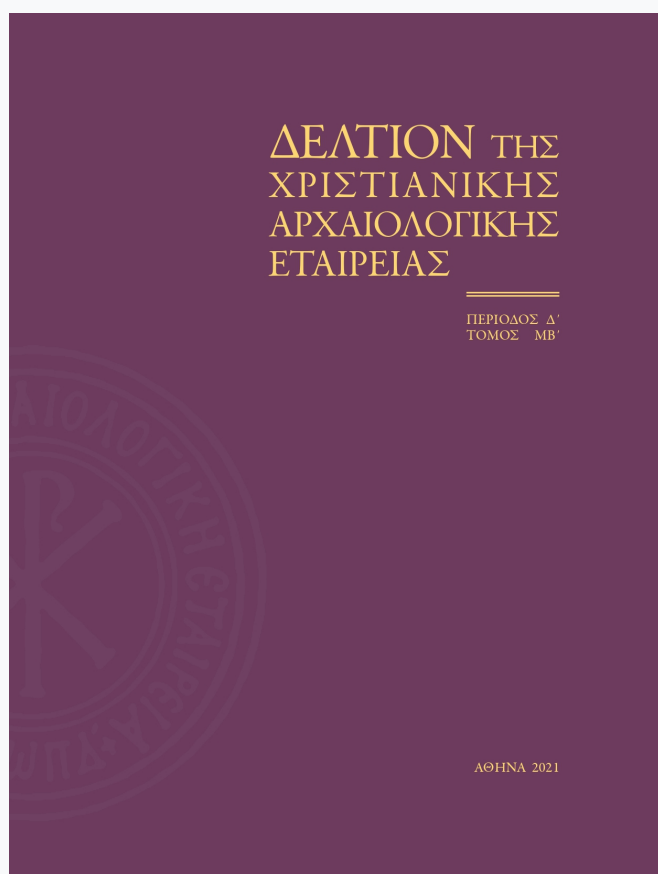


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Gazing beyond earthly reality: A reconsideration of the wall paintings at asketario on the island of Chalki, Dodecanese

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GAZING BEYOND EARTHLY REALITY: A RECONSIDERATION OF THE WALL PAINTINGS AT ASKETARIO ON THE ISLAND OF CHALKI, DODECANESE

Στη γλυκιά ανάμνηση της μαμάς μου

Με αφορμή νέα στοιχεία που προέκυψαν, επιχειρείται η αναθεώρηση των τοιχογραφιών του Ασκηταριού στα Κελλιά, στη Χάλκη Δωδεκανήσου. Στην παράσταση, στο κοίλωμα που διαμορφώνεται εν είδει αφίδας στον βράχο, η συναπεικόνιση των αγίων Φαύστου και Κήρυκου με τον Χριστό Εμμανουήλ μεταξύ των αρχαγγέλων αποτελεί εικονογραφική επιλογή που θα μπορούσε να συνδεθεί με την κοπτική τέχνη της Αλεξάνδρειας. Η σχέση αυτή, σε συνδυασμό με τα ιστορικά γεγονότα, οδήγησε τη χρονολόγησή τους στο δεύτερο μισό του 7ου – αρχές του 8ου αιώνα και την πιθανή προέλευση κάποιων από τους αναχωρητές, ίσως και του ζωγράφου, από την Αίγυπτο.

In this paper are revisited the wall paintings of the Asketario at Kellia on the island of Chalki, Dodecanese, through the presentation of new evidence. Notably, in the scene of the cavity of the rock formed as apse, the presence of Saints Faustus and Kerykos with Christ Emmanuel flanked by archangels reveals possible ties with the Coptic art of Alexandria. Similarities with Coptic art, combined with the historical background, point to a date in the second half of the 7th – beginning of the 8th century and suggest that certain hermits, maybe and the painter, came from Egypt.

Λέξεις κλειδιά

7ος-8ος αιώνας, 9ος-10ος αιώνας, τοιχογραφίες, κοπτική τέχνη, εικονογραφία, άγιος Φαύστος, άγιος Κήρυκος, Δωδεκάνησα, Χάλκη, Αλεξάνδρεια.

Keywords

7th-8th century; 9th-10th century; mural paintings; Coptic art; iconography; Saint Faustus; Saint Kerykos; Dodecanese; Chalki; Alexandria.

Asketario is located on the island of Chalki, to the west of Rhodes, in the precipitous, isolated area of Kellia, invisible from the sea. The place name itself clearly indicates a retreator *locus* of hermits. The Asketario consists of two spaces, a cave for communal worship, and further down a chapel projecting from a hollow on the rock face. The rest of the cave above, separated from the

“sanctuary” by a wall, may have served as a habitation.

The murals of Asketario have recently been the subject of a study¹, which revised the initial assignment of the frescoes to the 9th-10th century², proposing an Early Byzantine date instead. However, it is our content that these paintings must be reviewed in another context. In the light of new information concerning iconographic

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¹ M. Sigala, “Τα Κελλιά της Χάλκης Δωδεκανήσου. Η χρονολόγηση των τοιχογραφιών και η σημασία τους”, *DChAE* 30 (2009), 149-158.

² E. Kollias, “Τα Δωδεκάνησα”, *Δωδεκάνησα*, Rhodes 1995, 21.



Fig. 1. Chalki, Asketario, chapel, first layer. A military saint, ca. 700 – first quarter of the 8th century.

choices, will attempt their reevaluation in association with the history of the region.

A. Katsioti, “Οι παλαιότερες τοιχογραφίες του Αγίου Γεωργίου του Πλακωτού στη Μαλώνα της Ρόδου: Παρατηρήσεις στην τέχνη του 11ου αιώνα στα Δωδεκάνησα”, *DChAE* 23 (2002), 116, 118.



Fig. 2. Chalki, Asketario, chapel, second layer. Saint Andrew, 9th-10th century.

Iconographic Programme

The publication of the wall paintings of Asketario makes an extensive description of the tiny monastic establishment and its mural repertory and allows us to skip the descriptive part; it is thus possible to proceed directly to a series of observations.

The sparse fragments of paint indicate two successive layers low in the southeast corner of the chapel. The older one, chiselled and almost effaced by salt incrustations, represents a full-figure headless military saint holding a spear and wearing a tunic belted at the waist, decorated with circular pearl-studded ornaments (Fig. 1). To the second layer belongs the very worn head with dishevelled hair belonging to an originally full-figure St Andrew (*ΑΝΔΡΕΑΣ*) on a red field framed by a three-coloured band, at the lower tier of the front of the apse (Fig. 2).

In the southern part of the cave above the chapel (Fig. 3), a single, worn painting layer preserves a youthful



Fig. 3. Chalki, Asketario, cave. Christ Emmanuel between archangels, Saints Faustus and Kerykos, ca. 700 –first quarter of the 8th century.

Christ (+EMANOYHA) with curly hair, holding a cross-bearing staff, a symbol of triumph. He is flanked by two angels of which only the left one (+MIXAHA), with blond curly hair, survives, turning towards the Christ; of Gabriel only part of the halo and the hagnonym ([Γ] ABPIHA) are left. Michael is accompanied by two frontal saints. At the edge stands the young and curly-haired [KH]PIKOC holding the martyr's laurel crown and St Faust[us] (+ΑΓΙΟC ΦΑΟΥCΤ) depicted as a bearded older man holding a gem-encrusted book. At the upper tier, on a white ground spreads a band of foliate periodically interrupted by dark flowers.

Observations on the Iconography

The features of the composition inside the cave, such as the Christ Emmanuel between archangels³, a kind of Epiphany⁴ with the representation of martyrs as spiritual

³ The representation of Christ flanked by archangels is very common in the apse in Coptic churches, G. van Loon, *The Gate of Heaven. Wall Paintings with Old Testament Scenes in the Altar Room and the Hurus of Coptic Churches*, Istanbul 1999, 76, 82-83.

⁴ In the case of Coptic murals the emphasis on the holy nature of Christ was supported by exegesis, something accentuated and preserved

ancestors and models for the monks, the offering of wreaths by the martyrs, given their importance in Early Byzantine worship, and the young beardless Christ and archangel clad in white tunics with orange clavi and white himatia⁵, these are all encountered across broad geographical areas in the Byzantine empire. Many of them are of Eastern provenance.

Before proceeding on stylistic issues, the presence and choice of the two saints Kerykos and Faustus have to be considered (Fig. 4). To date, in the publication Faustus has not firmly identified, whose features denote a mature presbyter, nor suggested an explanation for his association with Kerykos, as the two saints seem to have little in common. It is clear that a fresh look is required into this unique pairing, which may provide evidence for the source of these murals.

We know of a beardless martyr Faustinus, whose most characteristic representation is found in the catacomb of Generosa in Rome. There, the enthroned Christ is flanked by four saints, Simplicius, Faustinus, Beatrix and Rufinianus, all holding the wreath of their martyrdom. A nearby basilica church is also dedicated to them. The painting from the catacomb has been dated to ca. 682-683, when Pope Leo II ordered the relics of three of the martyrs of Generosa to be translated to the church of Saint Bibiana⁶. Faustus is otherwise unknown to Byzantine iconography. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the name encountered in Chalki is a Hellenization of the Latin original⁷, but its rare occurrence in the East is worth reviewing⁸. One of the best-known lamp makers in the time of Augustus signed his products as *FAVSTI* or *FAVST*. It is thought that he moved to the East, probably Petra or Egypt, since some of his lamps have been discovered in Cyprus⁹. A slightly different version occurs

in the Dodecanese. It appears on an inscription next to the name of a contemporary bishop, one Ioannes, cut into an Early Christian marble column reused in the *catholicon* of Saint Michael Panormitis on the island of Symi¹⁰. Also, under the variant Faustinus, perhaps a diminutive, is commemorated one of the mosaicists of Saint Anastasia at Arkassa in Karpathos, dated precisely to AD 555¹¹.

As St Faustinus of the Western calendar is shown as a beardless youth, the middle-aged priestly Faustus holding a book at Asketario points to a different direction and the suggested link to the Western saint and Ravenna should be forgotten¹². However, two more saints with the same name were priests martyred in Alexandria¹³. The first Egyptian Faustus was martyred with ten companions in AD 250, under Decius and the second with many more in AD 311 under Galerius. The martyrs of 250 are commemorated on 6 September according to the *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanum*; while the feast day of those of 311 is celebrated on 26 November. It has long been suggested by past scholarship¹⁴ that the two Fausti, each a martyred presbyter leading a group of less-known companions, were merged or one was left out of the *Synaxarium* because they were too similar.

Catalogue of the Lamps in the British Museum, II. *Roman Lamps Made in Italy*, London 1980, 95. Idem, *A Catalogue of the Lamps in the British Museum*, IV. *Lamps of Metal and Stone, and Lampstands*, London 1996, 96-97.

¹⁰ Located next to the *cathedra*, D. Chaviaras, “Συλλογή χριστιανικῶν ἐπιγραφῶν καὶ περιγραφῇ χριστιανικῶν ἀρχαιοτήτων. Β'. Νήσου Σύμης”, *Vizantijski Vremnik* XIX (1912), St Petersburg 1915, 168-169.

¹¹ G. Jacopich, *Edifici bizantini di Scarpanto, Mosaici ed iscrizioni*, Rhodes 1925, 35, fig. 36 (fac-similé); S. Pelekanidis – P. Atzaka, *Σύνταγμα τῶν παλαιοχριστιανικῶν ψηφιδωτῶν διαπέδων τῆς Ἑλλάδος*, I, *Νησιωτικὴ Ἑλλάς*, Thessaloniki 1974, no. 3, 60, pl. 21. G. Kiourtzian, “Inscriptions chrétiennes de Karpathos”, *CahArch* 58 (2019-2020), 73-98 with further examples.

¹² For a corpus of examples see, Sigala, “Τα Κελλιά”, op.cit. (n. 1), 157-158.

¹³ On saint Faustus see A. Papaconstantinou, *Le culte des saints en Égypte. Des Byzantins aux Abbassides. L'apport des inscriptions et des papyrus grecs et coptes*, Paris 2001, 214. A third saint Faustus, also martyred at Alexandria, was an older person; thus, his iconographic features are not relatable to those of the middle-aged saint at Asketario.

¹⁴ H. Delehaye, “Les martyrs d'Égypte”, *AnBoll* 40 (1922), 83.

by Monophysitism, A. Mantas, *Τὸ εἰκονογραφικὸ πρόγραμμα τοῦ ἱεροῦ βήματος τῶν μεσοβυζαντινῶν ναῶν τῆς Ἑλλάδος (843-1204)*, Athens 2001, 121 note 3. On Epiphany see A. Bergmeier, *Visionserwartung: Visualisierung und Präsenzerfahrung des Göttlichen in der Spätantike* (Spätantike – Frühes Christentum – Byzanz / Reihe B: Studien und Perspektiven), Wiesbaden 2017.

⁵ On all these see Sigala, “Τα Κελλιά”, op.cit. (n. 1), passim.

⁶ S. Piazza, *Pittura rupestre medievale. Lazio e Campania settentrionale (secoli VI-XIII)*, Rome 2006, 100-102, pl. 25b.

⁷ Sigala, “Τα Κελλιά”, op.cit. (n. 1), 154.

⁸ For more examples, Sigala, “Τα Κελλιά”, op.cit. (n. 1), 154.

⁹ Branching of the workshop is a possibility. D. M. Bailey, A



Fig. 4. Chalki, Asketario, cave. Saints Faustus and Kerykos (detail of the Fig. 3).

Indeed, Eusebius writes at length on the presbyter Faustus, martyred together with Peter, bishop of Alexandria; he dates his martyrdom under Diocletian¹⁵. At any rate much confusion prevails in the ecclesiastical tradition and the calendar of the Alexandrian saints¹⁶.

The case with St Kerykos seems different, at first glance. The best known saint of that name was martyred in childhood alongside his mother Julitta in Cilician Tarsus under Diocletian. His cult, with or independent of his mother, was widespread in various regions, including the Dodecanese. In a recent study¹⁷ provoked by the depiction of St Kerykos at Asketario, all the information regarding the dissemination of his cult in the nearby islands was collected¹⁸, including hints for the coastline of Asia Minor that for centuries was the hinterland of the islands. Interesting aspects of the saint's cult in the Dodecanese were revealed by the unknown details of an inscription from the focus of his cult in the Bozburun peninsula near Cnidus, which formed part of the Rhodian Peraia.

However, does the saint's iconography at Asketario, child or adolescent with the wreath of martyrdom, point to this particular Kerykos? Looking for evidence of his cult in the same geographical area as St Faustus, i.e. in Egypt, we find alongside –or replacing– Kerykos, a particularly popular saint called Kyriakos. Moreover, the saint is mentioned in the bibliography of Coptic monuments as *KYPI(A)KOΣ* since he appears either as Kyriakos or as Kerykos, both in painting and on other finds¹⁹. The confusion increased as in Coptic texts saint

KYPI(A)KOΣ acquires either the appearance of a child or a man, a martyr and ascetic²⁰. The representation of St Geriakos (Kyriakos) with the features of a child or young adolescent, in chapel LI at Bawit is typical²¹. In a Bawit inscription, in chapel XIX, he is labelled presbyter (priest): *ΠΙΕCΒΗΤΕΡΟC + KYPIEKΩ[C]*²², while in chapel LII he is *KHPIKOC* martyr. Beardless St Kyriakos is represented in the Bawit LVI chapel²³. Cases of identification or fusion of saints are not unknown in the Coptic calendar²⁴. However, in the Coptic calendar, alongside St Kyri(a)kos exists the young martyr Kerykos. Insisting further on the possible merging of Kyri(a)kos and Kerykos, perhaps the delay in the inclusion of his mother Julitta in ecclesiastical texts²⁵ contributed to the confusion, as did the fact that both saints are often mentioned separately, and independent of each other²⁶. Conversely, in Byzantine iconography and hagiography Kerykos and Kyriakos are clearly distinct saints. Kyriakos

132-134, where he has been recorded as *Κυρικ(ου)* (Kyrikou), *Κέρακος* (Kerakos), *Κυριακ(ου)* (Kyriakou), *πρεσβ(ύτερος) νάπα Κύρικος* (presbyter father Kyrikos), *Κάρακος* (Karakos), etc. See esp. D. M. Bailey, *A Catalogue of the Lamps in the British Museum*, III. *Roman Provincial Lamps*, London 1988, 108, for the inscription Kyrekos or Kyriakos on a Egyptian lamp dated ca. 500-650; both readings are equally possible. Papaconstantinou (op.cit.) cites two more inscribed lamps; *του αγίου Κυριακός* (belongs to saint Kyriakos) and *άπα Κυρικός* (father Kyrikos). Cf. the inscriptions at Bawit where the saint also occurs as *Κύρακος* (Kyraikos), *Κεριαγός* (Keriagos), *Κήρικος* (Kyrikos) in J. Clédât, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouît*, notes mises en œuvre et éditées par D. Bénazeth – M. H. Rutschowskaya, t. 2, fasc. 2 (MIFAO 111), Cairo 1999, 406 (index).

²⁰ S. Grébaud, "Les miracles de saint enfant Cyriaque", *ROC* 8 (1913), 421.

²¹ J. Clédât, *Le monastère*, op.cit. (n. 19), 112-113, figs 105, 107, *Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ΑΠΑ ΓΕΡΙΑΚΩC*.

²² J. Clédât, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouît*, t. 1, fasc. 1 et 2 (MIFAO 12), Cairo 1904, 111.

²³ Clédât, *Le monastère*, op.cit. (n. 19), 158, fig. 144.

²⁴ Like the example of saint Fevronia, who was merged with an anonymous martyr from Egypt in an attempt to "egyptianise" and foster her cult. St Davis, "Variations on an Egyptian Female Martyr Legend: History, Hagiography, and the Gendered Politics of Medieval Arab Religious Identity", *Writing "True Stories". Historia and Hagiographers in the Late Antique and Medieval near East*, ed. A. Papaconstantinou, with M. Debié and H. Kennedy, Turnhout 2010, 214.

²⁵ Delehay, *Les origines*, op.cit. (n. 16), 167-168.

²⁶ Papaconstantinou, *Le culte des saints*, op.cit. (n. 13), 134.

¹⁵ Hist. eccl. VI, 40,9; VII, 11; VIII, 13,7, *Eusebius Werke*, II. *Die Kirchengeschichte* III, ed. E. Schwartz, [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte (GCS) IX], Leipzig 1909, 116.

¹⁶ H. Delehay, *Les origines du culte des martyrs*, Brussels 1933, 216-217, 219.

¹⁷ A. Katsioti – N. Mastrochristos, "The Cult of Saint Kerykos in the Dodecanese: The Evidence of the Rhodian Peraia", *Karia and the Dodekanese. Cultural Interrelations in the Southern Aegean*, II. *Early Hellenistic to Early Byzantine*, eds B. Poulsen – P. Pedersen – J. Lund, London 2021, 247-254.

¹⁸ On the probable depiction of saint Kyrekos in the Early Christian basilica of the same name at Vathy, Kalymnos, see, M. Kappas – K. Kefala, "Across the Waves. Early Christian Paintings on Kalymnos and Karia", *Karia and the Dodekanese*, op.cit. (n. 17), 258-260.

¹⁹ Papaconstantinou, *Le culte des saints en Égypte*, op.cit. (n. 13),

is represented²⁷—although not often—as the saint of that name best known to Byzantine hagiographic literature, who became an anchorite in Egypt between 449 and 556/57 honoured on 29 September.

Even in the case of confusion between Kyrekos and Kyri(a)kos in the Coptic iconography, however, there is no clear link between Sts Faustus and Kerykos/Kyriakos appearing together at Asketario. Assistance comes from the *Synaxarium*, where it is mentioned that 6 September is the feast day of Faustus and Kyriakos (two Kyriakoi are named, the companion of the blessed Faustus and Kyriakos *demotes*), martyred together in Alexandria under Decius²⁸. However, it is uncertain whether the cult had taken hold in Constantinople; or how it emerged, directly or indirectly, in hagiography and iconography.

Thus, the proximity of the two saints at Asketario on Chalki appears independent of developments on mainland Greece, and there are no particular iconographic ties to monuments in Ravenna or elsewhere in the West as been suggested²⁹. Of course, the iconographic choices at Asketario could be explained by Constantinopolitan influence; however, as will be seen below, stylistic considerations also lead us to the East. Obviously, the presence of the two saints does not represent a local (Dodecanesian) tradition but a choice of saints from elsewhere; it is thus proposed that the decoration at Asketario points to some tie with the Egyptian calendar, leading to certain interesting thoughts.

Investigation, mostly of Late Antique Alexandria in whose archaeological sphere the two martyrs belong, has shown that in the neighbourhood of Pharos, already at the time of the Arab conquest were known two churches, dedicated to the Holy Wisdom and Saint Faustus³⁰.

The reference seems reliable and has a context as, a little earlier, during the Persian invasion of 616 ten other churches are mentioned in relation to those of the 4th century. Five of them must have been built in the 5th–6th centuries, among them Saint Faustus. In the 7th century, both John of Nikiou and John Moschos add the information that a *xenodochium* (hospice) existed between Saint Sophia and Saint Faustus, near Pharos³¹. The pilgrim from Piacenza in North Italy (ca. 570) visited the tomb of the martyr³², although the identity of the person buried cannot be confirmed³³. We also do not know whether St Kyriakos was also venerated at the same site, although as they were martyred together this is not unlikely. The scarce reports on the cult of St Faustus indicate that did not travel far from the city boundaries. A lamp in the collection of the Benaki Museum inscribed *ΤΟΥ ΑΓΙΟΥ (Φ)ΑΥΚΤΟC*³⁴ probably was dedicated to one of his shrines. It could also be suggested, indirectly, from the observed fluctuations in the popularity of other saints³⁵, that the cult of St Faustus was constrained by the strong Chalcedonian presence in large urban centres like Alexandria, the second in importance city in the empire.

We have more information for churches dedicated to St Kyriakos³⁶, and the relative spread of his cult can be inferred from his churches in Saqqara, Gebel el Teir, Bawit, and Esna³⁷. The numerous suburban monastic centres multiplied from the end of the 4th and through the 5th

²⁷ S. Tomeković, *Les saints ermites et moines dans la peinture murale byzantine* (Byzantina Sorbonensia 26), Paris 2011, 48–49, with a full description of saint Kyriakos' iconography. Just for the Dodecanese, representative examples are the saint's 15th century depiction in the church of Zoodochos Pege at Stelies, Sianna, and in the katholikon of the Patmos monastery of the 17th century (both images unpublished).

²⁸ *Synaxarium CP*, 22. Delehaye, "Les martyrs d'Égypte", op.cit. (n. 14), 83.

²⁹ Sigala, "Τα Κελλιά", op.cit. (n. 1), 157.

³⁰ A. Butler, *The Arab conquest of Egypt and the last thirty years of the Roman dominion*, Oxford 1978, 389. For Late Antique Alexandria see also Ch. Aas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity. Topography and Social Conflict*, Baltimore – London 1997, particularly the final chapter.

³¹ John Moschos, "Spiritual Meadow, cap. 105 and 106", *PG* 87.3, col. 2961C and 2965A, tr. J. Wortley, Kalamazoo 1992, 83 and 85. Generally on the churches, J. McKenzie, *The architecture of Alexandria and Egypt, c. 300 BC to AD 700*, New York – London 2007, 236–321.

³² Delehaye, *Les origines*, op.cit. (n. 16), 219 (*Ibi enim requiescit sanctus Athanasius, sanctus Faustus... et alia multa corpora sanctorum*). Pèlerin de Plaisance *Itin.* 45.5, Milani, 226–227. See also, The Piacenza Pilgrim, *Travels from Piacenza*, 20, trans. J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, Wiltshire 2002, 149–150.

³³ Papaconstantinou, *Le culte des saints*, op.cit. (n. 13), 201.

³⁴ K. Loverdou-Tsigarida, "Ενεπίγραφοι κοπτικοὶ λύχνοι τοῦ Μουσείου Μπενάκη", *DChAE* 6 (1970–1972), 135, pl. 42 α2; Papaconstantinou, *Le culte des saints*, op.cit. (n. 13), 200.

³⁵ A. Papaconstantinou, "The cult of saints: a heaven of continuity in a changing world?", *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300–700*, ed. R. S. Bagnall, Cambridge University Press 2010, 359.

³⁶ The cult of saints, <https://cultofsaints.history.ox.ac.uk/>, under the name Kyriakos.

³⁷ Papaconstantinou, *Le culte des saints*, op.cit. (n. 13), 393, index.



Fig. 5. Chalki, Asketario, cave. Christ Emmanuel and archangel Michael (detail of the Fig. 3).

century onwards, but in the second part of the 6th their role increased in importance in the outskirts of settlements. After the Arab conquest of 646 and the resulting social transformation of Egypt, urban and rural sanctuaries declined and monasteries came to the fore, developing into centres of the cult of martyrs and their relics³⁸, the only real influence over the Christian populations in Egypt. Churches and monasteries were an integral part of the religious identity urban centres, important for the local economy and part of the communal subconscious. Thus local saints, often unknown beyond the bounds of their city, sometimes speedily sinking into oblivion, were

part of a pyramid crowned by those of wider significance, familiar and popular throughout the land³⁹.

In the iconography of the cave at Chalki, the triumphant Christ of the heavenly church is greeted by archangels clad in white and by martyrs, the representatives of the terrestrial Church presented to Christ by the archangels (Fig. 5). Their role as intercessors is emphasized by their gestures in presenting the martyrs, thus stressing the triumphal character of the scene⁴⁰. The compaction of subjects like the Theophanic vision with the representation

³⁹ Ibidem, 363.

⁴⁰ For the concept of the deesis/intercession, particularly in later times, see mainly A. Cutler, "Under the Sign of the Deesis: On the Question of Representativeness in Medieval Art and Literature", *DOP* 41 (1987), 145-154.

³⁸ E. Wipszycka-Bravo, "Le monachisme et les villes", *TM* 12 (1994), 10-14, 22. Papaconstantinou, "The cult of saints", op.cit. (n. 35), 352-354.



Fig. 6. Sohag, Red Monastery. Christ Emmanuel flanked by two angels, ca. 7th century.

of full-length saints is probably due to the limited space available in the rocky cavity. The pictorial vocabulary is familiar not only to Coptic art but throughout the Mediterranean before Iconoclasm⁴¹. Among the iconographic *comparanda* of Coptic art, are the textile with Christ Emmanuel flanked by two angels (6th century) at the Louvre⁴², or the mural from the Red Monastery at Sohag (ca. 7th century) (Fig. 6)⁴³. The considerable importance of angels and archangels in Coptic art and ritual should be noted⁴⁴. The cross before the name of Emmanuel is standard in the hagionyms and graffiti of Coptic art⁴⁵. Besides it should be kept in mind that the wreath-holding martyrs was an iconographic device popular in the monumental art of the Early Christian period and the

dedication of laurel wreaths a common *topos* in Early Byzantine times.

The iconographic layout of the chapel cannot be restored. The fragmentary character of the decoration suggests the absence of a strictly structured programme⁴⁶. The presence of two layers is established⁴⁷ but it is hard to estimate the time dividing them. In the full-length saint the military element is already present in the Early Byzantine period⁴⁸. If the reading of Coptic affiliation in the frescoes at Asketario is correct, it should be noted that, in Egyptian ritual, St Kyri(a)kos is present in processions with military saints⁴⁹. The Apostle Andrew, considered as the founder of the first Christian community of Constantinople, is also a regular presence in the chapels at Bawit. In all probability, the case of St Andrew, who belongs to the second layer (9th-10th century), is different; his presence could point to the influence of Constantinople⁵⁰.

⁴¹ For other versions of the subject of Theophany see A. Grabar, *Martyrium, Recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique*, II, Paris 1946, 177, 211.

⁴² M. H. Rutschowskaya, "Quelques rares peintures sur toile de lin à l'époque copte", *Journal of Coptic Studies* 2 (1992), 55-61, pls 9-11.

⁴³ M. Zibawi, *Images de l'Égypte chrétienne. Iconologie copte*, Paris 2003, 100, fig. 124.

⁴⁴ Papaconstantinou, "Le culte des saints", op.cit. (n. 13), 154-159, 261. H. Rochard, "Le culte des archanges en Égypte byzantine et au début de l'époque arabe: le témoignage des peintures de Baouît", *Études Coptes XV, Dix-septième journée d'études (Lisbonne, 18-20 Juin 2015)*, eds A. Boud'hors – C. Louis, Paris 2018, 117-136.

⁴⁵ Cf. the images of the Apostles in the apse of chapel VI at Bawit, K. Wessel, *Koptische Kunst. Die spätantike in Ägypten*, Recklinghausen 1963, pl. VII.

⁴⁶ See observations in Grabar, *Martyrium*, II, op.cit. (n. 41), 308.

⁴⁷ Sigala, "Τα Κελλιά", op.cit (n. 1), 156-157.

⁴⁸ Cf. the nine military saints depicted in the mosaics of the Rotunda in Thessaloniki, H. Torp, "An Interpretation of the Early Byzantine Martyr Inscriptions in the Mosaics of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki", *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 24 n.s. 10 (2011), 40-41.

⁴⁹ Papaconstantinou, *Le culte des saints*, op.cit. (n. 13), 133.

⁵⁰ For the role of Saint Andrew in the tradition of Constantinople, see



Fig. 7. Chalki, Asketario, cave. Christ Emmanuel (detail of the Figs 3 and 5).

Stylistic considerations

The iconographic choices of the paintings have led us to Egypt, and even a possible connection to Alexandria. The discussion and comparisons will naturally focus on works dating from the 6th century onwards.

The available stylistic elements are as follows: the drapery of Christ Emmanuel principally, and of the angel as well, is executed with schematic yet fluid folds, painterly in balance with the strong outlines (Fig. 5). The impressive form and facial traits recall statuary. Nevertheless, the figure of the archangel is disorganized in turning, betraying an inability to properly represent the three-quarter pose.

F. Dvornik, *The idea of Apostolicity in Byzantium and the legend of the apostle Andrew*, Cambridge MA 1958, 171-175, 231. N. Gioles,

Interestingly enough the facial traits have a statuesque essence and rendition. However, the posture of the archangel towards Christ, despite his lively turn, has been treated with some weakness especially in those parts where the figure had to be shown in three quarters. The drapery flows naturally, but the dominant role of the dark linear

“Εικονογραφικά θέματα στη βυζαντινή τέχνη εμπνευσμένα από την αντιπαράθεση και τα σχίσματα των δύο εκκλησιών”, *Θωράκιον. Αφιέρωμα στη μνήμη του Παύλου Λαζαρίδη*, Athens 2004, 266-267. I. Μπίθα, “Η παρουσία του Αγίου Ανδρέα στο εικονογραφικό πρόγραμμα των βυζαντινών ναών των Κυθήρων (13ος αι.)”, *Ο απόστολος Ανδρέας στην ιστορία και την τέχνη, Πρακτικά Διεθνούς Συνεδρίου, Πάτρα 17-19 Νοεμβρίου 2006*, eds E. Σαράντη – Δ. Τριανταφυλλόπουλος, Patras 2013, esp. 185 passim. M. Αχειμάστον-Ποταμιάνου, *Στο Θάρι της Ρόδου. Ο ναός και οι τοιχογραφίες της Μονής του Ταξιάρχη Μιχαήλ*, Athens 2006, 101-102.



element stands out in the strong, parallel folds. Linearity is also marked in the shaping of the bodies. The thickness varies in the outlines of the faces, reducing schematization and contrast. Conversely, schematization is strong in the arms, which lack grace or much detail; sometimes the painting of the hands includes the nails. The wide-open, ecstatic eyes and the fixed and distant gaze ignores the viewer, looking beyond the earthly world. The line of the eye is also dark, accented with a red one, laid alongside. Christ's nose is described by a black stroke highlighted in red (Fig. 7). Reddish lines join the eyelids to the bridge of the nose and two strokes render the nostrils. Reddish, comb-like brushwork at the edge of the cheek gives volume to the faces. The mouth is shaped by a black brushstroke with red fill for the upper lip and some red touches for the lower. The cheeks of the three beardless faces are highlighted at the centre by a dark spot. In general, the colour palette is limited. Cool smooth brown shades are used with warm red tones, both highlighted by off-white. Especially the depiction of St Faustus stands out with its long oval face, thin mustache, typically bare chin surrounded by the beard, the ε-shaped ears; while the nose, mouth and eyesockets are merely outlined giving a sense of spiritual depth.

In the manner of the painter the frontal austerity of Faustus and Kerykos are associated with later developments such as the more relaxed poses of the centrally placed Christ Emmanuel and angel, despite the latter's clumsy posture, and with the folds of the garments that add volume to the figures. The two-dimensional quality of the martyrs is combined to elements of plasticity, three-dimensional perspective, the idealization of the Christ and angel and the effort to set them effectively into the available space. This approach, in a way representative of the wavering between the Christian ideal and Greco-Roman tradition, reflects the age of transition to which the murals seem to belong.

The tendency towards simplification and reduction shown by the frontal Kerykos and Faustus, hieratic, passionless figures imbued with inner strength, recall portable icons and reflect local peculiarities of Coptic painting. In particular, the presbyter Faustus, the only one with a dark skin (an indication of race?)⁵¹ (Fig. 8), seems to connect the murals of Chalki with Coptic art:

⁵¹ Cf. similar cases like that of Saint Moses the Ethiopian, T. Starodubchev, "St. Moses the Ethiopian or the Black. Cult and representation in the Middle Ages", *Zograf* 43 (2019), 1-22.

there are some well-known *comparanda* as the wooden fragment of a painting with the Brother George the Scribe (8th century) (Fig. 9)⁵², or murals from the Bawit depicting Sts Phib, Apollo, and Anub (Fig. 10)⁵³. Elements such as dress, the position of the lower limbs, or the rendering of the hands holding the Gospel can also be compared to the full-length deacon saint from chapel XXVIII⁵⁴, inscribed *O ATTO AITA MOYN ΔΙΑΚΟΟΖΕ*, or the repetitive row of Apostles⁵⁵ in Hall 6 at Bawit. A technical detail of this mural, the reddish comb-like brushwork that highlights the cheeks, enlivens the cheek of the enthroned Virgin (Fig. 11)⁵⁶.

Similarities also emerge with other Coptic murals: for instance, echoes of the iconographic type of the prelate are encountered in John the Evangelist at Faras (8th century)⁵⁷. St Faustus at Asketario shows the same iconographic characteristics and technical details as St Mark the Evangelist (ca. 7th century) in the sanctuary of the Red Monastery church near Sohag (Fig. 12)⁵⁸ and the frontally depicted Sts Onuphrius, Macarius, Apollo, Phib etc. from cell A in the monastery of Apa Jeremiah at Saqqara⁵⁹, probably dated after 640 (Fig. 13): red and grey lines descend from the eyelids and outline the nose, while the lips are outlined in black, as in the figures of Asketario. Specifically, there is close affinity between the saints and Faustus in the rendering of the dress and even the bare chin framed by the beard. The chrismon before the hagionyms, with several Coptic examples, still appears in 8th-century works. Similar features are observed in other media of Coptic art, such as the frontal figure on a potsherd now at the British Museum⁶⁰.

⁵² Kept at the Newark Museum, *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition, 7th-9th Century*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, March 14 – July 8, 2012 (exhibition catalogue), eds H. Evans – B. Ratliff, New York 2012, no. 52A on p. 84-85 (D. Bénazeth).

⁵³ Zibawi, *Images*, op.cit. (n. 43), 84, fig. 93, Cairo, Coptic Museum.

⁵⁴ Cledat, *Le monastère*, op.cit. (n. 19), pls XCVII, 1, XCIX.

⁵⁵ J. Maspero, *Fouilles exécutées à Baouît. Notes mises en ordre et éditées par Étienne Drioton*, fasc. 1, 1931, MIFAO LIX, 59, 16, pl. XXIII.

⁵⁶ Zibawi, *Images*, op.cit. (n. 43), 81, fig. 90, Cairo, Coptic Museum.

⁵⁷ K. Michalowski, *Faras. Die Wandbilder in den Sammlungen des Nationalmuseums zu Warschau*, Warsaw 1974, 94-96, no. 4.

⁵⁸ *Byzantium and Islam*, op.cit. (n. 53), 70, fig. 22 (E. Bolman).

⁵⁹ Zibawi, *Images*, op.cit. (n. 43), 87, fig. 96, Cairo, Coptic Museum.

⁶⁰ O. M. Dalton, *A Guide to early Christian and Byzantine*





Fig. 8. Chalki, Asketario, cave. Saints Faustus (detail of the Figs 3 and 5).



Fig. 9. Newark Museum. Wooden fragment of a painting. The Brother George the Scribe, 8th century.



Fig. 10. Cairo, Coptic Museum. Mural painting from Bawit. Saints Phib, Apollo, and Anub, 8th century, detail.



Fig. 11. Cairo, Coptic Museum. Mural painting from Bawit, Hall 6. Virgin enthroned between apostles, 6th century, detail.



Fig. 12. Sohag, Red Monastery. Saint Mark the Evangelist, detail, ca. 7th century.

The similarity of the head of the archangel Michael (Fig. 14) with those from the Coptic textile icon representing the Virgin enthroned between archangels, today at the Cleveland Museum of Art, generally dated to the 6th century, should be noted (Fig. 15)⁶¹. The archangel can also be compared to his half-figure counterpart on a bilateral icon of the 7th-8th century from Bawit, the archangel dated to the 6th century at the Louvre⁶² and, regarding the hair, to the Michael from the metropolitan church at Faras⁶³.

Although the first layer at the nearby chapel is fragmentary, the resemblance of the military saint (Fig. 1) with the ornamental roundels and belt on the dress of the saint in the apse of Hall I at Bawit⁶⁴ and St Theodore in

Antiquities in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities, London 1921, 31, fig. 17.

⁶¹ E. Bolman, "The Early Paintings", *Monastic Visions, Wall Paintings in the Monastery of St. Antoine at the Red Sea*, ed. E. Bolman, New Haven – London 2002, 33, fig. 3.5. *Age of Spirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, ed. K. Weitzmann, New York 1979, 532-533, no. 477 (S. A. Boyd).

⁶² Belting, *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich 1990, pl. 47.

⁶³ Michalowski, *Faras*, op.cit. (n. 57), 103-111, nos 7, 8.

⁶⁴ Maspero, "Fouilles exécutées à Baouît", op.cit. (n. 55), 16, pl. VIII, C.



Fig. 13. Cairo, Coptic Museum. Mural painting from the monastery of Apa Jeremiah at Saqqara, cell A. Saints Onuphrius, Macarius, Apollo, Phib, probably dated after 640.



Fig. 14. Chalki, Asketario, cave. Archangel Michael (detail of the Figs 3 and 5).



Fig. 15. Cleveland Museum of Art. Textile icon. Virgin enthroned between archangels, 6th century.



Fig. 16. Paris, Museum of Louvre. Icon from Bawit. Christ and Apa Mena, 7th century.



Fig. 17. Berlin, Museum für spätantike und byzantinische Kunst. Icon. Apa Abraham, ca. 600.

a bilateral Coptic icon of the 7th-8th century is evident. In the latter the saint holds a lance and wears a belted chiton with discoid roundels decorated with pearls⁶⁵. Another 6th-7th century icon of St Theodore, part of a triptych and probably of Coptic origin at Mount Sinai⁶⁶, shares common elements with the mural of Chalki. Even the red background of Andrew the Apostle at the same chapel (Fig. 2), presumably of later date, although not unknown outside Egypt, also recalls representations of Eastern art such as the Coptic icons of Christ and Apa⁶⁷ Mena (7th century) from Bawit (Fig. 16)⁶⁸ or that of Apa Abraham, probably from the monastery of Apa Phoibamon (Deir el Bahri, Luxor), ca. 600 (Fig. 17)⁶⁹.

The acknowledged universality of the art of the Early Byzantine period contributed to its Coptic version acquiring footholds in the medium of painting throughout the empire. A representative example is the 8th-century icon with the frontal St Irene and a donor in the Sinai collection⁷⁰ which shares elements with the paintings of Bawit and Saqqara. This diffused uniformity is remarked in the representation, perhaps copying a portable icon (such as the one of Apa Abraham already mentioned), the Alexandrian St Abbakynos⁷¹ (757-767) in a niche in the atrium of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, a monument with mural layers from the 6th century onwards. The cult of St Abbakynos was introduced in Rome from Egypt in the first half of the 7th century⁷². Apart from

Coptic art, the flat folk-style rendition and linearity of the saint is related to a two-zoned icon, also from Sinai, part of a triptych with busts of Sts Basil and Athanasius of the 7th-8th century⁷³.

Two-dimensional works lacking in painterly qualities frequently occur in Western art⁷⁴, for instance the mosaic composition with the Virgin flanked by archangels and donors in the chapel (7th century) of the amphitheatre at Dyrrachium.⁷⁵ These affinities are due to an artistic *koine*, as no part of the empire had to show an individual painting tradition free from outside connections.

Parallels with the dominant trends in art are also found in other media. The archangel from Asketario resembles the archangel of the marble icon (6th-7th century)⁷⁶ in Adria with the corresponding broad face, wide eyes and curly hair, reminiscent of Coptic art of the 6th-7th century. The clumsy pose of the worshipping archangel at Chalki, attempting a turning pose, is repeated in the greeting of the Virgin by Elisabeth in the scene of the Visitation at the basilica of Poreč (mid-6th century)⁷⁷. Still within the Balkans, the fragment of a figure

⁶⁵ Cf. saint Theodore (and the Archangel Gabriel), second layer, Cairo, Coptic Museum, *Byzantium and Islam*, op.cit. (n. 53), 85-86, no. 53 (D. Bénazeth).

⁶⁶ K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai*, 1. *From the Sixth to the Tenth Century*, Princeton 1976, 36-37, no. B 13.

⁶⁷ The prefix *AIIA* signifies our father (F. Cabrol, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, I. 2, Paris 1907, cols 2494-2495), and is exclusively used in Egypt.

⁶⁸ *Age of Spirituality*, op.cit. (n. 61), 552-553, no. 497 (N. Patterson Ševčenko); Zibawi, *Images*, op.cit. (n. 43), fig. 128.

⁶⁹ *Ägypten. Schätze aus dem Wüstens and Kunst und Kultur der Christen am Nil*, Wiesbaden 1996, 148, no. 110 (A. Effenberg), Staatliche Museum, Berlin. Zibawi, *Images*, op.cit. (n. 43), fig. 127.

⁷⁰ Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai*, op.cit. (n. 66), 66-67, no. B. 39; *Byzantium and Islam*, op.cit. (n. 53), 57-58, no. 29 (K. Corrigan).

⁷¹ D. Knipp, "The Chapel of Physicians at Santa Maria Antiqua", *DOP* 56 (2002), 17, figs 12-15.

⁷² *Ibidem*, 21.

⁷³ A. Grabar, *Christian iconography, A study of its origins*, London 1968, 74, 82, figs 185, 217; Conversely, Weitzmann argues for a Palestinian origin of the icon, see Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai*, op.cit. (n. 66), 48, B 24.

⁷⁴ F. Bisconti, "Trace altomedievali nelle catacombe romane. Presenze funeraria e decorazioni pittoriche. Il caso del Lucernario di S. Cecilia", *Prima e dopo Alboino. Sulle Tracce dei Longobardi. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi Cimitile-Nola-Santa Maria Capua Vetere, 14-15 giugno 2018*, eds C. Ebanista – M. Rotili, San Vito 2019, fig. 9, Rome, catacombs of S. Felicità where the image of Christ with the saint and her children is dated to the 7th-8th centuries.

⁷⁵ N. Thierry, "Une mosaïque à Dyrrachium", *CahArch* 18 (1968), 227-229. V. Pace, "Mosaici e pittura in Albania VI-XIV secolo", *Progetto Durres. L'Indagine sui beni culturali Albanesi dell'antichità e del medioevo: tradizioni di studio a confronto*, *Antichità Altoadriatiche LIII*, eds M. Buora – S. Santoro, Trieste 2003, fig. 6; G. Fingarova, "Mary as Intercessor in the Decoration of the Chapel in Durrës, Albania", *Presbeia Theotokou. The Intercessory Role of Mary across Times and Places in Byzantium, (4th-9th Century)*, eds L. Peltomaa – A. Külzer – P. Allen (Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 39), Vienna 2015, 207.

⁷⁶ F. Coden, "Ancora sull'icona marmorea protobizantina di Adria (Rovigo)", *Minima Mediaevalia, Atti Accademia Rovetana degli Agiati*, an. Acad. 268, ser. IX, VIII, A (2018), 40-53, figs 1, 3.

⁷⁷ R. Cormack, "Η Παναγία στα ψηφιδωτά της κόγχης του ιερού", *Μήτηρ Θεού. Απεικονίσεις της Παναγίας στη βυζαντινή τέχνη*, ed. M. Vassilaki, Athens 2000, 92, fig. 45. G. Gounaris, *Εισαγωγή*

in the basilica of Crum⁷⁸ (6th century?) presents the same dreamy manner and painting quality characteristic of the Emmanuel at Asketario.

The broad vertical folds are another common practice, encountered in the full-length Sts Cornelius, Ciprian, Sixtus II and Ottatus (7th-8th century) in the crypt of St Lucia at the Callixtus catacomb in Rome⁷⁹. This “novel” feature, a departure from the Hellenistic memories in older works, also characterises later ones such as the murals in the lower church of Saint Clement (847-855)⁸⁰. The rendering of the hair of Emmanuel is an enduring feature in such representations, as in the fragmentary fresco with St Sabba from Rome (8th-9th century?)⁸¹.

The merging of Proto-Byzantine elements with later ones is common, a feature of transition evident even in major monuments. The impressionistic artistic language coexists with more abstract, two-dimensional forms. For example, at Santa Maria Antiqua, the 8th-century paintings introduce directions that, in a few years, would split into different paths; the layer of 705-707 (papacy of John VII) has strong linear outlines and harsh shading, contrasting with the skilfully worked planes of the faces⁸². In the layer of 757-767 (papacy of Paul I), despite the irregular brush-strokes, the figures are austere hieratic⁸³, something mostly seen in later works.

Some other features encountered at Asketario are also found in works distant in time and space. For instance,

στην παλαιοχριστιανική αρχαιολογία, Β', Ζωγραφική, Thessaloniki 2007, fig. 285.

⁷⁸ See the detached fresco today in the museum of the crypt of the Alexander Nevski cathedral, Sofia. R. Pillinger – V. Popova – B. Zimmermann, *Corpus der spätantike und frühchristliche Wandmalereien Bulgariens*, Vienna 1999, pl. 57, fig. 44.

⁷⁹ F. Bisconti, *Primi Cristiani. Le storie, i monumenti, le figure*, Vatican City 2013, fig. p. 26. Idem, “Trace altomedievali”, op.cit. (n. 74), figs 4, 5. Piazza, *Pittura*, op.cit. (n. 6), 113-114, pl. 29ab.

⁸⁰ W. Tronzo, “Setting and Structure in Two Roman Wall Decorations of the Early Middle Ages”, *DOP* 41 (1987), 477-492, figs 1, 3.

⁸¹ H. Belting, *Studien zur Beneventischen Malerei*, Wiesbaden 1986, fig. 260. For 8th century Rome and its art, see recently, J. Osborne, *Rome in the 8th century: a history in art* (British School at Rome Studies), Cambridge – New York 2020, esp. chapter 2, 22-66 and chapter 5, 95-136.

⁸² P. Romanelli – Per J. Nordhagen, *S. Maria Antiqua*, Rome 1964, pl. 21, with the angel from the Annunciation, 24a with a chorus of angels, 24b with the medallions of the apostles.

⁸³ Ibidem, pl. 42 a, b, full-length saints with enthroned Christ.

we meet parallels of the drapery with harsh contours on a white ground in the 9th-century paintings at San Vincenzo al Volturno near Benevento, 826-842⁸⁴. Although the eyes lack the ecstatic gaze of the earlier period, the facial features and outlines have much in common with the Asketario archangel and the face of the crucified Christ with St Faustus.

The wide open eyes staring beyond the world survive at least through the 8th century, as is attested by a series of saints depicted at Tempietto Longobardo at Cividale (ca. 750-760)⁸⁵, a monument linking iconographic types and styles of the Early Christian period to the centuries that follow. Nevertheless, it appears that physiognomies grew progressively more drawn and elongated. Comparison of the face of Christ from this remarkable monument to that of Julitta from Santa Maria Antiqua (741-752)⁸⁶ shows that the elongated and drawn faces have moved away from the vitality of Emmanuel and the archangel at Asketario which conserve ties to the Hellenistic past. The fading of Hellenistic elements before the simplistic and two-dimensional style is already present in the 7th century: a typical example is provided by dedicatory mosaics of St Demetrius at Thessalonica such as the one with the saint with two donors and the deacon⁸⁷. This development is clear in the icon of Sts Sergius and Bacchus (6th-7th century) from Sinai now at Kiev⁸⁸. This simplifying

⁸⁴ Belting, *Studien zur Beneventischen Malerei*, op.cit. (n. 81), pl. 22, figs 29, 39.

⁸⁵ See H. Torp, “Lo sfondo storico-iconografico dell’immagine di Cristo nell’Tempietto Longobardo di Cividale”, *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 28 (2015), figs 6-8.

⁸⁶ V. Pace, “La questione bizantina in alcuni monumenti dell’Italia altomedievale: la ‘perizia greca’ nei ‘tempietti’ di Cividale e del Clitumno, Santa Maria foris portas a Castelseprio e San Salvatore a Brescia, Santa Maria Antiqua a Roma”, *Medioevo mediterraneo: l’Occidente, Bisanzio e l’Islam, Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Parma 21-25 sett. 2004*, Milan 2007, figs 1, 2.

⁸⁷ Th. Papazotos, “Το ψηφιδωτό των κτητόρων του Αγίου Δημητρίου Θεσσαλονίκης”, *Αφιέρωμα στη μνήμη του Στυλιανού Πελεκανίδη*, Thessaloniki 1983, 365-376. See also A. Mentzos, *Τα ψηφιδωτά της ανοικοδόμησης του ναού του Αγίου Δημητρίου στον 7ο αιώνα μ.Χ.*, Thessaloniki 2010, passim. See also for the mural paintings P. Bonnekoh, *Die figürlichen Malereien in Thessaloniki vom Ende des 4. bis zum 7. Jahrhundert. Neue Untersuchungen zur erhaltenen Malerei aus stattungzweier Doppelgräber, der Agora und der Demetrios-Kirche*, Oberhausen 2013, 277-280.

⁸⁸ *Holy image, hallowed ground, Icons from Sinai*, eds R. S. Nelson – K. M. Collins, Los Angeles 2006, 127, no. 3 (T. F. Mathews).

trend in art was the result of a long process whose origins may be traced as far back as the end of the 4th century⁸⁹, making dating more challenging.

A brief glance at the contemporary art of nearby Asia Minor and the islands would be desirable, but evidence is scarce. For example, comparisons to works at Ephesus⁹⁰ do not provide sufficient similarities and parallels to establish any relationship. This makes the Asketario frescoes appear even more solitary. The fresco fragment with an angel from Aphrodisias, retrieved from a spot adjacent to the theatre, is the nearest parallel to Christ and the archangel from Chalki⁹¹. Its dating to the first half of the 6th century appears doubtful⁹². It might be comparable to a mural fragment with St Irene at Alakisla of the 6th-7th century⁹³. This sort of “Hellenistic” impressionism displayed by these examples could be compared to an angel from the 7th century layer at Santa Maria Antiqua⁹⁴. In the few surviving murals at Küçük Tavşan at Halikarnassos peninsula in Caria, all idealised character has been lost⁹⁵.

⁸⁹ E. Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the making. Main lines of stylistic development in Mediterranean Art, 3rd-7th century*, London 1977, particularly 113-122.

⁹⁰ Cf. the figure at the head of the symposium in Terrace House Odeion of the first half of the 4th century, with sharp features and strong contours. N. Zimmermann – S. Ladstätter, *Wall Paintings in Ephesos from the Hellenistic to the Byzantine period*, Istanbul 2011, 169, fig. 352. The development of this realistic style is visible in the paintings of Paul's grotto, in the fresco depicting the conversation of Paul and Thecla with Theoklia as an onlooker (ca. 500-600). On the grotto and the paintings, see ibidem, 174-181, figs 368-370.

⁹¹ M. Cormack, “The Wall-Painting of St. Michael in the Theatre”, *Aphrodisias Papers 2: The Theatre, a sculptor's workshop, philosophers, and coin types* (Journal of Roman Archaeology, Supplementary Series no. 2), eds R. R. R. Smith – K. T. Erim, Michigan 1991, 109-122.

⁹² A fairly safe *terminus ante quem* is set by the earthquake of 616 that caused the collapse and abandonment of the theatre of Aphrodisias. The painting was found in a building north of the theatre. Dating the archangel to the first half of the 6th century is problematic, since the theatre was then still functioning and a house of Christian worship in close proximity to the theatre implies the latter's shutdown. Hence, a dating after 616 appears more reasonable.

⁹³ V. Ruggieri, *Il golfo di Keramos: dal tardo-antico al medioevo bizantino*, Catanzaro 2003, pl. MH68c. The frescoes of the 6th-7th century are in a building complex containing a church, baptistry, bathhouse and mausoleum. The frescoes combine a linear approach with flat shapes. Cf. ibidem, pl. MH60c.

⁹⁴ Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the making*, op.cit. (n. 89), 111, fig. 202.

⁹⁵ Cf. the layer of the three full-length saints, V. Ruggieri, *La Caria*

From the insular context⁹⁶, and within the same geographical area with Chalki, the frescoes of Saint Kyrekos at Vathy in Kalymnos are of some interest. The church, part of a rebuilt Early Christian basilica, preserves a fresco layer on its north wall with half length portraits of saints, St Kyrekos (probably) identifiable among them⁹⁷. The idealised features and the Hellenistic beauty of the portraits radiating other worldly calm, date the frescoes to the second half of the 6th century.

bizantina: topografia, archeologia ed arte, Catanzaro 2005, fig. III, 125 c. See also Kappas – Kefala, “Across the Waves, Early Christian Paintings on Kalymnos and Karia”, op.cit. (n. 18), 260-262, fig. 18.14, with further literature. The emphasis on the linear rendering is combined with less stylised folds. The elongated figures with the few vertical folds suggest a dating after the end of the 7th century.

⁹⁶ The early Byzantine murals of Naxos require an integrated approach. For the most part unpublished, they cannot be compared to the painting of Asketario. The following murals are mentioned: St Isidore (6th-7th century), St John at Afikli and Taxiarches at Monoitsia (6th century), and the first layer at the Panagia Kaloritisa (6th century). At St Panteleemon at Lakkomersina the figures of Saints Panteleemon and Isidore, and that of Christ (second half of the 6th century) stand out: see Th. Konstantellou, “Οι τοιχογραφίες της αψίδας του Αγίου Παντελεήμονα στα Λακκομέρσινα Απειράνθου της Νάξου: χρονολόγηση και ένταξη στο καλλιτεχνικό και ιστορικό περιβάλλον της εποχής τους”, *11ο Επιστημονικό Συμπόσιο: Ανασκαφή και έρευνα XI. Από το ερευνητικό έργο του Τομέα Αρχαιολογίας και Ιστορίας της Τέχνης, 6-7 Απριλίου 2017. Περιλήψεις Ανακοινώσεων*, Athens 2017, 33-34. These vaulted basilicas date from the 6th century, see K. Aslanidis, *Βυζαντινή ναοδομία στη Νάξο. Η μετεξέλιξη από την παλαιοχριστιανική στη μεσοβυζαντινή αρχιτεκτονική*, Thessaloniki 2017, 23-51 and passim. Better known are the murals of the first layer at Protothroni (7th century), see N. Zias, *Νάξος*, Athens 1989, 36-37, figs 7, 8, and Panagia Drosiani (advanced 7th century), N. Drandakis, *Οι παλαιοχριστιανικές τοιχογραφίες της Παναγίας της Δροσιανής της Νάξου*, Athens 1988. N. Gioles, “Οι παλαιοχριστιανικές τοιχογραφίες της Παναγίας της Δροσιανής στη Νάξο και η εποχή τους”, *DChAE* 20 (1998), 65-70. The representation of an archangel is typical, G. Mastoropoulos, *Νάξος. Το άλλο κάλλος. Περιηγήσεις σε βυζαντινά μνημεία*, Athens w.d., fig. 27. There murals recall art familiar on the island: figures lacking volume despite the painters' efforts, retaining strong outlines, but the indifference to detail turns the faces into masks. Generally for the painting of this period see N. Gioles, “Monumental Wandmalereien fruehchristlicher Zeit in Griechenland”, *Byzantinische Malerei. Bildprogramme-Ikonographie-Stil (Symposion in Marburg vom 25.-26.6.1997)*, ed. G. Koch, Wiesbaden 2000, 73-78.

⁹⁷ Kappas – Kefala, “Across the Waves, Early Christian Paintings on Kalymnos and Karia”, op.cit. (n. 18), 258-260.

A little further away on Crete, the south pastoforium of the church of Saint Michael at Episkopi Kissamou preserves a mural of St George with a donor⁹⁸. The painting, dated generally to the 7th century, offers some insights on matters of artistic convergence and divergence. It is strongly linear, lacking perspective, with limited painting or design qualities. In another insular context, the *hagiasma* of Nicodemos near the basilica of Saint Epiphanius at Salamis on Cyprus, the fresco fragment of a bearded Christ in a Nilotic scene dates from the 6th century⁹⁹. The solemn portrait has strong affinities with Coptic art. It contrasts sharply with the mosaic of the Virgin from the church of Panaghia Kanakaria at Lythragomi (first half of the 6th century), which is far more conservative, and the greater freedom of the mosaic figures in the apse of Panagia Angeloktisti (early 7th century)¹⁰⁰.

Dating

All this shows that the debate between the original dating of the Chalki murals to the 9th-10th century, their recent attribution to Early Christian art and their assignment to the transitional period towards the Middle Byzantine period attempted here is related to the well-known difficulty of dating Coptic painting¹⁰¹. The fact that scholars working on this field have not concentrated fully on the study of stylistic evolution between key monuments has led to vague datings ranging from 550 to 700¹⁰² which are often not based on firm evidence.

The ambiguity of style and the merging of prototypes make it difficult to firmly place the frescoes of Chalki between the second half of the 7th and the first half of the 8th century. Assuming that the inclusion of the Kyriakos martyred alongside Faustus was deliberate, painting him as the young Kerykos instead, would not have been

a problem because he was familiar in the region and his prototype was ubiquitous in contemporary Coptic art. Representing Faustus as a middle-aged presbyter holding a gem-encrusted book may reflect an Alexandrian tradition, perhaps linked to the origin of the anchorites at Chalki. The dark skin tone used only for Faustus at Asketario is unlikely to be a coincidence. If the mural of Chalki does not represent a living tradition, at least it is a conscious attempt to draw from a recent past. However, if we accept some relationship with the art of Alexandria¹⁰³ it should be made clear that attempted stylistic comparisons to Coptic art are limited to only the part belonging to local folk expression in the form preserved in the chapels of Monophysite Egypt, as formal painting is unknown.

The classic approach and refinement of the composition of Asketario, the sense of volume, the balanced layout and the generally correct proportions of the bodies are visible in the figures of Christ and the archangels are combined with the awkwardness in the rendering of the turning body and technical of the angel's facial features and the general clumsiness in the drawing of the limbs. These features do not set the Asketario murals in a provincial local style. Stylistic details like the red comb brushwork on the cheeks of Emmanuel show that memories of Coptic examples, like those in Bawit, are still living.

If we were to hazard a closer association with the murals of Bawit, we should exclude those of chapel XVII, and its enthroned Pantocrator as part of a Theophany and full-length saints¹⁰⁴. These frescoes were dated before 735 by graffiti dipinti and have been correctly identified

⁹⁸ M. Andrianakis – K. Giapitsoglou, *Χριστιανικά μνημεία της Κρήτης*, Heraklion 2012, 372, 379.

⁹⁹ N. Gioles, *Η χριστιανική τέχνη στην Κύπρο*, Nicosia 2003, fig. 23.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, figs 27-29.

¹⁰¹ For datings at Bawit and Saqqara cf. E. Bolman, "Depicting the Kingdom of Heaven: Paintings and Monastic Practice in Early Byzantine Egypt", *Egypt in the Byzantine world, 300-700*, ed. R. S. Bagnall, New York 2010, 411, 421, 427.

¹⁰² See the observations of Bolman, "The Early Paintings", op.cit. (n. 61), passim.

¹⁰³ The surviving church with some fresco fragments at Karm al-Ah-bārīya in Maryut, near Abu Mina, is under the artistic influence of Alexandria (for the frescoes cf. J. Witte Orr, *Kirche und Wandmalereien am Karm al Ahbariya* [Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum. Ergänzungsband 36], Münster 2010, esp. 106-115, see for instance pls 1, 2, 8. Bonnekoh, *Die figürlichen Malereien*, op.cit. [n. 87], pl. 47, 1-2). However, the fresco fragments, too inadequate for any conclusions, could differ in style from the art of the city.

¹⁰⁴ Detached frescoes in the Coptic Museum of Cairo. H. Torp, "Il problema della decorazione originaria del Tempietto Longobardo di Cividale del Friuli", *Quaderni della Face* 18 (1959), 10, fig. 4 a, b. Further comparisons of the frescoes with those of Saint Demetrius in Thessaloniki were also attempted, ibidem, 10, fig. 5 a, b. The decoration of Christ's gospel book in Cividale is similar to that of Zachary from the chapel of Theodotus in Santa Maria Antiqua (ibidem, 18-19, fig. 11 a, b), which can be compared to that of Saint Faustus from Chalki.



as the provincial expression of the style in the Tempietto Cividale in Friuli (750-760). Comparison between chapel XVII and Chalki contrasts the rigidity of the former with the grace of the latter. Indeed, at chapel XVII the white lines highlighting the arch of the eyebrows are strong and schematic, while at Chalki they are casual and less emphatic. Such clues generally suggest a chronology for the frescoes of Chalki around 700 but not later than the first quarter of the 8th century. They also betray a painter aware of the Coptic idiom and choices. It would be interesting to know whether these traits were survivals or if, after a lengthy absence from Egypt, recollections of a painter still young when he settled at Asketario, as traces of Hellenistic style are combined with provincial simplification thus resulting in a cultural hybrid.

The paintings in the cave and the first layer in the nearby chapel (military saint) show artistic affinities despite the fragmentary state of preservation. Both appear to belong to the early period of the anchorites at Asketario. In all probability, the second layer (apostle Andrew), representing the continuation of the painting activity in the settlement, rather distant in date (9th-10th century)¹⁰⁵, although a more precise chronology is impossible due to the thick salt encrustations covering the figure of the apostle.

The historical context

The islands of the south-eastern Aegean, to which Chalki belongs, had always been a destination for people coming from the East, including Egypt. Since the early part of the first millennium B.C., and especially during the Hellenistic and Roman times, the maritime routes that connected the islands with Egypt were busy¹⁰⁶. During Late Antiquity

(5th- 6th century) transporation of the *annona* from Egypt to the rest of the empire and Constantinople placed Rhodes and surrounding islands like Chalki within an important network of ports of call¹⁰⁷. Their participation in this annual event contributed to their prosperity and economic interdependence created a climate suitable for friendly contacts and cultural ties, making them a preferred destination for people in need of refuge in times of peril. Moreover, the history of Chalki is closely connected with Rhodes across the ages¹⁰⁸.

In the disturbed period after the second half of the 7th century the Dodecanese islands were directly affected by the surrender of Alexandria to Amr ibn al-As under caliph Omar and the escape of the Byzantine navy on 12 September 642. The Arab conquest was not unchallenged: in 645 a powerful fleet left Rhodes under the command of *augustalis* Manuel the Armenian who managed to recapture Alexandria, but the Byzantines lost it again a year later. This attempt of the central government to recapture Alexandria is reflected by the increase of coin circulation on Rhodes. The defeat of the Byzantines at the battle at Nikiou in summer 646 resulted in the definite loss of Alexandria. Rhodes was also conquered by the Arabs in 673 or 674; they controlled a fort in the town and the port until 680 or 681. This interval has left a trace in the numismatic evidence through a group of locally issued imitative coins. In general, the numismatic evidence in Rhodes testifies to the fact that the military importance of Rhodes and the wider region had risen as its commercial importance diminished. The impoverished island could not support an urban population and its needs, and this resulted in the rapid decline that eventually affected the entire region¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁵ According to Sigala, “Τα Κελλιά”, op.cit. (n. 1), 157, in the early 8th century. The elongated face of the saint conveys the classicism current in the period with a style recalling the artistic achievements of the 9th and 10th century. It ought to be compared with some distinguished monumental paintings of this period, see for instance A. Wharton-Epstein, *Tokali Kilise. Tenth-Century Metropolitan Art in Byzantine Cappadocia*, Washington, D.C. 1986, esp. the chapter “The Frescoes of the New Church and the Art of Constantinople”, 39-44.

¹⁰⁶ D. Bosnakis, “Οι αιγυπτιακές θεότητες στη Ρόδο και την Κω από τους ελληνιστικούς χρόνους μέχρι και τη ρωμαιοκρατία”, *AD* 49-50 (1994-1995), Meletes, Athens 1998, 43-74; Ch. Fantaou-

tsaki, *Οι αιγυπτιακές θεότητες στη Ρόδο κατά την ελληνιστική και ρωμαϊκή περίοδο: αρχαιολογικά τεκμήρια και επιγραφικές μαρτυρίες* (unpublished M.A. thesis), University of the Aegean, Department of Mediterranean Studies, Rhodes 2017.

¹⁰⁷ See for example P. Papanikolaou, “Αποτυπώσεις της εξουσίας. Εικονογραφία και προσωπογραφία επάρχων σε ενοφράγιστους πρωτοβυζαντινούς αμφορείς”, *σοφία ἄδολος. Τιμητικός τόμος για τον Ιωάννη Χρ. Παπαχριστοδοπούλου*, Rhodes 2014, 171-194.

¹⁰⁸ K. Bairami – Ch. Giakoumaki, “Halki. An Historical and Archaeological Introduction”, *Islands Off the Beaten Track. An Archaeological Journey to the Greek Islands of Kastellorizo, Symi, Halki, Tilos, and Nisyros* (exhibition catalogue), eds N. Stambolidis – G. Tasoulas – M. Filemonos-Tsopotou, Athens 2011, 168-183.

¹⁰⁹ A.-M. Kasdagli, *Coins in Rhodes. From the Monetary Reform*



The written sources of the later 7th century relate that, after the Arab conquest of Egypt in 642,¹¹⁰ the remnants of the Byzantine army and large part of the population embarked from Alexandria for Constantinople¹¹¹. In the first two centuries of Islamic rule the Egyptian church declined, causing part of the population, anyway bred in the tradition of anachoresis¹¹² as taught by the great Egyptian leaders of monasticism¹¹³, to leave, a phenomenon that indeed did not become widespread. At the same time, pressure on the Christian population by the Church and the Islamic authorities led to the Islamization of part of the Coptic community¹¹⁴. The second and heaviest¹¹⁵ wave of refugees occurred in the early 8th cen-

tury due to economic reasons as monasteries declined¹¹⁶.

This brief review of the historic context of the period demonstrates that from the mid of 7th century there were many occasions which might trigger fleeing and the relocation of Egyptians elsewhere. One or more migrants of Asketario, perhaps the patron/ settler of the place and/or the painter, since the two were not necessarily the same, followed familiar routes from Alexandria to Constantinople and other places. It is true that a single individual, such as the painter, could have suggested an overall programme of decoration with no input by the occupant of the space. In any case, from the mid-7th and for a large part of the 8th century, it is permissible to visualize that a migratory flow continued to safer destinations, even in reduced numbers. In this context, Chalki may have accepted a relocation of this kind far from its settlements. Thus it is proposed, as a working hypothesis, that the island received some refugees who left their imprint at distant Asketario. It is difficult, however, to establish more precisely the date of such an arrival from Egypt in the period of turmoil between the 7th and the 8th century¹¹⁷.

Views involving the movement of people from Egypt to the Greek Lands and the concomitant dissemination of ideas are not new. For instance, the iconography in the apse of Latomou Monastery has been linked to Egyptian monks of the 5th-6th century¹¹⁸. Also, the spread throughout the empire of the Coptic apse subject of Pantocrator in glory is attributed to the relocation of Egyptian monks¹¹⁹. Indeed, the term *eastern style*¹²⁰ has been

of Anastasius I until the Ottoman Conquest (498-1522), Oxford 2018, 33-40.

¹¹⁰ For a review of the doctrinal divide and nomenclature of the various constituents see M. S. A. Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt. Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest*, London – New York 2014, 222-225, ch. 9. L. Török, *Transfigurations of Hellenism. Aspects of Late Antique Art in Egypt AD 250-700*, Leiden – Boston 2005, 10-15. P. M. Sijpesteijn, “The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Beginning of Muslim Rule”, *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300-700*, ed. R. S. Bagnall, Cambridge 2010, 440-443.

¹¹¹ R. H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John (ca. 690 A.D.) coptic bishop of Nikiu. Being a history of Egypt before and during the Arab conquest*, transl. from H. Zotenberg’s edition of the Ethiopic version with an introduction critical and linguistic notes and an index of names, Amsterdam 1981 (reprint of the edition London 1916), 120.17-21, 193-194; Sijpesteijn, “The Arab Conquest of Egypt” op.cit. (n. 110), 441, particularly about Alexandria.

¹¹² As noted when the diyarlah (church-rate) was imposed by the Arabs in 705: “Yet the habit of running away to escape from tax was well-established in Egypt from Hellenistic times at least (it is even the original meaning of the term anachōrēsis made famous by the ascetic movement)”, see A. Papaconstantinou, “Administering the Early Islamic Empire: Insights from the Papyri”, *Money, Power and Politics in Early Islamic Syria. A review of Current Debates*, ed. John Haldon, Farnham 2010, 60.

¹¹³ Wipszycka-Bravo, “Le monachisme”, op.cit. (n. 38), 36-37, observes that the Egyptian monks travelled much more than has been suggested.

¹¹⁴ A. Papaconstantinou, “Theia oikonomia. Les actes thébains de donation d’enfants ou la gestion monastique de la pénurie”, *Mélanges Gilbert Dagron*, Paris 2002, 526. C. M. Carrasco, “Al Muqawqas and the Islamic Conquest of Egypt. A New Proposal of Interpretation”, *Graeco Arabica* XII (2017), 477-501.

¹¹⁵ The Persian conquest drove refugees towards the West, while the Arab conquest towards Asia Minor, P. Theodoropoulos, “The Migration of Syrian and Palestinian Populations in the 7th Centu-

ry. Movement of Individuals and Groups in the Mediterranean”, *Migration Histories of the Medieval Afroeurasian Transition Zone. Aspects of Mobility between Africa, Asia and Europe 300-1500 C. E.*, eds J. Preiser-Kapeller – L. Reinfandt – Y. Stouraitis, Leiden – Boston 2020, 267. It should be recalled here that Asia Minor had always served as a hinterland of the Dodecanese islands.

¹¹⁶ E. Wipszycka-Bravo, *Les ressources et les activités économiques des églises en Egypte du IV-VIII s.*, Brussels 1972, 91-92, chapter III.

¹¹⁷ Detailed account of the events in A. J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the last thirty years of the Roman Dominion*, Oxford 1902, particularly 65.

¹¹⁸ N. Gioles, “Ἀγιολογικὸ καί εἰκόνα. Ἡ περίπτωση τοῦ ψηφιδωτοῦ τῆς Μονῆς Λατόμου στή Θεσσαλονίκη”, *EEBS* 52 (2006), 226; ibidem 219, and note 1, has more literature on the subject of Coptic influences in the iconography of Asia Minor.

¹¹⁹ C. Ihm, *Die Programme der christlichen Apsismalerei: vom 4. Jahrhundert, bis zum Mitte des 8. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart 1992, passim.

¹²⁰ Observations of Th. Konstantellou, *Η ζωγραφική των μονα-*



used to describe the aesthetic preferences of Egypt and Syria, which often reflect general perceptions.

Conclusions

The dating of the Asketario frescoes is not an easy task, even when iconographic choices and the historic context are taken into account. The cave and the first layer of the chapel should, nevertheless, be dated at least a century later than previously thought, i.e. in the second half of the 7th, if not the first decades of the 8th century. The second layer belongs, in all probability, to the classicist movement of the 9th-10th centuries.

No indications have been traced to connections with Rhodes – Ravenna or Western imperial lands in general. Instead, prototypes and influences have to be sought in a different geographical area, that of Egypt. Thus, the art of the painter of the Asketario cave and the first layer of the chapel is presumably drawn from the memories of his homeland. To this direction points the exceptionally rare representation of St Faustus, martyred in Alexandria alongside St Kyriakos, according to the *Syaxanarium* and whose joint memory is celebrated on 6 September. Their paired presence at Asketario is probably justified since we have seen that in Egyptian texts and painting Kerykos and Kyriakos are often merges, an osmosis occurring in the wider region in Early Byzantine times. St Kerykos/Kyriakos was formally and in fact present in the Coptic calendar. At the same time, the child Kyrekos at Asketario represents a significant endeavour to incorporate cultic elements from the Aegean that received the exiles, and contact with local cults¹²¹. The focus of the saint's

cult in the Rhodian Peraia enabled the dissemination of his cult to the neighbouring islands, including Chalki.

The establishment of anchorites at the Asketario of Chalki, should perhaps be associated first with successive waves of refugees after the final loss of Alexandria to the Arabs in 654, within a century of general retreat of the empire at all fronts. As the iconographic choices under consideration mark the effort to reproduce familiar figures of the Coptic tradition, such as saints venerated in Alexandria¹²² and its religious identity, have a key part in the understanding of these iconographic choices. Thus, although the representation of the two saints is not directly supported by texts or other monuments, it is assumed here that the monks at Asketario came most probably from Alexandria. It is also true that despite stylistic resemblances, the painting examined is not a typical example of the Coptic artistic idiom. As a hybrid example, they belong to the stylistic and iconographic traditions of the eastern Mediterranean, a part of the Mediterranean artistic commonwealth. Could we conceive some of the anchorites as refugees, formerly monks in Egypt? The regular contacts between the island and Egypt might explain the presence of travellers during Late Antiquity, but this could not be said of the dangerous times after the Islamic conquest, that is of the 7th-8th centuries proposed here. Are connections to Alexandrian cycles likely? Could the art the Asketario reflect Alexandrian trends? The quality, traditions and complexity of the art practiced in the second most important city of the empire is mostly unknown¹²³. Leaving

στηριών στο Wadi-Natrun της Κάτω Αιγύπτου. Συμβολή στη μελέτη της χριστιανικής ζωγραφικής της Αιγύπτου (unpublished M.A. thesis), Athens 2010, 114 and passim.

¹²¹ For issues concerning cult transfers as mechanisms of transformation or adaptation in religious traditions cf. E. Rizos, "Martyrs from the North-Western Balkans in the Byzantine Ecclesiastical Tradition: Patterns and Mechanisms of Cult Transfer", *Late Roman, Early Christian, Early Byzantine as Categories in Historical-Archaeological Research on the Middle Danube, Akten des 27. Internationalen Symposiums der Grundprobleme der frühgeschichtlichen Entwicklungsmittleren Donauraum*, Ruma, 4-7.11.2015, eds I. Bugarski – O. Heinrich-Tamáska – V. Ivanišević – D. Syrbe, Remshalden 2016, 195-214 and esp. 199-204, where the

possibility of an hagiographic merging of martyr deacon Demetrius from Sirmium with that of Saint Demetrius of Thessaloniki is discussed, a fact already noted by J.-M. Spieser, "Le culte de Saint Démétrius à Thessalonique", *Des dieux civiques aux saints patrons (IVe-VIIe siècle)*, eds J.-P. Caillet et al., Paris 2015, 278.

¹²² For conditions in Alexandria during the period of the Arab invasion, see A. Papaconstantinou, "What Remains Behind: Hellenism and Romanitas in Christian Egypt after the Arab Conquest", *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, eds H. Cotton – R. Hoyland – J. Price – D. Wasserstein, Cambridge 2009, 447-450; Z. Kiss, "Alexandria in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries", *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300-700*, ed. R. S. Bagnall, Cambridge 2010, 187-206.

¹²³ See the conclusions of Török, *Transfigurations of Hellenism*, op.cit. (n. 110), 344-350. See also McKenzie, *The architecture of Alexandria and Egypt*, op.cit. (n. 31), passim.



aside works of the minor arts for which the local workshops were renowned¹²⁴, for works like the exquisite 6th-century illustrated Cotton manuscript of Genesis¹²⁵, attribution to Alexandria is supposed but not proven. Its miniatures combine iconographic elements related to Coptic art with Hellenistic tradition. Could the frescoes of Chalki be considered a point of reference for the evaluation of Alexandrian monumental art? Firm conclusions are impossible but the observations of Kitzinger on the impressionistic tendencies in 8th and 9th century works¹²⁶ are still valid.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the epithet *+EMA-NOYHA* in the depiction of Christ in Asketario like in the icon of Christ enthroned from the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, seems to be one of the earliest mentions of Christ's name in pictorial representation. This appears probably due to ideas developed by Pseudo-Dionysius. Dionysius' works were very popular among the Egyptian monastic communities especially in the circle of John Philoponus a theologian from Alexandria¹²⁷.

The suggested provenance of certain anchorites from Alexandria does not exclude their earlier connection to a monastic environment, since it is known that Egyptian urban centres like Alexandria and its suburbs had quite a few¹²⁸. Nevertheless, it is not possible to associate these individuals with anti-Chalcedonian tendencies; or

whether their departure was a result of the final conquest of Alexandria by the Arabs in 646, if they left during persecution or religious division, or for economic reasons when the Arabs began to tax monasteries in the 8th century. The name Kellia given to the locality on Chalki might be an echo of the well-known monastic community near Alexandria¹²⁹ that started to decline in the early 7th and was abandoned in the 8th century. Also, the case of Asketario can only provide indications for the role of monasticism in the Aegean islands and the wider region¹³⁰. It is unknown for how long this distant and precipitous site was occupied. Only archaeological excavation and the careful exploration of the area could give us some answers.

ADDENDUM

I would like to thank dear colleague Irina Oretskaia for drawing my attention to the coptic papyrus scroll with the Alexandrian World Chronicle preserved in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts (ca. 700). The fragments of its iconography present similarities with the murals of Asketario: A. Bauer – J. Strzygowski (eds), *Eine alexandrinische Weltchronik: Text und Miniaturen des griechischen Papyrus der Sammlung W. Goleniščev*, Vienna 1905.

¹²⁴ Cf. J. Kollwitz, "Alexandrische Elfenbeine, in Christendom am Nil", *Internationale Arbeitstagung zur Ausstellung Koptische Kunst*, Recklinghausen 1964, 207-220.

¹²⁵ For the manuscript see K. Weitzmann – H. L. Kessler, *The Cotton Genesis. Illustrations in the Manuscripts of the Septuagint*, I, Princeton 1986. J. Lowden, "Concerning the Cotton Genesis and Other Illustrated Manuscripts of Genesis", *Gesta* 31 (1992), 40-53. Interpretations for the copying of earlier Alexandrian prototypes in illustrated manuscripts, have also been expressed for miniatures of Dioscorides (cod. Med. Gr. 1, Περὶ ὕλης ἱατρικῆς) in Vienna.

¹²⁶ Kitzinger, *H βυζαντινὴ τέχνη ἐν τῷ γενέσθαι*, op.cit. (n. 89), 163-164.

¹²⁷ See N. Teteriatnikov, "Absence of *nomina sacra* in post-iconoclastic images of Christ and the Virgin. Mosaics of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople", *The Eloquence of Art. Essays in Honour of Henry Maguire*, eds A. Olsen Lam – R. Schroeder (Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies) London 2020, 376-377.

¹²⁸ Wipszycka-Bravo, "Le monachisme", op.cit. (n. 38), 31. Cf. also J. H. Goehring, "Monasticism in Byzantine Egypt: Continuity and Memory", *Egypt in the Byzantine World 300-700*, ed. R. S. Bagnall, Cambridge 2010, 390-407.

¹²⁹ For Kellia, *Les Kellia. Ermitages coptes en Basse-Égypte*, eds Y. Mottier – N. Bosson, Geneva 1989.

¹³⁰ Generally on monasticism during the Early Byzantine period, B. Caseau, "Les moines et les communautés monastiques durant l'Antiquité chrétienne", *Histoire générale du christianisme*, 1, *Des origines au XVe siècle*, dir. J.-R. Armogathe – P. Montaubin – M.-Y. Perrin, Paris 2010, 217-230. For the rise of monastic institutions and the ecclesiastical situation in the 6th century. E. Rizos, "Sixth-Century Asia Minor through the Lens of Hagiography: Ecclesiastical Power and Institutions in City and Countryside", *Asia Minor in the Long Sixth Century. Current Research and Future Directions*, eds I. Jacobs – H. Elton, Oxford 2019, 45-61, esp. 49-53.

Illustration credits

Figs 1-5, 7, 8, 14: Ephorate of Antiquities of the Dodecanese, photographer Nikos Kasseris, Sept. 1991. Figs 6, 10, 11, 13, 16, 17: Zibawi, *Images*, op.cit. (n. 43), figs 124, 93, 90, 96, 128, 127. Figs 9, 12, 18: *Byzantium and Islam*, op.cit. (n. 53), no. 52A on p. 84-85, fig. 22, no. 29 on p. 57-58. Fig. 15: Bolman (ed.), *Monastic Visions*, op.cit. (n. 61), fig. 3.5.



Αγγελική Κατσιώτη

ΜΕ ΤΟ ΒΛΕΜΜΑ ΠΕΡΑΝ ΤΩΝ ΕΓΚΟΣΜΙΩΝ: ΑΝΑΘΕΩΡΗΣΗ ΤΩΝ ΤΟΙΧΟΓΡΑΦΙΩΝ ΣΤΟ ΑΣΚΗΤΑΡΙΟ ΤΗΣ ΧΑΛΚΗΣ ΔΩΔΕΚΑΝΗΣΟΥ

Στη γλυκιά ανάμνηση της μαμάς μου

Στη Χάλκη, ένα νησί στα νότια της Ρόδου, σε απομακρυσμένη περιοχή από τον οικισμό, σχεδόν αθέατη από την θάλασσα, βρίσκεται το Ασκηταριό, στη θέση Κελλιά. Η ονομασία υποδηλώνει ησυχαστήριο αναχωρητών και περιλαμβάνει λατρευτικό χώρο σε σπήλαιο και, σε χαμηλότερο επίπεδο, ναΐσκο σε βραχώδες κοίλωμα με κτιστές τις εξωτερικές πλευρές. Η κατοίκηση πιθανόν να εκτεινόταν στο υπόλοιπο τμήμα του σπηλαίου, που χωρίζεται με χαμηλό τοίχιο από το ιερό.

Οι τοιχογραφίες του Ασκηταριού αποτέλεσαν θέμα μελέτης, σύμφωνα με την οποία η, κατά την πρώτη εκτίμηση, αρχική χρονολόγησή τους στον 9ο-10ο αιώνα αναθεωρήθηκε. Επανερχόμενοι με την παρούσα δημοσίευση στο μνημείο και με αφορμή νέα στοιχεία για τις εικονογραφικές επιλογές, θα επιχειρηθεί η τεχνολογική αποτίμησή τους, σε συνδυασμό με τα ιστορικά γεγονότα της εποχής.

Στον ναΐσκο, από τα λιγοστά υπολείμματα της ζωγραφικής, εντοπίζονται δύο επάλληλα στρώματα χαμηλά, στη νοτιοανατολική γωνία του ιερού. Το παλαιότερο, σφυροκοπημένο και ημιεξίτηλο, περιλαμβάνει ολόσωμο ακέφαλο στρατιωτικό άγιο που κρατά δόρυ και φορά ζωσμένο στη μέση χιτώνα, διακοσμημένο με κυκλικά μαργαριτοκόσμητα σχέδια (Εικ. 1). Σε επόμενο στρώμα ανήκει η πολύ φθαρμένη κεφαλή, με την ακατάστατη «φλογώδη» κόμη, του αρχικά ολόσωμου αποστόλου Ανδρέα (ΑΝΔΡΕΑC), μέσα σε τρίχρωμο πλαίσιο και σε κόκκινο κάμπο, στην κάτω ζώνη του μετώπου της αψίδας (Εικ. 2).

Στην κοιλότητα της σπηλιάς διατηρείται με φθορές ένα ενιαίο στρώμα ζωγραφικής με τέσσερις από τις αρχικά περισσότερες μορφές (Εικ. 3). Στο κέντρο της σύνθεσης ο Χριστός (+ΕΜΑΝΟΥΗΛ), σε νεαρή ηλικία, αγένειος, με σγουρά μαλλιά που σχηματίζουν βουστρύχους, ευλογεί με υψωμένο το χέρι και κρατεί σταυροφόρο ράβδο, διακριτικό θριάμβου. Δορυφορείται από δύο αρχαγγέλους, από τους οποίους σώζεται ο εξ ευωνύμων (+ΜΙΧΑΗΛ) με σγουρά ξανθά μαλλιά, γυρισμένος προς

τον Χριστό, ενώ από τον ([Γ]ΑΒΡΙΗΛ) σώζεται τμήμα του φωτοστεφάνου και το αγωνύμιο. Μετά τον Μιχαήλ σώζονται στην άκρη, σε μικρότερη κλίμακα, ο νεαρός σγουρομάλλης [ΚΗ]ΡΙΚΟC που κρατεί το στεφάνι του μάρτυρα, και ο +ΑΓΙΟC ΦΑΟΥCΤ., γενειοφόρος πρεσβύτερος, με διάλιθο βιβλίο (Εικ. 4).

Τα στοιχεία της σύνθεσης, και συγκεκριμένα η επιλογή των δύο αγίων, ίσως αποτελούν κλειδιά για την προέλευση και τις πηγές των τοιχογραφιών αυτών. Ειδικότερα, εκκρεμεί η ταύτιση του αγίου Φαύστου, ο οποίος παρουσιάζει χαρακτηριστικά που παραπέμπουν σαφώς σε πρεσβύτερο ώριμης ηλικίας, ενώ δεν προέκυψε κάποια ερμηνεία για την επιλογή της απεικόνισής του από κοινού με τον Κήρυκο, δύο αγίων που φαινομενικά τίποτε δεν τους ενώνει. Για την ερμηνεία και συνεπακόλουθα την προέλευση της ζωγραφικής αυτής που αποτελεί *unicum* στον ευρύτερο γεωγραφικό χώρο, πιθανολογήθηκε ότι η εικονογράφηση στο Ασκηταριό μαρτυρεί κάποια εξάρτηση από το αιγυπτιακό εορτολόγιο. Πρόκειται πιθανώς για μια εξαιρετικά σπάνια απεικόνιση του πρεσβυτέρου Φαύστου, που μαρτύρησε στην Αλεξάνδρεια. Συμμάρτυρας του αγίου υπήρξε ο άγιος Κυριακός, όπως αναφέρεται στο Συναξάριο της Κωνσταντινούπολης, σύμφωνα με το οποίο η μνήμη αμφοτέρων εορτάζεται την 6η Σεπτεμβρίου. Η συναπεικόνισή τους στο Ασκηταριό μπορεί να δικαιολογηθεί, καθώς σε κείμενα και απεικονίσεις στην Αίγυπτο είναι συχνός ο συμφυρμός των αγίων Κηρύκου και Κυριακού, ώσμως που απαντά στην ευρύτερη περιοχή κατά την πρωτοβυζαντινή εποχή. Ο άγιος Κήρυκος/Κυριακός ήταν συχνός στο κοπτικό εορτολόγιο. Στο Ασκηταριό, λαμβάνοντας υπόψη την απεικόνιση του παιδιού Κηρύκου, παρατηρείται μια ουσιαστική προσπάθεια υιοθέτησης λατρευτικών στοιχείων από την περιοχή του Αιγαίου, που τους υποδέχτηκε, καθώς και επαφή με τις κυρίαρχες τοπικές λατρείες. Ένα από τα κέντρα, άλλωστε, της λατρείας του Κηρύκου στη Ροδιακή Περαία φαίνεται



ότι είχε πρωτεύοντα ρόλο στη διάδοση της λατρείας του αγίου στα γειτονικά νησιά όπως η Χάλκη.

Τα διαφορούμενα αυτά τεχνοτροπικά στοιχεία και ο συγκεκριασμός τους δυσχεραίνουν μια συγκεκριμένη τοποθέτηση των τοιχογραφιών της Χάλκης. Η ζωγραφική της σπηλαιώδους κοιλότητας και του πρώτου στρώματος του ναΐσκου πρέπει να χρονολογηθεί στο δεύτερο μισό του 7ου, αν όχι στις πρώτες δεκαετίες του 8ου αιώνα, από ζωγράφο με κάποια γνώση του κοπτικού ιδιώματος. Το δεύτερο στρώμα του ναΐσκου θα μπορούσε να τοποθετηθεί στον 9ο-10ο αιώνα και η παρουσία του αγίου Ανδρέα ίσως μαρτυρεί την επιρροή της Κωνσταντινούπολης.

Τα υφολογικά στοιχεία του ζωγράφου, όπως εκφράζονται με την αυστηρή μετωπικότητα των Φαύστου και Κηρύκου, συνδυάζονται με νεωτερικά στοιχεία, όπως η κινημένη στάση των κεντρικών μορφών, του Εμμανουήλ και του αγγέλου, παρά την αδέξια στροφή του τελευταίου, και με την πτυχολογία που αναδιπλώνεται προσθέτοντας όγκο (Εικ. 5). Η δισδιάστατη ανάπτυξη των δύο μαρτύρων συμπράττει με την πλαστικότητα, την τρισδιάστατη προοπτική, την εξιδανίκευση των άλλων δύο μορφών και την κατά το δυνατόν αρμονική σύνδεσή τους με τον χώρο. Η αντιμετώπιση αυτή, που αντιπροσωπεύει κατά κάποιο τρόπο την αμφιταλάντευση ανάμεσα στο χριστιανικό ιδεώδες και την ελληνορωμαϊκή αρχαιότητα, δεν φαίνεται να είναι άσχετη με τη μεταβατική εποχή, στην οποία υποστηρίζουμε ότι ανήκουν οι τοιχογραφίες. Η τάση για απλοποίηση και αφαίρεση, όπως εκφράζεται στους μετωπικούς αγίους Φαύστο και Κήρυκο, μορφές ιερατικά απαθείς, εμψυχωμένες από εσωτερική δύναμη, θυμίζουν φορητές εικόνες και ανακαλούν τις τοπικές ιδιαιτερότητες της κοπτικής ζωγραφικής. Ο συγκεκριασμός στοιχείων από την πρωτοβυζαντινή περίοδο, σε συνδυασμό με νεωτερικά στοιχεία, είναι συνηθισμένος, συνιστά δείγμα μεταβατικής εποχής και χαρακτηρίζει ακόμα και κορυφαία μνημεία.

Η εγκατάσταση αναχωρητών στο Ασκηταριό της Χάλκης ίσως πρέπει να συνδεθεί με διαδοχικά προσφυγικά ρεύματα, μετά την οριστική απώλεια της Αιγύπτου από τους Άραβες το 654, σε έναν αιώνα γενικευμένης υποχώρησης σε όλα τα μέτωπα της βυζαντινής αυτοκρατορίας. Καθώς οι εικονογραφικές επιλογές που προαναφέρθηκαν, σηματοδοτούν την προσπάθεια αναπαραγωγής οικείων μορφών από την κοπτική παράδοση, τότε, στην περίπτωση της αποδοχής της υπόθεσής μας για την προέλευση των ασκητών της Χάλκης από την Αίγυπτο,

η απεικόνιση αγίων που λατρεύονταν στην Αλεξάνδρεια και αποτελούσαν μέρος της εκκλησιαστικής ταυτότητας της πόλης, έχει καίρια θέση για την κατανόηση των εικονογραφικών αυτών επιλογών. Όμως, παρά τις τεχνοτροπικές ομοιότητες, η ζωγραφική του Ασκηταριού δεν αποτελεί τυπικό δείγμα του κοπτικού καλλιτεχνικού ιδιώματος. Θα μπορούσαμε άραγε να υποθέσουμε ότι πρόκειται περί προσφύγων, οι οποίοι υπήρξαν επίσης μοναχοί στην Αίγυπτο; Μπορούν να θεωρηθούν πιθανοί κάποιοι δεσμοί τους με εκκλησιαστικούς κύκλους της Αλεξάνδρειας; Η τέχνη που αντιπροσωπεύουν θα ήταν δυνατόν να αντανακλά αλεξανδρινές τάσεις; Η ποιότητα, οι παραδόσεις και η πολυπλοκότητα της τέχνης που ασκείτο στη δεύτερη σημαντικότερη πόλη της αυτοκρατορίας το ίδιο χρονικό διάστημα, και της ζωγραφικής της παράδοσης είναι σε μεγάλο βαθμό άγνωστη. Θα ήταν δυνατό οι τοιχογραφίες της Χάλκης να θεωρηθούν σημαντικό κριτήριο για την αποτίμηση της αλεξανδρινής μνημειακής ζωγραφικής;

Η υποτιθέμενη προέλευση των αναχωρητών από εκεί δεν αποκλείει τη σύνδεσή τους με μοναστικό περιβάλλον, καθώς είναι γνωστό ότι στα αστικά κέντρα, όπως αυτό της Αλεξάνδρειας, αλλά και στα περὶχωρά της δεν έλειπαν οι μονές. Παρά ταύτα, δεν είναι δυνατή η συσχέτισή τους με αντιχαλκηδονιακές αντιλήψεις, ούτε το κατά πόσον η φυγή τους υπήρξε αποτέλεσμα της οριστικής κατάληψης της πόλης από τους Άραβες το 646 ή αν έφυγαν αργότερα, υπό το κράτος διωγμών ή θρησκευτικής διαφοροποίησης, ή ακόμα για οικονομικούς λόγους, όταν εισήχθη στον 8ο αιώνα η φορολόγηση των μοναστηριακών καθιδρυμάτων από τους Άραβες. Η ονομασία της θέσης στη Χάλκη, Κελλιά, θα μπορούσε ενδεχομένως να ανακαλεί τη γνωστή μοναστική κοινότητα σε όμορη με την Αλεξάνδρεια θέση, η οποία παρήκμασε από τις αρχές του 7ου αιώνα και εγκαταλείφθηκε τον 8ο. Ακόμα, με αφορμή το Ασκηταριό, ενδεικτικά και μόνο συμπεράσματα μπορούν να εξαχθούν για τον ρόλο του μοναχισμού στα νησιά του Αιγαίου και στην ευρύτερη περιοχή. Είναι άγνωστο πόσο διήρκεσε η κατοίκηση στην απόρημη αυτή θέση. Μόνο η ανασκαφή και η προσεκτική διερεύνηση του χώρου θα μπορούσε να δώσει περισσότερες απαντήσεις.

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