Saint George on horseback with the Dragon:

A Norman stone sculpture.

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Summary

An old stone statue of a warrior on horseback, piercing a dragon was proposed as a "Saint George and the Dragon". Related historical context of such stone sculptures was exposed. The object was examined in an appropriate laboratory. The material used and the manufacturing technique were discussed. The stylistic features of the object were extensively commented on, as well as the comparative studies with similar objects. All these led to a proposed origin in ducal Normandy (Fr.) carved by settled Normen, and with a proposed dating of end 10th, beginning 11th c. A.D.

Key words: *Saint George and the Dragon, Medieval round boss stone sculptures, ducal Normandy.*

Introductive Iconography

The ancient Roman idea of representing their god Jupiter, i.e. the Roman Emperor or Caesar, as a horseman-warrior, who, on top of his mount, destroys the giant, the insurgent, the evil, develops under the reign of the Emperor L. Septimus Severus (193 - 211 A.C.). Such statues (Fig.1) were standing on top of 'four-god-pillars', which later could be found on many crossroads or marketplaces in Roman controlled areas of the former Empire ([1]). Few of these monuments have survived.

But the theme of the god-horseman subduing evil was even older and can be traced back to old Grecian (Perseus saving Andromeda from the Dragon), and before that to Egyptian sources (Horus killing the crocodile – Louvre Museum).

Before and after the official recognition of the Christian religion in the Roman Empire, in 311 and 313 A.D., some so called 'pagan' deities were slowly assimilated within the Christian sphere. In the northern regions of Gaul, this assimilation was slower and different than elsewhere. Later, in the 5th and 6th c. A.D. Germanic tribes coming from the East invaded and sacked Western Europe and finally settled. They assimilated some persistent local or Roman pagan idols of the conquered areas, but also introduced their own.

Fig. 1. Jupiter destroying the giants (Roman work). Provincial Gallo-Roman Museum. Tongeren, Belgium

The long-time visible Roman four-god-pillars could have contributed to the assimilation of the Christian *'Saint George with the dragon'* with the image of the Roman Emperor. The story of this Christian Saint however is only an apocryphal legend ([2]). It stands for: the Christian warrior victorious of evil comprehensible for simple Christian worshippers. St. George was said to be a Roman legionnaire officer originating from Cappadocia. According to the legend he was cruelly martyrized in 303 A.D. under the persecution of the then forbidden Christian sect by emperor Diocletian (244 – 311 A.D.). Up until the 10th-11th c. A.D, he was depicted as a standing knight with blank sword or lance, and a shield bearing a cross, or a white banner with red cross.

The dragon, as his attribute, was added later as a result of another legend: one day the Roman soldier arrived in a city terrorized by a men-eating dragon. The king's daughter had to be offered to appease the monster's appetite, but George pierced the dragon with his lance and killed it (cfr. Perseus and Andromeda). Throughout the dark ages, the cult of St. George remained mostly in the area of the Byzantine Empire. However, by the 12th c. A.D. the cult had spread over Western and Northern Europe.

From the 9th c. A.D. on, Danish and Norwegian seamen, warriors, plunderers, and immigrants, also called Vikings or Norsemen or Normen (men coming from the North via the sea) invaded Western European shores, sacking and destroying everything on their way. In Frankish land, - formerly Gallic country- (now France) they build permanent strongholds for instance at the mouth of the river Seine and the surrounding areas. There they finally settled after the Frankish King Charles-the-Simple ceded land to their leader Rollon (Hrólfr) in the non-aggression pact of St.-Clair-sur-Epte of 911 A.D. This land was then called '*Normandy',* land of the Normen. The new settlers were converted to the Christian faith well before the end of the 10th c. A.D., but without losing their bellicose nature. One may assume that the legend of St. George bravely killing the evil Dragon impressed and inspired the locals. So, he quickly became the holy patron of horsemen, soldiers, saddle makers, horse breeders, weapon forgers, and so on. The cult spread West over the Channel, and after the conquest of the Anglo-Saxon island (battle of Hastings in 1066) by (Frankish-) Norman armies under the leadership of William the Conqueror, St. George was promoted in 1222 by the Oxford synod as **the national saint of Great Britain.**

The region 'Normandy' in France stayed very independent, and formed a separate duchy, until the neighbouring Frankish king Phillip-August invaded the region around 1214 and ended its independency. The new rulers brought with them new cultural styles (Gothic), replacing the indigenous art forms. But they experimented with sculpturing in the round only since early 14th c. A.D. To the contrary, the descendants of the Scandinavian settlers may not have lost their tradition of round boss sculpturing f.i. in wood. Inspirational painted imagery of Saint George had spread via the local Christian monasteries, which were rebuild after destruction by the pagan ancestors. But his image in the form of a stone sculpture, visible to all common worshippers in a Christian oratory, would have been more persuasive or impressive. Great veneration of the saint in some rural Norman locality may have saved the under infra described sculpture from oblivion or destruction.

SUBJECT

A stone statue of a helmeted man sitting on a horse, sculptured in the round, and representing Saint George with the Dragon is described (see fig. 2 and 3). The Saint is represented as a plain warrior mounting his steed. He holds in his left hand a pointed shield bearing a cross, as sign of his holy Christian mission. In his right hand he holds a lance which pierces the mouth of a bat-winged monster, commonly denominated as a dragon. The horse stands upon it and subdues it with its forelegs. The statue was discovered and bought by the present owner in a shop in St. Ouen (Paris) in 1980. There is no knowledge about a previous owner.

MATERIAL and TECHNIQUE

The statue was presented to the "ASA laboratoires d'Archéométrie" in Wadgassen-Werbeln, where it was analysed, and a report delivered on 16 December 2004 (see the study report [3]).

Fig. 2, St. George, sandstone, right side ©. Photo N.B.

The sculpture measures 36 cm from top to bottom, is 22.8 cm wide and 13 cm broad at the base and weighs about 8 Kg.

It is made out of sandstone (Fr.: 'grès'), a rather coarse mixture of sand and chalk, with traces of iron oxide. This kind of stone is present in the Seine area in former Normandy. Especially the sandstone from around Caen was much appreciated at the time. Sculptures of the Gothic period were mostly made of limestone, softer, and with a finer grain. Further geological investigation about the exact source location could provide a valuable clue as to the original quarry and provenance area because stone workers mostly employed stone out of the vicinity, where they lived.

The stone of the present sculpture has the particularity of being more granular at the base than on the top. This represents a

Fig. 3. St. George, sandstone, left side © Photo N.B.

lesser quality, which could be imputed to the non-availability of good quality stone at the time, either because of lack of good tools to cut it in the quarry, or because of lack of funds to buy a better quality.

The surface of the sculpture has a very old patina, according to the ASA lab report due to long exposure of the surface to the (polluted) atmospheric elements. There were no traces of burning, the carbon rests of which could have facilitated precise dating. The surface had been scraped patchy-wise in many places which let us to suppose that it was partially covered with stone moss or stone moulds. The base is very much worn.

Early sculptures in the round are rare. After the splendour of Roman art in Western Europe, the technical know-how got almost completely lost by the fifth century A.D. ([4]). Causes were the sacking by Germanic tribes, the influence of Islam in southern Europe and the Iconoclasm (726-843). But Scandinavians, the 'Normen', had kept some traditions of sculpturing in the round, which they introduced into the newly conquered countries.
The carving method employed in the discussed object differs from later sculpturing techniques. In the early periods, chiselling tools were not available, and sculptures, mostly in low relief, were incised and scraped ([5]). This limited the degree of plasticity, which could be given to a work of art. For full evaluation and appreciation of the present object, it should therefore be seen in tangential beamed light (the way it would have been seen in the light rays coming through a small early Christian oratory window).

The general form of the stone is a rectangular cube. With great virtuosity a complex image was cut out within these limits. Both left and right flanks are fairly flat, still they outline well the shape of a winged dragon underneath a mounted horse. Melting horse and dragon together, a technique reused in modern times (20th/21th c.) by

expressionist artists, solved the problem of having to shape freestanding figures in the fragile stone, a technique that was lost during previous centuries and had to be reinvented in later periods.

STYLISTIC DISCUSSION

The stylistic features of the work provide us with important clues regarding the origin, the authenticity and the proposed dating. In the description, we are biased toward Norman origin because we already have an idea of the possible finding places of the stone and we can compare with similar objects discussed infra.

The rider is not a fully harnessed knight like similar St. George representations in pre-Medieval times, but a simple warrior. His hair is hanging straight down in Norman style, and cut even at the height of his collar. In the tapestry

'Sicilian' Norman warrior, photo N.B.

of Bayeux datable between 1077 and 1082, Norman soldiers had their hair cut short in the neck and were often bearded and moustached ([5]). Our horseman is a young-looking boy. His face is round, beardless, with regular youthful features. Cleaning by scraping has done here some damage. He wears a short tunic leaving the legs free up to above the knees. This is the clothing of the common man-soldier of the time. Better equipment for the cavalry was the very expensive coat of mail over the whole body ([5]). The artist must have purposely omitted a richer armour, unlike later figurations where the splendour of the armour was a must. The horseman also wears a plain cone-shaped helmet, with two cheek-pieces, actually looking more like ear-protectors coming out from underneath the helmet. This type of helmet is not specific for a certain period, but it was in use during the 11th century ([6]). There is no nasal piece. Striking is the very smooth surface of the helmet in contrast to the rest. A similar soldier was depicted in a capital of the Palazo dei Normanni in Palermo, Sicily, build after the conquest of the Isle by Normen in the 12th c. A.D. (see picture to the left).

The rider mounts his steed in a correct way. He leans slightly forward as his horse's forelegs step on top of the monster, in order to compensate for the rising of the horse's forepart. His legs are bended, with knees high up, like barbarians rode horses ([7]), with the feet resting on stirrups at the height of the forelegs of the horse. The

same attitude is seen in the illustration of riders in the *'Spanish Apocalypse'*, a manuscript dated around 840 A.D.(as published by Lefebvre des Noëttes ([8] p. 38), his figure 8, see picture to the right), but not later on. This very rare feature alone is an important argument as to a very early dating of our sculpture. Stirrups were not used by Roman cavalry or by Germanic tribes. This "*Spanish Apocalyse*" drawing shows also the first representation of stirrups. Scandinavians used them as early as the 10th c. A.D. and imported them into Western Europe. The way of using stirrups however was changing gradually toward the beginning of the Middle Ages, as war techniques were rapidly changing. Stirrups were situated at first at the height of the forelegs, but gradually the stirrup leathers became longer, and the leg of the rider stretched and moved backwards ([7]). These observations also lead us to date the sculpture late in the Xth or early in the XIth c. because the horsemen in the Bayeux tapestry as well as the Baldishol tapestry (Norway around 1200 [9]) mounted already with stretched legs.

Fig.4. St. George and the Dragon, limestone, around 1500 with Sotheby's, 10 dec. 1992

Our rider is armed with a lance. Romans and Frankish people up to the twelfth century used a lighter spear, which was mostly thrown from overhead. Out of the spear developed in the 11th-12th century gradually the lance, with heavier point and shaft. The Scandinavians introduced the lance on the continent. One way of holding the lance is the arm down, and the lance pointed at the enemy footman, technique already in use in the Battle of Hasting as depicted on the Bayeux tapestry ([6]). This is the way our rider holds his weapon to pierce the dragon, the hand being correctly but somewhat primitively rendered. When in later times, say the early Middle Ages, lances became stronger hence heavier, they were held under the armpit. At the same time the posture of the legs became straighter, with the stirrup leathers at the height of the saddle so one could stand straight up in the stirrups and lean forward while thrusting the lance (see for example fig. 4). Also this stylistic feature helps in the early dating of the present sculpture.

It is difficult to discern if our warrior sits on a saddle. If so, it is definitely not a saddle with high saddlebows developed when new war techniques necessitated a firmer sit as pictured in the Bayeux tapestry where the cavalry had already high saddlebows in front and in the back. So, the absence of this feature may go with an earlier dating.

Underneath the tunic hangs a long saddle blanket, nicely double bordered. Such a blanket was already in use since ages. Later on, it protected the horse's skin from the war saddles, which were becoming gradually heavier and more sophisticated.

The horse's headstall is simple. Only a head strap to be fitted behind the ears, but no frontal or nose straps and with a simple bridle. Presence or absence of parts of the headstall have no specific significance as for the location in time or place, but it is interesting that in the Bayeux tapestry, horses have complete headstalls, while in the Baldishol tapestry frontal and nose straps are absent, as they are in our sculpture. A difference between

Scandinavian and Frankish-Norman horse equipment may be an explanation. The manes of the horse hang nicely combed over the forehead between the eyes, halfway the nose. In the neck they are neatly braided and positioned longitudinally. The eyes are made of incised ovals, with central dot, a manner typical for Scandinavian art, but also seen in early Romanesque continental art, under Scandinavian influence. The tail hangs down to the ground.

The shield, which the horseman holds in his left hand, has a pointed shape, and protects from the shoulder to the feet. This type is the same as in the horse rider from the Baldishol tapestry, in the Sicilian foot soldier (vide supra), or in the Lewis chessmen (vide infra). The shield surface is divided in four parts, here definitely by means of a Christian cross. This makes the horseman a warrior for the Christian God, and defines him as Saint George, protector of soldiers.

The dragon underneath the horse is four footed with claws and bat-shaped wings. This representation goes back to earlier Byzantine models, and continued hence on. In our sculpture, the monster is pierced through the mouth, a (probably efficient) killing technique of wild animals, characteristic for early representations up until the late Middle Ages. Thereafter the lance is more often stuck in the belly of the beast.

We conclude that the sculpture may be a Normen interpretation, of the already popular St. George. The style is provincial, but nevertheless direct, naturalistic, compact, and powerful. The sculpture represents a plain ordinary cavalry warrior albeit holy, with whom the contemporary common people could easily identify themselves, and from whom protection and strength on the battlefield could be implored.
It is the earliest in the round representation of the Saint with the Dragon we know off.

COMPARATIVE STUDY

Round boss sculpture in Normandy and in Western Europe is extremely rare. A few primitive examples existed already on the continent, for instance the wooden gold-plated statues of saints '*en majesté'* (Sainte-Foy, in France, around 985 A.D.), but there is no relationship with the discussed stone statue. Early stone sculptures in Romanesque style (1000-1200 AD) were mostly in relief.

Fig.5. *Epoxy replica of a 'Lewis' chess piece.*

Strong resemblance was found between our sculpture and the so called 'LEWIS' chessmen. These 78 chess pieces are walrus ivory carvings, found in 1831 on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland, said to be left there by traders, and believed to be the work of Anglo-Norse seamen carvers, and dated to about 1150-1175 ([9, 10]). The find was largely published. The pieces are now partly in the possession of the British Museum in London, and the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in Edinburgh. It should be mentioned that they were conceived in the contemporary spirit of 'conquest' by force, and division of power between king and church.

Strong similarity with the chess piece of the knight (Fig. 5 and 6) is apparent.
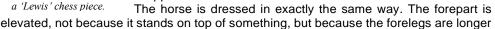The horse is dressed in exactly the same way. The forepart is elevated, not because it stands on top of something, but because the forelegs are longer

Fig.6. *A 'Lewis' chess piece, around 1150*

than the hind legs (!). This results however in the same attitude as in our stone sculpture. The neck is even so broad with the manes braided in the same longitudinal way. On the forehead, the manes hang between the ears and the eyes in the same way. The eyes are also made of incised ovals with central dot. Frontal and nose straps are also absent from the headstall. The tail is also straight and long reaching to the ground. The saddlecloth however is somewhat longer. The knight wears the same type of helmet, with the same earflaps, albeit with a

Fig. 7. *The Liebieghause St. Georges, around 1250. Sandstone.*

third flap in the neck. He is bearded which points to his Norman-Anglo-Saxon origin. He wears a longer tunic hanging down to the feet. He sits straight in a saddle of a more advanced conception, with high saddle boards in front and in the back, and with his legs straighter in the stirrups. This suggests an evolution in time, the chess pieces being possibly of later origin than the described sculpture. Hence the tempting hypothesis that the idols, in casu Saint George, seen and revered in local churches before the battle or the sea journey, may have inspired seaman or traders when they cut out the chess pieces in their spare time.

A comparable work of art of a later date is the St. George with the Dragon of the Museum alter Plastik in the Liebieghaus in Frankfurt am Main in Germany, Inv. nr. 966. dated around 1250 A.D. (Fig. 7). The work starts also from a rectangular cube of sandstone with a similar positioning of beast and horseman. But an attempt is made to give the work more plasticity by means of new techniques (drilling holes and chiselling out more material).

CONCLUSION

The dating of stone sculptured objects is difficult. There are few scientific methods. Often only conjectural arguments can be used. For this Christian cult statue, we propose the end 10th- beginning 11th c. A.D. as a '*terminus post quem'*. Indeed, earlier there seems to have been no knowledge in the region about George's dragon. In addition, style, and military and equestrian characteristics, would corroborate such a date. It may have been an important cult object in a period that Norman warriors and seamen left the Norman countryside to conquest the Anglo-Saxon isle or southern Europe (a.o. Sicily). Reminiscence of their homeland resulted in the carving of similar artefacts (Lewis chess piece). The described sculpture in the round must have followed a Scandinavian tradition. Indeed, 'foreign' i.e. Romanesque or Gothic stylistic features are absent. The newly conquered Gallic country -Normandy- remained long time isolated and independent from its hostile Frankish neighbour. As '*terminus ante quem'*- the date after which its creation is dubious, we propose 1214, the date the ducal Norman army was defeated by the king of France in the battle of Bouvinnes, and the duchy was possibly sacked and abolished. The more refined Gothic culture took over. The reconquest by the Anglo-Saxons starting in 1345 with the 100-year war is too late a date as we are then in full Gothic cultural period.

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