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Andreas STYLIANOU

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THE PAINTED CHAPEL OF THE ARCHANGEL MICHAEL VIZAKIA, CYPRUS

(PL. 13 - 16)

We believe that Byzantine art is like a piece of classical music, the interpretation of which varies according to the character and abilities of the performing artist. Various audiences appreciate different interpretations.

In this context, we shall examine a series of rustic paintings of the sixteenth century in the chapel of the Archangel Michael¹, Vizakia, Cyprus, not far from the well known Byzantine church of Panagia Phorbiotissa, Asinou, in the foothills of the Troodos range of mountains.

The chapel is a rectangular building of rough stones and sun-baked bricks with three tie-beams across, covered with a steeply pitched roof with flat tiles, a type of church common to the villages of the Troodos range of mountains since the thirteenth century, but probably going back to earlier times. It measures 5, 29 × 2,95 m. without the apse, which is 1,57 m. wide and 1,15 m. deep. There is a small porch at the west end, measuring 2,25 × 3,45 m., open to the south. The walls have a height of 2,65 m., and the height from the floor to the apex of the roof is 4,98 m. (Pl. 13a).

Only the south and west walls of the nave retain their wall-paintings. They are of an extremely rustic character, some of them imbued with Venetian iconographic elements of an unusual character. It is popular art *par excellence*.

The walls are divided into two zones; the pediment of the west wall is a third zone. In the upper zones are depicted the Festival scenes and in the lower ones the individual Saints.

Starting from the east end of the south wall we have the following scenes in the upper zones:

1. A little about the chapel see, R u p e r t G u n n i s, *Historic Cyprus*, London 1936, p. 457. A. P a p a g e o r g i o u, *Οι ξυλόστεγοι ναοί της Κύπρου*, Nicosia, 1975, p. 176. Annual Report of the Department of Antiquities for the year 1975, Nicosia, 1976, p. 13.

1. *The Annunciation*. Keeping to tradition, the Archangel Gabriel approaches from the left with his right hand blessing. He wears a red *chiton* and a green *himation*, one end of which waves behind him. He has a slight smile, although this is accidental or probably emanates from Western prototypes, as it is present in other figures. His wand ends in a cross above his right wing; he is touching (not holding) its lower part with his left hand, where it appears by his left knee. As we shall see later on, the artist had a problem in making his figures hold objects.

The Virgin sits on the right, supposedly on a throne, but, owing to the two-dimensional seat, she looks precariously perched. She wears a grey *chiton* and a red *maphorion*. The lower half of her body is facing right, allowing the end of her *chiton* to fall to the ground in the form of an illusory two-dimensional bucket seat, and the upper half is turned left to face the messenger, an old iconographic device in Byzantine art impressing modesty. From her raised right hand extends an ochre thread (instead of scarlet), to the spindle in her left hand. Both the figures are squat with large heads. The faces are treated with linear white highlights.

The dove of the Holy Ghost sits on the ray descending from the sky, near the Virgin's head.

The architectural background is late Byzantine, with a red cloth thrown between the two buildings from over the roofs, an iconographic device very common during the Palaeologue period. The walls are decorated with bands of tooth decoration successfully depicted in relief.

2. *The Birth of Christ* (Plate 13b). It is composed of the conglomeration of scenes usually present in this subject, in spite of the limited space. In the centre, the Virgin Mary reclines on a red mattress, wearing a scarlet *maphorion* and resting her head on the back of her right hand. The usual jagged entrance to the cave is not shown. There is an iconic depiction of the new born Child in an almost upright rectangular manger. The most unnatural and deformed postures and expressions of the adoring ox and ass are highly expressive through their naive appearance. Above the manger, there is a star attached to the ray descending from heaven.

The three adoring angels, in the top right, are clothed in differentiated colours, and they are less squat than the other figures in the painting.

The Magi arriving on horseback guided by an angel, in the top left, are differentiated in age, the oldest one leading the way. They are depicted in the fold of two hills, the leading one stepping onto the hill of the Birth scene, thus bridging the space in Byzantine fashion.

In the foreground we have three other scenes. St Joseph is seated in a thoughtful posture, the end of his *himation* looping round him to cover the ground where he sits. Before him stands an unusual type of a bearded shepherd with rough features in profile, wearing a Venetian hat, a woolly cloak and black shoes, addressing Joseph with his right hand, while with his left he supports his stooping body on a walking-stick. He is reminiscent of a certain character in the play "One Night in Venice".

In the scene of the washing of the Child, the figures are seated on the ground. The assistant with the water jug in her lap is effective, the end of her greenish gown forming an illusory bucket seat, like the Virgin's *chiton* in the Annunciation.

Finally, on the extreme right, we have the young flute-playing shepherd with a pointed cap, seated on a bucket seat facing an announcing angel.

The sheep completing the picture are childish drawings, but the Byzantines were never very strong in depicting sheep anyway.

3. *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple.* The painting shows the usual figures enacting the scene. The Virgin Mary advances from the left with her hands out ready to receive Christ back from Symeon. She wears a grey *chiton* and a red *maphorion*. Young Christ looks very eager to go back to His mother. Symeon's posture is effectively balanced by the rounded sentry-box type of enclosure at his back. The Virgin is followed by Anna the Prophetess holding the usual scroll and turning to communicate with Joseph who follows with a pair of doves in his hands. Anna wears an ochre *chiton* and a green *maphorion* parting at the chest to show her outlined breasts, an iconographic point usually present with secondary figures in Byzantine art. Joseph displays a dark-ochre baggy *himation* with clumsy folds. The altar with its domed ciborium and curtains, and the building on the left with a pitched roof and bands of tooth decoration in relief, conform with late Byzantine architectural backgrounds.

4. *The Baptism of Christ.* The schematic background is at once arresting. St John on the left and the three angels on the right stand on reddish rock outcrops fading upwards into ochre. St John, with his grey *miloti* and ochre *himation*, is the most successful of all the figures depicted. The grey-green river with white waves is framed by the usual jagged banks, while the black sky gives an effective contrast. The pear-shaped ray from the sky fits into the opening between the two outcrops of the hills, the dove sitting on Christ's halo.

The figure of Christ is clumsy. He is shown *en face* without a loin-

cloth, resulting in the elimination of His genitals. He is blessing the personification of the river Jordan reclining in the bottom left corner, a clumsy figure with large feet. Below Christ's feet there is a scroll with an unreadable inscription, presumably imitating some Old Testament quotation in Aramaic concerning the Baptism of Christ.

The fish depicted in the river are of the same childish drawing as the sheep in the Birth of Christ.

5. *The Raising of Lazarus*. The elongated two fingers of Christ pointing at Lazarus in a blessing gesture reflect Western medieval iconography. The women at the feet of Christ have been raised to three. Simple, schematic, in green, ochre and white *maphoria*, they produce an effective ensemble. Behind Christ stand Peter and five Apostles in ochre colours of varying tones.

Before the tomb of Lazarus stands a Jew wearing a buff tunic and a wide-brimmed pointed hat. Lazarus is swaddled like a white cocoon standing up in the rectangular entrance to the cave tomb. Next to the tomb there are four more Jews looking on to the scene. In the foreground a youth bears the lid of the tomb on his back.

6. *The Washing of the feet* (Pl. 14a). With this subject we move to the west wall. The first impression is that the artist has the urge to break away from the established rules, as we have noticed in other scenes. The white *lention* winding round Christ's waist and then looping round Peter's right leg like a hook holding it in position over the bowl of water, attracts our attention. The attending Apostles have been raised to thirteen! Christ wears a scarlet *chiton* and blesses Peter with his two elongated fingers pointing at him.

Peter and another Apostle hold rolled scrolls, unnecessary accessories in this scene. The figures are squat and the garments are delineated with few and simple folds, occasionally suggestive of movement, as in Peter's ochre *chiton*.

7. *The Last Supper* (Pl. 14b). Christ sits at the top centre of the circular table with Peter on His right. The figures nearest to the spectator are on a larger scale, adapted from Western prototypes. John must be one of the four young ones in the foreground. Of these, the one in the centre is depicted with the lower part of his body turned to the right and the upper half turned to face the table. The one next to him appears to be kneeling with his back to the spectator.

The table has a white table-cloth and is strewn with fish and small loaves of bread. In the centre there is a bowl on a high base with a fish. Judas, with rougher features than the others, appears to be seated third

from Christ on the left (on Christ's right), and is stretching across the table to touch the fish in the bowl. Christ rests his right hand on the back of Judas, an unusual iconographic detail, again suggesting the innovating tendencies of the popular artist. Furthermore, six of the Apostles hold forks, albeit clumsily, three on the left with their right hand and three on the right with their left hand, a rare luxury in Byzantine art.

8. *The Betrayal* (Pl. 15a). This is perhaps the most arresting of his compositions. The formidable array of squat soldiers their short coats, spotted ochre pantaloons and sharply pointed helmets, clutching their Venetian swords hanging from their sides, evoke the message of the scene, further enhanced by their rough features with staring eyes and pointed noses. An array of spears appearing in the background complete the message.

The apathetic embracing of Christ by Judas – emanating from his prototype – apparently did not satisfy the rustic artist. He tried to introduce some action into the scene by allowing the ochre *himation* of Judas to fall off his shoulders in a loop behind his back and across his front, a trick suggesting violence, but betraying little understanding of the real functioning of the garment, for the rest of the *himation* has been turned into pantaloons!

Christ is dressed in a red *chiton* with two ochre woven bands down the front and massive scarlet highlights on the sleeve. He looks rather into space, although his right hand is extended towards Peter, depicted in the foreground cutting off the ear of Malchus who is represented as a middle aged man. A soldier with a pronounced rough and pointed nose standing behind Christ, holds a torch on a pole in his right hand.

The last painting on the west wall is the Deposition, but we must first see the Crucifixion in the pediment above.

9. *The Crucifixion* (Pl. 15b). It is depicted in the pediment of the west wall, a usual place for this subject in this type of church of the Troodos range of mountains. The naive distortions and tendencies for innovation in secondary iconographic points are more conspicuous in this painting. One thing is certain: the popular artist was not using transfers for his paintings. It is obvious that he was adapting his scenes to the space available as best as he could. Christ's head is out of proportion to the rest of the body, but there is extreme calmness in the expression of the face with the schematic outlines, enhanced with linear highlights in the manner of the post-Byzantine period, although the features have taken on a Western character. In contrast, and apparently owing to the shortness of space, His arms are short and atrophied.

The childish drawings of the two thieves, with their skinny arms wound loosely over the arms of their crosses, evoke misery through their very naive deformation.

The *ensemble* of the Virgin Mary fainting in the arms of her three friends, in the bottom left corner, are better rendered in style and iconography (Pl. 16a). Owing to the large size of the figures we can now see his technique of facial build up: on a dark ochre *proplasmos*, massive white highlights, enhanced with superimposed linear ones, leaving the shadows to appear from underneath in schematic form, one of the modes of rendering during the post-Byzantine period.

St John with the Good Centurion, on the opposite side, show the same style. With them there is another soldier holding a spear. His body is facing left and his legs are facing right!

For Longinus, the popular artist introduced a noble Venetian soldier with fur collar, leather jerkin with sleeves to the elbows, scarlet undergarment showing at the arms, red pantaloons, black boots, sheathed sword with a silver cross-handle and a steel helmet (Pl. 16a). The spear does not belong to this prototype, for it is shown by-passing his right hand which is raised in a posture evoking sympathy rather than spearing. The figure looks grafted and unassimilated, perhaps used with political implications.

The peculiar pole, composed of oval sections, on which the youth on the other side of the Cross raises the sponge to Christ, looks as though it was borrowed from some Western processional emblem (Pl. 15b).

10. *The Deposition* (Pl. 16b). We return to the end of the west wall to examine this painting which combines the *Apokathelosis*, the Lamentation and the Entombment of Christ, as they were fused during the post-Byzantine period.

In the foreground, Christ is about to be entombed in a sarcophagus which is smaller than His body. His head is over the rim of the sarcophagus on the left and is supported by His squatting mother. Young John is bending over from the inner side to raise his Master's loose left hand to his lips with his covered hands. Joseph of Arimathaea holds the feet and Nicodemus crouches in a *proskynesis* posture in the foreground.

In the second plane we have the three Marys in differentiated postures of despair accentuated by their loose hair. The one in the centre with her hands raised towards the Cross must be Magdalene. The three-dimensional Cross is small. Two flying angels are shown in gestures of despair on either side of the Cross.

11. *Sts Peter and Paul* (Pl. 16c). Returning to the lower zone of the

south wall we find Sts Peter and Paul on the left of the main entrance to the chapel. They are depicted in three-quarter-length, turned towards one another. Peter, left, holds a rolled scroll and the keys in his left hand. Paul holds a large book with both hands. They both wear grey *chitons*, Peter wears an ochre *himation*, and Paul a reddish one. They are much better rendered than the rest of the paintings. Their faces are treated with linear highlights in the icon technique, especially that of Peter. But we note the schematic ears of the two figures: Peter's is calligraphic and Paul's just an oval hole.

12. *St George*. On the right of the door we have St George mounted, killing the dragon. We return to extreme clumsiness, especially in the figure of St George.

13. *St Mamas*. Next to St George is depicted St Mamas riding his lion, a popular subject in the island since the fifteenth century, considered as the patron Saint of the tax-payers. He rides *en face* in iconic manner, holds a shepherd's crook in his left hand and clutches a minute lamb with his right. He wears a green *chiton* and a red cloak. His eyes are too close together and make him look cunning, which suits the Cypriote story of his appearance before the "King" riding a lion. The lion has no resemblance to the real beast, but its atrocious rendering makes it fearful.

14. Next to St Mamas stands an *unidentified soldier saint* with a spear (half damaged).

15. *Sts Constantine and Helena* (Pl. 16d). They are depicted in the lower zone of the west wall (left of the door into the porch), and show a more successful rendering like Sts Peter and Paul, including the treatment of the faces.

16. A sixteenth-century *icon of Christ* kept in the chapel is of a much better quality and it should be by another hand.

These are all the surviving paintings of the chapel. We are faced with the art of a rebellious artist, probably very young, who must have ran away from his master to work on his own and show his abilities. He paints with a childish delight, unwittingly achieving unusual expressions through his deformations and naive approach. He obviously borrowed some iconographic elements from contemporary Western material, which is not unusual during the post-Byzantine period even with much greater artists like Theophanes of Crete. He tried to absorb the borrowed details into his inherited post-Byzantine repertoire, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. His shepherd in the Birth of Christ is assim-

lated, but his Longinus in the Crucifixion is not. His Western soldiers in the Betrayal of Christ are very effective even in their naive rendering, but these had probably already been borrowed and developed into this form by others, before his prototype came to him. The features of the figures, especially in the compositions, also betray Western influence, especially the noses.

For a date we suggest the third quarter of the sixteenth century. The villagers who employed the popular artist must have liked him and understood him. He is playing the tune of post-Byzantine art as he felt it and understood it. He cannot be classed among the best post-Byzantine painters, but we think that the unknown Cypriote church painter could be given a small niche in the *Σχεδίασμα Ἱστορίας τῆς Θρησκευτικῆς Ζωγραφικῆς μετὰ τὴν Ἄλωσιν* of Andreas Xyngoropoulos.

ANDREAS STYLIANOU



The chapel of the Archangel Michael, Vizakia Cyprus. a. South-east view. b. The Birth of Christ.



The chapel of the Archangel Michael, Vizakia, Cyprus. a. The Washing of the feet.
b. The Last Supper.



The chapel of the Archangel Michael, Vizakia, Cyprus. a. The Betrayal. b. The Crucifixion, detail.



The chapel of the Archangel Michael, Vizakia, Cyprus. a. The Deposition. b. The Crucifixion, detail. c. Sts Peter and Paul. d. Sts Constantine and Helena.