
ON A POSSIBLE ABBATIAL CROSIER FROM BIZERE MONASTERY (FRUMUȘENI, ARAD COUNTY)

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Abstract

Various artefacts belonging to the former Benedictine abbey in Bizere were recovered during archaeological excavations in 1981 and from 2001 to 2009. The present study focuses on one such item, a partially preserved bronze piece in the shape of a dragon's or a snake's head, broken off from the body at some point. Several comparable Western European pieces suggest that the fragment might belong to the upper end of a crosier, and enable a partial graphic reconstruction. Given that the item was found in an abbey complex, it was arguably an abbatial crosier. Stylistically Romanesque, it may be dated sometime before the thirteenth century and thereby be considered the oldest abbatial crosier known so far from the territory of present-day Romania.

Keywords: religious inventory, Benedictine abbey, medieval bronze, Romanesque art

1. Introduction

The literature on the place or role of the Benedictine abbey in Bizere (Frumușeni, Arad County) (ca. twelfth – sixteenth century) has gradually grown over the last few years [1, 2]. Archaeological digs in 1981, and from 2001 to 2009, have uncovered various artefacts that were once part of the abbey's functional inventory. The present pages aim to analyse one bronze item (discovered in a fragmentary state) that relates to the abbey and, alongside other evidence, offers evidence for the level of religious and non-religious material culture that the monks reached [3]. The fragment was found during the 2002 digging season, in a demolition layer in C4, at a depth of -0.25 m. It is a fragment from a cast bronze object, 4.1 cm in length and 0.6 cm in thickness, and weighing 8 g (Figure 1) (Museum Complex Arad (CMA), inv. no. 17.487); it has the shape of an animal's head and neck, with slightly opened mouth.

2. Description

The anatomic details of the head, slightly flattened, are not clearly rendered. The 'forehead' is shaped along the main axis, while the eye is marked

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by a leaf-shaped, oblique contour. The neck soon becomes lozenge-shaped in section, showing no fewer than nine triangular protuberances on one side, made through incisions in the mold, whereby the master attempted to render a mane or stylized scales. Two holes perforate the item, one notably circular in the open mouth, the other slightly off-centre, to one side of the base of the neck and with ragged edges, typical for a broken piece. Further breakage at one end indicates that the fragment once belonged to a larger object, at least partially curved, that is probably lost forever.

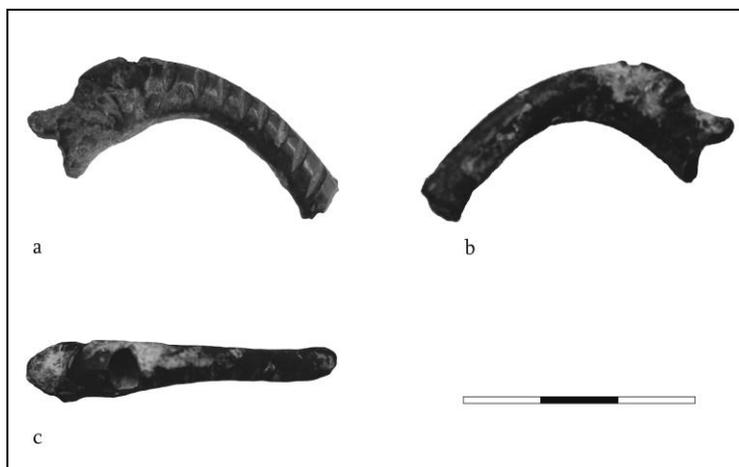


Figure 1. Bronze fragment from Bizere (author's photo): (a, b) sides, (c) top view.

Even if no dating element has been found in the same context, its obvious Romanesque traits date the fragment approximately to sometime before the mid-thirteenth-century.

3. Identification and meaning

As for the identification of this image on the broken tip of a largely lost object, it seems from the shape of the mouth that the craftsman intended an imaginary animal, a dragon rather than a snake. Nevertheless, this identification cannot be considered definitive, precisely since the rest of the body is missing. The dragon and snake are both among the animals most depicted in medieval art. The bestiary tradition devoted much space to dragons and their real or imagined aspects, always linked to the good/evil ambivalence with which they were endowed. The snake was popular as a decorative motif because of two episodes [4]. The first is when Moses demonstrated his God-given powers by throwing his staff at the pharaoh's feet, where it changed into a snake. The second refers to Jesus' words: "Be ye therefore as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves" (Matthew 10.16). As I will show, both interpretations can be recognized in the handiwork on the positioning supports of the object under analysis. The snake or dragon was also confused or equated with the Devil, bringing the animal into the iconography of a long series of male and female saints (among which the best

known are Philip, George, Hilarion, Pope Leo, Margaret, Martha, Michael, Sylvester, Theodore of Herakleia and Varlaam). On the other hand, the animals had an opposite, beneficial role, mainly due to their association with protection against Evil; here we may mention the two dragons on the relief decoration of the tympanum above the Romanesque portal of the church in Drăușeni (Brașov County).

The main details that suggest the original location or use of the bronze fragment from Bizere are the two holes. If these were not meant to provide a simple connection to a larger object, then we might most probably imagine a lance or spear that once pierced the animal's open mouth and exited at the side of the upper neck. In this latter hypothesis, the dragon would be shown speared by the Archangel Michael or Saint George: but it might be risky to pronounce that this was definitively the case. One counter argument is that the decorative elements of the neck are stronger on one side, suggesting that the object was meant to be seen from a single point of view and not as a *ronde-bosse* item.

Leaving the issue of the animal's possible identity and looking instead at the type of artefacts with which it was associated, one can find it in the most unexpected postures, all of them highly decorative, on objects such as reliquaries (for example an item dated to the fourteenth or fifteenth century, from the area of Zadar) [5] aquamanile spouts (an English item from the thirteenth century) [6, 7] and various types of handles (from the fourteenth century, preserved in the Museum of Cluny). As may be expected, artefacts from lay contexts provide fewer clues. The few examples mentioned here are also relevant for the time when they were used. On the other hand, snake (not dragon) heads can be found in the upper part on a remarkably large and beautiful series of pastoral crosiers. The symbol, of ancient Jewish origin, derived directly from the basic 'tool' of shepherds and goat herders. The shepherd's 'flock' and 'crook' became symbols for the guidance of those who had embraced Christianity. As previously mentioned, Moses' staff was the first to change its upper part into a living creature.

The pastoral crosier (*baculus pastoralis*, *baculus ad volutam*, *pastorale*, *virga*, *pedum*, *cambuta*) was already in use in churches during the fifth century, but was officially instituted during the local council of Toledo (633) and became current in the investiture of church hierarchs from the ninth century. Around the year 1000, crosiers were used by both regular hierarchs (bishops and archbishops) and by Benedictine abbots. Such a crosier can be identified through three components: the *curva* (*Krümme*, *crosseron*, *crook* – the curved area), the *pedum* or *virga pastoralis* (*Schaft*, *hampe*, *stave* – the staff) and the *nodus* (*Knauf*, *noeud*, *knot* – the protuberance that ended the crook) [8]. Important here are the decorations at the upper end, on the crook and knot. In Romanesque art, these sectors were enriched with plant and animal motifs, while architectural elements started to appear from the fourteenth century besides vegetal ornament [9]. The crosiers were first made of precious materials, precious metals (gilded silver, bronze) or ivory. In extreme cases, more modest materials (such as wood or maybe even common bone) were also gilded. The entire lower part, used as a

staff, did not require any jewels or detail, since it was less visible and had a predominant functional role (supporting the other elements). A survey of early pastoral crosiers leads to the observation that in most cases, the spiral ended in the head of a snake or snake-like animal.

The isolated profile of this animal head, remarkably similar to that from Bizere, can also be found on the tomb of Abbot John of Silos (ca. 1175-† 1198) from the San Domingo abbey in Castile (Spain) [10] (Figure 2a). Though made of silver, the ‘snake’ head in this case lacks other decoration on the inner side of the curve in the tip of the spiral. Nevertheless, the elegance of its ‘lips’ and the broken ‘forehead’ and neck of the animal are similar. We may also add the abbot’s crosier end from Airvault (preserved in Poitiers, France) [4], an item judged to be Hispanic-Limousin in style, and a twelfth-century crosier discovered in the tomb of Jean de Chanlay († 1291), Bishop of Mans. Almost identical and dated to the same century, though gilded, is another French crosier (The Louvre) (Figure 2b). We should also mention a fragment broken from a crosier dated to the first half of the twelfth century, discovered at the end of the nineteenth century in the cathedral of Châlons-en-Champagne (Figure 2c) [11]. The fragment, also of gilded bronze, shows a distinct item in the animal’s mouth in shape of a thorn or claw, but considered to have been intended to depict the animal’s tongue (though this should have been forked); the element might have also been the tip of a lance that had pierced the beast’s head.

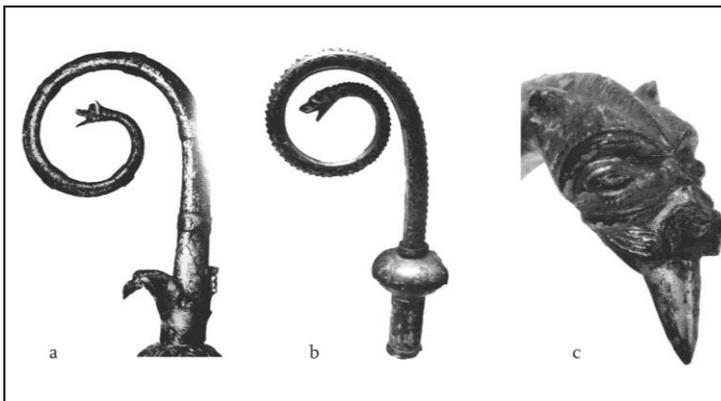


Figure 2. (a) Crosier once owned by Abbot John of Silos (ca. 1175-† 1198), from the San Domingo monastery in Castile; (b) Crosier once owned by Jean de Chanlay († 1291), Bishop of Mans (Louvre, author’s photo); (c) Detail of the knot of the pastoral crosier from the cathedral in Châlons-en-Champagne.

There are also some examples from Germany. In Bremen, the tomb of an anonymous bishop, with the inventory recovered intact and easily dated to around 1200, also contained the entire head of a crosier, with a similar ending (Figure 3a). A fragmentary abbey crosier, with a snake’s head but richer collateral decorative elements, was found in the cemetery of Saint Egidius Monastery in Braunschweig and dated to between the mid-twelfth and mid-thirteenth century [12]. We may end this survey of comparable pieces with

another crosier, made in the same style that can be seen in the Bargello Museum in Florence (Figure 3b). It seems that in all these cases, metal was employed for the required decorations.

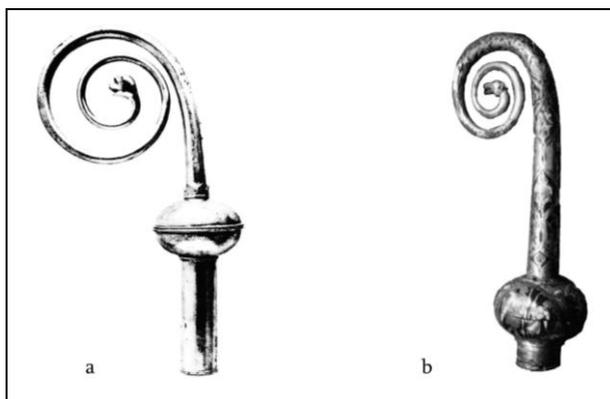


Figure 3. (a) Pastoral crosier from Bremen [12], (b) Pastoral crosier from Florence (author's photo).

Ivory was also used for the upper end of crosiers. An abbey crosier with animal head and decorative links in the neck area was excavated from the cemetery of Altenburg monastery (Austria) [13]. A similar item might have been the model for an image depicting bishop Ermacora, associated to Saint Mark, on the wall of the crypt inside the basilica in Aquileia (around 1180) [14]. Nevertheless, through a rigorous 'reading', one might identify the animal as a dragon as well.

The negative image of the snake/dragon did not go unrepresented either, especially when crosiers received additional elements. An item from Cluny museum includes another snake head, pierced by the lance of an archangel who carries a round shield. The idea is also found on another crosier created in the enamel style typical to Limoges, preserved in the Louvre. In the case of a third crosier head from the twelfth century, made of ivory, from Metten (Germany), the rendering of the snake's head and neck is also remarkably similar [4, p. 161]. Here the association has been made with an *Agnus Dei*, as in the case of another item from thirteenth-century Italy.

We must look this far afield for pieces comparable to the fragment from Bizere because, unfortunately, there are too few from the Kingdom of Hungary (including Transylvania), and these are anyway later than the object under discussion. One of the closest depictions in bas-relief art can be found in Hungary, on the abbot's seal from Rabbit Island in Buda (end of C13) [15]. In the museum of Eger I have identified a clumsily executed crosier crook of ivory or bone, never published, that also includes a reptile/dragon head. Though undated, it might be attributed to the Romanesque. On the other hand, early iconographic sources have not been preserved. The earliest examples date from the C14; one of the oldest representations is on a blank funerary slab from Oradea [16]. Numerous depictions have been preserved from the C15, but these

contain shapes not very similar to the piece analysed here. This suggests that such ceremonial items were made according to their era's 'fashion', just like everything in Europe. I will mention only one find from Transylvania: a 1427 inventory of the Benedictines in Cluj-Mănăştur includes a crosier (*bacculus pastoralis*) of gilded wood, which included a depiction of the Virgin with Christ child in the crook [17, 18].

From the series of Western European comparisons, one may already infer that several figurative combinations were employed in the making of crosiers. The snake head was connected to an *Agnus Dei* (the Louvre), a Limoges crosier contains the Coronation of the Virgin (the Louvre) and another, produced in the same workshops, only has stylized decorative motifs (Nieul-sur-l'Autise, Vendée – the Louvre). The range is far from exhausted. The snake is at the knot of the crosier, while in its body's arches or spirals in the crook we find further decorative motifs (other animals or religious scenes). Therefore, the Western European examples do not allow us to establish with certainty which elements were used in Bizere to complete the inner part of the crosier. Still, the hole on the side of the neck indicates without a doubt that this abbot's crosier was not of simple design.

4. Final considerations

The fragment discussed here has been given not only a possible function, as part of a crosier, but also a partial graphic reconstruction (Figure 4). Since it was discovered among the ruins of the abbey, it may be the oldest abbot's crosier discovered so far on the territory of Romania. Nevertheless, we cannot decide whether it was a local product or an artefact made on site, in the monastery, by the knowledge accumulated by the monks. There are arguments both for and against local production.

Monastic technology was a never-ending process. Rare written sources must always be combined with valid archaeological data, which are also available in the case of Transylvania – although it is true that they represent later periods (between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries) and until now, were never associated with a Benedictine abbey. The Cistercians from Cârța are known to have produced glass, the Dominicans from Vințu de Jos practiced alchemy and in other places bone was worked (Târgu Mureș), and stove tiles produced and finished (at least in Sighișoara and Târgu Mureș, but probably also in other urban monasteries). As for gold articles and toreutics, the Franciscans from Teiuș and Târgu Mureș are known to have used small crucibles for precious metals, and the Dominicans from Vințu left half a mould for casting buttons.

In the case of Bizere, the monks' technical skills could already be seen in the handling of drinking water (through the tower-fountain [19]) and other water-related techniques (communicating water adducts, metal pipes for a lavabo in the south-western corner of the cloister courtyard and the nearby kitchen, for the garden, docks and dams). Stone-carving workshops and

workshops for modelling and firing bricks were also found in the abbey. The first stoves were built of figurative tiles pressed in a few basic moulds, individually modelled and glazed [20].

The monks were highly skilled in acquiring raw materials. At least in obtaining building stone, they most probably employed the quarries downstream on the Mureş river for white limestone Roman *spolia*, but also brought in rare stones from around the Mediterranean for the mosaics ('imperial' red porphyry and a green porphyry named 'Lacedaemonian'). They either bartered with salt or bought goods with the money obtained from selling it [21].

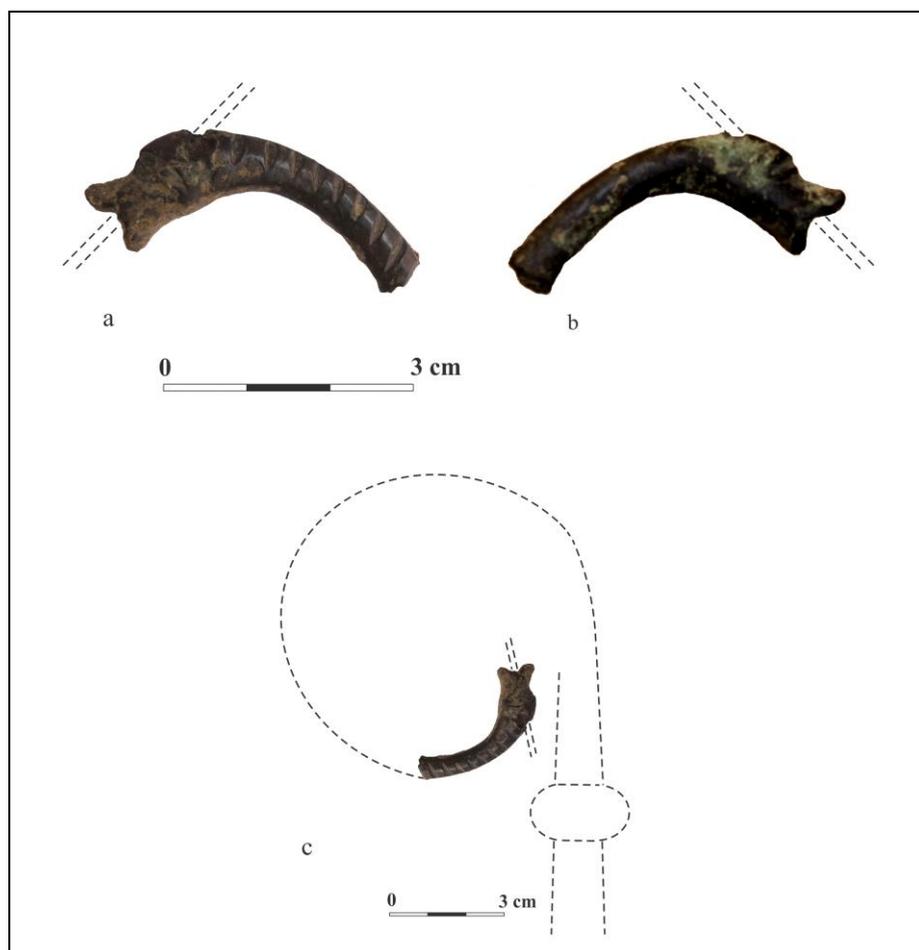


Figure 4. (a-c) Hypothetical reconstruction of the abbot's crosier from Bizere.

Information about sources for basic metals is very scanty, especially for the early chronology of Bizere, but still wealthy by comparison with other areas. Traces of primitive mining were found, though we cannot establish much more than that they date from the medieval period. The closest mines were discovered along the Mureş (Milova) or to the north of that river (Arăneag, Cladova, and

Dud); these mainly contained copper but also silver and iron [22, 23]. Much later, at the close of the Middle Ages, the domain of Şiria was recorded as providing minerals, but as usual only precious metals were mentioned: Păuliş in 1394 [Magyar Országos Levéltár (National Hungarian Archives), DL collection, 7806], Şiria in 1464 [24].

Besides the traces of mining in the surrounding region, excavations at the monastery yielded a significant number of lead fragments: bar fragments (2003-2004) and a piece of lead shaped as a plate (2009). The lead could also be used independently, for cramps, for fixing stone, as leading for glass or for water pipes, but could also be smelted for bronze, in which case it is the only uncombined but useful stable metal found on-site. We know that lead rarely made up even as much as 5% in the mixtures of bronze, in comparison to 55-75% copper and 20-30% pewter. It is essential to mention here that lead is a very stable metal, which explains its chances of surviving long periods in the soil.

Other, indirect evidence indicates similar activity on the abbey site. A forge left traces of lumps and slag (2004, 2008) [CMA, inv. no. 17.115; 17.139]. 'Cold process' metalwork, through the hammering of soft metals or other suitable metal, is indicated not only by the repaired fragments of brass vessels, with patches and rivets (2004) [CMA, inv. no. 17.166], but also by a small anvil (2008) [CMA, inv. no. 17486].

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