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Between Paganism and Christianity: Transformation and Symbolism of a Winged Griffin

This paper examines the reoccurring role of a winged griffin, a hybrid animal known from the third millennium B.C.E. Throughout different chronological periods, several selected scenes with griffins have been transmitted from the pagan iconography of non-Western cultures in accordance with diverse needs of contemporary patrons and policy makers. With the advance of Christianity, among numerous examples, two favorite symbolic roles of griffins became popular, based on the following sources: a romance of Alexander the Great's Celestial Journey and a "master of animals" motif.

The first known written description of a griffin appeared in Greece during the seventh century B.C.E. According to Bulfinch's definition "the griffins is a monster with the body of a lion, the head and wings of an eagle, and back covered with feathers." In the Bronze Age, these mythical beasts were symbols of royalty, divine messengers, guardians, and protectors of the dead. In Etruscan art, the emergence of griffin motifs varied in different chronological periods but it was the role of predator that was dominant. Further development of the symbolism of the griffin motif continued in Roman art. It was related to the function of *psychopompos* of the emperors; as a part of architectural decorations, the griffins served as guardians and divine protectors. In Christianity, a legend popular among the worshipers told of griffins carrying Alexander the Great through the heavens so that he could view his vast realm. Visual and literary evidence of his celestial journey can be traced in Byzantine art from the ninth to the end of the thirteenth century and this particular scene was understood as the message of divine salvation possible for all humans. In the West, the view of Alexander's ascension is placed in a negative context, emphasizing an allegory of pride, parallel to Lucifer's supreme attempt against the throne of God. In addition, there is another frequently depicted scene in which griffins eat the fruits of the Tree of Life or drink from a mysterious chalice-like cup. This scene is predominately depicted as part of the facades of the churches, thus had the symbolic function of protection and of averting evil.