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The Romanesque Signs of the Zodiac

By Phila Calder Nye

ONE of the hitherto unexplained archæological phenomena is the sudden appearance of the signs of the zodiac as a prominent part of church decoration of the twelfth century. Why the signs are used and from what sources they are derived are the chief points for investigation. Everywhere the cycle appears it is evident that the artists follow a set form. The source of this form is the problem of the present study.

In the early twelfth century the signs generally appear alone, as at Vézelay and Autun, either surmounting a decorated tympanum (*Cf.* Fig. 8) or forming the decorative band of an archivolt over a simple arch or portal (*Cf.* Fig. 1). Later the occupations of the months appear either as companion bands or in combination, and in the Gothic period a rich and perfect union of the two is attained. In the Romanesque type the band shows the signs depicted according to a plan so uniform in style and method as to point to a single and definite origin. When we first encounter the cycle it has an air of long usage; here is no novice working out a tentative design, to be copied here and there by imitators of his style and fancies.

In the first place, the position occupied by the decorated band is significant. It sometimes turns above a tympanum, enclosing some pictured scene of importance in the history of the church or community or illustrative of a Biblical event. It is often the crown of the principal portal of a cathedral or church, even when the tympanum decoration is eliminated. Usually, if it is not in the west façade, it is to be found over some other door that is in constant use. If the archivolt decoration portrays other subjects, we sometimes find the zodiacal band relegated to the jambs (Fig. 2).

In the second place, the geographical distribution is significant. The signs do not make an early appearance in the extreme north. They are found along the Rhine valley, through France and Italy, and extend eastward to their birthplace in the Euphrates valley, while on the west they reach to Britain.

This leads us to the very definite question: Is there any one antique type of the zodiac which had such a widespread popularity that all the centers of European civilization within this territory would have felt its influence?

Our first impulse is to examine the illuminated manuscripts which have answered so many similar questions. We find that only the early manuscripts make use of the subject, and that in two ways. The earlier, and by far the more popular, method is the use of the single signs as decoration for the calendar pages of devotional books. Such decoration begins during the ninth century and is probably patterned after a copy of the Calendar of Filocalus, which was made at this time (see initial letter). Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, such as the Psalter of Athelstan at the British Museum, and the Psalter of St. Louis at Leyden (Fig. 3), occasionally show this treatment. From the eleventh century it appears with increasing regularity, culminating in the elaborate French and Flemish work of the fifteenth century. In the early examples the signs occur mainly as marginal decorations, painted in any convenient space at top, side, or bottom of a page, with sometimes an attempt to place the little picture near the day of the month on which the sun enters the

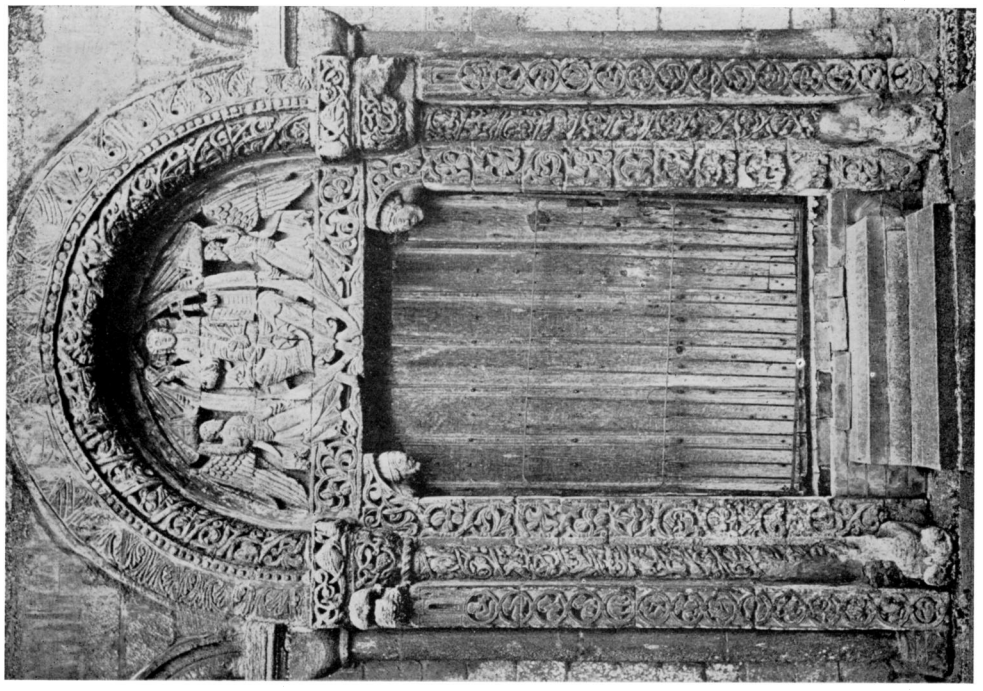

FIG. 2—ELY, CATHEDRAL: PRIOR'S DOORWAY

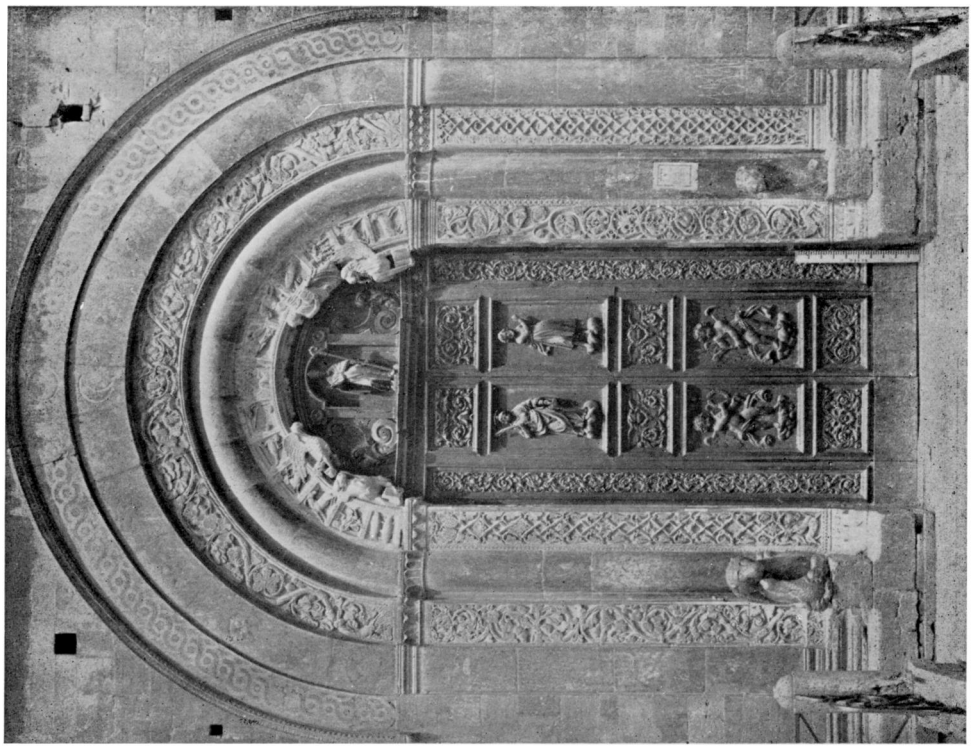

FIG. 1—FOLIGNO, CATHEDRAL: DOOR ON SOUTH SIDE

sign. In other cases the sign forms the decorative motive for the "KL" which heads each page of the calendar. The important point to remember here is that the signs are used singly, one to a page.

The later, less popular, use of the zodiacal signs in manuscript decoration is that of grouping them around a central figure. This arrangement, which may be studied in the eleventh-century Rabanus Maurus manuscript at Montecassino (Fig. 4) or in manuscript No. 7028 at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Fig. 5), is principally reserved for secular volumes treating of astronomical and anatomical subjects.

There are but slight variations in the forms of the zodiacal animals in these two types of manuscript decoration. In neither case is there any indication that the cycle could lend itself to sculptural decoration. Nor do the manuscripts cover so wide a field as do the sculptural examples. So it is unlikely that we can find in the manuscripts the source of inspiration for which we seek. What *their* source of inspiration was becomes evident when we compare with them antique examples like the mosaic from Sentinum or a relief at Modena (Fig. 6). In each we have a central deity surrounded by a band decorated with the zodiacal cycle. The same cycle in the same sort of band is occasionally used to surround the scene of Mithras slaying the bull; and here we touch upon a possible source for the Romanesque type.

Let us return to the question of the geographical distribution of the Romanesque zodiac and see whether that can throw any light on the subject. Recalling the territorial extension assigned above to zodiacal sculpture, one notices that it falls within the boundaries of the Roman Conquest. Is there any possible connection between the Roman Occupation and the use of the signs as a motive for decorative sculpture? Perhaps here we have a solution of the mystery.

It will be remembered that the Roman soldiery was devoted to the worship of Mithras, a cult popular in the Near East and of Persian origin. The earliest records of this belief go back to the days before the separation of the Hindus and Persians. The cult spread through Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, adopting the star-cult of the Chaldæans as an adjunct to the worship of Mithras as god of light. By the time of Alexander its characteristics were fixed, and it reached full maturity during the Roman period. The first artistic representations connected with the cult date from its Grecian popularity, and it was during the Pergamene period that the famous relief of Mithras Tauroctonus originated. Cilician pirates captured by Pompey are said to have introduced the cult at Rome, where it existed among the middle classes, spreading through the army, the mercantile class, and the slaves, and flourishing along the trade routes. Finally the emperors encouraged it, as Mithras was supposed to be personally represented by the ruler, and this wave of popularity lasted until the third century A. D. After that it rose and fell until it was finally wiped out during the fifth century. In the main, the tenets of the cult resembled those of Christianity, and at one time the two beliefs were serious rivals, both having very strong adherents in all parts of Europe. The Mithraic meetings were always held in caverns, so small that each locality of any size had several. The form of all these caverns was the same, a rectangular vaulted room, with an apse opposite the entrance. In this apse was placed the relief of Mithras. The preservation of these reliefs may be accounted for by the cave-like character of the sanctuaries, the popularity of the cult, and the long period of the exercise of the mysteries. The people may have been interested to protect the shrines from the drastic destruction meted out to those of the ordinary Roman gods. At any rate, the Mithraic monuments have been preserved in a number and over an area unparalleled by any other cult of the Roman period.

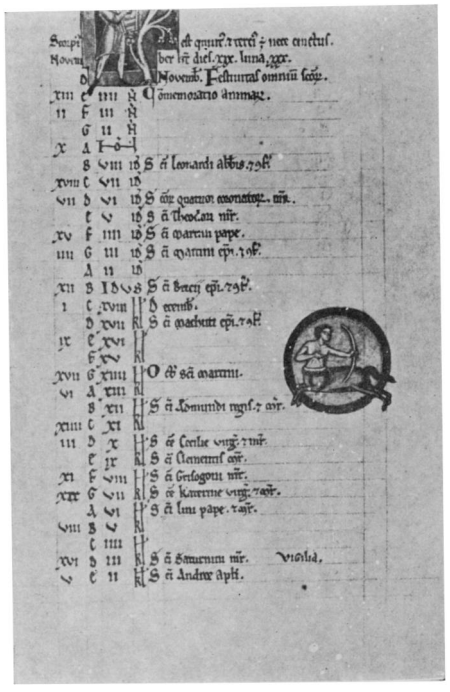

FIG. 3 — LEYDEN, UNIVERSITY LIBRARY: PSALTER OF ST. LOUIS, NOVEMBER CALENDAR

FIG. 4 — MONTECASSINO, ARCHIVIO: MANUSCRIPT OF RABANUS MAURUS, SIGNS OF THE ZODIAC

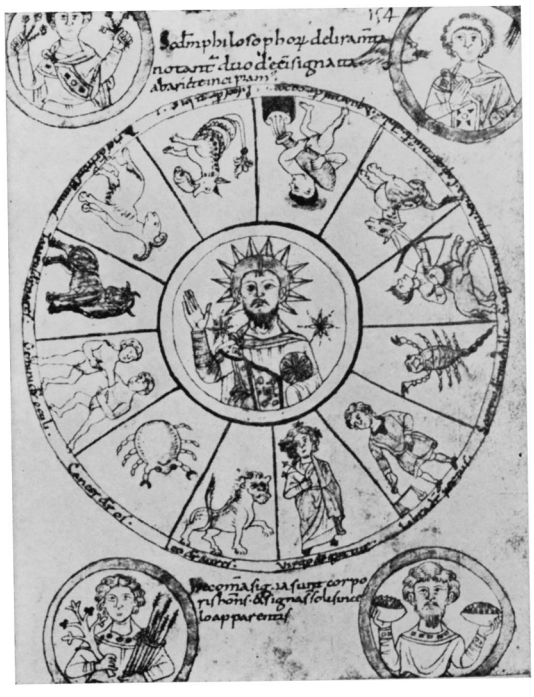

FIG. 5 — PARIS, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE: MANUSCRIPT NO. 7028, FOLIO 154R

FIG. 6—MODENA, BIBLIOTECA ESTENSE: MITHRAIC RELIEF

FIG. 7—WIESBADEN, MUSEUM: ROMAN MITHRAIC RELIEF FROM HEDDERNHEIM

Now the center of interest in a Mithræum was always the relief or statue of the god often shown with the signs of the zodiac as part of the symbolical decoration. These occur as a continuous band, surrounding the god in a circle or oval, as we have indicated above, or arching over the scene of Mithras Tauroctonus. Here then, for the first time, we have a definite arrangement, giving the signs a place of importance, and treating them as a cycle, not as separate entities nor as simple illustrations. They have a definite message to convey, that of the heavens bearing witness to the solemnization of a rite infinitely old, but ever new, as symbolized in this annual repetition. This use of the signs was not a common one. To be sure, it does occur elsewhere, but mainly in Roman work which was probably directly influenced by the Mithras reliefs.

Turn now to the Romanesque portal. Here the signs occur on an archivolt very reminiscent of the Mithraic band, and often, as in the case of the relief of Mithras Tauroctonus, the cycle of signs frames an important composition, occupying a prominent place. In some instances (Figs. 1 and 8) the signs are enclosed in individual frames, such as are to be seen on the great Mithraic reliefs of Karlsruhe and Wiesbaden (Fig. 7). Another significant fact is that there is practically no change in the forms of the symbols. In almost every instance a parallel can be drawn between the Romanesque and the Mithraic work. That the later artists were copyists is shown by an occasional transposition in the order. Some, especially in Britain, misunderstood the meaning of the signs; for we find queer animals introduced as companions to the fishes and their zodiacal brothers; or a sign may be several times repeated (Figs. 2 and 9). But the continuous band is the rule, and this does not derive from the early manuscript forms as we know them. It appears that the Romanesque artists, in their search for illustrative matter suitable for the shape and position of certain of their decorative sculptures, called upon this half-forgotten cult since it had solved similar problems of design. But the strongest of all reasons for drawing upon this source was probably the abundance of accessible Mithraic remains. A glance at the table of contents of Cumont's exhaustive work on the cult of Mithras will show at once that in every center where the Romanesque cycle made an early appearance, late Roman art had provided a Mithræum. England has remains north and south; France has them at points where we find the earliest portal reliefs; Germany the same; Italy and Sicily comply with the rule. Where the Mithræa are found, there the Romanesque sculptor used the signs.

Thus we see that the evidence for our thesis is strong. The signs reappear almost simultaneously throughout the above-mentioned parts of Europe and follow faithfully the last sculptured style in which they were presented. This is a well recognized characteristic in early mediæval art: it is always the late classical style that is copied when later artists revive a form. The Mithraic zodiac fulfilled the requirements of the Romanesque sculptor and furnished him a familiar local model.