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Binding and Unbinding: The Knotted Serpents on the Lining of the So-called Mantle of Roger II (528/1133–4)

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Abstract: In a recent thought-provoking analysis of the iconography on the exterior of the Mantle of Roger II (r. 1105–1154), the Norman ruler of Sicily and southern Italy, William Tronzo has advanced a compelling hypothesis suggesting that the Mantle may actually have been intended to serve as Roger's shroud. This article examines the intriguing but rarely discussed figured silks found within the Mantle's lining to assess whether their iconography aligns with Tronzo's hypothesis, which focuses primarily on the Mantle's exterior. The interior consists of a patchwork of silk fragments inserted into the famous garment as a relic-like lining, revealing a fascinating but often overlooked iconography: knotted serpents. Continuing an earlier practice, the repetition of the knotted serpent motif appears to have been deliberately employed to reinforce a beneficial effect, perhaps invoking the notion of unceasing, everlasting protection. This study contextualizes the richly multivalent symbol of the knotted serpent within the broader realm of southern Italian iconography, as well as its significance in the wider Mediterranean world and beyond. In particular, the research incorporates a fascinating discovery: a previously unnoticed silk fragment from the Afghan province of Samangan, now in the Al-Sabāh Collection in Kuwait. This fragment bears striking similarities to the textiles used in the cloak's lining, further enriching our understanding of its cultural and historical import.

Keywords: Mantle of Roger II, Norman Sicily, shroud, lining, serpents, knot work, endless protection

One of the most astonishing objects I came across years ago, while working for more than a decade as a UNESCO curatorial consultant for the Al-Sabāh Collection at the Kuwait National Museum, was a late twelfth-century tapestry-woven silk fragment reportedly found in the province of Samangan in present-day Afghanistan. While cataloging this newly acquired piece, I was immediately struck by its distinctive iconography and its uncanny resemblance to one of the intriguing figured silks found

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within the lining of the renowned Mantle of Roger II (r. 1105 [as count], 1130 [as king]–1154) of Sicily. This Mantle stands as one of the most extraordinary surviving artifacts not only of Norman Sicily but of the medieval era. Remarkably, the discovery of this important fragment has largely evaded attention until now.[1]

This oversight may be largely due to the fact that the lining is not seen in the iconic depictions of the Mantle that have come down to us. In a preliminary study in 1510,[2] Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) immortalized the emblematic Mantle of Roger II of Sicily by depicting it as the robe of Charlemagne (742–814) in preparation for his painting of the emperor.[3] Dürer's depiction focused solely on the exterior of the Mantle. This remarkable anachronism arose from the incorporation of the royal Norman Mantle, along with other artifacts of the Sicilian monarchy, into the coronation regalia of the Holy Roman Empire through the efforts of the Hohenstaufen Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250), who had canonized Charlemagne. As a result, the Norman regalia were recognized and later revered as relics associated with Charlemagne.[4]

As part of the imperial regalia (*Reichskleinodien*), the Mantle partook in the cult of relics in late medieval Nuremberg from 1424 onward. During the annual display of the holy relics, which attracted large crowds of pilgrims, only the outer face of the Mantle was exhibited, showing its striking ornamentation of large heraldic lions subduing camels, separated by a stylized palm tree, and with an Arabic inscription along the hem.[5]

The association of a garment embroidered by artisans steeped in the Islamic tradition with Charlemagne's relics was so extraordinary that Christoph Gottlieb von Murr, in his 1778 description of the Nuremberg imperial regalia, even proposed

1 Even though it was included in the 2011 exhibition at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, see Curatola, Keen, and Kaoukji 2011, 104–105, cat. no. 76.

2 At the top right of the painting, Dürer noted: "Das ist des Heilgen grossen keiser karels habitus [This is the attire of the Holy Great Emperor Karel]." Dürer's original sketch is preserved at the Albertina, Vienna (3125), and can be accessed online at: https://sammlungenonline.albertina.at/?query=search=/record/objectnumbersearch=[3125]&showtype=record; for further reference, see Michel and Sternath 2012, fig. 24, 174.

3 The original artwork is housed in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (Gm 167) and can be viewed online at: https://www.gnm.de/objekte/kaiser-karl-der-grosse/. A late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century copy of the painting is currently in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (GG 2771, 2014/1432), accessible at: https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/620/.

4 Through the union of Roger II's daughter Constance with Emperor Henry VI in 1186, their offspring, Frederick II, eventually ascended to the imperial throne and was crowned emperor in Rome in 1220. See Jacoby 2004, 212.

5 See the "pilgrims' guidebook," known as *Heiltumsbüchlein* (Booklet of the Holy Relics), fol. 192v, 1487, preserved in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Sign. 4Inc.c.a.514 (Hain 8415) available online at: https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb00011304?page=12,13.

the intriguing theory that the legendary Hārūn al-Rashīd (766–809) might have dispatched the Mantle, along with the famous elephant, to Charlemagne in Aachen.[6]

Centuries later, Dürer's fictional portrait of Charlemagne wearing Roger II's Mantle, now in the Albertina in Vienna, inspired the Jugendstil painter Franz von Matsch to incorporate his likeness into the monumental mechanical Ankeruhr. Built between 1911 and 1917, the clock shows the Carolingian emperor wearing the iconic Mantle every day at 2 p.m. on Hoher Markt, one of Vienna's oldest squares. Not far from the clock, visitors also gather in the Treasury of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna to marvel at the Mantle itself (inventory number WSX111 14), yet once more, only its exterior is visible.[7]

The Mantle as Shroud

Considerable attention has been devoted to the exterior of the Mantle.[8] Dated to 528 H (1133/34 CE) by its prominent Arabic inscription, or *ṭirāz*, in Kufic script embroidered along the lower hem,[9] the Mantle, measuring 146 cm by 345 cm, was presumably not used for Roger II's coronation in 1130. Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest it was worn during his lifetime. Weighing 11 kg due to its lavish embroidery with gold thread and pearls, the garment's continuous inscription affirms its creation in the Norman royal textile workshop (*al-khizāna al-malakīya*) of Palermo (*madīnat Ṣiqillīya*), staffed by both Christians and Muslims.[10] Its semicircular shape adheres to the conventions of Byzantine and Latin liturgical dress[11] with roots extending to antiquity, while the woven red samite base fabric may have been an import from Byzantium.[12]

Notably, at the court of the Fatimid caliphs, Arabic *ṭirāz*, or inscribed textiles, evolved from Sasanian and Byzantine traditions to become an integral part of monarchical representation at Islamic courts. These textiles attained the status of caliphal relics that conferred the caliph's powerful source of blessings (*baraka*)

6 Von Murr 1790. Cf. Höfert 2016, 168.

7 The Mantle later served in the coronation ceremonies of the German emperors of the Holy Roman Empire and in 1801 became part of the Imperial Treasury in Vienna, inv. no. XIII 14; for further details, see https://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/100435/?pid=2337.

8 Seipel 2004, cat. no. 66; Grabar 2005, 44–48.

9 Translations of the inscription can be found in Seipel 2004, cat. 66 (in German); Hoffman 2001, 32 (in English).

10 Dolezalek 2017, 43.

11 Cf. Ganz 2014, figs. 1, 10.

12 Andaloro 2006, vol. 1, 44–50, no. I.1; Grabar 2005, 30–48.

upon the faithful and often served as burial shrouds to ensure the salvation of the deceased.[13]

William Tronzo, one of the foremost specialists on Norman Sicily, has recently proposed an intriguing theory regarding the iconography of the conquering lions adorning the outer face of Roger II's Mantle.[14] Tronzo suggests that the initial iconographic reference point for these depictions can be traced back to the two pairs of lions engaged in combat on the sides of a strigillated Roman sarcophagus. Interestingly, this sarcophagus was originally intended by the Norman king as his own funerary monument and is now located in the town of Monreale.[15] Dating to the third century, this sarcophagus holds historical significance as one of two monumental Roman imperial sarcophagi that Roger donated to the bishopric of Cefalù in 1145.[16]

These sarcophagi, ancient architectural *spolia* made of porphyry – a rare and exceptionally hard purple stone traditionally reserved for Roman emperors with sacred connotations – were symbolic representations of Roger II's grandeur.[17] One was designated to house his body while the other remained as an empty monument to perpetuate the "august memory" of Roger's name and glorify the church.[18] Both

13 Sokoly 1997, 71–78.

14 For an exploration of the iconography of the conquering lion, see the seminal work of Hartner and Ettinghausen 1964, 161–171; also Tronzo 2011, 50. Another depiction of a lion attacking a camel, a motif with significance in Islamic contexts, can be observed on the wooden *muqarnas* ceiling of the Cappella Palatina within the Norman Palace in Palermo, consecrated in 1143. This motif is also documented in Islamic literature, such as the lion and camel in the *Kalīla wa Dimna* from thirteenth-century Syria. For further research, see Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Arabe 3465, f. 66r; available online at: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84229611/f145.item.

15 Stroszeck 1998, pl. 37.2; Tronzo 2020, 50, fig. 2.2.

16 Deér 1959, 1. For a detailed study of the "second" sarcophagus, which eventually contained the remains of Frederick II, see Tronzo 1959, 46–69; with particular emphasis on the four sculpted porphyry lions sitting on their hind legs to support the sarcophagus: 50–54; also Bassan 1995, 38–41 and Tronzo 2011, 233–237.

17 It is noteworthy that the chamber where future Byzantine emperors were born had porphyry columns, hence the origin of the term "porphyrogenite," which means "born in the purple" or "within porphyry walls." Given the symbolic significance of porphyry in the birthplace of Byzantine monarchs, it is fitting that both Byzantine and Norman rulers sought to be buried in porphyry. Licordari 2022, 17.

18 The leonine supporting figures of the "memorial" sarcophagus, which now holds Frederick II's remains, were relief-carved during the reign of Roger II. Tronzo 1959, 126–131. The technical knowledge required to carve relief decorations in such hard stone, a skill known in the Middle Ages, has unfortunately been lost to time. More information on this subject can be found at: https://krc.web.ox.ac.uk/article/islamic-porphyry. See also Gelfer-Jørgensen 1986, 151–153.

were to be ritually integrated into the cathedral's main liturgical space.[19] This, as Umberto Bongianino notes, "involved a significant expansion of the idea of the monarch as 'rex et sacerdos' and an evident blurring of the symbolic boundaries between altar and throne, royal body and holy relics."[20] According to Bongianino, a 1170 petition outlined a "rite of homage and veneration toward the two tombs" was conceived at some point, allowing the faithful to "approach the final resting place of the 'illustrious king, full of piety'" to express their devotion and affection toward their sovereign.[21]

The lion-combat motif on the sarcophagus intended to house Roger's body is echoed on the sides of the trough, with a proportionally small central vase motif serving as a divider.[22] While the lions depicted here are seizing horses rather than camels, as seen on the Mantle, Tronzo sees this representation as an "inspiration" for the iconography on the Mantle. This interpretation is supported by the stylistic similarity between the lion figures and the observation that the horses are "almost camel-like in their form."[23] However, at the time of Roger's death in 1154, Cefalù Cathedral had not yet been consecrated, leading to the royal remains being interred in a third, more modest porphyry sarcophagus in the Cathedral of Palermo.[24] Tronzo suggests that the resemblance between the lion-combat depictions and the coloring of both the sarcophagus and the Mantle hints at the possibility that "they may have been conceived together as two parts of the same program." More than that, he emphasizes that "the Mantle was not a garment for special occasion or even daily use, but a *shroud*."[25]

The contrast between the bold outer face of the Mantle and the intricate, yet rarely seen, ophidian lattice of its lining (inventory number WSX111 14) is stark and intriguing. The symbolism of the serpent(-dragon) motif adorning the lining begs the question: why were these creatures chosen to dominate the imagery of such a

19 Tronzo 1959, 126–131; Bongianino 2017, 30.

20 Bongianino 2017, 34.

21 Bongianino 2017, 34.

22 Stroszeck 1998, pl. 37.2; Tronzo 2020, 50, fig. 2.2.

23 Tronzo 2020, 51, 54. For a related example from c. 250–260 CE of lions seizing boars, see Stroszeck 1998, no. 332.

24 The two sarcophagi in Cefalù remained vacant until 1215, when Frederick II transferred them to Palermo. It was in Palermo that Frederick II himself was buried in 1251, in the sarcophagus originally intended as a memorial tomb for his father. Tronzo 1959, 1–2, 22–23; Tronzo 2020, 52. Roger's lion-combat sarcophagus later became the initial resting place for William II (d. 1189), the last Norman king of Sicily, prior to the completion of the porphyry tomb that now contains William II's remains. Tronzo 2020, 50–51. For a critical evaluation of Tronzo's conclusions regarding the Norman porphyry sarcophagi, see Poeschke 2011.

25 Emphasis added. Tronzo 2020, 52.

precious garment? In the discussion that follows, I will delve into the richly multivalent symbolism of this motif, exploring its complex mythical and symbolic significance not only in southern Italy but also throughout the Mediterranean world. Additionally, I will examine the extent to which this symbolism supports Tronzo's hypothesis regarding the intended use of the Mantle as a burial garment, rather than merely a ceremonial robe, during the lifetime of the Norman king.

Serpents on the Lining Fabrics

The lining, with its intricate iconographic details, was primarily concealed within the Mantle, reserved for the eyes of the king alone. It is noteworthy that the Mantle's lining does not consist of a single piece of fabric but rather of five successive sections, each composed of three different fragments of precious fabric. These sections are commonly identified by their motifs: the "Dragon," the "Tree of Life," and the "Bird" cloth (Figs. 1 and 4).[26] What is particularly significant is that all three figured silk tapestries, woven with gold thread, share a common feature: they are covered with a prominent grid-like pattern of paired serpent(-dragon)s.[27]

Fig. 1: Gold-woven lining from Roger II's Mantle, known as the "Bird" cloth, consisting of two fragments, each ca. 77.5 cm × 40.5 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (KHM), inv. no. XIII 14 © KHM, Vienna.

26 Caratsch 2004, 125–135; Andaloro 2006, III.1.

27 For an exploration of the kinship between serpents and dragons, see Kuehn 2011, 3–13.

The serpents depicted on the lining possess almond-shaped eyes, pricked-up ears at the top, and open jaws revealing tongues; notably, their bodies lack wings or legs. One serpent has a pearl *rinceau* along its body, while the other is characterized by evenly spaced stripes. In all three types of silk fragments, these paired serpents create knot-like designs. This interlacing and interlocking technique fosters a sense of betweenness within the symbolism. Within the interstices and enclosed spaces of the serpent motifs, various elements can be discerned, including groups of human figures, trees, birds, quadrupeds, composite animals, and foliate motifs. However, the exact meaning of these additional motifs remains undeciphered.

These figured silk textiles are believed to predate the embroidery found on the Mantle. Given the opulence of the Mantle's outer face, which undoubtedly ranked among the most luxurious garments of its time, it follows that the lining would have been equally precious. Ruth Grönwoldt speculates that these fragments may have originated from an earlier garment and, because of their exceptional importance, were incorporated into Roger's Mantle as *relics*.[28] Furthermore, Isabelle Dolezalek recently proposed that the palace workshop maintained a stock of both old and new fabrics from various sources (such as diplomatic gifts, treasuries of former rulers, spoils of war, etc.)[29] that could have been used to make the lining for Roger's Mantle.

When the sarcophagus of Roger II was unsealed in Palermo Cathedral between 1781 and 1799 as part of the Cathedral's "restoration" efforts, fragments of his burial attire were uncovered. Only a drawing by Francesco Daniele, the official historian of the Bourbon kings, remains today (Fig. 2). Daniele reports the discovery of Roger II's body in an advanced state of decomposition and notes that the contents of the sarcophagus appeared to have been previously disturbed.[30] He provides a description of the garments in which the king was interred as follows:[31]

> Long shreds of yellow, much entangled cloth and some others with a woven frieze of gold at their edge. Moreover, a piece of the mantle, or royal *paludamento*, which was of a yellowish colour in parts, and another part, which formed its hem, was crafted with utmost subtlety showing human and animal figures of various colours, beautiful to the eye, but drawn in a strange and crude manner.

28 Grönwoldt 1993, 889–890.
29 Dolezalek 2017, 111.
30 Daniele 1784, 23.
31 Daniele 1784, 23.

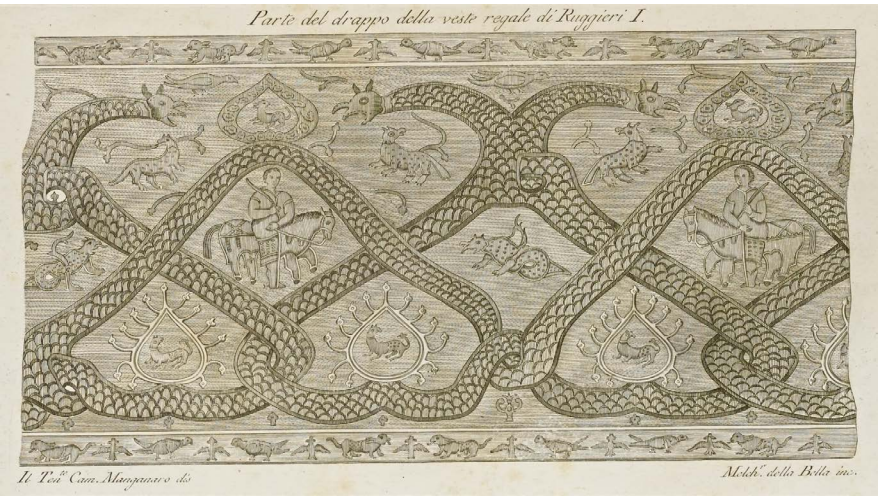

Fig. 2: Reproduction of a gold-woven textile from the shroud found in the sarcophagus of Roger II, Palermo, Sicily. Engraving by Daniele 1784, pl. C.

Daniele's illustration of a fragment from the hem of the royal Mantle reveals a pattern of paired intertwined serpents closely resembling those found on the lining fragments of Roger II's Mantle in Vienna. The only distinction lies in the uniform scale-like pattern covering all the ophidian bodies. His description implies that the pattern observed on other parts of the shroud, or on the lining of the Mantle in which the king was laid to rest, closely resembles the lining fragments of Roger II's Mantle in Vienna (see Fig. 1).

Paired serpents of a related type are also depicted on two small silk tapestries, providing tangible evidence of the medieval cult of relics. One tapestry shows more stylized confronted serpents, though not knotted, now in the Basilica of Our Lady in Tongeren, Belgium, dating from the late eleventh century. Another tapestry shows a closely related example with confronted knotted serpents in the dome chamber of St. Paul's Cathedral in Münster, Germany, dating from the late eleventh or early twelfth century. Both silk fragments are thought to have been made in the royal workshop in Palermo and bear certain similarities to the lining of Roger II's Mantle (see Fig. 1), as well as to the figured textile depicted in the Norman burial garments illustrated by Daniele (see Fig. 2).[32]

32 Andaloro 2006, cat. no. III.7 and 9, respectively. For other fragments with an overall lattice-like composition that differs from that of the paired serpents, or that are too fragmented to identify the pattern as depicting ophidian bodies, see Andaloro 2006, cat. no. III.3–6, 8, 10–17.

The discovery of the aforementioned late twelfth-century silk fragment, now in the al-Sabāh Collection in Kuwait, adds a third example to the small group of silk fragments covered with an all-over pattern of paired ophidian bodies (including the three types found in the gold-woven lining and the one preserved in the DANIELE engraving, a total of seven such textile fragments are now known). Similar to the Bird Cloth, the Al-Sabāh fragment displays a large, inverted heart-shaped interlace formed by the bodies of four serpents (Fig. 3). The intricate details of the iconographic expression, including the palmette-like trees flanked by perching birds in the lobes of the interlace, and the beaded or striped demarcation of the ophidian bodies, as well as their protruding red tongues, are very similar to those found on the "Bird Cloth" (Fig. 4). It is noteworthy that unlike the textiles in Tongeren and Münster, which are thought to have been made in Palermo, the textile in Kuwait was discovered in the Afghan province of Samangan. This suggests that it was likely not made in Palermo and that its creation can be dated after that of Roger's cloak in 1133/34.

Fig. 3: Fragment of gold-woven silk textile, ca. 28 cm × 28 cm, late twelfth century (based on C–14 dating), putative origin Dar-i Suf, Samangan province, Afghanistan. Al-Sabāh Collection, Kuwait National Museum, Kuwait, inv. no. LNS 519 T © al-Sabāh Collection, Kuwait.

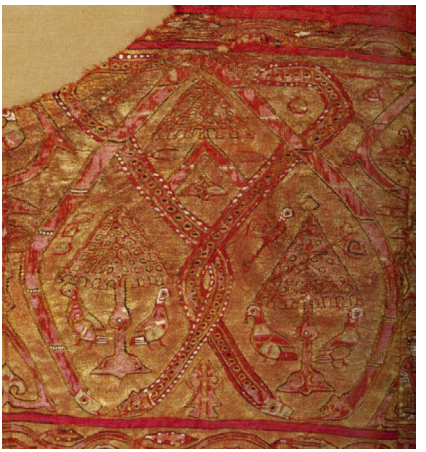

Fig. 4: Detail of the gold-woven lining of Roger II's Mantle, known as the Bird Cloth. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, inv. no. XIII 14 © KHM, Vienna.

The stylistic and iconographic similarities observed in these golden textiles, despite the geographical distance and differences in the period of production, can be attributed to the enduring practice of textile exchange and endowment.[33] This practice finds historical precedent in figures such as Robert Guiscard (d. 1085), Duke of Apulia and Calabria, and brother of Roger I. In the 1070s, Guiscard received "precious golden cloths," probably woven silk, as part of diplomatic marriage negotiations with the Byzantine Emperor Romanus IV Diogenes. Guiscard subsequently bestowed these textiles to the Abbey of Montecassino, viewing such acts as a means of seeking salvation and ensuring passage to heaven after death.[34]

The proliferation of Byzantine and Islamic woven textiles, characterized by a shared visual aesthetic, in weaving centers around the Mediterranean is well documented in the historical records. William of Apulia, for instance, described Amalfi in *La Geste de Robert Guiscard*, written between 1096 and 1099, as "none is richer in silver, gold and textiles from all sorts of different places." He further noted the presence of goods "brought from the royal city of Alexandria and from Antioch," highlighting these locations as significant centers for the production and distribution of high-quality cloth in Egypt and Syria.[35] Moreover, historical documents from the Cairo *genīza* reveal that during the twelfth century, under Norman rule, southern Italy, particularly Palermo, known as *madīnat Ṣiqillīya*, emerged as a central point for the silk trade.[36]

The strikingly similar iconographies found on the lining fragments and the Al-Sabāh silk also indicate the use of pattern books that may have been circulated among the various workshops involved in the production of these "golden textiles."[37] Given the complex cultural dynamics at play, Eva Hoffman suggests the existence of a "shared textile vocabulary of the international courts between the tenth and the twelfth centuries from Islamic, Byzantine and Norman centres."[38]

According to Daniele's account, while Roger II's body and burial garments were found in a poor state of preservation when his sarcophagus was opened, the vestments of Frederick II (d. 1250), Roger II's grandson, were remarkably well preserved. Frederick II was dressed in full regalia, including a tunic embroidered with an Arabic inscription, a dalmatic, and a pluvial, all of light red silk, along with silk

33 Cf. Hoffman 2001, 17–50, and 2011, 109–119; Schmidt and Wolf 2010; Gabrieli and Scerrato 1979; Cavallo 1982.

34 Amatus of Montecassino 2004, Bk VII, v. 26, 178, cited after Edwards 2020, 90, no. 4.

35 William of Apulia 2008, 43.

36 Goitein 1971, 9–33, esp. 9–14.

37 Kuehn 2011, 155.

38 Hoffman 2001, 34.

boots and shoes, metal spurs, and a sword fastened in his sash. Daniele speculates that these garments may have been his coronation robes.[39]

While Dolezalek proposes that Frederick II's funerary textiles bore a close resemblance to the lining of Roger II's Mantle and were "not specifically made for that purpose, but also used in other contexts,"[40] I contend that even the final presentation of the mighty king was meticulously choreographed. The choice of the all-over ophidian knotwork as the principal design of the burial garment in which the king was laid to rest suggests that these textiles held great importance in the funerary rituals of Norman Sicily.

Binding and Unbinding

As a first step, we will delve into the symbolism of the serpent, focusing in particular on the distinctive looping and knotting of its body. This exploration will pave the way for our second step, which will examine the serpent as a figurative threshold motif – a place of transition where the knot is untied. Throughout antiquity, the serpent (or serpent-dragon) has wielded a multifaceted symbolic significance, embodying a fusion of malevolence and benevolence. This inherent polyvalence and ambiguity have earned it the sobriquet "one of the most complex symbolisms of the history of cultures."[41]

It is striking that the bodies of all the serpents, whether depicted on the lining of Roger's Mantle, on the illustrated fragment of his funerary garments, or on the Al-Sabāh fragment, are rendered with loops or knots (bearing in mind that the knotting process inherently involves the creation of a loop). Since ancient times, knots have been believed to possess potent efficacy and have been regarded as a means of warding off malevolent spirits.[42] The replication of potent symbols, such as the intricate knotted forms found on the linings, was likely intended to enhance their protective effect by evoking the notion of continuous, endless protection. The knots function to contain the ambiguous powers of the serpents by binding them.

In his work, Tim Ingold explores the deeper meaning of "binding-something-together" with threads, resulting in knots or more complex patterns that fall within the broad anthropological spectrum of lattices, lozenges, and grids. Simi-

39 Daniele 1784, 102, pl. Q (sarcophagus of Frederick II).
40 Dolezalek 2017, 111.
41 Le Goff 1982, 162.
42 Gombrich 1979, 262–264.

larly, Alfred Gell, in *Art and Agency*, cites the maze as a quintessential example of what he calls "the apotropaic use of patterns."[43] By this he means the practice of inscribing complex and visually enigmatic designs on surfaces as a means of protection.[44] Ingold, following Gell, associates knots, as well as the broader notion of connecting, tying, or braiding, with meshes, lacework, and the labyrinth, all of which were considered to possess apotropaic and protective qualities.[45] Binding and unbinding, Ingold suggests, lie at the core of humanity's relationship with the cosmos.[46] Knots serve to seal, conceal, and cover, yet they also possess the ability to open and close, occupying the threshold where the maelstrom and the magical abyss beckon.[47]

Simultaneously, the lozenge pattern symbolizes the endless repetition of the diamond, embodying the concept of "becoming," as noted by Kitzinger.[48] The use of knots as apotropaic devices continues an earlier practice evident, for instance, in the palace architecture of the early Islamic period and in the Byzantine churches of the time. Crucially, these knot designs were often placed in or near thresholds.

While the iconography on the outer face has conventionally been interpreted as "a gory masterpiece of politico-religious triumphalism,"[49] Tronzo argues that the animal combat enacts "the triumph of virtue over sin,"[50] in keeping with the symbolism of the lion as *custos iusticie* in Norman dynastic tombs.[51] Conversely, the inner face suggests an implicit intention not only to shield the king but also to endow him with certain abilities or powers. The symbolic content of these images must have been paramount in their selection for the lining of Roger's Mantle. The overarching visual program can be seen as exerting a powerful influence. As such, it can be compared to the function of later talismanic shirts, designed to safeguard the wearer, ward off harm or disease, and confer invulnerability. These shirts, inscribed with Qur'ānic verses and often associated with astrological and magical practices and devices, were intended to be worn discreetly under outer garments

43 Gell 1998, 83–90.
44 Gell 1998, 84–86 (pertaining to Celtic and South Indian knotwork patterns).
45 Ingold 2007, 53; based upon Gell 1998, 83–90. Cf. Zischka 1977).
46 Ingold 2015, 86.
47 Ingold 2007, 53; Gell 1998, 83–90.
48 Kitzinger 1993, 3–15.
49 Metcalfe 2022, 244.
50 Tronzo 2020, 54.
51 Réfice 1996, 1.

or armor.[52] Much of this symbolism stems from the inherent apotropaic and protective potency[53] associated with the iconography of the serpent.

The serpent's apotropaic and protective function can also be linked to the belief in the Evil Eye, a pervasive concept representing the corrupting gaze of envy found in various cultures. Apotropaic symbols were employed to ward off its malevolent influence, dispel evil, and provide protection. It should also be noted that the Evil Eye was commonly perceived as posing the greatest threat during transitional periods of life, such as marriages, coronations, or funerals. Serpents are therefore sometimes used to demarcate religious spaces or contexts, as seen in the knotted serpents forming an all-over pattern on Roger II's burial robe and the lining of his Mantle.

Another instance of serpents serving as threshold motifs can be seen on the sarcophagus of Roger II's father, Count Roger I of Normandy. Upon Roger I's death in 1101, he was interred in the Abbey of Santissima Trinità, which he had built in the town of Mileto in Calabria, where he had established his residence and court. The remains of the youngest son of the Norman Tancredi, progenitor of the French noble house of Hauteville (Altavilla), were laid to rest in a reused Roman sarcophagus made of white marble, rectangular in shape, dating from the first half of the third century (Fig. 5a–c). Underscoring the recognition of the symbolic potency of Roman *spolia* as valuable medieval funerary monuments, the free-standing sarcophagus with the "Gates of Hades" was once crowned by a canopy, likely upheld by porphyry columns.[54] Unfortunately, this canopy was destroyed during the catastrophic earthquake of 1783, which devastated the entire city of Mileto.[55]

52 A considerable number of Turko-Iranian examples have been documented. See Roxburgh 2005, 442, 458–459, cat. nos. 257, 322.

53 For an exploration of *spolia* as apotropaia and talismans in both Byzantium and the Islamic world, see Flood 2006, 151. For examples illustrating the convergence of talismanic objects, magical rituals, and religious contexts, see Dauterman Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers 1989.

54 Faedo 1982, 691–706.

55 Faedo 1982, 691–706.

Fig. 5a–c: (clockwise) Roman strigillated "Gates of Hades" sarcophagus, white marble, repurposed for the tomb of Roger I of Sicily (Roger de Hauteville/Altavilla, 1030–1101), 240 cm long, 92 cm wide, 191 cm high, in Mileto (Vibo Valentia), Abbey of SS. Trinità, first half third century. Currently in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (MANN). © MANN.

Roger's widow, Adelasia, who was also the mother of Roger II, commissioned the Roman stonemason Petrus Oderisius to rework the Gorgon faces on the gables of the lid, replacing them with the Christian symbol of the Greek cross, while retaining the snake hair (Fig. 5b).[56] The remainder of the funerary monument remained unchanged. The sarcophagus was carved in relief with a paneled double door, shown slightly ajar, set within an *aediculum* comprising two fluted pilasters supporting an architrave and a triangular pediment decorated with a wreath flanked by floating ribbons on either side. The sides are also decorated with two panels of strigillation, a characteristic surface decoration also chosen by his son Roger II for the sarcophagus he intended for his own burial. Notably, the right door is shown ajar, symbolizing the transition of the deceased to the afterlife. Significantly, the pediment is surmounted by a pair of sea dragons (*dracones*, *serpentes*) with expansive spiraling coils (see Fig. 5c). Given the widespread prevalence of ancient Roman symbolism associated with serpents, dragons, or sea creatures in Italy, particularly during the eleventh century,[57] it can be inferred that the iconography was accepted, if not deliberately chosen.

56 Faedo 1982, 691–706.

57 As seen in the illustrated manuscript of Rabanus Maurus of Monte Cassino, copied in 1023. See Bloch 1946, fig. 232.

Serpents in a Western Norman Context

While the serpentine monsters adorning Roger I's repurposed Roman sarcophagus provide insight, they do not fully explain why serpents were chosen as the overarching symbolic motif in the visual representation of Roger's Mantle and burial garments. So the question remains: what is the significance of these serpents? Moreover, where else do we encounter serpents in a Western Norman context, and what are the connotations associated with them?

Many buildings in southern Italy boast magnificent mosaics, and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, built between 1130 and 1154, is no exception. Following the Byzantine compositional style, its mosaics are incredibly intricate. However, only two powerful figurative representations are present: lions and serpents. The first representation consists of two large serpents, each 2.13 meters long, flanking the high altar on the pavement of the main apse – the most sacred place in the Royal Chapel of the Norman Palace (Fig. 6a and b). These serpents, which form two large loops, serve to separate the altar from the rest of the church. As in the aforementioned textiles, these serpents have almond-shaped eyes, pointed ears, gaping mouths revealing rows of teeth, and sinuous tongues. This is similar to the practice in Byzantine churches, where serpents were sometimes depicted in mosaic or painted decoration near the altar area, the liturgical center, which in biblical tradition is associated with heaven and symbolizes a threshold in the church's liturgy.[58] Thus, the ophidian symbols, such as those in the Cappella Palatina, have a symbolic-apotropaic function, and their placement near the altar is particularly significant. The second is a small rectangular panel, 1.43 by 0.84 meters, located at the entrance to the choir. It depicts addorsed lions – heraldic animals of the Hauteville dynasty – on either side of a stylized tree of life emerging from a vase resting on a splayed foot (Fig. 7), recalling the outer face of the Mantle.[59] Positioned at the entrance to the choir, these lions signify entry into the royal space. The importance of these symbolic representations is underlined by the use of the *opus sectile* technique to create their bodies and the *opus tessellatum* technique to shape their heads, evident in both the lions and the serpents.

58 For instance, as the *porta caeli* (Gen 28:17) following Jacob's dream. An example from the eleventh-century monastic church of Sagmata in Greece depicts a serpent in a panel in front of the central apse or *bēma*, which forms the sanctuary platform. See Kier 1970, figs. 319, 321.
59 Deér 1959, 52.

Fig. 6a and b: Serpents flanking the main altar, mosaic in the apse, Cappella Palatina, Palermo. Photo © Sara Kuehn.

Fig. 7: Addorsed lions flanking a tree, mosaic on the pavement at the entrance to the choir, Cappella Palatina, Palermo. Photo © Sara Kuehn.

Elaborate depictions of serpents, often paired with lions, also appear in other medieval mosaic pavements in southern Italian churches. Analogous examples can be found in Palermo, particularly in the nearby church of Sta. Maria dell'Ammiraglio (also known as the Martorana). Fragments of the *opus sectile* floor of the northern nave preserve only the serpent heads, which are of the same type as those in the Capella Palatina.[60]

60 Kitzinger 1990, 27–67. Longo 2009, fig. 124 (fig. to the right).

The church was commissioned by Roger's chief minister, George of Antioch, from 1126 to 1151, next to his own residence. Hailed in many ways as a second Cappella Palatina, it is noteworthy that George of Antioch's church features only serpents and no royal lions. The hypothesis that these serpents serve as guardians is reinforced by an analogy with two marble slabs at least 60 years older than the Palermo serpents. These depict canine figures facing each other in a similar position and are located in the presbytery that guards the tomb of St. Benedict, the most venerated place in the Campanian Abbey of Montecassino, consecrated in 1071.[61] Their contours are filled with red and white checkered tesserae of colored marble, created by Byzantine mosaic masters from Constantinople whom the Benedictine Abbot Desiderius of Montecassino, with the blessing of the Norman rulers of southern Italy, had summoned to Montecassino to revive the art of mosaic in south-central Italy.[62] Earlier, the Norman Duke Roger Borsa had returned the monastery to the Basilian monks and allowed them to practice the Byzantine rite.

Thus, one of the primary uses of serpent iconography seems to signify the liminality of the threshold (Latin *limen*, *limina*). The serpents flanking the altar face outward, presenting a fierce and menacing aspect that serves a "beneficial" purpose. This outward orientation is intended to ward off hostile attacks and protect the sanctity of the "inside," represented here by the altar. Its semantic horizon is thus expanded to include the function of guardian of the threshold, akin to ancient "guardian spirits" imbued with prophylactic and talismanic power. The threshold embodies what could be described as the "topography of the in-between," serving as a pivotal point of transition, decisively linked to a crossing between this world and the other.

61 Bloch 1946, fig. 225. These slabs are now in the Museo dell'Abbazia, Montecassino, cf. Longo 2009, fig. 80; Kier 1970, fig. 342. For a discussion of the mosaic work in the Abbey of Montecassino, see Longo 2009, 10161–10166.

62 Longo 2009, 10162; Bloch 1986, 40–41.


Figs. 8 and 9: Serpent motif (left), serpent and lion motif (right), mosaic on the pavement, church of Sant'Adriano in San Demetrio Corone, Calabria, 1088–1106. Photos © Sara Kuehn.

The figurative representations in the Abbey of Montecassino are closely connected to the serpent and lion motifs found in the mosaics of the pavements of the eleventh-century church of Sant'Adriano inside the Abbey of San Demetrio Corone in Montecassino in Calabria, dating from 1088–1106.[63] The construction of this church was made possible by the financial support of Roger Borsa, son of Robert Guiscard and Duke of Apulia (1085–1111), which allowed its mosaics to reach a remarkable artistic splendor.[64] Inside the church there are no less than four remarkable representations of both serpents and lions in *opus sectile*.

One prominent rectangular mosaic panel shows a massive serpent whose coils form three concentric circles, tightly wound at the center, where they culminate in a gaping mouth. The serpent's head, topped by a horn, and its tail, looped in the outer circle, create a striking pattern (Fig. 8).[65] Another mosaic on display depicts a similarly coiled serpent, composed of tiny triangular tesserae, with its tail twisted into two large loops (Fig. 9).

Equally impressive is the third mosaic, which features a towering upright lion and an equally large serpent, separated by a now-damaged vase-like object (Fig. 10). Although only the outline of the vessel is visible, both the lion and the serpent appear to be extending their heads toward the top of the vase. The scene is inter-

63 The dedicatory inscription in the church of Sant'Adriano provides evidence for dating the *opus sectile* floor to the late eleventh or early twelfth century, see Longo 2009, fig. 81.
64 Bloch 1986, 47.
65 Tronzo 1997, 33, no. 20.

preted as a "symbolic reference to the contrast between good and evil."[66] On closer inspection, however, the lion's tongue protrudes as if it were lapping up liquid, while the serpent's head, which is unfortunately damaged (so that only the silhouette is visible), suggests that it was inserted into the vessel.

The fourth mosaic shows a single lion in a formal pose with one foreleg raised, a stance often associated with heraldic symbolism.[67] It is noteworthy that lions appear in medieval Italian pavements only in the church of Sant'Adriano, commissioned by Roger Borsa (Roger II's cousin), and in the Capella Palatina, commissioned by Roger II. Here, too, both lions and serpents serve not only as apotropaic symbols but also as guardians.

In contrast to the lions, the serpents in the Cappella Palatina are often interpreted as symbolic representations of the vanquished by the victorious Christ, as described in Psalm 90:13–14 ("You will tread on the asp and the basilisk, and you will trample on the lion and the dragon"). Thus, during the liturgy, the celebrant's act of treading on these serpents is seen as a symbol of Christ's triumph over evil.[68] This would imply, however, that the royal lions flanking the tree of life in the apse of the Cappella Palatina were to be trampled on in a similar manner.

But were the serpents merely allusions to the theme of Christ crushing the beasts? That is, were they to be trampled only as repositories of evil? Or did they have a different meaning?

Fig. 10: Serpent motif, mosaic on the pavement, church of Sant'Adriano in San Demetrio Corone, Calabria, 1088–1106. Photo © Sara Kuehn.

66 Pace Longo (2009, 10167, no. 643), who proposes that both animals are contending with an unknown prey.

67 Longo 2009, fig. 79 (fig. to the right).

68 Reilly 2020, 150–151.

Fig. 11: *Baculus*, ivory and glass paste, height 20.5 cm, mid-twelfth century. Palermo, Treasury of the Cappella Palatina. © Il Fondo edifici di culto (FEC).

It is worth noting that, as in one of the mosaics in the Calabrian church of Sant'Adriano, the head of the crosier used in the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Rite Catholic traditions often has a spiral design resembling a serpent, serving – maze-like – a similar symbolic purpose as a knot. Typically made in Siculo-Arabic workshops, where Muslim craftsmen in Norman Palermo produced objects for Christian patrons, such staffs are usually made of ivory. An example from the mid-twelfth century shows the head of such a crosier (Latin *baculus*), with its polyhedral body inlaid with late Norman glass paste, spiraling inward and culminating in a horned snake head with pointed ears and protruding tongue, now in the Treasury of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo (Fig. 11).[69] Associated with St. Cataldo, the ivory relic is documented in the church inventory of 1309. Another closely related Siculo-Arabic

69 Guastella 1995, 174–177. For related twelfth-century crosier heads, see Cott 1939, figs. 149, 152, 157, 167; Knipp 2011, fig. 3. Also noteworthy are the depictions of serpents on oliphants, such as on the Borradaile oliphant of the tenth or eleventh century. This oliphant features interlaced medallions borrowed from textile patterns, ending in a knotted serpent(-dragon) of the same type consuming its own tail next to a pair of peacocks drinking from a fountain. A replica is in the Pinacoteca Provinciale in Bari, while the original is in the British Museum; https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1923-1205-3. Cf. recently Vernon 2023, figs. 39 and 40.

baculus, dating from the last quarter of the twelfth century, features a similar serpent's head releasing a stylized quatrefoil above the intertwined necks of peacocks enclosed by ophidian spirals. This piece, known as the Altmanni coat of arms, is preserved in the Benedictine monastery of Göttweig in Lower Austria.[70]

Such serpent-shaped handles are often interpreted as a reference to the biblical story of Moses and the brazen serpent, Nehushtan, wherein God instructs Moses to fashion an image of a serpent and raise it on a pole (Numbers 21:4–9) as a prophylactic device against snakes and perils during the journey to the Promised Land. This act was believed to prefigure the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The connection stems from a saying of Jesus in the Gospel of John: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:14–15). Consequently, Christian theologians such as the late fourth-century archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom (*c.* 347–407), were able to relate the symbolic language of the "lifting up" of the serpent to the manner of Jesus' death, drawing a parallel between Christ himself and the image of the serpent:[71]

> In the former, the uplifted serpent healed the bites of the serpents; in the latter, the crucified Jesus healed the wounds inflicted by the spiritual dragon. In the former, there was the uplifted brass fashioned in the likeness of the serpent; in the latter, the Lord's body formed by the Spirit.

This positive symbolism of the serpent is echoed in the exegesis of Psalm 118 by Ambrose of Milan in the fourth century, where he draws a comparison between Christ and the brazen serpent: "In the brazen serpent is my serpent prefigured, [...] the good serpent who poured out of his mouth remedies and not poison."[72] The serpent lifted up by Moses in the wilderness thus emerges, through its association with the "exaltation" of Christ,[73] as the antithesis of the satanic serpent described in Genesis[74] and Revelation. By commemorating this biblical event and its profound implications, and by serving as a symbol of authority and guidance, the serpent-shaped crosier handles are believed to provide spiritual healing and protection. The underlying rationale for the perceived healing properties of both

70 Lechner 1976, cat. no. 290, p. 254.

71 John Chrysostom 1957–1960, vol. 1, 262–263. On the symbolic and liturgical parallelism between the cross and the brazen serpent, see Fricke 2007, 136–141.

72 Cited after Graepler-Diehl 1967, 168.

73 Charlesworth 2010, 1, 12–13, 372, 377–379, 384, 389, 409.

74 Kuehn 2011, 68; cf. Kessler 2009. For Byzantine representations of serpent-dragons associated with the cross in apotropaic contexts, see Kuehn 2011, 67–68.

the serpent-handled crosier and the brazen serpent essentially revolves around the principle of "like cures like,"[75] an extension of the principle of sympathy through mimesis.[76]

This also recalls the bronze serpent of Hellenistic origin that Emperor Basil II presented to Archbishop Arnulfus II (998–1018) of Milan in exchange for generous gifts to the Byzantine court. This artifact still adorns a column in the nave of the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan, next to a mounted cross.[77] As Herbert L. Kessler has astutely observed, this arrangement promotes "a dialogue between the Old Testament type [serpent] and its fulfilment, and between the agent of evil and the bringer of eternal life."[78] Overall, it was also perceived as apotropaic, much as snake imagery often functioned in the medieval Mediterranean world, inheriting such a role from the guardian serpents and dragons of antiquity.[79] However, unlike in much of Christian culture, where the serpent or dragon is primarily associated with evil and sin,[80] in Islamic culture their depiction is more nuanced, with potentially benevolent as well as malevolent connotations. Notably, the serpent as a symbol of evil is absent from the Qurʾān, appearing only once in the story of the staff of Mūsā (Moses) turning into a snake (*sūra*s 20:20 and 79:16).

Byzanto-Islamic Ophidian Inspirations

The serpents examined in this study are intricately linked to the stylistic continuum of Byzanto-Islamic iconography. The motifs contained within the imposing serpents, facing each other and dividing the entire surface, include ancient Iranian cosmological symbols such as the tree with birds. This motif bears a close resemblance to the iconographic scheme found on one of the enameled medallions of the Pala d'Oro, originally on the high altar of St. Mark's Basilica, now housed in the Treasury of San Marco in Venice, which was made in Byzantine Constantinople in the eleventh century (Fig. 12). The medallion features a stylized composition depicting a central tree inhabited by birds, flanked by two addorsed peacocks with their heads turned backward. Encircled by a pair of giant serpents with looped bodies

75 See Kessler 2009, 119–134; Weinryb 2016, 121–124.

76 Taussig 1993; Gell 1998.

77 Cf. Di Giovanni 1966, 3–5, esp. 4; Bertelli 1987, 85–87; Fricke 2007, 136–141; Kessler 2009, 119–134.

78 Kessler 2009, 123.

79 On serpent-dragons as guardians, see Ogden 2013, e. g., 166–169, 343–350. For depictions of serpent-dragons on Byzantine fountains, see Bouras 1977, 65–68.

80 On the positive aspect of the serpent in Western medieval symbolism, see Le Goff 1978, 53–90.

and interlaced tails, it provides a bird's-eye view of the earthly cosmos, reminiscent of the worldview attributed to Alexander the Great in medieval Iranian lore.[81]

Fig. 12: "The world as seen by Alexander." Medallion from the Pala d'Oro, enameled silver, eleventh century, Byzantine Constantinople. Treasury of San Marco, Venice. Photo © Sara Kuehn.

This artistic tradition also permeates the more complex iconography on the "Bird" cloth lining of Roger II's Mantle. The Al-Sabāh fragment with the tripartite heart-shaped knots formed by serpents underscores the widespread use of this significant motif. The persistent use of a motif rooted in ancient Iranian concepts is not surprising when one considers that, despite the rise of Islam, the inhabitants of eastern Islamic lands held on to their pre-Islamic heritage and associated iconographic ideas more assiduously than those in many other parts of the Islamic world. Evidently, this motif enjoyed wide currency in the medieval world, encompassing both Muslim and Byzantine realms.

Of particular note is the motif's adaptation in a Christian context: analogous to the third-century white marble sarcophagus reused for the tomb of Roger I, in which the countenance of the Gorgon was re-carved in the form of a Christian cross (see Fig. 5c), the Christian religious symbol *par excellence* was added at the top of the tree to reinterpret this ancient Iranian representation of the cosmos into a Christian allegory.[82]

81 Grabar 1951, 48.
82 Grabar 1951, 48, no. 17.

Yet the knotted serpent motif cannot be attributed to a single artistic tradition. Evidence of this can be found in the depiction of similar motifs on an eleventh- or early twelfth-century burgundy and gold samite known as the relic shroud of Saint Amandus. This textile, believed to be of West Asian origin,[83] features a repeating pattern of pairs of giant double-headed serpents enclosing double-headed eagles above mythical felines.

Further evidence of transcultural entanglements in the mobility of forms, objects, artisans, and ideas is provided by the discovery of the silk fragment from the Samangan province of Afghanistan, now in the al-Sabāh Collection in Kuwait (see Fig. 3). The shared iconography gives an intimation of the cosmopolitanism of visual culture in Norman Sicily, where the Greek, Arab-Iranian, and Latin worlds intersected. Simultaneously, its provenance in present-day Afghanistan testifies to the dissemination of this important iconographic representation beyond the Mediterranean world. These artifacts all contribute to Oleg Grabar's concept of the "shared culture of objects," whose provenance is often difficult to determine, but which were valued and utilized in both Christian and Muslim courts.[84]

The distinctive iconography of interlacing and interlocking serpents creates intricate webs of entanglement that leave distinct traces or threads. In West Asian art, we encounter further crossings and entanglements of the knotted serpent motif from at least the eleventh century.[85] Importantly, this iconography transcends conventional East–West categorizations, often regarded as part of a Mediterranean visual *koiné* or artistic *lingua franca*. In this context, disparate elements are seamlessly integrated to produce a wholly original composition of indistinct components.[86] While tracing the precise chain of transmission of the knotted serpents may prove challenging, they can be understood as variations within the broader context of a possible *sensus communis*.

Concluding Remarks

The careful selection of lining fabrics for the Mantle hints at a deliberate and meticulous process, as suggested by Grönwoldt, who proposes that they were selected and inserted as relics into the highly prized garment. The exclusive use of lining fabrics covered with the multifaceted symbolism of the serpent highlights its

83 Kuehn 2011, fig. 156.

84 Grabar 2006, 115–129.

85 For further examples, see Kuehn 2011, figs. 155, 174.

86 Belting 1978 and 1982.

special significance. This deliberate choice implies that the iconography carried a profound meaning or held a particular significance in the context of the Mantle's purpose.

Nevertheless, there is no evidence to suggest that Roger himself wore the Mantle during his lifetime. As Tronzo argues, the use of the Mantle as a royal shroud likely established an important precedent, akin to the practice observed with Roger's son Frederick, who, as Daniele speculates, was buried in what may have been his coronation robes. These garments, designed for pivotal rites of passage or transformative experiences, such as the ultimate transition to death, indicate the profound symbolism and ceremonial significance associated with such royal attire.

It should be remembered that Roger II was not buried in the magnificent sarcophagus he had commissioned, but in a considerably less extravagant one. It is reasonable to speculate that he was interred in less elaborate garments than those which he, as the "supreme head of the church and vicar of Christ,"[87] might have envisioned or specially prepared to serve as a conduit of spiritual or sacred power. Nevertheless, he was buried in garments decorated with the same all-over serpent iconography as depicted in the fragment illustrated by Daniele (see Fig. 2), underlining the enduring significance of this symbolic motif.

The lining itself can be perceived as a threshold, a pictorial site exemplified by the phenomenon of doubling. The profound symbolism of the serpents covering the silk fragments is doubled, reflecting the parallelism between the representation of a transition (to eternity, to paradise, to heaven, *limina lucis*) at a point of transition – a threshold representation at a threshold point. This constellation, a representation of a threshold at a transition place, is accentuated by the striking looping and knotting of the ophidian bodies. According to Ingold, the knot engenders an in-between, a space "between" matter and form.[88]

A central motif within these interstices is the tree, which Ingold notes embodies a knot in itself, as evidenced by the knotted tree trunks depicted in the lining. The defining characteristic of all knots is that their constituent threads are not joined end-to-end, but rather in the middle, with trailing ends that seek out other threads to bind: "Life [and, one might add, the transition to death] is a meshwork."[89] At the same time, the attribution of an animal's head or limb to the knot or knotted tree, as depicted in these textiles (see Fig. 1), imbues it with life and thus enhances its magical potency.[90]

87 Bongianino 2017, 8.
88 Ingold 2015, 85.
89 Ingold 2021, 35.
90 Kitzinger 1993, 3–15.

As Tronzo observes, the inscription on the Mantle alludes to the "pleasure of days and nights without cease or change," which resonates with a "cross-cultural concept of paradise."[91] Tronzo goes on to point out that the theme of paradise is echoed in the imagery of the Mantle, particularly in the central motif within the field – the palm tree or palm leaf. In the Middle Ages, this symbol, wielded by the blessed deceased, universally symbolized victory over death.

On the lining, paradisiacal symbolism is also found in the iconography of serpents drinking from a vessel.[92] While the motif of birds drinking from a fountain is more prevalent, possibly due to its Christian allegorical meaning of "ingesting eternal life,"[93] serpents have historically been associated with water, particularly the water of life.

In medieval Byzantium, where ancient basins and fountains continued to be used, the classical association between serpents and water persisted and evolved. The *Vita Basilii*, written in the mid-ninth century, mentions a porphyry fountain carved with serpents that was erected by Basil I in front of the New Church.[94] This fountain, probably the same one that a later emperor, Andronikos Komnenos, moved to his mausoleum in the 1180s, was described by Niketas Choniates as a "great porphyry basin, which has coiled together around its rim two entwined dragons, a wonder to behold."[95] This fundamental association between the vessel as a receptacle of precious liquid associated with eternal life and the serpent-dragon appears to have persisted in various forms.

The recurrence of intricately knotted ophidian forms on the three enigmatic gold-woven silk textiles that line the famous Mantle of Roger II, depicted in Daniele's illustration of the king's burial robe, alongside related silk fragments in Tongeren and Münster, and the Al-Sabāh Collection in Kuwait, alludes to paradisiacal concepts. The serpentine trails of these visual *koiné*, which often serve as threshold motifs, seem to evoke continuous and boundless protection, aligning seamlessly with the Mantle's role in enveloping the king in his final resting place.

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91 Tronzo 2020, 52.

92 On the drinking serpent-dragon, see Kuehn 2011, 155–157.

93 Birds drinking from a fountain is the central motif on a sixth-century marble sarcophagus now in the Archiepiscopal Museum of Ravenna, see Janes 1998, 102, fig. 5. Cf. Kuehn 2011, fig. 161 (serpents drinking from the fountain of life, in a canon table of the Vani Gospels, Constantinople, *c*. 1200).

94 See Delbrueck 1932, 176–179.

95 Cf. the remarkable fountain with knotted serpents forming a finial, as depicted in the mid-twelfth-century Seraglio Octateuch. A comparable fountain with an intertwined ophidian finial appears in a late twelfth-century illuminated Gospel book, now in the Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos. A closely related motif is found twice in a twelfth-century manuscript containing the sermons of Gregory of Nazianzos; Topkapı Sarayı Gr. 8, fol. 251v. Lowden 1992, 21–26.

The findings of this article's examination of the silk textiles with serpents thus complement Tronzo's hypothesis regarding the monumental iconography on the exterior of the Mantle, suggesting that it was envisioned as the king's ultimate garment.

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