

## ***HUNTING IN COPTIC ART***

The hunt is a frequent theme in Coptic art. [Hunters](#) on foot and on horseback are often depicted in paintings, reliefs, and textiles. Two examples from the monastery of BAWIT are particularly noteworthy. One, on a sanctuary wall in a chapel, illustrates a passage from the scriptures. The other, in chapel 12, a lion hunt, probably with bow and arrow, also depicts prophets in a standing position. Among them is Zechariah (Clédat, 1904, p. 62, pl. 37). It probably alludes to Zechariah 11:3: “Hark the roaring of the young lions.”

Other examples of the hunting theme include gazelle hunts. One, detached from a wall and preserved in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, shows a lion stalking and gazelles bounding. Another, in chapel 8 at Bawit, depicts two gazelles in flight (Clédat, 1904, pp. 49-52, pl. 30). A third, in chapel 37 at Bawit, shows a hunt in a forest; some of the hunters, wearing swords at their sides, are in Persian costume (Clédat, 1916, pp. 38-39). This seems to illustrate the words: “then like a hunted gazelle” (Is. 13:14).

In a sketch (p. 40) of a scene at Bawit, linked with a scene of gazelle hunting, Clédat has captured the essential elements of a hippopotamus hunt. The [hunters](#) are depicted as *putti* (cherubs) among water lilies. The meaning of this scene is questionable in so far as Christian iconography is concerned since the hippopotamus does not appear in the fauna mentioned in the Bible. However, as the hippopotamus was part of the ancient Egyptian fauna, it was one of the naturalistic motifs frequently used in pharaonic times in tomb paintings and reliefs and in temples, particularly the Temple of Idfu.

In the Alexandrian period, the theme of the hippopotamus hunt passed into Hellenistic iconography; one of the best-known examples of *putti* among water lilies is that of the mosaic of Palestrina in Italy dating from the first century A.D.

The presence of such a scene in Bawit betrays links with Greek iconography but derives most probably from themes in the Temple of Idfu: Horus, God of Good, vanquishes Seth, God of Evil and the desert, represented as a hippopotamus, symbol of evil and by extension, the devil (see BIBLICAL SUBJECTS IN ART). The representation of the hippopotamus gives further significance to the gazelles mentioned earlier when we think that, for example, on the cippi of Horus (votive stelae for magical use) of the late pharaonic period, the gazelle is depicted among the malignant animals of the retinue of Seth.

This detail is further alluded to in the very iconography of Bawit, namely the fresco representing Saint Sisinnios piercing the demoness Alabastria with his lance. He is surrounded by malign animals and emblems that include a gazelle.

These considerations form the transition to other hunting scenes that are no longer simple illustrations, borrowed from profane life, of passages of scripture and participate only outwardly in the sacred character of these texts. They depict rather a theme in itself sacred, or more properly funerary, that, among the Mesopotamians as among many other peoples, symbolizes the victory of good over evil in the guise of a hunter on foot or on horseback in pursuit of game, whether large or small.

This symbolism, as has been noted, existed in [Egypt](#) in the representation of the struggle between the god Horus and the god Seth, often represented under their animal guises borrowed from the Egyptian fauna. Egyptians who remained pagan after the triumph of [Christianity](#) exploited it in a celebrated relief showing the victorious Horus (see MYTHOLOGICAL SUBJECTS) piercing a Typhonian animal from the back of his horse. But the piece must date from the seventh century, and despite the Greco-Roman uniform and the harness, the presentation of Horus with a falcon's head presupposes the use of this relief in a sanctuary of belated adherents to the pharaonic gods.

The borrowing of the Mesopotamian theme, the use of Greco-Roman garments, and the survival of the pharaonic theme to a late date bear witness to the blendings of cultures and the neighbourly relations between them that had been established. The rarity of the pharaonic theme, however, and its almost complete disappearance contrasted with the abundance of examples of the Mesopotamian theme that were less directly symbolic; the head of the huntsman, for example, remained a human head and emphasized the acceptance by the Christian Copts, as by the Christian artists of the catacombs (du Bourguet, 1970, pp. 48-51), of themes with a universally spiritual value without feeling any need to add any specifically Christian mark (see ICONOGRAPHY, CHRISTIAN).

From this perspective, we may consider, in addition to the hunts of the hippopotamus or the gazelle, hunting scenes of large or small game. These must, however, be distinguished from the theme of the Parthian horseman, who is recognized by his gesture of benediction with the right hand. Such scenes may be grouped in three categories: (1) [hunters](#) on foot, no doubt taken from Roman domestic decoration (du Bourguet, 1964, no. C 22 and passim), particularly in the fabrics but also in the paintings; (2) hunters on horseback, often wearing the Phrygian cap, which marks an Oriental origin (du Bourguet, 1964, nos. C 20, D 91, 96, and passim), very frequent in fabrics; and (3) the pursuit of wild animals in the bushes by lions or dogs, no doubt deriving from the preceding category but reduced to this significant detail without the need for any human presence, according to a typically Coptic procedure, and present in paintings (Clédat, 1904), reliefs (Chassinat, 1911) and fabrics (du Bourguet, 1964, nos. C 70 and D 117).

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**PIERRE DU BOURGUET**

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