

A Stylobate Lion
Southern Italy, Apulia
c. 1150-1200



46.5 x 68 x 36 cm; white marble with some abrasion and loss of detail to the surface

Provenance:

Private collection, Ticino, Switzerland

A stylobate lion carved in a recumbent pose, its head raised and turned to one side, and its haunches and legs tucked neatly at the sides of its body. An octagonal base, layered with a circular disc is carved at the centre of the lion's back. This would have originally supported a column, the locating rod or pin implied by the narrow hole carved at the centre of the surface. The head of what appears to be the animal's prey is shown between its two front paws. The face of the lion is abstracted, carved with an open mouth, revealing four protruding teeth. The mane is composed of stylised locks and crisp curling strands that extend down toward the lion's shoulders. A skilfully carved tail wraps itself under its belly and fans out over his back. This regal figure was carved from a single block of stone – evident from the base upon which it sits. It was created as a pedestal for a freestanding column supporting a superstructure such as an elevated window surround, a pulpit, a portal, or a water stoup. This is supported by the fact that the stone is fully carved in the round. Since examples of such lions that survive on the exteriors of buildings in Apulia have suffered extensive weathering, this example was probably protected by being installed on the interior or covered by a portico of some type.

Analogous sculptures survive at the Cathedral of Bari, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the façade of Barletta Cathedral and the Glencairn Museum (figs. 1-4). The abstracted facial features, bulging eyes and stylized manes all find parallels with our sculpture, supporting a localization to southern Italy, and a dating to the end of the 12th century. This style of lion was first created for the exterior of Bari Cathedral and was copied throughout Southern Italy. The material used here, a white marble, is also consistent with surviving architectural sculptures and monuments from this region.

Discussion:

Lions, without doubt the most widely depicted animals in Romanesque sculpture, were drawn from a broad spectrum of liturgical, textual, and visual sources. The menacing lions framing a large number of church portals were intended to banish the evil influences from the church (fig. 2). Often guarding the throne of King Solomon, lions could be imbued with apotropaic and judicial symbolism. As Adalbert Erler pointed out, the lion can frequently be interpreted as an image of justice and jurisdiction in the Middle Ages, a fact that is illustrated by the frequent use of lion imagery in the decoration of royal and episcopal thrones.¹ An interesting example of this is the statue of Dagobert which formally decorated the entrance to the cloisters of the abbey of St. Denis.² The statue depicted the enthroned king with an orb and a sceptre, resting its feet on two lions, while the base of the statue was inscribed with the words *justitiae cultor*.³ Another example to illustrate the link between lion imagery and justice is the lion on the buttress near the south portal of the Strasbourg Cathedral, where courts were frequently held;⁴ and the lion in the Castle Dankwarderode in Braunschweig which stands as a central monument in the court of the castle to mark the place of justice.

In Rome, the link between leonine imagery and public punishment was articulated from at least the 10th century on the Capitoline Hill. Here, the statue of Marcus Aurelius, then thought to have been Constantine, stood in a square in front of the Senatorial Palace. An ancient statue of a lion sinking its teeth into a horse, located now in the Capitoline Museum, also stood on the terrace in front of the Senatorial Palace, and represented Rome's secular authority. It was in front of this statue that capital punishments were announced by the Senate and often carried out, mimicking – while iconographically contrasting – the role of the She-Wolf statue, which stood for papal power in the Lateran precinct.⁵ The lion was the symbol of Rome until the 15th century and live lions were even kept in cages on the Capitoline hill to 'embody the living image of the city's political authority.'⁶

¹ The four lions of Parma Cathedral also flanked the episcopal throne. Adalbert Erler, *Das Strassburger Münster Im Rechtsleben Des Mittelalters*. (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1954), 19; Dirk Jäckel, *Der Herrscher Als Löwe : Ursprung Und Gebrauch Eines Politischen Symbols Im Früh- Und Hochmittelalter* (Köln: Böhlau, 2006). The throne of Solomon is described in the *Second Book of Chronicles* as a 'throne of ivory, and overlaid with pure gold; and there were six steps to the throne, with a footstool of gold, which were fastened to the throne, and stays on each side of the sitting place and two lions standing by the stays; and twelve lions stood there on the one side and on the other upon the six steps.' See Warwick Rodwell, *The Coronation Chair and Stone of Scone: History, Archaeology and Conservation* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013), 35.

² Julian Garden, "Seated Kings, Sea-Faring Saints and Heraldry: Some Themes in Angevin Iconography," in *L'État Angevin. Pouvoir, Culture et Société Entre XIIIe et XIVe Siècle ; Actes Du Colloque International Organisé Par L'American Academy in Rome* (Rome: Ist. Storico Ital. per il Medioevo, 1998), 117. Little, "Kingship and Justice: Reflections on an Italian Gothic Sculpture," 102.

³ Little, "Kingship and Justice: Reflections on an Italian Gothic Sculpture," 102.

⁴ Paul Crossley, "Kasimir the Great at Wislica," in *Romanesque and Gothic: Essays for George Zarnecki* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1987), 44–46.

⁵ Cristina Mazzoni, *She-Wolf: The Story of a Roman Icon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 49.

⁶ Mazzoni, *She-Wolf*, 50.



Fig. 1
Column base
Italy, Apulia
c. 1200
V&A 324A-1889



Fig. 2
Capital with a lion
Italy, Bari, Crypt of
San Nicola



Fig. 3
Fragment of a
capital
Italy, Apulia
First half of the
12th century
Glencairn Museum
09.SP.243



Fig. 4
Lion from the façade of Cathedral of Barletta
Italy, Puglia
Late 12th century