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Imperial Usage of Zoomorphic Motifs on Textiles. The two-headed Eagle and the Lion in Circles and Between Crosses in the Late Byzantine Period

In the early Middle Ages, the ornamentation on cloth became the frame for an image of the real world. Textiles were decorated with geometric, vegetable and zoomorphic ornaments, as well with entire compositions of imperial triumphs or religious scenes. One can find partridges, grouse, peacocks, eagles, green and pink eagles, eagles in circles, the dragons – basilisks, the gryphon, gryphon - lions, gryphon – capricorns, white lions, bulls, flies, and sea creatures. The ornamentation on the textiles was similar to the descriptions, but more complex. Sometimes, details were missing in the description of these textiles. For example, eagles could have metal rings in their beaks, be depicted with one or two heads, standing or triumphantly clutching their prey.

Till the late Byzantine period, court attire presented in painting was similar to its presentations on the preserved textiles. The First Crusade found “animal style” textiles in Byzantium and re-used them for the new emblematic system of heraldry. From the 12th till the 14th century, there were two major changes in the motifs in court attire. They occurred in the ornamentation and the stylization. The choice of motifs shifted to symmetrically depicted creatures, whose teeth and claws were invisible or less prominent than before. Zoomorphic motifs – eagles, lions, dragons, gryphon, birds, or verdure motifs - the fleur de lis, stars, flowers, hearts, leaves, circles with branches, could be presented in purple, in precious stones, pearls, or gold, in red but seldom other colours, in circles, spaces between composite crosses or branches, or alone. The principle of the organization of the ornamentation was hierarchical, although the importance of the motifs was traditional and aesthetic. Indisputably, the purple with pearls, and gold with precious stones, were the mark of imperial attire. The first comparable emblem was the two-headed eagle in a circle. It was not only the emperor’s insignia. It was also reserved for the imperial titles of the despotes, sebastokrators and the caesars. The system of colours of this motif was representative of the Byzantine approach to the system of emblems. The two-headed eagle made of precious stones or pearls, and the purple two-headed eagle were the mark of an emperor or a despotes. The golden two-headed eagle was the insignia of a sebastokrator, as well as titles of more elevated rank, while the red two-headed eagle was the emblem of all the dignitaries of imperial rank. Other motifs often supported this one. Therefore, fantastic or real animals, presented in profile, could symmetrically emphasize the central motif.