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THE LIGHT OF THE MIDDLE AGES

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During the middle ages, candles were necessary items, and thus so were candlesticks. Besides their usefulness, some candlesticks were crafted in ways that provided more to their possessors than just light. The Gloucester Candlestick, the Pricket Candlestick with a Naked Youth Fighting a Dragon, and the Islamic Candlestick not only provide insight into the historical context of their times of creation to modern viewers, but to contemporary viewers they provided spiritual and religious messages through the symbolic use of animal and natural imagery along with metaphorically evocative physical constructions.

The Gloucester Candlestick is one of the best remaining works of Romanesque metalwork and a prime example of the purposes of candlesticks other than for providing light. Made of copper alloy, gilded, along with glass beads found in the eyes of some of its figures as decoration, it was most likely made by a goldsmith.¹ It consists of three different parts, built separately—the three-footed base, the stem, and the grease pan—that combine to form the entirety of the candlestick by sliding along a central shaft.² All throughout the candlestick there are depictions of beasts, such as dragons, serpents, and canine creatures, as well as of humans, with leaves and other foliage intertwined about. At the center of the stem, a central knob shows the only explicitly religious subjects on the candlestick, which are the four symbols of the Evangelists—a man representing Matthew, a lion representing Mark, a calf representing Luke, and an eagle representing John. There is symmetry to the piece, with three dragons facing outwards at the bottom and top of the piece, and a general decline of ornament as the viewer's eye travels from both ends towards the middle where the knob depicting the Evangelists is. Also,

1. "The Gloucester Candlestick." V&A Search the Collections. Accessed April 29, 2020. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O114078/the-gloucester-candlestick-candlestick-unknown/>.

2. "The Gloucester Candlestick."

there are three Latin inscriptions on the candlestick. One of them spirals down the stem, another wraps around the outside of the grease pan, and the last is on the inside of the grease pan.

The inscription down the stem of the Gloucester Candlestick gives insight into its creation sometime between 1107 and 1113 and its purpose: “The devotion of abbot Peter and his gentle flock gave me to the church of St. Peter at Gloucester.”³ It was commissioned by an Abbot Peter to be given as a gift to the church that is now Gloucester cathedral, and the inside inscription of the grease pan relates that it was again given as a gift at a later time to the cathedral of Le Mans in France by Thomas of Poché, a lord of a manor in the province where Le Mans is the capital of.⁴ This candlestick shines light into the nature of relations between churches and both clerics and laymen in the early middle ages, which is that gifts would be given to a church as signs of devotion by the wealthy. Another insight into the historical context of the candlestick is its functional use. Given its size, 51 centimeters tall, it would have been most likely used on an altar.⁵ “Initially,” however, “the ceremonial use of lights was associated with worship of the Roman gods and pagan ritual and was actively opposed” by the Church.⁶ Eventually, though, lights were reestablished in the Church for practical use and also developed a symbolic role, but their use on an altar was not definite until the 11th century; the Gloucester candlestick is the second oldest remaining candlestick to have been used on an altar in a Christian church.⁷

Given that the candlestick was used on an altar in a church, it at first seems odd that it would flaunt such unreligious designs as dragons and beasts. However, the inclusion of bestial imagery on the candlestick was purposely done as religious symbolism. As aforementioned, the

3. “The Gloucester Candlestick.”

4. “The Gloucester Candlestick.” Le Mans is the capital of the province of Maine.

5. “The Gloucester Candlestick.”

6. “The Gloucester Candlestick.”

7. “The Gloucester Candlestick.”

symmetry of the piece is striking, and it appears as though the chaos of the images increases the farther away they are from the center of the stem where the images of the Four Evangelists are kept. This construction, with the explicitly religious images at the center and the bestial, earthly images most abundant farther away from them, is a symbolic representation of Earth in that the vice of the world flourishes where Christianity is not, and the work of the Evangelists and of Christians is to spread God's Word to the farthest reaches of Earth in order to release people from the hold of evil, which is depicted by the beasts. The Word of God, then, is symbolically represented by the light of the candle—given that light was developing into a symbolic role in the Church in the early middle ages—which makes sense that it would be physically above the world that the candlestick represents, since God resides in Heaven above Earth. Furthermore, as the light of the candle would illuminate a room as well as the candlestick, the light acts as a confirmation of the Evangelists' success as God's light overcomes the darkness of the depicted evil world on the candlestick.

Another candlestick with Christian symbolism is the Pricket Candlestick with a Naked Youth Fighting a Dragon. This candlestick is also made of copper alloy that was gilded.⁸ There are three main focal points of the candlestick, the first being a curly haired, naked human, thought to be an Ethiopian, the second being a dragon, and the third being a support of metal with swirls that culminate in a floral dish with a pricket to hold the candle. The Ethiopian subject was typical of medieval art, as images of Ethiopians were derived “through a complex interweaving of Classical mythological tradition, Christianized physiognomic theory, and

8. “Pricket Candlestick with a Naked Youth Fighting a Dragon.” Metmuseum.org. Accessed April 29, 2020. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/467704?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=medieval+candlestick&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=12>.

biblical exegesis,” in which the Ethiopian came to represent the exotic.⁹ Ethiopians were often depicted with “images of hybrid animals, grylli [i.e. field crickets], and other fantastic creatures,”¹⁰ such as the dragon in the candlestick. The dragon seems to be looking up at the Ethiopian with fright as it gets speared in its open mouth.

Made in the Meuse Valley, Netherlands, around 1150, The Pricket Candlestick can be included in a broader range of medieval metalwork that all included animal imagery. This range includes pieces of aquamanilia, which are “essentially small-scale, functional sculptures” that “range from standing lions small enough to be easily held without a handle to larger and more elaborate vessels composed of two figures.”¹¹ Aquamanilia incorporated symbolism with practicality. The practical nature of aquamanilia was that they were hand-washing vessels, but the symbolism was twofold: the animals comprising the structure each held significance—such as a lion representing strength or a serpent evil—and the act of cleansing the hands symbolically represented washing away sin, similar to baptism, especially since aquamanilia were used during Mass before the celebration of the Eucharist.¹² These vessels always included animal imagery, and the “image of the youth riding a dragon as he engages in battle” of the Pricket Candlestick “is similar to some aquamanilia in its incorporation of human-animal struggle or struggles between beasts.”¹³ Additionally, the candlestick relates to these other pieces of medieval metalwork in its fusion of practicality—a candle used for light—with symbolism.

9. Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons & Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 79.

10. Strickland, 89.

11. Peter Barnet, *Lions, Dragons, & Other Beasts: Aquamanilia of the Middle Ages, Vessels for Church and Table* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 3.

12. Barnet, 3.

13. Barnet, 184.

The symbolism of the Pricket Candlestick is its bestial imagery being used to reinforce religious themes. In that respect, it is comparable to the Gloucester Candlestick. “In this type of image, the Ethiopian represents the powers of good in the cosmic struggle against the forces of evil symbolized by the dragon.”¹⁴ Like the images of human figures fighting canine-headed winged beasts at the bottom and along the stem of the Gloucester Candlestick, the Ethiopian fighting its dragon emphasizes the human aspect of religion, that humans must fight spiritual battles for themselves, and the apparent success of the Ethiopian in the Pricket Candlestick acts as encouragement for viewers to suppress the sins and temptations of the world. Furthermore, the candlestick is reminiscent of the legend of St. George and the Dragon, reinforcing the religious purpose of the piece. This symbolism exemplifies the inseparable relationship of bestial images with religious subject matter.

Though of a different region and religion, the Islamic Candlestick displays a similar relationship. The Islamic Candlestick has a much different style than the other two candlesticks. Made of sheet brass,¹⁵ this candlestick has two main areas of focus. The first is the large, concave cylindrical base. The second is the shaft extending up from the center of the base and another concave cylinder at its top, almost identical to the lower one but smaller in size. Different from the decoration of the Western-made candlesticks, the Islamic Candlestick is inlaid with repetitive and intricate patterns of silver.¹⁶ Covering most of the candlestick are interlocked designs of “Z” shapes that give it the zigzag look of Islamic artwork. Dispersed around the base, shaft, and upper cylinder are circular motifs of birds, foliage, and swastikas. These circular depictions are abundant on the entire candlestick.

14. Strickland, 93.

15. “Candlestick.” Cleveland Museum of Art, March 20, 2020.
<https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1951.539>.

16. “Candlestick.”

The Islamic Candlestick is an example of the outcome of a larger development in the middle ages at the time of its creation. This phenomenon was the movement of the Mongols. In the early 13th century, Persia was invaded and conquered by the Mongols, and according to historian Chris Wickham, “the Mongols were almost entirely a negative force, with their tendency to mass killing and brutal exploitation nearly everywhere they attacked.”¹⁷ However, the Mongol conquest of Persia had an interesting and perhaps beneficial effect on Eastern metalwork. In Mosul, Mesopotamia, a school of metalwork was established by refugee craftsmen from Persia, and it is here where this Islamic Candlestick was crafted.¹⁸ This resulted in the construction of other pieces of metalwork, all of which shared similar designs and motifs.¹⁹

It is the circular motifs of the Islamic Candlestick that provide the symbolism that, like the Gloucester Candlestick and Pricket Candlestick, exemplify the relationship of natural, bestial images with religious and spiritual themes. The birds flying together in circles, along with foliage wrapping about and outlining the circles, are used to symbolically represent the sun.²⁰ Unlike the other two candlesticks that depict animals or beasts as representations of evil or sin, here they are used to positively represent the benefits of the sun, which has a spiritual connection to it of protection and providence through light and warmth. To further emphasize this symbolism, the images in circles are formed out of the brass of the candlestick, giving it a golden color like that of the sun. Adding to this, the physical design of the candlestick is itself symbolic. The smaller cylinder raised in the air, almost separate from the rest and main body of

17. Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 176.

18. The Cleveland Museum of Art, *The Cleveland Museum of Art Handbook* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1958).

19. The Cleveland Museum of Art.

20. “Candlestick.”

the candlestick, is where the flame of the candle would be. This light can be looked at as symbolic of the sun as well, situated above the body just as the sun is above the earth.

To conclude, candlesticks of the middle ages were more purposeful than merely holders for candles. The Gloucester Candlestick shows the religiously symbolic nature of bestial imagery along with its metaphorical construction to mimic Earth and Heaven. The Pricket Candlestick similarly depicts bestial imagery as a religiously symbolic representation of human conquest over sin. The Islamic Candlestick differs from the Gloucester Candlestick and the Pricket Candlestick in that its bestial imagery serves as positive symbolism, but like the Gloucester Candlestick, it also has a metaphorical construction mimicking Earth and the sky. Not only do these candlesticks provide historical insight into the times of their creations, but they exemplify the heavily symbolic nature of medieval design and construction of not just art but also everyday objects.

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