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To Professor Andrzej Zaborski,
my Teacher of Coptic, Syriac,
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ICONS OF THE VIRGIN MARY IN THE EARLY GREEK AND COPTIC TEXTS

According to one of the most ancient and treasured traditions of the early Christianity the first icons of Christ were painted during His lifetime, while the first icons of the Virgin Mary were made after the Descent of the Holy Spirit.¹ These images were King Abgar's icon of Christ and the icon of the Madonna painted by St.Luke. C.Henze's study *Lukas der Muttergottesmaler* (1948) shows that the tradition of the oldest icons from Apostolic times is still alive in our time. Theodore Anagnostes, who compiled his *Church History* some time after AD 450 tells the story of the Empress Eudokia, who identified St.Luke's most sought after icon of the Madonna during her sojourn in Jerusalem in 438/9, and donated it to her sister-in-law Pulcheria.² Pulcheria founded a sanctuary and a convent in Constantinople to keep the precious relic of Early Christianity. We do not know what the icon looked like: τὴν εἰκόνα τῆς θεομήτορος, ἣν ὁ ἀπόστολος Λουκᾶς καθιστόρησεν (Theod.Anag. *Hist.trip.*I,1). This is all we can learn from Theodore's history. Some 15 years later two brothers, Galbuis and Candidus, won the well-deserved admiration of their contemporaries when they purchased the Virgin Mary's veil in a village near Jerusalem from a Jewish woman, who

¹ Uspienski L. 1993, p.14; Bayet 1879, p.49 also believed that the Marian icons were earlier than the Council of Ephesus

² Dobschütz 267**ff.; Theodore Anagnostes, *Hist.tr.*I,1; the story was also related by Andrew of Crete, who wrote of St.Luke's icons in Rome (Dobschütz 269**). They were followed by George Pachymeres *Syn.hist.*II,31; Nicephorus Kallistos, *HE* XIV,2; Mango C. 1986, p.140

had allegedly inherited it from her ancestors. The *maphorion* (μαφόριον) was whisked off to Constantinople, where it soon became one of the most venerated relics of Eastern Christianity.

The chronology of those events is not coincidental. The oldest Marian icons which we know come from the period directly following the Council of Ephesus (431), the θεοτόκος Council, which stimulated a rapidly developing cult of the Virgin Mary and her icons. The phenomenon added its inspirations to the massive contemporary social movements symptomatic of the 4th-7th century: monasticism, asceticism and pilgrimage movements. A majestic mosaic icon of the Madonna enthroned and dressed in the imperial gown in the Epiphany scene remarkable for its Oriental colour adorning the rainbow arch of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome (Pl. I), or another Madonna pictured as the *basilissa* - Santa Maria Regina from the S. Maria Antiqua Church in Rome³ - are vestiges of the Marian iconography of the post-Ephesian period. As in the case of the ancient icons of Jesus, we have no descriptions of the earliest Marian icons. It was not until the 8th century that Andrew of Crete would give a brief description of the icon of Lydda near Diospolis, which was believed to have been the *acheiropoietos* of Apostolic times:

ἀχειρόγραφον εἰκόνα, ἐν πλαξὶ πάνυ καθαράις τὸ σκῆνος τῆς Θεοτόκου τρίπηχυν παραδηλοῦσαν ἀπὸ τῶν χρόνων τῶν Ἀποστόλων...οὕτω κυρίως ἐγγεγραμμένην ὡς ἀπὸ χειρὸς ζωγράφου, τὴν τε πορφύραν φημὶ καὶ τὸν στολισμὸν, τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τὸ πρόσωπον καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γραφὴν τῆς ὄψεως, ὡς μέχρι καὶ νῦν ὁρᾶσθαι ταῦτα σωζόμενα (PG 97,1301).

We learn from Andrew's description that the icon was quite big, about 1 m in height (τρίπηχυν), and that it portrayed the full body, that the figure of Jesus had a majestic appearance (κυρίως ἐγγεγραμμένην); while Mary looked as if she were actually painted (ὡς ἀπὸ χειρὸς ζωγράφου). She was dressed in an imperial purple gown. Her facial portrait is unique in the Early Byzantine literature and worth mentioning, although its date is later than the mid-7th century, that is it exceeds the chronology of this study. Andrew refers to her painterly hands, face and appearance (*manum et vultum, et totam similitudinem faciei*). Andrew of Crete was born c.660 in Damascus. He and Patriarch Germanus opposed the iconoclasts. Andrew died in exile on the island of Lesbos deposed by the iconoclasts from his bishopric of Crete.⁴ We know something of his treatise *de sanctorum imaginum veneratione*. One of its preserved passages contains a list of the earliest icons, the origin of which goes back to Apostolic times: King Abgar's icon, the *acheiographos* of the Virgin Mary of Lydda adored by the

³ Felicetti-Liebenfels 1956, Taf.34A

⁴ Auzépy 1995, p.2



Pl. I The Virgin Mary enthroned in the Annunciation and Epiphany scenes, the Church of S. Maria Maggiore, Rome, pontificate of Sixtus III (432-40), Filarska 1999, il.11

Apostles, the icons of Christ and the Virgin Mary painted by St. Luke, according to Andrew's testimony venerated in Jerusalem and Rome (*PG* 97, 1304).

An 11th/12th century Greek sermon describes her beautiful nose, her divine, dark eyes, purple lips of inspiration, and golden hair on a Marian icon.⁵ We also have many references to Marian icons in the Early Byzantine hagiographic and homiletic literatures, church histories or pilgrims' diaries. John Moschos tells the story of a monk, John the Hermit, who lived in a cave near Jerusalem. He lit a lamp and prayed before the icon of the Madonna and Child (*Prat. Spirit.* 180; *PG* 87ter, 3052)⁶:

⁵ Felicetti-Liebenfels 1956, p.21; Henze C. 1948, p.61

⁶ Kitzinger E. 1954, p.97, n.39 (bibl.)

εἰκόνα δε εἶχεν ὁ γέρων ἐν τῷ σπηλαίῳ αὐτοῦ τῆς παναγίας ἀχράντου Δεσποίνης ἡμῶν Θεοτοκου καὶ ᾠειπαρθένου Μαρίας, ἐν ἀγκάλας φέρουσιν τὸν Θεοῦ ἡμῶν.

In the same biography we come across a fine catalogue of the pilgrimage centres in the Christian Orient of the 6th century: Jerusalem, Sinai, St.John's in Ephesus, St.Theodore's in Euchaita, St.Tecla's in Seleucia Isaurica (Meriamlik), St.Sergius' in Saraphes (Resafa, Sergiopolis). John the Hermit's character was a singular mix of hermit and pilgrim.

From the *Life of Mary the Egyptian* (354-422) by Sophronius of Jerusalem (c.550-638) we learn that this Saint was converted when praying before the icon of the Virgin Mary located in the atrium of the Holy Sepulchre (εἰκόνα τῆς παναγίας Θεοτόκου) (PG 87c, 3713).⁷ The *Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae* (PG 87, 3697-3726) attributed to Sophronius of Jerusalem is now regarded to have been inauthentic.⁸ Sophronius also relates the story of Theodore Aeliotes, about an anonymous hermit who lived on the Mount of Olives and was persecuted by a demon. He prayed daily before the image (ἐκτόπωμα) of the Virgin Mary with the Child:

τὴν δέσποιναν ἡμῶν τὴν ἁγίαν Μαρίαν τὴν θεοτόκον βαστάζουσιν τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν.⁹

Some details which refer to the appearance of a Marian icon may be drawn from the Coptic sermon delivered according to the Coptic tradition on the Feast of Assumption by the Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria (485-412). The sermon contains a wealth of local, Egyptian colour and interesting topographical details on the city of Alexandria. It also reflects the intercommunal conflicts between the

⁷ Kitzinger E. 1954, p.108, n.92 (bibl.); cf.Kotter p.162, I 63, II 59; Eudoxia, mother of St.Mena prayed before the icon of the Virgin with Child, conceived and gave birth to her son: 'she heard a voice from the mouth of the Lord Christ, held in Mary's, his mother's arms, saying "amen." She called her son "Mena" saying to her husband: "if we put the 'a' first we have 'Amen', if we put it last, we have the name "Mena," Drescher J. 1946, p.133; Kitzinger E. 1954, p.106f.; a woman cured her husband who was obsessed by an evil spirit with an icon of the Virgin Mary. This is a story from the Life of John the Faster (+595), composed by Photius, Kitzinger 1954, p.108f.; Mansi XIII, 80 E-85C; Krumbacher p.187, no.4. The mother of S.Stephen the Younger prayed in a dream to the icon of the Virgin Mary and Child. The Madonna looked exactly the same as in the icon venerated in the Church of Blachernae, *V.Stephani Iunioris*, BHG 1666, 1076BD, Kahzdan 1991, p.6. In the reign of Justinus II and his coregent Tiberius I (565-78) during the wars with Persia and a disastrous earthquake in the East an angry crowd attacked high state and church officials in Antioch and Constantinople. Anatolius, one of the imprisoned men, prayed in his prison cell before the icon of the Virgin Mary (Evagrius Scholasticus, *HE* 5,18). He was cruelly executed in the amphitheatre, ad bestias. Evagrius was born in Syrian Epiphania, c.536, cf.K.Balke, Evagrius Scholasticus *LACL*, p.257.

⁸ G.Röwekamp, Sophronius, *LACL*, p.648

⁹ John of Damascus I 64; II 67; quoted by John from the *Leimonarion* by Sophronius, Kotter p.165; a similar story of a monk persecuted by a malicious demon, and saved by an εἰκὼν τῆς ἁγίας Θεοτόκου, Athanasius (Ps.-), *quaestiones ad Antiochum*, PG 28,621C

Greeks, Egyptians and Hebrews, conflicts which made part of the history of the Graeco-Roman Egypt and also of Alexandria with its Greek, Jewish and Egyptian quarters. The standard handbooks generally pass over the problem in silence, or express their doubts as to the Coptic lore of Theophilus. His role in the removal of John Chrysostom from the See of Constantinople in 403 and his Origenistic conflicts with Egyptian monks prevail over discussion on his literary activities. This is partly due to the strongly critical opinion expressed by certain influential church historians like Socrates Scholasticus and Sozomenos, and other Christian intellectuals like Palladius (*de vita Joannis Chr.*). Jerome, who selected some of Theophilus' sermons to show his own *ars interpretandi* influenced by the best Ciceronian Latin and also to advertise Theophilus' rhetoric to the Western audience, did not manage to amend the prevailing negative opinion on Theophilus held in the West (*Ep.* 87, 89, 90, 92, 96, 98, 100).¹⁰ Two sermons which we adduce in this study, one of them on the Three Young Men in the Furnace, and the sermon now under discussion on the Feast of Assumption, speak well of Theophilus as a preacher, of his rhetorical skills and abilities. The Assumption sermon was embellished with an *exemplum* which tells the story of an Alexandrian Jew who intentionally smashed the icon of Virgin Mary, but later on seeing that the pieces of the icon were bleeding, he converted to Christianity. Subsequently he was baptised and died a Christian. There is an excellent edition of this sermon by Worrell, illustrating the philological skills of the ancient Orientalist scholars at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. The icon is mentioned time and again in the sermon. Let us focus on two passages which refer to its appearance. Some workers find the icon in a house which was bought by the Jew from a poor Christian family.

ΑΝΡΚΑΤΗΣ ΒΩΨΤ ΑΥΝΑΥ ΕΤΠΟΚΕ ΝΨΕ ΕΣΤΑΛΗΥ ΕΧΝ
ΧΟ ΕΡΕ ΤΖΙΚΩΝ ΝΤΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ ΣΕΖ ΕΡΟΣ (p.80,1-12, ed. Worrell). 'Some workers saw the icon of Virgin Mary, which was painted on a wooden tablet and set it up on the wall. They took it, venerated it and kissed Her hands and feet.'

The painted icon showed the Virgin Mary full size. Worrell translates ΕΡΕ ΧΖ ΕΡΟΣ (sc. on the tablet of wood) as 'being drawn thereon'. ΣΖΑΙ Q ΧΖ may be safely translated as 'write' (γράφω), and is also as 'paint'.¹¹ The Greek borrowing ΤΖΙΚΩΝ ΝΤΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ is usual in such contexts. Some officials, probably police officers (ΝΑΡΧΩΝ) brought a basket with ashes and the pieces of the bleeding icon back to the bishop's house, where Theophilus with other Egyptian bishops was making preparations for the Feast of the Assumption.

ΜΝΝΣΑ ΝΑΪ ΝΤΕΡΟΥ ΕΪ ΨΑΡΟΪ ΔΙΕΙΝΕ ΕΖΡΑΪ ΖΝ
ΠΒΙΡ Ν ΤΠΟΒΕ ΝΨΕ ΕΤΕΡΕ ΤΣΟΓΡΑΦΙΑ Ν
ΤΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ ΧΖ ΕΡΟΣ ΠΙΣΤΕΥΕ ΝΑΪ Ω ΝΑCΝΗΥ

¹⁰ G. Münch-Labacher, Theophilus von Alexandrien, *LACL*; Altaner pp.385f.434f.

¹¹ Westendorf p.211 CḤAI, Crum p.381



Pl. II The Virgin Mary and Child, The Sad Madonna, Monastery of St. Apollo, Bawit, 6th/7th century, Grabar 1966, Fig.193

XE NTepiθwψT EχM πZO NTcoγpαφiα aλoK M̄
NEπICKOΠOC ETN̄MMai aλN̄aY EπCZO eφwOOT
Z̄N OYOKM ZWC XE ECPIME ECTABE CNOq EBOL

(p.84, col.13-p.85, col.5, ed. Worrell) (Thereupon, when they had come to me, out of the basket I took the tablet of wood upon which the picture of the Virgin was [painted]. Believe me, my brethren: As I and the bishops who were with me gazed at the face of the picture we saw that its countenance was sad, as if weeping tears of blood, ed. Worrell p.372).¹²

TCOγpαφiα NTapθEHC was used as synonymous with εἰκων, ζικων. We have one more instance of a Greek word introduced into the Egyptian language as an equivalent for 'painted icon.' We also find another Greek word in a synonymous phrase, πZO NTcoγpαφiα, 'the icon's face.' The text also says that her countenance was sad, that she seemed to be weeping tears of

¹² Worrell's adaptation 1923 of 'drawn' into 'painted'

blood. The sad appearance of the Virgin's face is the usual expression on innumerable Roman or Greek icons (Pl. II). The tears of blood belong to the recurrent stories of Christian icons. In the modern history of Poland they appeared on the face of one Marian icon in Lublin on 4th July 1946, expressing in this particular and by far not unusual way in the history of Christianity, the suffering of thousands and thousands of men and women dying in concentration camps in Siberia, or in the dungeons of the Polish and Soviet political police.¹³ I am making this analogy because a similar mysterious destiny has made of the Coptic Church a Church of the most demanding witness and testimony, and not infrequently of martyrdom.



What is left of the once flourishing art of the Marian icons of the 5th-7th century? Marian icons may be encountered in private houses, hospitals and pilgrims' hotels, in hermits' caves and pilgrimage churches.¹⁴ The old tradition of the Eastern Churches says that it was St. Luke who invented the three main

Pl. III Our Lady of Vladimir,
Trietiakovska Gallery,
Moscow, 11th-12th century,
Popova, Smirnova, Cortesi
2003

types of Marian icons which have been venerated for centuries: the *Eleusa* – the Madonna embracing Her Child (Pl. III), the *Hodegetria* – the Madonna pointing to Christ (Pl. IV), and the *Madonna Orans* (Pl. V).¹⁵ The earliest *Hodegetria* commonly and for a long time identified with Eudokia's icon from Jerusalem, can be seen in the *Rabbula Codex* (6th century).¹⁶ Some of us are inclined to believe that the impressive and moving icon of the Virgin Mary of Vladimir from the Trietiakovska Gallery in Moscow may represent a high-quality copy of the famous Constantinopolitan icon (11th/12th century: Pl. III). The visitor in the Trietiakovska Gallery is absolutely enchanted by the original beauty of the icons. He has the irresistible feeling that he faces the most beautiful icons in the world. It is sometimes also believed that a strongly repainted *Hodegetria* from S. Maria Maggiore in Rome (8th/9th century) may represent another copy of the famous icon.¹⁷ On the other hand the *Eleusai* can be dated only from the 10th century

¹³ The churchwarden who was the first to notice the phenomenon and the parish priest were blamed for provoking the political unrest and consequently sentenced to long years of imprisonment.

¹⁴ Bayet 1879, p.49, *Prat.spirit.*45,18, on the widespread veneration of the Marian icons in the Christian Orient

¹⁵ Uspienski 1993, p.31

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.32

¹⁷ Felicetti-Liebenfels 1956, p.27, Taf.33a



Pl. IV The Virgin Mary with the Archangels, St. Theodore and St. George, Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, Popova, Smirnova, Cortesi 2003



Pl. V Maria orans, mosaic icon, Archbishop's Chapel, Ravenna, Felicetti-Liebenfels 1956, Taf.6

at the earliest.¹⁸ Basing on the archaeological and manuscript evidence, we are currently able to classify the earliest icons of the Virgin Mary in two types:

1. The Syro-Egyptian or Syro-Palestinian type. On these images the Madonna wears a simple blue *stola*, covered with a veil, which resembles a mantle (*palla*, *maphorion*). She has her hair covered in the same way that nuns do.¹⁹ This type prevails in the extant collection of the earliest icons (Pl. IV).

2. The Virgin Mary represented as a *basilissa*, sometimes called the Graeco-Roman Madonna, pictured with her hair pinned up, adorned with ear-rings and jewellery, and clad in an imperial tunic. The Madonna appears as a Byzantine *basilissa* on a fresco from S. Maria Antiqua in Rome, venerated as Maria Regina accompanied by St. Peter and St. Paul (dated to the 5th century).²⁰ The Madonna della Clemenza from the charming Roman Church of S. Maria in Trastevere also

¹⁸ Uspienski 1993, p.32

¹⁹ Felicetti-Liebenfels 1956, p.29

²⁰ Ibid.p.27, Taf.34A



Pl. VI St. Peter, St. Catherine's
Monastery, Sinai, 6th century,
Popova, Smirnova, Cortesi 2003



Pl. VII Christ in Majesty, Monastery of Apollon,
Bawit, Coptic Museum, Cairo, 7th century, Wessel
1964, Pl. VII

wears a crown and an opulent necklace of pearls. She sits on a throne studded with jewels and holds a tall cross in her right hand, and Christ with her left hand.²¹ Some believe that the Madonna in the breath-taking gallery of painting in S. Maria in Aracoeli on the Capitol in Rome, may reflect the *Hagiosoritissa* from the Basilica Chalkoprateia in Constantinople.²² Similarly the icon of *Maria Orans* from the Archdiocesan Chapel at Ravenna may be a copy of the famous icon from the Theotokos Church of Blachernae in Constantinople (Pl. V).²³ A wonderful example of an icon which probably reflects one of the oldest Palestinian images of the Virgin Mary with the Child is still preserved in St. Catherine's Monastery on Sinai (Pl. IV). It is the Madonna Panagia, a great work of the Justinianic period. The icon shows the Madonna between St. Theodore and St. George and two classicizing, graceful *stupentes angeli*.²⁴ We also know images of the Virgin Mary in a *maphorion*. They can be seen on small tondos above the head of St. Peter on Sinai (Pl. VI) and St. John the Baptist in Kiev,

²¹ Ibid. Taf. 34A

²² Ibid. p. 29, the Hagiosoritissa of Kraków, Poland, in Uspieski 1993, fig. 6

²³ Felicetti-Liebenfels 1956, p. 27, Taf. 6

²⁴ Felicetti-Liebenfels 1956, p. 26, taf. 32



Pl. VIII The Virgin Mary and Child, a relief-
icon, limestone, Fayum, Coptic Museum,
Cairo, Wessel 1964, il.6

one of the most impressive icons ever painted.²⁵ Felicetti-Liebenfels characterized the style of the Sinai icon with his usual exactness and expertise. I would like to cite his description of the Child Jesus:

‘Der kleine Jesus hat immer die antike Philosophen-Kleidung bestehend aus Tunika und Pallium. Er erhebt die Rechte, wie gezeigt, zum Segens- oder Redegestus, die Linke hält in der Regel als ständiges Attribut unter Hinweis auf seine Mission eine Schriftrolle...’.²⁶

The Virgin and Child between the angels was to be found on a stone lintel in the church at Khanaser in Syria (6th century). Flying angels carried the image, which must have been a relief copy of a painted icon.²⁷ We cannot forget about the early Coptic Madonnas, as for example the enthroned Virgin Mary and Child among the Apostles from the apsidal fresco

of St. Apollon’s Monastery in Bawit, dated in the 7th/8th century (Pl. VII),²⁸ or a charming *Maria Lactans* encircled by Archangels on a niche fresco from St. Jeremias’ Monastery in Saqqara, also dated to the 7th/8th century.²⁹ I would also add two relief images, one of which shows the Madonna seated on the throne between the angels (7th century), and a *Madonna Lactans* between two saints (7th century), both limestone *stelae* from the Coptic Museum in Cairo (Pl. VIII).³⁰ I am recalling them because in the Coptic texts we come across references to icons of saints made on stelae (στήλαι).

²⁵ Ibid.26, Taf.31B

²⁶ Ibid.p.29

²⁷ Lassus 1947, p.295. We also know of an enthroned Virgin Mary on the lintel of the church of Rweida, and in a chancel of Hawra, Church B.,ibid.

²⁸ Effenberger 1975, p.213

²⁹ Ibid.p.215

³⁰ Ibid.Taf.44,45

This short review of the extant Early Byzantine icons brings the reflection that some of them had a chance for preservation either in Rome; or in Coptic Egypt, icons which remained intact, untouched by the Greek iconoclasm, and saved in an Egypt devastated during the Bashmuric uprisings; and on that 'island of icons' in the heart of the Islamic world: St. Catherine's Monastery on the Sinai Peninsula. Icons found a haven of tolerance and veneration in Egypt, Rome and Sinai, where they remained out of reach of the iconoclast Byzantine bureaucracy at the time when the Greek state officials 'destroyed icons wherever they found them, burning them, tearing them off from the walls, whitewashing them.' 'The mosaics were torn off the walls, the encaustic paintings were scratched off. All the beauty disappeared from the church interiors.' This moving epitaph on the dying art was composed by anonymous witness of the destruction.³¹ We find similar, distressing pictures of devastation of the works of art in the *Vita S. Stephani Iunioris*, which described in strong and simple words the destruction of the icons of Christ, the Virgin Mary and Saints (50=PG 100,1112-1113) and the destruction ordered by Constantine V (741-775) of the figural wall decoration in the Church of Our Lady of Blachernae in Constantinople (ibid.53=PG 100, 1120-1121) (Hennephof p.26f.). In the moving biography of Stephen the Younger, its author Stephen the Deacon commemorated his beloved master, who was persecuted, imprisoned, tortured and murdered by the imperial bureaucrats for the defence of icons (764).

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³¹ Diehl, *Manuel* I,364; Uspieski 1993, n.55,p.114; Bayet 1879, p.50 cited a passage from a letter which tells about the destruction of the Marian icons by the Arians in the reign of Constantius (or Valens?), n.1, p.50, *Enarrationes*

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