

The Cyprus Plates: The Story of David and Goliath

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NINE SILVER PLATES with scenes from the life of David, now divided between The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Antiquities, Nicosia, were discovered together in Cyprus in 1902. Many scholars have discussed the plates,¹ but no one has yet attempted to see them as a unified narrative group with a precise meaning. In this paper I hope to demonstrate that (1) the plates, by following the biblical text of 1 Samuel, illustrate in full the battle of David and Goliath, (2) the scenes were composed from disparate sources in order to narrate the story, and (3) the plates, dating from the early seventh century,² possibly commemorate a specific historical event from the reign of Emperor Heraclius (610–641).

Most of the plates can be readily associated with specific verses from the biblical text.³ Others have resisted any thoroughgoing interpretation. The Presentation, for example, where David stands to the left of the enthroned King Saul, could refer to any of three different episodes (Figure 1).⁴ Until recently the scene was identified as the first meeting between Saul and David at which time David brought the king gifts of wine and bread from his father, thereby explaining the bags and basket in the exergue.⁵ The text, however, mentions only one skin of wine, not the two shown, nor does it mention a basket, just bread.⁶ The problem is further complicated by the inclusion of an identical set of bags and basket in the Marriage plate, where there

1. O. M. Dalton, "A Second Silver Treasure from the District of Kyrenia, Cyprus," *Archaeologia* 60 (1906) pp. 1–24; O. M. Dalton, "Byzantine Plate and Jewellery from Cyprus in Mr. Morgan's Collection," *Burlington Magazine* 10 (1906–07) pp. 355–362; A. Sambon, "Trésor d'orfèvrerie et d'argenterie trouvé à Chypre et faisant partie de la Collection de M. J. Pierpont Morgan," *Le Musée* 3 (1906) pp. 121–129; C. H. Smith, *Collection of J. Pierpont Morgan. Bronzes: Antique Greek, Roman, etc., Including Some Antique Objects in Gold and Silver* (Paris, 1913); J. Wilpert, "Early Christian Sculpture: Its Restoration and its Modern Manufacture," *Art Bulletin* 9 (1926) pp. 89–141; J. Strzygowski, "The Authenticity of Early Christian Silver," *Art Bulletin* 10 (1928) pp. 370–376; M. Rosenberg, *Der Goldschmiede Merkzeichen* IV (Berlin and Leipzig, 1928) pp. 636–653, nos. 9647–9716; E. Cruikshank Dodd, *Byzantine Silver Stamps*, *Dumbarton Oaks Studies*, no. 7 (Washington, 1961); A. and J. Stylianos, *The Treasures of Lambousa*

(in Greek) (Nicosia, 1969); K. Weitzmann, "Prolegomena to a Study of the Cyprus Plates," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 3 (1970) pp. 97–111.

2. The stamps on the plates are dated between 613 and 629 or 630 (Dodd, *Silver Stamps*, p. 10).

3. Anointing; 1 Sam. 16:13; Lion Battle, 17:34; Bear Battle, 17:34; Arming of David, 17:38; Battle of David and Goliath, 17:41–51; Marriage, 18:27.

4. 1 Sam. 16:21, 17:31, 17:57.

5. Smith, *Collection of J. Pierpont Morgan*, p. 45; Rosenberg, *Goldschmiede Merkzeichen*, p. 647; Dodd, *Silver Stamps*, p. 182; W. F. Volbach, "Silverware," *Byzantine Art, an European Art*, 2nd ed. (Athens, 1964) p. 423; Stylianos, *Treasures of Lambousa*, p. 25.

6. "And Jesse took an ass laden with bread, and a skin of wine and a kid, and sent them by David his son to Saul" (1 Sam. 16:20).

FIGURE 1

The Presentation of David to Saul. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.397

is no textual justification whatsoever for the depiction of bread and wine (Figure 2). Kurt Weitzmann recently provided the key for the solution to this problem.⁷ From comparisons with consular diptychs he demonstrated that the bags and basket copy representations of the *sparsio*, the money distributed to the Roman populace at the imperial games. On these diptychs the image of the *sparsio* carries associations of victory and regal munificence;⁸ and once the bags and basket on the silver plates are understood in this way, their inclusion makes good sense both in the Marriage and the Presentation. In 1 Sam. 17:25 David is told that “the man who kills [Goliath], the king will enrich him with great riches, and will give him his daughter.” Thus, the Marriage plate does not simply illustrate the wedding of David and the Princess Michel. More precisely, it renders the reward, both the girl and the money, which David was to receive for slaying Goliath.

The recognition that the *sparsio* alludes to the reward unquestionably identifies the Presentation as the second meeting between David and Saul. Although the reward is not repeated at this time in the text, one can assume that it was discussed when David approached the king in 1 Sam. 17:31 with his offer to fight the Philistine giant. Weitzmann had already identified the

7. Weitzmann, “Prolegomena,” p. 110, figs. 14, 15.

8. The bags in the consular diptych of Boethius, which resemble those in the Presentation, are described as “Siegespreise” (R. Delbrueck, *Die Consulardiptychen und verwandte Denkmäler* [Berlin and Leipzig, 1929] p. 105). These bags in the Boethius diptych accompany “other objects distributed to the victors such as palm leaves, a crown and a plate” (Weitzmann, “Prolegomena,” p. 110). This same nuance of victory seems explicit in the Quadriga tapestry at Aachen where the depiction of the *sparsio* accompanies the representation of a charioteer receiving a “Siegeskranz” (W. F. Volbach and J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Byzanz und der christliche Osten*, Propyläen Kunstgeschichte III [Berlin, 1968] p. 193, pl. 65).

FIGURE 2

The Marriage of David. Nicosia, Cyprus, Museum of Antiquities (photo: courtesy John Beckwith, Victoria and Albert Museum; reproduction courtesy The Department of Antiquities, Cyprus)



scene as this second meeting between David and Saul “because a noticeable emphasis was placed in the case of all three central figures on the raised hands that are characteristic of gestures of speech.”⁹ To be more specific, David’s hand gesture would seem to refer to the narration of his victories over the bear and the lion and, in particular, to verse 37 where he says, “The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” Such precision in determining the verse is possible because of Saul’s curious acknowledgment with the gesture of benediction. It is in response to this statement of David that Saul says, “Go, and the



FIGURE 3
The Confrontation with Eliab. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.395

Lord be with you!” This gesture of benediction can only be understood as the direct visual translation of Saul’s response in 1 Sam. 17:37.¹⁰

9. Weitzmann, “Prolegomena,” p. 106.

10. In the Summoning of David the silversmith uses the gesture of benediction as a greeting. But if the artist had wanted to illustrate the first moment of their encounter in the Presentation, David as well as Saul would make the gesture of benediction. Instead, David makes the gesture of speech.

With the Presentation now associated with the second meeting between David and Saul, the nine plates take on a greater coherence than has previously been recognized.¹¹ They illustrate, as a continuous narrative, the episodes leading up to the battle of David and Goliath, thus suggesting an entirely new identification for the small plate showing David speaking to a soldier

FIGURE 4
The Anointing of David. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.398



(Figure 3). David frequently speaks with soldiers, but just before he meets Saul for a second time, he confronts his brother Eliab (1 Sam. 17:28-30). The warrior in this scene would then be Eliab who did, in fact, follow Saul to battle (1 Sam. 17:13). Moreover, David would

11. Since the Presentation illustrates the second meeting between Saul and David, the plate showing David called by a messenger probably does not refer to 1 Sam. 16:21, where David is summoned to their first meeting. Instead, it would seem to illustrate the only other time when David is called by a messenger. This occurs in 1 Sam. 16:12 when David is summoned for his anointment, an episode depicted on another of the plates.



FIGURE 5

The Battle of David and Goliath. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.396

be appropriately dressed as a civilian, for he was only bringing provisions to the soldiers' camp. It is at this moment in the story that David discusses the reward for slaying Goliath with his brother. Thus it seems that besides sharing a chronological connection, the Presentation and the Confrontation with Eliab also relate through their references to the reward. No detail in the scene of David speaking with a soldier argues against its identification as the Confrontation with Eliab, and connections in meaning and chronology with the Presentation would seem to confirm it.

One might hesitate to identify this plate as the Confrontation with Eliab if he were not included on another of the plates. Although unnamed, he is the figure on the far right of the Anointing (Figure 4). This can be determined because a figure in an identical, though reversed, pose with the same soul-searching gesture appears above an identifying inscription in the Anointing of the Paris Psalter (Figure 13).¹² As so often

FIGURE 6

The Arming of David. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.399



in this series where one plate alludes to another, the standard iconographic type for Eliab,¹³ which served both the painters of the Psalters and the silversmith of the plates, is included on the Anointing plate to associate it with the next episode of the cycle, the Confrontation with Eliab.

In size and format the plates fall into three groups. Among the nine, the Battle of David and Goliath is unique both with respect to its greater size (diameter 49.4 cm.) and its composition in three registers (Figure 5). The plates of the second group, comprising the Anointing, the Presentation, the Arming of David (Figure 6), and the Marriage, are all approximately 26 cm. in diameter.¹⁴ Furthermore, they all use an architectural background to indicate the palace and a five-figure frieze composition. The third group includes the Lion Battle (Figure 7), the Bear Battle (Figure 8), the Confrontation with Eliab, and the Summoning of David (Figure 9). In addition to their all being 14 cm. in diameter,¹⁵ they share a simplified landscape setting populated by just two major figures, whether human or animal.

In turn, the two groups of four plates divide into pairs, both in meaning and format. This is most apparent in the animal combats where one scene is very nearly the reverse of the other; in each, David is shown as the victorious warrior. The Marriage and Presentation, by referring to the reward, form a pair: the Marriage represents the fulfillment of the promise made in the Presentation. Besides sharing the bags and basket filled with coins, both have Saul in the center presiding in his regal capacity.

In contrast, the Anointing and the Arming both show David in the center being ceremonially honored. In the Anointing he is consecrated with oil, in the Arming he is crowned with King Saul's own helmet. When seen in conjunction with the sacred act of anointment, the implication of coronation in the Arming becomes ex-

12. H. Buchthal, *The Miniatures of the Paris Psalter* (London, 1938) pp. 18–21, fig. 3; K. Weitzmann, "Der Pariser Psalter ms. grec. 139 und die Mittelbyzantinische Renaissance," *Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 1 (1929) p. 180, fig. 7.

13. The iconographic type for Eliab appears in other Byzantine manuscripts. For the Anointing in the Bible of Leo the Patrician and in Vat. cod. gr. 333, see Buchthal, *Paris Psalter*, figs. 27, 71.

14. 26 cm., 26.5 cm., 26 cm., and 26.8 cm. (Dodd, *Silver Stamps*, pp. 181–186).

15. Dodd, *Silver Stamps*, pp. 189–194.



FIGURE 7
The Lion Battle. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.394

FIGURE 8
The Bear Battle. Nicosia, Cyprus, Museum of Antiquities (photo: courtesy John Beckwith, Victoria and Albert Museum; reproduction courtesy The Department of Antiquities, Cyprus)



plicit. Together these plates show the pair of ceremonies regularly associated in the Byzantine world with the conference of kingship—coronation and consecration.¹⁶ The silversmith obviously intended to associate these two scenes visually: he has Saul in the Arming repeat Jesse's gesture of blessing from the Anointing, and he even uses Samuel as the model for the figure holding

FIGURE 9
The Summoning of David. Nicosia, Cyprus, Museum of Antiquities (photo: courtesy John Beckwith, Victoria and Albert Museum; reproduction courtesy The Department of Antiquities, Cyprus)



the helmet. For both figures the position of the hands and feet are identical. The only striking difference is in costume. In contrast to Samuel, this figure wears a short tunic and chlamys, forcing the silversmith to invent a drapery pattern for the chest. No longer can he use the long robes that flowed over Samuel's right arm to obscure the torso. The result is little better than

16. More precisely, anointment was the ceremony used for conferring kingship in the Old Testament, whereas coronation was used by the Byzantines. See J. M. Hussey, *The Byzantine Empire*, Cambridge Medieval History IV, part 2 (Cambridge, 1966–67) p. 3: "Anointing was added to coronation only in the twelfth century [as] a mark of the especially close relationship existing between God and the ruler, who had in fact always been paid the honor due to the Lord's anointed."

an arbitrary and unnaturalistic series of concentric lines. Since the left arm and shoulder of Saul are so awkwardly rendered, he too must be an adaptation. If complete models for these figures had been available, the silversmith would surely have been able to maintain his highly naturalistic style.

In a comparable way the Summoning of David and the Confrontation with Eliab form a pair. Compositionally, they both show David conversing with another figure in the presence of cosmic symbols. The sun, always placed over David's head, the moon, and several stars appear in a raised compartment at the top of the plate. In terms of their meaning both scenes show David chosen over his brother as the elect of God. In one scene David is called to the anointing to replace his brother Eliab; in the other David is chosen by God to fight Goliath despite Eliab's malicious accusations. Ironically, Eliab's own words from 1 Sam. 17:28 seem to relate the two episodes. Eliab asks, "With whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption, and the evil of your heart; for you have come down to see the battle." In the Summoning the artist reveals that in an earlier episode David did not desert "those few sheep" but was called by a messenger from them to become shepherd over all Israel.

The recognition that the plates form pairs allows an arrangement of the eight smaller plates around the largest one in the shape of the Chrismon, the monogram of Christ.¹⁷ In this arrangement the pendant pairs are displayed across from each other while the narrative unfolds in a clockwise direction in near-perfect chronological order (Figure 10). The story begins in the top left-hand corner with the Summoning of David (1 Sam. 16:12), then the Anointing (16:13), the Confrontation with Eliab (17:28), the Presentation (17:31), the Bear Battle (17:34), the Arming (17:38), the Lion Battle (17:34), and finally the Marriage (18:27). There is only one break in the chronological sequence of the

episodes. Both the lion and bear battles are from verse 34 and therefore should precede the Arming. However, by having these scenes enframe the Beheading of Goliath, which they resemble both in scale and composition, the artist is able to call to mind 1 Sam. 17:36, where David says "Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them." Through this arrangement the silversmith is able to create a triad of scenes that illustrate David's prowess as a warrior.

A comparable phenomenon occurs with the group-



FIGURE 10
The plates arranged, and shown in their relative sizes (photo: courtesy Leo Holub, Stanford University)

17. For this combination of the cross and the *chi* as an accepted form of the Chrismon, see F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq, "Chrisme," *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* III (Paris, 1914) cols. 1500–1503, figs. 2839, 2840; K. Wessel, "Christusmonogramm," *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst* I (Stuttgart, 1966) col. 1049; E. Dinkler and E. Dinkler-von Schubert, "Kreuz," *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* II (Rome, 1970) cols. 569–570, fig. 12. For such an arrangement among the scenes of a sarcophagus, see J. A. Gaertner, "Zur Deutung des Junius-Bassus-Sarcophages," *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 83 (1968) pp. 240–264.

ing of the Summoning of David, the Confrontation with Eliab, and the scene in the upper register of the largest plate, the Confrontation with Goliath. All three similar compositions show David selected over another in the presence of cosmic symbols. With the sun always suspended above David's head, it is as if the heavens were assenting to his role as the "chosen one." The divine presence is explicitly revealed in the Confrontation with Goliath where the hand of God reaches out

to David, and in the Summoning where the messenger, in contradiction to the text, is nimbed. No matter whether David is being summoned to Samuel or to Saul, the Bible explicitly states that a human messenger was sent. Yet the silversmith, by bestowing a nimbus and angelic scepter upon the messenger, implies that the Lord is working through a human agent. The cosmic symbols, the hand of God, and the nimbus and scepter of the messenger, reinforce the primary meaning of these three episodes, which all show David as the elect of God.

The middle register of the largest plate, the Battle of David and Goliath, also relates to other plates in the set. Visually it shares with the Anointing, the Presentation, the Arming, and the Marriage not only a comparable scale but also the same frieze composition in which a pre-eminent central group is enframed by subordinate figures. Its connections in meaning are closest to the Presentation and the Marriage, where reference is made to the reward. The Arming and the Anointing seem most closely linked with the adjacent scenes showing David as a victorious warrior and as the elect of God.

With the plates now identified and appropriately arranged around the central episode, it becomes apparent that the artist attempted to illustrate only that portion of David's life that specifically concerns his encounter with the Philistine giant. By following the narrative as recounted in the Old Testament, the plates reveal David's spiritual and physical preparation, the battle itself, and his rewards for victory. The cycle begins with David's spiritual preparation: the Summoning of David and the Anointing. Next come the major episodes leading up to the battle: the Confrontation with Eliab, the Presentation, the narration of the Lion Battle and Bear Battle, and finally the Arming.

In the upper register of the largest plate is the next episode, the Confrontation with Goliath. Since the

hand of God is pointing to David, the artist is able to render not only David's divine support but also the specific moment he says to Goliath, "I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel" (1 Sam. 17:45). The middle register shows the first moments of the battle; the outcome is revealed in the exergue with David beheading the fallen giant. The Marriage, by showing the fruits of David's victory, completes the cycle.

Since this narrative relationship between the nine plates makes them unique among extant Byzantine and Roman silver vessels, it is impossible to find exact parallels for their arrangement among surviving works. Nonetheless, it is known that silver vessels were displayed on tables and cabinets in Roman homes.¹⁸ Silver show-plates were even made in pairs,¹⁹ possibly designed for exhibition on stands like the one found at the Casa del Menandro.²⁰ Furthermore, it has been suggested that three silver dishes from the Mildenhall treasure, the large Oceanus dish and a pair of smaller platters with Bacchic imagery, were probably made as a set.²¹ If this were true, at least two of the compositional principles underlying the Cyprus plates, the use of pairs and the combination of dishes of different dimensions, would find confirmation in existing silverwork. Nevertheless, the far more complex arrangement of pairs conceived by the silversmith of the Cyprus plates would still be unprecedented. This greater complexity, however, would be readily understandable if the nine silver plates, as has been suggested, were made for an important imperial personage.²²

The sources for the Cyprus plates are difficult to determine. There are two Christian cycles illustrating the life of David that may predate the plates, but both pose numerous problems of interpretation. The wooden doors from Sant'Ambrogio, Milan, from the late fourth or early fifth century, have been heavily restored,²³ and the frescoes in Chapel III at Bawit are at best

18. D. E. Strong, *Greek and Roman Gold and Silver Plate* (London, 1966) pp. 125, 130.

19. For a pair of plates showing Attis and Cybele, see E. Pernice and W. Franz, *Der Hildesheimer Silberfund* (Berlin, 1901) pp. 26–28; for a pair of dishes from Hermopolis, Egypt, with female profile busts facing in opposite directions, see A. Adriani, *Le Gobelet en Argent*, Société Royale d'Archéologie d'Alexandrie, Cahier no. 1 (1939) pls. iv, v; for a pair of sixth-century dishes from Egypt, see M. C. Ross, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection I* (Washington, 1962) pp. 7–9.

20. Strong, *Greek and Roman Plate*, p. 130.

21. Strong, *Greek and Roman Plate*, p. 198, pl. 60. For illustrations of all three plates, see T. Dohrn, "Spätantikes Silber aus Britannien," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 2 (1949) pls. I–III.

22. P. Grierson, "The Kyrenia Girdle of Byzantine Medallions and Solidi," *Numismatic Chronicle*, 6th series, 15 (1955) p. 69.

23. For the late fourth- or early fifth-century date, see A. Goldschmidt, *Die Kirchenthür des heiligen Ambrosius in Mailand* (Strassburg, 1902) p. 24.

FIGURE 11
The Battle of David and
Goliath. Paris, Biblio-
thèque Nationale, cod.
gr. 139, fol. 4v (photo:
Bibliothèque Nationale)



provincial reflections of contemporary metropolitan works.²⁴ Although these frescoes are helpful for iconographic purposes, they do not resemble the Cyprus plates in style and format as closely as illuminated manuscripts of the Macedonian Renaissance. Weitzmann has examined the relationship of the Cyprus plates to comparable scenes from the illuminated Psalters of the “aristocratic group” and the Vatican Book of Kings cod. 333, carefully defining similarities and dissimilarities between them.²⁵ Several scenes were shown to have particularly close connections with these manuscripts, while differences in detail between the plates and the manuscript illuminations were attributed to the existence of different manuscript recensions. On the other hand, the silversmith may be responsible

for these differences, having transformed his models in order to meet the narrative and compositional requirements of his commission.

The representations of the Battle of David and Goliath on the silver plate and in the Paris Psalter are remarkably similar, pointing to a common source (Figure 11).²⁶ The position, gestures, and garments of both David and the Philistine giant in the middle reg-

24. J. Clédat, “Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouït,” *Mémoires publiés par les Membres de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale du Caire* 12 (1904) pp. 13–29. The frescoes are not securely dated and may well postdate the plates; for the various dates suggested, see K. Wessel, “Bawit,” *Reallexikon*, cols. 580–582.

25. Weitzmann, “Prolegomena.”

26. Weitzmann, “Prolegomena,” p. 97.



FIGURE 12

The beheading of Goliath. Bawit, Chapel III
(photo: after Clédar)

ister of the plate accord closely with those of the upper group on the manuscript page. The figure of David beheading Goliath on the plate also compares with its manuscript counterpart. As Weitzmann has remarked, "Yet in two points the two monuments show essential disagreement." First, David decapitates Goliath from the back "in a rather unusual and dramatic manner."²⁷ Second, the soldiers on the plate accompany the com-

27. Weitzmann, "Prolegomena," pp. 100, 103.

FIGURE 13

The Anointing of David.
Paris, Bibliothèque
Nationale, cod. gr. 139,
fol. 3v (photo:
Bibliothèque Nationale)



bat whereas in the Paris Psalter they hover ambiguously between the two episodes.²⁸ Instead of seeking another recension to explain these details, one may hypothesize that these motifs were employed by the silversmith to harmonize the largest plate with other plates in the group. In both the Bawit fresco (Figure 12) and the large majority of Psalter illustrations David beheads Goliath from the front.²⁹ By reversing the decapitation, the silversmith can use a similarity of composition to relate this episode to the animal combats, where David approaches the beast from above and behind. Likewise, the artist can connect the frieze composition of the middle register of the largest plate with the frieze compositions of the four palace scenes by including the soldiers at the combat instead of at the beheading where they more frequently occur.³⁰

One detail from the middle register of the largest plate unequivocally shows that the designer of the plates was willing to transform his models. In contrast to the Paris Psalter version, the plate shows Goliath's shield from the front, rather than from the back. Since the shield in the Bawit fresco, although held differently, is shown from behind (Figure 14), one can only assume that the silversmith renounced this exciting motif because it would require hammering the plate in from the front, a technically arduous feat.³¹ This modification leaves Goliath's shield awkwardly related to his body and, in comparison with the Paris Psalter, far more prominent, perhaps too prominent.

The Anointing would also seem to depend on an earlier prototype, much like that used for this scene in the Paris Psalter (Figure 13). Even though the ceremony takes place in opposite directions in the two works, there exist numerous similarities in pose, gesture, and dress between David, Jesse, Samuel, and Eliab. But in one detail the figures of Samuel disagree with one another. On the plate Samuel, still holding the horn of oil in his right hand, places his left hand on the

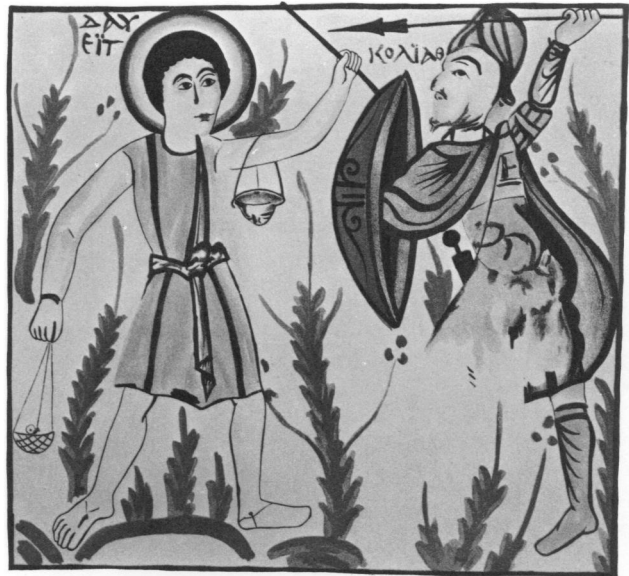


FIGURE 14
The Battle of David and Goliath. Bawit, Chapel III (photo: after Clédat)

head of David. This differs from later Psalter illustrations where Samuel, standing either on the left or right, holds his left hand at his waist.³² Even the third-century fresco of the Anointing from Dura-Europos shows Samuel with his left hand lowered.³³ From the agreement between these later works and the Dura-Europos painting one must conclude that the archetype in at least this detail resembled them. By having Samuel raise both his arms, and by omitting many of David's brothers, the silversmith is better able to visually relate the Anointing and the Arming. Through these modifications, the artist can create a pair of pendant images whose meanings seem to echo one another.

The five objects in the exergue also help to visually connect the Anointing with the Arming as well as with the other two palace scenes. As Matzulewitsch has

28. Weitzmann, "Prolegomena," p. 100.

29. For other illustrations of David beheading Goliath from the front, see J. Lassus, "Les Miniatures Byzantines du Livre des Rois," *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 45 (1928) fig. 7; Weitzmann, "Prolegomena," figs. 8, 9.

30. Soldiers also appear at the scene of the beheading of Goliath in cod. gr. 274 in the Public Library, Leningrad (Weitzmann, "Prolegomena," fig. 4).

31. On the silver dish showing Aphrodite in the Tent of

Anchises, in the Hermitage, Leningrad, a shield is rendered from the back. The metal, however, does not appear to be hammered in from the front; see L. Matzulewitsch, *Byzantinische Antike* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1929) p. 26, pl. 3.

32. For illustrations of the Anointing from the Marciana Psalter, the Bible of Leo the Patrician, Vat. cod. gr. 333, and the Paris Gregory, see Buchthal, *Paris Psalter*, figs. 26, 27, 71, 75.

33. C. H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue, The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report, VIII, part 1* (New Haven, 1956) pl. 66.

remarked, the sword, the slain heifer, the altar, the shepherd's staff, and the ram are explained by the "geschichtlichen Umständen" of the Anointing.³⁴ To avoid the wrath of Saul, Samuel came to Jesse under the guise of sacrificing a heifer (1 Sam. 16:2). The shepherd's staff and the ram would then allude to David having been summoned from his flocks. The presence of the ram at the Anointing would also seem to discredit Eliab's later accusation that David would desert his flocks. In any case, these five objects seem to have been added to the scene, as if from a pattern book, to elaborate upon the story and the meaning of the plate.

The Summoning of David has close ties with illustrations of David and Melodia from other manuscripts of the aristocratic Psalter group. The position of David compares with that of his counterparts in the Ambrosiana Psalter and in the Barberini Psalter (Figure 15).³⁵

FIGURE 15

David as Harper. Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Psalter MS. M. 54 sup., fol. iirv (photo: Biblioteca Ambrosiana)



In all of them David sits upon a hill or rock with a harp in his left hand. The silver plate, however, distinguishes itself by having David incline his head to his right and raise his right hand in greeting. Although a more logical representation would have shown David turning his right shoulder into the background to face the messenger, it is David's left shoulder that is foreshortened. His torso twists to his left as if he were still playing the harp. And just as in these later Psalter illustrations, the drapery about David's neck falls to his left as if it were still pressed between his arm and chest.

David's raised right arm and inclined head would seem to be seventh-century adjustments of an earlier harping figure.³⁶ This is especially apparent from the head, which seems to copy the prototype of the Ambrosiana David. In both figures the coiffures, the facial features, and even the position of the head in three-quarter view are identical. The only difference is that the silversmith, disregarding the head's anatomical connection with the spinal column, has tilted it slightly to the left so that David can acknowledge the approaching messenger. This scene must be a seventh-century creation, joining a running figure and a harping David in order to narrate the episode. The figure of David is far too inconsistent anatomically to be a creation of the same age that produced models for the Anointing and the Battle of David and Goliath.³⁷

Two other scenes, the Arming of David and the Confrontation with Eliab, seem to be adaptations of other plates rather than copies of earlier illustrations. In depictions of the arming of David, as at Bawit or in the Vatican Book of Kings cod. 333, the young shepherd usually stands in battle regalia to one side of

34. Matzulewitsch, *Byzantinische Antike*, pp. 26–27.

35. For the Harping David of the Barberini Psalter, see Buchthal, *Paris Psalter*, fig. 21.

36. For the opposite view, see K. Weitzmann, "The Psalter Vatopedi 761: Its place in the Aristocratic Psalter Recension," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 10 (1947) p. 39: "The plate with the harping David and the messenger must also be understood as a copy of a miniature in an aristocratic Psalter and, because of its literal illustration of the text, it seems to reflect the archetype even more closely than any of the later Psalter miniatures."

37. The costume of David, which recalls the ultimate prototype for all these harping figures, Orpheus playing the lyre, also suggests that the Summoning was composed at a later date. If all the plates were copied from an early cycle illustrating the whole life of David, the shepherd would probably be shown here in the same short tunic and chlamys that he wears before both Saul and Samuel. The different costumes argue for different sources.



FIGURE 16
The Arming of David. Bawit, Chapel III (photo:
after Clédât)

the enthroned King Saul (Figure 16).³⁸ On the plate, however, David stands in the center with King Saul on the left. As already demonstrated, their positions as well as that of Saul's servant would seem to depend on the parallel figure placements of Jesse, David, and Samuel in the Anointing.

The Confrontation with Eliab is unquestionably patterned on the scene of the Confrontation with Goliath in the upper register of the largest plate.³⁹ The poses, gestures, garments, and even the size of the figures are remarkably close. For the Confrontation with Eliab the silversmith has simply removed the shepherd's staff with which David approached the Philistine giant (1 Sam. 17:40). This modification, however, has cost David his left hand. As in the Arming and the Summoning of David, the seventh-century silversmith is able to adapt images to the needs of his narrative;

38. For the Arming in Vat. cod. gr. 333, see Weitzmann, "Prolegomena," fig. 13.

39. The source for the Confrontation with Goliath may be Psalter illumination, see Weitzmann, "Prolegomena," p. 104: "As a scene in itself [the Confrontation with Goliath] does not exist in any extant copy, but there are, nevertheless, indications that it had existed in the archetype."

but his many anatomical errors reveal that he is no longer capable of creating new ones *ex nihilo*.⁴⁰

The sources of the other four plates, the Lion Battle, the Bear Battle, the Presentation, and the Marriage, probably do not come from manuscript illumination. Psalter illustrations of the lion and bear battles usually show David confronting the animal head-on, with or without a weapon.⁴¹ In contrast, on the two plates David kneels on the back of the beast, his left hand grasping it, his upraised right hand holding a weapon. As shown by such works as the marble relief of Hercules and the Cerynean Hind in the National Museum, Ravenna,⁴² and the Samson textile in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection (Figure 17), this compositional for-

40. For a discussion of the anatomical misunderstandings that occur so frequently on seventh-century silver vessels, see Matzulewitsch, *Byzantinische Antike*.

41. For the illustrations in the Paris Psalter and the Marciana Psalter, see Buchthal, *Paris Psalter*, figs. 2, 26.

42. W. F. Volbach, *Early Christian Art* (New York, [1962]) pl. 180.

FIGURE 17
Samson textile (detail). Washington, D.C.
Dumbarton Oaks Collection (photo: Dumbarton
Oaks Collection)

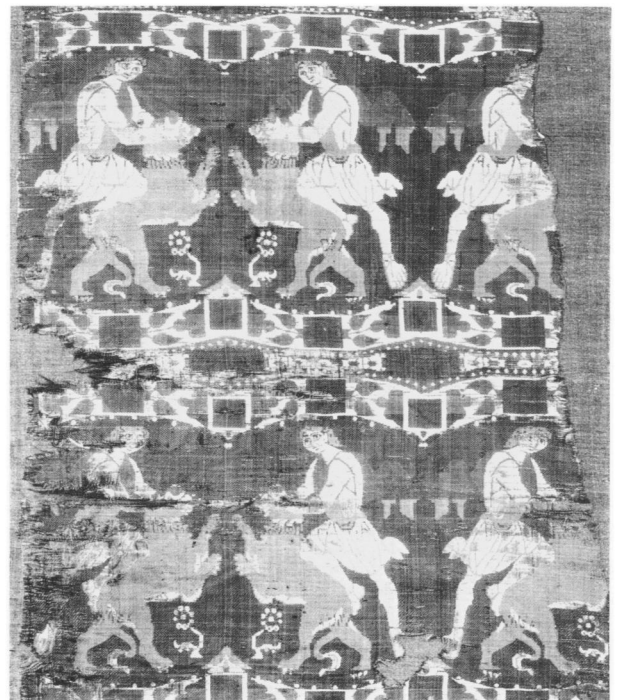




FIGURE 18

Gold medallion from a marriage belt. Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Collection (photo: Dumbarton Oaks Collection)

mula, which ultimately derives from representations of Mithra slaying the bull,⁴³ was employed in contemporary Byzantine art. Probably one such image served as the model for both plates. The two animal combats are so similar that the silversmith must have modified the details of a single model to meet the narrative requirements of both episodes. In this way the artist could obtain the reversed compositions necessary for a pendant pair.

Likewise, the Marriage of David is rarely found in illuminated manuscripts.⁴⁴ This type of ceremony, the *dextrarum junctio* or joining of the right hands, however, is represented frequently on Byzantine coins and medallions. On a fifth-century coin Emperor Theodosius II performs the ceremony for Valentinian III and Eudoxia.⁴⁵ On two gold medallions, one in the De Clercq Collection, Paris, and another in the Dumbarton

Oaks Collection (Figure 18),⁴⁶ Christ takes the place of the emperor; but in its general lines the representation of the ceremony remains the same.

Since neither the Marriage nor the animal combats would seem to derive from manuscript illumination, it is not necessary to presume such a derivation for the Presentation. Its connections seem much closer to imperial art in general and to the *Missorium* of Theodosius in particular (Figure 19). Such details as the architectural background or palace *fastigium*, the enthroned emperor, the costumes, and the bodyguards appear on both works. David and the figure to the right of Saul could easily be adapted from other sources. The figure of David recalls his counterparts in the confrontation scenes; the other figure, as has frequently been noticed, resembles a saint on a fifth-century ivory plaque in Paris.⁴⁷ A Byzantine vessel much like the *Missorium*, conceivably forged in the same workshop as the Cyprus plates, must lie behind the overall composition of the Presentation.

After study of the sources of the nine silver plates, both their principal figure arrangements and the subordinate objects included with them, one conclusion stands out beyond all others. The nine compositions are not mindless copies of earlier works. They are creations of a seventh-century artist who sought, through the use of earlier models, to narrate a specific biblical story. The models for the plates have been transformed both to narrate the story of David and Goliath and to create a meaningful, harmonious arrangement. There is not one plate in the series whereon the silversmith has not adjusted his models, adding and subtracting elements as necessary, in order to achieve his overriding purpose.

The nine silver plates were certainly made in Constantinople⁴⁸ and probably for a very high court official.⁴⁹ The plates were found with an enormous treasure of gold jewelry including a girdle of Byzantine medallions and solidi. According to Philip Grierson, "There

43. J. Beckwith, *The Art of Constantinople*, 2nd. ed. (London, 1968) p. 53.

44. See Volbach, "Silverware," p. 424; the author states that the marriage of David is "not shown in any Psalter." For the existence of the marriage of David in a Book of Kings, see Lassus "Les Miniatures Byzantines," p. 71, catalogue no. 46b.

45. Dalton, "A Second Silver Treasure," fig. 1.

46. For the marriage belt in the De Clercq Collection, see M. C. Ross, "A Byzantine Gold Medallion at Dumbarton Oaks," *Dum-*

barton Oaks Papers 11 (1957) p. 258, fig. 12; for the marriage belt in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, see Ross, *Catalogue* II, pp. 37-39.

47. E. Kitzinger, "Byzantine Art in the Period between Justinian and Iconoclasm," *Berichte zum XI Internationalen Byzantinisten-Kongress* (Munich, 1958) fig. 5; E. Rosenbaum, "The Andrews Diptych and Some Related Ivories," *Art Bulletin* 36 (1954) fig. 4.

48. Dodd, *Silver Stamps*, p. 23.

49. Kitzinger, "Byzantine Art," p. 7.

can have been few dignitaries in the empire able to afford a girdle weighing nearly a pound of gold, the equivalent of a quarter of a year's salary of an average provincial governor, to say nothing of the other valuable objects included in the Kyrenia treasure."⁵⁰

The Cyprus plates may even have been made for Emperor Heraclius himself. Silver vessels from the sixth and seventh centuries usually have either figures drawn from classical mythology for secular consumption, or from the New Testament for use as religious vessels in the celebration of the Mass. Among extant works, this rendering of an Old Testament cycle is unique.⁵¹ Yet there is one event from the history of the period that seems most evocative of the David and Goliath story. According to the chronicler Nicephorus, among others,⁵² Heraclius was challenged by the Persian general Razatis to single combat. Nicephorus even mentions that Heraclius fought Razatis because the other soldiers in the army refused.⁵³ Although the specific details of the combat are not at all like the David story, the final

result, with Heraclius triumphing over his enemy and beheading Razatis, is suggestive of the biblical tale.

This battle occurred on the twelfth of December, 627, near the Great Zab River, a tributary of the Tigris.⁵⁴ Thus, the river god who appears so prominently on the largest plate may refer not only to the stream (χείμαρρος) from which David drew the five stones (1 Sam. 17:40), but also to the battlefield of Heraclius' great victory.⁵⁵ To my knowledge, there are no contemporary documents linking this event in Heraclius' life with the biblical narrative; but when Martina, the wife of Heraclius, gave birth to a son three years later, he was named David.⁵⁶ Certainly the drawing of such a parallel between David and Heraclius would not be foreign to the Byzantine mind. In his panegyric poems to Heraclius, George of Pisidia, the court poet, repeatedly compares the emperor to the greatest Old Testament figures. Heraclius in imitation of Moses (Μωσῆς νέος) turns his armies against the second Pharaoh.⁵⁷ As the "New Daniel" (Δανιηλ ὁ δεύτερος), the emperor quenches the fire in the furnace of Persia.⁵⁸ Heraclius is even the "Noah of the new world" (ὁ Νῶε τῆς νέας οἰκουμένης), saving humanity from the deluge of Chosroes.⁵⁹

In a poem about Heraclius' final campaign against the Persians, George of Pisidia mentions the emperor's battle with Razatis. At this time he may even have compared Heraclius to David, but this cannot be known for sure. Except for fragments that can be gleaned from a comparison between the *Suidae Lexicon* and the text of the *Chronographia* of Theophanes, the

FIGURE 19

Missorium of Theodosius I. Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia (photo: Hirmer Fotoarchiv)



50. Grierson, "Kyrenia Girdle," p. 69.

51. For one silver plate with the Old Testament episode of David slaying the lion, see L. Matzulewitsch, "A Summary: Byzantine Art and the Kama Region" *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 6th series, 31 (1947) fig. 2.

52. Nicephorus, *Opuscula Historica*, ed. Charles de Boor (Leipzig, 1880) p. 19; Sébéos, *Histoire d'Héraclius*, ed. F. Macler (Paris, 1904) p. 84; Theophanes, *Chronographia*, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* XLVI (Bonn, 1851) pp. 489-492.

53. Nicephorus, *Opuscula Historica*, p. 19.

54. A. Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century I* (Amsterdam, 1968) pp. 210-212.

55. For the identification of this river god as a personification of the Valley of Elath, see K. Weitzmann, *Studies in Classical and Byzantine Manuscript Illumination* (Chicago, 1971) p. 157.

56. Stratos, *Byzantium*, p. 264.

57. George of Pisidia, *Expeditio Persica* III, l. 415.

58. George of Pisidia, *Heraclius I*, l. 16.

59. George of Pisidia, *Heraclius I*, l. 84.

poem is entirely lost.⁶⁰ And among these fragments one of the largest lacunae exists at exactly that point in the narrative where Heraclius goes out to fight Razatis.⁶¹ Possibly a more comprehensive study of the literature will determine whether such a comparison between David and Heraclius is historically founded. Nonetheless, the hypothesis may be offered that it was the battle of Heraclius and Razatis that led to the conception of this unique cycle of silver plates following the emperor's triumphant return to Constantinople in 628.

Certainly the iconography of the plates declares this connection to the imperium. The four palace scenes illustrate imperial ceremonies. In the Presentation King Saul sits enthroned, accompanied by numerous symbols of his regal authority: the palace architecture, the nimbus, the bodyguards, and the sparsio. In the Marriage Saul presides over an ancient Roman ritual, while in the Anointing and the Arming reference is made directly to consecration and coronation. In the Confrontation with Goliath, David even carries a royal scepter.⁶² As can be seen with the use of the halo, it is the imperial figures who are nimbed, not the Jewish prophet Samuel. André Grabar has already noted that

the artist was attempting to create a parallel between the reign of David and that of Heraclius.⁶³ And given their narrative focus, the plates may well have been intended to allude to Heraclius' victory over Razatis. Certainly there are few Old Testament events that could better dignify Heraclius' victory over the Persian general than David's triumph over the Philistine giant.

Although the exact nature of this historical parallel must remain a matter for speculation, it seems certain that the nine plates were composed from diverse sources for display together. When seen together, they add an entirely unexpected dimension of meaning to the epic story of David and Goliath. Nuances of victory, divine intervention, and imperial grandeur vibrate through the cycle. The Cyprus plates are a supreme artistic creation, worthy of the heroic age of Heraclius that produced them.

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60. Georgio di Pisidia, *Poemi, i Panegirici Epici*, *Studia Patristica et Byzantina* 7, ed. A. Pertusi, (Ettal, 1959) p. 31.

61. Georgio, *Poemi*, p. 305.

62. Weitzmann, "Prolegomena," p. 103; "David clad in tunic and mantle, stands at ease and leans on a staff, which according to the text (verse 40) should be a shepherd's staff (= βακτηρία), but in reality is a scepter."

63. A. Grabar, *L'Empereur dans l'art byzantin* (Paris, 1936) pp. 96-97.