

# A Byzantine Bronze Finial for a Church

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CONSIDERING ALL that has been written about Byzantine architecture and the various treatments of the dome in the Byzantine period, little if any attention<sup>1</sup> has been given to the finials on the domes of churches. These finials must, of course, have been crosses, but there are many different shapes and forms of the cross that may have been used. The purpose of the present note is to call attention to a rare Byzantine finial, known to me by only one actual example, paralleled by one other pictured in a contemporary miniature. At one time, however, the type may have been more widely used.

The obvious finial for the dome of a Byzantine church, as already stated, would be the cross. In pictures of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, as represented on the *ampoullae*<sup>2</sup> from the Holy Land, now in Monza and Bobbio, one sees a single-branched cross with outward flaring ends, the cross generally mounted on a globe. In a few instances the globes are not visible in these small pictures because of their faulty execution. Probably the crosses on the domes of early churches were usually of the simple Latin form with single branches. The combination of globe and cross seen in the pictures of the Holy Sepulchre on the Monza and Bobbio *ampoullae* recalls the sceptre used by Byzantine emperors with the cross surmounting the globe, which signified the triumph of Christ over the world. It may have had such import in these pictures, but with a double meaning: one being that the Holy Sepulchre was an imperial foundation and the other the triumph of the cross over the world.

Eventually a more elaborate type of cross became popular, the double-branched cross combined with the tree motif, symbolizing

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, E. Baldwin Smith, *The Dome, a Study in the History of Ideas* (Princeton 1950) index. Also, idem, *Architectural Symbolism of Imperial Rome and the Middle Ages* (Princeton 1956) see index.

<sup>2</sup> A. Grabar, *Les Ampoules de Terre Sainte* (Paris 1958); see plates IX, XI, XIV, XXXIV, XXXV, XXXVI, XXXVII, XXXVIII, XXXIX, and LV.

life after death in Paradise. This type of cross one finds at the Grand Lavra on Mount Athos,<sup>3</sup> a tenth-century foundation. On the phiale of the Grand Lavra the dome is surmounted by a double-branched cross with the tree. The same motif is carved on some of the sculptured slabs about the lower part of the phiale and can be seen, also, in a manuscript of the Gospels, said to have been presented to the Lavra Monastery by the Emperor Nicephoros Phocas but possibly dating from the following century. This same type of cross with the tree motif and on a dome appears in two manuscripts in miniatures believed to be pictures of the destroyed Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. These manuscripts contain the twelfth-century Homilies of the Monk James. One manuscript is now in the Vatican Library in Rome, and the other in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris<sup>4</sup> (PLATE 1). The finial so designed for a dome seems to have been generally used in the Middle Byzantine period. Later, the crosses on the domes of churches tended to become more elaborate, as can be seen today in some of the other monasteries on Mount Athos.<sup>5</sup>

The cross with the tree motif, however, was not the only type of finial for the dome of a church in the Middle Byzantine period. Another type, which is rather unusual, has the cross on the back of a dove standing on a globe. One example of this is to be found in the Skylitzes Manuscript in the National Library at Madrid<sup>6</sup> (PLATE 2). A miniature in this manuscript shows the Empress Theodora, sister of the Empress Zoe, leaving a church on her way to the Imperial Palace. All the elements of the finial are clearly visible in the miniature, which is the only picture of a Byzantine church that has come to my attention showing such a finial on a dome.

One actual finial of this type does exist. It belonged to the late Hayford Pierce and is now in the possession of his widow, Mrs. Pierce (PLATES 3 and 4). It was photographed by Giraudon in Paris and labelled "croix imperial." This could not have served as a cross to be carried because the lower part flares outward, making a very awkward handle; but it is perfectly formed to fit on a dome. The Hayford

<sup>3</sup> For an illustration see F. Dölger, *Mönchslands Athos* (Munich 1945) p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> See *Byzance et la France médiévale*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, pp. 21-23.

<sup>5</sup> F. Dölger, *op.cit.* fig. 153.

<sup>6</sup> L. de Beylie, *L'Habitation byzantine* (Paris 1902) p. 114. Professor Grabar suggests that the manuscript is thirteenth century with miniatures in imitation of models of the eleventh century. See "Trônes d'évêques en Espagne au Moyen Age," *Kunstgeschichtliche Studien für Hans Kauffmann* (Berlin 1956) p. 9.

Pierce example is composed of several parts, (a) the cross, which rests on the back of a dove, (b) the dove, now somewhat battered and with its wings missing, (c) a base for the dove attaching it to the top of a globe, (d) the globe, having engraved on it four crosses within circles against a background of punched decoration, and lastly, (e) the handle engraved on the upper and lower parts with a scale pattern. This bronze finial, for that is what it appears to be, engraved and formerly gilded and nielloed, would have been perfect for the dome of a small church. That such finials were used is demonstrated not only by this existing example, but also by the one clearly visible in the miniature of Theodora in the Skylitzes Manuscript in Madrid.

The use of the cross on the back of a dove, which in turn rests on a globe, is unusual. It raises the question of whether or not the finial was intended for an imperial foundation. The combined cross and eagle for an imperial sceptre existed as early as the sixth century. It may be seen, for example, on the coins of the Emperor Tiberius II.<sup>7</sup> The cross on a dove appears in manuscripts of the Middle Byzantine period<sup>8</sup> (PLATE 5). There is a dove on a dome in an early Christian fresco showing Jonah, in Caligari, Sardinia.<sup>9</sup> In the Museum of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor there is a sixth-century bronze censer, on which the dove stands on a cross on a globe topping a dome (PLATE 6).

The eagle on the globe is seen in representations of sceptres from the fourth century to the sixth<sup>10</sup> and possibly later. In the West the eagle on the globe was replaced by the dove.<sup>11</sup> Have we not here a transformation or Christianization of another Roman form, as has been noted about many imperial customs? Has not the dove on the cross replaced the eagle? It is quite possible. If we accept this, the cross on the dove resting on a globe means the victory of Christianity over the world. Since these motifs are generally associated with imperial insignia, it would be natural to assume that the finials with the cross and dove were intended to indicate imperial foundations. The fact that the miniatures sometimes show imperial foundations

<sup>7</sup> For an illustration, see A. Grabar, *L'Iconoclasme byzantin* (Paris 1957) fig. 2.

<sup>8</sup> See *Byzance et la France médiévale*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Baldwin Smith, *The Dome*, fig. 70.

<sup>10</sup> For various coins with representations of the imperial sceptre, see H. Cohen, *Description historique des monnaies frappées sous l'Empire romain*<sup>2</sup> (Paris 1892).

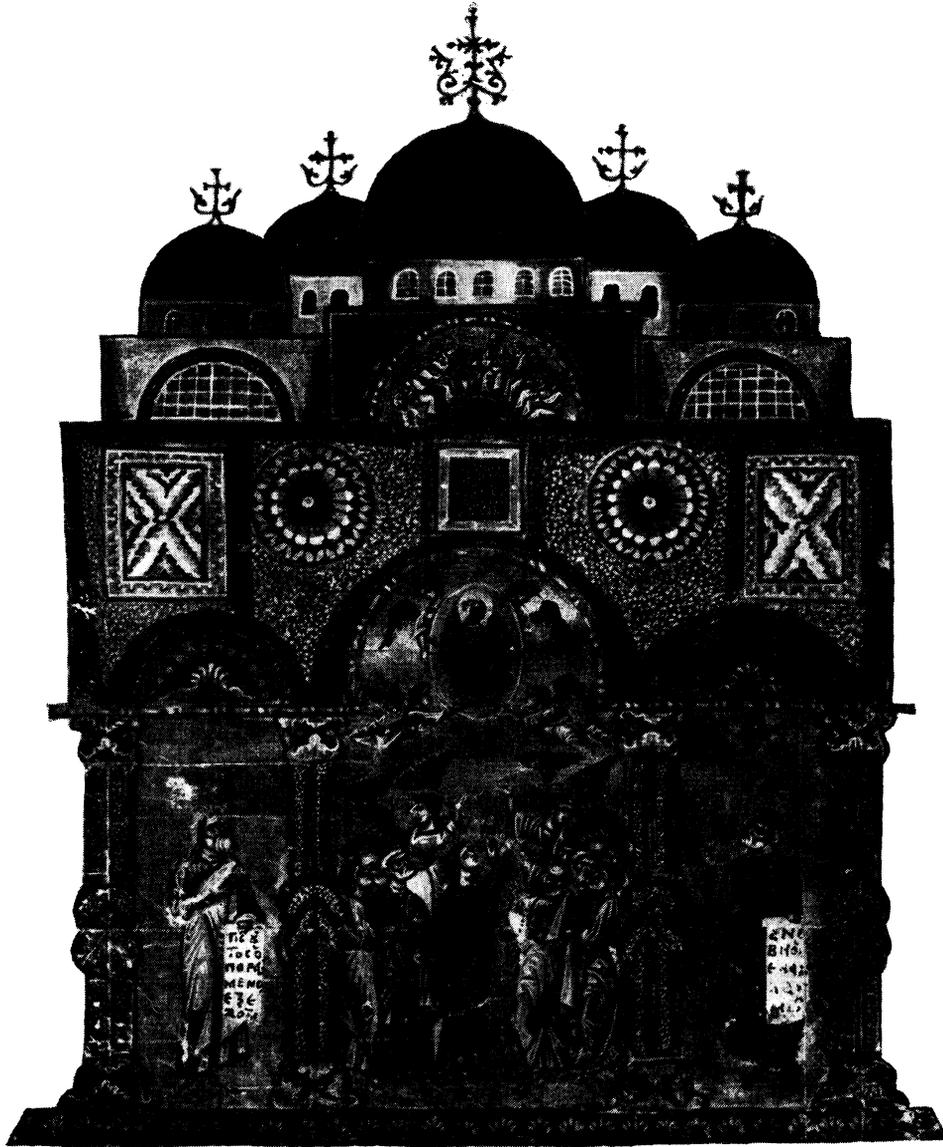
<sup>11</sup> J. Deér, *Das Kaiser Bild im Kreuz*, Ext. *Schweizer Beiträge zur allgemeinen Geschichte* XIII (1955) pl. II, 1.

with the cross and tree motifs on the dome, and in another instance the cross, dove, and globe, indicates that an emperor could show personal taste or choice in the matter.

Through the survival of what may be a unique example and the pictured representation of another finial, we receive a clearer conception of the domes of Byzantine churches in the Middle Byzantine period, when finials were in place and completed the design.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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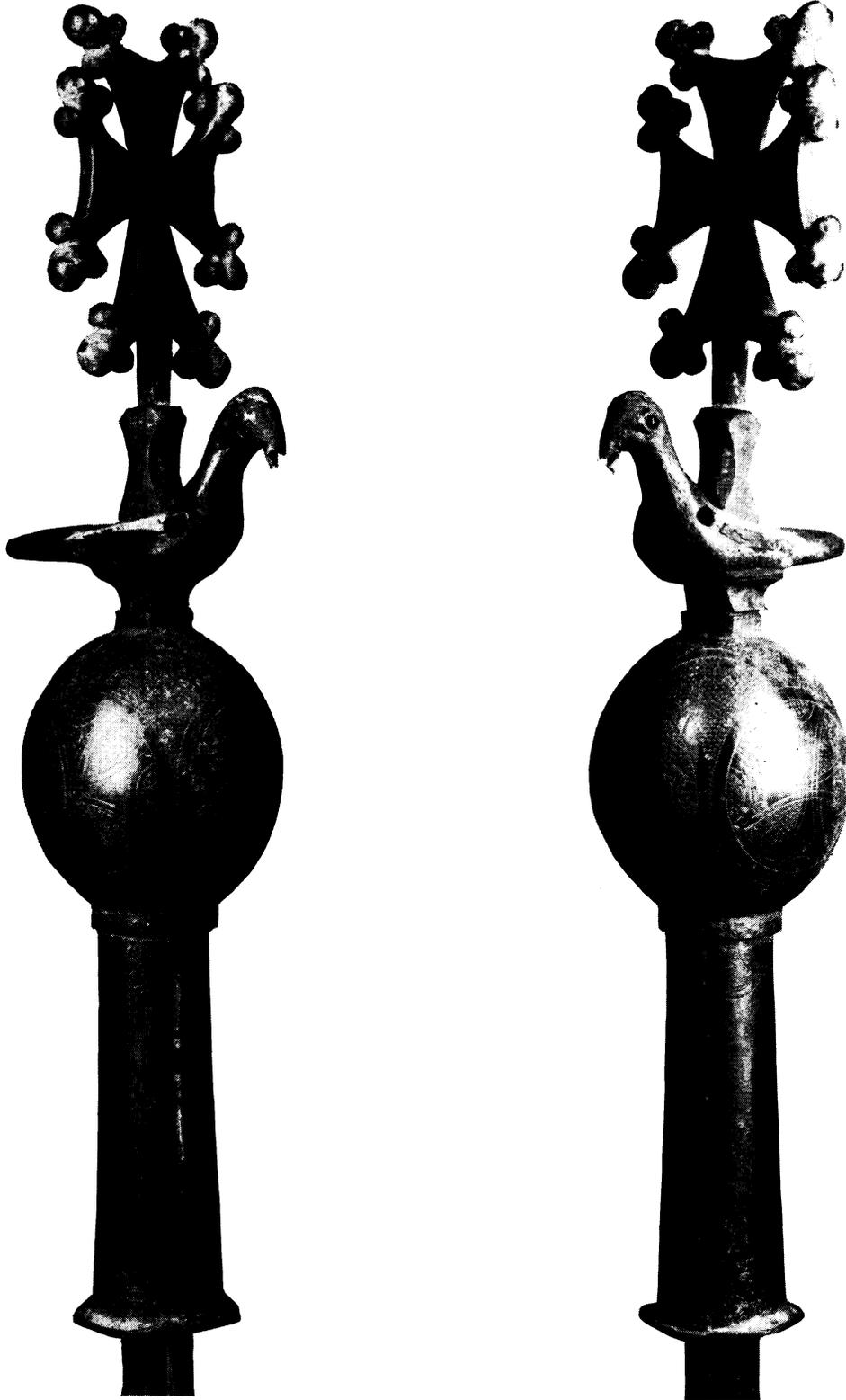
MINIATURE SHOWING DOUBLE-BRANCHED CROSSES WITH TREE MOTIFS AS  
DOME FINIALS

(MS. Gr. 1208, fol. 3v. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)

PLATE 2 Ross

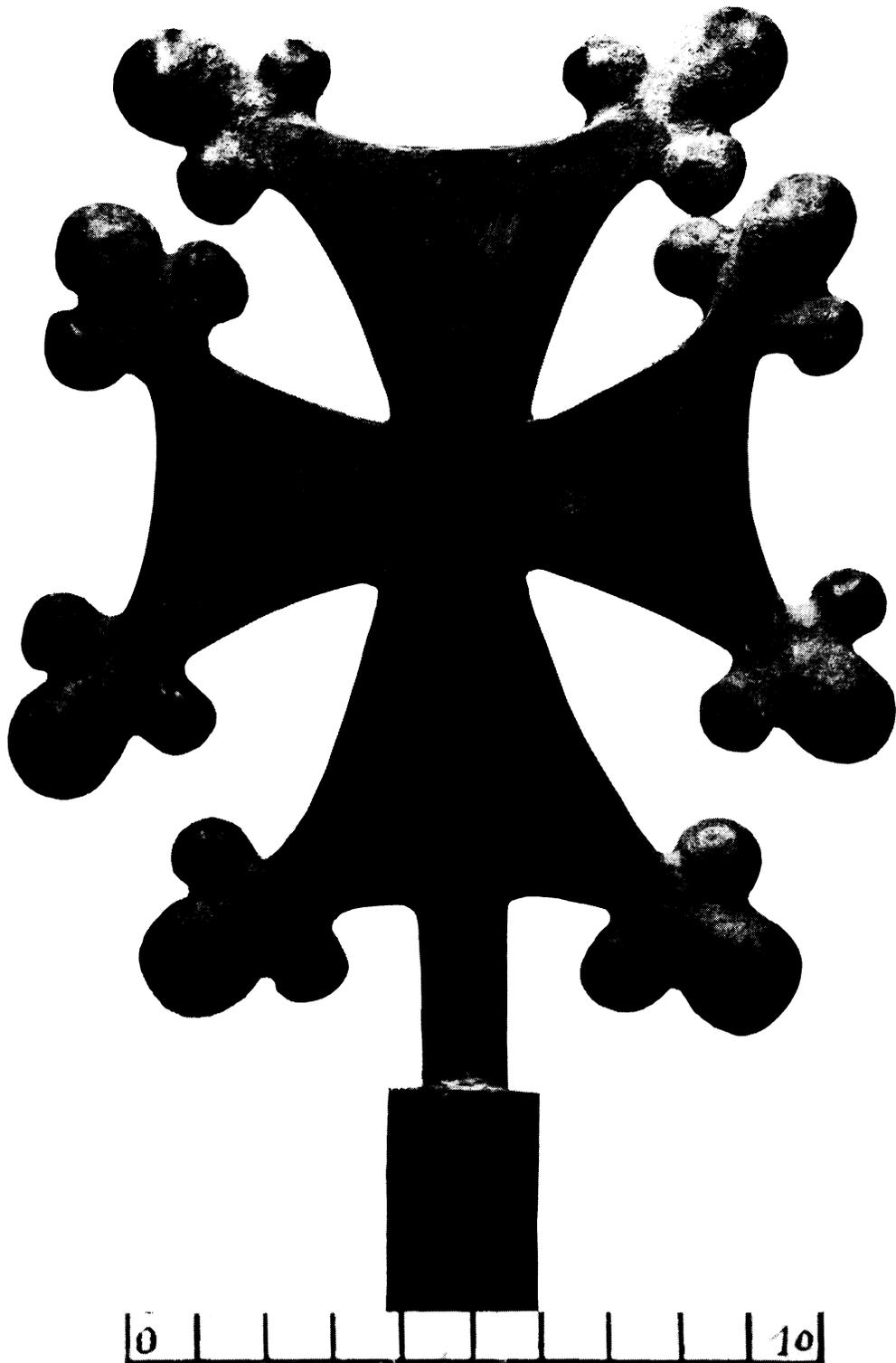


MINIATURE SHOWING CROSS ON DOVE AND GLOBE AS DOME FINIAL  
(*Skylitzes Manuscript. National Library, Madrid*)



TWO VIEWS OF A BRONZE FINIAL FOR A DOME. BYZANTINE, XI/XII CENTURY

PLATE 4 Ross

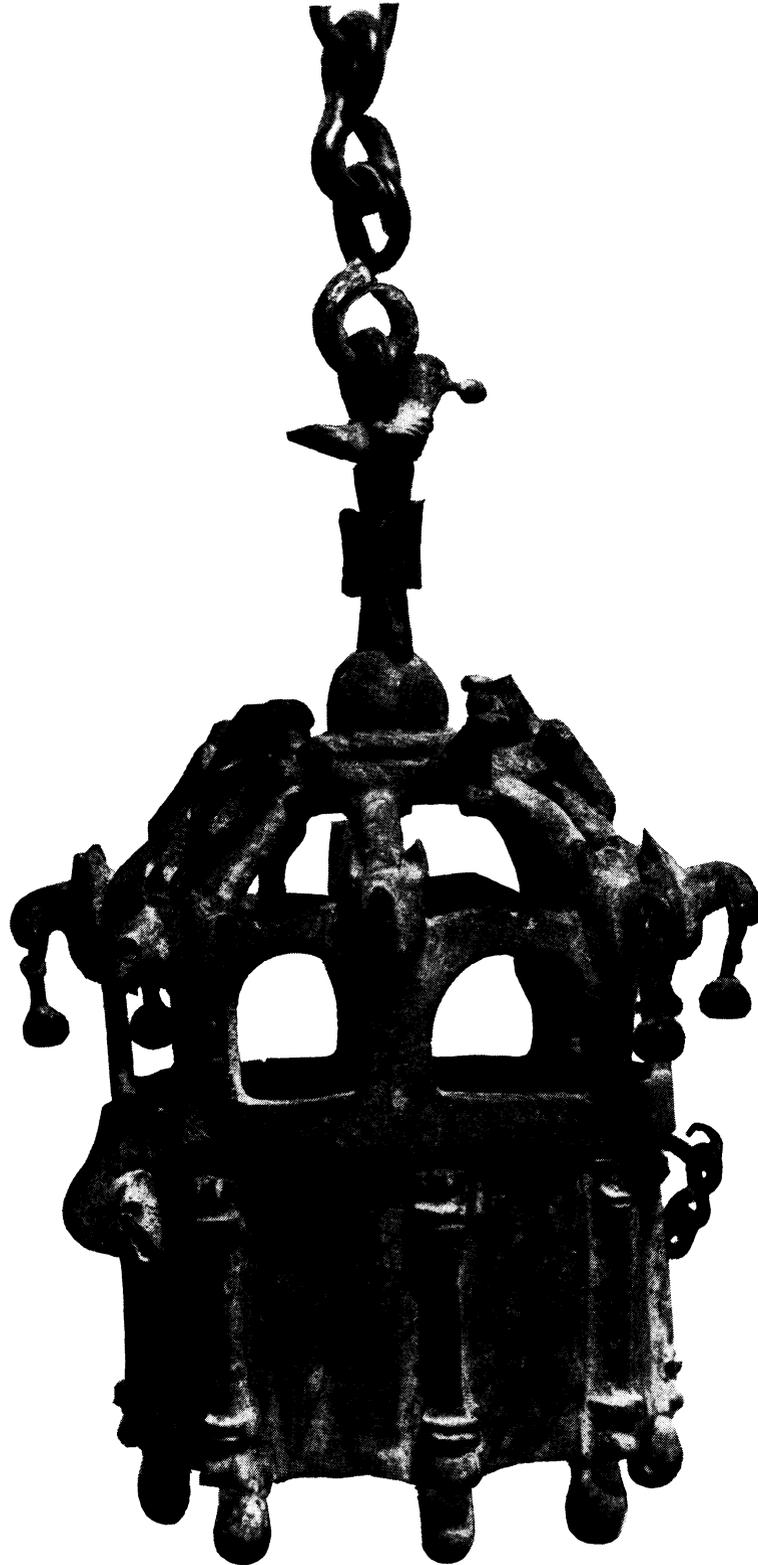


DETAIL VIEW OF CROSS FROM THE HAYFORD PIERCE FINIAL

*(Photo Giraudon)*



MINIATURE SHOWING A CROSS ON A DOVE  
(MS. Gr. 505, fol. 83. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)



BRONZE CENSER SURMOUNTED BY DOVE, CROSS, AND GLOBE ON A DOME.  
PROBABLY VI CENTURY

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