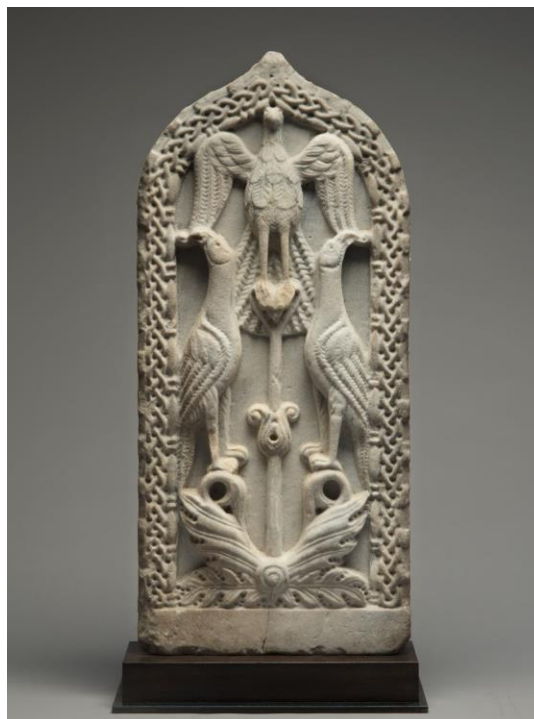


A formella relief with the Tree of Life
Northern Italy, Venice
c. 1200 – 1250



81 x 37 x 10 cm; marble, very good condition with general surface wear, restoration to the legs of the top bird

Provenance:

Private collection, Normandy, Manche, since 1960s

A Venetian carved marble *formella* depicting long-tailed birds, enclosed within a braided ogee arch frame. The inner part of the frame is decorated by a bead and reel ornament, while the outer part is adorned by dentilwork. Within this frame, a frontally facing bird with outstretched wings perches on the top of a stylized branch. Two further, elongated birds rest their feet on the elaborately carved leafy base at the bottom of the relief. The two birds turn their bodies inward but their heads outward. The relief is handsomely carved with drill-work which creates deep shadows, emphasising the three dimensionality of the sculpture and its intricate details.

Formelle, or lancet-shaped reliefs such as this example, were often designed as part of the exterior embellishment of churches, palazzos and mercantile buildings in and around Venice. This genre of sculpture forms part of the *patere* family and although it is thought to have been invented in Venice in the twelfth century, its design and iconography uses eastern prototypes. The early use of an ogee arch in this example derives from Islamic art while the three long-tailed birds resting their feet on a stylised branch are inspired by Byzantine iconographies of the Tree of Life. Some of these reliefs are made from spoliated Roman marbles; the circular *patere* are thought to have been made from marble columns.

Characteristically Venetian, many similar examples can still be found in museum collections and in situ (fig. 1 – 4). The eight medallions embedded in the marble revetment of the north façade of San Marco are the first known Italian examples, which have been related to the work of the late eleventh-century local ateliers. Once removed from their original context and without documentation, however, *patere* and *formelle* are difficult to localise precisely as they were often used and re-used over generations.

The iconography of this sculpture derives from images of the Tree of Life, which was a central theme in early and middle Byzantine art. A related relief can be found in the Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst in Berlin (fig. 4).¹ The Berlin example shows the Tree of Life as a fruit bearing organism, feeding a variety of animals. In contrast, our relief is much more stylised: the abstracted tree bears no fruit and is in line with the more ornamental *patere* that survive from this period (fig. 3). The rendering of the iconography is extremely similar not only to surviving Venetian examples but also to Byzantine stone reliefs, ivory boxes and ceramics.²

Literature:

Effenberger, Arne and Hans-Georg Severin. *Das Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst in Berlin*, Mainz, 1992.

Schulz, Juergen. *Palaces of Medieval Venice*. Pennsylvania, 2004.

¹ Arne Effenberger and Hans-Georg Severin, *Das Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst in Berlin*, Mainz, 1992, cat. 150-154.

² Juergen Schulz, *Palaces of Medieval Venice* (Pennsylvania, 2004), 64.



Fig. 1
Formella with animals
Italy, Venice
First half of the 12th century
Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst in Berlin



Fig. 2
Relief with peacocks and lions flanking a tree
Italy, Veneto
c. 1200
Denver Art Museum



Fig. 3
Decorative roundel
Italy, Veneto
c. 1200
Walters Art Gallery



Fig. 4
Formella with the Tree of Life
Italy, Venice
Second half of the 12th century
Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst in Berlin