

Airship and Submarine in the Medieval Imagination (1913)

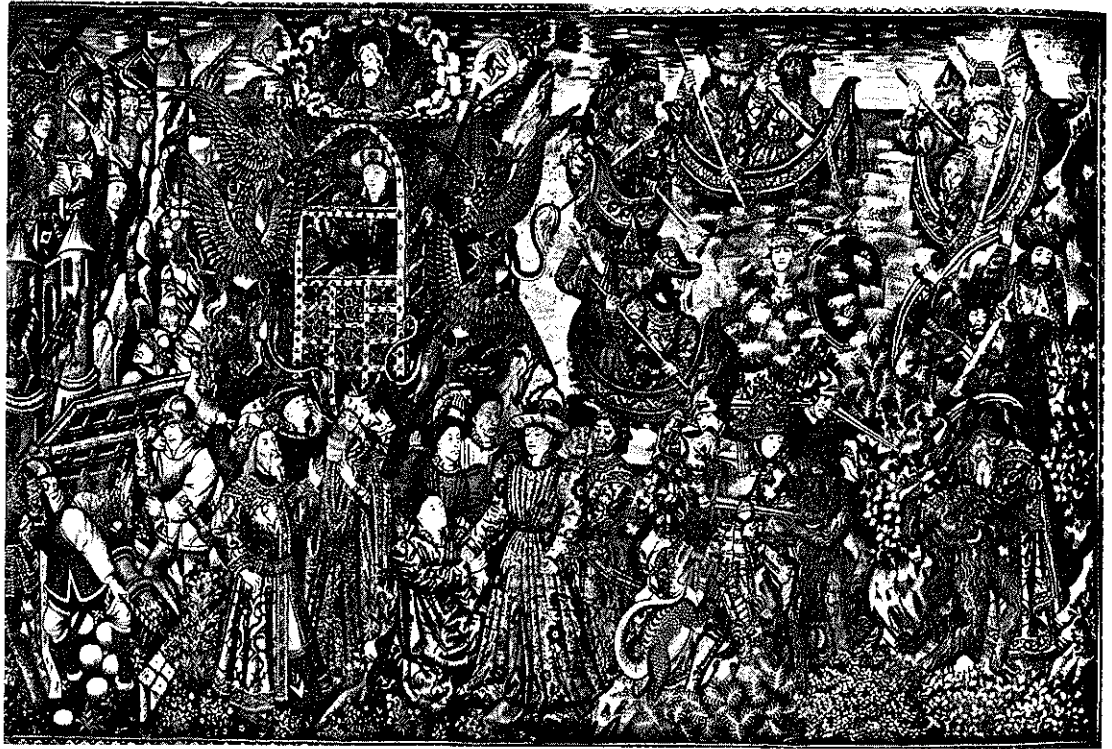


In Rome, in the fall of 1912, when the participants in the Tenth International Congress of the History of Art were invited into the private apartments of their host, Prince Doria, they were startled to come upon the two fifteenth-century Northern European figurative tapestries that form the most substantial scheme of mural decoration in his palace. The strange and un-Italian figures that swarm in baffling profusion across the vast expanses (4.3 × 10 m) of these two Flemish tapestries—probably woven in Tournai * between 1450 and 1460—look down, as they probably have done for several centuries now, on a festive Italian social scene. Early Italian Renaissance collectors had a taste for *arazzi* of this kind; and these wall hangings, which combined convenience with entertainment, enjoyed the privilege of presenting mythological and historical narratives in a curiously unclassical style—until the High Renaissance, that is, when Italian artists began to provide cartoons of their own, and Northern influence was gradually eliminated from all Flemish figurative tapestries made for the Italian market.

These two Burgundian tapestries depict the life of Alexander the Great. One shows the exploits of his early youth; the other his fabled deeds as the * conqueror of the world. Two scenes from the latter are reproduced here [the whole tapestry, fig. 64]. The king is seen flying aloft, to the amazement of the bystanders, in a metal cage drawn by four griffins; nearby, we see him lowered into the sea in a glass tub. We recognize him again, by his face and his crown, as he is welcomed after his landing. To the right he reappears in full armor, vanquishing fearful monsters in the depths of a virgin forest.

This imagery—which is as naive, to our eyes, as a page from some huge book of fairy tales—was then regarded by the educated society of Western Europe as accurate and well-documented history. It precisely corresponds to the facts as given in the *Romance of Alexander*: a Greek text, replete with fantastic accretions, that long preserved Alexander's memory in East and West alike, through countless manuscripts in something like twenty-four languages. In an absorbing paper in the *Freiburger Münsterblätter* (1906), Friedrich † Panzer has shown that Alexander's attempt at flight—his "Ascent with the Griffins"—was already a favorite theme in the earliest medieval art and literature and enjoyed a wide international circulation.

For a direct source for our illustration we may turn to the French writer Jean Wauquelin, who recounted the history of Alexander the Great to the *



**Fig. 64. *Alexander's Ascent with the Griffins
and Journey to the Depths of the Sea***
Flemish tapestry, fifteenth century
Rome, Palazzo Doria (see p. 333)

Burgundian court around 1450. We shall allow him to speak for himself, in a free translation from a manuscript now in Gotha:

After Alexander had subdued the kingdoms of the Orient as far as India, he came to a mountain so tall that its summit seemed to touch the sky; and, as he gazed at this mountain, he pondered how he might travel beyond the clouds to learn what manner of thing the air was. So without delay he provided himself as follows. He summoned carpenters to make him a cage, large enough for him to sit inside in comfort. As soon as this was ready, he sent for eight griffins, of which he had many in his army, because he had brought along with him all of the strange things he had found in India; and he caused the griffins to be firmly chained to the cage, two on each side. Then he commanded his barons to wait until they heard from him, and entered the said cage and took with him sponges soaked in water and a lance, on the point of which he placed a piece of meat, and held it out above the cage.

Then the griffins, which were hungry, began to rise into the air, trying to catch the meat, and as they took flight they bore up the cage with the meat, and they were off. So high did they fly, at last, that the barons lost sight of their lord, his cage, and the birds; and he of them. And at last these flew so high that Alexander was carried far beyond the sphere of pure air into that of fire. Then he started to rub his birds' feet with his sponges to refresh them, and also used them to cool himself. At last he was carried so high that he felt the glare of the fire. When he looked down, he was so high, the story tells us, that the earth looked to him like a little garden surrounded by a tiny hedge, and the sea that surrounds the earth seemed no more than a little snake.

When Alexander found himself so high, he feared that the feathers of his birds might burn, and he prayed to Almighty God, in his grace and mercy, to let him return safe and sound to his people, for his own sake and for his people's sake. Then the Almighty wrapped the cage and the birds in a cloud, so that they turned back and came again to earth. But he came down more than ten days' journey from his army. Then Alexander alighted from his cage and gave thanks to Our Lord for the honor and favor that he had done him by permitting him, in his grace and mercy, to return safe and sound to earth.

Thereupon Alexander began to range about, inquiring after his army, and he reached it with great difficulty on the sixth day. He was received with great joy and many tokens of honor, for, as soon as his barons saw him, they came to meet him and welcomed him with all possible solemnity and respect. They praised and extolled him, crying: "Long live King Alexander, lord and governor of the whole world, of the air as well as of the earth!"

We can now understand the scene shown on the left. Alexander the Great sits in a lavishly ornamented metal construction, from the side windows of which he holds up two hams on long spears, which serve as an inducement to the four griffins harnessed to the craft to do their aerial work. Above them, however, God the Father, in a glory peopled with angels, signifies with an ominous gesture that, as a mortal, Alexander is forbidden to rise above the

sphere of the fourth element, fire, into heaven. On earth, nevertheless, Alexander receives an admiring welcome from his courtiers, who pay tribute to his daring. Nor, indeed, does Alexander allow the less than total success of this flight to deter him from his other enterprise, that of exploring the depths of the sea. Jean Wauquelin continues:

Shortly after this, he felt the desire to explore the bottom of the sea, to see its wonders; and forthwith he sent for craftsmen, whom he commanded to make him a glass tub, large and wide enough for a man to turn around within. In such a tub he would have an excellent view of all that went on below. Then he had the tub bound with good iron chains and furnished with a ring at the top, to which a stout hempen rope was secured. Once the tub was as he desired it, he entered it, taking with him a number of lamps, and had the opening above so firmly stopped that not a drop of water might enter, and took ship and sailed out to sea and let himself down on a rope.

What he saw below was hardly to be believed, as he said on his return: had he not seen it with his own eyes, he himself would not have credited it. He saw fishes that walked on the ground like quadrupeds and ate the fruits of the trees they found on the bottom of the sea; and whales of quite incredible size, which recoiled, however, from the bright glare of the lamps that he had brought with him. In the end he refused to tell the half of what he had seen. He did, however, go so far as to say that he had seen fishes in human form, both men and women, who walked on their feet and hunted fish for their food, just as animals are hunted on earth.

After he had looked his fill on all these wonders, he gave a sign to those above to draw him up again. They did so, and he was hauled back on board. There he broke open the tub, stepped out, and returned to his tent, where his barons awaited him in fear and trembling. They began to chide him for exposing his person to unnecessary danger. But Alexander replied: "My Lords, the man who desires to maintain his honor, or to extend his power and to advance himself, must often take his chances with Fortune. He must take little thought for the presence of his enemies; nor must he speak opprobriously of them, for there is no valor and no fortitude in empty words. Well may you marvel, now that I have exposed myself to this danger, at the greater wisdom with which I shall now rule my kingdom, because I have learned how great an advantage it is to have strength within oneself, even though strength without cunning is worth little. I say this, because in the depths of the sea I saw small fish that contrived to overcome greater ones by cunning, although they could never have vanquished them by their own strength alone."

Alexander in his glass tub, a flambeau in either hand, can be seen through the shimmering waters of the sea, into which bearded warriors in a tiny boat have lowered the tub on stout chains. The rest of his barons ply the oars of three other equally diminutive boats; they wear the ornate Greek cap that was worn by the Greek emissaries who came to Western Europe in the fifteenth century to seek aid against the Turks. To a contemporary eye, Alexander's retainers thus had the authentic look of true Greeks.

Alexander's attempts to conquer the more inaccessible of the elemental spheres are framed and flanked by his warlike exploits on earth. In the left-hand third of the tapestry (of which only part is included in our illustration), we see the siege and storming of a citadel; and on the far right Alexander subdues the horrific creatures that peopled the "Ends of the Earth" in the imagination of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. He and his trusty retainers kill dragons, club-wielding woodwoses, and even those shaggy monsters whose faces are set in their chests. Alexander himself is seen running his sword through one of these offspring of a debased ethnography.

† The sunlit uplands of classical culture seem to bear no relation to this underworld of childish phantasms; and yet there clearly resides in all this the nucleus of an authentic Roman-Oriental solar religion. To my mind, Alexander's ascent and descent clearly echo the legend and the cult of the sun god, who ascends and descends every day in his chariot—a chariot drawn, in the † Syrian cult of Malachbel, by a team of four griffins. In the state religion of the later Roman Empire, this solar cult found its ultimate expression in the belief that the deified spirit of a deceased Roman emperor would return to the sun. For all its plethora of marvels, this romance has a rationalistic side to it: Alexander enjoys his solar apotheosis here on earth, as it were, in the form of his flight with the four griffins. The prosaic Burgundian courtier does not deify his own prince, in a poetic cult of nature, by making him into a sun god; but he hails and honors him in the guise of a more fortunate Phaethon, safely returned from a perilous voyage of exploration.

For all his delight in grotesque marvels, Jean Wauquelin also takes pleasure in undaunted practical competence; so does the artist responsible for this tapestry. Against the same ground on which the hero earns easy plaudits for defeating mere phantasms, the siege (on the left; shown here only in part) is carried through in a sound and workmanlike manner. A gunner is firing his bombard, shielding his face from the flash with his free hand; a second artilleryman raises the shield to make way for the massive stone cannonball as it flies. And so the medieval and modern minds meet in a spontaneous symbolic antithesis: above, the uncritical faith in griffins and in the impassable fiery sphere; below, the sober, inventive spirit that puts fire to practical use, in the siege artillery of Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy.

* That this Alexander tapestry actually was woven for Philip the Good, by Pasquier Grenier in Tournai, is suggested not only by documentary evidence that such a commission was issued in 1459 but, above all, by the hitherto unremarked fact that the two *arazzi* in the Palazzo Doria incorporate portraits of Philip and of his son, Charles the Bold. Philip the Good and his consort are shown on the first tapestry (to be discussed elsewhere) as the parents of the youthful Alexander; and on the present tapestry the king himself, in my opinion, unmistakably bears the features of Charles (born 1433).

Charles was brought up in an atmosphere of courtly romance, in which flattering parallels were drawn between Philip of Burgundy and Philip of Macedon, in a Northern re-creation of an idealized ancient world. This was

pagan antiquity as it appeared to the Burgundian court in the age of Philip the Good: the expression—however dense the medieval disguise—of a genuine passion for the grandeur of the ancient world. †

The Portuguese author Vasco de Lucena, in his own later Alexander romance (which he dedicated to Charles the Bold), pointed with pride to his omission of the puerile legend of Alexander's flying and diving exploits as evidence of an advance in historical scholarship. But did this new and academically respectable Alexander mean more to Charles—who proudly displayed Alexander tapestries at his meeting with Emperor Frederick III in 1473—than † the fairy-tale king of the *Roman d'Alixandre*, whom he had known and admired since childhood?

It was at about this time that the Italian "early Renaissance" restored a more classical form to the subject matter of antiquity; or at least it presented Western culture with the ideal of a truly attainable human greatness, and thereby gave modern man a new weapon against the debilitating belief in a perfidious world of magic. Even so, the ability to see Alexander as a clear-cut classical profile did not necessarily make him more of a living presence in the heart.

This was the century in which Christian Europe, for all its supposedly greater learning, stood by helplessly while Constantinople fell to Sultan Mehmet II. As part of the ransom paid for the Burgundian Prince John (Philip's father, captured in the Battle of Nicopolis in 1396), the Sultan—whose ancestor Bajazet claimed descent from Alexander the Great himself—had demanded and received arras tapestries of the life of Alexander. It is said of Mehmet II † that he listened to daily readings from the history of Alexander in order to learn from the Macedonian hero how to conquer the whole world. And were not those inartistic Turkish warriors truer successors of Alexander than, for instance, the lover of Roxana, as portrayed with elegant and authentically "antique" stylization by Sodoma in the Villa Farnesina?

The tapestry in the Palazzo Doria, not previously noticed in the literature, can thus be seen as a revealing document of the evolution of historical consciousness in the age of the revival of classical antiquity in Western Europe. The exaggerated costume detail, and the fantastic air of romance, in the Alexander tapestry—its superficially anticlassical style—should not close our eyes to the fact that here in the North the desire to recall the grandeur of antiquity was as vigorously felt and expressed as in Italy; and that this "Burgundian Antique," like its Italian counterpart, had a role of its own to play in the creation of modern man, with his determination to conquer and rule the world. While continuing to visualize the elemental sphere of fire as inaccessible even to the preternatural strength of fabulous oriental beasts, man himself, through firearms, had already tamed the fiery element and pressed it into his own service. It seems to me by no means far-fetched to tell the modern aviator, as he considers the "up-to-the-minute" problem of motor cooling systems, that his intellectual pedigree stretches back in line direct—by way of Charles the Bold, trying to cool the burning feet of his heaven-storming griffins with wet sponges—to *le grand Alixandre*.



Fig. 65. Piero della Francesca
Battle of Chosroes
Arezzo, San Francesco (see p. 339)

Fig. 66. Johann Anton Ramboux
Watercolor copy after Piero della Francesca
Düsseldorf, Akademie (see p. 339)