

A Note on our Eponymous Horn

Some readers of *Olifant* might be interested to have their attention drawn to an important article by the art historian Ernst Kühnel entitled "Die sarazenischen Olifanthörner."¹ In it Kühnel sets out to reinterpret the extant body of medieval oliphants and to reevaluate the evidence available for ascertaining the place and date of their manufacture. The theories which he is led to formulate contradict the hitherto widely accepted views of Otto von Falke, who saw the horns as continuing an early Farimidic tradition based primarily in Egypt and subsequently imported into Western Europe.²

Kühnel reminds us that while some seventy-five medieval oliphants have survived, ecclesiastical sources provide written evidence of the existence of at least twenty more, now lost. Winchester seems to have headed the league with nine exemplars. Their appearance in Church treasuries was no doubt linked with their use as symbols of enfeoffment. An early example of such a tenure horn is that given to (and preserved at) York Minster by the Danish nobleman Ulph before the reign of Edward the Confessor. Of these seventy-five survivors, Kühnel points out that, while almost sixty are Oriental (Islamic or Byzantine) in either provenance or style, not a single one is preserved in the East. More significantly even, there exists no direct evidence of oliphants having been used in the Orient: they never appear in Islamic art or on the many decorated objects where they might have been expected to figure, nor is any reference to them found, apparently, in Arabic literature. Finally, none has any Arabic inscription.

Kühnel then proceeds to classify the oliphants into three basic types according to their decoration: those with an unworked central zone but with one or both extremities showing a frieze of carved animals in procession set in circles over scroll-work; those with all three zones carved with animals in interconnected circles; those in which the body of the horn is worked in panels separated by vertical bands. While the unmistakable Islamic features of most of the beasts and birds point to an Arabic origin, it is not necessarily exclusively Egyptian, since Byzantine and pre-romanesque Western influences are also sometime discernible.

As the bulk of the surviving oliphants are attributable to the eleventh century, and as Moorish Spain and the Crusader States of Syria

¹*Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* [*Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen, Neue Folge*] 1 (1959), 33-50.

²*Pantheon* (1929), 514ff.; (1930), 39ff.

and Palestine could hardly be expected to have possessed flourishing artistic centres at that time, the most likely area of production emerges as Sicily, where similar composite carving techniques are known, from other sources, to have been practised during the second half of the twelfth century. Kühnel goes on from there to postulate the existence of a southern-Italian oliphant industry, based probably on Amalfi, Salerno and Bari, with resident Saracen craftsmen making skilfully decorated horns specifically for export to the West. It seems unlikely that such centres would have become established in Moslem Sicily prior to the arrival of the Norman, whose conquest was initiated in 1060 and well advanced by 1072. On the mainland, Bari fell to the Normans in 1071, Amalfi in 1073, and Salerno four years later.

Kühnel's findings are accepted as convincing by another art historian, Hanns Swarzenski, in an article on two fine oliphant specimens in the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. Swarzenski adds some interesting observations on the elephant as a symbol of chastity and purity (including a short excursus from the bestiary on its bizarre procreation habits) and on the allegory of its ivory tusks. He also informs us that the late Adolph Goldschmidt's extensive photographic collection of oliphants is now housed in the Manuscript Room of McCormick Hall at Princeton University. This valuable corpus of research material would, I venture to think, quickly become more widely known and appreciated were it allowed to grace the front covers of our journal.

What relevance could Kühnel's research and theories have for the study of the Old French epic? Probably not very much. Those (particularly, perhaps, individualists) who agree with André Burger that the two horn-scenes of the Oxford *Roland* are "des scènes capitales qui donnent l'impression d'être le point central de toute la conception du poème"⁴ might be tempted to use this art-historical testimony to confirm the dating of the composition of the *Roland* to no earlier than the last decades of the eleventh century. Some—though this seems even more unlikely—might argue that the Sicilian and Italian connection could constitute an additional argument in favour of close links between the *Roland* and the Normans as expounded

³"Two Oliphants in the Museum," *Boston Museum Bulletin*, 60 (1962), 27-45.

⁴"Les deux scènes du cor," *La Technique littéraire des Chansons de Geste*, Bib. Fac. Let. Univ. de Liège, fasc. 150, (Paris, 1959), pp. 105-125, here 105.

principally by E. Li Gotti⁵ and D. C. Douglas,⁶ or more specifically between the *Roland* and Norman Italy as advanced by H. Grégoire⁷ and E. Mireaux⁸ amongst others. All of which would be tenuous, to say the least. Some, on the other hand, (including, no doubt, traditionalists) might view this particular piece of evidence from art history as an indication that the oliphant possesses little historico-literary pedigree in the long pre-Oxford tradition of the *Roland*, a conclusion—it should be added—that had already been reached by Gaston Paris as long ago as 1882.⁹

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⁵*La Chanson de Roland e i Normanni* (Firenze, 1949).

⁶"The Song of Roland and the Norman Conquest of England" *French, Studies*, 14 (1960), 99-116.

⁷Bibliography in M. de Riquer, *Les Chansons de Geste françaises*, 2e éd., (Paris, 1952), p. 49, note 41.

⁸*La Chanson de Roland et l'Histoire de France* (Paris, 1943), esp. pp. 185-199. (Other books by Mireaux include *L'expérience financière de M. Raymond Poincaré* and *Les Miracles du Crédit*, in which field he was no doubt more at home than in medieval French literature.)

⁹*Romania*, 11, 506. Roland's oliphant (described, it will be noted [v. 2296] with much the same sort of poetic adornment as the Jewel-encrusted epic helmet) is thought by Gaston Paris to have been introduced "à l'occasion de la relique de Bordeaux," that is the Saint-Seurin horn of vv.3685-7. Cf. my "Roland's Final Combat" in *Cultura Neolatina*, 30 (1970) 135-155, esp. 136-141.