Δομήνικου Θεοτοκόπουλου: η βάπτιση του Χριστού. Το πρόσφατο απόκτημα του δήμου Ηρακλείου

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Domenikos Theotokopoulos, The Baptism of Christ. A Recent Acquisition of the Municipality of Heraklion, Crete

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DOMENIKOS THEOTOKOPOULOS, THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST.  
A RECENT ACQUISITION OF THE MUNICIPALITY  
OF HERAKLION, CRETE*

A previously unknown painting (Fig. 1) by Domenikos Theotokopoulos (El Greco), which appeared at auction at Christie’s, London in early December 2004 and was acquired by the Municipality of Heraklion, Crete, has afforded us a welcome opportunity of contributing to this volume dedicated to the memory of George Galavaris. In doing so, it has also given us a chance to honour the memory of a colleague and friend, who greatly admired El Greco and dedicated a very important study to him1. The invitation by the Municipality of Heraklion to authenticate this painting allowed us to spend long hours holding it, looking at it and studying it. What follows here is our first effort to put on paper some of our thoughts concerning this panel. It is therefore a preliminary study of a painting to which, after it has been cleaned by the Conservation Department of the Benaki Museum, Athens, we intend to return. The technical investigation and pigment analysis which will be conducted during the process of cleaning will allow us to understand more clearly and penetrate more deeply into this very important work of art.

The discovery of an unknown painting by El Greco is an international event. In the case of the Baptism of Christ it is also one of those totally unexpected events which make the world of art so exciting. According to the Christie’s Press release of 20 October 2004 the painting, found in an envelope during a routine valuation in Spain, had been in the ownership of a Spanish family since the mid-nineteenth century. The importance of the painting was instantly recognized2. The scene depicted on the panel is the Baptism of Christ. St John the Baptist is standing beneath a tree on the left bank of the river Jordan. He is wearing a red robe with white highlights. The upper part of his body and his right leg are left uncovered. St John, at the moment of baptising him, is pouring water over Christ’s head from a shell in his left hand and holding a staff with a cross at the top in his right. Christ, turned to the left, is standing in the waters of the river and is extending both his arms towards the Baptist. He is wearing a light blue loincloth with golden floral decorations and fringes. The Holy Spirit, in the form of a white dove, is descending from the sky above towards the head of Christ. On the right-hand bank of the river three winged angels, in the guise of young girls, are standing behind Christ. The angel to the right is holding a red towel, with which to dry Christ’s body, and is turned away from the viewer. The middle angel

* We would like to express our deepest thanks to the Municipality of Heraklion and to its Mayor Mr Yannis Kourakis, who entrusted us with the authentication and publication of the panel. We would also like to thank Prof Nano Chatzidaki, of the University of Ioannina, and Dr Xavier Bray, assistant curator at the National Gallery, London, for discussing with us some of the issues raised in this text. We very much enjoyed exchanging our views with Mr John Craxton, painter and academician at Royal Academy, London. Mr Jack Wakefield of Christie’s London was very helpful during the authentication of the panel. He also provided us with the Press release and the condition’s report of the panel.


2 We are citing from the Press release: “Paul Raison, Director and Head of Old Master Pictures at Christie’s London, and Pablo Melendo, Director of Fine Art at Christie’s Spain, discovered the piece while carrying out a routine valuation in Spain. To discover a painting of such beauty and importance came as a complete surprise; we simply hadn’t expected such a find. This is a wonderful, vibrant work that has an impact that goes well beyond its modest dimensions. This painting originates from a particularly exciting moment in El Greco’s career, when the artist was still developing what became his distinctive style.” Part of this information was also included in the auction catalogue, Old Master Pictures, Christie’s, London, Wednesday 8 December 2004, lot 91, 162, 164.
Fig. 1. Municipality of Heraklion, Crete. Domenikos Theotokopoulos, The Baptism of Christ.
is looking towards the angel on the right. The left angel is looking towards Christ’s back and is isolated from the other two. On the more distant left bank of the river we can see a group of figures and a city. The trees on each side of the composition have thick foliage, both originally truncated at the top, which is now repainted where the panel has been extended. The panel is currently rectangular in format, measuring 23.60 cm in height and 18.00 cm in width. However this was not apparently its original form, since it has been embedded into a wooden panel which is 0.07 cm thick. The wooden support on which the painting was executed is 0.02 cm thick, but most likely this has been sliced vertically, and is therefore thinner than when it was first painted and has, consequently, lost its original back. It appears, therefore, that the panel may have been thicker and may have had another painting on the other side. It is not possible at present to see this side of the panel as it is covered by the secondary rectangular panel. The painting has been executed in a mixed medium (egg-tempera and oil) on wood. Its condition is good, but at present some colours are muted by dirt and varnish, and the surface is chipped in a few places. There are some cracks in the wood, and slight damage has been caused by a hook which must once have been inserted at the top of the panel in the centre, no doubt after its alteration into a rectangular panel. There must have been some over-painting on the right side along the two vertical cracks caused when the wood was sliced vertically. Although the painting is now rectangular in shape, it is clear that an alteration has been made in the upper part and that the composition was once arched at the top. At a later date the panel was embedded in the rectangular base and the painting on each side of the arch belongs also to a later date, one presumably contemporary with the alteration. The importance of recognising this alteration and of understanding that the painting was originally arch-shaped is that we may deduce from this that originally the panel formed part of a triptych. Something which is confirmed by the marks left by two hinges, themselves no longer extant, on the left side of the panel. The reasonable conclusion is that this scene was the right wing of a triptych (Fig. 4). An example of this format is offered by the well-known triptych, which bears the signature ΧΕΙΡ ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΥ (Hand of Domenikos) and belonging to the Galleria Estense of Modena in Italy (Fig. 2), which is believed to have been painted by Domenikos

3 Ms. Sarah Walden, conservator of paintings, has conducted a condition’s report for Christie’s, London. We want to thank her for having allowed us to use the information included in it. Here follows what it is stated in it: “This very thin panel, with a domed top and integrated side wings, has presumably been thinned and now has an equally thin backing panel, probably a century or more old. There is some extinct worm damage in this backing but no reason to think that this has affected the original wood. Various very old cracks appear to have been completely stabilized long ago by the addition of this backing. Very old minor flaking can be seen in some places, now long inactive. There is no structural problem with the paint layers, neither with the panel and support. The old cracks stem from the base, with one vertical crack from the base up to the spandrel on the right, one slightly diagonal a little more towards the centre from the right base up through the central angel into the tree behind. Another is close to the left edge rising above two inches. The central top of the domed curve has been knocked and lost flakes with some small cracks, and there is an equivalent knock at the centre of the base edge, with other minor knocks along the centre of that edge and some retouching. The side edges are knocked and there is some retouching down the left edge. The old cracks have been retouched rather broadly and roughly: down the right crack, on the horizon and in the angel’s skirt, on the more diagonal crack, quite narrowly but with rather wider touches on the drapery. The base edge has some retouching in the centre and rather older to centre left. In the sky the blue at the top has been heavily strengthened, with the underlying slightly darker, browner sky still visible in spaces. The same generation of over-paint can be seen on the streaks of blue in the middle of the sky and just below the dove, where lighter sky has been reinforced with the blue. The original bluish light behind the heads of the angels appears to have partially flaked long ago and the ground is visible also in the redder cloud above. There are some iconoclastic (sic!) scratches across the central juncture of the two figures, with some damage to the far side of the face of Christ. There are various minor scrapes elsewhere, with little nicks in the paint and minute flakes here and there in the figures and throughout. There are drifts of old discoloured varnish. However the essential brushwork is undisturbed even in the minutiae of the distance and the modeling of the heads and drapery. The heads of the angels, in particular the reworked head of the angel closest to Christ, are beautifully intact, despite the vertical crack through the central angel. The delicate area around the feet of Christ in the water for example is perfectly preserved and despite the occasional accidental damage or flaking over time this painting has escaped rubbing and wear from radical restoration. Even the vegetation near the base and towards the left edge and in the trees is remarkably well preserved, under the surface distractions of decomposing varnish and old retouching at the left edge and base. The richness of the crimson drapery and the flowing brushwork in the sky and throughout are remarkably intact, as is the fine detail of the figures.”

4 The extensive bibliography on the Modena triptych can be found in the relevant entry compiled for the exhibition catalogue N. Hadjinico-lou (ed.), El Greco of Crete, exh. cat., Municipality of Iraklion 1990, no. 4, 156-85 (M. Vasilakis-Mavrukaki) (hereafter: El Greco of Crete). See also M. Vasilakis, Three Questions on the Modena Triptych, N.
Fig. 2. Modena, Galleria Estense. The Modena triptych.
Theotokopoulos (El Greco). This has an image of the Baptism on the right side and so offers a close parallel to the form that we have reconstructed (Fig. 4). It is also very close in size (24.5 x 17.9 cm).

At this point we want to introduce another painting which has not yet received the attention it deserves. This is a panel of the Adoration of the Shepherds (Fig. 3) which was sold at auction at Christie’s, New York, in May 1991. As becomes clear from the photograph this too is the wing of an unknown triptych. It can be attributed to El Greco and compared with the painting in the Adoration of the Shepherds in the collection of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry at Kettering, England, which has also been attributed to Greco. The wing was sold at Christie’s, New York in 1991 and is now in the possession of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre (inv. 34-011) of the Queen’s University at Kingston, Ontario in Canada. The dimensions of the Adoration of the Shepherds are 23.80 cm in height by 19.10 cm in width and thus it makes a convincing candidate for the left wing of the very same triptych to which the Baptism belonged. Were such a reconstruction of the triptych (Fig. 4) correct, with the Adoration, that is, of the Shepherds on the inner left wing and the Baptism of Christ on the inner right, it would suggest that the now missing triptych had closely followed the form of the Modena triptych, at least as far as its inner left and right wings are concerned.

It is common knowledge that it was a feature of El Greco’s working practice throughout his life that he often produced multiple versions of the same subject. Each of these versions, individually worked out, was effectively a new production. To take just one such example, this is the case with the Adoration of the Name of Jesus in the National Gallery, London and El Escorial. Some of the iconographic features of these two compositions were already apparent on the inner central panel of the Modena triptych with the Coronation of the Christian Knight. The question that arises at this point is whether El Greco had produced an exact copy of the Modena triptych and if he did, at what stage of his career he did so. For, as long as we have to rely on two of its compositions (the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Baptism of Christ) alone, out of the six that originally decorated this triptych, anything we say must remain highly hypothetical. It is possible that El Greco could have produced a second triptych identical to the Modena one. If we were able to offer a convincing answer to the question of who we think might have commissioned the Modena triptych, we might then be able to answer the question of whether El Greco could have produced a copy identical to it on the occasion of another commission. Most of the compositions chosen for the Modena triptych make absolute sense for a piece destined for private ownership and devotion. It is the central panel of the Modena triptych, with the Coronation of the Christian Knight on its inner side and the View of Mount Sinai on its outer, which, more than anything, gives to the triptych its unique character. The Coronation of the Christian Knight has already been interpreted as an allegory for the triumph of the Christian Faith, and, as a scene containing Counter-Reformation connotations, it would need...
to be investigated further before one could say whether it might have been selected by an individual to accord with his own preoccupations and beliefs. It might also be held to reflect the historical and religious conditions of its time as well as the general climate and atmosphere of the period. Of course, we are unable for the moment to take these questions any further. We can only make a few suggestions.

If we compare the scene of the Heraklion Baptism (Fig. 1) with that of the Modena triptych (Fig. 2) we find that they resemble each other closely. The position and gesture of Christ, the detailed rendering of his face and hair; the shell held by the Baptist; the white dove coming down from the sky and the trees on each side of the scene – all these features are common to both compositions. However, there are many differences of detail which show that this is not simply a copy of the Modena triptych but is rather a more refined version of it. It is in several respects a much more powerful work of art. Thus, the figure of St John the Baptist has about it a greater sense of movement, the Baptist and Christ are set at the same level, so that the relationship of the two figures has a different and more direct impact and becomes more human than in the Modena triptych. The angel on the right is similarly a far more powerful image than the related figure in the Modena triptych, whose posture and gesture appear to be quite ‘clumsy’.

In general, it could be said that the Baptism on the Modena
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Fig. 4. Proposed reconstruction of the triptych with the Baptism of Christ and the Adoration of the Shepherds.

triptych relies far deeper on the Byzantine – in fact, the ‘Post-Byzantine’, the Cretan – background and training of El Greco\textsuperscript{12} than the Heraklion Baptism, which has a much stronger Venetian character. It might also be said that, where the Modena Baptism is the outcome of the artist’s acquaintance with Venetian mannerism mainly through prints\textsuperscript{13}, the Heraklion Baptism issues rather from his direct acquaintance with the paintings of late Venetian mannerism, which he could have seen in large numbers on his arrival in Venice\textsuperscript{14}. This does not exclude the possibility that El Greco also derived, as was his common practice, some of the iconographic features in this panel from prints. According to G. Dillon, the composition of the Modena Baptism follows that of an engraving (Fig. 5) by Giovanni Battista d’An-  

\textsuperscript{12} For example, the placing of the Baptist higher than Christ finds many parallels in sixteenth-century Cretan representations of the scene, such as the fresco at the Stavronikita monastery on Mt Athos, painted by the Cretan Theophanes in 1546. M. Chatzidakis, The Cretan Painter Theophanes. The Final Phase of his Art in the Wall-Paintings of the Holy Monastery of Stavronikita, Mount Athos 1986, 57, fig. 7. The range of colours is rather limited compared to those used in the Heraklion Baptism and also stem from the painter’s Byzantine background.


\textsuperscript{14} It is true that works by Titian, Tintoretto, Jacopo Palma and Giovanni Bellini are documented to have existed in Candia (modern Heraklion), but it is also true that their number should have been very small compared with that of paintings existing in Venice herself. N. Panagiotakis, Τά νεανικά χρόνια τον Δομήνικον Θεοτοκόπουλον, Crete University Press, Heraklion 1999, 140-51.
Fig. 5. Giovanni Battista d’Angeli, The Baptism of Christ, engraving.


17 The print executed between 1524 and 1530 is kept in the Cabinetto Disegni e Stampe of the Uffizi Gallery. L. Fornari Schianchi and S. Ferino-Pagden, Parmigianino e il manierismo europeo, exh. cat., Parma, Galleria Nazionale, 8/2-15/5/2003 and Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 4/6-14/9/2003, 89-91, fig. 13.

18 Alterations (pentimenti) are also visible in the head of the left-hand angel.

19 See, for example, the drawing that has been revealed during restoration underneath the painted surface of the panel of the Evangelist Luke painting the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria (1560-1567) and of that of the Adoration of the Magi (ca. 1565-1567), both in the Benaki Museum, Athens. S. Stassinopoulos, Το σχέδιο στη χάρα του δορυφόρου Θεοτοκούπολα στο Μουσείο Μπενάκη, Τα νέα των φίλων του Μουσείου Μπενάκη 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1988), 13-7.

20 They are both dated in 1577 and are thought to have “formed part of a much larger composition depicting the altarpiece commissioned by Diego de Castilla from El Greco for Santo Domingo el Antiguo”. El Greco, nos 18-19, 118-9 (X. Bray), with previous bibliography.


22 For a review of the existing bibliography up to 1990, see the entry by M. Vassilaki in the catalogue El Greco of Crete, no. 4, 156-91, esp. 156-9 and eadem, Three Questions, op. cit. (n. 4), 119-32. See most recently the entry for the Modena triptych by M. Constantoudaki-Kitromilides in El Greco, Identity and Transformation, no. 6, 351-6 and the views expressed in the El Greco catalogue by D. Davies in his essay, El Greco’s Religious Art (n. 11), 45-71, esp. 45, 46 and by G. Finaldi in his entry for the panel with the View of Mount Sinai, today in the Historical Museum of Crete, Heraklion, no. 10, 100 and elsewhere in the same catalogue, 106, 112.

23 S. Betini, Maistro Menegos Theotokopoulos sgrafiato, ArtVen 32 (1978), 238-49, esp. 244. H. Wethey who had initially dismissed the authenticity of the triptych (H.E. Wethey, El Greco and his School, Princeton 1962, II, 198-200) later suggested that El Greco “painted the little and much disputed triptych in the Galleria Estense at Modena before he left Crete”. Idem, El Greco in Rome and the
the Modena triptych was painted before the one to which both the Baptism of Christ and the Adoration of the Shepherds belonged. The comparison also offers further clues that the components of Venetian mannerism in the Modena triptych could arise from the use of prints, which El Greco had at his disposal rather than through first hand knowledge of paintings in Venice. The iconography and range of colours used for the Modena triptych are still very close to...
'Post-Byzantine', Cretan, representations of the theme both in monumental art and icon-painting. On the other hand, the compositions of the Heraklion Baptism and the Canada Adoration of the Shepherds rely on much more refined versions of their iconographic themes and the range of colours used in these is different and much wider than those used for the Modena triptych. The Modena triptych consequently fits better into El Greco's experience of art while he was still living in Crete.

The fact that the engraving by Giovanni Battista Fontana of the View of Mt Sinai (Fig. 10), which El Greco used for his Modena composition (Fig. 2), was printed in Venice in 1569 has been taken to be decisive evidence for dating the triptych's to a time after the painter's arrival in Venice in 1567/68. We do not think, however, that we are on firm ground when we date the Modena triptych on the evidence of a single engraving alone. This would require one to assume that every single print that was ever produced of Mt Sinai has either survived or at least been located. It is not clear where Battista Fontana found his prototype for the View of Mt Sinai. It seems entirely possible that both Battista Fontana and Theotokopoulos made use of the same source for portraying Mt Sinai, which being the case the engraving by Fontana cannot be taken as offering a secure terminus post quem in dating the Modena triptych. A small number of Cretan triptychs of the second half of the sixteenth century with the View of Mt Sinai have adopted the same portrayal of Sinai and this at least shows that the iconographic scheme used by Fontana and Theotokopoulos was circulating on Crete at the time. Surviving examples also indicate that the View of Mt Sinai had become a popular theme among Cretan painters of the second half of the sixteenth century, such as Georgios Klontzas, who was a contemporary of Theotokopoulos. There is a further connection between the Modena and the Klontzas triptychs. Their carved wooden frame is identical and they all seem to have been produced by the same Cretan woodcarving workshop operating in Candia during the second half of the sixteenth century. Sergio Bettini has shown that this carved decoration had its origins in traditional Venetian woodcarving and copied a type which by the sixteenth century had already been given up by Venetian woodcarvers. It continued at the Benaki Museum, Athens and of the Dormition of the Virgin, today on the island of Syros. M. Constantoudaki-Kitromilides, Italian Influences on El Greco's Early Work. Some New Observations, in Hadjinicolau, El Greco of Crete, Proceedings (n. 1), 97-118. Eadem, Saint-Luc par Théoctocopoulos au Musée Bénaki. Nouvelles remarques, Topics in Post-Byzantine Painting in Memory of Manolis Chatzidakis, Athens 2002, 271-86. For the prints used in the Dormition of the Virgin see also K. Fatouros-Hesychakis, Philosophical and Cultural Interests of Domenicos Theotokopoulos in Crete, El Greco of Crete, Proceedings (n. 1), 45-68. 


26 The article by G. Kühnel, Die ‘Ikonen des Sinai Klosters’ und verwandte Pilgerillustrationen, OC 65 (1981), 163-218 has provided us with an impressive number of engravings and prints of Mt Sinai.

27 Their carved wooden frame is identical and they all seem to have been produced by the same Cretan woodcarving workshop operating in Candia during the second half of the sixteenth century. Sergio Bettini has shown that this carved decoration had its origins in traditional Venetian woodcarving and copied a type which by the sixteenth century had already been given up by Venetian woodcarvers.
ed, however, to be produced by the Cretan workshops of the second half of the sixteenth century. It seems reasonable to suggest that the wooden carved frame of the Modena triptych indicates that it was commissioned by Theotokopoulos while he was still in Crete. Otherwise we would have to accept that though he painted it in Venice, he ordered its wooden support and frame from Crete. Following what we have stated above, we find it more reasonable to accept that Theotokopoulos painted the Modena triptych before 1567, while he was still living in Crete and that he probably took it with him on his journey to Venice. This fits exactly with the function of a triptych as a portable object. The engraving of Mt Sinai that El Greco used for the Modena triptych was to be used again by the painter when he executed the panel with the View of Mt Sinai (Fig. 11), once in the Hatvany collection in Budapest, then in a private collection in Vienna and finally in the Historical Museum of He-

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This painting is recorded in the inventory of the Fulvio Orsini collection in Rome compiled in 1600 and this is taken as evidence of its execution during the artist's stay in Rome (ca. 1570-1575/76). It is interesting to note that the Heraklion Baptism shares with the Historical Museum View of Mt Sinai the common iconographic feature of a group of figures on the more distant left bank of the river Jordan that are rendered in miniature scale.

There are many iconographic and stylistic devices adopted by the Heraklion Baptism that bring it closer to works that El Greco executed while in Venice. The use of orange and of a light transparent blue for the right angel's vestments is known to us from paintings such as the Flight into Egypt, formerly in the Hirsch collection, Basel and now in the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid and the Entombment of Christ formerly in the Stanley Moss collection, New York and now in the National Gallery of Greece, Athens, which are both to be placed in the Venetian period (1567/68-1570) of El Greco. The dark brown skin of the Baptist is reminiscent of the two dark-skinned barefooted men who bear Christ's body in the Entombment of Christ. The emotional effect created by the thick clouds on the sky is also reminiscent of similar renderings of a clouded sky in the Flight into Egypt and in two paintings of St Francis receiving the Stigmata, one from the Istituto Suor Orsola Benincasa, Naples and the other from a private collection, both dated in the early 1570s. The latter also shares with the Baptism the common device of rendering the trees with thick foliage. The rich red garment of the Baptist that rests heavily on the ground is another feature which El Greco will develop in paintings that he will execute in Venice and Rome. This will later become one of his most characteristic features in works of his Spanish period.


32 El Greco, no. 10, 100-1 (G. Finaldi), with all the previous bibliography.
33 "Quadro corniciato di noce con un paese del Monte Sinai, di mano di un Greco scolare di Titiano". P. de Nolhac, Une galerie de peinture au XVle siècle: les collections de Fulvio Orsini, GBA 29 (1884), 433, no. 39.

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ings, which he could have seen on his arrival in Venice. His alleged apprenticeship at Titian’s workshop would have been one way in which he might have studied such paintings. He also appears to have seen paintings by Tintoretto, such as Christ Carried to the Tomb of ca. 1564/65, the Last Supper in San Trovaso, ca. 1556/58 and in San Marcuola of 1547. The period in which El Greco was present in Venice was the same as that in which Tintoretto was working for the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. Iconographic and stylistic features that El Greco employed for the Baptism of Christ, such as the use of orange and blue for the vestments of the figures and the trees with high trunks and thick foliage seem to have their origin in paintings by Tintoretto, like the Way to Calvary, of 1566/67 painted for the Sala dell’Albergo of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco.

We would like to conclude by saying that the Baptism of Christ that the Municipality of Heraklion acquired from auction at Christie’s in December 2004 can rightly take its place in El Greco’s Venetian production. It is a work of immense quality and craftsmanship that shows how much more confident the painter had begun to feel in the years that followed his arrival in Venice. The Modena triptych, thanks to the Heraklion Baptism and the Canada Adoration of the Shepherds, can now be more confidently dated in El Greco’s Cretan period. His enthusiasm for the new adventures of his artistic life can be clearly traced in the spontaneity of his brushstrokes of the Heraklion Baptism and can speak for themselves in this work by an exceptionally gifted painter.

Maia Basilaki - Robin Cormack

DOMENIKOS THEOTOKOPOULOS: THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST
THE PROSPECT OF new acquisitional possibilities for the Municipality of Heraklion, the Δήμος Ηρακλείου, was realised through the acquisition of a painting that was exhibited at auction by Christie’s in December 2004. The Baptist of Christ, convincingly identified as the work of Domenico Theotokopoulos, has had a rich history and was acquired by the Heraklion State Museum in 1983. The acquisition was made possible through the generosity of the Anthony and Jane Martin Foundation. The painting is currently on display in the Heraklion Museum, where it is shown to visitors as a work of exceptional quality and craftsmanship.

Greek Text:

Στις 8 Δεκεμβρίου 2004, σε πλευσματισμό του οίκου Christie’s του Λονδίνου, ο Δήμος Ηρακλείου απέκτησε τον πίνακα του Δομήνικου Θεοτοκόπουλου «Η Βάπτιση του Χριστού» (Εικ. 1). Το έργο είχε πρόσφατα εμφανιστεί στην αγορά συνοδευόμενο από την πληροφορία ότι είχε εντοπισθεί στην Ισπανία από υπεύθυνους του οίκου Christie’s και ότι βρισκόταν στην κατοχή ισπανικής οικογένειας από τα μέσα του 19ου αιώνα.

Το έργο έχει σήμερα ορθογώνιο σχήμα και διαστάσεις 23,6 εκ. (ύψος) και 18 εκ. (πλάτος). Ομως αυτό δεν ήταν το αρχικό του σχήμα, αλλά έφερε τοξωτή απόληξη. Στη μεταγενέστερη εποχή ο πίνακας ενσωματώθηκε σε ορθογώνια επιφάνεια ξύλου. Η τοξωτή απόληξη του έργου υποδηλώνει ότι αποτελούσε ένα από τα φύλλα ενός τριπτύχου και επομένως έφερε παράσταση και στην άλλη πλευρά, η οποία διαχωρίστηκε από την Βάπτιση. Η ύπαρξη αυτών, που υποδηλώνουν την ύπαρξη στροφίγων στην αριστερή κατακόρυφη πλευρά του έργου, οδήγησε στην αποκάλυψη της αριστερής κατακόρυφης πλευράς του τριπτύχου (Εικ. 4). Αυτό επιτρέπει να το συνδέσουμε με το τρίπτυχο που σήμερα φυλάσσεται στην Galleria Estense in Modena.

30 T. Nichols, Tintoretto. Tradition and Identity, London 1999, illus. 20 (San Marcuola), 59 (San Trovaso), 110 (Christ Carried to the Tomb) today in the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.
31 G. Romanelli, Tintoretto, La Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Milan 1994. Nichols, Tintoretto, 149-73 (for the period 1564-67). A. Zen-
της Μόδενας (Εικ. 2), φέρει την υπογραφή ΧΕΙΡΔΟΜΗ-ΝΙΚΟΥ στην πίσω πλευρά του κεντρικού φύλλου και θεωρείται ότι γραφήθηκε από τον Δομήνικο Θεοτοκόπουλο μετά την άφιξή του στη Βενετία (1567/68). Και στο τρίπτυχο της Μόδενας (Εικ. 5) του Giovanni Battista d'Angeli (del Moro). Ο δεξιός άγγελος (Εικ. 7), που στερεί την πλάτη του προς το θεατή, προέρχεται από χαρακτικό του Giulio Bonasone (Εικ. 6), που αντιγράφει σχέδιο του Parmigianino.

Υπάρχουν πολλά εικονογραφικά και τεχνοτροπικά στοιχεία στη σύνθεση της Βάπτισης που επιτρέπουν να τη συγκρίνουμε με έργα που ο Θεοτοκόπουλος ζωγράφισε κατά την περίοδο της διαμονής του στη Βενετία (1567/68-1570). Το πορτοκαλί και το διάφανο μπλε χρώμα που χρησιμοποίησε για την ενδυμασία του δεξιού αγγέλου παραπέμπει στη Φυγή στην Αίγυπτο, που ανήκε στη συλλογή Hirsch της Βασιλείας και σήμερα βρίσκεται σε ιδιωτική συλλογή του Αονδίνου, και στην Ταφή του Χριστού, σήμερα στην Εθνική Πινακοθήκη της Αθήνας. Το έντονα σύννεφα στον ουρανό, που προσδίδουν ένα δραματικό τόνο στη σύνθεση, θυμίζουν εκείνα που ο ζωγράφος χρησιμοποίησε για τη Φυγή στην Αίγυπτο αλλά και για δύο πίνακες με τον άγιο Φραγκίσκο να Δέχεται τα Στίγματα, που χρονολογούνται στο 1570 και βρίσκονται ο ένας στο Istituto Suor Orsola Benincasa της Νάπολης και ο άλλος σε ιδιωτική συλλογή του εξωτερικού. Τέλος, οι μορφές στο βάθος της σύνθεσης, που έχουν αποδοθεί μικρογραφικά, θυμίζουν ανάλογες μορφές στη σύνθεση του Τοπίου του Όρους Σινά που βρίσκεται στο Ιστορικό Μουσείο Ηρακλείου (Εικ. 11).

Όλα τα παραπάνω δεν αφήνουν καμια αμφιβολία πως η Βάπτιση του Χριστού αποτελεί ανυπόγραφο έργο του ζωγράφου Δομήνικου Θεοτοκόπουλου και ανήκει στη βενετική περίοδο (1567/68-1570) της καλλιτεχνικής παραγωγής του. Ο επικείμενος καθαρισμός του έργου στα εργαστήρια συντήρησης του Μουσείου Μπενάκη, καθώς και η ανάλυση της τεχνικής και των χρωστικών του, θα επιτρέψουν να μελετήσουμε πιο διεισδυτικά αυτό το έργο του κορυφαίου κρητικού ζωγράφου.