

**A relief panel carved with a Centaur**  
**Southern Italy**  
**First half 11<sup>th</sup> century**



*52 x 47 x 5.5 cm; white marble*

*Provenance:*

Collection of Jacques and Henriette Schumann;

Sold Christie's Paris, September 30, 2003;

Private collection

A marble panel carved in low relief on both sides with crisp lines and bold patterns. The panel is decorated with an image of a centaur who wears a vest that falls in sharp vertical folds. The figure is depicted leaping ahead yet twisting his torso as he draws an arrow pointed behind him. The opposite side of the panel is ornamented by thick scrolling bands, interspersed with stylised foliage and flower-like stars. This panel is one of a group of four which were once in the collection of Jacques and Henriette Schumann, now dispersed in private collections. They are all carved on one side with mythological subjects and on the other side with an interlace pattern framing various stylized motifs including crosses, stars, geometric shapes, flowers and animals. Having two carved faces, the panel is likely to derive from a tempon or chancel screen, where both sides of this slab would have been visible.

This fragment almost certainly originated in Southern Italy, where white marble was abundant and where the style of the piece finds close parallels. The symbolism of the motifs included on the panel, such as knots, stars and swastikas, were perceived as good luck and would not have been inappropriate in ecclesiastical architecture – particularly on sanctuary barriers. One analogous example to the present fragment is an interlace panel from Bari, which shares a very similar loose interlace framing stars, crosses and foliage (fig. 1). This interlace pattern also finds prototypes in early Greek churches and monasteries, which led some archaeologists to argue that many surviving fragments of this type in Italy might have been looted from sites further afield. Examples of this might include the fragments that are now incorporated into the façade of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice and those in the St. Mark's Museum (figs. 2 – 3). Dated to the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, the style of these fragments is extremely similar to the present sculpture.

The depiction of mythological creatures such as this centaur is also commonly found in Italian architecture and church furnishing. The signs of the Zodiac, as well as creatures derived from pagan iconography, were standard motifs in the margins of early religious buildings, especially as stone elements from ancient buildings were reused in religious settings. In Italy, some of these mythological creatures were also copied by masons from ancient sculpture easily at their disposal, such as pagan monuments or sarcophagi, and they remained a constant theme which found a way to merge with Christian iconography. Mermaids, centaurs and other mythological creatures can be found on the frieze which runs along the bottom of the exterior of the baptistery in Parma, created around 1196 (fig. 4). Further north, examples of such iconographies can be found on the entrance and in the atrium of the monastic church of Saint Ambrose in Milan (fig. 5).

Together with its companion panels, this relief is a testament to the creativity of sculptors from this period and to the elaborately decorated screens that existed in early medieval churches in Italy (fig. 6). 11<sup>th</sup> century chancel screens rarely survive in situ anymore and so fragmentary examples such as this are important evidence that allows us to reimagine the splendour of these places.

*Literature:*

Eds., Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom, *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D.843-1261*, exhibition catalogue, New York, 1997, p.38.



Fig. 1  
Pluteo panel  
Italy, Bari, St. Nicola  
10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century



Fig. 2  
Transenna Panel  
10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century  
Italy, Venice, St Mark's Basilica (west façade)



Fig. 3  
Marble panel (possible war loot?)  
10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century  
Italy, Venice, St Mark's Museum



Fig. 4  
Centaur  
Italy, Parma Baptistery Exterior  
1196



Fig. 5  
Centaur  
Italy, Milan, Sant' Ambrogio  
c. 1100

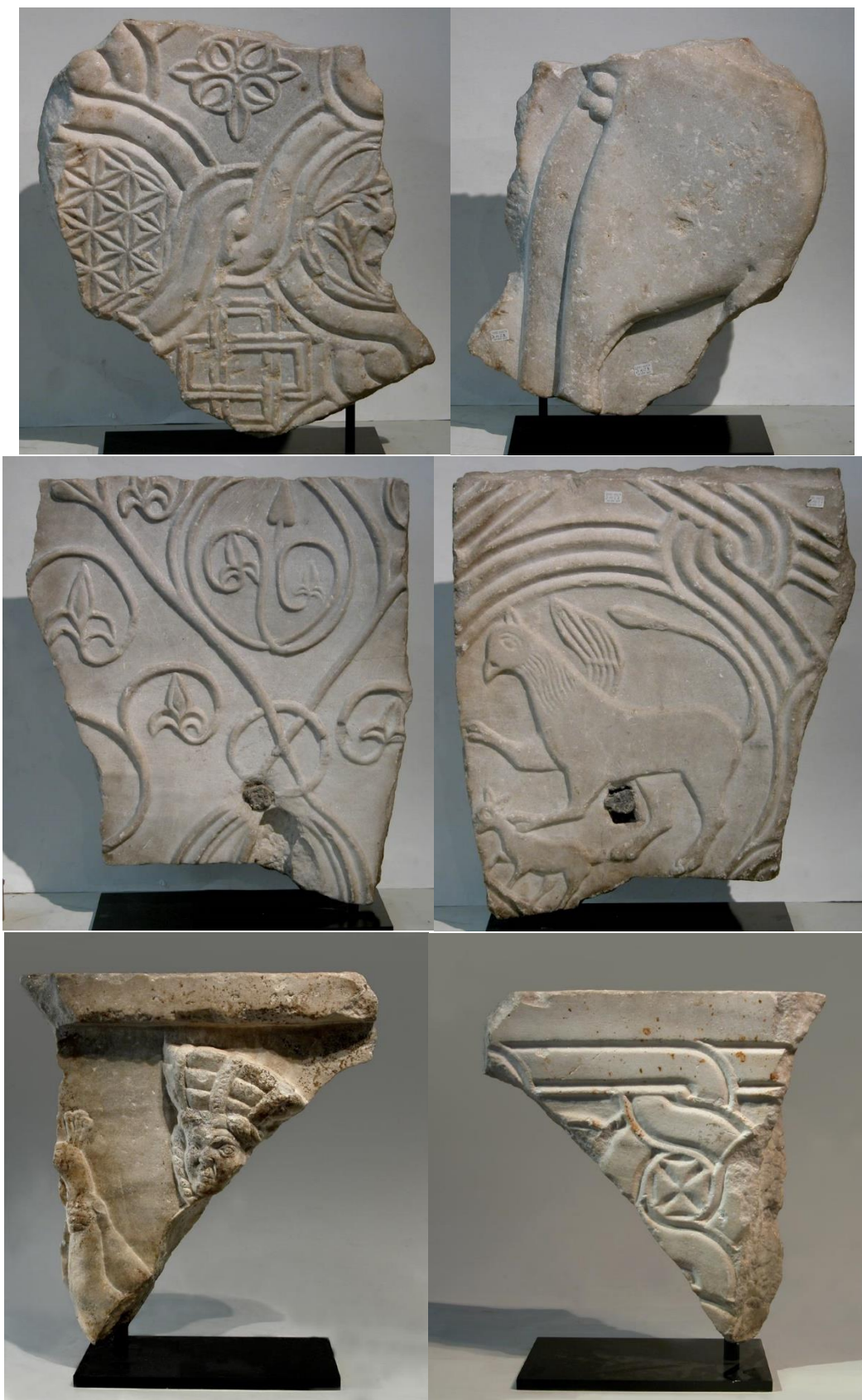


Fig. 6  
Double-sided companion bas-relief panels from the Schumann Collection  
Southern Italy  
First half 11<sup>th</sup> century