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A comet, two coins, thousands of Venetian lions

Introduction

The Venetian winged lion, or the Lion of St Mark, is one of the world's best-known medieval symbols, which is still "alive" today and appears in a variety of forms on various objects of applied art, graphics and company logos. The winged lion even has thousands of Facebook fans, where new images of it are uploaded almost every day. This popularity dates back to the Middle Ages, but the reasons and circumstances behind it are obscure. This study aims to dispel this.

Background

Although it is well known that the lion was the symbol of St Mark, the patron saint of Venice, even in the early Middle Ages, there is no coherent explanation among historians, art historians or archaeologists as to why it suddenly became the official symbol and icon of the entire Venetian Republic in the 13th century. But before tracing the symbol's sudden popularity, let us briefly examine the origins of the ways in which the winged lion was depicted.

The Biblical origins

In the Bible, Ezekiel writes about four winged creatures: "And the shape of their faces was the face of a man, and the face of a lion on the right of the four, and the face of a bull on the left of the four, and the face of an eagle on the back of the four ... And these are their faces. And their wings were stretched out above, two wings touching each of them, and two covering their bodies. "

Later, in Christian depictions, each creature was linked to an Evangelist, thus the lion became the symbol of St Mark. As the 11th-century ivory carving below illustrates, in most cases the lion was depicted from the front or in semi-profile, holding a book in his hands. Fig. 1

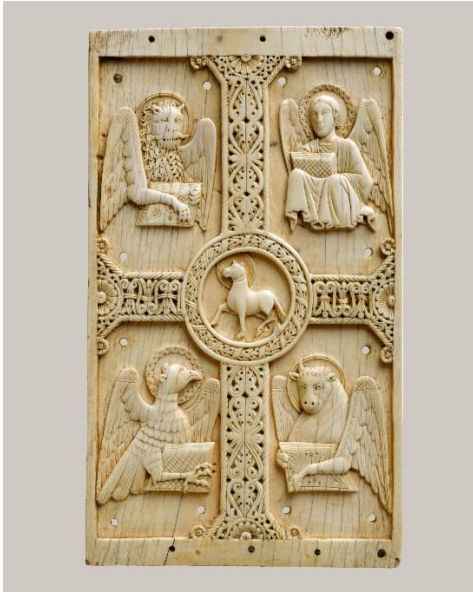


Fig. 1

Arab influence

Al-Sufi is believed to have written his influential book on the constellations¹ in Shiraz in the mid-10th century, which was the subject of numerous medieval revisions and copies, and by the 11th-12th centuries was well known in Europe through various Arab scholars. This book not only led to the development of astronomy, but also influenced various branches of art. There is, for example, a connection between the lion constellation, as can be seen in this book from 1260-1280 - Fig. 2 - and other common representations of lion figures throughout Europe. As with the constellations, the lion is depicted from the side, its tail often curved in an inverted S shape and one foreleg raised. Fig. 3

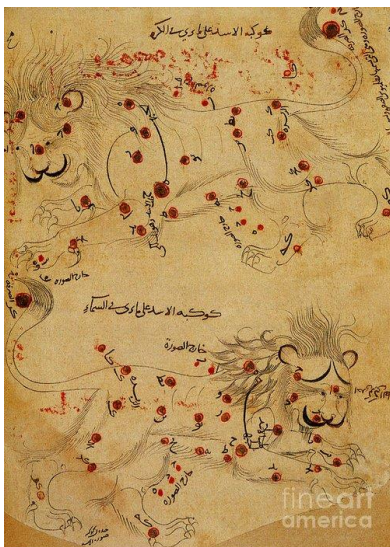


Fig. 2

¹ Emilie Savage-Smith: The Most Authoritative Copy of Abd al-Rahman al-Sufis - Guide to the Constellations, p. 125.



Fig. 3

Thus, in the 11th and 12th centuries, some of St Mark's winged lions may have been based on the lion design known from the constellations. Ingenious artists took advantage of the raised paw in the constellation to place the book of the Gospel underneath. An 11th-century German ivory carving is an example of this. Fig. 4



Fig. 4

Ancient origin

A third factor may have influenced the origin of the Venetian winged lion. When Constantinople was conquered - and sacked - Venice came into contact with a number of artefacts of ancient and Middle Eastern origin. The origins of the winged lions can be traced back to the ancient Near East, as shown by the 6th century BC lion depiction - Fig. 5



Fig. 5

The lion in Venice

To summarise the foregoing, we can say that there may have been several influences on the development of the two main ways of depicting the Venetian lion. This is true both for the 'stepping lion' depicted from the side and for the so-called 'moleca', where the lion is seen almost from the front. According to Alberto Ricci, perhaps the greatest expert on the subject, it was in the 1260s that the lion of St Mark came to the fore as a symbol of Venice and its republic.² The iconographic foundations were therefore already well established for Venice to begin using the winged lion as a symbol, and some - albeit not yet fully developed - examples of its use are known from the early 1260s. Fig. 6. The most important and best known winged lion, however, is undoubtedly the bronze statue on a column in the former harbour, erected around 1268.³ - Fig. 7

² Alberto Rizzi: I LEONI DOLOMITICI Il simbolo della Repubblica Veneta nelle "provincie" del Bellunese, Feltrino e Cadore - p. 14.

³ Robert S. Nelson: The History of Legends and the Legends of History: the Pilastrini in Venice San Marco, Byzantium, and the Myths of Venice Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection Washington, D.C. 2010 - p. 79.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Very little is known about this bronze lion. What is certain is that it is of ancient origin and that Venice probably captured it from the East, perhaps from Constantinople. It has undergone several modifications and repairs, and its wing was probably added by the Venetians. However, this wing looked different then from the one it has now - more on this later.

Reniero Zeno Doge

Other remarkable things also happened in Venice in the 1260s, during the reign of Doge Reniero Zeno.⁴ It was at this time that Zeno introduced the Apparitio, a ceremony in honour of the legend of the miraculous rediscovery of the relics of St Mark, which was given a special place and held every year from then on. The curious thing is that it was introduced nearly two hundred years after the alleged rediscovery of the relics. The famous Apparitio mosaics in St Mark's Cathedral were also made in the 1260s.⁵ They are ultimately a reference to St Mark's renewed prominence in the Venetian state. With the erection of the columns in the 1260s, Venice also renewed the Sposalizio

⁴ Fabio Berry: *Disiecta membra Ranieri Zeno, the Imitation of Constantinople, the Spolia Style, and Justice at San Marco*-8.p.

⁵ Otto Demus and Herbert L. Kessler, *The Mosaic Decoration of San Marco, Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988), p. 110.

del Mare - Marriage with the Sea - celebration.⁶ It was also sometime in the mid 1260s that the Piazzetta, where the port's columns, including the one holding the lion, are located, was first covered with brick paving.⁷ In the same period, on 8 September 1264, Zeno wrote to the Pope urging His Holiness to launch a crusade to re-establish the Roman Empire.⁸ For some reason, the Doge, after his expulsion from Constantinople in 1261, felt the urge to strike back and regain his Byzantine power.

What could have happened to Zeno in the 1260s to make him suddenly and unexpectedly rediscover the importance of St Mark for Venice? What gave such impetus to the use of the winged lion, which belonged to Saint Mark and had hitherto been only a trace of his presence, that he not only placed it on a pillar in the harbour but also made it the symbol of the state? And finally, what gave Reniero Zeno the confidence to attack again three years after the loss of Constantinople and restore Venice's dominance there?

The comet

I believe that the answer to the previous questions must be sought in a celestial phenomenon that was extraordinary in many ways. From July to the beginning of October 1264, a comet of sometimes astonishing size and spectacular appearance was visible in the sky: C/1264 N1. From contemporary descriptions, it is certain that the comet was for a time composed of open 'branches', which could be interpreted as wings, and was also visible in the constellation of Leo for at least some of the time. Using astronomical programmes, it can be reconstructed that the 'winged lion' was visible from the present lion's column, approximately east of the Doge's Palace, over the lagoons. It may be a coincidence, but the fact remains that the bronze lion on the column was - and still is - facing in the direction in which the comet was visible in the sky.

Let's start with the comet descriptions of the time. The comet was observed from several continents, and although there are understandable discrepancies between the accounts, the various sources agree that the comet was visible from at least mid-July until early October at the latest. The Erfurt chronicle and an Arabic, a Colmarian and a British source point to the comet appearing a few hours before dawn, and several also mention its eastward or pre-Venus appearance,^{9 10} which, if examined with the Stellarium astronomical program around August-September 1264, would place the comet in the constellation Leo for at least some time during the period. - Fig. 8. The Chinese Song Shi sources and the autobiography of Emperor Lizong both mention the constellation of Willow, or Leo, as the constellation where the comet appeared.¹¹

⁶ Fabio Berry: *Disiecta membra Ranieri Zeno, the Imitation of Constantinople, the Spolia Style, and Justice at San Marco*-8.p., p. 10.

⁷ A.J. Ammermann, *More on the origins of Venice* 505.p.

⁸ Fabio Berry: *Disiecta membra Ranieri Zeno, the Imitation of Constantinople, the Spolia Style, and Justice at San Marco*-8.p.

⁹ David A.J. Seargent: *The Greatest Comets in History: Broom Stars and Celestial Scimitars* pp. 95-99.

¹⁰ Christopher Carter: "I Still Continue Convinced": Expecting the Great Comet of 1848 *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 2017 - pp. 185-193.

¹¹ Christopher Carter: "I Still Continue Convinced": Expecting the Great Comet of 1848 *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 2017 - pp. 195-196.



Fig. 8

The sources also agree that the comet has changed both in size and shape over the months. According to the Korean source, the comet has split into 5 branches. The Arabic source refers to the shape of the comet as rising fingers - again suggesting five branches.¹² Bernard Gui compares it to the sail of a ship, which may also mean that the sail was narrowed upwards.¹³ It is not hard to imagine that the tail could have been very similar to a wing, and that for at least some time it did indeed resemble a winged lion, along with the constellation of the lion.

Interestingly, Asian sources say that the comet disappeared for a while in the second week of September. According to the autobiography of Emperor Lizong, the comet "disappeared" on 8th of September. Many people also report that for a time the celestial body grew to an astonishing length, and thus crossed half the sky. Sources say that in October it was only visible at the very beginning of the month at the most, and then it disappeared completely.

The Hungarian coins

However, there are also artefacts that support the idea that it was not only Zeno and his court who saw the winged lion phenomenon. Two contemporary Hungarian coins together provide ample evidence of this. The coin - Opitz catalogue coin 23.19.1.1 - of King Stephen the Younger of Hungary, ruler of one half of the country, later Stephen V (1232-1272) shows a winged lion with an S-shaped tail and raised forepaw, and a large and accentuated star - Fig. 9

¹² David A.J. Seargent: *The Greatest Comets in History: Broom Stars and Celestial Scimitars* p. 98.

¹³ Christopher Carter: "I Still Continue Convinced": Expecting the Great Comet of 1848 *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 2017 - p. 189.



Fig. 9

The coin is unusual and special in many ways. First of all, the fact that it depicts a winged lion needs to be explained. Stephen's only contact with Venice could only have been through a potential rival, a pretender to the throne, called Stephen from Venice, but this does not explain, or rather rule out, the inclusion of a Venetian lion on his coin. We are not aware of any alliance with Venice, nor of any plan to make one. Even more telling is the lion's wing, which is elongated and tapers upwards, consisting of five branches, and does not even resemble the usual wings. The tiny coin also has a large star, which, although not an uncommon motif on medieval Hungarian coins, is not so prominent on them as a single star. In addition, the weight of the coin is unusually only about half the usual - about 0.25g - as if it were an obolus, which it cannot be, because there is no coin of this type of denarius size and weight. Of particular interest is the fact that the obverse of the coin bears a striking resemblance to an earlier coin which also once depicted astronomical phenomena. Such a match has never been seen before, so I do not think it is a coincidence.

All of this makes it very likely that the coin features the Comet n 1264, and in the same way as the Venetian, near the constellation of Leo.

There is, however, another coin - ÉH 249 - from the same period, minted by Stephen's father, King Béla IV, ruler of the other half of Hungary, which I believe was also inspired by the 1264 comet, only in its earliest phase, when it was still a bright star in the sky. On the reverse of the coin we see a dragon, which bears a strong resemblance to the dragon constellation found in the aforementioned books of Islamic constellations that are widely used throughout Europe. Both the shape of the dragon, the direction of its curves and its tail curling in a loop at the bottom show this. Fig. 10



Fig. 10

This coin also has a large bright star to the right of the dragon, which is held, unusually and seemingly unjustifiably, by the dragon in its "hands". One of the earliest descriptions of the comet comes from Japan and records the place where the comet appeared. According to this, it appeared in the sky on 21 July in the constellation of Ursa Minor.¹⁴ Fig. 11 shows that the location of Ursa Minor is exactly the same as the star on the coin of Bela IV: in the middle and to the right of the constellation of the Dragon.

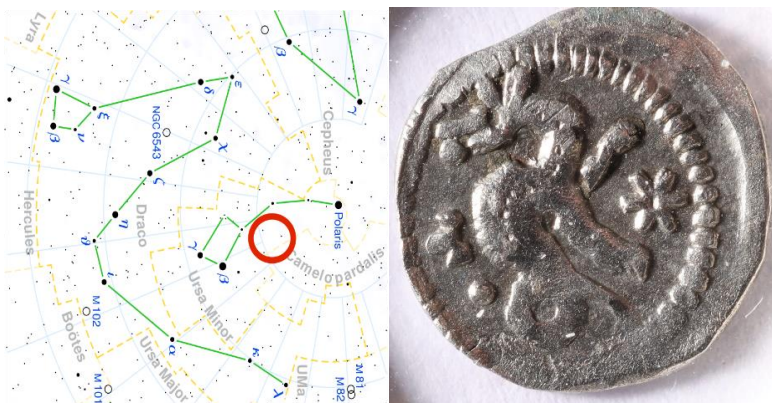


Fig. 11

The same applies to this coin as to the coin struck by Stephen: it weighs only half the normal weight, and there is no known denarius version of it. Since both the coins minted by Stephen and Béla were struck in an unusual way, in a hurry, almost spontaneously, after the comet appeared, it is understandable why the coins weigh less. Around July and August, the resources, both human and material - silver - were probably not yet suddenly available, as if they were preparing for the usual annual Easter exchange.

If we examine the obverse of the coin - Fig. 12 - and look a little deeper into the relationship between the two Hungarian rivals, it may help us to understand the development of the Venetian winged lion cult.

¹⁴ David A.J. Seargent: The Greatest Comets in History: Broom Stars and Celestial Scimitars p. 96.

We know that for the people of the Middle Ages, the comet usually foreshadowed some kind of disaster - famine, pestilence. However, there was another interpretation of the celestial phenomenon, which was interpreted positively, especially by kings and rulers who were dissatisfied with their political situation and hoped for change. A contemporary Austrian source, when mentioning the comet of 1264, mentions that comets signify change in kingdoms - i.e. the fall of a king or empire.¹⁵

In the case of Béla IV, this was particularly suited to his political hopes, since not long before his son Stephen, the enemy ruler, had imposed his will on Béla, who was apparently not reconciled to it. For Béla IV, then, the promise of change in the kingdoms, as opposed to the status quo, was a decidedly encouraging sign from heaven. This can be read from the obverse of the coin, which is full of signs never before seen on Hungarian coins, and fits in with the supposed mindset of Béla IV at the time. If we bear the above in mind, it makes sense why the letters Alpha and Omega appear on both sides of the king's figure.



Fig. 12

According to the Bible, the two letters signify the apocalypse, quoting the words of the Lord, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end". Perhaps also because of his well-known religiosity, Béla IV expected some kind of divine intervention in his struggle with Stephen. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that on the reverse, next to the dragon, only Omega, or 'the end', is visible, and that the dragon eats one of the two circles. It is therefore safe to assume that the comet of 1264 may have been a divine sign to Béla IV, which he believed would mark the end of Stephen's reign and power. This is also confirmed by Béla IV's strategic moves, which are well known from history. It is easy to imagine that Béla IV began plotting against Stephen at the 'instigation' of the comet. He was gathering allies, and it seems that in the summer he may indeed have been preparing for battle against Stephen. It was also around this time that he began to organise the wedding of his favourite son and ally, Prince Béla, a marriage which would provide him with a serious political and military ally in the person of the bride's relative, the powerful Ottokar II. If the wedding in early November 1264 had been planned a few months earlier, the decision to have the wedding could indeed have been taken around the time of the comet's appearance in mid-July. Béla IV's military attacks, planned in the summer and which caught Stephen unawares, began almost immediately after the wedding, around December. If we take these historical facts as a starting point, it is easy to imagine that one of the driving forces, if not the main one, behind the events behind Béla's military organisation, the

¹⁵ Zvláštň Otisk z Pekarova Sborniku, Praha 1930 - 132.p.

winning of the most important alliance through the wedding and his rapid attack on Stephen, was Béla IV's interpretation of the comet's appearance.

Venice

After this detour, let's return to Venice and examine whether the comet could not have been the main motivating factor behind Reniero Zeno's letter to Pope Doge? The contents of the letter suggest that it could have been. For it was under Zeno Renieri that Venice lost Constantinople and the so-called Latin Empire came to an end, which was a great blow to the Italian Republic. Thus, as in the case of Bela IV, the possibility of change, rather than the status quo, after the Byzantine embarrassment, would have been very important for Zeno. The contemporary interpretation of the comet as a celestial sign must have been very encouraging for the Doge, who, in his letter to the Pope of 8 September 1264, was therefore eager to launch a new crusade against Constantinople. It is particularly interesting that the letter was written on the very day that Emperor Lizong reported that the comet had temporarily disappeared from the sky. It is possible that this is just a coincidence, but perhaps Zeno was waiting to see how the celestial phenomenon would end, and when the comet disappeared on 8 September - the Doge could not have known at the time that it would return later - he thought he would act immediately and write to the Pope. Whether it was the case or not, the phenomenon of the comet, the historically defining fiasco of Venice in Constantinople, Zeno's letter to Pope, and the contemporary interpretation of the comet are all consistent with the above interpretations.

It is also worth taking a brief detour back to the relationship between the Venetian depictions of the winged lion following the appearance of the 1264 comet and the image of the Leo constellation. Most of the early Venetian winged lions move to the left, have an S-shaped tail and a book with a quotation from St Mark under their raised forepaws. However, the way in which the stars in the constellation of Leo were connected and their pictorial interpretation was not entirely consistent in medieval books, and was often entirely a matter of chance. This is understandable, since the stars can be connected in many different ways, and many different things can be seen in them. – Fig. 13



Fig. 13

Even the lion constellation depictions found today see different shapes in the stars. - Fig. 14



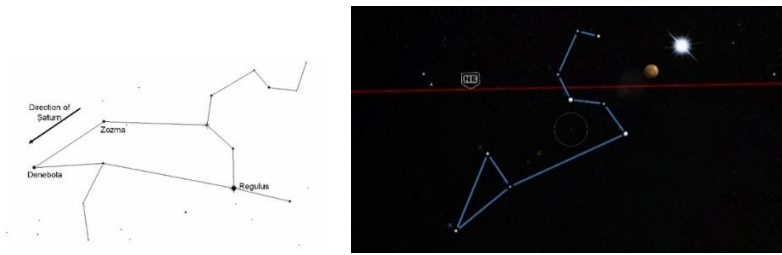


Fig. 14

To add to the confusion, the Arabic books depicted the constellations in two different ways. The reason for the two types of axially symmetrical images - Fig. 15 - was that the constellations were not only shown from the Earth looking up to the sky, but also projected 'from outside' onto a large sphere, as they were represented on a metal sphere, an astronomical tool of the time.¹⁶ Fig. 16

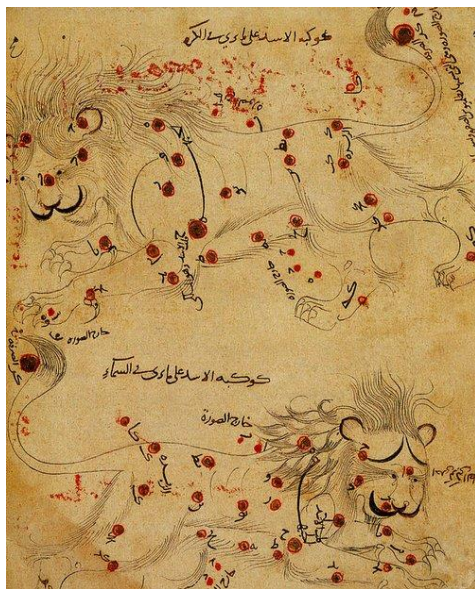


Fig. 15



¹⁶ Emilie Savage-Smith: The Most Authoritative Copy of Abd al-Rahman al-Sufis - Guide to the Constellations, p. 126.

Fig. 16

My assumption is that both the Venetians and according to Stephen's coin the Hungarians used the lion stepping to the left – just like elsewhere in Europe, who chose to use this version from the Arabic book illustrations. The S-shaped tail of the lion, which was by then a common depiction, was recognised as being in the right-hand part of the constellation, which is made up of the brightest stars - contrary to the original intention by the Arabs. The raised foreleg thus fell to the left of the constellation. Fig. 17

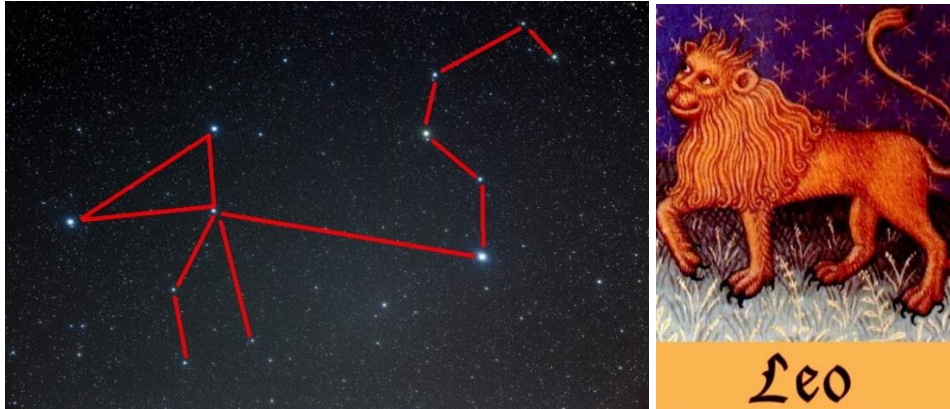


Fig. 17

Finally, we can perhaps take the liberty of reconstructing the most spectacular phase of the comet's appearance, when it formed the lion's "wings", on the basis of the contemporary accounts and the coin image of the Hungarian denarius - the contemporary accounts and the coin image are fully compatible. One written source says that the comet split into five branches, while another says that it rose up like fingers, which also suggests five branches. On the coin of Stephen, the wing is also divided into five parts. The current wing of the bronze lion was only made in the 19th century, but a painting by Francesco Bassano from around 1590 shows that the wings were originally still made up of five separate parts. Fig. 18. It is possible that this was inspired by the comet's appearance at the time.



Fig. 18

The third source compares the shape of the comet to a sail, which implies an upward tapering shape, as seen on the Hungarian denarius. Since the Stellarium astronomy program can determine the location of the former constellation of Leo, we can also reconstruct approximately what a Venetian citizen saw in 1264 from the vicinity of the Doge's Palace (this image does not yet show the five branches of the comet) - Fig. 19



Fig. 19

Summary

We know from contemporary accounts that in 1264 a comet was visible in the constellation of Leo, which for a time split into five branches and could be likened to a wing. In line with this, a Hungarian coin most probably depicts this comet as a lion with wings. If anywhere, it must have been in Venice that the celestial phenomenon of the winged lion was highly appreciated, since it was already known as the lion of St Mark, although not yet used as an official symbol. It is known, but needs to be explained, that in Venice in the 1260s, the Doge Reniero Zeno unexpectedly revived a cult associated with the relics of St Mark. In connection with this, some of the mosaics of the Cathedral of St Mark were also completed. It was also at this time that Zeno erected the iconic column next to the harbour, on which he placed the bronze lion he had captured earlier - with wings attached. By the end of the 13th century at the latest, the Lion of St Mark had become the official symbol of Venice and was also displayed on its flag. The Doge also urges the Pope to launch a new crusade just as the comet is shining in the sky of Venice - or perhaps on the very day it disappears. According to the lore of the time, the comet heralded a change in the kingdoms.

If we connect the above facts with a logical thread, we can reconstruct the events in a nutshell: in the appearance of the comet in 1264, Doge Reniero Zeno - and, incidentally, King Stephen the Younger of Hungary - sees the figure of a winged lion. As it had already been a symbol associated with St Mark, and therefore with Venice, Zeno understandably interpreted it as a divine sign for Venice, and in the second half of the 1260s he revived the hitherto forgotten cult associated with the relic of St Mark - the Apparitio - and erected the iconic columns at the harbour, one of which featured a winged lion. The Doge and his successors then venerate the winged lion as the official symbol of Venice, with a phrase in its paw, replacing the Book of the Gospel, emphasising the link between St Mark and Venice.