

The Mystery of the Marble Man and His Hat: A Reconsideration of the Bari Episcopal Throne*

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For nearly nine hundred years, an imposing throne has stood in the central apse of the Basilica of San Nicola in Bari (*Fig. 1*). Sculpted from a single block of white marble, it is widely considered to be one of the finest achievements of Italian Romanesque sculpture. Unlike so many other medieval masterpieces, it has largely escaped the ravages of time, with only minor damage testifying to its continual use over almost a millennium. It stands today, as it has for much of its history, largely hidden from view by the basilica's imposing twelfth-century ciborium — perhaps a symbolically appropriate fate for an object whose complexities have defied generations of scholars. After almost a century of sustained art historical analysis, the throne's dating has become only increasingly controversial, its craftsmanship more debated, its iconographic programme less certainly understood.

Although the throne was expressly intended for a liturgical purpose, it bears few traces of the religious iconography that one might expect. Instead, the most striking feature of the throne is its intense aura of raw authority. Close inspection reveals that the throne is not devoid of Christian symbols: a bas-relief band on the front edge of the seat depicts a griffin, a lion, a pelican, a sphinx, a calf, and a heraldic eagle, all of which were used in Eastern Christian iconography (*Fig. 2*). Having been under Byzantine control for centuries, Bari was certainly susceptible to Eastern influences, even

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if much of the population remained faithful to the Latin rite. However, these reliefs are dwarfed by the size and intensity of the figures surrounding the throne's base. At the rear of the throne, two lionesses sink their teeth into the heads of the human prey they grasp in their claws, while the victims desperately clutch the supporting pillars with outstretched hands (*Fig. 3*). From the front, the seat appears to rest prominently on two stooping atlas figures whose contorted faces and gaping mouths suggest the enormous strain of their load. Given both their almost bestial appearance and the fact that they are clad only in loincloths, they almost certainly represent either slaves or barbarians.¹ Although such atlas figures were frequently used as stylobate supports in columnar sculpture, the Bari throne is the only extant example from this period in which they form part of an episcopal throne.²

Between these two stooping barbarians stands a central figure who raises only a single hand to support the throne, his serene posture and expression distinguishing him from the agonies of the figures framing him. Clad in a simple tunic, a grooved conical cap with a corded base, and pointed shoes, he carries a short staff in one hand and supports the throne with the other. He shows none of the apparent strain of the figures to either side, with their large and distorted faces. Instead, he seems to be looking up at the presumed occupant of the throne with an expression of mixed subservience and wonder. The prominence of his position suggests that his characterization was deliberate; it is virtually inconceivable that the central sculpture on such an important piece of liturgical furniture should have been chosen at random. Yet his identity has never been established, and with the throne's central figure thus escaping clarification, the iconographic programme of the throne itself has remained largely undeciphered. Only by identifying the mysterious marble man, therefore, can the enigmatic strands of the throne itself be unravelled, allowing it to be properly appreciated as a historical document that sheds light not only on artistic and cultural influences in medieval southern Italy, but also on public manifestations of religious authority and the exercise of power in the Middle Ages.

Until the twentieth century, the throne was universally held to have been sculpted in or immediately before 1098 for Elias, the abbot of San Nicola and archbishop of Bari and Canosa. This identification was based on two principal pieces of evidence,

1 Grabar, "Trônes épiscopaux," 12.

2 Deér, *The Dynastic Porphyry Tombs*, 85-88; Bornstein, *Portals and Politics*, 34.



Figure 3. Bari Throne — Rear View, Detail. (Photo by author)

Figure 1. Episcopal Throne, San Nicola, Bari, Italy. (Photo by author)



Figure 2. Bari Throne — Front View, Detail. (Photo by author)

one epigraphic, the other textual. Running prominently around the back of the throne is a hexametric inscription that reads,

INCLITVS ATQVE BONVS SEDET HAC IN SEDE PATRONVS
PRESVL BARINVS HELIAS ET CANVSINVS.³

[The illustrious and good patron, Elias, bishop of Bari and Canosa, sits on this seat.]

This would seem to narrow the dating of the throne to the period in which Elias served as the archbishop of the single archdiocese of Bari and Canosa, namely, from his consecration in 1089 until his death in 1105. A brief passage in the *Chronicon Ignoti Civis Barensis*, an early twelfth-century chronicle written in Bari, further clarifies the circumstances surrounding the throne's creation:⁴

MLXXXVIII.⁵ Ind. VII. Tertia die intrante mense Octubris venit Papa Urbanus cum pluribus Archiepiscopi[s], et Episcopi[s], Abbatibus, et Comitibus; intraverunt in Bari, et suscepti sunt cum magna reverentia, et preparavit Domino Helia nostro Archiepiscopo mirificam sedem intus in Ecclesia Beatissimi Nicolay confessoris Christi.⁶

[In the year 1098, on the third day of the month of October, Pope Urban [II] came with many archbishops and bishops, abbots and counts; they entered Bari and were received with great dignity. And he [Urban II] prepared for our lord archbishop Elias a marvellous throne inside the church of St. Nicholas the Confessor of Christ.]

Assuming that the *mirificam sedem* referred to the surviving episcopal throne, it was therefore clear that the throne had been created for Elias on the occasion of the Council of Bari in 1098.

Based on this evidence, the influential art historian Arthur Kingsley Porter declared in 1923 that, as far as the dating was concerned, “doubt is not possible.”⁷

3 The verse is clearly an attempt at hexameter, though the length of the syllables in BA-RI-NVS and CA-NV-SI-NVS disrupts the metre of the second line. All translations are my own.

4 *Antiche Cronache*, 27.

5 The calendar year in Bari began on 1 September; hence the entry corresponds to October 1098 in conventional dating, not October 1099.

6 *Chronicon Ignoti Civis Barensis*, 197.

7 Porter, “Bari, Modena, and St.-Gilles,” 58. See also Porter, *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads*, 66.

Yet the attribution to 1098 had already begun to meet with skepticism on the grounds of the throne's remarkable artistic precocity. Already in 1903, Émile Bertaux had noted that, were it not for the documentary evidence, he would have assigned it to the late twelfth century rather than the end of the eleventh.⁸ Then, in 1940, Géza de Francovich advanced the hypothesis that the throne might have been the work of the great Wiligelmo of Modena. In order to fit the throne into the stylistic chronology of the sculptor, de Francovich suggested a *terminus ante quem* of 1105 — within Elias's lifetime but well after the Council of Bari. The *mirifica sedes* prepared for the Council might have been instead a wooden throne, perhaps gilded, which has since disappeared.⁹ While André Grabar strongly defended the 1098 dating in an influential 1954 article that closely examined the throne's iconographic and stylistic borrowings, he did not succeed in settling the debate.¹⁰

In a 1969 study, Roberto Salvini revived de Francovich's dating of 1105, and while he did not accept the attribution to Wiligelmo, Salvini argued that "the close stylistic affinities between this work and some of the sculptures in the Collegiate Church of Monopoli, dated 1107, rule out any much earlier date."¹¹ However, while the similarity between the Bari throne and the Monopoli sculptures is indeed striking, there is no reason to rule out *a priori* the possibility that the same sculptor could have produced both works ten years apart. Yet this solution, which would both satisfy the demands of the written evidence and locate the Bari throne within a contemporary Apulian artistic context, was not even considered by Salvini.

In a provocative essay published soon thereafter, Pina Belli D'Elia offered a systematic reevaluation of the throne's origins.¹² In this and subsequent studies, she argued that the throne was created sometime after 1160 as a means of immortalizing the memory of the basilica's founder. The meaning of the inscription, like the work as a whole, is purely conceptual — an effort to transcend the temporality of Elias's own episcopal tenure and forever concretize his presence in the basilica. It is, at the very least, a remarkably creative solution to the stylistic questions posed by the throne. However, Belli D'Elia's handling of the chronicle reference is troubling. She mistakenly conflates

8 Bertaux, *L'art dans l'Italie méridionale*, 446.

9 De Francovich, "Wiligelmo da Modena," 252-58.

10 Grabar, "Trônes épiscopaux," 10-13.

11 Salvini, *Medieval Sculpture*, 320 n. 78.

12 Belli D'Elia, "Cattedra dell'abate Elia," 1-17. See also Belli D'Elia, *Basilica di S. Nicola a Bari*, 101-102; and Belli D'Elia and M. D'Elia, "Aggiunte tranesi al Maestro."

the chronicle of Lupus Protospatharius with that of the *Chronicon Ignoti Civis Baren-sis*, and consequently argues that the reference to the *mirifica sedes* appears in only one of the manuscript traditions and that it might have been interpolated years later by an over-zealous scribe. Her error presumably stems from the ambiguous title given to the *Chronicon* by Camillo Pellegrini, its first editor: *Ignoti civis Baren-sis siue Lupi Protospatae chronicon ab anonymo auctore Barensi*, which incorrectly suggests that the *Chronicon* was merely a variant version of Lupus's work. In light of the absence of any surviving manuscripts of the *Chronicon* (the one used by Pellegrini is now lost), this conflation was frequently compounded by later scholars. However, while the *Chronicon* certainly draws heavily on Lupus's chronicle (and, indeed, both works begin in the year 855), there are sufficient differences between the two to indicate that they almost certainly did not share the same author.¹³ It is therefore not surprising that the throne is referred to by the compiler of the *Chronicon*, and not by Lupus. However, Belli D'Elia's conflation seems to have gone entirely unnoticed, and even the eminent art historian Ernst Kitzinger accepted her proposed dating.¹⁴ While not all recent scholars have been convinced by Belli D'Elia's arguments, the tide of academic opinion seems to have turned towards a late twelfth-century dating for the throne.¹⁵

Nevertheless, as Gerardo Cioffari, a prolific historian of the basilica of San Nicola, has repeatedly stressed in recent years, the arguments of Belli D'Elia and others rest entirely on unsupported conjecture.¹⁶ There are no grounds to consider the reference to the *mirifica sedes* to be a later interpolation, nor to assume that the use of *sedet* in the inscription — rather than *sedit* or *sedebat* — refers to anything other than the physical presence of Elias when the throne was first installed. Furthermore, given that the throne has numerous stylistic analogues in the following decade, both in Apulia and elsewhere, it is far from inconceivable that the throne predated them by a few years. Indeed, such precocity would be almost expected from a masterpiece that seized the attention of a chronicler who was normally very sparing of detail and who lived in a city already resplendent with the artistic heritage of two centuries of Byzantine rule.

13 *Antiche Cronache*, 26.

14 Kitzinger, "Arts as Aspects of a Renaissance," 667 n. 85.

15 Hearn's rather far-fetched suggestion that the throne was the work of German goldsmiths active in Rome in the late 11th century does not appear to have attracted any adherents; see Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture*, 80-85.

16 See, for example, Cioffari, "Concilio di Bari del 1098," 114-15.

A further controversy stems from the heavy influence of the vernacular in the Latin of the *Chronicon Ignoti Civis Barensis*. The apparent use of the dative case in the phrase “et preparavit Domino Helia nostro Archiepiscopo” suggests that Elias was the recipient of the throne, with Urban, as the antecedent subject of *preparavit*, being responsible for its commission. However, given the chronicler’s frequent lapses into the vernacular (for example, *Boamundo* for *Boamundus* in the succeeding entry), Cioffari translated *Domino Helia nostro Archiepiscopo* as a vernacular nominative in his Italian edition of the *Chronicon*, thereby rendering Elias the antecedent of *preparavit*.¹⁷ This interpretation makes Elias himself solely responsible for the creation of the throne and leaves the recipient unnamed, though one may assume that the throne was intended for papal use during the Council. However, at no other point in the *Chronicon* is the form *Helia* substituted for the Latin nominative *Helias*; indeed, in all other instances the name of the abbot-archbishop is correctly declined, as is the word *dominus*. It seems improbable, therefore, that the entire phrase “Domino Helia nostro Archiepiscopo” represents an extended inadvertent slip into the vernacular rather than an intentional use of the Latin dative. Moreover, although the pope and his entourage are the plural subject of *intraverunt* and *suscepti sunt*, the use of the singular *venit* (referring solely to Urban II himself) clearly establishes a grammatical precedent within the phrase for taking the pope as the antecedent of the singular *preparavit*.

While the chronicler’s use of the word *preparavit* obviously need not imply that the pope was personally involved with the throne’s creation, he may have provided the marble and the necessary funds. Indeed, given the close stylistic affinities of the surviving throne with the Monopoli sculptures and its strong structural resemblances to two other eleventh-century Apulian episcopal thrones at Monte Sant’ Angelo and Canosa (specifically in the use of figural supports, geometric and floral tracery along the arms and supports, surmounting orbs, and pointed backs), it was almost certainly carved in Apulia.¹⁸ Its design would presumably have been influenced by the ecclesiastic for whose church it was being carved, a man who certainly took a more active interest in the arts than the peripatetic pope and whose name would be permanently inscribed on the side.¹⁹

17 *Antiche Cronache*, 169. Cioffari’s translation is also cited on a panel in the basilica itself that discusses the existing throne.

18 See Salvini, *Medieval Sculpture*, 320 n. 78; and Grabar, “Trônes épiscopaux,” 7-10.

19 See Glass, “Papal Patronage,” 386-90.

Elias was a man whose life and ecclesiastical career were inextricably interwoven with the political and cultural transformations of late eleventh-century Bari. Little is known about his origins, although at an early age he entered the small monastery of Santa Maria in Bari and ultimately became its abbot, probably at some point in the 1060s. Having obviously distinguished himself in this position, he was named, in March 1071, the successor of Abbot Leucio at the important Benedictine monastery of San Benedetto, also in Bari. In the charter commemorating the event, Elias is said to be “learned and well versed in divine and earthly affairs” (*eruditus et de divinis et mundanis sciens*).²⁰ The latter quality was particularly critical, for the circumstances surrounding his succession were not auspicious. For three years, Robert Guiscard had been besieging the city, the last Byzantine stronghold in southern Italy, and only a month later, he would enter Bari and establish Norman overlordship. Indeed, Leucio cited the strain of these conditions, together with his advanced age, as his reason for resigning after serving for more than thirty years as the abbot of San Benedetto.²¹

The events of the following two decades are difficult to discern precisely, partly because numerous charters are of dubious authenticity and partly because a series of spurious assumptions have been repeated and compounded by later scholars.²² The most pervasive of these assumptions stem from the rigid classification of various individuals and groups within the city as belonging to opposing factions: pro-Norman *versus* pro-Byzantine, for example, or pro-Gregorian *versus* anti-Gregorian. Yet few of these designations recognize that factional sympathies could shift in response to the rapidly evolving political and cultural circumstances in the region — and, indeed, they often did. To suggest, as did Francesco Nitti di Vito, that Abbot Elias was anti-Byzantine because his election to the archbishopric in 1089 was supported by the Norman rulers implies an improbable degree of ideological fixity.²³ Indeed, the charter naming Elias the abbot of San Benedetto was signed by a number of prominent Greek citizens, who are unlikely to have supported the accession of an openly anti-Greek candidate. Yet once the city was taken by the Normans, Elias — *mundanis sciens* as he was — evidently accepted the new political realities. Whatever his personal sympathies, there is no doubt that Elias came to enjoy the favour, or at least had the

20 *Codice Diplomatico Barese* (hereafter *CDB*) IV, no. 45 (March 1071).

21 *CDB* IV, no. 45.

22 The principal source of many of these errors is Nitti di Vito, *La ripresa gregoriana*. For a penetrating critique of Nitti di Vito, see Pertusi, “Ai confini tra religione e politica,” 6-56.

23 Nitti di Vito, *La ripresa gregoriana*, 39.

astute acceptance, of the city's Norman overlords. His popular acclamation as archbishop of Bari in 1089 seems to have been freely accepted first by Roger Borsa (*voluntate atque consensu Ducis Rogerii*)²⁴ and then by Bohemond of Taranto after he took control of Bari later that year, following the Council of Melfi.²⁵ Moreover, Elias managed to remain tremendously popular among the city's residents — no mean feat in the turbulent and often rebellious atmosphere that followed the Norman takeover.

His local prestige was most strikingly displayed in 1087, when a band of sailors stole the body of St. Nicholas from Myra and brought it to Bari. Abbot Elias was able to convince the sailors to grant ownership of the precious relic to the monastery of San Benedetto against the express wishes of Archbishop Urso, who sought to acquire it for the cathedral. The stakes were enormous, from both the religious and the financial point of view, for the cult of St. Nicholas was immensely popular. Whichever institution gained control of the relics would therefore be among the wealthiest and most influential religious centres in Apulia. Even before the translation, there were already four or five churches dedicated to him in Bari and environs alone, and the presence of his relics ultimately turned Bari into one of the most important pilgrimage destinations in medieval Italy.²⁶ After having secured control of the relics, Elias was immediately appointed the head of an ecclesiastical corporation charged with the building of a suitable resting place for the saint.²⁷ Elias evidently convinced Roger Borsa to grant the corporation the land once occupied by the palace of the Byzantine governor (*catepanus*), and construction of the future basilica of San Nicola (over which Elias was given the abbacy) began almost immediately.²⁸

The contest between abbot and archbishop over the relics has attracted much attention from historians, many of whom have followed Walther Holtzmann's suggestion that it reflected a deeper conflict between supporters of the anti-pope Clement III (supposedly led by Urso) and the Gregorian camp (led by Elias).²⁹ In fact, this argument rests entirely on two passages in the chronicle of Lupus Protospatharius which may indicate pro-Wibertine sentiments on the part of the chronicler but say

24 Johannes arcidiaconus Barenis, *Historia inventionis s. Sabini*, col. 330C.

25 *CDB* I, no. 34 (November 1089).

26 Pertusi, "Ai confini tra religione e politica," 10-13.

27 Elias refers to this appointment in a charter issued in November 1089; see *CDB* I, no. 34.

28 *CDB* I, no. 32 (June 1087).

29 Holtzmann, "Studien zur Orientpolitik," 183-84. For examples of later restatements of Holtzmann's thesis, see Cowdrey, "Mahdia Campaign of 1087," 19; and von Falkenhausen, "Bari bizantina," 219.

nothing whatsoever about the inclinations of Urso.³⁰ It is more likely that Elias secured the relics simply based on his personal popularity within the city. Urso, a “close friend and supporter” (*intimus et particeps*) of Robert Guiscard, had been made archbishop of Bari and Canosa in 1079, evidently at Guiscard’s behest.³¹ He spent most of his time on diplomatic missions and visited his archdiocese only rarely.³² Elias, by contrast, was probably born in Bari and certainly spent most of his life there. His popular support, and thus his victory over Urso for control of the relics, is therefore unsurprising.

However, while Urso’s pro-Wibertine sentiments are purely a matter of scholarly speculation, there can be no doubt about Elias’s close alliance with the Gregorian movement. As early as the 1070s, Robert Guiscard had placed Elias’s monastery of San Benedetto under the ecclesiastical patronage of Montecassino, thereby bringing Elias into the orbit of the most powerful religious institution in southern Italy and a driving force behind the Gregorian reforms.³³ Under Byzantine rule, the Latin Church in Apulia had enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy from papal involvement, whereas following the Norman conquest, the reformist papacy played an increasingly active role in the region.³⁴ The news of the accession of a sympathetic archbishop in Bari would have been greeted with great excitement in the pro-Gregorian camp. Indeed, in a reputed departure from “Roman and Apostolic custom,” Urban II travelled to Bari to consecrate Elias personally, as well as to inter the relics of St. Nicholas in the crypt of the magnificent church being built to honour the saint.³⁵

Donations flowed in, and as the edifice rose ever higher, so too did the standing of its abbot and archbishop, Elias. Indeed, by the 1090s his influence, both political and religious, seems to have been virtually unrivalled in the region. In 1095, the citizens of Bari swore to obey him in whatever he ordered “for the common salvation” (*pro communi salvatione*).³⁶ As Vera von Falkenhausen has noted, it is unlikely that *salvatio* in this context was limited purely to matters of the soul.³⁷ Amidst the social

30 Lupus Protospatharius, *Annales*, 62. See also Pertusi, “Ai confini tra religione e politica,” 31-32.

31 Johannes arcidiaconus Barensis, *Historia inventionis*, col. 329F.

32 Johannes arcidiaconus Barensis, *Historia inventionis*, col. 329F.

33 Kamp, “The Bishops of Southern Italy,” 190. See also Cowdrey, *The Age of Abbot Desiderius*, esp. 107-76.

34 Herde, “The Papacy and the Greek Church,” 215; Loud, *The Latin Church*, 34-41 and 181-205.

35 CDB I, no. 33 (October 1089); “Anno 1089” in Lupus Protospatharius, *Annales*, 62. See also Loud, *The Latin Church*, 208-10.

36 *Chronicon Ignoti Civis Barensis*, 197.

37 Von Falkenhausen, “Bari bizantina,” 226.

fragmentation and continuous political upheaval of late eleventh-century Apulia, he had succeeded in acquiring the two most powerful and lucrative ecclesiastical positions in the city and maintained the support of pope, prince, and populace alike. For Elias, the massive basilica was to be more than just the resting place for the relics of St. Nicholas. It was also to be the public expression of his success and the crowning achievement of his ecclesiastical career. Indeed, the episcopal throne would be a memorial to him principally as *patronus*, and his own epitaph would declare him “equal to Solomon as a builder” (*fabricae quoque par Salomoni . . . similandus*).³⁸

If San Nicola was the physical manifestation of Elias’s authority and ambition, then the Council of Bari in 1098 represented his opportunity to showcase it to the world beyond Apulia. Little is known about the conference, save that almost two hundred bishops (including the redoubtable Anselm of Canterbury) as well as a host of other feudal and ecclesiastical figures convened in the still unfinished basilica and devoted considerable attention to the *filioque* dogma.³⁹ The dogma was highly significant, for it represented one of the major stumbling blocks to the reunification of the Latin and Greek Churches (one of Urban II’s enduring concerns), and it was hoped that the Council would make significant progress towards this goal.⁴⁰ Moreover, the Council was overshadowed by Urban’s other great pre-occupation, the First Crusade. Urban had been the driving force behind the movement since the Council of Clermont in 1095 and had spent much of the intervening period rallying support and raising funds. For the assembled throng in Bari, the crusading enterprise would have been one of the chief topics of discussion, and news would already have been trickling in about the capture (and subsequent relief) of Antioch. As the launching point for the crusader fleet in 1096, Bari had played a role in the campaign, and it is even possible that Elias himself was among the prelates to cast a blessing over the troops before they embarked.

It is in this historical context that the motivation for the preparation of the *mirifica sedes* must be understood. From Elias’s perspective, a magnificent church merited a magnificent throne, especially given that San Nicola was to be the setting for a major international gathering of religious and political leaders. Moreover, Urban had reason to be thankful to Elias for the latter’s support of the reform movement, and an

38 For other Solomonic comparisons, see Cahn, “Solomonic Elements in Romanesque Art,” 57 and 69-70.

39 For a brief overview of the Council, see Cioffari, “Concilio di Bari del 1098,” 109-21.

40 See Cowdrey, “The Gregorian Papacy,” 161-69.

impressive throne would be a visible reminder of the importance of Urban's principal representative in Apulia. The creation of a new episcopal throne was the natural response, for it satisfied both of their interests. Similarly, the iconography of the *mirifica sedes* may well reflect the concerns of both parties individually rather than present a unified symbolic programme. Clearly, the surviving throne cannot be fully understood unless it is seen both as an expression of the concerns of both a crusading pope and a powerful prelate and as an artistic testament to the pan-Mediterranean influences in the city for which it was built.

The throne is five-sided, with a pointed back and orbs surmounting each of the corners (the front two appear to be later additions). The lateral panels are pierced by a geometric floral pattern, and a floral relief also frames the raised arm rests. As noted above, the horizontal band on the chair's frontal facade is decorated with six figures in bas-relief. While most of these figures had roots in pagan antiquity and were relatively rare in Latin Christendom, all of them had been reinterpreted in a Christian context by the Byzantine Church and were widely used in Greek iconography. The sphinx, for example, was an ancient symbol of enigma that had come to represent the mystery of faith in Byzantine churches; the griffin was a Christological figure because of its dual nature; the pelican, which supposedly nourished its children on its own blood, was also seen as Christ-like (an interpretation widely diffused in the West) and frequently ornamented Greek Eucharistic vessels; the calf was seen as medicinal in ancient times, which led Greek theologians to link it to Divine Providence, and by the tenth century it, too, was seen as a figure of Christ, the personification of Providence.⁴¹ The eagle and the lion were prominent symbols in Western iconography as well as Eastern (lion iconography will be further discussed below with regard to the sculptures on the base of the throne), but in the Byzantine context, both were used as representations of Christian empire and sacred authority.⁴² To members of the local community, who were still surrounded by many of the artistic monuments and sacred images of their former Byzantine overlords, the six relief figures on the Bari throne would have been an indication of its Christian nature.

From a distance, however, the reliefs are virtually invisible, unlike the five figures upon which the seat rests — two lionesses in the rear, two slave-barbarians at each

41 Schettini, *La Basilica di San Nicola*, 71. See also Cavarinos, *Byzantine Iconography*; and Weitzmann, "The Survival of Mythological Representations," 43-68.

42 Of course, they also had evangelical associations, but in the absence of either a winged ox or the image of a man, it seems unlikely that this was the symbolic intention on the Bari throne.

of the front corners, and in the front centre, the enigmatic man with the short staff and grooved cap. The use of slave-barbarians as supports for an episcopal throne is unique and striking; their religious symbolism, if any, was subservient to the overall suggestion of power and domination, especially insofar as they may have conjured up images of Roman imperial thrones (which were often supported by such figures) and the *sella curulis*, which is depicted on certain Roman tombstones as being carried on the shoulders of prisoners.⁴³ The same themes are played out on the back of the throne, for the primary iconographic association of lions was, and is, one of power. However, the addition of victims being devoured not only reinforces the image of victory over enemies but also relates it to several well-known scriptural passages. The first, “*Salva me de ore leonis*” (Psalm 22:21), was part of the Roman Ordo for Extreme Unction and referred to a sinner’s desire to be saved from the clutches of evil at death. Similarly, the Offertory Prayer of the Mass for the Dead included the plea “*Domine, Iesu Christe, rex gloriae, libera animas omnium fidelium defunctorum de poenis inferni et de profundo lacu. Libera eas de ore leonis.*”⁴⁴ Such invocations rely on the belief that the faithful will be saved from evil; the sculptural reference to them was thus a reminder of the saving power of the Church, embodied in the throne’s occupant.

The frequent association between lions and justice may also be alluded to in the throne’s imagery, especially since the site of Bari’s open-air law court was prominently marked with a stylobate lion, on whose neck was inscribed *CVSTOS IVSTICIE*.⁴⁵ While the column may date from the early twelfth century, rather than the late eleventh, it clearly indicates that lions were widely understood as a symbol of justice in the region. Furthermore, given Elias’s explicitly Solomonic associations (as indicated by his epitaph), Solomon’s throne might well have been present in the artist’s mind as an exemplar. Admittedly, the Bari throne is hardly a replica of the biblical one, which was surrounded by fourteen lions, was inlaid with gold and ivory, had a rounded back, and had six steps leading up to it.⁴⁶ Yet, since both were fellow temple-builders

43 Bornstein, *Portals and Politics*, 35; Deér, *The Dynastic Porphyry Tombs*, 85; Grabar, “Trônes épiscopaux,” 31.

44 “Lord Jesus Christ, king of glory, free the souls of all the faithful departed from the infernal punishments and from the deep pit. Free them from the mouth of the lion.” See Deonna, “*Salva me de ore leonis*,” 479-511.

45 Bornstein, *Portals and Politics*, 36; Deér, *The Dynastic Porphyry Tombs*, 66-68.

46 1 Kings 10:18-20.

and possessors of a magnificent throne, the parallels between Elias and Solomon would have been unmistakably clear to the learned who might have had occasion to see the back of the throne.

Yet neither power, domination, nor justice is exuded by the throne's central figure, who stands apart — both physically and stylistically (*Fig. 4*). To date, few have even tried to identify the figure, and none of the identifications suggested so far have been able to explain him in the overall context of the throne. In 1882, Domenico Bartolini suggested that he represented the triumph of the Gospels over the Qu'ran, but offered little defence for his theory.⁴⁷ Grabar interpreted him to be the master of the barbarian slaves on either side.⁴⁸ Others, interpreting his headgear as a helmet, have implied a military connection, but this explanation is largely confounded by the rest of the figure's apparel, which is devoid of any explicitly military garb or accessories.⁴⁹ Belli D'Elia, while conceding that his significance remains obscure, has posited three different explanations: first, that the figure is an allusion to some historical fact connected to the life of Elias; second, that he is a representation of the sculptor himself; and most recently, that he is a pilgrim, the staff that he carries being similar to those carried by pilgrims.⁵⁰ Of these three, the pilgrim interpretation is the only one based on anything other than pure conjecture, but Belli D'Elia offers no insights into its possible function in the throne's overall iconographic programme.

In fact, the identity of the central figure can be found neither in Western sculpture nor in Byzantine iconography, but rather in the artistic tradition of the third great medieval Mediterranean civilization — Islam. Grabar first drew attention to the highly 'oriental' features of the throne, including the stylized zodiac figures in relief and the floral and geometric detailing on the upper part, and noted furthermore that while the barbarian slaves seemed to be representations of north Africans, the robe, hat, and even the staff of the central figure "evoked instead an Oriental, an Arab or a Seljuk Turk."⁵¹ Admittedly, figural sculpture was never a major component of Muslim art (because of Hadith restrictions), but it existed nevertheless in various regions

47 Bartolini, *Su l'antica basilica*, 24.

48 Grabar, "Trônes épiscopaux," 12-13.

49 E.g., Willemsen and Odenthal, *Apulia*, 33.

50 The three explanations are advanced by Belli D'Elia in "La cattedra dell'abate Elia," 8; *La Basilica di S. Nicola a Bari*, 102; and *Puglia Romanica*, 123.

51 Grabar, "Trônes épiscopaux," 12 and 32.

and in various media from the eighth century until the sixteenth, particularly in Fatimid Egyptian ivories and woodwork.⁵²

Indeed, an eleventh-century wooden door panel from the now destroyed Western Palace of the Fatimids in Cairo depicts a close cousin of the central figure of the Bari throne interwoven among a tangle of vines (*Fig. 5*). Like his marble counterpart, he carries a short staff, is clad in a knee-length robe, and, most tellingly, wears grooved conical headgear with a corded base.⁵³ Other wood carvings from the Western Palace show similar figures, all carrying staffs (some slightly longer than that of the Bari throne figure) and wearing knee-length robes and slightly rounded conical headgear.⁵⁴ While the latter lack the distinctive grooves of the Bari figure's cap, this may be due to the general lack of fine carving in the works, which were originally painted.⁵⁵ In all of these examples, of course, the sculpted headgear represents turbans. This is clearly shown by several surviving contemporary Islamic ivory sculptures which depict similarly clad figures; in these works, more finely sculpted than their wooden analogues, the clearly delineated folds in the headgear identify them unmistakably (*Fig. 6*). While it is more common for the sculpted turbans to have horizontal or diagonal banding, vertical banding is certainly not unknown (*Figs. 5 and 7*).⁵⁶ All of these figures belong to larger image cycles which depict scenes from ordinary life: the first figure holds the reins of an unseen animal and some are shown leading ware-laden camels while others are hunting prey. Given that the wooden panels were carved in Fatimid Egypt while most of the ivories were sculpted in southern Italy, it seems that the shared elements in the attire of the figures — knee-length tunics, short walking sticks, and turbans — were both common and widely distributed among Muslim communities in the Mediterranean.

Closer inspection of the central figure on the Bari throne reveals further debts to the conventions of Fatimid and Fatimid-inspired figural sculpture. He is depicted with a slightly wide and flattened nose, enlarged lips, a prominent chin, and a general compression of the facial features. These elements contrast starkly with the faces of the other throne figures, but they are common features of the sculpted faces on many surviving contemporary ivories.⁵⁷ If the central figure was indeed based on an existing

52 Marçais, "La question des images," 67.

53 Anglade, *Catalogue des boiseries*, 59, fig. 32. See also Marçais, "Les figures d'hommes," 88-89.

54 For further examples, see Pauty, *Les bois sculptés*, pls. XLVIII and LV.

55 Dimand, *A Handbook of Muhammadan Art*, 113.

56 See also Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, pl. 84b.

57 See Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, pls. 88 and 89.



Figure 4. Bari Throne — Central Figure. (Photo by author)



Figure 5. Sculpted Panel with Genre Scene. Cypress Wood, Egypt, 12th century; Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Photo © Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, N.Y.)



Figure 6. Plaque with Figural Scene. Ivory, Egypt, 11th-12th century; Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. (Photo © The Walters Art Museum)



Figure 7. Morgan Casket — Detail. Ivory, southern Italy, 11th-12th century; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure 9. Cathedral of St. Lawrence, Trogir, Croatia — West Portal, Detail. (Photo by author)



Figure 8. Cathedral of St. Lawrence, Trogir, Croatia — West Portal, Detail. (Photo by author)

wooden or ivory model, whether produced locally or imported from elsewhere, this would also explain both the stylistic variation between the central figure and the slaves to either side and the unusual posture of the central figure, whose left arm (the one supporting the throne) seems incongruous, almost an afterthought — exactly what one might expect if the rest of the body had been copied from a separate artistic context.

The use of an Islamic artistic model would not have been an unusual occurrence. Scholars have long noted the widespread influence of Islamic art in eleventh-century Apulia, especially with regard to stone liturgical furnishings; the episcopal thrones at Canosa and Monte Sant'Angelo and the Siponto altar screen are only a few examples among many.⁵⁸ More strikingly still, an early twelfth-century apse pavement in the basilica of San Nicola itself incorporates the monogram of Allah, probably installed by Muslim craftsmen or at the very least copied closely from Muslim exemplars.⁵⁹ Although Muslim control of southern Italy had collapsed by the late tenth century, Muslim artistic workshops continued to exist in southwestern Italy until at least the mid-thirteenth century, and Bari may even have been an important centre of Muslim ivory carving.⁶⁰

However, if the figure was deliberately copied from an existing model in order to evoke a Muslim, to what extent would he have been readily identifiable as such to contemporary onlookers? Until the mid-thirteenth century or later, the use of headgear of any sort would have served to distinguish him from his Apulian audience, since evidence from contemporary south Italian miniatures and sculptures suggests that local men rarely wore hats of any kind.⁶¹ By contrast, almost all depictions of Muslim men in Sicilian and proto-Sicilian manuscripts from the eleventh to the thirteenth century show them wearing headgear of some sort, usually turbans, as they do in the extant ivories and wood carvings.⁶² Moreover, similar pointed caps, often with grooves, were commonly associated with exotic or fantastic creatures in medieval Apulian sculpture. An almost contemporary example is found on the main portal of San Benedetto in Brindisi, and late twelfth-century sculptures on the main portals of the basilica of

58 Bornstein, "Romanesque Sculpture," 285; see also Garton, "Islamic Elements," 100-16.

59 Babudri, "Il monogramma di Allah," 149.

60 Bornstein, "Romanesque Sculpture," 287.

61 See Levi Pisetzky, *La storia del costume*, 1:133-222, esp. fig. 69.

62 Orofino, "Oriente eccentrico," 284-85, figs. 6-11; Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, pl. 88-100; Marçais, "Les figures d'hommes."

San Nicola and the cathedral of Barletta (some fifty kilometres to the north) show such grooved caps on a monkey and a centaur, respectively.⁶³ These instances are clear evidence that the headgear worn by the central figure of the Bari throne was a common topos of exoticism in late eleventh and twelfth-century Apulian art. Furthermore, given that the city's merchants were active participants in the eleventh-century Levant trade, Muslim attire would have been well known to many of them, and in a period of crusading fever, it cannot have been difficult for the rest to make the connection between the exotic and the infidel.⁶⁴

A final piece of evidence is found across the Adriatic, on the west portal of the cathedral in the Croatian town of Trogir. One of the lesser-known triumphs of medieval sculpture, it was completed in 1240 by the Dalmatian sculptor Radovan. It is most noted for the statues of Adam and Eve standing on two stylobate lions, but the portal itself is supported by eight stooping human figures. On the left-hand side, two of the figures are bare-chested and barefoot, and are depicted bearing the weight of the portal on their shoulders. A third figure has curly hair, wears a loose-fitting toga, and raises a single hand to support the portal. Between them stoops an elderly figure carrying a cane-like staff and prominently wearing a turban; opposite him, on the right-hand side of the portal, stands another figure who likewise wears an elaborate turban. The two figures are unmistakably Muslims, and while they differ in many respects from the central figure on the Bari throne (for example, the Trogir figures have beards and bare feet) and are separated by a period of one hundred and fifty years, the structural similarities are striking (*Figs. 8 and 9*). In both cases, the Muslim figure is surrounded by partially clad stooping figures; the presence of lions clutching prey is another shared motif. Moreover, the fine execution of the Trogir figures serves as additional proof that Western sculptors were capable of depicting Muslim figures without resorting to caricature — and if that was true in mid-thirteenth-century Trogir, a city which had limited contact with the Muslim world, it would certainly have been true in the cosmopolitan world of late eleventh-century Bari. It is impossible to know whether the Trogir portal was directly influenced by the Bari throne, though

63 For the Brindisi figure, see Grabar, "Reflets de l'art islamique," pl. VI. Unfortunately, the Bari and Barletta figures are now much eroded, although their original appearance is well preserved by a set of 19th-century plaster casts displayed in the Gipsoteca of the Swabian Castle in Bari.

64 Over the course of the 12th century, in fact, it became increasingly common for infidels to be associated with fantastic zoological creatures in Western art; see Curzi, "L'immagine del nemico," 280-81; and Curzi, "Stereotipi, metafore e pregiudizi," 534-45.

it is far from improbable; Dalmatian commercial ties with Apulia are well attested in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and artistic influences moved freely across the Adriatic during the Middle Ages. Regardless, the unambiguous use of Muslims as atlas figures in religious sculpture elsewhere on the Adriatic coast is clear evidence that such figures could not only be acceptably used as part of a Christian iconographic programme, but also that they could be distinguished and recognized by medieval Mediterranean artists and audiences alike.

With the central figure now identified as a Muslim, the throne's iconographic programmes fall into place. From one perspective, figures representing authority, justice, and power convey Elias's Solomonic ambitions. They surround a throne which itself surmounts the former epicentre of temporal authority in the region — a fitting seat for an ecclesiastical figure who, through skilful manoeuvring and sheer longevity, had become one of the most powerful men in southern Italy. From another perspective, the throne exalts victory over enemies and the subjugation of the defeated, a stark reminder of the ongoing Crusade that had been promoted by the very pope who commissioned the throne. The crusading imagery is rendered even more explicit by the central presence of a Muslim figure looking reverently upwards towards the Catholic occupant of the throne. He and the stooping barbarians to either side are collectively surmounted by a series of reliefs that serve as reminders of the Christian ties of both the throne and its occupant. Admittedly, during ceremonial uses of the throne all of these features — both the reliefs and the figures surrounding the base — would have been concealed behind the folds of the ecclesiastical vestments worn by the throne's occupant. But the temporary physical obscuring of the images would not have blinded those who had seen the throne beforehand, even from afar, to the obvious symbolism of the enthroned prelate supported by the subjugated Muslim and the barbarians at his feet.

It is not surprising that a throne commissioned by a pope for the use of an archbishop, as the Anonymous of Bari recorded, should reflect the interests and ambitions of both parties. While it is impossible to definitively identify the surviving throne as having been created for the Council of Bari, the city's historical circumstances in the late eleventh century offer a convincing framework for understanding the surviving throne's overlapping and mutually reinforcing symbolic meanings. The period from 1095 to 1100 was one of fervent triumphalism; it permeates the letters and chronicles of the era, and it radiates forth unequivocally from the marble contours of the surviving episcopal throne. If the throne's iconography has

so often resisted interpretation, it is perhaps because too few scholars have tried to see it as a dialogue rather than as a unified statement, while others have forgotten that Bari was not merely an Italian city, but a Mediterranean port with pan-Mediterranean influences.

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