A Note on the Iconography of the Sangemini Doorway

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FOR WILLIAM H. FORSYTH

IN 1965 A ROMANESQUE marble portal was installed at the far end of the gallery to the left of the main staircase, as an appropriate entrance to the Medieval Galleries beyond (Figure 1). Acquired in 1947, the portal came originally from the ruined abbey church of San Nicolò, just outside the city gates of the small Umbrian hill town of Sangemini.

This doorway looks strangely composite, with mismatched jambs that had been parts of an earlier, Roman structure—apparently elements of the base of a statue—but were completely reworked to fit into the totally different concept of the doorway. Even their bases with sculpted lions are of unequal sizes and shapes.

To mark the installation in the Museum, William Forsyth wrote an essay, "The Sangemini Doorway," for the Museum's *Bulletin* (June 1965, pp. 373–80), in which he traced the somewhat convoluted history of the doorway but did not go too deeply into unraveling the rather puzzling iconographical details of its decoration.

Once, during the preparation of this essay, Bill asked me whether I had any ideas about the little man squatting in the vines on the left-hand doorjamb (Figure 2). He is simultaneously blowing a horn and sticking a rod into a vessel before him. At that time, intrigued by the scene directly below, showing three hounds attacking a boar, I could think of nothing better than that the man might be a hunter who had caught some of the prey's blood and was stirring it to prevent clotting. With due caution, Bill accepted this rather outlandish explanation, faute de mieux, and put it into his essay (p. 376). However, in making this suggestion I had ignored another important and actually quite conspicuous iconographical element: the angel in the uppermost quarter of the jamb (Figure 3).

Some fifteen years later, I visited the Cathedral of Saint Peter in Worms, where I saw the group of Romanesque reliefs of *Daniel in der Löwengrube* (Daniel in the lions' den). Above the scene of Daniel sitting in the vaulted lions' den while a pair of lions tamely licks his hands and feet, there is another scene. Here, a crouching man carrying a bag over his shoulder is stirring a pot held in his hand. A descending angel grasps him by the hair with one hand and with the other reaches out for another pot in front of the man. This second relief shows *Habakuk mit seinem Breitopf vom Engel getragen* (Habakkuk with his porridge pot transported by the angel; Figure 4; Villinger, pp. 14–15). It struck me that here were the same elements (angel, man with a pot, and lions) that are present on the Sangemini Doorway.

In this episode of the story of Daniel, found in Bel and the Dragon, one of the apocryphal additions to the Book of Daniel, King Cyrus is blackmailed to throw Daniel into the lions' den as punishment for having killed—and thus unmasked as a false god—the great snake that was worshiped as the dragon of Babylon. There were seven lions in the den, and every day they were fed two slaves and two sheep; but now, to make sure that they would devour Daniel, they were given nothing. Daniel stayed in the den for six days. Meanwhile, in Judaea, the prophet Habakkuk was on his way to his field, with a pot of porridge with bread broken into it as a meal for the reapers working there, when an angel of the Lord appeared before him and ordered him to carry that meal to Babylon for Daniel in the lions' den. Habakkuk, quite reasonably, replied that he never had been to Babylon and thus did not know where the lions' den would be, whereupon the angel took him by the hair, swept him to Babylon, and set him down above the den. When Habakkuk delivered the meal, Daniel thanked God for not abandoning him and gratefully ate the meal thus provided, while the angel took Habakkuk home. On the seventh day, King Cyrus went to the lions' den to mourn Daniel, but found him hale and sound. The king praised the Lord and had Daniel pulled out of the den. Those who had

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Figure 1. The Sangemini Doorway as it is installed in the Metropolitan Museum, Italian (Umbrian), 12th century. Marble, H. including lintel, 3.58 m. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1947 (47.100.45)

Figure 2. Detail of Figure 1, the bottom part of the left jamb

Figure 3. Detail of Figure 1, the angel in the upper part of the left jamb

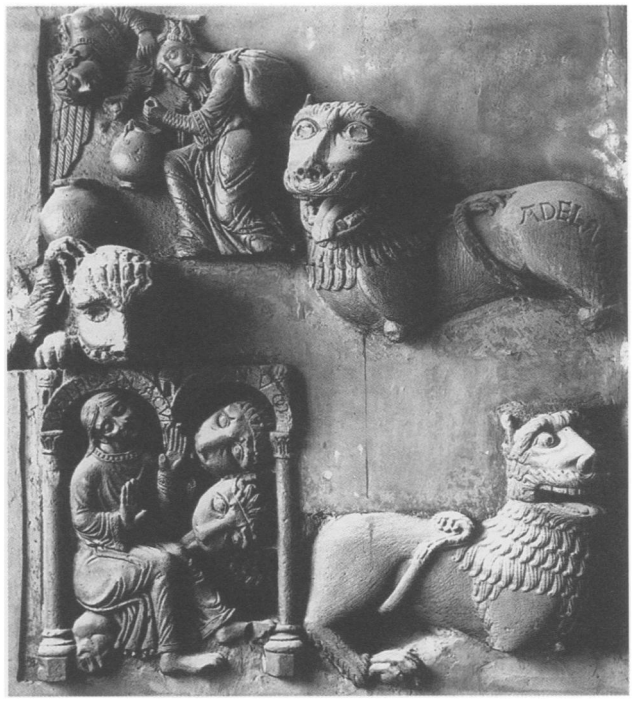

Figure 4. Reliefs of Daniel in the lions' den and of Habakkuk transported by the angel, in Worms Cathedral. German, 12th century (photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

plotted to destroy Daniel were flung into the den, where they were devoured by the now very hungry lions. (Nothing is said about the reapers' missing their well-deserved lunch.)

In the decoration of the left-hand jamb of the Sangemini Doorway are some very odd and even rather disturbing details that are not easily explained, such as the snake that crawls toward a bird's nest and the scene of three hounds worrying a boar. However, it seems safe to say that the little man blowing a horn and stirring in a vessel would be Habakkuk with his porridge pot, signaling to the reapers to come and have their lunch. As for the bread that was part of the meal, the angel above carries in his hand a round, segmented object that looks very much like one of the *panini* of fanciful shapes that are still made in Italian bakeries.

The bases of the jambs of the Sangemini Doorway are sculpted as the heads, shoulders, and forepaws of

crouching lions, and a small lion's face is peering out of framing acanthus foliage above the right-hand lion. As is the case with all the elements of the doorway, these bases seem to have been adapted from other structures, which accounts for the differences in their sizes. However, the lions were perhaps the inspiration for the sculptor, who had to coordinate the elements at hand, to make use of the Habakkuk story on the left jamb, although Daniel himself is conspicuously absent.

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