



# The Mythical Motif of Alexander's Flight in Medieval Literature, Art, and Architecture: From Byzantium to Western and Slavic Lands

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**Abstract:** The "Alexander Romance," known as "Pseudo-Callisthenes," is one of the most popular Late Antique works, mostly because of the figure of Alexander the Great, who had become a myth. Dating back to the third century AD, it was reworked many times during the Middle Ages, being translated into almost every vernacular language. The Slavic languages were not an exception, and several versions of the so-called "Aleksandrija" are attested among the South Slavic and East Slavic Medieval Literatures. That the "Alexander Romance" was quoted in the Epistle sent by the Metropolitan of the Kyivan Rus', Klim Smoljatič (1147-ca. 1154, 1158/1159) to the Presbyter Foma of Smolensk, as part of an intellectual polemic between them is clear proof of its popularity. Concretely, he quoted the passage referring to Alexander's flight through the air on the wings of huge birds or of legendary animals such as griffins, depending on the version of the story. In Western European Medieval works, it was shown as a symbol of human arrogance, the sin of "hubris." However, the motif is ambivalent, and its meaning among the Eastern Slavic lands is not that clear. Besides, the great popularity of this episode was not limited only to the written word, but it also attained the image. This way, the motif of Alexander's flight can be found in several Medieval Slavic works of art and architecture, like a relief on the façade of Saint Demetrius Cathedral in the Russian city of Vladimir or a gold enamel tiara that was found in the Ukrainian village of Sakhnivka, both dating from the second half of the twelfth century. In this presentation, we intend to show the different variants of their representations, while trying to trace their origin and meaning.

**Keywords:** *Pseudo-Callisthenes, Alexander Romance, Medieval Slavic Literature, Medieval Slavic Art, Medieval Slavic Architecture*

## The Motif of Alexander's Flight in Late Antique and Medieval Literature

The figure of Alexander the Great was very popular during the Middle Ages, mostly because this historical character whose adventures were vastly widespread throughout the whole of Europe and part of Asia became a myth. The *Alexander Romance*, known as *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, dates back to the third century AD, and it was reworked many times during the Middle Ages, being translated into almost every vernacular language (Settis-Frugoni 1978). The Slavic languages were not an exception, and several versions of the so-called *Aleksandrija* are attested among the South Slavic and East Slavic Medieval Literatures (Torres Prieto 2022).

Like this, Alexander the Great became a model for all the monarchs from the Byzantine Commonwealth to the Western kingdoms (Settis-Frugoni 1978). However, according to Kaldellis (2022, 236), in the Byzantine tradition, "he stood for an ideal of conquest, domination and diplomacy from a position of strength, and even for a spirit of adventure and romantic exploration, but he had very little to say about how a king should behave towards his subjects: he was not a model of rule as such." This way, his figure was ambivalent, and his

deeds were not always seen in a positive manner. That is the case of the episode of Alexander's journey in the air. At the beginning, it was not in the original Greek *Alexander Romance*, being transmitted most probably as a separate story. Nevertheless, since it is reflected in the Latin translation made by Archbishop Leo of Naples between 951 and 969, called *Historia de proeliis*, it should have been interpolated in the Greek *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, at least by the tenth century (Español Beltrán 1987).

H. R. Patch takes account of the latter:

When Alexander reached the land of darkness on the way to the land of the blest and had found the well of the water of life, he wished to press on further. He also found some large tame birds which were lingering near, apparently to feed on the bodies of dead horses, and which therefore seem to have been vultures. Two of them he ordered to be harnessed with a pole on which was suspended some liver. As the birds pursued the meat, Alexander soared with them up into the sky. A winged creature of human shape appeared to him, and, asking if he who understood not earthly things could hope to grasp heavenly matters, bade the monarch to look down. Struck with fear, Alexander looked down and saw the ocean coiled like a snake round the earth, which appeared like a threshing floor. Then, he returned to earth again. (Patch 1950 [repr. 1970], 24–25)

Archbishop Leo's version tells basically the same, except that the birds are turned into griffins, Alexander's iron throne is chained to the griffins (instead of the basket in the *Pseudo-Callisthenes*), and there is no winged monster to warn the monarch, as we can see in the English translation:

I took counsel with my friends how I might fashion such a machine that I might ascend the heavens and see if they be the heavens that we behold. I made ready a machine wherein I might sit, and I caught gryphons and bound them with chains, and set before them rods and meat on the tops thereof, and they began to ascend to heaven. Nevertheless, the divine power overshadowed and cast them down to the earth, in a meadow more than ten days journey from my army, and I suffered no hurt, even in the iron throne. I rose to such a height that the earth seemed like a threshing floor below me. The sea, moreover, seemed to me like a serpent writhed about it, and with great peril I was reunited with my soldiers. (Loomis 1918a, 136)

Regarding the griffins, they could represent some birds of prey, such as vultures or ospreys, for in the Middle Ages they were often associated with mythical creatures.

In some Slavic versions, like the Russian version preserved in manuscripts from the fifteenth century that was edited by Botvinnik, Lur'e, and Tvorogov (1966), this episode is omitted, being replaced by the account of how two birds with human faces warned Alexander not to continue further toward the earthly paradise, Eden, saying that it is not possible for a

human being in the flesh to see it, for it is defended by blazing weapons, and that he would be burned.

### **The Motif of Alexander's Flight in Ancient and Medieval Art and Architecture**

This particular episode of Alexander's flight has all the components that favored its subsequent success. On the one side, the same nature of the exploit that had a long tradition in the Roman world: the apotheosis of the emperor as an exaltation of the deceased figure (Settis-Frugoni 1973). On the other side, the cleverness of the Macedonian monarch, who stopped feeding the birds during some days in order to enhance their power. In addition, we must not forget that Alexander was not the first hero trying to fly to heaven. On the contrary, it is an ancient motif of Eastern origin that can be found already in the legend of a Babylonian hero called Etanna. We do not know exactly what the original story was, but the fragments of an Assyrian copy, made for the Royal Library at Nineveh by order of Assur-bani-pal, king of Assyria in the first half of the seventh century BC, have come down to us. According to them, Etanna ascended to the highest heaven on the wings of an eagle, where he met the gods, and he saw from above the ocean and the earth (Loomis 1918a). This ancient story was fastened on to Gilgamesh, a famous Acadian and Assyrian hero, as well as to Nimrod, the legendary king of Babylon who would have built the Tower of Babel following the account of some apocryphal traditions. Later, it would have been fastened on to Alexander too, and all these stories would reflect the human wish of flying and reaching the divine sphere and the knowledge of heavenly matters.

Such an attractive adventure soon had its representation in art and architecture that was no less widespread than the literary motif. The artists had at their disposal previous images that could be adapted to the theme, and this way appeared the different variants that can be found in Alexander's iconography. Among them, the most frequent shows a frontal view of the Macedonian king flanked by two griffins or birds like in the marble relief on the façade of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice from the twelfth century (Rodríguez Peinado 2018), following the traditional canons of the Roman emperors' apotheosis (Español Beltrán 1987). Another widespread variant borrowed from the imperial apotheosis is a side view of Alexander in a chariot pulled by animals like in a twelfth-century Mosan enamel (Español Beltrán 1987; Rodríguez Peinado 2018). Finally, a minority variant contains the hero riding a huge bird like in the church of Our Lady of the Assumption, in Villasayas, Soria, Spain (Rodríguez Montañés 2002). However, we must say that the first and most widespread type sometimes is combined with a different iconographic motif that has been called "the Master of animals," and it also has an Eastern origin in the figure of Gilgamesh (Hinks 1937–1938; Settis-Frugoni 1973), and a long and ancient tradition, as we can see in an Assyrian cylinder seal (about 700 BC),<sup>1</sup> or in the Mohenjo Daro carved seal (ca. 2100–1750 BC) belonging to the Huntington

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.flickrriver.com/photos/28433765@N07/3288043946/>

Archive at the Ohio State University.<sup>2</sup> This one too shows a frontal view of a human figure in the middle, with the same symmetrical composition, being flanked by two animals, mostly lions or birds. The main difference is that the man is not in a basket nor in a chariot, he does not hold spears, grasping instead the animals (usually their necks), sometimes tied with a rope. To this type belongs the Medieval representation of the prophet Daniel in the lions' den (Rodríguez Peinado 2018). Unlike the motif of Alexander's flight, the theological interpretation of Daniel in the lions' den is always positive, for it represents the superiority of humans over animal passions and vices.

On the contrary, the meaning of Alexander's iconography is ambivalent, as we said before. According to Grabar (1968), its sense is always positive in the Byzantine world, making an apotropaic use of this symbol as a protection against evil, but it is not that clear in Western Europe (Pérez-Simón 2022). It is due to the negative interpretation that was given by Medieval catholic theology. Like this, while it could appear in the relief on the façade of St. Mark's of Venice with the prophylactic function against evil typical of the Byzantine area, it was included in two mosaic pavements in the South of Italy with a negative message: in the mosaics of the Otranto and Trani cathedrals, respectively, where it implies the sin of arrogance, *hubris*, the worst sin during the Middle Ages (Rodríguez Peinado 2018). In both of them, it appears related to other themes that bear traditionally negative connotations, such as Adam and Eve's fall (Pérez-Simón 2022). This way, we can find clues about its meaning in the surrounding context, that is, the whole iconographic program where it belongs, as well as the position that it occupies in the temple. Usually, when it appears as a relief on the façade or on the *tympanum*, it tends to be positive, but not always, as we will see.

Chiara Settis-Frugoni (1973) presumed in France an exception to this general tendency in Western European countries such as Italy and Germany and interpreted some of the French representations in a positive way. On the contrary, Francesca Español Beltrán (1987) does not agree with her. For example, in the already disappeared frieze on the façade of the Nîmes cathedral, in the south of France, whose marks still remain, the combination of Alexander's ascent with king David or Samson fighting against a lion makes it adopt a negative role, and especially being located on the right side of the church,<sup>3</sup> of damned of the Last Judgment. In the opinion of Francesca Español Beltrán (*loc. cit.*), something similar would happen in the portal of the church of Sainte-Marie, in Oloron-Sainte-Marie, where Alexander's flight takes a negative value being on the right side of a relief representing Daniel in the lions' den, in opposition to the latter, in spite of this traditionally positive location, like for example the relief on the *tympanum* of Charney Basset in Gloucestershire from the fourteenth century (Loomis 1918b). Francesca Español Beltrán also gives an alleged example from Spain, concretely from the church of St. Peter of Cervatos, in Cantabria. On the façade, there is a relief on the right side of the portal that would represent Alexander's flight

<sup>2</sup> [https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/huntington/show\\_detail.py?ObjectID=30033515](https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/huntington/show_detail.py?ObjectID=30033515)

<sup>3</sup> From the point of view of the external observer.

according to Español Beltrán (1987), though it has been traditionally interpreted as Daniel in the lions' den. It would be the only Hispanic case in which the theme is carved in relief on the façade of a church. Besides, there is the motif of the Fall of Adam and Eve on the left lower side of the portal, and a capital on the exterior wall of the church with Daniel in the lions' den, strengthening the negative meaning of the profane legend for both of them.

Both motifs and figures are set up in a polemical letter written by the Metropolitan of the Kyivan Rus', Klim Smoljatič to the Presbyter Foma of Smolensk, most probably during the former's mandate as Metropolitan (somewhere between 1147 and ca. 1154, 1158/1159). His election had been very problematic and contested because he did not have the consent of the Constantinopolitan hierarchy. This way, it seems fitting that Klim's only certain extant work would be this polemical epistle that he was written as the answer to a letter that unfortunately has not come down to us in which his rival Foma had allegedly accused him of professing philosophy, of writing to win personal acclaim (the sin of *hubris*), and of neglecting the Scriptures in favor of ancient Greek philosophers. As I said, in a passage of his letter, Klim mentions the biblical character of Daniel in the lions' den and the pagan king Alexander flying through the air, setting them up, but with a different aim than Western European theology that had the aim of opposing the humility and the superiority over the passions of the former against the arrogance of the latter (Cary 1954). Here, and I bring the English translation given by Professor Simon Franklin, Klim exalts the real miracles made by the power of God against the fake wonders that are the result of sorcery and magic.

(66) "Idle words" are magic incantations. For some magicians can often tame wild dogs and beasts by their magic arts. But when Daniel was then cast into the den with the beasts, no magic skills or sorcery stopped the mouths of the Assyrian beasts—for the prophet was not such a man—but rather the almighty and omnipotent power of God made them as lambs to the prophet. (67) Nor was it the griffen of Alexander's flight through the air which speedily brought, from the Egyptian harvest to the Chaldean den, a prophet to feed a prophet. (68) The griffen is the ossifrage of the Hellenic writings concerning Alexander's flight through the air. But when Habbakuk was coming from Egypt to the reapers, bringing them food, then he was not taken up by a griffen—that is, by an ossifrage—but by the power of God sent from above: for an angel carried that prophet speedily, that he might see the place and the woes of the other prophet and sate his soul that was hungry and thirsty. Thus the prophet was sent food in abundance with another who was also called a prophet. (Franklin 1991, 50–51)

As we can see, in this excerpt, Klim is quoting the Book of Daniel (6:16–22), as well as the Book of Bel and the Dragon (1:33–39) regarding the prophet Habbakuk miraculously bringing food to Daniel in the lions' den, carried by an angel:

33. Now there was in Jewry a prophet, called Habbakuk, who had made pottage, and had broken bread in a bowl, and was going into the field, for to bring it to the reapers. 34. But the angel of the Lord said unto Habbakuk, Go, carry the dinner that thou hast into Babylon unto Daniel, who is in the lions' den. 35. And Habbakuk said, Lord, I never saw Babylon; neither do I know where the den is. 36. Then the angel of the Lord took him by the crown, and bare him by the hair of his head, and through the vehemency of his spirit set him in Babylon over the den. 37. And Habbakuk cried, saying, O Daniel, Daniel, take the dinner which God hath sent thee. 38. And Daniel said, Thou hast remembered me, O God: neither hast thou forsaken them that seek thee and love thee. 39. So Daniel arose, and did eat: and the angel of the Lord set Habbakuk in his own place again immediately.<sup>4</sup>

This way, Alexander is not only set up against Daniel, but also against the prophet Habbakuk and his miraculous flight. In a capital belonging to the cloister of the collegiate church of St. Julianne in Santillana del Mar, Cantabria, Spain, we can see the whole biblical scene, combining the two books: an angel comforting Daniel in the lions' den and the angel carrying Habbakuk by the hair of his head (Olañeta Molina 2009).

Regarding Klim's mention of the story of Alexander, we can draw some conclusions. First of all, it is clear proof of its popularity in the Kyivan Rus' already in the middle of the twelfth century. Moreover, Klim refers to "the Hellenic writings concerning Alexander's flight through the air," that is, the *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, and he mentions the griffins, that he directly explains as an ossifrage,<sup>5</sup> with the aim of demythologizing it. Like this, we could affirm that the version of the *Alexander Romance* that Klim could have read was a Greek interpolated copy.

This ecclesiastical reference of Alexander's ascent to Heaven is negative, though in a different way to that of Western European theology, but it is not that clear in its Medieval Rus'ian representations, being the most famous carving on the eastern *zakomara*<sup>6</sup> of the south wall of the Cathedral of St. Dmitri in Vladimir. This temple was founded by Vsevolod III Iurevich "Big Nest" somewhere between 1194 and 1197, and it was dedicated to Saint Demetrius, the patron saint of the king, whose Christian name was Dmitri.

Much has been said about the possible foreign influences that might have inspired it, whether trans-Caucasian (Georgian or Armenian) or Western European (Germanic or Lombard, from Northern Italy). The fact, however, is that Alexander's image fits perfectly with the Byzantine iconography that can be found on the façade of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, or with a relief belonging to the Church of the Virgin in the Peribleptos Monastery in Mystras, Greece, dating from the fourteenth century (Loomis 1918a, 139). Alexander is sitting in a chariot to which griffins are harnessed. In his raised hands, he is holding some small animals

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Bel-and-the-Dragon-1-33/>

<sup>5</sup> A bird of prey.

<sup>6</sup> Semicircular completion of a wall or bay in Medieval Rus'ian architecture.

sticked to poles, bait for the griffins, which are straining after them and thus carrying the emperor up to heaven. Above Alexander's head, there are two carved birds in flight that could be the birds that warn Alexander not to continue in the Russian version of the story. Surrounding the scene are a griffin and a winged lion on the right side, and a griffin attacking and subjugating an undefined herbivore, that reminds the Scythian iconography.

In order to determine the meaning of the image, we must take a look at the context, if we are to apply Francesca Español Beltrán's methodology. In general, in the carvings of the different façades of the temple, the religious theme plays a secondary role. It is only important on the band of blind arcading with figures of saints, among which are the martyred princes Boris and Gleb. There is also a scene of the Epiphany at the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the river Jordan on the west *zakomara* of the south wall, that is, on the left side of the façade on which can be found Alexander too, but on the right side. Between them, the central *zakomara* contains a beautifully carved figure of king David, who occupies the same central position in the north and west walls too. Though in principle Alexander's ascent could be considered as positive, while having a prominent place on the façade, as it has been proposed by Torres Prieto (2022), if we take into account the context, it could be not so positive. David is the model of the perfect king, and the dove of the Holy Spirit of the Epiphany coming out from God's mouth and descending upon Christ represents the divine wisdom as being inspired and revealed by God's Grace. Like this, the wish of Alexander to know heavenly matters could be perceived as arrogant, being damned to fail. Unlike the figures of Christ and kind David, Alexander does not have a halo around his head. Besides, there is another figure in the east *zakomara* of the north wall (just on the opposite side of Alexander) that could emphasize his negative value. It shows prince Vsevolod III himself sitting on his throne with his new-born son Svjatoslav on his knee and surrounded by his elder sons Konstantin, Jurij, Jaroslav, and Vladimir, who are bowing to their lord and father. He is facing the old town, having his back turned to the Macedonian king.

However, we must not reject completely its positive interpretation, as well as its possible apotropaic function. According to Rodríguez Peinado (2018), only in a few cases could it be understood as the expression of the soul's longing for its ascension into Heaven, and therefore, as an allusion to the joy granted to the blessed ones in the afterlife. With this apotropaic meaning could be explained its presence on some portals and *tympana* of Medieval temples, such as the aforementioned fourteenth-century *tympanum* of Charney Basset in Gloucestershire (Loomis 1918b), or the twelfth-century church of Santa Maria della Strada in Matrice, Campobasso, Italy, where the figure of Alexander as a prophetic prefiguration of the resurrection of Jesus is the image of the soul's longing for entering the heavenly Jerusalem. That is why the Mystic Lamb is represented there over the archivolt. This apotropaic function can be remarked also in another valuable work of art that was found in the soil of the Kyivan Rus', concretely in the Ukrainian village of Sakhnivka, being held now at the National Museum of Kyiv. It is a gold enamel tiara dating from the second half of the twelfth century, the same as St. Dmitri's carvings, that represents in the central piece Alexander's ascent to



Heaven on a chariot pulled by two griffins, following the same iconography as the carving, except that the animals on the poles have become scepters or hammers (Rodríguez Peinado 2018). Moreover, none of those representations of Alexander have a halo around their heads, only crowns.



Figure 1: Tiara from Kastana (Detail)  
 Source: Vaklinova 2001

It has a precedent coming from the First Bulgarian Empire and dating from the tenth century: the gold enamel tiara of Kastana, in whose central piece Alexander is holding the meat on the spears, having a halo around his head (Figure 1). This emphasizes its positive value, meaning the divine power of the monarchy, and possibly being a protection for the prince that must have possessed it, the same as the gold enamel tiara containing the *Deisis*,<sup>7</sup> coming from Kyiv and dating from the end of the twelfth century or the beginning of the thirteenth century (Boukhman 2010). Having undoubtedly belonged to the educated and refined court aristocracy, this family treasure was probably hidden during the fourth quarter of the tenth century when Preslav was invaded twice by Prince Svjatoslav of Kyiv before it surrendered to Constantinople in 971. According to Vaklinova (2001), different attempts to restore the diadem and to attribute it to a hypothetical owner have been made. Totev (1981) restored the length of the diadem, 35 × 36 cm, on the basis of its comparison with the diadems from Sakhnivka and Kyiv. Atanassov (1999) made a similar attempt. While Totev believed that the diadem had belonged to Maria, the wife of king Peter, Atanassov associated it with a princess from the palace of Preslav who became related to the Byzantine emperor during the tenth century.

<sup>7</sup> Representation of Christ Pantocrator flanked by the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Baptist in a praying attitude as intercessors of the humanity.



As an element of comparison with the carvings of the Cathedral of St. Dmitri, we will mention the study made by Tamar Khundadze (2007)<sup>8</sup> about the motif of Alexander's ascent on the relief of the church of the monastery of Khakhuli,<sup>9</sup> dating from the tenth century and located in ancient Southern Georgia<sup>10</sup> (Figure 2). The motif of Alexander's flight forms a composition on the left side of the south doorway, together with the other figures appearing on it: the elevation of the cross on the *tympanum*, Saint Peter and Jonas emerging from a beast on the right side, and several animals such as a griffin, a rooster, a lion, and the fight of a lion against a bull. Tamar Khundadze interprets the iconographical ensemble in a positive way, as conveying the idea of the triumph of the Christian religion, and of the resurrection, as well as a way of exalting the founder of the monastery: the king David III Kuropalates (966–1000/1001), who ruled the Georgian kingdom of Tao and carried excellent relations with the Byzantine empire. This positive meaning of the motif would be strengthened by its position on the left side of the doorway, and of the halo around the head of Alexander, something that is not very usual, though it also appeared in the Bulgarian tiara of Kastana.



Figure 2: Bas Relief from Khakhuli Monastery

Source: Mel 2010 (CC BY-SA 3.0)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khakhuli\\_Monastery#/media/File:Saint\\_George\\_bas\\_relief.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khakhuli_Monastery#/media/File:Saint_George_bas_relief.jpg)

<sup>8</sup> This paper was presented at the 21st Congress of Byzantine Studies in London and can be read at: [https://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/bitstream/1234/372991/1/Saqartvelos\\_Sidzveleni\\_N10\\_2007.pdf](https://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/bitstream/1234/372991/1/Saqartvelos_Sidzveleni_N10_2007.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Now Haho in Turkish.

<sup>10</sup> Modern Turkey at the present time.

## Conclusions

As a summary, we can say that the motif of Alexander's flight is one of the most suggestive and polysemic symbols in Medieval European art and architecture, and it is not always easy to find out its meaning. With this aim, it can be very useful for the analysis of the contemporary texts on which it is based, as well as of the surrounding context in the temples. Both the whole iconographic program of the church and the position of the specific motif in it can give us revealing clues. Regarding the motif of Alexander's flight, both positive meanings, such as the prefiguration of Christ's resurrection or the ascension of the soul into Heaven, and negative values, such as the *hubris* of human beings trying to access the knowledge of the sacred matters like breaking this the divine order, and especially when opposing the motif of Daniel in the lions' den, can be inferred. However, the results are far too conclusive, and the discussion must be opened to new interpretations.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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