



Is Alexander the Great depicted in this Oxfordshire Church?

St Peter's, Charney Bassett, has something in common with St Mark's in Venice.

By [Christopher Howse](#)

The finger-post near the river Ock at Charney Bassett says: "Challow Station 3½". It would be a disappointing walk, since the railway remains but the station was closed in 1964. Far better to take the turning for Lyford, because, down the lane, a little church soon appears, with a battlemented nave and stone-roofed chancel. Inside, there is something very curious.

It is a semi-circular carved stone, a tympanum, that used to sit above the south door. It is 900 years old and carved in a vigorous style associated with Herefordshire, most notably at Kilpeck. Here at Charney Bassett (once in Berkshire, but now conquered by Oxfordshire) the tympanum shows a man standing between two beasts.

A hurried glance on an overcast day might take him for Daniel in the lions' den. But wings grow from the shoulders of the beasts, which grip with beaked jaws the upper arms of the man between them. They are clearly griffins. He nevertheless stands resolutely with his hands round their necks.

Perhaps he is Alexander the Great. If that sounds far-fetched, consider a curious carving on the outside north wall of St Mark's in Venice. It depicts a man standing in a sort of chariot, pulled through the air by two griffins, led on by bait on two sticks held aloft by Alexander (for it is he). The carving was not made for St Mark's but fixed to its wall in the Middle Ages, along with other marvellous plunder from Constantinople.

The tale it illustrates is the celestial journey of Alexander. It was as familiar to everyone in the high Middle Ages as the story of Icarus. Chaucer mentions it more than once. It was part of common culture, like the dream of Scipio, described by Cicero, a journey into what we call space, looking down on the Earth. As a wonderful traveller, Alexander also finds his way into the Koran, in Sura 18, under the name Dhul-Qarnayn, the Two-Horned One.

What Alexander is doing in the Koran is not clear. But then, why is he on the wall of a church? As far as St Mark's goes, its external decoration incorporates any fine sculpture available.

It was only in 1865 that modern scholars realised Alexander was the subject of the bas relief there. But he features in Romanesque sculpture all over Europe: on a capital at Chalon-sur-Saône in Burgundy, a wall in a Georgian church now in Turkey, or on the cathedral at Vladimir in Russia. Otranto cathedral has a large mosaic of the celestial journey. The feature to look out for is the two sticks with their meaty bait held aloft by Alexander.

But at Charney Bassett, no such sticks are being held up. So does it depict Alexander the Great on his voyage through the air after all? The surprising thing is that a decorative motif known to scholars as the Master of Beasts occurs even more widely and earlier than

Alexander's image. In Luristan, in Persia, bronzes 3,000 years old showed a man standing between two rampant lions or more fantastical creatures. In the Christian era such a depiction may easily be mistaken for Daniel in the lions' den, an established image of faith.

It seems that the carving at Charney Bassett is one more version of the Master of Beasts theme. It could be taken to represent a Christian steadfast among the powers of evil, and perhaps the sculptor intended it so. Or it may be just an example of medieval exuberance. In any case it is an impressive piece of art.

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