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PLATE 1



Proto-heraldic sculpture of a lion with 'shoulder ornament', from Thetford, Norfolk. *See page 45.*

A FURTHER EXAMPLE OF CENTRAL ASIAN 'SHOULDER ORNAMENT' ON A PROTO-HERALDIC LION FROM THETFORD

Steven Ashley

The writer recently rediscovered an unpublished photograph of a Romanesque sculpture re-used in the fabric of the King's House, Thetford.¹ The sculpture depicts a lion passant reguardant queue fourchy with its shoulder charged with a cross (see **Plate 1**). This is only the second example known from Norfolk² of a twelfth-century object employing Central Asian 'shoulder ornament' as a proto-heraldic device or decorative motif. The first example comprises a copper alloy openwork buckle plate, discussed recently by the writer in the pages of this journal.³

Location and context

The King's House in Thetford was rebuilt in the eighteenth century on the site of a Tudor house and Jacobean hunting lodge.⁴ It contains many pieces of reset Romanesque carved stone, probably derived from the nearby Cluniac Priory of Our Lady, founded by Roger Bigod in 1103-4.⁵ The carving of the lion is located amongst these, set in the SSE facing curve of the external flint wall of the grotto on the eastern side of the house.

¹ Norfolk Historic Environment Record 5752. The original photograph was taken by Hallam Ashley (no relation to the author) in 1982.

² The writer knows of no other examples found elsewhere in England.

³ S. Ashley, 'Lions charged with a cross potent: Central Asian "shoulder ornament" on a twelfth-century buckle plate from Norfolk', *CoA* 3rd ser. 5 (2009), no. 217, pp. 1-6.

⁴ The earlier building is said to have belonged to the family of Wodehouse, for whose history see Walter Rye, *Norfolk Families* (Norwich 1913), pp. 1016-26. A carved shelly limestone panel, reset near the carving that forms the subject of this note, bears the arms: *On a chevron between three cinquefoils three gouttes* (Wodehouse) impaling *On a bend three roses* (Hunsdon), for Sir Thomas Wodehouse (b. 1585, d. 1658), who married Blanche, daughter of John Cary, Baron of Hunsdon; see Rye, p. 1025, and the Wodehouse Roll (in the collection of Ron Fiske; RCF MS46).

⁵ N. Pevsner and B. Wilson *The Buildings of England, Norfolk 2: North-West and South* (2nd edn., London 1999), p. 705. Some sculpture survives on site and an almost complete, small (>390 mm wide, 240 mm high) semi-circular tympanum in fine grained limestone from the priory, carved with a lion passant guardant, can be seen in the collections of Norwich Castle Museum (NWHCM: L1995.2.2: A), see fig. 59 in S. Margeson, 'Monasteries and Churches', in S. Margeson, F. Seillier and A. Rogerson *The Normans in Norfolk* (Norwich 1994), pp. 40-69.

The sculpture

The sculptural relief, broken and probably incomplete, comprises a block of rather coarse shelly Barnack limestone, >290 mm wide and 310 mm high. The face is fully occupied by a carving of a lion passant regardant with a divided double-strand tail and an incised cross on its shoulder. The jaws are open. The tail curls forward and bifurcates with the trefoil⁶ terminal of the shorter upper part almost touching the lion's snout. The lower part of the tail passes in front of the back and belly and projects beneath the body between the front and rear legs, ending in a trefoil. The upper, lower and right hand edges of the block may be original, the left hand edge appears to be broken or re-cut, although it is partly obscured, and a damaged front leg has been reconstructed in cement. A horizontal break runs from side-to-side immediately beneath the lower edge of the lion's body and across the legs.

This sculpture is likely to have originally been incorporated in an external face of the priory church, perhaps on the west front. A probable date of manufacture for the piece is c. 1120.⁷

A possible context for the carving is suggested by an example set above the south nave door of the church of St Mary, Santon Downham, Suffolk.⁸ This lies just over the county border in a bend of the Little Ouse River, c. 4.5 km NW of Thetford. This piece is approximately twice the size of the Thetford stone and has been dated to c. 1100-30. It displays a lion passant to sinister, tail cowed and ending in a trefoil or fleur-de-lis. The lion appears to be eating the end of a tree or plant which it straddles with its forelegs and which perhaps represents the Tree-of-Life.

The Thetford stone might have originally formed part of a tympanum, such as that comprising two rectangular blocks set above the south nave doorway of the church of All Saints in Wordwell, Suffolk, c. 12 km to the SSW of Thetford. This example shows the Tree-of-Life flanked by two lions passant confronted and dates to c. 1130-1140.⁹

The use of lions in external walls, often placed above doorways and openings, reflects the ancient belief that they possessed apotropaic qualities. Carved stone lions of similarly regardant form to that shown on the Thetford stone were employed on the forebuilding of Norwich Castle (Bigod's tower) in c. 1100. Here they were positioned in a prominent quasi-heraldic manner to guard the entrance to the keep.¹⁰

'Shoulder ornament'

The shoulder ornament shown on this lion is an ancient form of decoration, the earliest examples of which can be found in an Egyptian tomb of the Sixth Dynasty.

⁶ The trefoil or fleur-de-lis is an ancient Eurasian device, found sometimes in association with shoulder ornament on lions. See A. Roes 'The trefoil as a sacred emblem', *Artibus Asiae* 17. 1 (1954), pp. 61-8 at 67.

⁷ Personal communication from Stephen Heywood.

⁸ See the entry for Santon Downham in the on-line Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland: www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/location/santon/site/ed-sf-santo.html.

⁹ www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/location/wordwell/site/ed-sf-wordw.html.

¹⁰ T. A. Heslop, *Norwich Castle Keep: Romanesque Architecture and Social Context* (Norwich 1994), p. 31 and figs. 7 and 10.



*Figure 1: Confronted lions with shoulder ornament on a gold scabbard for a short sword (akinakes) found in a Scythian burial of the late seventh or early sixth century BC in the Melgunov Kurgan, near Kirovograd in South Russia. From H. J. Kantor, 'The shoulder ornament of Near Eastern lions', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 6.4 (Oct. 1947), pp. 250-74 at 273, figure 7c.*

It became commonplace in Scythian and Sassanian art and Animal Style art of the nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppe (see **Figure 1**). The subsequent transmission of both Animal Style art and associated motifs to European heraldry has been noted and discussed in earlier papers by Timothy Taylor¹¹ and the writer¹² amongst others.

The closest parallels to the lion with Central Asian 'shoulder ornament' on the Thetford stone can be found in the twelfth-century mosaic pavement in the Abbey Church of Notre Dame, Ganagobie, in Provence. Much of the decorative content in this floor was derived from textile exemplars, possibly firsthand or via copies in manuscript illustrations.¹³

¹¹ T. Taylor, 'Scythian and Sarmatian art', in J. Turner (ed.), *The Dictionary of Art* vol. 28 (London 1996), pp. 319-26.

¹² Ashley, 'Lions charged with a cross potent', and id., 'The "dragon-and-pearl" motif on a medieval armorial roundel from Norfolk', *CoA* 3rd ser. 3 (2007), no. 213, pp. 19-23.

¹³ Ashley, 'Lions charged with a cross potent', pp. 2f.

Conclusions

The subject matter of this sculpture, whether copied from a luxury import or a manuscript source,¹⁴ was ultimately derived from motifs found on exotic silks.¹⁵ Thereafter the carving may itself have acted as an exemplar for smaller personal objects such as the buckle plate described in the earlier note.¹⁶ As an additional example of 'shoulder ornament' it supports the original identification of this motif on the buckle plate, and also provides another link in the chain that carried nomadic clan marks (*tamgas*) and other devices and motifs from central Asia to their eventual incorporation into the applied arts and heraldry of Europe.

¹⁴ G. Zarnecki, *English Romanesque Sculpture 1066-1140* (London 1951), p. 19.

¹⁵ The placement of the cross, although inspired by a textile or manuscript source, possibly conveyed additional meaning. It may have signified that the beast was a 'good' lion, a 'Lion of Judah' or 'Lion of Justice', as opposed to a 'bad' lion, such as that personifying the devil who 'as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour' (I *Peter* v 8).

¹⁶ Ashley, 'Lions charged with a cross potent'. Acknowledgements: I am most grateful to Stephen Heywood for accompanying me to Thetford to look at the stone *in situ* and for his helpful observations whilst there, to Ron Fiske for additional information regarding the arms of Sir Thomas Wodehouse, and to Sandy Heslop, Helmut Nickel and Melanie Rolfe for commenting on the text. The photograph was taken by the writer.