The rendering of Christ in the Temple Icon of the *Theotokos*: A Gaze from the Fourth Century. Part two

Key words: icon, Egypt, Christ, Mary *Theotokos*, fourth century AD

Abstract:

In the article published in *Byzantinoslavica*, vol. 65, 2007 about the so-called 'Temple icon' in London, I argue that this piece on cloth in wax encaustic technique (now in a private collection) dates from the fourth century. In doing so I opposed the estimation of it belonging to the sixth-seventh centuries made, among others, by Robin Cormack. Within that piece I brought evidence in connection to Mary. In the current paper I provide information which refers especially to the way the infant Jesus is depicted within the icon in order to back this dating: Christ is shown wearing a tunic with purple *clavi*, a bulla, and an earring in the manner Roman children display in the portraits that survived from the third-fourth centuries AD. There are depictions of youngsters similar to such a rendering at Antinoopolis (*c*. AD 250-300) and Fayum (four century).

Additionally, I add a later observation concerning the Virgin: there are communalities between the icon in the UK and the *Hodegetria* wood panel in the chapel of St. Francisca Romana, which has been certainly attested to the fifth century - nuclear magnetic resonance sensors have been used for such a purpose. The most striking common features are the style in which the face of Mary is depicted and the manner in which the expression of her eyes has been rendered in both icons. Moreover, the shape of Mary's vestment around the neck and its general appearance are the same in both icons.

The pieces date from the pre-iconoclastic period and were transported from the East in countries pertaining to Western Christendom: the icon in Rome by Angelo Frangipane (in the fifth or sixth century), the other one probably by merchants or Napoleon's army (to France, from where Richard Temple and Laurence Morocco brought it to the UK).

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Since I published the article "A Gaze from the Fourth Century: The *Theotokos* Icon of the Temple Gallery" in the journal *Byzantinoslavica*, vol. 65,[1] where I dated what I think is a Coptic piece to this particular time [the fourth century], more evidence to support the respective temporal assignation – even to push it to an earlier period – has come out. An early dating of this piece is in variation to that most specialists who work on iconography in Britain have proposed; they maintain that the icon was painted in the sixth or even seventh century – I was in direct dialogue about it especially with Robin Cormack, but he has also written about the icon. [2] The others scholars preoccupied with the topic have just follow the opinion of this professor.[3]

In addition to the arguments I adduced referring to Mary in order to support an early dating of the icon in London within the above-mentioned publication, here I point out that the figure of Christ the Child looks like seconds-third century portraits of children from Egypt under the Roman rule. As it is obvious in fig. 1a below he, like the other two children (from Antinoe/Antinoopolis), wear a tunic with purple *clavi*, the garment specific to the youngsters in the Roman Empire, a bulla, and probably an earring (it seems to be a suggestion in the image of such a piece of jewellery as it is also the case with the portrait of the girl in fig. 1b; her image has been dated to the third century.[4]). The purple *clavi* (stripes) were a designation of the high status of the person clothed in the garment displaying them. The meaning of their existence varied in time – initially purple *clavi* were only for aristocracy (as purple was the colour they exhibited in

[1] ENE D-VASILESCU 2007, 83-90. Just to remind the reader: the icon was discovered at an auction in Avignon, France, in 2004 by Dr. Richard Temple and the restorer Laurence Morocco; they acquired it for the Temple Gallery in London (Richard is its owner).

[2] The icon is reproduced and discussed in CORMACK 2005, 22-29; it is also shown on the cover of the catalogue to which this scholar has contributed. In that publications the details of the icon, which formed part of an exhibition in Temple Gallery in 2005, are thus: "S003. Virgin and Child**;** Item #14585; Egypt, 6th or 7th century." I had a discussion about this icon with Prof. CORMACK at the 21st Congress of Byzantine Studies, London, 21-26 August 2006.

[3] The piece is also reproduced in BARKER 2011, where the holy mother represented there is referred to in terms of 'Mary as Wisdom'; BRUBACKER/CUNNINGHAM (eds.), Plate 6; p. 108; the image is also commented on there.

[4] According to the caption within the Musée du Louvre, Départment des antiquités égyptiennes; this is item AF 6488 in the museum.

ceremonies) – but later the simple existence of *clavi* denoted that the owner of the garment was a free person. In our figures the *clavi* on the cloths of the first two children are very dark, almost black; that can be so because over time both the tunics and *clavi* came to be made in a variety of hues. The dark colour in the case of our figures might also indicate that the pigment of the purple colour reacted with the oxygen and darkened. In the image below, where this is visible, the long-sleeved white tunics seem to have attached to them double cuff bands of deep purple (or black).

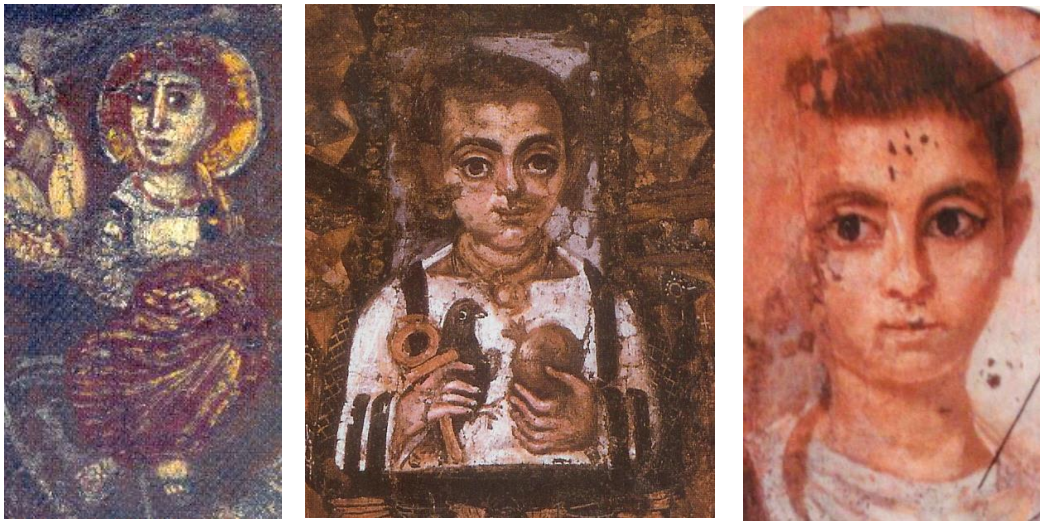


Fig. 1.
a) The child Christ in the 'Temple' icon 'Virgin and Child; encaustic on linen laid on modern panel; 48 x 23 cm, panel: 53.5 x 29.5 cm. In my opinion this icon was painted in the fourth century AD. I made a photograph of it *in situ* when Richard Temple invited me to see it; in my article ENE D-VASILESCU, 'A Gaze from the Fourth Century: The *Theotokos* Icon of the Temple Gallery', in *Byzantinoslavica* 65, 2007, this is image 'c' on p. 89; also CANTONE[5] as well as COUDERT *et alii* reproduce it.[6], 2011, fig. 2 on p. 19.
b) A child identified as a girl of 3-4 years, encaustic on linen with plaster applications. Today this in the Musée du Louvre, Départment des antiquités égyptiennes, AF 6488 (formerly in the Musée Guimet, MG 71); it was excavated at Antinoopolis by GAYET (exhibited 27th May to 31st July 1908 at Musée Guimet); information gathered during my visit to the Louvre (September 2018).
c) The portrait of a boy; encaustic on fig wood; late second to early third century AD. Excavated at Antinoopolis by GAYET in 1904-1905. Today in the Musée du Louvre, Départment des antiquités égyptiennes, E 12570; according to the caption of the image within the museum it was acquired in 1905.

[5] CANTONE, 2011, fig. 2 on p. 19.
[6] COUDERT *et alii*. In LINTZ/COUDERT (eds.), 2013, fig. 45 d on p. 197; its description is on pp. 196-197.

The bulla (lunula for girls), the necklace of gold for the rich, and a pouch of leather for the rest, indicated the fact that the young person had not yet reached the official adulthood. A good exemplar of such an object has been preserved very well in the image reproduced in fig. 2.

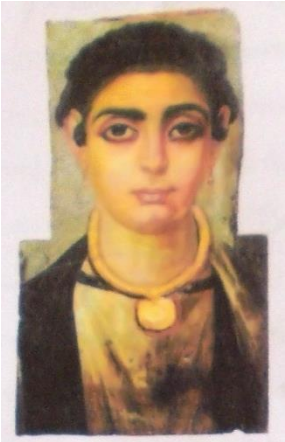


Fig. 2. The head of a girl with lunula; painting on wood, third century; in DOXIADIS, *The mysterious Fayum portraits: faces from ancient Egypt,* London: Thames and Hudson, 1995, page 112, n. 84.

Valentina Cantone opines that the motif of the child inscribed by a mandorla was firstly attested within the Syriac manuscript 341 in the Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris, fol. 118r, sixth-seventh century; the image containing it is entitled 'The Virgin between Solomon and the Church as Wisdom'.[7] Nevertheless, she considers that this iconographic theme is a very early one: it is a heritage of the imperial cult. The emperor was carried in triumph on a shield, which was usually of an oval shape, and also his aura resembles a mandorla. Cantone further considers that the image representing this reality became popular, at least partially, through the circulation of consular diptychs "that took over and developed the imperial prototype."[8] Since this is the case, the occurrence of the motif happened much earlier that sixth century. There is an obvious continuity between the practice of the court ritual and its Christianization, sublimation, and consequent depiction in icons, on the walls of churches, and in the pages of illuminated manuscripts as that mentioned above.

Cantone compares the icon in the Temple Gallery with that of the Virgin and Child within the frescoes in the south church of the monastery of St. Apollo from Bawit where a first building that dates to

[7] CANTONE 2011, 18. The page of the Syriac manuscript 341 that shows Mary with the child in mandorla is reproduced in *Rivista di Storia della Miniatura*, XV (2011), fig. 1 on p. 9.
[8] CANTONE 2011, 25.

the fourth century has been discovered. She does the same with regard to the corresponding scene that is depicted in the apse of chapel B in the Monastery of Saint Jeremiah at Saqqara (early sixth century).[9] The comparison refers to the fact that the positioning on the baby on Mary's lap in a particular manner (closed to the chest) suggest that he is still within the uterus (a mandorla), but the iconographers wanted to make it visible in order to emphasize that the pregnancy of the Virgin is the expression of the mystery of the Incarnation.[10]

Depictions of Mary holding the child in this way (but without the mandorla) exist in the catacombs from the second-third century; the oldest is that in the Catacomb of Priscilla on the Via Salaria, Rome (150 AD). It is very likely that by the fourth the scene of the child being held on the lap sometimes acquired a mandorla. The motif persisted in iconography until at least the thirteenth century; I found a representation very similar to that peculiar to the 'Temple' icon in St. Sophia Cathedral, Ohrid in the layer of painting from the eleventh century (three layers are there[11]). This church was erected on the foundation of an early one of which foundation is still to be precisely dated; Boris Cholpanov estimates that it was founded by Boris I (852-889).[12] Another similar representation of the Mother and child exists in the Church of Virgin Peribleptos in the same town; this was painted in the thirteenth century.[13] [There are two churches there, on two levels, and today this religious complex is known as the Church of St. Clement (the name of the larger of the two); the present iconography within the latter church is modern – it was realized between 1972 and 1990[14]]. A community of Egyptians was known there from the fifth century; most of its representatives where craftsmen who worked in gold and iconography. My theory is that they brought this

[9] CANTONE 2011, 19.
[10] CANTONE 2011, 17-25.
[11] The third layer is was painted under the Palaeologue family by the famous Michael and Eutiches Astrapas from Thessaloniki.
[12] CHOLPANOV, 1993, p. 131.
[13] The inscription above the door of the building that survived until today indicates as founder Progan Zgur, the cousin of the Byzantine Emperor Alexios Komnenos (1081-1118), and a high hierarch within the Church. The extant painting dates to the thirteenth century.
[14] DJURIC, 1996. The main church is dedicated to St. Clement of Ohrid; it was consecrated on 12 August 1990. The church below, painted in the thirteenth century, has Virgin Mary Peribleptos (the All Seeing) as a patron. One of the chapels is dedicated to Sts. Constantine and Helena, and the other to St. Mina the martyr. The panels on the iconostasis were painted between 1972 and 1990 by Gjorgji Danevski and Spase Spirovski, and the frescoes by Jovan Petrov and his workshop. Jesus Christ is painted on the surface of 70 square meters, with each eye having a diameter of 1.5 m. A departure from tradition is that the Old Testament prophets are depicted as sitting instead of standing. The second departure from tradition are the large windows, with a crystalline acrylic is placed in front of them to control the amount of light.

motif with them and from very early small churches that did not survived it was adopted by the medieval Byzantine iconographers who painted the images we see today in St. Sophia and the Virgin Peribleptos churches. (The artistic contribution of these Egyptians to the cultural heritage of Ohrid has been recently recognized by the local authorities through the decision of having the reproduction of an Egyptian golden mask on the banknote of 500 denars).

Going back to the Temple icon, additionally to the arguments above that refer to the dating of it on the basis of the portraiture of the infant Jesus, I found striking similarities between this icon in London (3a) and two other representations of the Virgin with the child. One is in Rome and is known as Our Lady of Consolation (the fifth century);[15] it is kept in the church of Santa Maria Nuova's sacristy,[16] fig. 3b. The other one exists in an arcosolium on the south wall of the tomb of Theodosia, within the northern necropolis at Antinoopolis (fourth-fifth century AD), fig. 3c. The fresco within the arcosolium depicts an outdoor scene with three figures identified by the Greek inscriptions above their heads as Saint Colluthus (on the left), Theodosia (the deceased), and Saint Mary (i.e. the Virgin Mary) on the right.

Concerning the resemblance of the icon in London and that in Rome it consists in the obvious manner in which the face of Mary was painted – especially the way in which the expression of the eyes was rendered. Except for the fact that the holy figures look in a different direction, they are identical (even the shape of Mary's vestment around the neck is very similar). The three images certainly date from the pre-iconoclastic times.

According to tradition, the icon in Santa Maria Nuova was brought from the East by Angelo Frangipane"[17] in the fifth or sixth century and transferred to the Basilica in the time of Pope Honorius lll (b. 1150, in See 1216-1227). In 1950, during his restoration of the church's works of art, Prof. Pico Cellini found it under two layers of painting, respectively added in the Middle Ages and later in 1805.[18] Modern technology

[15] PROIETTI/ CAPITANI/DI TULLIO 2014, 6983-6984, determined that the first layer of paint of this icon dates to the fifth century.
[16] Its official name is 'Basilica di Santa Maria Nova. Santa Francesca Romana al Foro Romano'. The construction of the Capella di San Francisca Romana – St. Frances of Rome, 1450, was sponsored by Mabilia Papazurri, the wife of Battista de' Poziani, grandson of the saint; NYBORG, C., 2000.
The Frangipani were a Roman noble family that expanded in all Italy. There were many branches all over Italy and Europe.
[18] CELLINI 1992.

using nuclear magnetic resonance sensors determined that the first layer of paint of this icon dates to the fifth century.[19]





(a). Icon of the *Theotokos*, Egypt; fourth century
b) Our Lady of Consolation in the sacristy of the church of Santa Maria Nuova, fifth century; VASSILAKI (ed.), *Images of the Mother of God. Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium* (Aldershot Ashgate), 2005, p. 42; fig. 3.1 (black and white); my colour image is from a card. It also exist on line and free to use in accordance to the Creative Commons Attribution License.
(c). St Mary [the Virgin]; fresco *in situ* in an arcosolium at Antinoopolis, Egypt; the south wall of the tomb of Theodosia in the northern necropolis. Date: fourth-fifth century AD. Excavations of the Istituto Papirologico "G. Vitelli" in 1936 and 1937; image in CALAMENT, 'Les fouilles d'Antinoé d'hier à aujourd'hui: un mise en perspective', in LINTZ/COUDERT (eds.), *Antinoé: momies, textiles, céramiques et autres antiques: envois de l'État et dépôts du musée du Louvre de 1901 à nos jours*, Musée du Louvre, Département des antiquités égyptiennes (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, Louvre éditions), 2013, fig. 4 on p. 29 [pp. 23-29].

With respect to the comparison of the Temple icon with the image in Antinoopolis one can see that the style in which Mary's eyes are represented in both pieces is strikingly similar as it also is the way in which the *mandorla* and the disk are held; this suggest that the images were realized in accordance with the same iconographical canon (to affirm that they come from the same painting school would be to take the similarity too far; until now there is no evidence to support such a statement).

All this information shows that the icon in the UK is a rare piece of Egyptian art that was certainly painted before the sixth century. It is one of the few pre-iconoclastic pieces to have survived; none of the specialist doubts that the panel was painted before the iconoclastic controversy.

[19] PROIETTI/ CAPITANI/DI TULLIO, 2014, 6983-6984.

Acknowledgments

I thank Susan Walker and Lauren McGee for their suggestions regarding especially the material from Antinoopolis.

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