Martine Meuwese*

King Arthur's Prowess: Visualising Arthur's Fight with the Terrible Cat

https://doi.org/10.1515/jias-2025-0006

Abstract: King Arthur's reputation as a great warrior is based mainly on his military victories as an army commander on the battlefield, but there are also individual victories where Arthur triumphs in one-on-one combat, either on horseback or on foot, as a heroic fighter for a good cause. In the French romance tradition, the story of King Arthur killing the cat of Lausanne is part of the campaign against Roman Emperor Lucius, who demands that Arthur pay him tribute. As a visual motif in medieval art, Arthur's fight with the monstrous cat did not enjoy a widespread popularity, which might explain why its visual tradition has not yet been studied in a comprehensive way. However, it is an important motif that visually demonstrates King Arthur's virtue and power. Apart from text illustration in Arthurian prose romance, the motif functioned – at a higher level – as an example of the fight of good against evil. Rulers identified with Arthur, and the fight with the monstrous cat was used in the context of personal propaganda.

This article studies the visual motif of King Arthur fighting the terrible cat across art forms, regions and centuries. It starts with its well-known but problematic first appearance on a floor mosaic in Southern Italy in the twelfth century, moving towards the West, where it occurs in other art forms and cultural contexts, up to modern comic books. This iconographic study on the motif leads to new interpretations, presents formerly undiscussed and unpublished manuscript illumination, reflects on a lost Romanesque mural painting, dismisses a sculpture from the Arthurian art canon, and suggests a new medieval representation of King Arthur's heroic fight against the monstrous cat.

Résumé: La réputation du roi Arthur comme grand guerrier repose principalement sur ses victoires en tant que commandant militaire sur le champ de bataille, mais il y a aussi des victoires individuelles où Arthur triomphe en combat singulier, à cheval ou à pied, en tant que combattant héroïque pour une bonne cause. Dans la tradition romanesque française, l'histoire du roi Arthur tuant le chat de Lausanne fait partie de la campagne contre l'empereur romain Lucius, qui exige qu'Arthur lui paie un tribut. En tant que motif visuel dans l'art médiéval, le combat d'Arthur contre le chat monstrueux n'a pas joui d'une grande popularité, ce qui pourrait

***Corresponding author: Martine Meuwese**, Utrecht University, The Netherlands,
E-Mail: M.L.Meuwese@uu.nl

expliquer pourquoi sa tradition iconographique n'a pas encore été étudiée de manière exhaustive. Cependant, il s'agit d'un motif important qui démontre visuellement la vertu et le pouvoir du roi Arthur. Outre l'illustration du texte dans les romans en prose arthuriens, le motif a fonctionné – à un niveau plus élevé – comme un exemple de la lutte du bien contre le mal. Les souverains s'identifiaient à Arthur et le combat contre le chat monstrueux était utilisé dans le cadre de la propagande personnelle.

Cet article étudie le motif iconographique du combat entre Arthur et le chat monstrueux à travers les formes d'art, les régions et les siècles. Il part de sa première apparition, bien connue mais problématique, sur une mosaïque de sol en Italie du Sud au XII[e] siècle, pour se diriger vers l'Occident, où il apparaît dans d'autres formes d'art et contextes culturels, jusqu'aux bandes dessinées modernes. Cette étude iconographique du motif conduit à de nouvelles interprétations, présente des enluminures non discutées et non publiées, réfléchit sur une peinture murale romane perdue, rejette une sculpture du canon de l'art arthurien et suggère une nouvelle représentation médiévale de la lutte héroïque du roi Arthur contre le chat monstrueux.

Zusammenfassung: Der Ruf von König Artus als großer Krieger gründet sich vor allem auf seine militärischen Siege als Heerführer auf dem Schlachtfeld, aber es gibt auch einzelne Siege, bei denen Artus im Zweikampf zu Pferd oder zu Fuß als heldenhafter Kämpfer für eine gute Sache triumphiert. In der französischen Romantradition ist die Geschichte von König Artus, der die Katze von Lausanne tötet, Teil des Feldzugs gegen den römischen Kaiser Lucius, der von Artus Tribut verlangt. Als ikonographisches Motiv in der mittelalterlichen Kunst erfreute sich Artus' Kampf mit der monströsen Katze keiner großen Beliebtheit, was erklären mag, warum seine visuelle Überlieferung noch nicht umfassend untersucht wurde. Dennoch handelt es sich um ein wichtiges Motiv, das die Tugendhaftigkeit und Macht von König Artus visuell demonstriert. Neben der Textillustration in der Artusprosa fungierte das Motiv – auf einer höheren Ebene – als Beispiel für den Kampf des Guten gegen das Böse. Die Herrscher identifizierten sich mit Artus, und der Kampf mit der monströsen Katze wurde im Rahmen der persönlichen Propaganda eingesetzt.

Dieser Artikel untersucht das ikonographische Motiv des Kampfes von König Artus gegen die schreckliche Katze in verschiedenen Kunstformen, Regionen und Jahrhunderten. Er beginnt mit seinem bekannten, aber problematischen ersten Auftreten auf einem Bodenmosaik in Süditalien im zwölften Jahrhundert und bewegt sich in Richtung Westen, wo es in anderen Kunstformen und kulturellen Kontexten auftritt, bis hin zu modernen Comics. Diese ikonografische Studie über das Motiv führt zu neuen Interpretationen, präsentiert bisher nicht diskutierte

und unveröffentlichte Manuskriptilluminationen, reflektiert eine verlorene romanische Wandmalerei, entlässt eine Skulptur aus dem Artus-Kanon und schlägt eine neue mittelalterliche Darstellung von König Artus' heroischem Kampf gegen die monströse Katze vor.

Keywords: Arthur, Cat of Lausanne, Otranto mosaic, manuscript illumination, iconography.

King Arthur and the Killer Cat in the Cathedral of Otranto

The Norman influence brought King Arthur to Southern Italy, where he is represented – as one of the first instances of Arthurian art – on the mosaic pavement of the Norman Cathedral of Santa Maria Annunziata in Otranto (Puglia). This mosaic in marble and stone is about 28 metres long and 10 metres wide, covering the entire church floor. It was constructed from East to West, from the apse to the entrance of the church. Inscriptions on the floor tell us that Archbishop Jonathan commissioned the mosaic, that presbyter Pantaleon supervised the execution in 1163–65, and that it was dedicated to the Norman King William I.[1] Other inscriptions mention the names of subjects or protagonists that are represented.

Central to the mosaic's composition is a huge tree, carried by two elephants, which 'grows' from the entrance into the apse. In and around the branches are isolated animals, hybrid creatures, naked people, and biblical scenes, such as the building of the tower of Babel or Noah's ark.[2] The extensive iconographic programme around this tree also depicts some topics from literature: the aerial flight

1 The inscription at the entrance of the church reads: 'EX IONATH[E] DONIS PER DEXTERAM PANTALEONIS / HOC OPUS INSIGNE EST SUPERANS IMPENDIA DIGNE' (The humble servant of Christ Jonathan, archbishop of Otranto, had this work made by the hand of priest Pantaleon). An inscription near the altar mentions King William I as 'REGE MAGNIFICO ET TRIUMPHATORE' (magnificent king and triumphator). Archival records at the time often refer to King William I and his son William II as 'rex magnificus' or 'triumphator', especially in a political or propaganda context. See Christine Ungruh, *Das Bodenmosaik der Kathedrale von Otranto (1163–1165). Normannische Herrscherideologie als Endzeitvision*, Studien zur Kunstgeschichte des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit 9 (Didymos-Verlag, 2013), pp. 29–30.

2 For an elaborate survey of the mosaic's iconographic programme, see Walter Haug, *Das Mosaik von Otranto. Darstellung, Deutung und Bilddokumentation* (Reichert Verlag, 1977); Carl Arnold Willemsen, *L'Enigma di Otranto. Il mosaico pavimentale del presbitero Pantaleone nella cattedrale* (Congedo, 1980); and Ungruh, *Das Bodenmosaik*.

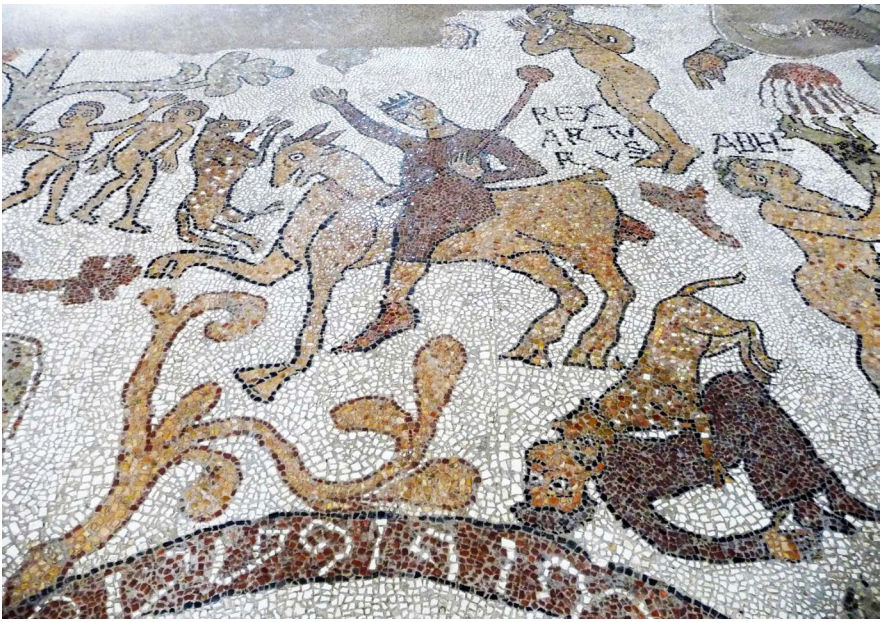

Fig. 1. King Arthur and the cat on the Otranto mosaic, 1163–65. Photo: author.

of King Alexander the Great and a representation of a king who is identified by the inscription as 'Rex Arturus' (King Arthur) (Fig. 1).[3]

The Arthurian scene is situated in the right part of the nave, close to the altar, above a series of roundels representing the Labours of the Months and the Zodiac. Arthur is placed above the month March with the Zodiac sign for 'Pisces' (fish), and between the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Earthly Paradise), and Cain killing his brother Abel. The mosaics in the aisles have smaller trees, also carried by animals and surrounded by figures and scenes.

Arthur, riding from right to left, confronts a spotted panther-like animal that jumps into the air before him. Below this scene, the same animal attacks the throat

3 The aerial flight of Alexander the Great was a popular iconographical motif, that in the context of the Otranto mosaic probably refers to life after death. See Martin Wierschin, 'Artus und Alexander im Mosaik der Kathedrale von Otranto', *Colloquia Germanica. Internationale Zeitschrift für germanische Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft*, 13 (1980), 1–34. For an extensive bibliography of older literature on Arthur in the Otranto mosaic, see Gloria Allaire, 'Arthurian Art References', in *The Arthur of the Italians. The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Italian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Gloria Allaire and F. Regina Psaki (University of Wales Press, 2014), pp. 233–46, at pp. 235–36.

of a man lying on his back on the ground. At the right of the inscription next to the king's head, a naked man – his hands raised in dismay – looks down at the dead victim. Highly diverse interpretations of this early and unique representation of King Arthur have been proposed. Unfortunately it cannot be traced to any known literary written source, but it is generally thought to show Arthur's fight with a huge monster cat (Cath Palug in Welsh, or C(h)apalu in French literature).[4] As it concerns a double scene, one might wonder whether Arthur is shown as the dying victim on the ground as well, or that an unspecified victim was added to the scene in order to demonstrate how dangerous the feline animal is.

Although Arthur usually conquers the animal, according to later stories, there also existed a narrative tradition that Arthur died in the fight with the monstrous cat or that the king disappeared after his victory over it. A Latin elegy by Henricus Septimellensis dated to c. 1193 mentions that Arthur fought and killed a monstrous beast, but that he did not come back from the fight, and that the Bretons still hope for his return. André de Coutance's *Li Romanz des Franceis* (Romance of the French), written before 1204, and the Occitan troubadour Peire Cardinal both tell that Arthur was killed while fighting the cat 'Capalu'.[5] However, this text clearly is a parodic variant as the cat then swims to England and becomes king in Arthur's place. A monster with the name Chapalu, having a cat's head and a horse's body, occurs in the early thirteenth-century epic *Bataille Loquifer* (Battle of Loquifer). The author of this text, Gandor de Brie, lived in Sicily. By the end of the twelfth century a legend developed that Arthur was still alive on the island of Sicily, living hidden away in the depths of Mount Etna.[6]

Even though we probably know what is represented in the Arthurian scene on the floor mosaic, many questions remain: What is Arthur holding in his left hand, and what does the gesture with his right arm mean? What kind of animal does he

4 The adjective 'Palug' means 'clawing'. The Welsh *Black Book of Caermarthen* – which was compiled between 1154 and 1189 but probably contains stories that first circulated in oral form – contains the poem 'Pa Gur' that refers to Kay preparing for an encounter with Cath Palug. See A. O. H. Jarman, 'The Arthurian allusions in the Black Book of Carmarthen', in *The Legend of Arthur in the Middle Ages. Studies presented to A. H. Diverres*, ed. by R. A. Lodge, C. E. Pickford, and E. K. C. Varty (Boydell & Brewer, 1983), pp. 99–112. Whether this concerns an animal (Palug's Cat) is not certain, though, as 'cath' can also mean 'battle'. See Helmut Nickel, 'About Palug's cat and the Mosaic of Otranto', *Arthurian Interpretations*, 3 (1989), 96–105, at pp. 96 and 101. The *Libro del Caballero Zifar*, written c. 1300 by a cleric of Toledo, mentions Arthur fighting 'El gato Paul'. Two fifteenth-century manuscripts of the *Libro del Caballero Zifar* exist (Madrid, BNF, M. 11.309 and Paris, BnF, Esp. 36); neither contains an illustration of Arthur's fight with the cat.

5 For these authors and texts, see Haug, *Das Mosaik von Otranto*, pp. 30–35.

6 P. Aebischer, 'Le chat de Lausanne. Examen critique d'un double mythe', *Revue historique vaudoise*, 84 (1976), 7–23, at p. 13; Haug, *Das Mosaik von Otranto*, pp. 34–35.

ride? Why is he wearing a crown and not the victim, and does this have implications for whether Arthur wins or loses the fight with the wild cat? Is the naked man who looks on in dismay a character from the story or just an ornamental figure?[7] And is there a reason why the Arthurian scene is inserted between the Expulsion from Paradise and Cain killing his brother Abel?

The restoration

Before answering these questions, it is important to know that the Arthurian scene was crudely restored in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This is clear from the drawing of this mosaic segment made by the antiquary Aubin-Louis Millin de Grandmaison (1759–1818) during his Grand Tour in February 1813.[8] This drawing is now kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris (Fig. 2). As Millin's drawing represents the bad state of the mosaic before this restoration, we know which parts were added or altered.[9] Arthur's current crown was added then, which explains why it does not fit him well and why there is no hair on Arthur's head under the crown.[10] It is likely that Arthur originally was crowned, though, con-

7 Wierschin, 'Artus und Alexander', p. 10, interprets the naked man as Adam. The authors Haug, *Das Mosaik von Otranto*, p. 38; Manuel Castiñeiras, 'D'Alexandre à Arthur. L'imaginaire Normand dans la mosaïque d'Otrante', *Les cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa*, 37 (2006), 135–53, at p. 149; and Jozef Janssens, *Koning Arthur in meervoud. De mythe ontrafeld* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017), p. 66, opt for a representation of Merlin as a wild man, but wild men are always completely hairy in medieval art. Ungruh, *Das Bodenmosaik*, pp. 217–18, mentions that even Perceval and Siegfried have been suggested for the naked man. It is highly unlikely that someone specific is represented here, as random naked men occur in all parts of the mosaic and there is no iconographic evidence for any of the suggested options.

8 A.-L. Millin, 'Voyages. Extrait de quelques lettres que M. Millin a adressées à la classe de la littérature ancienne de l'institut impérial, pendant son voyage d'Italie', *Magasin encyclopédique ou journal des sciences des lettres et des arts*, 2 (1814), 5–75, at p. 52, briefly described his visit to Otranto: 'Je me suis rendu à Lecce, chef-lieu de la terre d'Otrante, ville riche et bien habitée; mais je l'ai quittée aussitôt pour aller à Otrante. Je croyais cette ville charmante; c'est bien la plus laide et la moins habitable qu'on puisse imaginer. Je n'y ai trouvé d'ailleurs que quelques inscriptions et une mosaïque dans laquelle Alexandre et le Roi Arthur sont en aussi bonne compagnie que Roland à Brindisi'.

9 Castiñeiras, 'D'Alexandre à Arthur', p. 142, mentions that the first major damage to the Otranto mosaic was done by the Turkish invasion in 1480, and again during the baroque renovations of the church during the eighteenth century. For largely undocumented drastic restorations that took place in 1875–76, followed by 1881–1902, 1933, etc., see Ungruh, *Das Bodenmosaik*, p. 50. During the mosaic's recent restauration in 1981–91 no iconographic changes were made.

10 Castiñeiras, 'D'Alexandre à Arthur', p. 143, assumes, based on Millin's drawing, that Arthur originally wore a 'bonnet', which is unlikely.

Fig. 2. King Arthur on the Otranto mosaic before restauration. Drawing by Aubin-Louis Millin, 1813. Paris, BnF, Estampes, GB 63 Fol., fol. 15r. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

sidering the inscription 'rex' and the fact that all other kings in the mosaic wear a crown.[11] The scene with the victim on the ground would then demonstrate that the cat was extremely dangerous and had killed before. On the other hand, if Arthur originally did not wear a crown, he would look identical to the man who is killed by the cat, which would imply that Arthur dies in this fight.[12]

11 Other rulers on the Otranto mosaic with a crown and the word 'rex'/'regina' in the inscription are: Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, Alexander the Great, and the King of Ninive.

12 Janssens, *Koning Arthur in meervoud*, p. 66; Haug, *Das Mosaik von Otranto*, pp. 89–90, assumes that the cat kills Arthur in Otranto.

Fig. 3. A horse on the Otranto mosaic, 1163–65. Photo: author.

During the nineteenth-century restoration Arthur's horse obtained the look of a goat-like creature with horns, cloven hoofs, prominent testicles and a short tail – which confused many scholars up till now.[13] It would make most sense if Arthur would ride a horse, but why then does the animal have horns, cloven hoofs, a short

13 E. Bertaux, *L'art dans l'Italie méridionale*, vol. 1 (Albert Fontemoing, 1904), pp. 488–90, introduced the interpretation as a goat. After the standard work of R. S. Loomis and L. H. Loomis, *Arthu-*

Fig. 4. A goat on the Otranto mosaic, 1163–65. Photo: author.

tail and prominent testicles, which all seem appropriate for a goat? However, if it is meant to be a goat, why then does it lack the typical goatee, and why should Arthur ride a goat at all? In late-medieval allegorical iconography a goat can be a symbol of lechery, but that connotation does not suit Arthur, neither in stories, nor in this mosaic's context, as we shall see later. Furthermore, Arthur's mount visually has much in common with horses elsewhere on the mosaic: they have cloven hoofs, but no horns (Fig. 3). The 'horns' of Arthur's animal are now quite short and sharply pointed, but Millin's drawing shows that before the restoration, the elements protruding from the animal's head were much longer and not pointed at all. Walter Haug suggested they may originally have been the reins that were changed into horns by the restorer, who perhaps was confused in the animal's identity because of the cloven hoofs.[14] I would like to enter the reservation that the so-called testicles

rian Legends in Medieval Art (Modern Language Association of America, 1938), p. 36, the interpretation as a goat became common in Arthurian studies and beyond.

14 Haug, *Das Mosaik von Otranto*, pp. 36–37, and Janssens, *Koning Arthur in meervoud*, p. 64, already identified the mount as a horse.

Fig. 5. Hunting scene in the apse of the cathedral in Otranto, 1163–65. Photo: author.

seem no more than a surviving part of a fragmentarily preserved branch with leaves of the tree that was situated behind the animal. Elsewhere on the mosaic goats have no testicles, but they do have goatees (Fig. 4). If Arthur was originally meant to ride a goat, the goatee would be important to avoid a visual misunderstanding, but according to Millin's drawing nothing was restored under the animal's head. Arthur's outstretched right arm was also added at the restoration, but it may well be Arthur's original gesture as it has a widespread late-antique iconographic tradition. A similar man on horseback with an outstretched right arm is represented in the apse mosaic. He is a hunter who killed a wild boar with his spear (Fig. 5).

At the time of the mosaic's creation, Otranto cathedral was in the Norman principality of Taranto. The mosaic floor of Taranto Cathedral, which is dated to 1160,

is heavily damaged, but there is a striking visual resemblance between a generic nude man holding a stick and sitting on horseback in Taranto with the Arthurian composition on the floor of Otranto.[15] Nobody questioned the Taranto animal, that also has cloven hoofs and an atypical head, as being a horse. Hence, I do not support the common interpretation of Arthur riding a goat. Apart from the evidence presented above, it would be odd to represent a 'negative character' (a representation of lechery) to fight a devilish monster, as it is the battle of good against evil that is central to the iconographical programme of this mosaic.

King Arthur in the mosaic's cultural context

During the reign of King William I of Sicily (r. 1154–66), the Norman dynasty ruled Sicily and the south of Italy, but Roman and Byzantine artistic traditions still circulated in this region.[16] Otranto had an important and strategically well-defensible port that also served as an assembly point for crusaders. Originally a Greek province, of great importance to the Romans for maritime trading purposes, and part of the Byzantine Empire till 1071, Otranto became a crossroads of cultural exchange between East and West. The name of the priest Pantaleon, who according to the inscription supervised the execution of Otranto's mosaic floor, implies that he was a Greek, probably from the important Byzantine monastery of St. Nicola di Casole, at about two kilometres from Otranto. It is assumed that Pantaleon knew the floor mosaic of the Cathedral of Taranto before he started working on the iconographic programme of the mosaic in Otranto.[17] Bishop Jonathan, who commissioned the mosaic, may have been of Norman descent himself, but in any case he supported Norman political propaganda.[18] Hence it is not surprising that the Otranto mosaic

15 See Willemsen, *L'Enigma di Otranto*, plate LXVIb; on p. 134, he describes this Taranto-scene as 'tondo con un arciere a cavallo' (roundel with an archer on horseback). The 'unicorn' in the c. 1160 floor mosaic in the Byzantine church of Santa Maria del Patir (Calabria) also has cloven hoofs.

16 A Late Roman geometrical mosaic, which decorated the pre-Norman basilica, was found underneath the Norman mosaic floor. See M. T. Giannotta and F. Gabelone, 'New data from buried archives and 3D Reconstruction. The Late Roman Mosaic in Otranto (Italy)', *International Conference on Heritage and New Technologies*, 20 (2015).

17 See especially Ungruh, *Das Bodenmosaik*, pp. 27, 35; and Willemsen, *L'Enigma di Otranto*, p. 37.

18 Castiñeiras, 'D'Alexandre à Arthur', pp. 145–47.

in its entirety shows contemporary Norman influences and iconographical motifs that clearly refer to older Roman and Byzantine traditions.[19]

The composition of the Arthurian scene on the Otranto mosaic is similar to Late Antique hunting scenes, especially since the monstrous cat has a spotted fur and thus looks like a predator such as a tiger or a panther. Images of lion and panther hunts were popular in both Late Antique and Byzantine culture. Hunting motifs frequently decorated sarcophagi and mosaic floors, referring metaphorically to the defeat of enemies and to the conqueror's strength and triumph in battle. Hunting imagery was thus associated with triumph. The gesture of the outstretched right arm ('dextra elata') of the horseman traditionally displays authority and the ability to subjugate enemies.[20] Hunting imagery with an outstretched right arm for the victor was often used on floor mosaics of Roman villas and on sarcophagi.[21] On the Late Antique Ludovisi sarcophagus (Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano, c. 250 AD) showing Romans defeating Barbarians, for example, the man in the centre is shown as triumphant on a horse, with his right arm outstretched. An example of this gesture in hunting imagery is the third century AD Roman sarcophagus, now functioning as a fountain at the church square in Spoleto (Fig. 6). The body position of the central victor is like Arthur in Otranto, and the scene on the right, where a lion kills a man lying on the ground, has a similar composition as the monster cat biting its victim's throat in Otranto.

Arthur is shown on the mosaic without a lance, sword or shield. The club of some kind that Arthur carries in his left hand over his shoulder is also held by the

19 A typically Roman motif is the 'spinario' (boy removing a thorn from his foot) at the month of March. Byzantine influence is obvious at the scene of Dismas standing at the gates of Paradise, the presence of Kairos (Opportunity), and in Greek words and references to Orthodox liturgy. See Ungruh, *Das Bodenmosaik*, pp. 239, 242–44, 278–81.

20 For this gesture in Roman Imperial hunting scenes, see Steven L. Tuck, 'The origins of Roman Imperial hunting imagery: Domitian and the redefinition of Virtus under the Principate', *Greece & Rome*, 52 (2005), 221–45. For hunting scenes on Byzantine floor mosaics, see Mohammad Nassar, 'The art of decorative mosaics (hunting scenes) from Madaba area during Byzantine period (5th–6th c. AD)', *Mediterranean Archeology and Archaeometry*, 13 (2013), 67–76. The position of the horse's raised foreleg also fits into Classical triumph iconography.

21 Examples are the c. 400 AD mosaic in the House of Bacchus in Djemila (Algeria); the c. 250 AD mosaic in El Jem (Thysdrus); the hunter Dulcitius in a villa in Castéjon (Navarra); the late Roman mosaic pavement currently in the British Museum (no. 1967,0405.17), and the hunting horseman from Carthage (British Museum, no. 1967,0405.18). This hunting motif also appears isolated on silk fabric, e. g. see the panel of a late Antique tunic in the Victoria and Albert Museum (no. 334–1887). Secular hunting motifs also decorated church floors: the mosaic in the nave of the Byzantine basilica of Kissufim (a former Roman province in Gaza), dating to 578, depicts a Byzantine nobleman on horseback, spearing a leopard with his lance. Ungruh often refers to similar compositions in sixth-century mosaics from Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

Fig. 6. Roman sarcophagus with hunting scenes, now at the church square in Spoleto, 3rd century AD. Photo: author.

naked man in the apse, who is walking behind the hunter making the triumphant gesture with his right arm (Fig. 5). It is also similar in shape to the club that Cain holds to kill his brother Abel, to the right of the Arthurian scene. A club is the traditional attribute of giants, fools and wild men in medieval iconography, but that does not explain the club-like stick (or mace or sceptre) Arthur carries over his shoulder. The object does not seem to be a sceptre, which is common for a ruler enthroned.[22] There is another, less well-known possibility, though, which refers to a Norman iconographic tradition: the 'baculum'. On the Bayeux Tapestry, made soon after 1066 in Canterbury, the protagonists William the Conqueror and his half-brother Bishop Odo carry a club or mace on the battlefield (Fig. 7). An inscription on the embroidery calls this object a 'baculum'.[23] When carried by a rider on horseback,

22 For the interpretation of Arthur holding a sceptre, see Loomis and Loomis, *Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art*, p. 36; H. Birkhan, 'Altgermanische Miszellen aus fünfzehn Zettelkästchen gezogen. Nr. 15 Rex Arturus in der Kathedrale von Otranto', in *Festgabe für Otto Höfler zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. by H. Birkhan (Braumüller, 1976), pp. 62–66; *Arturus Rex. I Catalogus. Koning Artur en de Nederlanden*, ed. by Werner Verbeke (Leuven University Press, 1987), p. 54; Janssens, *Koning Arthur in meervoud*, p. 66. The only ruler on the mosaic holding a sceptre (that looks quite different) is King Solomon.

23 *Baculum* has several potential translations, including a stylised and shortened bishop's staff, as well as a rod, sceptre or baton. An inscription on the Bayeux Tapestry calls it a 'baculum' at scene 54: 'HIC ODO EPISCOPUS BACULU[M] TENENS CONFORTAT PUEROS' (Here Odo the bishop holding

Fig. 7. William of Normandy shown as military leader with a 'baculum' in his hand. Bayeux Tapestry, soon after 1066. Photo: Wikimedia.

it functioned as a symbol of authority, rather than a weapon, since it is restricted to high-status commanders.

In conclusion, there seems to be an intended Norman royal propaganda connotation for the Arthurian scene on the Otranto floor mosaic.[24] On the one hand, the iconography of the mosaic shows a mix of several local cultures, addressing the diverse

a 'baculum' strengthens the boys). See Michael John Lewis, 'Identity and Status in the Bayeux Tapestry. The iconographic and artefactual evidence', *Anglo Norman Studies*, 29 (2006), 100–20, at p. 106.

24 Wierschin, 'Artus und Alexander', interprets the mosaic differently, as Arthur representing emperor Frederick I, and Alexander as pope Alexander III.

people of Otranto. On the other hand, there may be an indirect visual reference through King Arthur to the Norman King William I of Sicily's namesake, William the Conqueror, who conquered England a hundred years before. It is important to keep in mind that King William I of Sicily was not only mentioned in the mosaic's inscription as a magnificent king, but also as 'triumphator'. Ungruh states that the mosaic's entire iconographic program is focused on Psalms 148–50, which glorify the Lord, and through them the temporal Norman ruler as God's representative on earth.[25] Arthur was a brave warrior who united people under his authority, as the Normans did in Southern Italy. Since both the mosaic as a whole and this scene deal with the battle of good versus evil, King Arthur must be interpreted here as a positive, triumphant figure with both antique and Norman connotations, riding towards Paradise.

King Arthur Fighting the Cat in French Manuscripts

Suite Vulgate du Merlin

In the French Arthurian romance tradition, the story of King Arthur fighting the monster cat is told in the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin*, a continuation of the *Merlin* branch in the prose *Lancelot-Grail* cycle, which was written in the first decades of the thirteenth century.[26] Toward the end of the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin*, two solo fights showing Arthur's prowess are part of the episode dealing with Arthur's campaign against the Roman Emperor Lucius. Arthur first fights the giant of Mont Saint-Michel in single combat, after which he and his army defeat the Romans on the continent. Arthur then sends Emperor Lucius's body to Rome as his way of paying tribute. The final fight in this episode deals with Arthur killing the cat of Lausanne.

25 Ungruh, *Das Bodenmosaik*, pp. 191–92, 195–96, does not include the representation of Arthur in her hypothesis, probably because she assumes – following the common interpretation – that he is represented as a sinner riding a goat and that he will be defeated by the cat.

26 *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances, edited from manuscripts in the British Museum. 2 Lestoire de Merlin*, ed. by H. Oskar Sommer (AMS Press, 1979), pp. 441–44; or in translation: *Lancelot-Grail. The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation. 1 The History of the Holy Grail (translated by Carol J. Chase), The Story of Merlin (translated by Rupert T. Pickens)*, ed. by Norris J. Lacy (Garland, 1993), pp. 410–12; *Le Livre du Graal I. Joseph d'Arimathie, Merlin, Les Premiers Faits du roi Arthur*, ed. Daniel Poirion and Philippe Walther (Gallimard, 2001), pp. 1606–16. In 1326, Lodewijk van Velthem translated the cat episode in Middle-Dutch verse in his *Merlijncontinuatie*: 'Hoe die koninck Artur street tegen ene vreeslike catte' (How King Arthur fought a terrible cat), vv. 34979–81.

According to this text, Merlin informs Arthur that there are local people at the Lake of Lausanne who need his help against a huge and frightening cat 'filled with devils'. Four years before, a poor fisherman cast his nets in the Lake of Lausanne and promised the first fish he would catch to God. He caught a beautiful big pike, which he decided to keep, in order to give the next fish to God. The next catch, however, was worth even more than the first, so the fisherman decided to keep it for himself as well; God would have the third catch. The third time the fisherman pulled out a black kitten that he could use well to rid his house of rats and mice, so he kept the cat too. It soon grew up to a monstrous size, killed the fisherman and his family and fled to a mountain near the lake, where it started terrorising the surrounding countryside. This cat monster was considered as a sign that God was wroth with the fisherman for breaking his oath.

At Merlin's insistence, Arthur sets out for the Lake of Lausanne. King Lot, King Ban, and the knights Gawain and Gaheriet accompany Arthur and Merlin to climb the mountain. Approaching the top, they spot a cave inside the rock, where the cat lives. When Merlin whistles, the hungry cat comes out of the cave and rushes upon Arthur. It takes the shaft of Arthur's lance in its teeth and breaks it off. Arthur now draws his sword and holds his shield in front of his chest. In the great fight that follows, the cat digs his forefeet so deeply into the king's shield that it cannot withdraw them. Arthur then strikes off the cat's forelegs. When the cat now attacks him with his hind legs, clawing into his hauberk, Arthur strikes these off as well. The cat won't give up that easily; when the now legless creature jumps at him, Arthur slices the body open with his sword, thus killing the monster. Arthur's heroic deed brings peace to the local people and there is much rejoicing. The mountain that was originally called 'Mont du lac' (Mountain of the lake) shall henceforth be called 'Mont du chat' (Mountain of the cat).

The *Suite Vulgate du Merlin* thus mentions a 'Mont du chat' near the Lake of Lausanne, the current Lake of Geneva. E. Freymond investigated several possible sites for Arthur's supposed fight with the cat. He rejected the localisation near Lausanne, as there is neither a 'Mont du Chat', nor a local legend referring to such a fight at, or near, Lausanne. A more suitable option would be the 'Mont du Chat' (1400 metres high), which is situated some 30 miles south of Geneva, near Lake Bourget in the French Alps. It was already mentioned by this name in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sources. What is more, in the nineteenth century stories were still told in that region about a fight with a cat, be it by a knight or soldier as the victorious hero.[27]

27 E. Freymond, *Artus' Kampf mit dem Katzenungetüm. Eine Episode der Vulgata des 'Livre d'Artus'. Die Sage und ihre lokalisierung in Savoyen* (Max Niemeyer, 1899); Nickel, 'About Palug's cat', p. 98.

Although Arthur's defeat of 'the Cat of Lausanne' was an act of bravery, it was not a popular topic for illustration in *Suite Vulgate du Merlin* manuscripts. As far as I know, only four miniatures in manuscripts containing this text depict the fight. These instances are all column-wide miniatures, made in the region of Northern France and the Southern Netherlands or in Paris, c. 1300–1410.[28] The miniatures will be discussed in chronological order of the manuscripts in which they occur.

The first manuscript, or rather the remains of a manuscript, is Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale, L.III.12, fol. 49v (Fig. 8). It was made in Thérouanne or Ghent, c. 1300. The codex was severely damaged in the fire at Turin's Biblioteca Nazionale in 1904. The very fragile remains are still under restoration, which explains why the 'material' miniatures cannot be consulted and remain largely unpublished. This explains why this illustration has not been reproduced before.[29] This manuscript was illustrated by the same artist as another copy of this text in Paris, BnF, fr. 749, which has no illustration for this episode. Both manuscripts have exceptional heraldry for King Arthur: gold, three crowns gules, which emphasises the manuscripts' kinship and northern provenance.[30] The Turin miniature showing Arthur's fight against the cat was damaged by the fire, but the general composition of the illustration is clear. On the left, a man with curly hair wearing a pinkish surcoat, probably Merlin, points to the right, in the direction of Arthur fighting the monster cat with his sword. In the centre, Arthur stands at the waterside with fish, next to a rock changing into a mountain towards the right. He is wearing full armour, including a crowned helmet and a red sword belt decorated with little white ornaments. The right side of the miniature cannot be seen in all its detail, but judging from the photograph Arthur

28 I follow the localisation and dates by Alison Stones in her Lancelot-Grail Chronological and Geographical Distribution List: https://www.lancelot-project.pitt.edu/LG-web/Arthur-LG-ChronGeog.html.

29 The miniature was mentioned in Irène Fabry-Tehranchi, 'Conception et production d'un manuscrit enluminé atypique. La réalisation colloborative et échelonnée de New Haven, Beinecke Library, 227 (1357)', *Perspectives Médiévales*, 38 (2017); and Simonetta Castronovo, *La biblioteca dei Conti di Savoia e la pittura in area Savoiarda (1285–1343)* (Allemandi, 2002), p. 191. With special thanks to Dott. Fabio Uliana from the Biblioteca Nazionale in Turin for generously providing the photograph.

30 These crowns symbolise Arthur's reign over his three realms, but the colours are usually reversed: 'gules, three crowns or'. These arms also occur for Arthur in a Middle Dutch manuscript of Jacob van Maerlant's *Spiegel Historiael* (The Hague, KB, KA 20) that was probably made in Ghent between c. 1315–35. See Martine Meuwese, 'De omzwervingen van enkele boodschappers en een jongleur. Van Bologna via Oxford en Parijs naar Vlaanderen', *Maar er is meer. Avontuurlijk lezen in de epiek van de Lage Landen. Studies voor Jozef D. Janssens*, ed. by R. Sleiderink, V. Uyttersprot, and B. Besamusca (Davidsfonds, 2005), pp. 338–57.

Fig. 8. King Arthur fights the monstrous cat, c. 1300. *Suite vulgate du Merlin*, Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale, L.III.12, fol. 49v. Photo: BN, Turin/photograph: Fabio Uliana.

Fig. 9. King Arthur fights the monstrous cat, c. 1317. *Suite vulgate du Merlin*, London, BL, Add. 10292, fol. 209v. Photo: BL, with permission from the *Lancelot-Grail Project*.

seems to hit a greyish cat-like monster, standing on its hind legs, on the head.[31] The background of the miniature is pinkish red with white geometrical decoration. There is no rubric above or below the miniature.

31 It is hard to tell with certainty from the photograph whether there is a cave on the right of the cat. Castronovo, *La biblioteca dei Conti di Savoia*, p. 191, does not mention a cave in her description of the miniature.

A well-known miniature illustrating this episode is London, BL, Add. 10292, fol. 209v, made in Thérouanne or Ghent c. 1317 (Fig. 9).[32] This manuscript was used by Oskar Sommer for his text edition of the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle. The main illuminator of this codex was involved in two more copies of the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle. However, these related manuscripts do not contain an illustration of Arthur's fight with the cat, as one of the sister manuscripts (*olim*-Amsterdam, BPH 1) only contains the *Merlin* without the *Suite Vulgate*; and the other (London, British Library, Royal 14 E III) does not contain the *Merlin* at all. The illustration of Arthur's fight against the cat in Add. 10292 was painted by another illuminator than the main hand. The battle scene is set against a (damaged) gold background. It shows King Arthur standing in full armour, wearing a white surcoat, a sword belt, and a red crown on top of the helmet. His shield shows random heraldry of little white crosses on a yellow background. Arthur cuts off the first of the monster's front legs that are attached to his shield. The cat is black, with long red nails on the paws, probably emphasising its wild nature. The illustration follows the text in the previous column closely as it is unique in showing the four knightly companions who climbed the hill with Arthur and Merlin. Two of them can be identified as kings by the red crown on top of their helmets, which corresponds to the information in the text. There hardly is an indication of a natural setting in this miniature, apart from a bit of sand or rock under the feet of the knights. The space for a rubric above the miniature is left blank.

The third miniature (Beinecke, Yale 227, fol. 307v) was also made in the 'northern' region, in Tournai (Fig. 10).[33] The text in this manuscript was copied in 1357 by Jehan de Loles, as is mentioned in the manuscript's colophon.[34] The fight is set against a background of a geometrical motif in gold on red. Arthur wears metal gauntlets and a red surcoat that is longer at the back, conforming to the fashion at the time of production, over his chain mail. He has a golden crown on top of his helmet and a 'vair' shield, which is exceptional for him in the heraldic tradition, but it is consistent with his arms in the rest of the manuscript. Arthur is raising his sword to cut off the black cat's front paw, which is stuck into the shield. The rubric above the miniature reads: 'Comment li rois Artuz se combat fierement au chaut'

32 Reproduced in Alison Stones, 'Illustration and the Fortunes of Arthur', *The Fortunes of King Arthur*, ed. by Norris J. Lacy (Brewer, 2005), pp. 116–65. For the group of manuscripts from the same workshop to which Add. 10292 belongs, see A. Stones and M. Meuwese (eds.), *The Lancelot-Grail Project. Pictorial choices in three related manuscripts*, Manuscripta Illuminata, vol. 6 (Brepols, 2025).
33 This miniature was reproduced in Fabry-Tehranchi, 'Conception et production'. The manuscript contains the *Estoire*, *Merlin* and *Suite Vulgate du Merlin*.
34 'Cis livres fu par escripit l'an mil.ccc. lvij. le premier samedi de guillet et le fist Jehan de Loles escrivemnes de hainnaut pries pour lui et ce que vous en dires puissiez vous avoir soit bien soit mal' (1 July 1357).

Fig. 10. King Arthur fights the monstrous cat, Tournai, 1357. *Suite vulgate du Merlin*, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Ms. Yale 227, fol. 307v. Photo: Yale, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

(How King Arthur fiercely fights the cat). A note in a different hand, written in black ink, to the right of the miniature, clearly is a colour instruction for the miniaturist: 'et le chat tout noir' (and the cat all black).[35] Apparently the colour of the cat was considered important to be rendered correctly.

The last, and youngest, miniature in a *Lancelot-Grail* manuscript depicting Arthur's fight with the cat was made in Paris c. 1410. The manuscript contains the *Merlin* and the *Suite Vulgate*, followed by Jean Cuvelier's *Bertrand du Guesclin*. The manuscript's current whereabouts are unknown, apart from the fact that it

35 See Fabry-Tehranchy, 'Conception et production'.

Fig. 11. King Arthur fights the monstrous cat, c. 1410. *Suite vulgate du Merlin*, Antiquariat Günther Cat. 3, 1995, lot. 11, fol. 318v. Photo reproduced with the courtesy of Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books, Basel.

is owned by a Swiss private collector. Fortunately, the folio with the miniature was reproduced in full colour in the catalogue of the last auction house that sold the manuscript (Günther Cat. 3, 1995, lot. 11, on fol. 318v) (Fig. 11).[36] The rubric under the miniature reads: 'Comment le roy Artus se combat contre le chat' (How King Arthur fights against the cat). The composition of the miniature showing Arthur's fight with the cat is in mirror-image, compared to the three older miniatures. Arthur, with a golden crown on top of his helmet, now wears a white surcoat over his more modern plate armour. He stands to the right of the animal. A nearly white

36 See Jörn Günther, *Katalog 3. Mittelalterliche Handschriften und Miniaturen* (Jörn Günther Antiquariat, 1995), pp. 68–80. The manuscript was formerly owned by the Duke of Newcastle.

cat has clutched its forelegs into Arthur's plain white shield. This miniature omits the claw-cutting scenes, focusing on the outcome of the battle, as Arthur pierces his sword in the monster's chest, which bleeds heavily. The fight does not take place on a rocky mountain near the waterside, but rather the opposite: in a green valley, against a sky that turns from white to blue. Hence this miniature is less text-specific than the older illustrations depicting the fight.

The four manuscripts illustrating Arthur's fight against the cat are relatively late copies in the illuminated *Suite Vulgate du Merlin* tradition: no less than twelve surviving thirteenth-century manuscripts with illustrations for this text predate the Turin manuscript. All four illustrations were inserted at different parts of the text episode. The Turin miniature is inserted within Merlin's story about the terrible cat; the ex-Günther miniature occurs when the Arthurian delegation has climbed the hill; the London illustration is placed before the beginning of the fight; and the Beinecke image is inserted after Arthur has cut off the monster's front legs. Furthermore, each miniature depicting Arthur's fight with the cat highlights different details, demonstrating that there is no standardised iconography, apart from the depiction of the two protagonists: they all show King Arthur wearing a crown, fighting on foot with a sword and a shield against a big cat-like monster standing on its hind legs.[37] These common visual elements can be considered the basic 'requirements' for the illustration of this episode in French manuscripts.

The Parisian c. 1410 miniature does not yet mark the end of the manuscript tradition depicting Arthur's fight with the monstrous cat. Although the topic was no longer illustrated in manuscripts of the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin* that were produced in the rest of the fifteenth century, it revives once more in a different literary manuscript context in early sixteenth-century France.

37 The composition of Arthur fighting the cat in manuscripts is somewhat similar to the iconography of Gawain cutting off a lion's paw at the Wonder Bed episode of Chrétien's *Perceval*, although that visual motif concerns a knight (instead of a king), a maned lion (instead of a cat-like creature) and an interior scene. Stones, 'Illustration and the Fortunes of Arthur', p. 908, links the motif of a black cat to Cathar heresy in the Vienna *Bible Moralisée* manuscripts, made for Parisian royal circles. In Jean de Vignay's *Miroir Historial*, St. Dominic preaches to heretic women. When he tells them that they shall see the Lord that they have served, a horrible cat springs forth with great flaming eyes, a long bloody tongue, and a short tail, mounting up by the bell rope and leaving a great stench, after which the ladies convert. It is rendered as a black cat in a miniature illustrating this story in a manuscript made in Paris 1400–10 (The Hague, KB, 72 A 24, fol. 313v). However, there is no connection with heresy for this Arthurian cat motif.

Pierre Sala's *Prouesses et Hardiesses*

The text of the early thirteenth-century prose *Lancelot-Grail* cycle was still popular at the end of the Middle Ages and in the early sixteenth century. Pierre Sala (1457–1529) retold the story of Arthur's heroic fight with the monster cat in *Les Prouesses et Hardiesses de plusieurs empereurs ou rois*. Sala's text has come down to us in two early sixteenth-century manuscripts, representing two closely related text versions that are redactions of the author himself.[38] The frame narrative of this text contains about forty stories, usually written in prose, alternately told by three ladies during a single day. These stories about heroic emperors and kings from the past were part of the well-known literary tradition at the time. The text begins with King David, followed by Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Arthur, etc., up to the first French Renaissance King François I, to whom Sala dedicated his text.

King Arthur's deeds are told by the third lady in the chapter 'Hardiesses du roy Artus' (King Arthur's boldness). This chapter describes three heroic exploits of Arthur fighting against two dangerous giants and the monstrous cat. Arthur's first fight against Frollo, on an island near Paris, does not derive from the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin*, as it is based on the historical tradition of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittanniae* and Wace's *Brut*. The second heroic deed in Sala's text is Arthur's defeat of the giant of Mont Saint-Michel. Geoffrey and Wace describe the fight against Frollo and against the giant of Mont Saint-Michel, but they do not mention the third fight with the cat, whereas only Arthur's combat against the giant of Mont Saint-Michel and the cat are told in the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin*. Sala's lady first describes it as a huge and hideous monster, exemplifying only later in the story that it concerns a black cat.

After the lady's stories about Arthur's three heroic fights, Sala takes over as the narrator in a fourth section on Arthur. He mentions that he read about Arthur's battle with the terrible cat in the 'Livre de Merlin', thus clearly referring to the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin* as his literary source.[39] Sala follows this text, but as he knew the geography of the area where the fight was situated, in contrast to the author of the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin*, he knew that the 'Mont du Chat' was not situated at the Lac de Lausanne, but at the Lac du Bourget. Hence Sala corrected his literary source

38 Richard Trachsler, 'Le monde Arthurien revisité au XVI[e] siècle. Pierre Sala dans la grotte du chat monstrueux', in *Le monde et l'autre monde. Actes du colloque Arthurien de Rennes (8–9 mars 2001)*, ed. by Denis Hüe and Christine Ferlampin Acher (Paradigme, 2002), pp. 381–96, at p. 383.

39 Jane Taylor, *Rewriting Arthurian romance in Renaissance France. From manuscript to printed book* (Boydell & Brewer, 2014), p. 12, n. 6, suggests that Sala may have read the story in Vérard's edition of 1498.

tacitly by omitting the mention of the Lac de Lausanne in his version of the story.[40] Another aspect of Sala's text is also important: he describes in detail how in 1510, by sheer literary tourism, he followed Arthur's footsteps and travelled to the Lake of Bourget, as he was eager to see the spot where King Arthur had engaged the cat in combat. Sala also visited the cave where the cat was supposed to have lived, and he introduced the Seigneur of Loissy as an 'authority' for the story. This nobleman claimed descendance from one of Arthur's knights as his ancestor, 'Le Chevelu', who had been granted the land around the lake by King Arthur himself.[41]

The first manuscript (Paris, BnF, fr. 584) is dated by François Avril to 1512–14, and by Richard Trachsler to soon after 1515.[42] It has opening miniatures for the chapters on King David and Alexander the Great, after which the spaces for miniatures remained blank. Therefore, at the beginning of the stories on Caesar and Arthur (on fol. 26v) only the miniature's frames were sketched. The second manuscript (Paris, BnF, fr. 10420) is dated to 1522–23.[43] The lay-out of this codex was more modest as it only contains historiated initials. This is probably the copy dedicated to King François I, as the king's arms and motto are painted on fol. 8v, and the prologue explicitly mentions that the king visited Sala at his home in Lyon. The text opens with a full-page presentation miniature, showing the Saône in the foreplan and an architectural overview of the city of Lyon, including Sala's house in the hills. Sala is shown kneeling in front of the house, presenting his book to the king and his entourage. Both Sala manuscripts were illuminated in Lyon by the same illuminator, Guillaume Leroy II, who, among others, also illustrated a *Traité des armoiries de la Table Ronde* (Paris, Ars., 4976).[44]

The Arthurian illustration in Paris, BnF, fr. 10420, fol. 40v, which to my knowledge has not been reproduced or discussed before, is set in the opening initial 'A' of the chapter on King Arthur (Fig. 12). It depicts the three fights that are described in the text: the first shown as a fight on horseback and the other two on foot. The space in the upper part of the initial shows Arthur fighting on horseback with

40 Trachsler, 'Le monde Arthurien revisité', p. 386.

41 See Trachsler, 'Le monde Arthurien revisité', p. 387, for an edition of this episode.

42 François Avril and Nicole Reynaud, *Les manuscrits à peintures en France 1440–1520* (Flammarion – BnF, 1993), p. 365; Richard Trachsler, 'Pierre Sala et le récit-cadre. "Les prouesses et hardiesses de plusieurs roys et empereurs" entre la compilation médiévale et le receuil de nouvelles', *Reinardus*, 11 (1998), 185–203, at pp. 191–92, points out that the manuscript should be dated after 26 May 1515 as the manuscript mentions King François I heroically fighting a wild boar, which happened on that day.

43 Avril and Reynaud, *Les manuscrits à peintures*: 1523; Trachsler, 'Pierre Sala et le récit-cadre': 1522–23.

44 Avril and Reynaud, *Les manuscrits à peintures*, pp. 362–65.

Fig. 12. Arthur fighting Rion, the giant of Mont Saint-Michel, and the terrible cat, c. 1523. Pierre Sala, *Les Prouesses et Hardiesses de plusieurs empereurs ou rois*, Paris, BnF, fr. 10420, fol. 40v. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

Frollo, set on a green island with a ridge of hills in the background, and thus not recognisable as a setting in or near Paris. At the left side of the lower part of the initial, Arthur fights the giant of Mont Saint-Michel, who is armed with a club, on a big rock next to a river. On the right, on another rock, Arthur fights the cat that stands on its hind legs, stuck with its forepaws in Arthur's shield (Fig. 13). The cave is visible above them. The depiction of Arthur's fight with the cat thus corresponds to the miniatures in *Suite Vulgate du Merlin* manuscripts. The tiny figures in this

Fig. 13. Detail of Fig. 12: Arthur fighting the terrible cat.

initial are painted as black silhouettes, highlighted with gold. Arthur does not wear a crown, probably because the very small space available would not allow that much detail.

It is very interesting that Sala explicitly refers to a work of monumental art depicting Arthur's fight with the cat. In the fourth Arthurian sequence Sala mentions that he has seen a painting (*paincte a vif*) of Arthur's battle with the cat in the Benedictine Abbey of St. Nicolas in Angers. The older text version (BnF, fr. 584) mentions that the painting was situated in 'the refectory', whereas the younger manuscript (BnF, fr. 10420) has 'cloister', which is probably meant as a more generic reference to the monastery, although the term can also refer to the square of covered and arcaded walkways next to the church. Richard Trachsler interpreted Sala's remark as a reference to a – now lost – mural painting in the refectory, which seems likely.[45] Since the detailed account of Sala's touristic journey seems reliable in all its detail,

45 Trachsler, 'Le monde Arthurien revisité', pp. 388, 394. The sculpted capitals in the Angers cloister, dating to c. 1180, were painted in bright colours: 'rehaussé' according to Christian Davy, *La peinture murale romane dans les Pays de la Loire. L'indicible et le ruban plissé* (Société d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de la Mayenne, 1999), p. 162; 'peints de vives couleurs', according to Henri Enguehard, 'L' Abbaye Saint-Nicolas d'Angers', *Congrès archéologiques de France*, 122 (1964), 88–96, at p. 96. A reference by Sala to a mural painting seems most likely, though.

the artistic reference to the abbey in Angers is probably also based on personal experience.[46] Thus Sala's text might prove that there was another Romanesque medieval religious building, apart from the floor mosaic in Otranto, incorporating Arthur's fight with the cat in the decoration programme, and that still existed in Sala's time.

Trachsler's thorough investigation of Sala's reference to an Arthurian wall painting in this abbey demonstrates that, sadly, there are no traces left of this painting, nor any further documentation on it.[47] The Benedictine abbey of Angers was founded c. 1020–22 by Foulques Nerra, count of Anjou, to fulfil a promise he made when he nearly shipwrecked on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The church was consecrated by Pope Urban II and it was rebuilt in 1180.[48] Around 1620 the abbey, including the refectory, was partly rebuilt again; the current refectory dates to the eighteenth century.[49] A few remains of murals from the medieval refectory survive, dating to the last quarter of the twelfth century. It concerns fragments of a donkey and of a goat blowing a horn, situated in a tympanum above windows in the refectory.[50] In Romanesque art it was not uncommon to paint animal scenes in the refectory. A famous example is a set of Esopet's fables, painted in the eleventh-century refectory in the abbey of Fleury.[51]

Hence it is possible that scenes involving animals based on profane literature were depicted in the refectory of the abbey in Angers. If Sala was right, the mural would predate the text of the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin*.[52] This does not have to be problematic, as this is also true for the Otranto mosaic, but perhaps it would be good to keep another possibility in mind as well. After all, it is possible that Pierre Sala looked at a wall painting that he – having read the impressive story in the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin* – interpreted as King Arthur's fight with the monster cat, but which may in fact have shown a different or generic knight fighting a cat-like creature standing on its hind legs and clinging by its paws onto the shield.

46 Trachsler, 'Le monde Arthurien revisité', p. 394.
47 Trachsler, 'Le monde Arthurien revisité', pp. 394–95.
48 Davy, *La peinture murale romane*, p. 162.
49 Enguehard, 'L' Abbaye Saint-Nicolas d'Angers', p. 93.
50 Enguehard, 'L' Abbaye Saint-Nicolas d'Angers', p. 96: 'un arc en pierre peinte qui était la partie supérieure d'une fenêtre du réfectoire du xiie siècle (mur sud). [...] les deux tympans sont ornés de peintures d'animaux dont l'un représente une Iane et l'autre un bouc jouant du huchet'.
51 Davy, *La peinture murale romane*, p. 163; Estelle Ingrand-Varenne, 'Les fables d'Ésope à Fleury: du manuscrit aux peintures du réfectoire, et retour', *Inscriptions. Une matière en toutes lettres*, ed. by Sandrine Hériché Pradeau and Maud Simon (Sorbonne PSN, 2023), pp. 67–84.
52 Trachsler, 'Le monde Arthurien revisité', pp. 394–95, also referring to Davy, *La peinture murale romane*, p. 162.

Christian Davy kindly drew my attention to some Romanesque French mural paintings in churches that visually are very close to the 'Arthur fighting the cat' illustrations in Gothic Arthurian manuscripts.[53] A profane mural painting of a knight fighting a dragon or griffin on the eastern wall of the choir of the church of Lourouër-Saint-Laurent (Indre), includes the remains of an inscription ('… AV/DVIS') and dates to c. 1200. The composition of this knight in armour, holding a shield and cutting off one paw with his sword, while smashing the animal's skull in the same blow, is very similar to Arthur's fight in the Turin fragment, including the angle of the sword scabbard behind the men's back. Another example that is close to the 'iconographic Arthurian requirements' is a twelfth-century wall painting of King David (or Samson, according to some) fighting a cat-like female lion with sword and shield, in the crypt of the church of St. Nicolas in Tavant. The only difference with the Arthurian iconography is that this warrior is not shown as a king, which is required for an Arthurian interpretation of the visual motif.[54] Traces of a mural of Samson fighting a lion can still be seen in the church of Vieux-Pouzages (Vendée), dating to c. 1200. It is interesting that this mural (including the inscription '.IRTVS SAM/SON') is meant to symbolise the fight of good against evil, as is likely for Arthur in Otranto.[55] Similar Romanesque murals could well have confused Sala's perception; we shall never know for sure whether his mention of an 'Arthur fighting the cat' mural in Angers really depicted Arthurian legend.

To err is human, and interpreting medieval iconography also depends on the eye and knowledge of a beholder, both in medieval and in modern times. The modern scholars Jacques Stiennon and Rita Lejeune thus overinterpreted a sculpted Romanesque marble relief (1169–79) on the Ghirlandina belltower of Modena cathedral as Arthur fighting a fantasy animal. They compared the composition of a man with an animal between his knees to the Arthurian scene on Otranto's floor mosaic, where – in their opinion and conforming with the widespread tradition since the Loomises – Arthur was supposed to ride a goat.[56] However, the Modena carving shows a bearded man holding a knife, in the act of (sacrificially?) killing a goat that

53 E-mail correspondence, 12 June 2024. I am most grateful to Christian Davy for his helpful suggestions and references to contemporary French mural paintings.

54 For the Tavant mural, see Martine Lainé and Christian Davy, *Saint-Nicolas de Tavant, Indre et Loire*, L' Inventaire géneral des monuments et des richesses artistiques de la France, 213 (L'Inventaire, 2002), p. 36. Traces of a mural of Samson fighting a lion can still be seen in the church of Vieux-Pouzages (Vendée), dating to c. 1200.

55 See Davy, *La peinture murale romane*, pp. 364–65.

56 Jacques Stiennon and Rita Lejeune, 'La légende Arthurienne dans la sculpture de la cathédrale de Modène', *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale X^e^–XII^e^ siècles*, 6 (1963), 281–96, at pp. 291, 294. However, the man on the Modena sculpture is not riding the animal.

is clamped between his legs.[57] Hence, we must conclude that there is no iconographical or documentary proof for an interpretation of King Arthur being represented in a sculpture on the belltower of Modena.[58]

As for Sala's account of a representation of Arthur's fight with the cat in the Angers monastery, apart from the uncertainty whether his interpretation of the painting was right, one would expect an image of a king holding sword and shield, fighting an animal that looks like a cat, lion, panther, or leopard, preferably with a paw near or in the king's shield. There are several examples in Romanesque sculpted stone capitals of a battle between a knight and a feline, but as far as I know not with a king as the hero.[59] A composition that corresponds to these requirements for Arthurian iconography, although not something Sala could possibly have seen, is a misericord in Exeter Cathedral, dating to c. 1240, which depicts a king in chain mail wielding a sword in combat with a feline, which has two paws stuck in the shield (Fig. 14).[60] The king is in a somewhat kneeling position in order to remain at the same height as the cat in the space available on the misericord. A contemporary misericord belonging to the same set in Exeter Cathedral depicts the Swan Knight, a legendary hero in a swan-drawn boat from the Old French crusade cycle, which is unique to Exeter.[61] I suggest that we should seriously consider the misericord of a king fighting a cat with its claws clenched into the shield as another reference

57 Other authors interpreted this carving as Samson opening the lion's jaws, which is not likely either as the animal does not look like a lion; Samson usually has long hair (as his strength derives from his uncut hair), and he does not hold a knife, as he fights the animal with his bare hands.

58 Gloria Allaire, 'Arthurian Art in Italy', in *The Arthur of the Italians. The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Italian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Gloria Allaire and F. Regina Psaki (University of Wales Press, 2014), pp. 205–32, at p. 208, still mentioned the Ghirlandina sculpture in an Arthurian context. Vladimir Agrigoroaei, 'Sacré et profane dans deux cathedrales du XII^{e} siècle. Le contexte culturel de l'Artus de Modène et du Roland de Vérone', *Francigena*, 4 (2018), 63–99, convincingly argued for a non-Arthurian interpretation of this Modena sculpture.

59 See for instance a stone capital made in Toulouse 1151–75 for the chapter house of Sainte-Marie-de-la-Daurade (Toulouse, Musée des Augustins, no. ME 92); and a c. 1200 stone capital of the church of San Cornelio and San Cipriano in Révilla de Santullán (Palencia, Spain). For a tile showing a knight fighting a lion that originally decorated the floor of Chertsey Abbey, England c. 1250, see also A. Luyster (ed.), *Bringing the Holy Land home. The crusades, Chertsey Abbey, and the reconstruction of a medieval masterpiece* (Brepols, 2023), p. 54.

60 Christa Grössinger, *The World upside-down. English misericords* (Harvey Miller, 1997), p. 24: 'a crowned knight in chain mail fights a leopard'; and Paul Hardwick, *English Medieval Misericords* (The Boydell Press, 2011), p. 160. The concentric circles in the background may be a carver's mark. This set of Exeter misericords is the oldest large set preserved in Britain. Another misericord in the oldest set depicts a knight fighting a dragon. This could perhaps be related to Tristan if a convincing literary context can be proved for the other two misericords.

61 The Swan Knight was claimed as an ancestor by the English Bohun family.

Fig. 14. Exeter cathedral, misericord showing a king fighting a cat, c. 1240. Photo: STALLA, nr. 08603/ photograph: Janet Whitham.

to French literature. This possible new reference to the episode of Arthur fighting the monstrous cat would add a new artwork to the corpus, by way of compensation after having deleted the Modena Ghirlandina sculpture from the Arthurian canon.

King Arthur Fighting the Monstrous Cat through Time

The surviving medieval visual testimonies showing Arthur's fight with the monstrous cat date from the twelfth to the sixteenth century: starting in 1165 on the Romanesque floor mosaic of a Norman cathedral in Southern Italy; perhaps a twelfth-century mural painting in the refectory of a monastery in Angers; possibly a Gothic thirteenth-century representation on a British Cathedral's misericord; between 1300–1410 in four illuminated manuscripts made in the Southern Netherlands or Northern France and in Paris; and finally in an early sixteenth-century

Renaissance manuscript illuminated in Lyon, near the location where Arthur's fight with the monstrous cat presumably took place.

The monstrous cat always has aspects of a devilish creature, but the exact appearance of the fearsome animal is hardly described in the texts that tell the story of Arthur's exceptional prowess in fighting the animal. The monster can be shown as a (black) cat, a spotted panther, or a female lion. In the French romance tradition of the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin* and Pierre Sala's *Prouesses et Hardiesses*, Arthur is fighting on foot, whereas he is shown on horseback as a triumphant Norman/Roman ruler on the floor mosaic of Otranto. Both the first and the last appearance of this Arthurian motif in the chronology of medieval art are connected in celebrating a specific contemporary ruler: the Norman King William I of Sicily was honoured in Otranto and the manuscript of Sala's text was made for King François I of France, the first French Renaissance King. This clearly demonstrates how showing Arthur's act of prowess and heroism in fighting the monstrous cat could serve contemporary political purposes as well. Beyond the surface of an Arthurian story, it's all about the fight of good against evil, heroic identity and personal status.

The topic of King Arthur fighting the monstrous cat revived a few decades ago in the new context of comics and children's books. To my knowledge, the subject first reoccurred in an Italian comic album published in 1981. Both authors are from Milan: the scenario is by Alfredo Castelli and the drawings by Ferdinando Tacconi. In *Gli Aristocratici. La spada di re Artu* (The gentlemen. King Arthur's sword) a group of detectives, on a quest for Arthur's famous sword Excalibur, visit the cathedral of Otranto.[62] They look at the Arthurian scene on the mosaic, which has been subtly modified. Arthur is now wearing late Gothic armour and a high crown, and he seems to greet with his outstretched right arm. A creature is situated in front of his saddled mount: not the terrifying killer cat, but a naked lady sitting on her knees and raising her arms in despair. The second comic referring to Arthur's fight with the cat is by an Italian comics artist living in Switzerland: Hugo Pratt's *Corto Maltese. Les Helvétiques* (1988).[63] The fight is represented in an informative 'prequel' in watercolour to Corto Maltese's adventures, commenting on Swiss history and regional traditions. The front body in profile of a gigantic, fearsome black cat wearing a golden earring and labelled 'le chat du lac de Genève' (the cat of the Lake of Geneva), frightens three knights who are labelled Arthur, Merlin and Gawain.

Finally, Hélène Cordier and Amélie Buri refer to the story of Arthur's fight both in Switzerland and on the Otranto mosaic in *Le Chat de Lausanne. L'aventure Suisse*

62 Alfredo Castelli and Ferdinando Tacconi, *Gli Aristocratici 7. La spada di re Artu* (Koralle, 1981).
63 Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese 11. Les Helvétiques* (Casterman, 1988).

du roi Arthur (2023).[64] In their adaptation of the Otranto mosaic, Arthur has a bear's head and his mount has obtained a long tail, although the text still identifies it as a goat. Visualising King Arthur's prowess in fighting the terrible cat obviously still appeals to the imagination in Italy and Switzerland, adding a new connotation to the demonstration of heroic behaviour in the fight of good against evil: to promote local (art) history and literary tourism.

64 Hélène Cordier and Amélie Buri, *Le Chat de Lausanne. L'aventure Suisse du roi Arthur* (Jobé-Truffer, 2023).