, a narrow scrolling stem bearing a pomegranate on the left (Fig. 7), and the tips of fleshy acanthus leaves on the right (Fig. 5). Such a combination, of thin stems bearing fruit and of thick acanthus, can be found in the sculpture of several churches datable between the middle of the fifth century and the end of the first quarter of the sixth century. It may be seen, for example, on an Ionic impost capital from the gallery of the basilica at Lechaion, near Corinth (Fig. 10). Here a central cross is flanked on each side by curving stems bearing pomegranates, which arch over fleshy scooped-out acanthus leaves. According to D. I. Pallas, the excavator of this church, the evidence of coins indicates that the basilica was begun around 450 or 460 at the earliest, but it was not finished and used for services until the time of Justin I (518-27)³⁵. This date range is broadly confirmed by other sculptures that are comparable to the relief found at Kavala. In the church of St. John Studios in Constantinople, securely datable to around 450³⁶, the two types of foliage appear to have been found: the fleshy scooped out acanthus leaves, carved on impost capitals that perhaps came from the gallery; and the narrow twisted stem bearing a pomegranate, which appears on a volute of one of the composite capitals at the entrance to the narthex (Fig. 13)³⁷. Closely related to the capitals of Studios basilica, but less well dated, are those of the church of the Acheiropoietos in Thessaloniki. Here, too, there is a combination of the pomegranate-bearing stems on the volutes of



Fig. 5. Kavala, Archaeological Museum. Fragment from an ambo, detail on right-hand facet. Acanthus leaves. (Photo: author).

27. S. D. Campbell, *The Malcove Collection*, Toronto 1985, p. 95, no. 121 (provenance unknown).

28. Έργον 1969, pp. 57-61, fig. 59 (Basilica A, Amphipolis); R. E-tzeoglou, *Παλαιοχριστιανική βασιλική παρά τους Μολάους Λακωνίας*, AE 1974, pp. 249-50, pls. 83b, 85a; H. Maguire, *Earth and Ocean: The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art* (Monographs of the College Art Association of America, 43), University Park 1987, pp. 45, 51-52, fig. 58 (basilica at Qasr-el-Lebia).

29. F. D. Friedman (ed.), *Beyond the Pharaohs* (Exhibition catalogue, Rhode Island School of Design), Providence 1989, p. 218, no. 131 (silk fragment from Akhmin in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, with a listing of other examples).

30. It occurs, for example, five times in the sculptured reliefs on the "Little Metropolis" (Panaghia Gorgoepeikoos) in Athens; A. Grabar,



Fig. 6. Kavala, Archaeological Museum. Fragment from an ambo, detail. Column and capital on left side. (Photo: author).



Fig. 7. Kavala, Archaeological Museum. Fragment from an ambo, detail. Plant-stem and pomegranate on left-hand facet. (Photo: author).

Sculptures byzantines du moyen âge, II, Paris 1976, pls. 65, 66, 68.
 31. R. Wittkower, Eagle and Serpent: A Study in the Migration of Symbols, *JWarb* 2 (1938-39), pp. 293-325, esp. p. 310, pl. 51k (triumphal arch at Pola).
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 311, pl. 50g (sarcophagus in S. Lorenzo fuori le Mura); Pfuhl and Möbius, *op. cit.*, p. 532, no. 2216, pl. 316 (relief from Kos); La civilisation romaine de la Moselle à la Sarre, exhibition catalogue, Musée du Luxembourg, Paris 1983, p. 171, no. 111 (funerary monument at Siesbach).
 33. J. Trilling, The Soul of the Empire: Style and Meaning in the Mosaic Pavement of the Byzantine Imperial Palace in Constantinople, *DOP* 43 (1989), pp. 26-72, esp. p. 59, fig. 40.
 34. L. Bréhier, La sculpture et les arts mineurs byzantins, Paris 1936, p. 81, pl. 44.

35. D.I. Pallas, *ΑΔ* 17 (1961-62), pp. 72-74, pl. 83d; *idem*, Über die Datierung eines Kapitells der Basilika von Lechaion (Korinth), *BZ* 63 (1970), pp. 69-70.
 36. J. Kramer, Skulpturen mit Adlerfiguren an Bauten des 5. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. in Konstantinopel, Cologne 1968, pp. 61-64; C. Mango, The Date of the Studius Basilica at Istanbul, *BMGS* 4 (1978), pp. 115-22; U. Peschlow, Die Johanneskirche des Studios in Istanbul, XVI. Internationaler Byzantinistenkongress, Akten, II, 4 (= *JOB*, 32, 4), Vienna 1982, pp. 429-34.
 37. Kautzsch, *op.cit.*, p. 167, pl. 33, no. 540; F. W. Deichmann, Studien zur Architektur Konstantinopels im 5. und 6. Jahrhundert n. Chr., Baden-Baden 1956, pp. 70-72; Kramer, *op.cit.*, pp. 69-70, fig. 9.

certain capitals in the nave with fleshy acanthus leaves on the impostes (Fig. 11). Most scholars concur, from various sources of evidence, that this church must have been built in the second half of the fifth century, although a closer dating has been a matter of dispute³⁸. It can also be noted that some of the capitals of the Acheiropoietos basilica have eagles carved on their corner volutes (Fig. 12). These eagles, though smaller in scale than the eagle appearing on the relief at Kavala, are quite similar in execution. They are characterized by large, clumsy, elongated claws. Their puffy leg feathers are crudely formed of concentric ridges, shaped like inverted 'v's, and their lower wing feathers are indicated simply by means of overlapping vertical bands.

On the basis of these parallels, a date range of 450 to 525 may tentatively be suggested for the ambo fragment in Kavala. Such a dating would fit with the iconography of the relief. As has been shown, the nearest parallels for the unusual motif of the eagle which simultaneously attacks a snake and grasps its prey are two-zone capitals with leaves of the "Theodosian" type (Fig. 9), which may be dated between the middle of the fifth and the middle of the sixth centuries.

Meanings

As is well known, the eagle in Roman and Early Byzantine art was a polyvalent symbol, with a wide range of potential meanings, political and religious, pagan and Christian. In imperial imagery the bird was associated with Jupiter, with power, victory and apotheosis³⁹. In Christian art and writing it could stand of renewal, resurrection and immortality as well as for Christ himself⁴⁰.

More specific meanings were given by Christian writers to the two motifs appearing on the sculpture at Kavala, the eagle destroying the snake and the eagle with its prey. The image of the eagle fighting the serpent, was interpreted as Christ defending the faithful from evil. Thus St. Jerome, in his commentary on Isaiah, said that God protects his children from the devil, just as the eagle shields its young in the nest from the serpent⁴¹. A similar explanation of the motif can be found in one of the sermons spuriously attributed to St. Ambrose: Christ, by becoming incarnate, destroyed the devil and released humanity from sin, just as the eagle devours the serpent and destroys its poison⁴². A commentary on the *Hexameron*, spuriously attributed to Anastasius Sinaïtes, gives a somewhat different interpretation of the image. The author of this work also identifies the serpent with the devil, but he says that the eagles who crush

the snakes in their talons represent the blessed in Paradise⁴³.

The image of the eagle with its prey is more frequently encountered in Early Christian literature than that of the eagle with the serpent, just as it appears more frequently in Early Christian art⁴⁴. In Christian exegesis, the bird could represent either Christ or his followers. Maximus of Turin identified the eagle with Christ who takes the Christian captive to the heavens⁴⁵, while the author of the sermon spuriously attributed to St. Ambrose said that the eagle is Christ who by his Resurrection snatched man from the jaws of the devil and flew back to his father⁴⁶.

Other writers gave a different interpretation of the motif of the eagle with its prey, interpreting the bird not as Christ himself, but as his disciples. Many of these interpretations take as their point of departure a saying of Christ that appears twice in the gospels "For where the corpse (*πτῶμα*) is, there will the eagles congregate" (Matthew 24: 28; Luke 17: 37). St. Ambrose, for example, in his commentary on Luke's Gospel, identified the eagles as the souls of the just, and the corpse as the church where we are renewed in spirit through the grace of Baptism⁴⁷. Cyril of Alexandria, in his exposition of the same text, explained that at the return of the Son of man, all the eagles, that is the just, who can soar above the things of this world, will flock to Him⁴⁸. The

38. Kramer, *op.cit.*, pp. 48-52; R. S. Cormack, *The Mosaic Decoration of S. Demetrios, Thessaloniki*, BSA 64 (1969), pp. 17-52, esp. p. 51; M. Vickers, *Fifth-Century Brickstamps from Thessaloniki*, BSA 68 (1973), pp. 285-94; Ch. Bakirtzis, *Sur le donateur et la date des mosaïques d'Acheiropoietos à Thessalonique*, *Atti del IX Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana*, II, Rome 1978, pp. 37-44; Sordini, *op.cit.*, p. 510; W. E. Kleinbauer, *Remarks on the Building History of the Acheiropoietos Church at Thessaloniki*, *Actes du Xe Congrès International d'archéologie chrétienne*, II, Thessaloniki, 1984, pp. 241-57, esp. pp. 245-47.

39. On the imperial symbolism see Maguire, *op.cit.*, pp. 65-66; J. Engemann, *Ein Missorium des Anastasius*, *Festschrift für Klaus Wessel*, ed. M. Restle, Munich 1988, pp. 103-15, esp. p. 109.

40. On the Christian symbolism see J. P. Kirsch, *L'aigle sur les monuments figurés de l'antiquité chrétienne*, *Bulletin d'ancienne littérature et d'archéologie chrétiennes* 3:2 (1913), pp. 112-26; RAC, I, cols. 91-4 (Adler); Maguire, *op.cit.*, pp. 51-52, 59, 65, 96 nt. 47.

41. In *Isaiam*, 66.13; PL XXIV, 662.

42. *Sermo XLVI*, 2; PL XVII, 695C-D.

43. *Hexameron*, 6; PG LXXXIX, 926A.

44. Some of the western sources are cited by F. Mutherich, *Der Adler mit dem Fisch*, in H. Roth, ed., *Zum Problem der Deutung frühmittelalterlicher Bildinhalte*, Sigmaringen 1986, pp. 317-40.

45. *Homilia LX*; PL LVII, 369-370.

46. *Sermo XLVI*, 2; PL XVII, 695A.

47. *Expositio in Lucam*, 8.56; PL XV, 1782.

48. *Explanatio in Lucae Evangelium*, 17.37; PG LXXII, 847A-B.



Fig. 8. Istanbul, Archaeological Museum. Ambo from the church of St. George, Thessaloniki. (Photo: Hirmer).



Fig. 9. Istanbul, Archaeological Museum. Capital. (Photo: author).

Fig. 10. Basilica of Lechaion (Corinth). Capital. (Photo: author).



commentary on the *Hexaemeron* attributed to Anastasius Sinaites identifies the eagles as the just who congregate at the body of the Good Thief, namely in Paradise⁴⁹.

Many writers gave the Gospel text a eucharistic interpretation, either implicitly or explicitly, often identifying the “corpse” of the Gospel text with the eagle’s carrion. Origen identified the eagles of this passage as the disciples of Christ who believe in his passion and congregate at his body⁵⁰. A hymn of Ephraim the Syrian specifically identifies the “corpse” of the Gospel text with the bread of the communion, by eating which each believer becomes an eagle that flies to paradise⁵¹. St. Ambrose, in his commentary on St. Luke’s Gospel and in his treatise *On the Sacraments*⁵², identifies the “corpse” as the elements of the communion, where the

faithful congregate. Likewise St. Jerome, in his commentary on Matthew, identifies the eagles with believers who congregate at the sacrament of Christ⁵³. Among the Greek fathers, St. John Chrysostom says that the faithful should approach “that fearful and awful sacrifice” in a lofty manner, as eagles⁵⁴.

The eagle, therefore, received a variety of interpretations in Early Christian literature; even the more specific motif of the eagle with its prey, or carrion, was given different interpretations by different writers, the bird being seen sometimes as Christ, at others as his believers. We should expect a similar latitude of interpretation in works of art. In some cases the eagle may have been specifically intended by a designer to represent Christ; in others it represented the Christian; in others the motif was ambiguous. It is necessary, in each case, to look for clues that help to narrow down the specific symbolism of the piece.

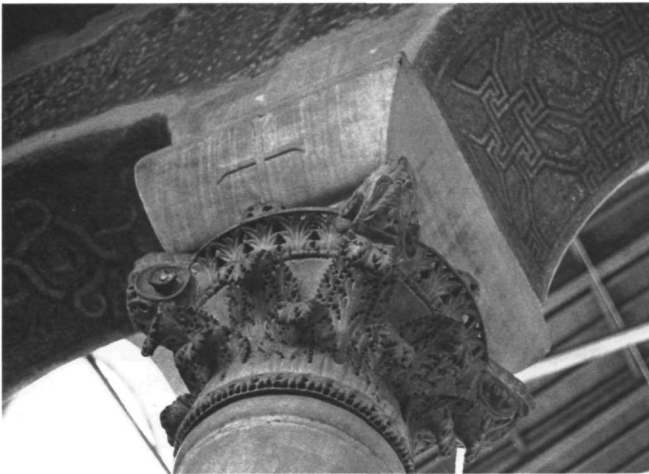
In the case of the relief at Kavala, some clues to the sculpture’s intended significance are provided by the vessel upon which the eagle stands. Since many of the texts on the eagle and the “corpse” give to the image a eucharistic meaning, it is not inappropriate to read the vessel as a chalice. It may be objected that the vase in our sculpture takes a peculiar form, for which it is difficult to find close parallels among surviving Early Byzantine chalices. The vessel in the carving has two long scrolling handles, like some other Early Christian chalices that either survived into modern times or were depicted in works of art⁵⁵. But the shape of its body, a truncated cone with gadroons forming a strongly scalloped rim, cannot be matched among those surviving chalices that are securely dated to the Early Byzantine period. However, some parallels for this shape can be found among carved vessels of precious stone which were mounted for use as cups or chalices during the Middle Byzantine period. In the collection at S. Marco, in Venice, for example, there is a cup of rock-crystal carved with ten gadroons forming a strongly scalloped edge, which was given a silver mount with two handles in the tenth or eleventh century⁵⁶. A sardonyx cup in the same treasury is carved in the shape of a truncated cone, but without gadroons; it also was set in a metalwork mount during the tenth or eleventh century and, as the enamelled inscriptions around the rim demonstrate, was at that time intended for use as a chalice⁵⁷. In both of these cases it is difficult to date the stone cups, which may be earlier than their settings⁵⁸.

If the vase under the eagle is given a eucharistic interpretation, the conjunction of images on our relief becomes comparable to other works of Early Byzantine art, particularly the so-called “chalice of Antioch” in the col-



Fig. 11. Thessaloniki, Basilica of the Acheiropoietos, nave. Capital and impost. (Photo: author).

Fig. 12. Thessaloniki, Basilica of the Acheiropoietos, nave. Capital and impost. (Photo: author).



lection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York⁵⁹. This object, which was probably made in the mid-sixth century, consists of a double silver bowl with an added foot⁶⁰. The outer bowl has a dense design of an inhabited vine executed in openwork. The images within the vine are arranged around two representations of the seated Christ. Beneath one of the figures of Christ is an eagle with outspread wings standing on a basket containing either grapes or bread (Fig. 14). The basket itself is flanked by two bunches of grapes, while another basket, perhaps containing bread, appears to the right. Like the sculpture of our relief, therefore, the images on the “chalice of Antioch” appear to associate the eagle with eucharistic imagery, that is, with the baskets and the vines⁶¹. Eagles are also found in association with vines on the famous ambo from the church of St.

George at Thessaloniki: eagles with outspread wings are set in the spandrels of the arches, while luxuriant grape vines growing from three handleless vases are carved on the front and sides of the platform (Fig. 8)⁶². Since a major function of the ambo in the Early Byzantine period was the reading of scriptures⁶³, the carving of eucharistic imagery upon ambos in effect made an association between the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the flesh. Such an association was spelled out by St. Jerome in his commentary on Matthew 24, 28: “We are instructed in the sacrament of Christ from a natural example that we see everyday. For eagles and vultures are said to sense carcasses even across seas and

49. Hexameron, 6; PG LXXXIX, 926A.

50. In Matthaem; PG XIII, 1669-1670.

51. T. J. Lamy, ed., Sancti Ephraemi Syri Hymni et Sermones, I, 1882, col. 619.

52. Expositio in Lucam, 8.56 (PL XV, 1782); De sacramentis, 4.7 (ed. B. Botte, SC XXV, Paris 1949, p. 80).

53. In Matthaem, 24, 28; CChr LXXVII, p. 229.

54. In Epistulam I ad Corinthios homilia XXIV, 3; PG LXI, 203.

55. O. M. Dalton, A Guide to the Early Christian and Byzantine Antiquities in the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities, British Museum, London 1921, p. 107; V. H. Elbern, Der eucharistische Kelch im frühen Mittelalter, Berlin 1964, p. 72, fig. 17 (chalice of Gourdon).

56. H. R. Hahnloser, ed., Il tesoro di San Marco, II, Il Tesoro e il Museo, Florence 1971, p. 70, no. 64, pl. 56.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 66, no. 56, pl. 51; The Treasury of San Marco, Venice, exhibition catalogue, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1984, pp. 156-58, no. 15.

58. On the production of hardstone vessels in the shape of truncated cones in the Classical period, see *ibid.*, p. 156; H. P. Bühler, Antike Gefäße aus Edelsteinen, Mainz 1973, no. 6, pl. 2 (agate vase in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo), and no. 9, pl. 3 (agate vase in the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Columbia).

59. K. Weitzmann, ed., Age of Spirituality, New York 1979, p. 606, no. 542.

60. On the date and function, see, most recently, M. M. Mango, Silver from Early Byzantium, The Kaper Koraon and Related Treasures (exhibition catalogue, The Walters Art Gallery), Baltimore 1986, pp. 183-87, no. 40, who shows that there is no proof that the vessel was originally a chalice; she suggests that it could have served as a lamp. However, the eucharistic imagery on the outer bowl should be taken into account in determining the original use.

61. W. R. Newbold, The Eagle and the Basket on the Chalice of Antioch, AJA 29 (1925), pp. 357-80, esp. pp. 359-60, 371. A similar association can be found on a carved ivory pyxis of the sixth century at Livorno, which was found at Carthage; here an eagle with outspread wings accompanies a scene of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. *Ibid.*, p. 376; W. F. Volbach, Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters, Mainz 1976, p. 106, no. 165, pl. 84.

62. Orlandos, *op.cit.* (as in note 10), p. 554, fig. 519.

63. T. F. Mathews, The Early Churches of Constantinople, University Park 1971, pp. 147-49; Kourkoutidou-Nikolaïdou, Les deux ambons de la basilique du Musée à Philippos, *op.cit.* (as in note 15), p. 198.



Fig. 13. Basilica of St. John Studios. Constantinople. Capital in the narthex. (Photo: author).

to congregate at food of this kind. If, therefore, irrational birds can sense where a small carcass lies by means of their natural senses when they are separated by such wide spaces of land and of sea, how much more should we and all the multitude of believers hurry to him whose radiance goes forth from the East and reaches to the West... We can understand [the word] *corpus*... as the Passion of Christ to which we are summoned to congregate wherever it is read in the scripture and through it we can come to the word of God..."⁶⁴.

In the case of the relief at Kavala, therefore, both the associated imagery (the vase), and the context (an ambo), would fit with a eucharistic interpretation of the motif of the eagle with its food in its claws. However, it is probably a mistake to interpret the imagery too narrowly. Early Christian symbolism was polyvalent, and intentionally so. The power of the symbols depended upon the wide range of potential references that they might evoke in viewers. Therefore, it should not be forgotten that St. Ambrose, in his exposition of Luke 17: 37, gave the subject a baptismal connotation, saying that the corpse represented the church and the eagles the just who are renewed in the spirit through baptism⁶⁵. According to this interpretation, the handled vase could equally well have represented baptismal waters, as it did

in the floor mosaics of surviving Early Christian baptisteries⁶⁶.

The polyvalent character of the symbolism in our relief is forced upon the viewer by the fact that the eagle is also destroying a snake. As has been seen, in some textual sources this motif was interpreted as Christ destroying the devil. Thus, according to one reading of the sculpture the eagle can be taken as Christ in conflict with evil, but according to another the bird is seen to be one of His faithful, assembled at His body in the eucharist, or renewed through baptism. Such a density of meaning is typical of late fifth and sixth century Christian visual imagery. The central design of the marble relief at Kavala is, in the words of Paul the Silentiary's description of the carver's art at St. Sophia: "one sigh that means many words"⁶⁷.

64. In Matthaicum, 24: 28; CChr, Series Latina, LXXVII, p. 229.

65. *Supra*, note 47.

66. See, especially, the mosaic in the antechamber to a baptistery at Salona, where a cantharos flanked by two stags is accompanied by an inscription quoting the first verse of Psalm 41: "As the hart longs for the water fountains...;" E. Dyggve, *History of Salonitan Christianity*, Oslo 1951, pp. 32-33, figs. II, 25-30.

67. Description of the imperial monograms on the chancel screen: *Descriptio ecclesiae Sanctae Sophiae*, lines 713-714.



Fig. 14. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Silver bowl ("Chalice of Antioch"). Christ, eagle, and eucharistic emblems. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art).