Notes on the Four Rivers of Paradise in Romanesque and pre-Romanesque Art

While preparing a visit to Ravenna, and to the pre-Romanesque churches of Rome, I became aware of the interest of artists around the sixth century in the theme of the Four Rivers of Paradise. This led me to seek out other examples from other periods, both earlier and later, as far as the thirteenth century and beyond. It soon became evident that, as with most iconographical themes, the origin of the motifs can be traced to pre-Christian periods, particularly to Classical Antiquity. The flowering of the use of the Four Rivers to symbolise Paradise in many areas of Christendom during the Byzantine era re-appeared in a slightly different form during the Romanesque period. The aim of this article is to find examples in all media, to compare the way in which they are used, and to trace, if possible, their evolution and the reasons for their popularity and eventual decline.

In the second chapter of Genesis we read that God planted a garden East of Eden. In the King James version, verses 10-14, we are told, "And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison... And the name of the second river is Gihon... And the name of the third river is Hiddekel... And the fourth river is Euphrates."

Note that Hiddekel is the Tigris, while in some versions the Euphrates is known as the Perat. Gihon (the Nile) is often spelt Geon, while Pison can also be Pishon, Phison or Fison, (the Ganges). The four rivers are therefore seen as tributaries of the one great river of Paradise (or the Garden of Eden), only acquiring names after they have left Eden and become part of our world. To the ancients and to many people in Medieval times, the concept of Paradise as a real place which could be reached was prevalent. Old maps frequently showed the rivers of Paradise with the Mesopotamian rivers more or less correctly placed, and the other two rivers laid out more speculatively. Occasionally five rivers are shown, with the Ganges being included separately from the Fison.

The Rivers appear on a mosaic of a map of the world at Madaba:
Fig 1: The Nile delta from the very damaged Madaba map, St George’s Orthodox church, Madaba, Jordan, Byzantine, sixth century

In a chapter by Michele Piccirillo on "The Mosaics of Jordan" from "Interactions, Artistic Interchange between the Eastern and Western Worlds in the Medieval Period", edited by Colum Hourihane, Piccirillo states that there were: "at least eleven ecclesiastical edifices with mosaics" of the early sixth to eighth century in the episcopal city of Madaba. Piccirillo continues, "The main figurative pattern in the mosaic of St Theodore's chapel is the Four Rivers of Paradise. . ."
On the floor mosaics of the fifth century church of The Holy Martyrs at Tayibat al-Imam, Syria, the rock is inhabited by an eagle, and deer come to drink the waters:
Fig 5: Mosaic of the Fountain of Life and the Four Rivers of Paradise, fifth century, Church of The Holy Martyrs, Tayibat al-Imam, Syria

In the ancient world and for desert people generally, water is Life, and a fountain is something marvellous; fish swimming in it and deer or doves drinking from it show that the water is pure. The deer themselves indicate Peace, while doves are symbolic of both peace and purity. Peacocks and the Phoenix, seen above, are both symbols of eternal life.

Later, in the Koran, the Rivers of Paradise are described by Mohamed as having been seen by him in a vision and explained by the Angel Gabriel. The Nile and the Euphrates, he says, are visible while the other two rivers are invisible. Mosaics from the Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, represent Paradise, with life-giving trees and waters flowing out of it:
References to the Four Rivers of Paradise are also found in the Bible in Ezekiel and in Revelations. In the latter, John has a vision of the rivers gushing from the throne of God, from the Lamb of God, the Tree of Life, etc., all interpreted and embellished by artists from the birth of Christianity. As with most types of Western iconography, their sources borrowed known images from the Graeco-Roman world, where river gods were frequently shown in mosaic and sculpture. The sea, too, was personified, either as female, Thalassa:
Fig 8 : Thalassa from the Church of the Apostles, Madaba, Jordan, sixth century
or more often as Poseidon or Okeanos, with dolphin ears and crab claw horns:

Fig 9 : Mosaic of Okeanos, Cividale, second century
In antiquity, Okeanos was thought to surround the Earth, looking more like a mighty river than an ocean on early maps.

Arthur Kingsley Porter writes about the iconography of "Winds, Sea and Rivers of Paradise", a chapter in his "Lombard Architecture": "No feature of geography gave rise to more profound speculation by the church-fathers than the Four Rivers of Paradise . . ." For St Augustine they symbolise "the four cardinal virtues: Prudence, Fortitude, Temperance and Justice" and also the four Evangelists. Kingsley Porter continues, "St Ambrose carries the symbolism even further. The fountain of Paradise is Christ, which divides into four rivers."

The Four (and sometimes Five) Rivers of Paradise have been depicted in every medium from early Christianity, such as on the central panel of this sarcophagus from the Alyscamps ("Elysian Fields"), Arles, now in the Museum at Arles:
Fig 12: Arles Museum, fourth century sarcophagus, the Traditio Legis, central panel with Christ above the Rivers of Paradise

Galla Placidia, daughter of the Emperor Theodosius I, and for some years regent for her son, the Emperor Valentinian III, died in Rome in 450 at the age of 58. A mausoleum may have been constructed for her both at Ravenna and in Milan in the Cappella Sant’Aquilino adjoining the Basilica of San Lorenzo. Among the mosaics in the chapel is this representation of a young, beardless Christ surrounded by his twelve Apostles and seated in Paradise under a golden sky. At their feet are two stretches of water with, below Christ’s feet and between the waters, a metal bucket filled with sheep or souls:
Fig 13: Christ in Glory mosaic, Cappella Sant’Aquilino, Basilica of San Lorenzo, Milan, fourth-fifth century

Compare this to a mosaic in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia at Ravenna:
Fig 14 : Mosaic in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, early fifth century

Here the Apostles Peter and Paul are shown below a golden cross in a golden sky; at their feet is a fountain springing from a large chalice; a dove on each side represents purity. This was a popular symbol from very ancient times, well-known in the Graeco-Roman world and adopted in Byzantine art.

The Apostles Peter and Paul were shown standing on each side of the enthroned Christ in a mosaic in the paleo-Christian Basilica of St Peter, Rome. The Rivers of Paradise flow from beneath Christ’s throne and deer drink from it; above Christ the hand of God is seen emerging from a fan-shaped arc of Heaven. On a lower register we see the Agnus Dei immediately below Christ with the cross behind. The Lamb stands on a rock and on each side is the Pope and the Roman Church leading six sheep emerging from the Heavenly Jerusalem. An inscription gives a full explanation. The mosaic was mid-fourth century, and was behind the altar. The Basilica of Old St Peter’s was sacked by the Barbarians in the ninth century and eventually replaced in the sixteenth century. The illustrations below are of a fresco representing the mosaic, in the Vatican Grottoes.
Fig 15: Fresco representing the apsidal mosaic from Constantine’s Basilica of St Peter, Rome, sketch by Jacopo Grimaldi 1619 in the Vatican Grottoes.

Fig 16: Fresco representing the apsidal mosaic from Constantine’s Basilica of St Peter, Rome, sketch by Jacopo Grimaldi 1619 in the Vatican Grottoes.
Note that in the mosaics above, and in the semi-domes of some other choirs, there is a tent-like structure over Christ. It has been suggested that it is derived from one in Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, which is early fifth century. Here it is a tabernacle, held over Moses at his marriage to Zipporah.

![Fig 17: Santa Maria Maggiore, nave mosaic of marriage of Moses and Zipporah, early fifth century](image)

In the Mausoleum of Santa Costanza, Rome, the Rivers of Paradise issue from a rock below the feet of Jesus:

![Fig 18: Mausoleum of Santa Costanza, Rome, mosaic of the Rivers of Paradise issuing from the feet of Jesus, third quarter of the fourth century](image)
Santa Constanza died in 354. Christian imagery really only began to take consistent forms at about this period, and it consolidated towards the last two decades of the fourth century.

A similar scene with six saints is seen in a much later mosaic at Santa Prassede, Rome:

![Fig 19: Santa Prassede, Rome, mosaic of the apse, early ninth century](image)

while at the church of Santa Cecilia, Trastevere, Rome, the same subject is shown with very similar details:

![Fig 20: Santa Cecilia, Trastevere, Rome, mosaic of the Rivers of Paradise issuing from a rock below the feet of the Agnus Dei, ninth century](image)
Fig 21 : Santa Cecilia, Trastevere, Rome, mosaic of the Rivers of Paradise issuing from a rock below the feet of the Agnus Dei, ninth century

Christ and the Four Rivers of Paradise are issuing from the central river of Eden, beneath the throne of God; the symbols of the Four Evangelists appear from behind Christ’s halo, the prophets Ezekiel and Habakkuk are on either side.

Around the same time as the Thessalonika mosaic, in Ravenna, is the mosaic at San Vitale. A young, beardless Christ sits in Paradise; the Four Rivers of Paradise flow from the rocks beneath his feet:
In all the above examples (except on the Madaba map), the rivers are shown as short streaks of water, usually blue, and shaped like long, thin leaves that come to a point. Thus they are symbols of rivers since the point would logically be the source, but in these depictions the source is hidden behind a rock, a tree, a lamb or God. However, in the next two examples, also from Ravenna, we see a river - the River Jordan - personified as a river god.

The River Jordan was easily absorbed into Christian art as a witness to the Baptism of Christ, from the sixth century. This can be seen in all media:
Fig 25: Ravenna, the Baptism of Christ with the River Jordan personified, sixth century, Neonian (Orthodox) Baptistery

The same scene appears centuries later on a panel of the Pala d'Oro commissioned by the Doge from Byzantine craftsmen:

Fig 26: Enamel panel from the Pala d'Oro, early twelfth century, San Marco, Venice

In the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, the fifth century mosaics in the apse sit upon a Nilotic scene where a river god pours the water from a great golden amphora.
Nilotic scenes were much appreciated in the ancient world as decoration for murals and mosaic pavements.

Fig 27: Sta Maria Maggiore Apse mosaic fifth century, River Jordan or Okeanos

The great pavement of the Patriarchal Basilica of Aquileia uses this tradition to illustrate the story of Jonah:

Fig 28: Patriarchal Basilica of Aquileia, the story of Jonah, mosaic, fourth century

A mosaic in the apse of San Giovanni in Laterano, Rome, shows the rivers with their names, plus the River Jordan personified as a boy with an amphora. Though late Romanesque, the mosaic was created by Jacopo Torriti to replace the paleo-Christian mosaics which had been destroyed by an earthquake in the late ninth century. He may have based the "Nilotic" scene showing the River Jordan on the mosaic in Santa Maria Maggiore.
Fig 29: The Four Rivers flowing from the Cross, mosaic, thirteenth century, San Giovanni in Laterano, Rome

The rivers flow from the Cross, with deer drinking on each side, as in the fifth century mosaic from the Church of The Holy Martyrs, Syria, (fig 5), above. However, the personification of the great rivers began centuries before, with full-sized statues in Greece and Rome. Typically, the river god is a reclining male holding a vessel in his right hand from which he pours his river:

Fig 30: The god of the River Ilissos, Phidias, British Museum
Fig 31: Two River Gods in Rome: Arno or Tigris on top of a sarcophagus, second century, Vatican Museum

![Two River Gods in Rome: Arno or Tigris on top of a sarcophagus, second century, Vatican Museum](image1)

Fig 32: Tiber, second century, Capitoline Museum, Rome

![Tiber, second century, Capitoline Museum, Rome](image2)

Fig 33: Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome, sarcophagus with a river god and a naiad

![Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome, sarcophagus with a river god and a naiad](image3)

Even before these examples from classical antiquity, the Sumerians depicted the waters of life flowing from a pot, complete with fish, held by a god-like king, Gudea:
Fig 34: King Gudea of Lagash, Iraq, neo-Sumerian circa 2120 BC, diorite, Musée du Louvre

This depiction is intended to show the King's mastery over every aspect of his kingdom.

In a second century Roman mosaic from Zeugma now in the museum at Gaziantep, Turkey, Euphrates leans his right elbow on a golden amphora from which the waters of the Euphrates flow, while his daughter, a Naiad, reclines with her water plant nearby:
Water nymphs were portrayed as equivalents to River gods in the ancient world; several altars to a local River goddess, Coventina, were found at Hadrian's Wall including these examples, one inscribed with her name, the other showing three nymphs in similar attitudes:
The Four Rivers of Paradise can be seen on the floor mosaic of the sixth century "Eastern Church" at Quasr Libya, then known as Theodorias. It was founded by Justinian and Theodora, who lived here as a girl. The depiction of the Four Rivers of
Eden suggests that the church is Paradise. The Gihon was believed to be identical to the Nile, the Pishon to the Danube.

Fig 39 : Euphrates
Fig 40 : Tigris

Fig 41 : Pishon
Fig 42 : Gihon
Eastern Church, Quasr Libya, ca 539

From [http://www.livius.org/q/qasr_libya/qasr_libya1.html](http://www.livius.org/q/qasr_libya/qasr_libya1.html)

The Quasr Libya mosaics are sixth century, so much later than those from Roman Britain, but so similar that they must all be derived from artifacts of antiquity, similar to those found in the Asia Minor mosaics of the second century.

At Stobi, in Macedonia, an octagonal piscina in a sixth century baptistery has a mosaic floor with motifs that are suggestive of Paradise:
The design is of peacocks (symbolising eternal life) and deer drinking from large kantharoi. At Timgad in Algeria, I have come across references to the representation of the Rivers of Paradise in the baptistery, but can find no evidence of this. That is also the case with similar references for Dura Europos and Naples. In the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, the entire mosaic decoration is intended to represent Paradise. Deer drink from the waters of the rivers in a niche:
A similar design can be seen in the church of San Clemente, Rome, in the twelfth century, while in the church of Santa Prassede, there is a ninth century mosaic where the Four Rivers of Paradise issue from a rock beneath the Agnus Dei, where four deer drink from the waters:

Fig 45: Church of Santa Prassede, Chapel of San Zeno, the Four Rivers of Paradise issuing from a rock beneath the Agnus Dei, deer drinking from the waters, mosaic, ninth century

The Romanesque Period - with examples of iconography from earlier centuries

Mosaic Pavements

By the Romanesque period, it was not unusual to lay the Four Rivers of Paradise out schematically, with the four cardinal Winds, the Four Evangelists, and sometimes the Four Cardinal Virtues.

This is a description of the two mosaic pavements in Aosta Cathedral by Paula Lieber Gerson from her 1987 book, "Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis, a Symposium", page 251:

"In the Aosta choir mosaics the twelve months surround the personification of of the Year. This circular composition is set into a rectangle with representations of the Rivers of Paradise in the four corners."
Fig 46 : Aosta Cathedral choir mosaics, the months of the Year and the Four Rivers of Paradise

Fig 47 : Aosta Cathedral choir mosaics, the Four Rivers of Paradise, detail of the River Gion, twelfth century
One step above is a large rectangular panel in the centre of which is a circle within a circle inscribed within a square. In the outer circle are four animals that seem to represent various species. Four fantastic animals are placed in the corners around the square which encloses the circles, and a chimera and elephant appear in the outermost panels above representations of the Tigris and the Euphrates."

Details from the upper mosaic pavement:
Fig 50 : Aosta Cathedral choir mosaics, upper level, the Rivers of Paradise, detail of the River Tigris, twelfth century

Fig 51 : Aosta Cathedral choir mosaics, upper level, detail of the River Euphrates
Fig 52: Aosta Cathedral choir mosaics, upper level, detail of the Chimera, twelfth century

Photograph from before the restorations:
In the Saint Nicholas Chapel of the former Episcopalian Palace in Die, France, there is a splendid floor mosaic which bears certain resemblances to the Aosta pavement on the upper level. It represents the Four Rivers as grotesque heads with animal ears spitting out the rivers on each corner of a central, circular compass inscribed with their names. Thus their cardinal importance as the source of life on Earth is clearly displayed. The Four Winds are also shown in the corners, each is a head with a double horn in its mouth. Also worked into the design are signs of the Zodiac, birds, beasts and fish, stars and flowers and the Ocean surrounding all.
Fig 54: Die, St Nicolas Chapel, twelfth century mosaic - centre with Euphrates, Tigris, Fison, and Geon, as four spitting heads

Fig 55: Die, St Nicolas Chapel, twelfth century mosaic - centre with Tigris, Fison, and sea creatures
I quote again from Arthur Kingsley Porter in "Lombard Architecture", the chapter on "Winds, Sea and Rivers of Paradise": "in Lombard iconography (The Four Rivers) were represented in the mosaic pavement of Aosta cathedral, where they were put in parallel with the four Evangelists. In the mosaic pavement of San Savino of Piacenza the four figures at the corner of the disk about the year are probably personifications of the Four Rivers of Paradise; they are placed in parallel with the four cardinal
virtues." NB, Not according to the web site of San Savino, where the four figures are unequivocally said to be personifications of the Four Winds.

Fig 58: San Savino, Piacenza, sketch of the mosaic pavement with personifications of the Four Winds in the corners of the outer circle

In the pavement of Novara Cathedral, on a mosaic pavement of 1130-40, each river is named and represented as a naked man pouring from an amphora in the four corners, with Adam and Eve on each side of the Tree and the Serpent in the centre.

Fig 59: Novara Cathedral, mosaic of Adam and Eve surrounded by the Rivers of Paradise, twelfth century, photograph from the Novara Cathedral web site

Fig 60: Euphrates at Novara Cathedral, photograph by Rev Paul Cioffi SJ
In the same century, on a mosaic at San Clemente, Rome, as in San Giovanni in Laterano over a century later, there is a return to a symbolic depiction of the rivers. On either side of the rivers, in both churches, deer drink from the rivers, as on the fifth century mosaic in the Church of The Holy Martyrs, Syria.

Fig 61: Deer & Four Rivers of Paradise, mosaic, twelfth century, San Clemente, Rome

Fig 62: Four Rivers flowing from the Cross, mosaic, thirteenth century, San Giovanni in Laterano, Rome
Closely following the descriptions in Genesis, the mosaics in the Duomo at Monreale show the great central river of Eden in the scene describing the Creation of Adam, and the Four Rivers, both in the Garden of Eden and after the Fall from Paradise.
Fig 64: The Creation of Adam, mosaic, twelfth century, Monreale Duomo, Sicily

Fig 65: Adam & Eve by the Tree of Life with the Four Rivers, Monreale Duomo, Sicily
Frescoes

Among the medieval frescoes in San Giovanni a Porta Latina, Rome, there is a fresco of God creating Adam where the Four Rivers flow from the rock on which Adam is reclining. This is similar to the image on the Monreale mosaic above, but here, the Rivers are clearly visible; At San Pietro in Valle, Ferentillo, there is a very similar image among a cycle of frescoes showing Adam and Eve:
Fig 67 : San Giovanni a Porta Latina, Rome, The Creation of Adam, twelfth century

Fig 68 : Creation of Adam, twelfth century, San Pietro in Valle, Ferentillo
Images showing the Four Rivers together with fantastic animals are unusual, though not unique. These can be seen on the upper choir mosaic in Aosta Cathedral. More commonly, a griffin or other mythical animal is frequently found on scenes of the
Creation of the Animals. Medieval artists were probably under the impression that griffins and other strange animals existed before Noah’s Flood.

At the church of San Pietro al Monte, Civate near Lecco, two frescoes of the Four Rivers of Paradise are shown on the ceilings: we see them issuing from beneath the feet of Jesus and the Agnus Dei as they flow out of the Garden of Eden, and then we see them again, named and personified, pouring their rivers from long-necked vases not unlike some of the wind bags borne by the wind gods.

Fig 71: Fresco of the Four Rivers of Paradise issuing from beneath the feet of Jesus and the Agnus Dei, San Pietro al Monte, Civate, Lecco, twelfth century
Fig 72: Fresco of the Four Rivers of Paradise on the ceiling of San Pietro al Monte, Civate, Lecco, twelfth century

They appear in a simpler but similar guise on the ceiling of the Chapel of Saint Clement in the church of Saint-Chef in the Dauphiné:

Fig 73: Saint-Chef, Dauphine, the church of St Theudère, fresco of the Four Rivers of Paradise on the ceiling of the Chapel of Saint Clement, twelfth century
While at the church of the Panagia Katholiki, Cyprus, the Four Rivers are shown on a twelfth-thirteenth century fresco named, but reduced to devilish heads with animal ears, spitting their waters out of their mouths:

![Image of Tigris and Euphrates, Kouklia, Church of the Panagia Katholiki, Cyprus, twelfth-thirteenth century](image)

**Fig 74**: Tigris and Euphrates, Kouklia, Church of the Panagia Katholiki, Cyprus, twelfth-thirteenth century

At Sant Pere de Sorpe, NW Catalonia, a fragment from the South wall of the nave shows part of the scene of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Below are two men emptying pots of water. Joan Ainaud, Carlos Mancho and Monserrat Pages indentify this as part of the Four Rivers of Paradise.

![Image of Sant Pere de Sorpe, NW Catalonia, now in the MNAC, Barcelona, mural, 12th century](image)

**Fig 75**: Sant Pere de Sorpe, NW Catalonia, now in the MNAC, Barcelona, mural, 12th century

However, Lily Arad and Monserrat Pagès put forward an alternative interpretation of the scene, proposing that the two men holding jars were the personification of the
River Jordan. This might therefore represent the Baptism of Christ in that river by Saint John the Baptist. The position of this scene opposite that of the Crucifixion would give a more coherent reading of the decorative programme. An example of the scene was provided in the article showing the water pots at the Baptism of Christ in the River Jordan from the 12th century Limoges Sacramentary of St Etienne, now in the BNP, Paris. See:

"Les Pintures romàniques de Sorpe, noves interpretacions":

https://www.academia.edu/15685800/ Les_pintures_romaniques_de_Sorpe_Noves_interpretacions

My thanks to Peter Hubert for sending me this photograph and the attached notes. See his articles, "The Artist of Sant Pere de Sorpe":


where the detail of Eve and a River of Paradise are shown on p.28, and also, "The Osormort Circle":


On page 34, Peter Hubert suggests that the wide river in the scene of Adam and Eve, in the church of Sant Marti Sescorts, (now in Vic Museum), may be one of the rivers of Paradise.

Fig 76 : Sant Marti Sescorts, (now in Vic Museum), mural, 12th century
Textiles

The earliest textiles to survive from the paleo-Christian period have been found in the deserts of Egypt, preserved in the dry sand. They are known as Coptic, and fragments of these textiles can be seen in museums all over the world. Brightly coloured and decorated with images from classical iconography more often than overtly Christian themes, they date from the period of Roman Egypt through the Byzantine period and up to the Moslem conquest. The Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest has a fragment representing the Annunciation, but though other examples of scenes from the New Testament and especially of the life of Jesus exist, I am unaware of any representation from Genesis or of the Four Rivers of Paradise in any context, in Coptic weaving.

Fig 76a: Annunciation, Coptic textile, 8th century, Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest

Other textiles that have been conserved from the early centuries of Christianity were often precious silks, made not in Christian lands, but in Central Asia or the Persian Empire. They were sometimes used to wrap relics and many became relics in their own right, and can be seen in the treasuries of churches and cathedrals. The designs, often of heraldic and confronted animals, sometimes in pearled roundels, became an influence on the art of the West, especially on carved capitals. These hybrid and mythical animals entered Christian iconography. The fabric designs were copied both by Byzantine and Islamic manufacturies from Constantinople to Andalusia including mainland Italy and Sicily. None of these textiles has been found featuring rivers.

If there remains any form of woven or embroidered art making reference to the Rivers of Paradise, it may be on a carpet design, where gardens are frequently represented by Muslim weavers who may not depict human images. In the Muslim tradition, woven
carpets sometimes replicated the design of the fourfold garden. The design consisted of a central watercourse with tributary canals containing waterfowl and fish, lined by avenues of stylised trees and shrubs that surround flower plots often shaded by giant poplars.

Fig 76b : Isfahan Garden Carpet, National Museum, Krakov

Not until the Romanesque period, have I noted any pictorial reference to the Four Rivers of Paradise in textile. The great Girona Creation tapestry, now in the Girona Cathedral Museum, once featured the named personifications of the Four Rivers. Geon, in the top left corner, is the only River to survive.
Fig 77: Creation tapestry, eleventh-twelfth century, Museum of the Cathedral, Girona.

Fig 78: Girona Creation tapestry, eleventh-twelfth century, detail of Geon from top left corner, the only River to survive.

Just below each of the Four Rivers, in each corner of the large, central, circle of the Girona Tapestry, one of the four cardinal Winds is represented, similar to the Four Winds (with shorter horns) on the mosaic at Die:
To the best of my knowledge, the Girona Creation tapestry is the unique representative of a textile featuring the Four Rivers of Paradise.

**Stone sculpture**

The Abbey of Saint Victor in Marseilles was built in the fifth century over a fourth-fifth century crypt containing the sarcophagi of several martyrs including Saint Victor. A number of these feature the Rivers of Paradise issuing from beneath the feet of Christ, or of Christ in the form of the Agnus Dei. These include the sarcophagus known as "the Companions of Saint Maurice":

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*Fig 79 : Girona Creation tapestry, twelfth century, detail of the South Wind*

*Fig 80 : Die mosaic, twelfth century, detail of a Wind*
Fig 81: Saint Victor, Marseille - "Companions of Saint Maurice", marble sarcophagus front, late fourth century

and also, of "the Companions of Saint Ursula":

Fig 82: Saint Victor, Marseille – "Companions of Saint Ursula", marble sarcophagus, late fourth century

Fig 83: Saint Victor, Marseille - "Companions of Saint Ursula", marble sarcophagus, late fourth century, detail of Christ and the Four Rivers beneath his feet

and of the sarcophagus known as the "Traditio Legis":

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A fifth century sarcophagus in Tarragona Museum shows a symbol of the Four Rivers depicted below a laurel wreath in the centre of a sarcophagus decorated with the strigilate design. A figure in Roman clothing holding a scroll stands in a curtained niche at each end. If the figures represent Saints Peter and Paul, as has been suggested, this would also be an example of a "Traditio Legis" sarcophagus. The laurel wreath symbolised eternal victory for the Romans. The addition of the symbol of the Four Rivers would indicate that the person interred in the sarcophagus had reached Paradise.

The Traditio Legis ("giving of the law") is a symbolic motif of theological and political significance frequently found in early Christian art. It refers to the image of Christ delivering the New Law, ushering in the new Christian era to supplant the laws of the Old Testament. The concept is pictorialised primarily in compositions depicting Christ seated or standing, handing a scroll to Saint Peter, in the presence of Saint Paul. The sources for this image may derive from the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai and have also been traced to Roman imperial iconography. In early Christian
sculpture and mosaics, Christ may also be shown standing on the mountain of paradise, atop a world globe, or treading on an allegorical figure. (This paragraph is adapted from an article by Mary Evelyn Townsend, 1884-1954, "History of European Colonialism."

Fig 86 : Sarcophagus, possibly of the "Traditio Legis", with a symbol of the Four Rivers depicted below a laurel wreath, fifth century, Tarragona

There is a fine marble sarcophagus with an imbricated roof depicting the "Traditio Legis" in the Duomo, Ravenna:

Fig 87 : Sarcophagus depicting the "Traditio Legis", sixth century, Duomo, Ravenna

Christ is seated, but the Rivers appear from beneath his throne. Two sarcophagi in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia depict the Rivers coming from beneath the Agnus Dei, one features the three crosses of the Crucifixion, with two birds seated on the central cross. The other shows three lambs, with the central one crowned with a halo, between two palm trees:
Fig 88: Sarcophagus allegedly of Valentinian III, son of Galla Placidia, from her mausoleum, sixth century, Ravenna

Fig 89: Sarcophagus allegedly of Constantius III, husband of Galla Placidia, from her mausoleum, sixth century, Ravenna

The Four Rivers, lamb, birds, crosses and Chi-rho symbol decorate the ends of two sarcophagi in Sant’Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna:
Fig 90: The Four Rivers issuing from the feet of the Agnus Dei, Sarcophagus end, Sant’Apollinare in Classe, sixth century, Ravenna

Fig 91: The Four Rivers issuing from the Cross, Sarcophagus end, Sant’Apollinare in Classe, sixth century, Ravenna

In all these examples, the Four Rivers are shown in their most reduced form; and in several, Christ (or the Agnus Dei) is shown between palms.

From the sixth century to the twelfth century, there are few examples of the Rivers of Paradise in sculpture, after which they become increasingly popular again, continuing
well into the Gothic period and beyond. The trend at this time is to personify the Rivers as boys or men, with vessels as the source of the flowing water:

Fig 92: The Four Rivers of Paradise, Capital on twin columns, anonymous sculptor from the Toulousain district, twelfth century, Musée des Augustins, Toulouse

Fig 93: Anzy, Rivers of Paradise capital, twelfth century
Fig 94: Autun Cathedral, the Four Rivers of Paradise, twelfth century

Fig 95: Chartres, Four Rivers of Paradise, twelfth century
Fig 96: Cluny, one of the Four Rivers of Paradise, twelfth century

Fig 97: Cluny, one of the Four Rivers of Paradise, twelfth century
Fig 98: Metz Cathedral, Four Rivers of Paradise, twelfth century

Ivory carvings
Fig 99 : Adam in the Garden of Eden surrounded by the animals, ivory relief, Byzantine style, 380-400, Bargello Museum, Florence

The Four Rivers of Paradise are seen at the bottom of this panel, emerging from small culverts; some of the animals may be going down to drink, while the stag and the sheep may be ascending after having quenched their thirst. This is half of a diptych; the other half shows scenes of the life of the Apostle Paul.

Here are two examples of ivory carvings featuring a river god from the sixth and ninth centuries. The first, showing a very large John the Baptist with a much smaller
Christ, is decorated with the River Jordan resting one elbow on an upturned pot. Christ is young, beardless and naked following the Byzantine tradition. The gods of the sun and moon add importance as witnesses to Christ's Baptism as was frequently the case in representations of the Crucifixion over a long period.*

Fig 100: The Baptism of Christ with the River Jordan, Sol & Luna sixth century, ivory, Eastern Mediterranean, Lyons
In my second example, the god is Okeanos, whose mighty river was believed to surround the Earth. He is identified by his crab claw horns and is clutching a fish in one hand while pouring his river from an upturned pot with the other.

The next example of a Romanesque ivory shows a traditional Baptism of Christ, with the River Jordan pouring his river from a jug on one side, and an attendant water nymph (or naiad) with a snake encircling her arm. This is one of the many famous Salerno Cathedral ivories which are found in different museums, though most are in the Diocesan Museum of Salerno.
Fig 102: The Baptism of Christ with the River Jordan and a river nymph, ivory, eleventh century, Cathedral of San Matteo, Salerno

Compare this pair of Creation images, which were once joined together, with the Byzantine ivory now in the Bargello Museum, Florence. All the animals in the earlier panel can be found in real life, but the Salerno artist has included a marine monster and a griffin.
Fig 103 : The Creation of the Animals, ivory panel from Salerno Cathedral, eleventh century, now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York

Fig 104 : The Creation of the Animals, ivory panel from Salerno Cathedral, eleventh century, now in the Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest.
I do not know of any other representation of the Rivers of Paradise in ivory, which is surprising. Stone and marble sculptures might have been broken up and ended in lime kilns, objects made of precious metals might have been melted down, textiles are the most fragile; but small, portable objects like this one might be expected to survive. I have no other examples of The Four Rivers of Paradise in ivory of the Romanesque period. They are conspicuous by their absence.

Metalwork

In the Musée Curtius, Liège, the Bishop Notger reliquary contains an enamel of Mosan manufacture of 1150, containing an ivory panel of the tenth century representing Bishop Notger kneeling beneath Christ in Majesty.
The four corners feature the Four Rivers, with Fortitude and Justice on each side in the middle:

Fig 107: The Four Rivers of Paradise on the four corners of The Bishop Notger reliquary, 1150, Musée Curtius, Liège

At about the same period, a similar set of images forms a book cover in the Musée de Cluny, Paris, with the Agnus Dei, complete with triumphant flag in the centre. The book cover is inscribed with the Rivers’ names preceded by the words, "Fons Paradisiacus":

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Possibly of Mosan origin is this silver chalice now in the Treasury of the Cathedral of Trzemeszno in Poland:
Fig 109: Silver chalice with the Four Rivers on the knop, ca 1170, Treasury of the Cathedral of Trzemeszno, Poland

Fig 110: Silver chalice with the Four Rivers on the knop, detail, ca 1170, Treasury of the Cathedral of Trzemeszno, Poland

The photograph is from "Ars Sacra" by Peter Lasko, who describes the other figures below the Rivers as the Four Cardinal Virtues and the Eight Beatitudes. Scenes from the Old and New Testaments are engraved on the bowl of the chalice.
Finally, this image of the famous Baptismal Font from Hildesheim Cathedral with the Four Rivers as bearers, made in the thirteenth century, is now in the Schnütgen Museum. As with the chalice from Trzemeszno, there are appropriate scenes from the Old and New Testaments on the font, while the Four Rivers are equated with four Cardinal Virtues:

![Baptismal Font from Hildesheim Cathedral with Four Rivers as bearers, thirteenth century, Schnütgen Museum](image)

**Fig 111: Baptismal Font from Hildesheim Cathedral with Four Rivers as bearers, thirteenth century, Schnütgen Museum**

**Manuscripts**

Well before the Romanesque centuries, an illustration from the Moutier-Grandval Bible dated to the ninth century, shows God reproaching Adam and Eve, with the Rivers of Paradise flowing from the roots of the Tree
Fig 112 : Moutier-Grandval Bible ca 840, Probably made around Tours for the abbey, now in the British Library

The Gospel Lectionary of Henry II, a MS of the early eleventh century, probably made in Trier according to Dodwell, was commissioned for the Abbey of Bamberg. Christ is standing on the Tree of Life, within a mandorla surrounded by symbols:

Fig 113 : Gospel Lectionary of Henry II, MS, early eleventh century, Staatsbibliothek, Munich, Christ in a mandorla with symbols
Sol and Luna are depicted within gold circles emanating from Christ’s mandorla, with the head of God the Father at the apex. At the bottom of the mandorla another circle encloses one of five female water nymphs. All are bare-chested and this one is flesh coloured with blond hair, holding up the tree on which Christ is standing. The other four are coloured green, with dark hair, and each one supports one of the four Evangelists in his symbolic representation as the tetramorph. One could read this as the implantation of Christianity on pagan origins. The page, as a whole, looks like a triumphant banner. The band of green at the bottom may depict Ocean. The water nymphs with their seaweed skirts are a medieval interpretation of the traditional Roman siren as seen in a fragment of mosaic from St Romain en Gal, Vienne.

Fig 114 : Merman, Roman mosaic, first century BC, St Romain en Gal, Vienne

A page illustrating St Luke, from the Gospels of Otto III, eleventh century, shows two lambs drinking from two of the Rivers of Paradise, according to Dodwell, who explains the image on page 143 of "Pictorial Arts of the West, 800-1200".
Dodwell shows that the message behind this complex image is to unite Old and New Testaments, showing both as inspired by God.

While neither of the above images from the Reichenau school depict the Four Rivers of Paradise in a traditional way, each makes an allusion to the Biblical story in a way that is typical of the mysticism of this school of painting.

The Zwiefalten chronicle, Stuttgart ca 1145, has two pages where the Rivers are shown. On the first they are laid out, as on a map, but in cruciform, between two illustrations of the story of Adam and Eve, to be read from right to left:
Fig 116: Six days of Creation, detail of the Four Rivers of Paradise, Zwiefalten chronicle, Stuttgart ca 1145

On the second page, the Rivers are personified, with caps and pointy ears, like elves. Each pours his river from his amphora, thus forming a cross. The Agnus Dei is in a circle in the centre. The four Evangelists, each seated and writing his Gospel with his symbol above, fill the spaces on each quarter, while the four Cardinal Virtues are shown in a circle on each corner of the page:
Fig 117: Six days of Creation: detail of the Four Rivers of Paradise personified on a cross. The Agnus Dei is in the centre, and the Four Evangelists are depicted in each quarter, Zwiefalten chronicle, Stuttgart ca 1145
Jacobus of the Kokkinobaphos monastery, Bithynia, illustrated "Six Homilies on the Life of the Virgin" of which examples with slightly differing details are found in the Vatican Library as well as the BNF, Paris, and in the Laura Monastery, Bursa:

Fig 118: Expulsion from Eden with the Four Rivers of Paradise, MS Jacobus of Kokkinobaphos, twelfth century, Vatican Library
In the Laura Monastery version - uniquely - people are swimming in the rivers.
Each edition of Beatus of Liébana’s commentaries on the Apocalypse contains a map of the world surrounded by the ocean with the Rivers of Paradise laid out, sometimes near an illustration of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This is the map from the Beatus of St-Sever, Les Landes, 1050:

Fig 121: Beatus Map from the Beatus kept at St-Sever, Landes, 1050, with the Rivers of Paradise in the East, through "Asia Maior"

In the twelfth century, the Beatus of Turin in the National University Library, has a Mappa Mundi where the figure in each corner is a wind, with wind-bag and horn; the Four Rivers are laid out schematically:

Fig 122: Beatus of Torino, Mappa Mundi, twelfth century, National University Library, Turin
The image of the Four Rivers of Paradise as naked boys pouring the river water from their jars decorates the four corners of a page of a thirteenth century miniature from Germany, Paradise with Christ in the Lap of Abraham:

Fig 123 : Paradise with Christ in the Lap of Abraham ca 1239, MS, Weingarten, Germany, tempera & gold leaf on vellum, NGA Washington

Fig 124 : Gradual, Sequentiary & Sacramentary with the Four Rivers, thirteenth century, Morgan Library, New York
The earliest surviving Christian map, compiled in the sixth century by an Egyptian merchant, Cosmas, shows the Nile flowing into the "Sinus Romanus", and the Tigris, Euprates and Phison in the bottom corner on the right. The Four Winds blow their trumpets on each side.
The Four Winds also appear on the eighth century Turin Mappa Mundi which places Eden in Armenia. It was destroyed during the Second World War but copies survive:

![Turin Mappa Mundi, eighth century](image)

**Fig 127 : Turin Mappa Mundi, eighth century**

Unusually, on this thirteenth century Psalter Mappa Mundi, five Rivers of Paradise are shown, the Ganges joining the standard four.
Fig 128: Psalter Mappa Mundi, thirteenth century, British Library MS

Fig 129: Psalter Mappa Mundi, thirteenth century, British Library MS, detail showing Five Rivers of Paradise: Ganges, Euphrates, Tigris, Gheon and Phison
Fig 130: Psalter Mappa Mundi, thirteenth century, British Library MS, simplified sketch
Fig 131 : Ebstorf Mappa Mundi, upper part, thirteenth century (copy)

Many people thought it would be possible to find the Garden of Eden, and Columbus is said to have attempted it. It appears on maps well beyond the Romanesque period:

Fig 132 : Athanasius Kircher, Map of the Earthly Paradise, 1675
Fig 133 : A Map of the Terrestrial Paradise, Emanuel Bowen, 1694-1767
As we have seen, the Four Rivers of Paradise has been a very popular theme in Christian art from the very early days of Christianity. As is the case with much Christian iconography, the personification of the Rivers as men or boys originates in the art of Greece and Rome, and was also applied to the River Jordan in many representations of the Baptism of Christ. Such images are seen in mosaic, on murals and in manuscripts and as sculpture in stone, metal and ivory. In the Girona Tapestry we even have an example in textile. The Four Rivers of Paradise appear in many parts of Christendom either personified or using symbols. These are usually in the shape of elongated tear drops emanating from beneath the feet of Christ or in his mystical form as the Agnus Dei either directly or from a rock. This abbreviated form is often associated with the visions Ezekiel or of St John the Divine, in the Apocalypse. Unlike many images in Romanesque art, representations of the Four Rivers of Paradise are not associated with hybrid monsters of the kind so often derived from the textiles of ancient Persia or Central Asia. While the theme flourished in the artifacts of paleo-Christanity and the Byzantine art of Ravenna, Rome, and elsewhere, it then almost disappeared for half a millennium until the
Romanesque period, when it appeared again in architectural sculpture and other media in the wake of the massive explosion of church-building.

While it was not customary for artists and craftsmen to sign their work during earlier periods, there can be no doubt that many of them were educated and even learned people as so many of the artifacts display a knowledge of the Bible and of the writings of the Church Fathers. At the least we can suppose that there was a master in charge of many of the works, who would have been the abbot, a cleric, or another person trained within the Church, to plan and direct them.

Montagrier, 17 September 2016

To be continued -

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*see my article, http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/from_roman_to_romanesque.pdf for further examples of Sol and Luna at the Crucifixion.