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National College of Art & Design
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The Origins of the Symbols of the Evangelists and their use in some
early Christian examples.

by

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fig 1 The Evangelists shown in the 10th century Manuscript, Beatus of la seu d'Urgell

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THE ORIGINS OF THE SYMBOL OF THE EVANGELISTS AND THEIR USE IN SOME EARLY CHRISTIAN EXAMPLES

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I will endeavour to explore the imagery depicting the Evangelists , Matthew the angel, Mark the lion , Luke the bull and John the eagle (fig.2.) from the references of the Old Testament .My interest lies predominantly with their origin. There have been several explanations as to the sources of such imagery. Throughout history, it has been suggested that they are merely attributes given to the fore mentioned saints in early religious art, in order to differentiate them from the numerous other relevant saints because of the increasing difficulty in distinguishing them from other religious figures. However the Catholic Church maintains that these images originally derived from the depths of the Old Testament, where similar beings were documented (fig 3.)

"And from the midst's of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the form of men, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight and the soles of their feet were like the soles of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces on their wings thus: their wings touched one another; they went every one straightforward, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of their faces, each had the face of a man in front, the four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle at the back." (1)

These links have been drawn, since the 2nd century by Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereticas*. III, XI, 8 (2) and have been the conventional explanation ever since. My aim is not to dispute these links but to trace them further to their pre-Christian origins: to show that these images were absorbed by the church from pagan cults and given fresh Christian meanings. As we can see, Genesis (the first book of the bible) is very similar to the ancient Babylonian poem of creation dating from the early 2nd millennium B.C. (3)

"all lands were sea , until the creator Marduk or Bell, created the firmament. It was followed by the complete creative process, which took seven days, culminating with man."

This would appear to be the source of the Hebrew account in Genesis (4) This type of borrowing from one religion to another is frequent at this period . Once these links have been formed, I intend to locate their pagan origins and determine that these creatures were not the `creation of god` but merely the result of man's imagination. I intend to discuss the development of these creatures and the reasoning behind their creation. Inevitably with Christianity's absorption of pagan beliefs alot of the symbolism blended. I will establish these links. I will also look at the result on religious arts and its symbolism when these links used in pagan myth were severed. I will compare and contrast two early European manuscripts dating from the same period to demonstrate the different interpretations used to depict the Evangelists

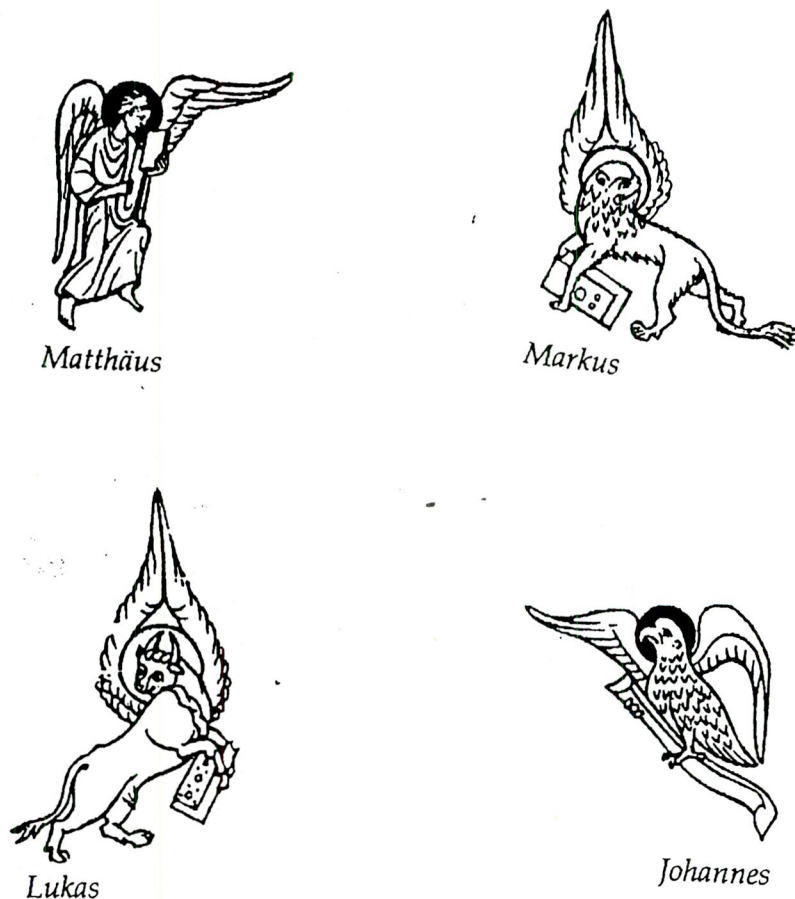


fig 2 Evangelists.Symbols Detail from a miniature; Pontifical of Chartres, 13th Century



fig 3 Tetramorph. Monastery at Atos, 1213.

CHAPTER I

The Conventional Explanation

In religious art the patriarchs and other Old Testament worthies are distinguished by their special symbols (e.g. Abraham has in his hand a lion, Amos has the crook of the shepherd, Moses carries the tables of the law, and is crowned with a radiant glory, Noah bears the dove and olive-branch, or a small figure of the ark in his hand; David has the harp, or sometimes the stone and sling, Elise a scroll or chariot; Jonah a big fish or ship).

The apostles are shown in human form when the need was felt to give them distinctive symbols to aid in their identification. It was the custom to bestow a certain personality, upon each of the Apostles (fig.4.). Thus St Peter always had a short rounded beard, while St Andrew had a long, flowing one, St Philip was of advanced age, St John almost a youth. It was soon found impossible by such means to clearly distinguish from one another twelve or more distinct persons. Attributes or symbols were therefore assigned to them. St Andrew bears the X shape cross, the emblem of his crucifixion. St Bartholomew was flayed alive, and therefore has in his hand a large knife, St James the elder carries the scallop shell, water -bottle, and staff of the pilgrim. Most commonly the evangelists symbols are the angel, the lion, the ox and the eagle, and these are generally associated with scrolls.

The evangelists are abundantly introduced, and under very varying forms. Sometimes they are men with scrolls or books in their hands, inscribed with their names but at other times we get the inscribed books alone. Sometimes the men are introduced with these four creatures by their sides, or at their feet. In a few cases the forms are human, except that they have heads of the angelic or animal type(Fig.5). In a much later work a portion of a picture by Van Eyck representing St Luke painting the portrait of the virgin shows that even though the treatment is purely modern in character, we still see introduced in the background the symbolic ox bearing its scroll of writing. ,(fig 6)

The book from which this fabulous creature came from (Revelation or Apocalypse) is the last book of the bible, and perhaps the least read. It is also one of the most difficult to understand because it contains extravagant symbolism. Such literature enjoyed wide popularity in both Jewish and Christian circles from 200 B.C. to 200 A.D. The author calls himself John (1), who because of his Christian faith had been exiled to the rocky island of

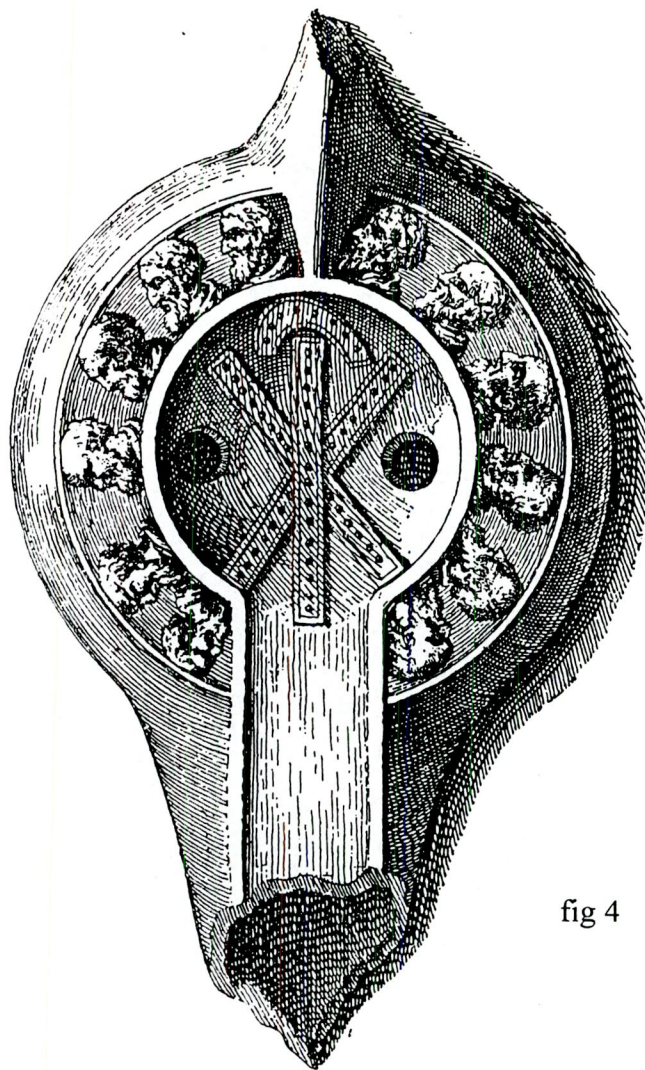


fig 4 Apostles



Matthäus



Markus



Lukas



Johannes

fig 5 Symbols of the Evangelists from Schmid's Musterbuch



fig 6 Painting by Van Eyck

Patmos. Although he never claims to be the apostle of the same name, many of the early church fathers so identified him. The book contains an account of visions in symbolist language borrowed in part from the Old Testament, especially Ezekiel, Zechariah, and the Apocalyptic Book of Daniel. Whether these visions were real experiences of the author or simply literary conventions employed by him is an open question

" And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within, and day and night they never cease to sing,

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (2)

The four Evangelists have evolved from the four living creatures from St John's Revelation. Early Christian fathers delighted in finding prophets in the Old Testament to illustrate the doctrine of the new faith. In keeping with this habit, the fathers particularly St Jerome, interpreted St John's living creatures as the symbolic personification of the four gospel-makers. St Matthew, who began his gospel with the human ancestry of Christ, came to be signified by the face of the man. The lion signified St Mark, the voice of the lion roaring in the desert, "prepare ye the way of the Lord." St Luke, who began his gospel with Zacharius the priest at the altar, is represented by the sacrificial animals, ox or calf. John, the messenger of the word of God, is fittingly represented by the soaring eagle. It is this interpretation that connects the four creatures of Revelation with the Evangelists, as neither Ezekiel nor John ever implied any such association, with these saints. Medieval commentators searching for satisfying parallels discovered other interpretations: " Christ became man by being born, died like a sacrificial bull, rose from the grave like a lion and rose to heaven during the Ascension like an eagle" (3)

The angel or man is associated with Matthew because his Gospel opens with the human genealogy of Christ and his humanity are stressed throughout. Adam of St Victor wrote:

"Foram viri dant Matthaeo,
Guia scripsit sic de Deo,
Sicut descendit ab eo,
Quem plasmavit homine

The figure of man is given Matthew,
Because it was thus he wrote of God.
Who indeed was from him, who formed man.(4)

Later in 1380 Wyckliffe refers to Matthew's representation as a man or angel in as much as he dwells in his Gospel chiefly upon the manhood of Christ.(5) The traditional explanation for the attribution of the lion to St Mark is because he wrote of the royal dignity of Christ and began his gospel with an account of St John the Baptist. "The voice of one crying in the wilderness "(6)

Wyckliffe wrote that Mark's description, as a lion was "of his rising again".(7) This probably originates from the old belief that the loud roar of the lion was the means of bringing cubs to life by breathing on them, (they were believed to be born dead). Origen says in his commentary on the book of Genesis that this can be applied to Christ, who "was burned three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, until he had ended the sleep of death".(8)

Luke is represented as an ox, calf or bull a sacrificial victim in token of his enthusiasm on Christ's priesthood. Wyckliffe wrote "Luke is represented as the ox, writing as he does more especially concerning the sacrifice and the priesthood."(9) But it is Irenaeus who is credited with having assigned this creature to that of St Luke in the second century (10). The eagle of St John who soars to heaven, (as St Augustine puts it) and gazes on the lights of immutable truth with keen and undazzled eyes. The venerable Bebe repeated the idea of earlier writers when he commented on the significance of the eagle as a symbol of St John .

"In merit he is likened to a flying eagle in the figure of the four living creatures, for indeed the eagle flieth higher than all birds and is accustomed to thrust his gaze, more keen than that of all living things, into the rays of the sun. And the other Evangelists, as upon the earth do walk with the Lord, expounding his temporal generation and temporal acts equally and sufficiently but saying little of his divinity; but John, as into heaven flieth with the Lord, and though relating but few of his temporal acts, he know with

loftily soaring mind and clearest sight the eternal power of his divinity, and cause us to know also by his writing.” (11)

It took time for these attributions to become firmly established but even after the tradition had established itself, the actual placing of the four creatures varied .St Matthew and St John being placed at the top of the composition and the lion and the ox below them. The right hand and the left-hand arrangement remain flexible.

To summarise, the Evangelists are traditionally identified as the authors of the four canonical Gospels, and have been depicted either in human form or as philosophers and authors or by zoomorphic symbols since the 4th century. This imagery derives from the Old Testament, where we will find the four living creatures, which have come to signify the Evangelists. They have two sources of inspiration. The first from Ezekiel's vision .The other biblical source originating from the strange poetical vision of St John in Revelation. The later being the more influential in Western art, seemed to exert a power over the conceptions of theologians and artist's of the middle ages.

The origins of the Tetramorphs

These four creatures from Ezekiel's vision have become known as Tetramorphs. St Jerome drew these links in the fourth century. (12) Originally Tetramorphs were probably a symbol of Gods spiritual omnipresence, reflected in the wheel's on which they stand. Ezekiel's complex character makes him one of the most interesting figures in Israelite prophecy. He resembles a more primitive type of prophet perhaps Elijah or Elisha. Ezekiel like Jeremiah, was a priest and has been referred to as "the father of Judaism." He became a prophet in Babylon, the first prophet to receive the call to prophecy outside the Holy Land .As one of the exiles deported by Nebuchadnezzar in 597, his first task was to prepare his fellow countrymen in Babylon for the final destruction of Jerusalem, which they believed to be sacred. Then in 587, when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, Ezekiel was vindicated before his unbelieving compatriots.

This is evidently where John of Parmos found the inspiration for his four living creatures .By merely separating the heads of the tetramorphs, dividing them in to four individual characters, (the dignity of man as an angel, the pride of the lion, the strength of the ox, and the nobility of the eagle). He gives them variety within their common relationship. In doing so he strengthens their characters, considering that four separate

beings with individual personalities contain much more defined power. Their appearance also resumed a more natural form, yet the continuing use of multiple wings remained, as a sign of their divinity. Although the primary purpose of the Tetramorphs and four living creatures was as messengers of the word, their secondary purpose was as guardians. Tetramorphs were covered with eyes, as well as being equipped with heads on all sides, allowing them to see everywhere at once, which enabled them to be ideal guardians. John's creatures however having only one head, were unable to achieve omnipresence in this way, and so were assigned with, "eyes front and back inside and out." Although John's living creatures were more influential in Western art, Ezekiel's Tetramorphs showed graphic qualities of wings and gesture of movement, that naturally appealed to artists, seeking to express the dynamism of the gospel's message. The Tetramorph is a tremendous example of a hybrid creature, with its quadruple animal, bird and human shapes. It carried the wings of spiritual power, which could not fail to fire the minds of craftsmen.

Ezekiel's vision as far, as the Christian church is concerned, is the tip of the root in the Evangelist's family tree. Where did Ezekiel find the inspiration for his curious Tetramorph? Is it, as we are lead to believe, the result of a vision while in exile or was Ezekiel also inspired by earlier prophets, Isaiah's seraph perhaps (fig.7). Seraphim appeared in the year of Uzziah's death approximately one hundred years prior to Ezekiel's Tetramorphs

"Seraphim were stationed above, each of them had six wings with two they veiled their faces, with two they veiled their feet, and with two they hovered aloft." (13)

Seraphim (literally the burning), are celestial beings that surrounded the throne of God. Each has six wings. Reverence for the divine majesty causes them to veil their faces with two wings; modesty, to veil their extremities in similar fashion; alacrity in God's service, to extend two wing in preparation for flight. As they sing "Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts" They are of the higher spiritual hierarchy. In the Old Testament they were spiritual beings attending to God as keepers of Eden, bearers of the divine throne, and protectors of the Ark of the Covenant. In Christian art, they are usually portrayed as having many wings and being covered with eyes: a symbol of the omnipresence of the higher spiritual world, their attribute is a wheel (fig.8). Prior to John's deconstructing the Tetramorph into four individual creatures, which eventually became the evangelists, Ezekiel was inspired to create them from a vision combining pagan symbols and seraphim. By introducing the head of a bull, bird and an eagle which when combined with wings and many eyes created the Tetramorph.

The only other question being, what inspired the three zoomorphic images? For the



fig 7 Seraph attended by two fiery Ophanim, Sixth Century Bronze mirror, Aleppo .



fig 8 Seraph standing on a wheel by Napoleon Didron, 1886



fig 9 Seraphim and symbols of the Evangelists

answer we look to where Ezekiel was at the time he wrote the text. Bearing in mind that Ezekiel was still in exile in Babylon at this period, as he expressly says in his description, the prophecy opens with:

"Now it came to passing the thirtieth year in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar, that the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God." (14)

Chedar was a river of Assyria that runs into the Euphrates about two hundred miles north of Babylon. The Assyrian sculptures therefore most have been familiar in appearance to Ezekiel and to those to whom he was sent to preach.

At this period in Assyria and in neighbouring regions animal imagery was the essence of their religious beliefs. This would indicate that the population of the period would be familiar with this form of imagery, in which astrology played an important part. How better to recruit new followers, than to absorb images familiar to them and fuse them with his own. This fusion with pagan imagery was a technique employed by Christianity as we have seen from Elish's poem of creation. This is probably what Ezekiel did, with the fusion of the Seraphim with the zoomorphic images found in this region. Unbeknown to himself he had in fact created one of the most influential images of religious art: the Tetramorph.

The Evangelists in Astrology

The church absorbed astrology with many other aspects of Hellenic civilizations. Some Christian thinkers worried about the tension between free will and the perceived determinism of astrology, but for the most part the science of the stars occupied an honourable position in the western tradition. The fourth century BC was particularly fertile for the proliferation of astrology. Plato and Aristotle had a unified view of the universe (Aristotle even spoke of connections between the heavenly bodies and the sublunary world) reflecting Greek culture and an Eastern heritage. Despite this opposition, astrology gradually came to be accepted among intellectuals. Toward the end of the first century BC, as the empire became Christianised, the Christian church began officially to oppose certain kinds of astrology. Some of the biblical prophets discouraged star gazing, In 1249 arguments were put forward on the basis of Augustine position (that astrology denies the will of God). Ardent followers maintained that in spiritual passages, it is obvious that God utilised heavily signs to instruct the faithful. The Old Testament contains a number of

allusions to astrology and its principles. "God created lights in the heavens, and he made them for signs and for seasons" (15) The New Testament has another, even better known instance of the ever present influence of the heavens: The star of Bethlehem and the three wise men, who were, obviously, stargazers. Sir Walter Raleigh's wrote on the subject:

"If we cannot deny but that God hath given virtue to springs and fountains, to cold earth, to plants and stones, minerals and to the excremental parts of the basest living creatures, why should we rob the beautiful stars of their of their working powers? For, seeing they are many in number and of eminent beauty and magnitude, we may not think that in the treasury of this wisdom who is infinite there can be wanting, even for every star, a peculiar virtue can operation; as every herb, plant, fruit, flower, adorning the face of the earth hath the like." (16)

Despite tension in the marriage, astrology and Christianity did not become divorced until the sixteenth century with the start of the Inquisition. Christianity rejected Astrology as delusion at best and a tool of Satan at worst.

This is where the dilemma starts, as over the centuries astrology had become fused with Christianity. Christianity had absorbed astrology, which was at the core of Assyrian and Mesopotamian beliefs e.g.. a Chaldean horoscope from the seventh century BC has survived, written in cuneiform, a primitive form of writing (17). The people of this region, identifying the symbolism of the four Evangelists with that of their own four fixed signs of the zodiac brought their own interpretations to the symbolism.

The zoomorphic imagery used to depict the Evangelists precisely that of the four fixed signs of the zodiac. The human form of Matthew is that of Aquarius; the lion of Mark is that of Leo; the eagle of John is that of Scorpio whilst the bull of Luke is that of Taurus. As long as Christianity and astrology intermixed this was of no serious concern to the church. However in the sixteenth century when the church began to reject astrology it became a serious concern. As astrology's forms and traditions had been embraced and had become the very basis of the church's symbolism.

Ouspensky, giving a journalistic sketch of Notre Dame in Paris, reflected upon the contrast he felt between the depth of knowledge expressed within the cathedral's structure, and the somewhat superficial nature of modern man. He maintained that the cathedrals expressed an ancient science, a knowledge hidden to man.(18)

As the end of the first thousand years of the Christian era approached, astrological symbolism was threatened, as the science and knowledge of the time had resided in monasteries. However with the hunting and prosecution of heretics and the approach of the inquisition, it was impossible for this form of knowledge to remain in monasteries. Consequently this knowledge found residence in the schools of builders and masons. Here cathedral architects were taught the true meaning of religious allegories and symbols. This presumably would explain the abundant use of this imagery in churches and cathedrals.

The knowledge salvaged by the masons allowed this symbolism to survive. The Evangelists -zodiacal symbolism is used more consistently in baptisteries and church pulpits, which is not surprising if we reflect on Matthew and John's contribution to the Christian symbolism. John is associated with birth, (baptistry) and John is connected as the messenger of God's word. (Pulpit) The astrological symbolism relates the idea of baptism with spiritual birth and incarnation directly linking it with astrological concepts. In this instance the pulpit is connected with the idea of the dissemination of the word of God, as well as frequently being linked with Taurus (Luke) as the ruler of the human throat.

One remarkable example of this form of symbolism is the tenth century pulpit of the pieva san Pietro at Gropina a hillside village outside Loro Ciuffenna in Tuscany (fig.10). The pulpit has a lectern composed of a vertical triad of the face of a lion, a human being and an eagle. Separated from this triad by a line of spiral foliage interweaving, there is a line of triangular motifs, probably intended to symbolise the trinity. Below are twelve figures, almost certainly the twelve apostles, encircling the top of a double column.

In this pulpit we find an unusual occurrence, the absence of the ^{fourth} third Evangelist. In such a case we would be led to believe that the designer either had no knowledge of the matter or consciously intended to mislead. However careful examination of the carvings uncovers, hidden in the triangular shape above the heads of the twelve disciples, the form of a bull's head (fig.11). This small head has not been moved to an obscure position without some conscious intent on the part of the designer. And in fact the idea is that the missing bull's head would complete the group each time the priest ascends the Gropina pulpit to preach his own face elevated above the group, and becomes the missing fourth symbol he speaks the word of God. Through zodiacal symbolism the priest is associated with St Luke and becomes the personification of Taurus the bull, representative of the living Logos. St Bernard of Clairvaux (1091 -1153) while criticising the excessive architectural ornamentation of medieval churches, inveighed against the representation of hybrid creatures:

Here you see many bodies joined to one head and they're many heads on one body. There a beast drags a horse dragging half a goat after it; here a horned animal is the forepart with a horse forming the hindquarters. Everywhere there is a profusion of the most varied forms, as motley as they are astonishing, so that people prefer to read in stone rather than in books, and spend the whole day gaping at every detail of these oddities instead of meditating on their prayers". From a letter to the Abbe Guillaume de St Thierry."(17)

At the same time this passage illustrates the extent to which the Christian church had taken over the ancient creatures in its visual repertory.

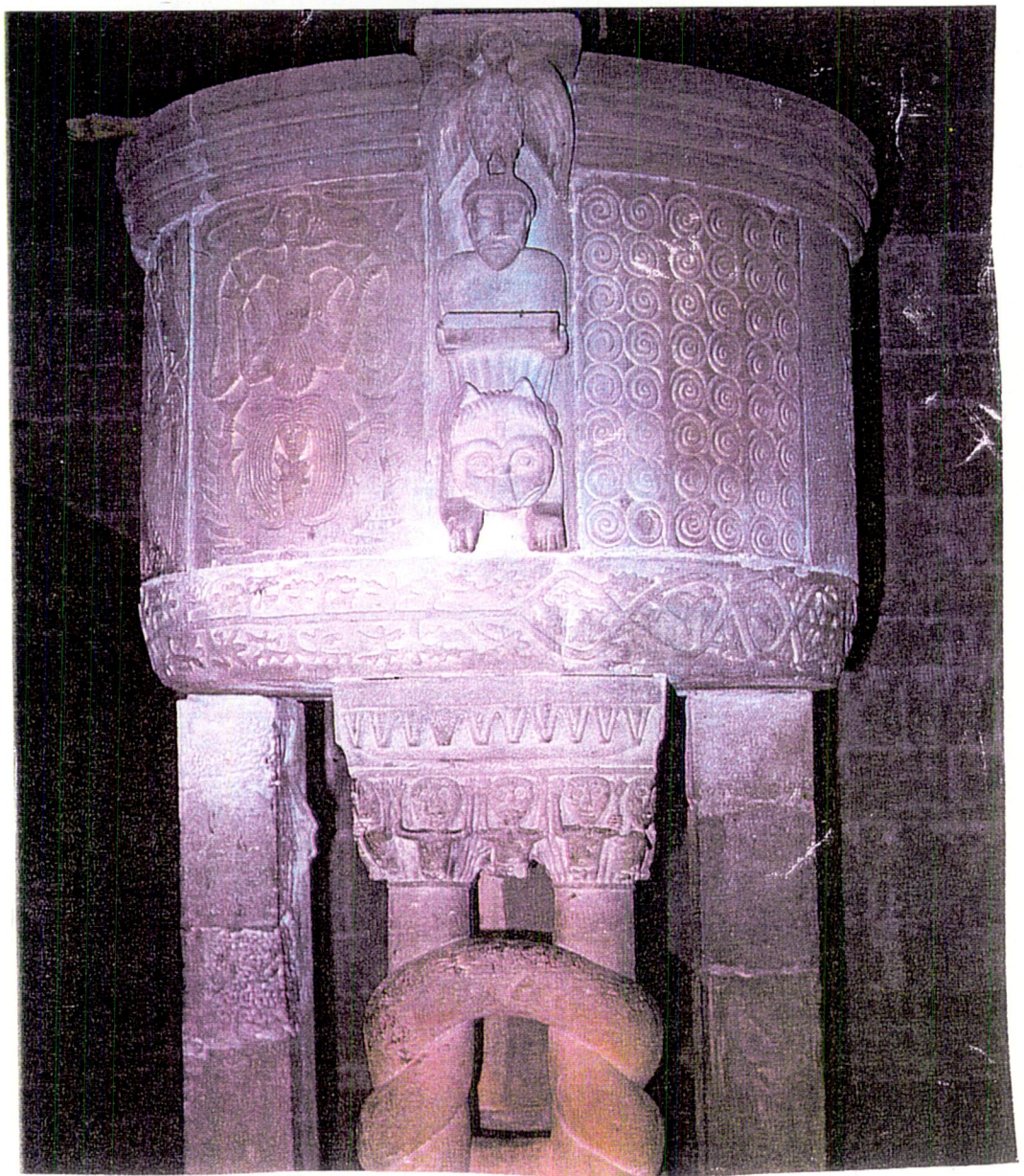


fig 10 Pulpit in the San Pietro, Gropina, Tuscany France



fig 11 Detail from pulpit, showing triangular bulls head

CHAPTER II

Evangelists; Gods creation or from mans imagination

As far as we can tell in the period around 3000 BC the first pictorial records of the Evangelists pre Christian ancestors can be found. Strange as it may seem these creatures were not the result of primitive civilizations but are in fact to a large extent the product of highly developed civilizations.

"Neither God created nor extinct in nature but that they are entirely product of the human imagination and have received their outward shape from human hands." (1)

This is a concept that the Christian religion would have reluctance in accepting. As it maintains that the birthplace of these images is firmly based in the shallow confines of the Old Testament. Nevertheless the resemblance between these hybrid creatures, originating in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Greece to that of the Tetramorphs and Evangelists is extensive. (fig. 12)

Man's use of animals as Gods

The use of animal-men to depict both gods and demons has lasted not days, weeks, months or years but thousands of years. Animal paintings are found on the walls of caves in France, Spain, Scandinavia and Africa dating back to the last Ice age, (between 60,000 and 10,000). "What is mans obsession with paying homage to animals, and how did animals come to symbolise good on one hand and evil on the other?" Probably by the natural process of polarization, animals represent instinctive energy, which can be life giving or destructive. A bull provides nourishing meat but an angry bull can gore a person to death. Bulls seem to have almost god-like power. One of the Babylonian gods was a bull, and the Egyptian goddess Hathor was cow-headed (fig. 13). In these examples, animals represent awe-inspiring power, though such power can equally be terrifying and destructive. The prophet Daniel saw a vision of four huge beasts emerging from the raging ocean, a winged lion, a rampant bear chewing human flesh, a four headed leopard and a bull-like horned beast with iron teeth (2). In this vision we are made aware of the destruction that animals can reek. Because animals can represent untamed instinct, Christian leaders were vigorous in condemning animal's rituals, and animals easily became associated with evil. Their primary presence, however is life giving, they give us meat and drink. Their God-given fertility was of vital importance, especially to herding people of the



fig 12 Animal-headed deities.



fig 13 The cow-headed Hathor and Falcon-headed god Horus. Egypt

Near East. The author of Genesis describes God bringing animals into existence, by a creative word: "Then God commanded, 'let the earth produce all kinds of animal life: domestic and wild, large and small', and it was done. So God made them all, and he was pleased with what he saw" (3). And although Christianity has remained ambivalent towards animals and their power, ceremonies have taken place from earliest times until the present day. Animals frequently appear in ancient works of religious art. BC).

The fusion of man and animal

Hybrid creatures ^{came} can from the realms of artists' representations, such as bull-men, bird-men and winged creatures (fig. 14). The oldest bull-men were from Elam and Mesopotamia usually having bull torsos but standing in an upright human way. Enkidu the bull-man is known from the Gilgamesh epic; his body was covered with hair as he grazed with gazelles and drank with the cattle. In an early text it is never directly stated that he was of hybrid form but the features and habits described in those words could hardly be heeded visually except by giving him animalistic attributes. These characteristics distinguish him from the animals surrounding him as well as from any human beings

The Mesopotamian tales from early dynastic times show bull-men in many forms. They are almost human but are crowned with horns. Human bodies with bull's heads are portrayed and finally bull's in their normal forms but in the upright human posture (fig 15). The Mesopotamian bulls identification with known deities begins with the Hittite storm-god, Teshub, who holds a lightning bolt and stands above a bull (1000 BC). A similar image represents the Akkadians storm god, Adad or Hadad, in the neo-Assyrian period.

But with this comes the age-old problem that illustrators have faced for centuries, the dilemma, which arises when an illustrator or artist endeavours to translate the literary model into two dimensions. Heinz Mode in his discussion of the subject opens the question: "If we were to be asked to illustrate a fairy-tale in which there was a speaking tree. How else would you do so, than to endow the tree with a face, mouth or human attributes? In one of Goethe's poems a bell comes waddling around the field. Some illustrators have equipped the bell with feet although there is no mention of this in the poem. It becomes apparent that it is only necessary for the poet to throw out the hint for the association to be made" (4)

If this is true of direct illustration the effects must apply even more to images, which are independent works, isolated from any written contact. In the case of the bull

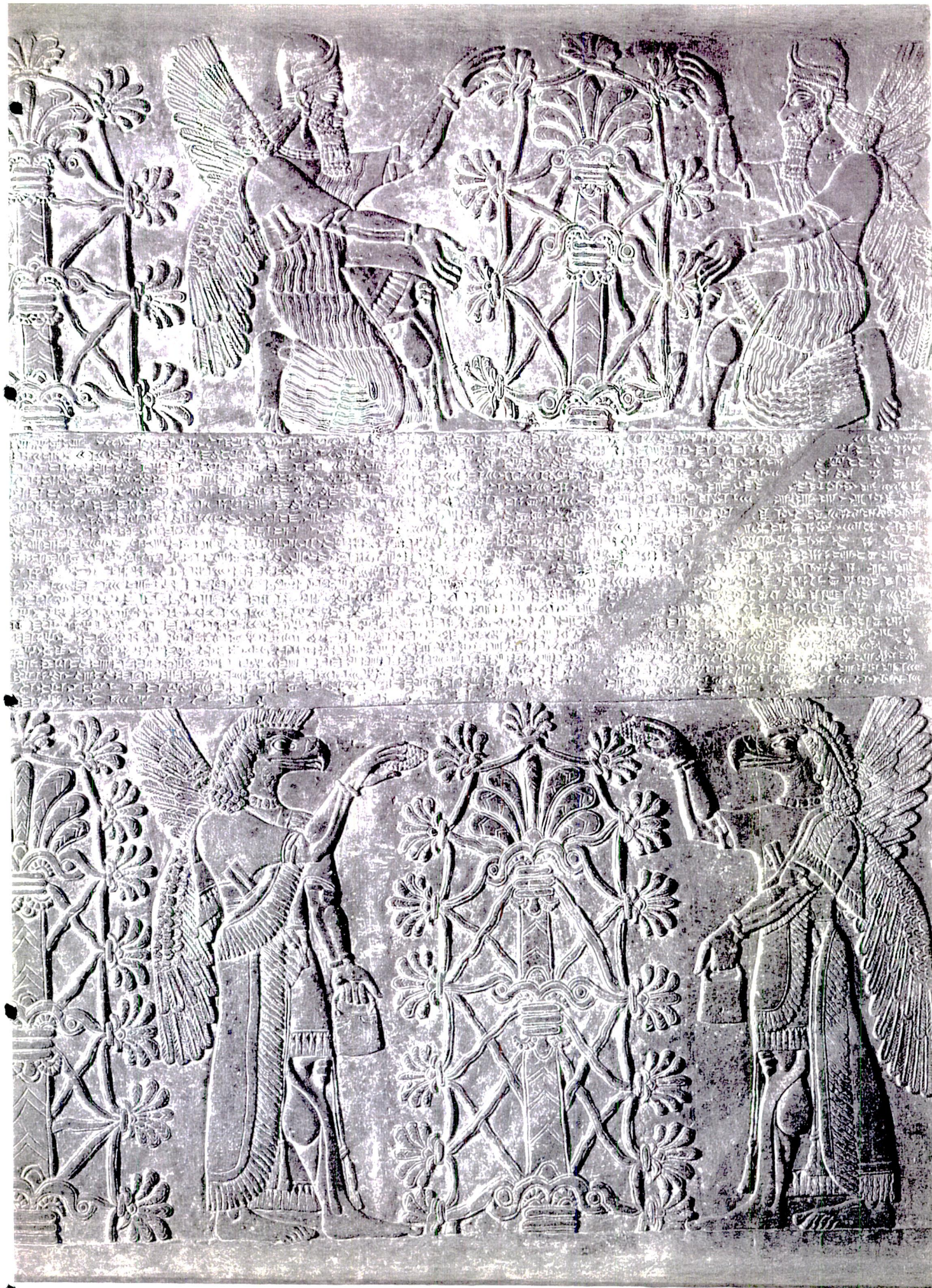


fig 14 Bird men and winged men, ninth century.



fig 15 .Lion-men and Bull-men about 1050 -850 B.C.

grazing among gazelles or drinking with the cattle at the water place, Heinz Mode asks an important question

"Whether he still would be related to an epic if there were no visible clue? If a purely human form were placed in the same context, would it alter our perception?" The information conveyed would be immediately altered so as to suggest the shepherd or a wonder. This example shows clearly that something so spectacular taken from myth or fairytale is almost impossible to represent except in monstrous form unless the figure has identifying attributes, or the scene is so unique as to be immediately recognised by the spectator.(5)

The bull-man Enkidu in the epic is a mythical figure, destined by the gods to be Gilgamesh's companion and share in his heroic deeds. It can be understood from the myths and the mythological images of early Mesopotamian civilization from Sumerian times onward, but even more clearly from the later Babylonian and Assyrian periods, that winged men and other creatures with human traits represented the powers of guardian spirits. These figures are denoted by the ritual title of kerub; the word comes from the Akkadian `karabu` to pray or to bless.(6) The great kerubim, are monumental statues who guarded the Assyrian palaces. These creatures which are especially important for later European development which occur in large numbers in the Far East.

In Mesopotamia and neighbouring regions images of bulls are related to sky gods' as a source of fertility and life. Hadad the hybrid bull-man appears intermittently, first on cylinder seals of the early dynastic period (mid 3rd millennium B.C.). He has a human head with horns and is bull from the waist down. He can be seen again in the neo-Assyrian period (883 -612 BC) when he holds up a solar disk or winged disk of the sun- god, Shamash. On the early seal he fights a lion-headed eagle and other foes. The winged, human-headed, bull had the important role of guardian, notable in the neo-Assyrian sculptures. Animal sacrifice was a deeply symbolic rite. The bull was slaughtered above a pit in which a worshiper stood to be drenched by a stream of blood flowing over him (sacrificial rituals) .The rite seemed to originate in Persia. The earliest examples, in clay or bronze, date from the 3rd millennium BC .In Assyrian sculpture we see a hybrid creature, a lion-headed dragon, called Imdugud, first seen on a cylinder seal of the 4th millennium BC. It would appear that in Western art winged figures are mainly descended from Mesopotamian sculptures.

They are ultimately derived from the representation of sacred birds such as the falcon and vulture. The winged creatures that are such a striking feature of neo Assyrian sculpture (9th - 7th cent BC) seem to be the product, not so much of religious symbolism, as of the living creative imagination of artists. Eagle, man, lion and bull have magical power, and each were the lords of their own kingdom. When combined in a single image they made irresistibly powerful guardians of temples and palaces. They must have been the kind of images seen in relief sculpture and wall painting that inspired the vision of Ezekiel and ultimately became the apocalyptic beasts. From Mesopotamia winged humans and animal figures were probably transmitted through military conquest, and trade. They in turn probably inspired the winged gods of Greece and Rome.(7)

CHAPTER III

The Book of Kells

The Book of Kells is a fine example of the sort of sumptuous codices which embellished altars on festive occasions. The Book of Kells which was written around the end of the seventh century to 806, was in use at the Columbian monastery at Kells in County Meath in Ireland and it is believed that, although it was started in Scotland, it was brought to Kells by the monks who had fled from Iona in the wake of the Viking raids

The book contains three full page figures two of which are obviously meant as portraits of Matthew and John. It is assumed that at some stage in the manuscript's history there also existed portraits of Luke and John. Portraits of the evangelists are common in insular manuscripts and appear in many other gospel books of the time whether Oriental, Italian or Carolingian.

Matthew and John appear in full face. St Matthew's fixed view almost makes him seem to be staring out from the page at us (fig. 16). In his left hand he is holding his gospel, and although his posture is upright he is placed against a chair or throne. In Matthew's case the throne features the other three Evangelists. Mark appears on the throne at each side of his head, John shows up on the right on the front arm and Luke makes his appearance on the left arm (fig. 17). The frame which surrounds them is ornamented with snakes. This could well be a reference to St Patrick as this is an Irish manuscript. Both figures have a nimbus halo, St John's being especially elaborate. Both evangelists are depicted holding books with decorated covers. Matthew's book is perched on his right knee held there with his left hand, while John holds his book aloft in his right hand. He has a long quill which he is preparing to dip in a small ink horn, standing on the edge of the frame near his right foot. This image is one of the most powerful in the entire book. In the centre of the outer edges of the frame we discover, hands feet and the remains of the head of a second human figure. The figure was partially dismembered in the ninth century at the hand of a clumsy book binder. The short flowering rod which is held so tightly in his right hand has been badly damaged by abrasion and since part of the left hand and most of the head are now missing it makes identification a problem.

Whole pages from the book of Kells have been devoted to the Evangelists and it is not surprising that their symbolism had been introduced (fig. 18). When the four



fig 16 Portrait of St .Matthew, Book of Kells, Trinity College, Dublin , Ireland .



fig 17 Portrait of St. Mark. Book of Kells, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland.

Evangelists are brought together there are few other means of identification. Each figure is shown with wings. However Luke the ox and John the eagle are shown with four wings, two less than we would expect if they were to correspond to their biblical origins and to the normal pattern used to depict the evangelists. In the case of John the wings are slightly more elaborate, three of the wings germinate from his back while one seems merely to sit on his chest quite unattached. The colouring employed to depict the eagle's wings show more vibrancy than that used for the others. Luke in this instance is illustrated as an ox (also depicted as a calf or bull), his wing also sprouting from his chest; the two larger wings are woven through the front legs of the calf and one of the smaller wings. Matthew and Mark however have only two wings which is more common in the representation of the Evangelists. Their wings are endowed with tassel-like feathers.

They are framed in panels, which create a cross in the centre. All four symbols have halos, and a cross is placed over the head of the calf while three crosses appear above the head of the eagle. John grasps his Gospel tightly as the only one in the instance to be in possession of his.

The Evangelical Symbols placed at the opening of Mark's Gospel, fol. 129 V.(fig. 19) do not appear to have halos but instead are encased in large yellow circles, which in Bernard Meehans opinion, may perform the same function (1). The circles are framed in panels around a cross. Matthew strangely shares his frame with an image of himself. Mark shares his frame with the eagle and the calf of John and Luke, John similarly shares his frame with the lion and calf of Mark and Luke. Peculiarly; Luke the calf shares his frame with John the eagle and himself, where it would be expected for Mark to appear. The assumed intention of these beings is to stress the unity of the gospels.

The Beatus Manuscripts

One of the best achievements of medieval art are the illustrations depicting the commentary on the Apocalypse of St John written by a Spanish priest, Beatus about 776 at the monastery of Lieana in Asturias in Spain. He wrote a lengthy commentary on the book of Revelation by alternating verses from the book itself with interpretations by Church fathers. There are numerous illuminated copies of Beatus's Commentary on the Apocalypse of which twenty six still survive, (in varying states of completeness) from the ninth to the thirteenth century. The illustrations are exciting in their unnatural colours, inventive form and flattened space, often with multi-coloured striped backgrounds. The images remain faithful to the text.



fig 18 The Evangelists Symbols. Plate IV. Fol. 27 V.

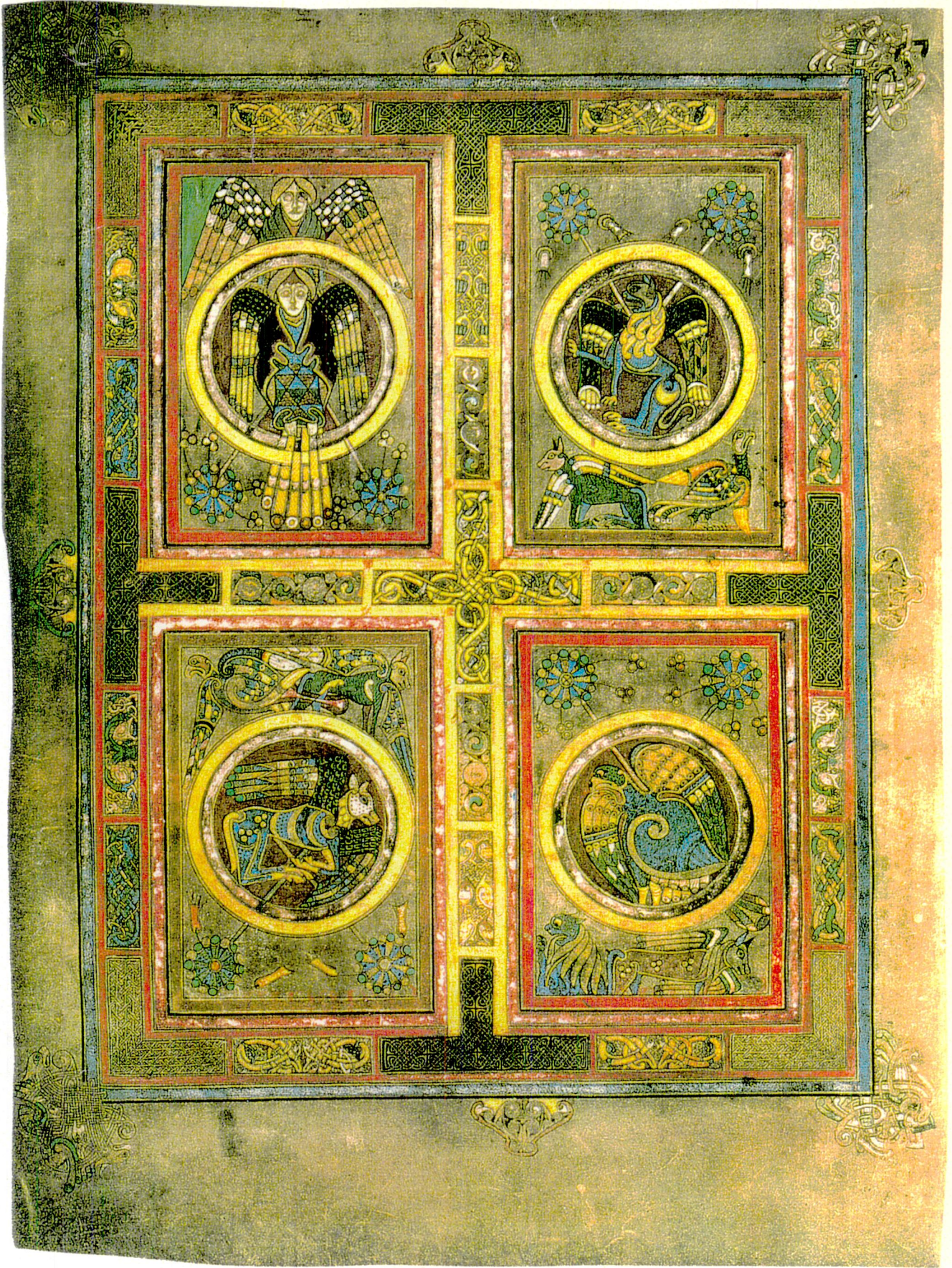


fig 19 The Evangelists Symbols. Plate XII. Fol.129 V.

The Apocalypse of St Sever, named after its origins in the abbey in southern France in the mid-eleventh century, has become well known through reproductions of its illustrations. The copy is a treasure of the Cathedral of Genoria, written about 975, supposedly in Tavera in Asturais. It is one of the best preserved of all the Beatus manuscripts making available for the first time in copy, a complete Beatus manuscript. It contains over a hundred paintings of an extraordinary power of colour and expression. As Emile Male said, it was the most famous of all Romanesque manuscripts. It shows more than fine colour, but also the incomparable drawing that distinguishes this isolated masterpiece from the purely Mozarabic as well as from the later Beatus manuscripts, which were executed in the usual late Romanesque or early Gothic manner.

In the illustration of the four riders a more elegant lamb appears crowned with seven thin horns, and loosens the four seals from the large golden book with a tap of his hoof, one by one each time. One of the four winged creatures grasps John's hand saying "come and see" (fig.20). One after the other the Riders leap forward on small headed Moorish horses with black hoofs. The last rider, Death, his spiky hair standing up, rides a pale horse with a black mane standing on its hind legs, while the kings of the earth wear strange crowns. The Evangelists in this case are illustrated in a very energetic fashion almost nymph like, each with all six wings and eyes all over. Unlike other representations are true to the text.

This Beatus manuscript from S. Isidoro de Leon is a splendid example of the vision of the throne (fig.21). (2) On top, two beings in long red robes, with hooked wings full of eyes and a cap of red light, are holding the open door under a horse shoe arch. The unnamed one sits on a stool, holding the golden book. A spectre (spirit) with dilated eyes and a cap of light, dressed in black stands at the door on top of the disk bordered by white stars and surrounding a smaller red disk. This is the throne of the lamb, with one leg the lamb holds a cross, a golden shrine lies at its feet against the black background of the outer zone. The half figures of the living beings, shown with the faces of the man, lion, ox and eagle, hold gospels while they roll on fiery wheels, the design on the inside of the fiery resembling that of Yin and Yang, their wings full of eyes. In this instance the four are more reminiscent of the Tetramorphs than that of the living creatures, as they roll on wheels and

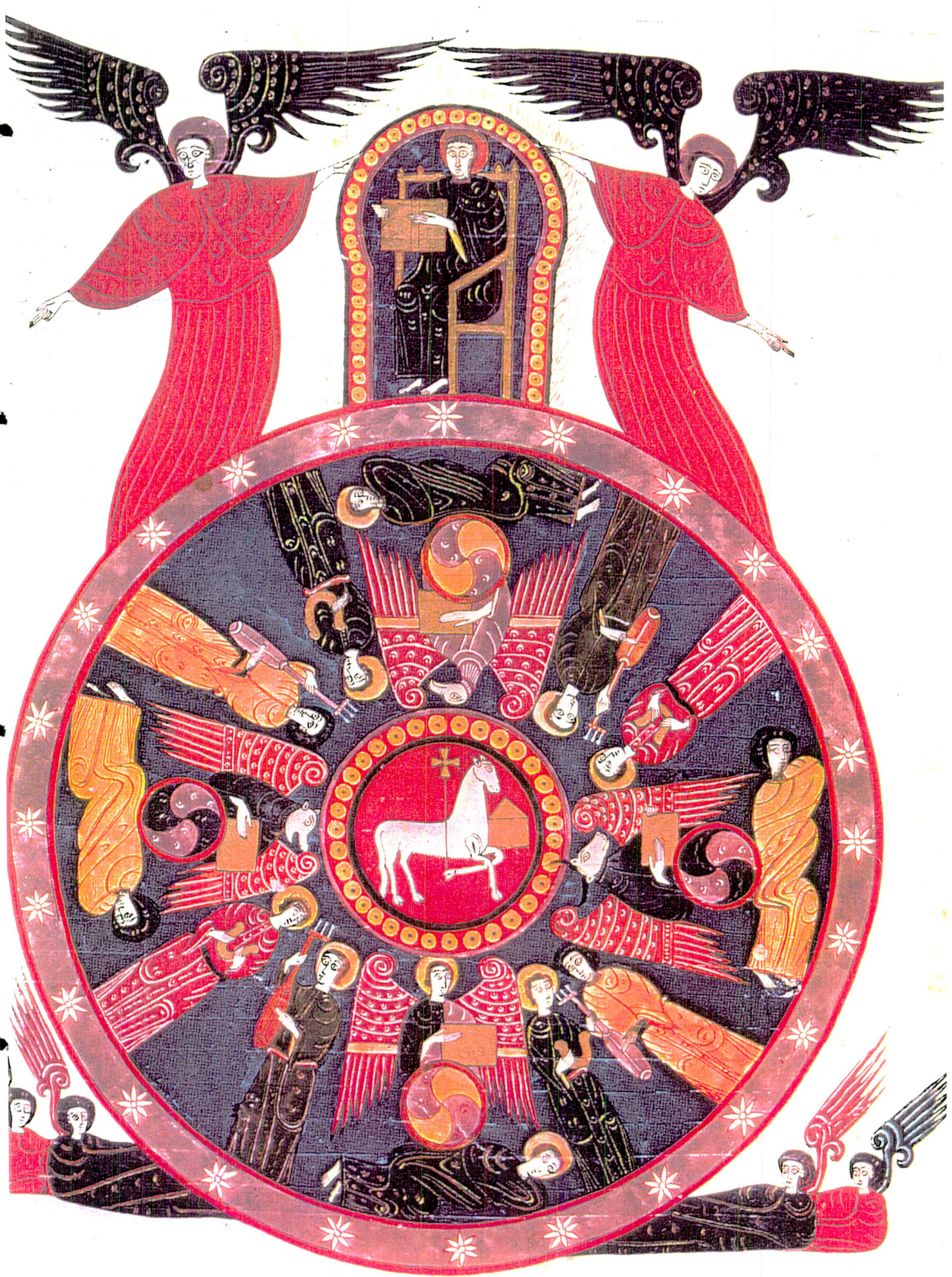


fig 21 Beatus from St Isidoro of Leon .

have the chest and hands of men, again each are missing to wings. Four elders lie below them, four pairs standing between them, the four beasts holding bowls while four others play Spanish guitars with four strings. Four winged beings sit on the starred border. All of this shown in dazzling colours: scarlet, ochre, black, blue, mauve and white. These Beatus maps give an excellent idea of the eighth century view of the world.

By far the most powerful pictures of the whole Beatus family are those of the mozarabic groups, both the earliest and the most primitive. Eight manuscripts belong to the tenth century, begun two centuries after the definitive edition of the Beatus text. They were illuminated in Oviedo, Tauara, S. Miguel de Escolada and Seo de Urgell or nearby. Like those of other early copies they are an art of colour, creating one great field divided into bands of contrasting colour, in which vivid figures are set, representing the Apocalypse of John.

"In a burning, heraldically bright colour, the artist transposes the imagery of the canonical text in naive illustration of the single word" (3)

The simplicity of this Spanish art is astonishing especially when considering the ease in which they pass between the natural and the supernatural.

When comparing the Book of Kells to the Beatus manuscripts it becomes apparent that although they were created around the same period the way in which they are depicted is radically different. Although the book of Kells is meticulously well illustrated, to the extent that it has been referred to as the work of angels and not of men,(4) when compared to the boundless energy that emanates from the playful nymph-like characters of the Beatus it appears lifeless and dull. The Beatus is illustrated in a simple manner, indifferent to detail unlike its contemporary Book of Kells where the illustrations are more detailed and precise but far less informative visually. Frederick van der Meer refers to the Beatus manuscripts as:

"image signs, which appeal to the intellect, which imply more than they actually show"(5)

CONCLUSION

This zoomorphic imagery has survived thousands of years. The animal-men from Mesopotamia and the winged deities of Egypt were absorbed by the Bible, whether these vision were real experiences of the author or simply literary conventions employed by him is not important . The solution of which in no way adds to, or detracts from, the divine inspiration of the book.

The imagery grew with the Church, although it's roots were in pre-Christian religions. The imagery evolved as Seraphim, Tetramorphs and the Living Being. Later when associated with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John the imagery developed to that of the Four Evangelists - writers of the four canonical gospels. The fascination with these creatures however did not end with the church's rejection of its Astrological links. The Evangelist's symbolism continued to flourish.

The varied use of such imagery in mosaics, paintings manuscripts can be seem in two particularly powerful manuscript examples. The Book of Kells and Beatus manuscripts, which demonstrate the power that emanates from visual symbolism. They communicates ideas and feelings, especially those which lie beyond the reaches of language and logic.

NOTES

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- 3 ELISH, Enumma, Quoted by HALLS, J., Halls Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols, 1994, p111.
- 4 GENESIS, (1. 2-4)

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- 2 REVELATION, (4. 6-11)
- 3 MUCHWORTH, Ben, The Book of Kells Pocket Size, 1994, p 20.
- 4 APPLETON, L.R. & BRIDGES, S., Symbolism in Liturgical Art, 1950, p 63
- 5 WYCKLFFES, Quoted by HULE, Edward, Symbolism in Christian Art, 1976, p127.
- 6 MARK (I,3)
- 7 WYCKLFFES, Quoted by HULE, Edwards, Symbolism in Christian Art, 1976, p 127.
- 8 ORIGEN, Quoted by APPLETON, L.R. & BRIDGES, S., Symbolism in Liturgical Art, 1950, p 58.
- 9 WYCKLFFES, Quoted by HULE, Edwards, Symbolism in Christian Art, 1976, p 127
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- 13 ISAIAH (6.2)
- 14 EZEKIEL (1. 1-3)
- 15 GENESIS (1. 14)
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- 17 HENNING, Ann, The Cosmos and You, 1995, p 21.
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- 2 DANIEL (7. 2-10)
- 3 GENESIS (1.24)
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- 2 REVELATION, (IV)
- 3 MEYER, Schapiro, Late Antique, Early Christian and Medieval Art, 1979, p322.
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