1

NOVELTIES AND INVENTIONS IN BYZANTINE ART

The Condemnation of Invention by Byzantine Writers

> In the cloisters, under the eyes of the brethren engaged in reading, what business has there that ridiculous monstrosity, that amazing mis-shapen shapeliness and shapely mis-shapenness? . . . Those fierce lions? Those monstrous centaurs? Those semi-human beings? . . . Here you behold several bodies beneath one head; there again several heads upon one body. Here you see a quadruped with the tail of a serpent, there a fish with the head of a quadruped. . . . In fine, on all sides there appears so rich and so amazing a variety of forms that it is more delightful to read the marbles than the manuscripts.

With these famous words, the Cistercian leader, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, condemned the imaginative variety of profane art that was to be found in twelfth-century Cluniac monasteries, such as St. Pierre at Moissac (figs. 1, 2).[1] St. Bernard, clearly, considered this art to be worthless, and yet, equally clearly, he was attracted by its allure. As Erwin Panofsky wrote: "A modern art historian would thank god on his knees for the ability to write so minute, so graphic, and so truly evocatory a description of a decorative ensemble in the 'Cluniac manner.'"[2]

Partly as a result of Bernard's diatribe, western medievalists have paid considerable attention to the type of art that he describes; indeed, the monstrous forms of the capitals and the initials in the manuscripts have been, for many modern scholars, defining features of the Romanesque style.[3] But in Byzantium, the case is different. There was no St. Bernard to focus our attention on the fantastic elements in Byzantine art, and so these features have stayed in the margins of our vision. Nevertheless, novelty and invention played a larger role in Byzantium than has been recognized, in spite of an official ideology that discouraged innovation of all kinds.[4]

It was axiomatic in Byzantium that orthodox Christian artists did not invent. The very legitimacy of the holy image depended upon its adherence to tradition and its supposed accuracy in reproducing the prototype.[5] Their lack of invention

distinguished Christian images from the fanciful and arbitrary creations of the pagans. In 787 the Council of Nicaea quoted from a seventh-century dialogue on this subject, written by John of Thessaloniki. In an exchange between a Christian and a pagan, the Christian says: "We . . . make images of men who have existed and have had bodies—the holy servants of God—so that we may remember them and reverence them, and we do nothing incongruous in depicting them such as they have been. We do not invent anything as you [pagans] do."[6]

A later passage, from the first *Antirrhetic* by the early ninth-century iconodule patriarch Nikephoros, specifies what these incongruous inventions of the pagans were: "The idol is a fiction of those things that do not exist and have no being in themselves. Of such a kind are the shapes that the pagans fatuously and irreligiously invent, such as of tritons, centaurs, and other phantoms that do not exist."[7]

Thus, for these writers of the Byzantine church, hybrid forms in art were not just fascinating and distracting without having any edifying content, as St. Bernard had characterized them; more importantly, they were diametrically opposed to the very principles of orthodox art and, thus, diabolical.

In making this distinction between pagan art as invented and Christian art as authentic, the church writers laid themselves open to attack concerning depictions of angels and other heavenly beings: were not depictions of angels and tetramorphs as men or beasts with wings inventions, like the hybrids created by the pagans? Against this accusation, iconophile writers had a principal line of defense, namely the scriptural passages that described the appearances of such beings as they were seen by human witnesses.[8] On the other hand, because the composite creatures invented by the pagans had no sanction in the Bible, they were irreligious.

Byzantine secular writings also characterized such composite creatures derived from pagan mythology as implausible or absurd. In the *Timarion*, the twelfth-century Byzantine satire, the protagonist says that the unlikely event of his release from hell is "as unrealistic as the things sculptors and painters create . . ., hippocentaurs, sphinxes, and all the other mythological fabrications of the ancients."[9] Likewise, the tenth-century Life of Basil the First speaks scornfully of the centaur Chiron, saying that the future emperor was educated by his father for, unlike Achilles, he had no need of a semihuman tutor.[10] The poet Constantine the Rhodian, writing in the same century, characterized the centaur as a "degenerate monster."[11] In the eleventh century, Psellos, in an allegorical treatise on the sphinx, treats the creature as pure fantasy, although he does not condemn it. He says that the sphinx has the form of a beautiful maiden as far as the navel, but its lower parts are covered with thick hair and have the feet of a wild beast and a long tail.

Nevertheless, adds Psellos, its voice speaks atticizing Greek. Such is the monster of the myth, he declares, and let license be given to the poets to create whatever they like; but as for him, he is concerned not with the appearance of the monster but with its symbolism. He goes on to explain that the sphinx represents man, who is composed of both rational and irrational natures.[12]

The invention of composite monsters by pagan artists was seen in more negative terms by the Byzantine saints' lives. The Life of St. Andrew the Fool, possibly written in the tenth century, has a story about the saint standing in front of the great reused bronze doors of the senate house and looking at its reliefs, ancient works of art said to have come from the temple of Artemis at Ephesus, which portrayed the battle of the giants against the gods. These reliefs may be reflected in a miniature from a tenth-century copy of the Theriaka of Nikander, where we see the legs of the giants represented in the usual classical manner as writhing snakes (fig. 3).[13] As St. Andrew was gazing at the giants on the senate house doors—the text calls them "thong-legs"—a sinful passerby saw him and gave him a slap on the neck, saying: "You idiot, what are you staring at?" The saint answered him back: "You fool in your spirit! I am looking at the visible idols, but you are a spiritual 'thong-leg', and a serpent, and of the viper's brood, for your soul's axles and your heart's spiritual legs are crooked and going to Hades."[14]

3. Giants. Theriaka of Nikander, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS suppl. gr. 247, fol. 47.

For St. Andrew, then, the snake-legged giants were not only idols but symbols of evil. Another type of composite creature is recorded in the lives and encomia of the stylite St. Alypios. In one of them, we read of a monstrous stone statue of a

tauroleon, a combination of a lion and a bull, which the saint found sitting on top of a column in a pagan cemetery that was deserted by all except demons. Showing considerable acrobatic prowess, St. Alypios scaled the column and prized this reasonless creature off its pedestal with a crowbar; he then replaced it with an image that was true, namely an icon of Christ. He did this, we are told, so that the enemy army of demons might be laughed at and made fun of.[15]

The god Pan, half human and half goat, was singled out for special censure by Byzantine writers. Another encomium of St. Alypios, written by a certain Antony of St. Sophia, perhaps in the tenth century, describes how the noble man, acquiring the feet of a deer, mounted the column by leaps and bounds until finally he reached its top and threw down the complex and beautifully worked sculpture of a lion and an ox that had stood there. The saint, says the encomium, made *himself* into a living statue on top of the column. Now the column was no longer serving as a pedestal for a mute sculpture of a pagan god, such as Sarapis, or Dionysos, or Apollo. Nor—far from it—did the column bear Pan, who, says the writer, was "the most ludicrously laughable of the lot—a mixture of different natures and faculties." Rather, the column now carried the saint himself, a divinely shaped image, an icon of piety, and a statue with reason.[16]

Just as church writers found fault with the composite inventions of pagan art, which they contrasted with the authentic icons of the church, so also political writers made oppositions between hybrid creations and the good order, or *taxis*, of the imperial court. In the tenth century, the western ambassador, Liudprand of Cremona, in a well-known invective against Nikephoros II Phokas, parodied the ritual acclamations of the factions on the feast of Pentecost, when the emperor processed along the road from the imperial palace to St. Sophia. According to Liudprand, the Byzantine singers "called out in adulation: 'Lo, the morning star is coming, the Day Star rises. In his gaze he reflects the sun's rays . . . Nikephoros [our] Prince.'" But, said the malicious westerner, the chanters should have called out: "Come forth, you burnt-out ember . . . goat-footed, horned, with limbs half-human half-animal, uncouth . . . shaggy."[17] Thus Liudprand, who was well acquainted with Byzantine court ceremonial and rhetoric, denigrated the emperor by comparing him to Pan, with goat's feet, horns, and long hair, a monster and a hybrid. Two centuries later, the twelfth-century Byzantine historian Kedrenos likened the emperor Zeno to Pan, saying that the emperor belonged to "the most evil and ugly-looking race of the Isaurians, being shaggy and extremely ugly, just as Pan is portrayed by pagan painters—goat-shanked and shaggy-legged."[18]

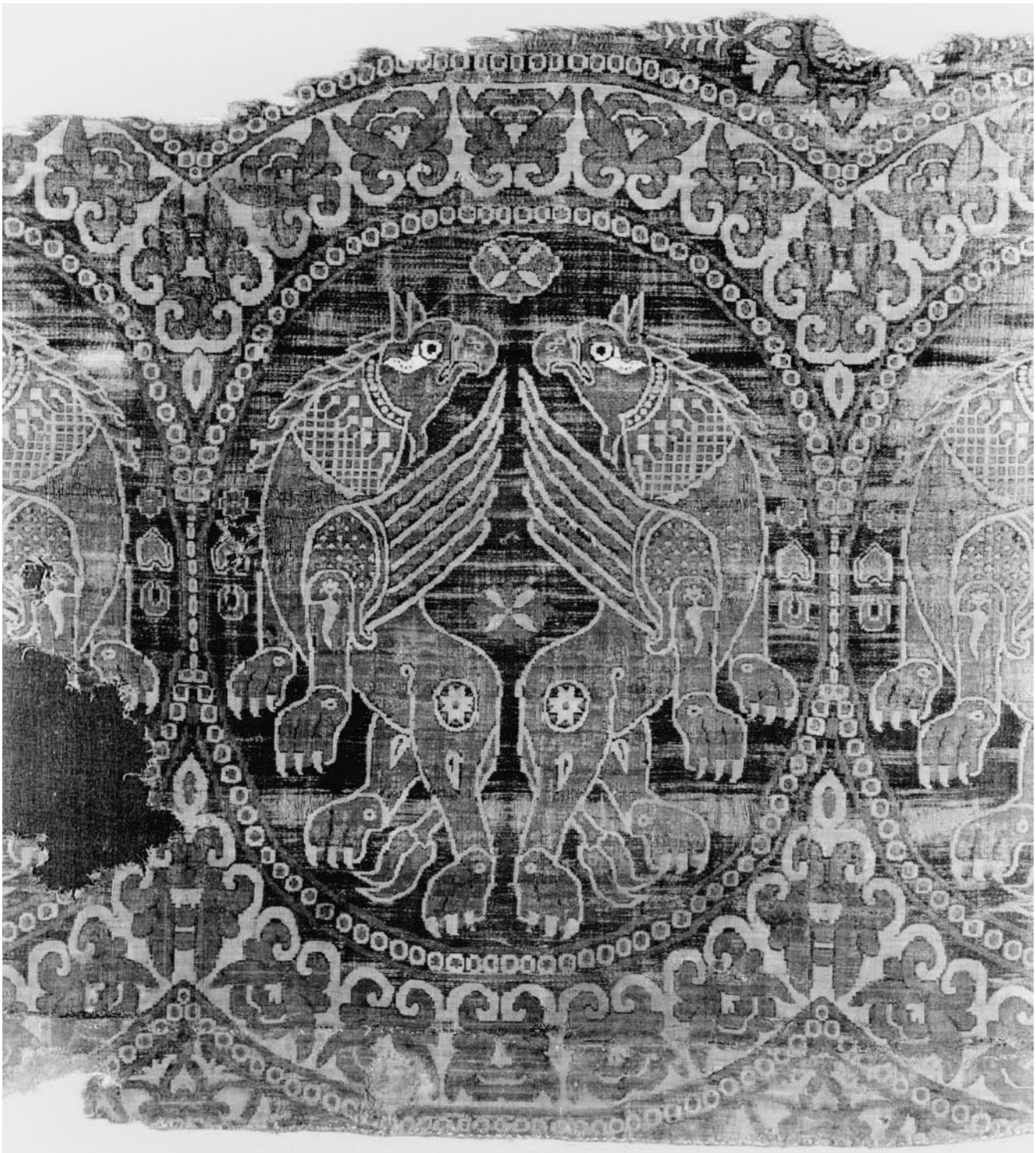
A later image of hybridization reflecting disorder in imperial ritual can be found in the writing of Nikephoros Gregoras, a fourteenth-century author of a history of Byzantium, who was also very familiar with the court. Gregoras described

how, in the reign of Andronikos III (1328–41), the etiquette of the palace broke down. Formerly, he wrote, only senior officials wore headdresses, which were of pyramidal shape and covered with silk cloths according to the office of the wearer. The younger courtiers went bareheaded. During the reign of Andronikos, however, everybody, young and old, was permitted to wear strange and multifarious head coverings in the Latin, Serbian, Bulgarian, or Syrian manner according to his own taste.[19] In a later passage Gregoras returned to this theme:

> Every kind of discipline was driven out and virtue was turned into its opposite . . . . And there surfaced among almost all the Romans [Byzantines], such as were of the new persuasion, new and strange customs, alien to the original wisdom of imperial rule, discipline, and good order. But what should be said of the clothes, how many aspects of these were changed contrary to regulation, and how the state was alienated from familiar custom through innovation, so that one could no longer tell who was from the Romans and who from other races. Nor did the Romans now adopt an unmixed Turkish dress, or a perfectly Latin one, or a purely Gothic one, or a Serbian, or a Bulgarian, or a Hungarian one . . . . And we see, inside the sacred precincts [of the palace], the sons of friends resembling Latins in their headgear, while the rest of their bodies are entirely clothed in the Turkish or Persian style, and the next day the opposite, now in one way, now in another, now in neither way, in a strange and monstrous fashion, according to each one's ungoverned whim.[20]

In this case, the monstrous hybridization and inventiveness of the costumes reflected the disorder and lack of discipline of the imperial court itself.

Tritons, centaurs, hippocentaurs, sphinxes, snake-legged giants, bull-lions, and the goat-shanked Pan—all of these pagan inventions were given negative connotations by Byzantine writers. The only composite creature from ancient art that escaped censure was the griffin, which many Byzantines considered not an invention of human artists but an authentic work of the creator, as can be seen from a passage in the seventh-century *Hexaemeron*, or poem on the first six days of Creation, by George of Pisidia. Praising the greatness of God, the poet asked: "who gave boldness to the lion, or the ability to run to the deer, as an antidote for its fear? Who gave strength to the bull, so that it could do the work of ploughing? . . . And whence did the griffin receive such tremendous force, that it could suddenly snatch up an ox in its talons? And how is it able to be borne aloft on its wings, and yet also walk on four paws?"[21] Even though Psellos spoke ironically of Alexander's using griffins as a means of achieving flight,[22] it seems that for most Byzantines, the griffin was just another animal, albeit a remarkable one, an authentic creature, whose appearance in art was perfectly justifiable.



4. Silk with griffins. Chapitre de Sion.

Hence griffins came to be accep
imperial power, whether depict
the emperors as gifts (fig. 4), on im
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Besides the mixing of differen
animal, as in the case of the t
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says that the statue had four faces,
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Later Byzantine writers specifie
faced idol of Zeus.[26]

In general, Byzantine writers
ever their form, were unnatural
century author of the Life of S
said that the idols in the hippodr
ly corrupted and outlandish in
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ers working in churches often
statuary in a similar manner,
example, in a fourteenth-century fresco at Dečani depicting an episode from the Life of St. Nicholas, in which the bishop destroys idols (fig. 5).[28] The naked statues, some of them equipped with animal tails like satyrs, cavort and posture around the lip of a round theater-like building, definitely not as objects of beauty but as evil spirits.

5. St. Nicholas destroys idols. Wall painting, Church of the Ascension, Dečani.

Hybrids and Inventions in Byzantine Art

In spite of the official condemnation of hybrids and other monsters, they were portrayed frequently and with relish by Byzantine artists—and not only in secular contexts but also on churches and in religious manuscripts. Even the goat-footed Pan, or his relatives, found a place in Byzantine art, as did other composites drawn from mythology, such as sirens. We shall look at a small selection, drawn first from secular contexts and then from church art.

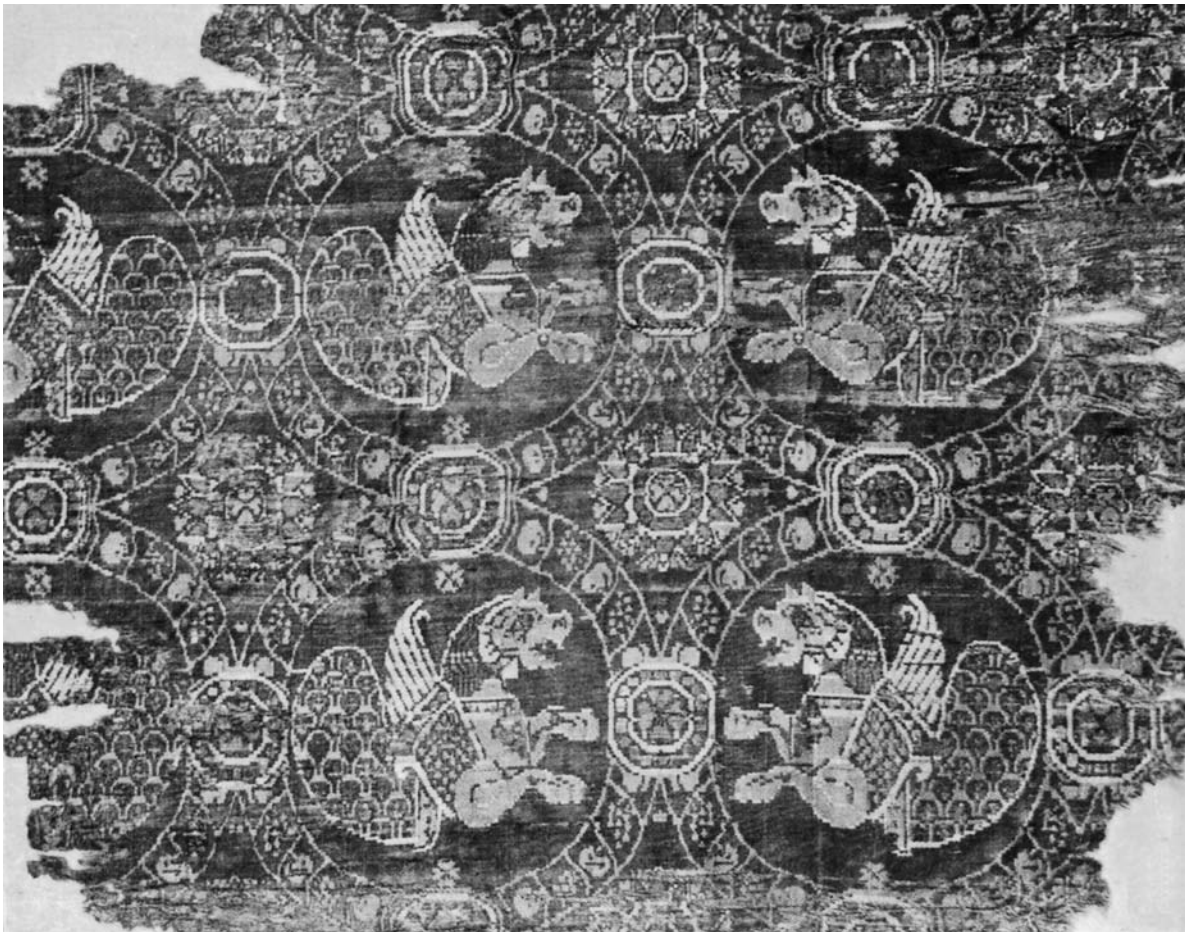
6. Ivory and bone casket, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

We can start with a tenth- or eleventh-century casket covered with plaques of bone and ivory that is in the collection at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C. On the lid we find several interesting inventions, including a Pan-like figure provided with goat's hooves and legs and with a long tail (fig. 6, center).[29] There is also a bird with a human head, which one would call a siren, were it not for the dog's head that grows out of the back of the human head (fig. 7).[30] In the fourteenth-century illuminated manuscript of the Alexander Romance in Venice, the *kynokephaloi* are shown in this way, with their dog's heads growing out from the backs of their human heads (fig. 8, upper right).[31] So this strange creature on the casket is really a mixture of a siren and a *kynokephalos*, a composite of

7. Bird with human and canine heads. Ivory and bone casket, detail of lid, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

8. Alexander and the *kynokephaloi*. *Alexander Romance*, fol. 107, Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini di Venezia.

9. Ivory and bone casket, detail of the lid, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.



10. Persian hybrids. Silk, Musées d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels.

two composites. Finally, on the same casket, we may note the appearance of a composite creature derived from Persia, a creature with the foreparts of a winged lion and the tail of a peacock (fig. 9, second from right).[32] This animal had entered the repertoire of Byzantine silk design from Iran; it can be seen woven into a Byzantine silk now in the Musées d'Art et d'Histoire of Brussels (fig. 10).[33]

For our next examples, we move to the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore,

where we find another casket decorated with plaques depicting a marine *thiasos* (revel). Here there are boys riding hippocamps, animals that have a good pedigree in antique art. But there are also some less authentically classical creatures, such as dolphins whose twisted tails turn into the heads of beasts, inventions that are of both the land and the sea (fig. 11, lower left).[34]

Our final example in this small selection from the rich variety of images provided by these tenth- and eleventh-century boxes is provided by the Cluny Museum in Paris. On the back of this container we find a centaur with his arms

11. Aquatic hybrids. Bone casket, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

12. Casket, Musée National du Moyen Âge—Thermes de Cluny, Paris.

13. St. Theodore Tiron. Silver bowl, detail of interior, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

14. Man-eaters and hybrids. Silver bowl, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

around a boy who is riding on his back—probably Chiron and Achilles. We also see another hippocamp, this time being ridden by a winged Eros (fig. 12, second and fourth panels from the left).[35]

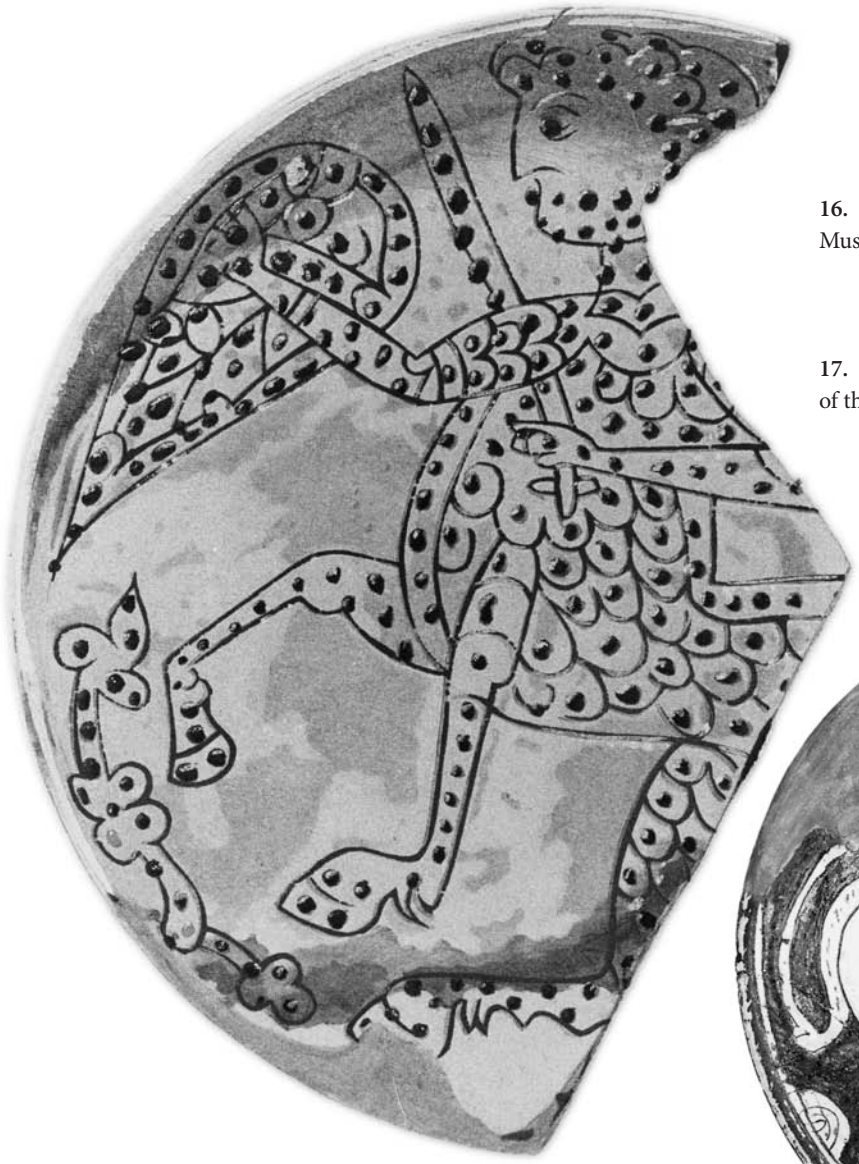
A somewhat similar repertoire of composite creatures may be found on Byzantine tableware, both on metal bowls and on their down-market imitations in pottery. A silver bowl now in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, which may date to the eleventh century, has a single Christian image on its inside—a relief icon of St. Theodore Tiron (fig. 13). The choice of saint can be explained by the inscription engraved upon the rim on the outside of the bowl, which makes an appeal on behalf of the owner, who was the namesake of the saint: "Lord help your servant Theodore Tourkeles." Beneath this invocation there is a zoo of fearsome beasts, including several man-eaters and also sphinxes with lion's bodies and human heads (fig. 14).[36]

From the many examples of hybrids depicted on pottery, we illustrate a twelfth-century engraved slipware bowl found at Corinth, which is decorated with a siren seizing a large water bird, presumably in order to carry it off as prey (fig. 15).[37] Figure 16 shows another bowl from Corinth, which depicts a centaur in the classical manner, bearded and with horse's hooves.[38] A handsome sphinx is engraved into a late twelfth- or thirteenth-century bowl, recently discovered at Veria, on Chalkidiki in northern Greece (fig. 17).[39]

15. Siren, water bird, and fish. Ceramic bowl found in Corinth, Archaeological Museum, Corinth.

In ecclesiastical art, sculptures of mixed creatures appeared both on the outsides and the insides of churches. The late twelfth- or thirteenth-century Church of the Little Metropolis in Athens, which we will look at more closely in chapter 4, presents the best-known gallery of such inventions, among them a relief on the facade showing four sphinxes, two with wings and two without (fig. 18).[40] Occasionally, hybrid creatures also made their appearance on the insides of churches, as in the case of a door jamb in the reconstructed screen of the prothesis of the Metropolis Church at Mistra, where a carved centaur raises his sword to protect the entrance (fig. 19).[41]

Ecclesiastical manuscripts contain some of the most engaging inventions in



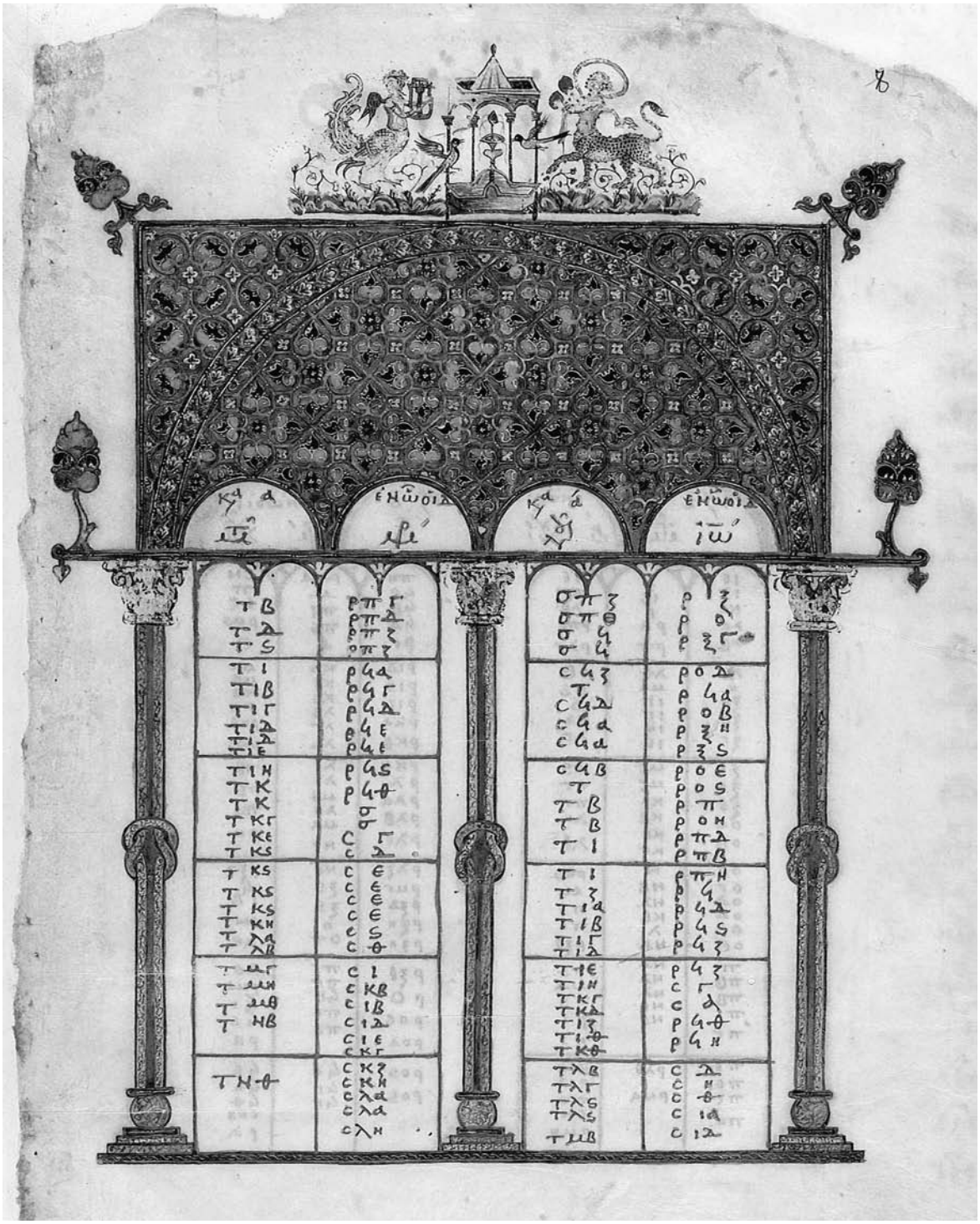
16. Centaur. Ceramic bowl found in Corinth, Archaeological Museum, Corinth.

17. Sphinx. Ceramic bowl found in Veria, now in the shipyard of the Prosphorion Tower, Ouranoupolis.

18. *(Above left)* Sphinxes. Detail of west facade, Panagia Gorgoepikoos (Little Metropolis), Athens.

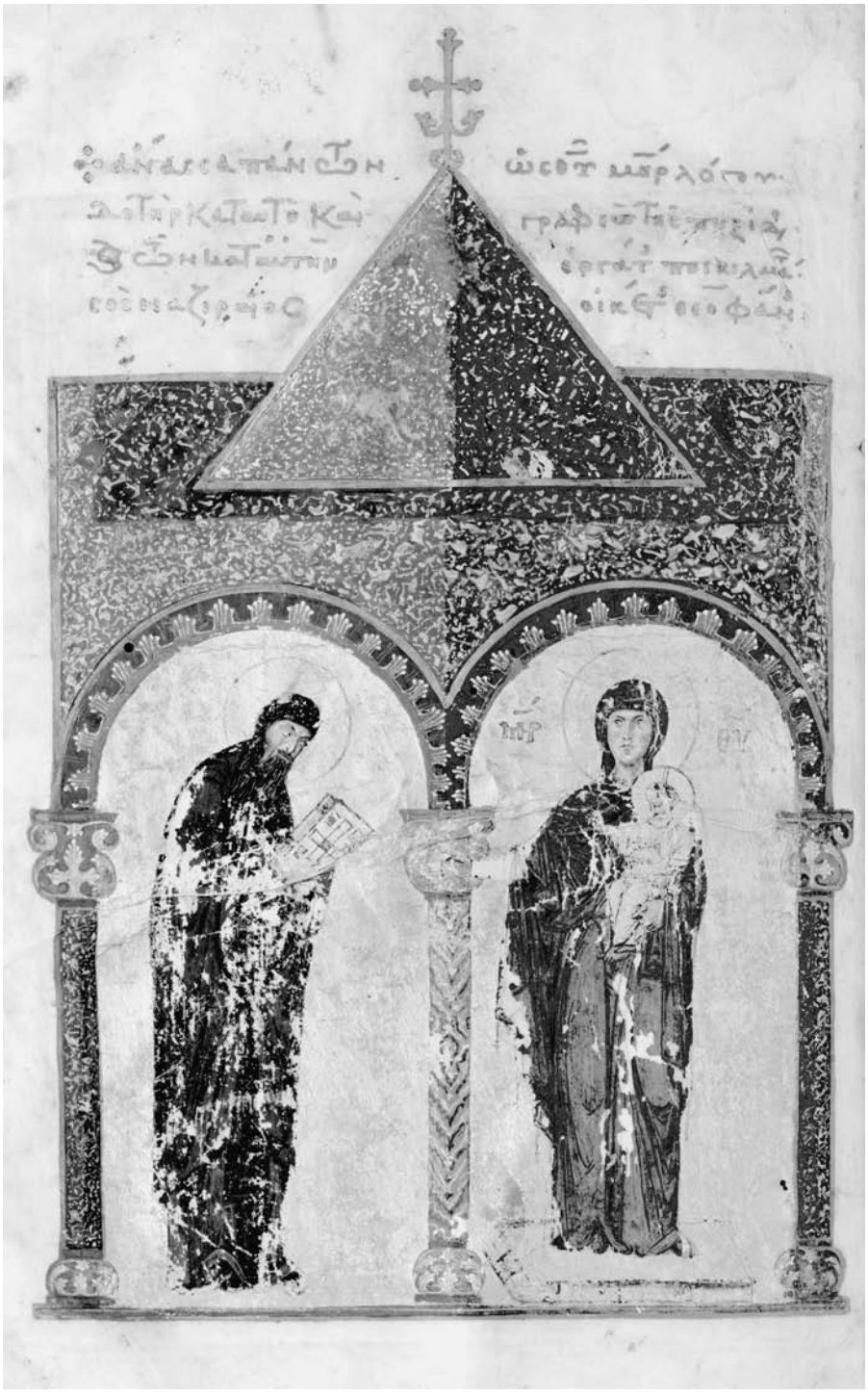
19. *(Above right)* Guardian centaur. Detail of prothesis screen, Metropolis Church, Mistra.

Byzantine art, such as the canon tables from a Gospel book in Parma, Biblioteca Palatina number 5. Here, at the top, a siren and a centaur-like creature engage in a duet beside a fountain set in a garden—the siren playing a harp, and the centaur, which is actually half man and half leopard or cheetah, clashing a pair of cymbals (fig. 20).[42] In another manuscript, a winged "centaur," again with the spotted body of a leopard or a cheetah, may be seen playing a lute; this initial decorates a twelfth-century copy of the homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos, commissioned by the abbot of the Pantokrator Monastery in Constantinople, Joseph Hagioglykerites, for presentation to another monastery, the community on the island of St. Glykeria, where Joseph had been a monk earlier in his career (fig. 21).[43]

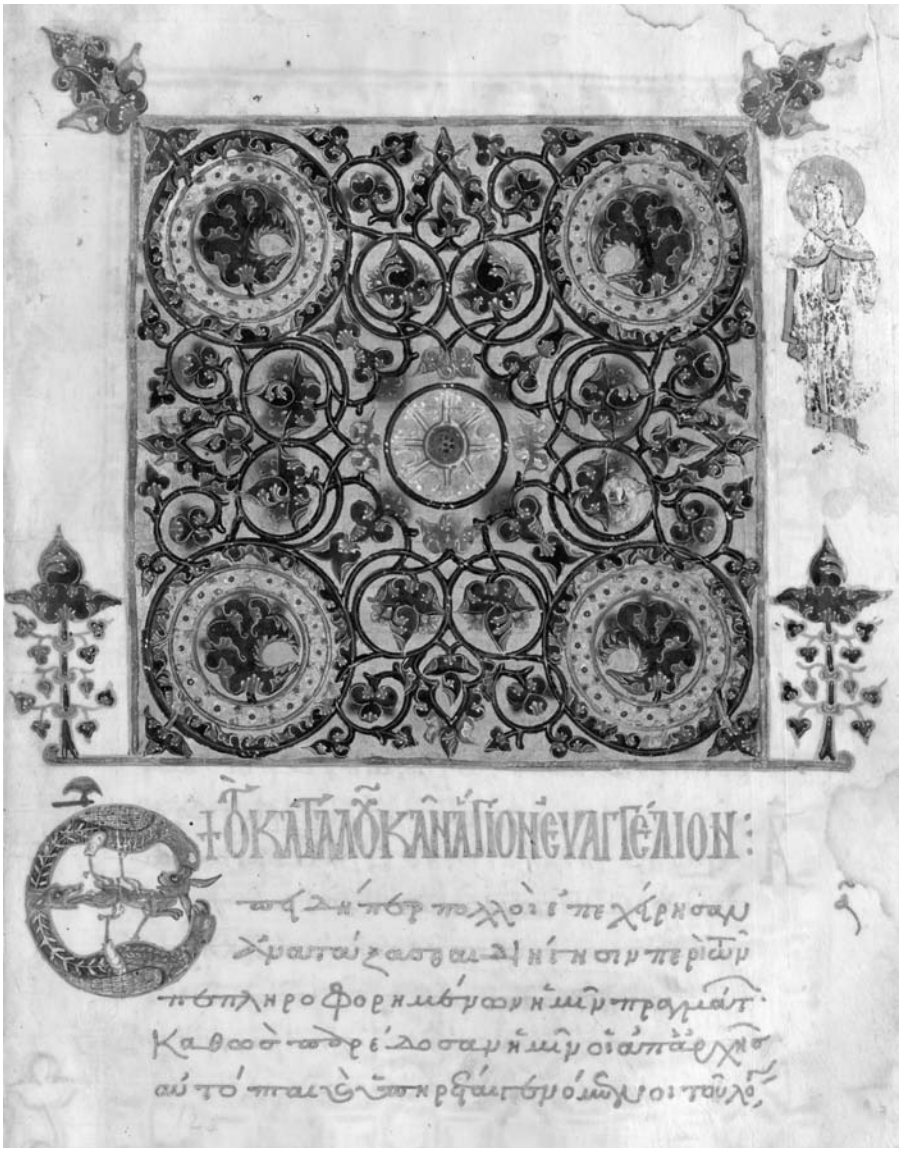


20. Duet of siren and "centaur." Gospel book, Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, MS 5, fol. 5.

21. "Centaur" with a lute. Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos, Sinai, St. Catherine's Monastery, MS 339, fol. 344v.



22. The monk Theophanes offering his work to the Virgin and Child. Gospel book, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, MS Felton 710/5, fol. 1v.



23. Opening of St. Luke's Gospel. Gospel book, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, MS Felton 710/5, fol. 125r.

Manuscripts containing such motifs were both commissioned and painted by monks. An illuminated Gospel book of the twelfth century, now in the National Gallery of Victoria at Melbourne, demonstrates this paradox. The frontispiece miniature of this book shows a structure with a double arcade framing both the donor, a monk standing on the left, and the recipient, the Virgin holding the blessing Christ Child on her left arm (fig. 22). Fitted neatly on either side of the triangular roof are four dodecasyllable verses:

O queen of all, as mother of God the Logos,
Theophanes is the donor and the scribe of this book,
as well as the executor of the ornaments it contains,
Theophanes your Nazarite servant.

Thus the poem specifies that the monk Theophanes was not only the donor of the book but also its writer and the artist who executed its painted ornaments.[44] When we look at these ornaments, we find that they include some inventions, such as the epsilon that serves as an initial to St. Luke's Gospel; it is composed of an unfortunate hare being devoured by two falcons and also, on the left, by the disembodied head of a fox that appears to grow out of the birds' tails (fig. 23).[45] Certainly, there is a striking contrast between the austere self-image of the monk, as he presents himself in the company of Christ and the Virgin on the dedication page, and the relative frivolity of his ornaments inside.

The Appreciation of Artistic Invention in Byzantine Literature

Obviously, then, the Byzantines liked looking at these composite creatures, whatever the official view of their church on such creations. Do we, then, find any reflections of this appreciation in their literature, that is, a positive as opposed to a negative evaluation of innovative and unnatural forms in art? The Byzantines did indeed express such an appreciation, and it is where we might expect to find it, not in church writings but in learned descriptions of classical monuments and in the secular romances. We cite several examples.

The first passage comes from the long poem written by Constantine the Rhodian in the tenth century describing the Church of the Holy Apostles and its mosaics. Constantine prefaces his *ekphrasis* (description) of the church with an account of the Seven Wonders of Constantinople, among them the marvels of the senate house at the Forum of Constantine, the third wonder. Here he describes at some length the bronze doors with their reliefs of the battle between the gods and the giants—the same reliefs that were critiqued by Andrew the Fool. Constantine's description of the snake-legged giants is vivid: "The giants [are shown] with their feet turned inwards and coiled underneath them like serpents . . . and the snakes, as if with flickering tongues, bellow terribly. They are grim to look at, and their eyes flash fire, so that those who gaze at them are in fright and trembling, and their hearts are filled with horror and fear."[46]

Immediately after this dramatic description, Constantine the Rhodian makes a disclaimer: "With such errors was the stupid race of [pagan] Greece deceived,

and gave an evil veneration to the indecen
vain impieties. But the great and wise [em
Constantine brought [the sculptures] here
a sport for the city, to be a plaything for chi
and a source of laughter for men." This stat
is a paraphrase of Eusebius's attempt to exp
why Constantine the Great had decorate
new foundation with pagan statues.[47] It
the characterization of the giants as evil
transmuting their power by making them m
jokes. But, in the case of Constantine the Rh
one wonders if the topos is not inserted in
ekphrasis pro forma; certainly, his characteriza
of the pagan idols at the senate house is in
respects more vivid than his following accoun
the Christian mosaics in the Church of the
Apostles, many of which show less inter
colorful physical description than in theo
commentary.[48] The juxtaposition of profan
sacred in the *ekphrasis* of Constantine the Rh
certainly served to enhance the solemnity
latter, but the strategy carried with it the d
of making the devil's works more fascinatin
the stereotyped sanctity of the familiar Chr
images.

Later Byzantine authors penned equally
descriptions of the monstrous creations of
sculptors; now, however, the disclaimers ar
tinctly fainter, being replaced by a more
ly expressed admiration. In the twelfth cen
another author named Constantine, Const
Manasses, wrote an *ekphrasis* of a marble sculpture showing the cyclops devouring the companions of Odysseus. The carving may perhaps have resembled a fragment of a third-century Roman sarcophagus now in Naples, that shows Odysseus bringing wine to the monster, who rests his foot on a disemboweled victim (fig. 24).[49] "I marveled at the skill and inventiveness of the craftsman," wrote Constantine Manasses. He then went on to describe the giant in some detail:

24. Odysseus brings wine to the cyclops. Sarcophagus fragment, Museo Nazionale, Naples.

> The cyclops was shown as wild and well fed, just as Homer described him before, with a gigantic body, fearsome to behold, and more like a beast and a wooded mountain than a civilized bread-eating man. His hair was thick and squalid, his teeth were many, and his brows were terrible to behold. His forehead was broad and gave no sign of humanity and gentleness . . . . The hairs of his beard were twisted . . . his neck was strong, his shoulders broad, and his mouth gaping wide open, so as to gulp down whole herds of animals . . . . One could see his stomach distended and full of meat, heavy with its load of food. In every respect he was formed by the sculptor as if he were palpably alive . . . . His claws were like the claws of a lion, his fingers were rough and exhibited much scaly skin . . . . That is how skillfully the idol of Polyphemos was formed.[50]

Somewhat later than Constantine Manasses, Niketas Choniates wrote in praise of the ancient statues of Constantinople that were destroyed by the crusaders in 1204. He calls the Latins barbarians and "haters of the beautiful," who did not allow "marvelous works of art to escape destruction."[51] Among these marvelous works he describes a Nile hippocamp, with the front body of a horse, joined to a scaly, spiny, tapering tail. He also describes sculptures of sphinxes, which he praises for their novelty—in other words, for the very qualities of innovation that church writers had condemned. He says that the sphinxes are "like comely women in the front, and like horrible beasts in their hind parts, moving on foot in a newly invented manner, and nimbly borne aloft on their wings, rivaling the great winged birds."[52]

Choniates' appreciation of the sphinxes' novelty echoes an ekphrasis by the second-century sophist Lucian, who praised the painter Zeuxis for inventing a novel subject of a female centaur suckling her twin babies, rather than depicting more commonplace themes such as heroes, gods, or wars. Like Choniates, Lucian characterizes the centaurs as a strange mixture of opposites: the upper part of the mother is that of a "very beautiful woman," whereas the babyhood of her young "is wild and already fearsome in its gentleness."[53]

The most explicit appreciation of novelty in the visual arts is to be found in the twelfth-century novel *Rodanthi and Dosiklis* by Theodore Prodromos. In a remarkable passage toward the end of the work, the author compares a fond embrace uniting the two lovers and their two fathers to certain textiles that he has seen. "I have often seen in many weavings. . . such a depiction by an innovative artist, the invention, that is to say, of the weaver's art, one head dividing itself into a quartet of bodies, or a quartet of bodies as though joined together in a single head—a four-bodied animal or, conversely, a one-faced creation [made up of] four animals, both lion and lions. For the bodies of the beasts were displayed

25. *(Above left)* Lion with one head and four bodies. Marble roundel on the north facade, San Marco, Venice.

26. *(Above right)* Initial Q with four-bodied lion. Boulogne-sur-Mer, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 36, fol. 124.

separately from the necks to the tails, but they all came together into the face of one lion."[54]

What kind of weaving did Prodromos have in mind when he wrote this description? It is possible that it was a western rather than a Byzantine textile, and specifically one from Venice. Although we can find examples in Byzantine art of this period of one-headed monsters with two bodies, there are very few with four. A rare example of a one-headed, four-bodied lion can be found in an eleventh-century copy of the sermons of St. Gregory of Nazianzos, now in the University Library at Turin (MS C.I.6, fol. 77), where the animal forms the letter *chi*.[55] However, the composition occurs frequently on sculptures at, or coming from, Venice; an example is the marble roundel that is set into the north face of San Marco (fig. 25).[56] There are several similar roundels, all from the Veneto.[57] The same composition was also woven into Italian textiles, such as a silk twill of the thirteenth or fourteenth century now in the treasury at Aachen Münster.[58] The ultimate source of the four-bodied, one-headed lion may have been northern Romanesque art of the type criticized by St. Bernard, such as an initial Q in a manuscript produced in the first half of the twelfth century in northern France, at St. Omer (fig. 26).[59] Whatever the source of the textile seen by Prodromos,

however, we can note that the criteria by which he praised this composition, that is, innovation and invention, are precisely those that official church doctrine condemned.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that, in general, the repertoire of invented creatures in Byzantine art was relatively restricted; it was certainly much smaller than the variety of monsters seen in western medieval art, which were evoked so vividly by St. Bernard.[60] To a considerable extent, Byzantine artists confined themselves to portraying the very composites inherited from pagan antiquity that their church authorities had condemned, such as centaurs, sphinxes, sirens, and satyrs, even if artists liked to play with these categories, as can be seen in the siren-*kynokephalos* of figure. 7, or the centaur-leopards of figures 20 and 21. Only occasionally do we find imports, such as the winged lion with a peacock's tail (figs. 9, 10), derived from Persia, or the four-bodied lion described by Prodromos, which was probably western. Thus, when the Byzantines created fantastic beings, their opposition to authority had prescribed forms. The inventions of profane art were regimented in an inverse way; even while the Byzantines were disobeying, their imaginations could not escape the discipline of their church.

If the depictions of hybrids and other inventions in Byzantine art were relatively limited in their types, they were certainly not restricted as to the contexts in which they appeared. We have found composite creatures in the secular realm of household vessels and boxes, as well as in religious manuscripts and in the carvings of churches. We have found the inventions at all levels of production, from pottery to ivory carving. In part the widespread popularity of these motifs must be attributed to the simple pleasure of breaking the formal rules of the church, a pleasure that could be shared by lay people and monks alike.[61] But partly, also, the hybrids and the other unnatural forms stood for a more fundamental alternative to the church, for in certain circumstances they embodied a different source of supernatural power. It is this aspect of the hybrids, their bewitching qualities, that is explored in the next chapter.