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The Chalkoprataia Annunciation and the Pre-Eternal Logos

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The analysis of Byzantine iconography, of which Doula Mouriki was so excellent a connoisseur, offers many delights and not a few pitfalls. The pleasure stems from the decoding of a message, often very complex, yet usually expressed by very simple means. The dangers are due to the ambiguity of the pictorial language. One can seldom state with assurance that a given schema (say the Deësis or the Hetoimasia) or the juxtaposition of certain subjects means exactly this or that, for it may also mean something else; and in looking for that 'something else', no matter how versed one is in Byzantine exegesis, it is all too easy to slip into interpretations that were possibly never intended, however plausible they appear to us. The following enquiry may serve to illustrate the truth of this warning.

The church of St. Mary of the Coppermarket (τῶν Χαλκοπρατείων), whose three-sided apse may still be seen a short distance to the west of St. Sophia, was one of the most important shrines of Constantinople. Although it probably was not the earliest Marian church of the capital, it appears to have been the first that was built within the walls by imperial initiative, for that of the Blachernae was originally suburban. Its founder was the empress Verina, not Pulcheria, as affirmed by tradition. True it was not very big (about 30 by 20 m.) compared to its near-contemporary, S. Maria Maggiore in Rome. Soon incorporated into the complex of the cathedral, by whose clergy it was served, it became, however, in liturgical terms, one of the most active churches of the capital and remained so until the Latin conquest.

Our knowledge of the Chalkoprateia church has recently been enriched by the publication of a miracle story¹. Its author is an otherwise unknown Elias, oikonomos of St. Sophia, who lived in the first half of the 9th century. As a boy, while attending the school attached to the church, he had witnessed the miracle in question during the patriarchate of Tarasios (784-806). He chose to write it down at a later date, when it had become safe to do so, i.e., presumably, after 843. We may assume that by virtue of his position Elias was well informed about the Chalkoprateia church, which fell within his jurisdiction.

The text opens with a historical excursus. Formerly a Jewish synagogue, the church, we are told, was built by the emperor Zeno (474-491)², who roofed it with beams of pine and cypress wood and provided it with galleries, now used to store liturgical plate³. He adorned the walls⁴ with a mosaic cycle, which started with the Nativity of the Virgin Mary and included the Birth of Christ. At a later date Justin II (565-578) added further adornment, namely a gilded coffered ceiling, a new set of doors made of silver, electrum and gold, and two mural compositions — one (location unspecified) representing the Adoration of the Magi, the other in the apse (κατὰ τὸν μῦθα) depicting, as we shall see, the Annunciation. This second image was obliterated by Constantine V, who replaced it by a cross. After the Council of 787 the patriarch Tarasios restored the apsidal image exactly as it had been before, as affirmed by persons who were knowledgeable about those things (τοὺς γινώσκοντας). So much by way of introduction.

The two images (surely mosaics) set up by Justin II are described rather briefly. In the Adoration the Virgin Mary was seated on a throne and held the Child in her lap. The same μὶμῶσις (presumably an enthroned figure) was repeated in the apse, except that here the Virgin held in her arms the "pre-eternal Lord" (τὸν προαιών-

1. W. Lackner, Ein byzantinisches Marienmirakel, Βυζαντινά 13/2 (1985), p. 835-860.

2. This does not contradict the ascription of the church to Verina (Justinian, Nov. 3.1, a. 535) seeing that the empress remained in a position of authority at Constantinople until late 478.

3. The wording is not very clear: κατηχούμενα, ἐν οἷς ἀπόκειται τῶν ἱερῶν σκευῶν ἀπαλλαγή. The editor (p. 850, n. 4) understands ἀπαλλαγή in the unattested sense of 'Ablage, Depot'. I would rather take it as equivalent to ὑπαλλαγή, 'spare set'. Cf. Theophanes, de Boor, 450.4: ὑπαλλάξας τὴν ἐνδυτὴν [altar cloth], ὡς ἔθος ἐστὶ τοῖς βασιλεῦσιν. However that may be, it is interesting to note that the galleries had become redundant and were put to a use that was not originally intended.

4. Once again, the wording is unclear to me: ἐν δὲ τοῖς καμαρώσεως τοίχοις.

νιον τῆς ἀληθείας κύριον). On her right an angel, holding an imperial sceptre, was “as it were” crying out in a loud voice, “Hail thou that art full of grace, the Lord is with thee.”

The miracle occurred soon after the apse image had been restored by Tarasios. To cut a long story short, a schoolboy, coming from the narthex, entered the south aisle, walking in an easterly direction. He was so captivated by the sight of the image that he neglected to look down and fell into a well that happened to be uncovered. The splash was heard by the custodian, who hastened to the scene and the boy was extracted from the well safe and dry. As he described what had happened to him, the boy pointed to the image and said, “I had her there [i.e. in the well] holding me in her arms as she is holding that child [Christ] in her other arm. She flashed a bright light over me and said, ‘Don’t be afraid, child. Sit aloft next to your schoolmate’” (‘Ταύτην εἶχον ἐκεῖ <με> ἐν ἀγκάλαις ὡς τὸ παιδίον ἐκεῖνο ἐν τῇ ἐτέρᾳ ἀγκάλῃ βαστάζουσιν καὶ φῶς μοι ἀπαστράπτουσιν καὶ λέγουσαν: ‘Μὴ φοβοῦ, παιδίον· κάθου μετεωριζόμενον τῷ συσχολίτῃ σου’). I am not sure how far one can press this passage, which does not shine by its clarity. Strictly speaking, it implies that the Virgin held the Child enfolded by one bent arm or, possibly, seated on one knee.

However that may be, there can be no doubt that we are dealing with an Annunciation. In the earliest iconography of that scene the archangel stands on the right, which appears to have been the case here if ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ (line 23) means the spectator’s right. Particularly significant, however, is the designation of the Child as the “pre-eternal Lord.” This was not the human Christ, the child about to be born, but the second person of the Trinity. I would surmise that he was shown within an aureole. Hence we have to do with what may be called a ‘dogmatic’ rather than a narrative composition, one that showed the Second Person entering Mary while remaining, as it were, distinct.

The presence of the Child in the scene of the Annunciation is extremely uncommon. Only two other examples are known to me, both of the second half of the 12th century. The first is a Novgorod icon now in the Tretjakov Gallery (Fig. 1). The Virgin, standing on the right, is in the act of spinning. Over her breast is a tiny Christ child, without mandorla, seated frontally, blessing with his right hand. A ray of light, now almost obliterated, issues from an arc of heaven containing the Ancient of Days. Grabar ascribed this iconography to western influence⁵, whereas Lazarev⁶, with some justification as it turns out, thought it went back to a very early model and cited as a possible precedent the apse mosaic of the

Koimesis church in Nicaea (Fig. 2), to which we shall return presently. The second example is the ‘baroque’ Annunciation icon on Mount Sinai, first made known by K. Weitzmann⁷, and often illustrated in subsequent publications. Here the Virgin is seated on a throne, while the Holy Spirit is seen descending on her in the form of a dove. Barely visible over her breast is a mandorla containing a frontally seated Christ rendered in grisaille. The mandorla is not centered in relation to the Virgin’s body, but placed close to her right arm, perhaps to avoid an overlap with her raised left hand that holds the skein of purple wool.

Elias, of course, was acquainted with the Chalkoprateia Annunciation only as the allegedly exact copy of ca AD 800, and we do not know on what evidence he ascribed the original to the reign of Justin II. Such a date does, however, make good sense, for it was precisely under that emperor that the image of the Virgin, which may with some reason be described as a ‘Blachernitissa’, begins to take the place of the earlier Victory on imperial lead seals⁸. Here we touch on an oft-discussed and controversial topic, which, I believe, has been needlessly complicated by modern commentators⁹. All I can do in this space is to briefly state my opinion, namely that the medallion, whether it is circular or oval, whether it contains a Christ in bust or a seated Christ, whether it is held by the Virgin or not actually held by her (i.e. when her arms are raised in an orant position), had originally the same basic meaning, which was to mark off the divine Logos from the human Mother, even if later that meaning may have been misunderstood or forgotten. In other words, the medallion is an aureole or mandorla, the traditional device for indicating the presence of the divine¹⁰, and has nothing to do with the *imago clipeata*

5. Iconographie de la Sagesse divine et de la Vierge, CahArch 8 (1956), p. 259ff.

6. Russkaja srednevekovaja živopis’, Moscow 1970, p. 108.

7. Eine spätbyzantinische Verkündigungssikone, Festschrift für H. von Eicken, Berlin 1965, p. 299-312.

8. See W. Seibt, Die byzantinischen Bleisiegel in Österreich, Vienna 1978, p. 63. Cf. idem, Der Bildtypus der Theotokos Nikopoios, Byzantion 13/1 (1985), p. 557 f. (hereafter: Der Bildtypus). On the pre-Iconoclastic imperial seals, most of which are not very distinct, the medallion sometimes appears to be co-extensive with the nimbus of the Child.

9. See, amongst others, A. Grabar, L’Iconoclisme byzantin, 2nd ed., Paris 1984, p. 41, 263 ff.; Chr. Belting-Ihm, “Sub matris tutela”, AbhHeidelberg 1976/3, p. 50ff.; Seibt, Der Bildtypus.

10. On which see esp. M. Sacapoulo, La Théotokos à la mandorle de Lythrankomi, Paris 1975, p. 29ff.



Fig. 1. Moscow, Tretjakov Gallery. Icon of Annunciation.

of Roman antiquity¹¹. I further believe it is legitimate to apply the label of Blachernitissa to this type of figuration because the pre-Iconoclastic painting discovered in the presbytery of the Blachernae church in 1031 is specifically described as being of the same kind: εὐρέθη εἰκὼν ὕλογραφική, σανίδιον [variants σανίδι, ἐπὶ σανίδος] ἐπιστήθιον κρατούσης τῆς Θεοτόκου τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν, ἀμόλυντος διαμείνασα ἀπὸ τῶν ἡμερῶν τοῦ Κοπρωνύμου, etc.¹².

The context of this passage implies that the rediscovered image was a wall painting (not an icon on a panel¹³), since it was found behind an area of damaged plaster (χρίσμα). For the term ὕλογραφική one may compare Theophanes, de Boor, 443: Νικήτας, ὁ ψευδώνυμος πατριάρχης, τὰς ἐν τῷ πατριαρχείῳ εἰκόνας τοῦ μικροῦ σεκρέτου διὰ μουσείου οὔσας ἔξεσεν, καὶ τοῦ μεγάλου σεκρέτου τῆς τροπικῆς ἐξ ὕλογραφίας οὔσας κατήνεγκεν. The images in the vault of the Big Sekreton, which were knocked down, were clearly in 'fresco'. As to the Blachernae painting, it was in the area of the presbytery, probably in the lower register, and certainly not in the semidone of the apse. The text makes it clear that the Virgin was holding the medallion with her hands, exactly as she does on the gold coins of Romanus III¹⁴. We cannot, of course, determine the date of the image, but may remember that the sanctuary end of the basilica of the Blachernae was rebuilt by Justin II, so there is a reasonable chance that the image had been put up in that connection. That would have made it contemporary with the Chalkoprateia Annunciation and the introduction of a type very close to the Blachernitissa on imperial lead seals, the last being clearly an act of deliberate policy. What we have here, in other words, is not merely a symptom of the growing prominence of icons or of reliance on the protective power of the Theotokos, but rather the promotion of a particular iconography, which may, indeed, have been created at that time. Why, we may ask, did Justin II favour this type? One motive may be suggested with due caution: Justin, as readers of John of Ephesus will remember, adopted a strongly anti-Monophysite line. Whatever the Monophysites (or some of them) actually professed, they were accused by their opponents of 'confusing' the two natures of Christ. An anti-Monophysite iconography would, therefore, lay stress on the distinctness of the natures, on the notion of the ἀσύγχυτον, which, I believe, is precisely the message of the images we have been considering.

It remains to say a few words concerning the destroyed sanctuary mosaics of the Koimesis church at Nicaea, which offer an obvious parallel to the Chalkoprateia décor in that they, too, went through three phases (pre-

Iconoclastic, Iconoclastic and post-Iconoclastic), as demonstrated by P.A. Underwood¹⁵. We do not know the exact date of Phase I (which I would now be inclined to place towards the end of the 7th century) nor that of Phase III (post-787 or post-843), but we are able to trace on the photographs published by Schmit the precise area of the successive alterations. On this basis we can state that the iconographic scheme of Phase I was *grosso modo* re-established in Phase III in the sense that Phase I also had a standing Virgin in the semidone of the apse (the area of repair being too narrow to accommodate, say, an enthroned Virgin) and four angelic figures holding banners in the bema arch. We are not, however, entitled to assume that the iconography of Phase I was *in all respects* identical to that of Phase III.

The meaning of the original Nicaea programme can be explicated thanks to the inscriptions, which, it must be remembered, dated from Phase I and were not disturbed in the course of the later alterations¹⁶. Here, too, I shall be brief because a full discussion of the matter would require a good deal of space. The inscriptions to be considered are three in number:

1. The one placed centrally, above the standing Virgin and below the hand of God: ΕΓΓΑΣΤΡΟΣ (sic) ΠΡΟ ΕΩΣΦΟΡΟΥ ΓΕΓΕΝΗΚΑ (sic) ΣΕ. This is a quotation of Ps. 109.3 (ἐκ γαστροῦ πρὸ ἑωσφόρου ἐξεγέννησα or ἐγέννησά σε), except that the verb has been adapted in accordance with Ps. 2.7 (κύριος εἶπεν πρὸς μέ· Υἱός μου

11. On this point I would agree with T. F. Mathews, *The Early Armenian Iconographic Program of the Ełmiciac Gospel*, in: *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, Washington, DC 1982, p. 208f., with some reservations about his alleged Buddhist models.

12. Scylitzes, ed. Thurn, p. 384. On a previous occasion I mistranslated this passage, having taken σανίδιον ἐπιστήθιον as standing in apposition to εἰκὼν, which is clearly not the case: *The Art of the Byzantine Empire. Sources and Documents*, Englewood Cliffs 1972, p. 155. The article by E. Trapp, *Eine wiedergefundene Ikone der Blachernenkirche*, JÖB 35 (1985), p. 193-195, does not deal directly with the matter that concerns us.

13. As understood by Seibt, *Der Bildtypus*, p. 551.

14. P. Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, III/2, Washington, DC 1973, pl. LVII, 2.1, 2.2. I do not know why the learned author (*ibid.*, p. 711) speaks of "the discovery of a splendid icon of the Virgin suckling the Infant Jesus".

15. *The Evidence of Restorations in the Sanctuary Mosaics of the Church of the Dormition at Nicaea*, DOP 13 (1959), p. 235-243.

16. The latest discussion, by C. Barber, *The Koimesis Church, Nicaea. The Limits of Representation on the Eve of Iconoclasm*, JÖB 41 (1991), p. 43-60, strikes me as insufficiently informed in matters of exegesis.



Fig. 2. Nicaea, Koimesis church. Apse mosaic.

εἰ σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε). One may wonder whether the substitution of the aorist by the perfect was deliberate or due to a lapse of memory.

2. The names of the angelic beings (not archangels) in the bema arch, namely Ἀρχαί, δυνάμεις, κυριότητες, ἐξουσίαι (also mis-spelt). These point directly to Eph. 1.21, the only scriptural passage that mentions these mysterius entities.

3. The inscription underneath the angelic beings, repeated on each side of the arch: Καὶ προσκυνησάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες ἄγγελοι (sic) Θεοῦ. This is taken from Hebr. 1.6, quoting with a few changes Deut. 32.43 (καὶ προσκυνησάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες υἱοὶ Θεοῦ) and Ps. 96.7 (προσκυνήσατε αὐτῷ, πάντες οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτοῦ). The nexus of these famous quotations, all of which had been the subject of extensive exegesis, ought to unravel the meaning of the sanctuary programme. In other words, we are not reduced to inferences drawn from iconography. Now, the central and most important text (No. 1) had given rise down to the 4th century to conflicting interpretations: spoken as it is by God, does it refer to the Incarnation or to the generation of the Only-Begotten before all time?¹⁷ Eventually, the second interpretation prevailed. It is represented notably by Chrysostom, who explains that πρὸ ἑωσφόρου refers to the creation, not the rising of the morning star on a particular day (i.e. that of the Nativity) and alleges that Christ himself (Mt 22.42-45) understood this psalm as referring εἰς τὴν κατὰ πνεῦμα γέννησιν. As to ἐκ γαστροῦ, it was to be taken metaphorically¹⁸. Likewise Theodoret, whose Commentary on the Psalms formed the basis of Byzantine catenae, explains that πρὸ ἑωσφόρου denoted τὸ πρὸ χρόνων αὐτὸν καὶ πρὸ αἰώνων εἶναι, while ἐκ γαστροῦ stood for the identity of nature, i.e. the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son¹⁹. Among later commentators, only Germanos, as far as I am aware, reverted to the ambiguity of the 4th century: for him Ps. 109 combined with Ps. 2.7 proved *both* the eternal divinity of the Only-Begotten *and* his Incarnation “in the last times”²⁰.

The two other texts, namely Eph. 1.21 (which speaks explicitly of the Ascension) and Hebr. 1, were, however, understood to refer to the human Christ: the angels, who always adore God, are here bidden to adore Him also as a man²¹. Hence, the basic meaning of the Nicaea programme may be understood as the identity of the pre-eternal Logos and the human Christ. Seeing, however, that the quotation placed above the figure of the Virgin referred to the generation before all time, it would have been more appropriate to express that notion by means of a Christ figure in an aureole rather than a normal infant Christ as in Phase III. The archaeo-

logical evidence does not preclude such a possibility, which, of course, can neither be proved nor disproved beyond pointing out its greater conformity to the accepted exegesis of the biblical text, assuming the Nicaea mosaics reflected a strictly orthodox position. But what if they (or their model) reflected a Monothelite position? Here is the formulation of the ‘heretical’ Ecthesis of Heraklios: ἓνα ἴσμεν υἱὸν τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν... τὸν αὐτὸν προαιώνιον τε καὶ ἐπ’ ἐσχάτων, ἀπαθὴ καὶ παθητόν, ὁρατὸν καὶ ἀόρατον²². We may remember that Germanos, whose exceptional explanation of Ps. 109 we have quoted, subscribed to the rein-statement of Monothelitism²³.

It is always risky to read a precise doctrinal meaning into a set of rather simple pictures. Iconography is not well equipped to express the subtle distinctions of theologians, especially in the matter of Christology, and it may be thought that in attempting such an explanation I have fallen into the very trap I mentioned at the beginning of this article.

17. See M.-J. Rondeau, *Le Commentaire des Psaumes de Diodore de Tarse et l'exégèse antique du Psaume 109/110*, RHR 116 (1969), p. 5-33; 117 (1970), p. 5-33.

18. PG 55, col. 264ff., esp. 275.

19. PG 80, col. 1772A.

20. *Rerum eccles. contempl.*, PG 98, col. 436D f.; In Dormit. hom. I, *ibid.*, col. 341. The blurring is particularly evident in the latter text, where Ps. 109 is interpreted as proving both τὴν προαιώνιον τῆς θεότητος ἐν τῷ μονογενεῖ... μετὰ τοῦ Πατρὸς συναΐδιον οὐσίαν, καὶ τὴν ἐνσαρκον αὐτοῦ περὶ τὰ ἐσχάτα τῶν καιρῶν... ἐνανθρώπησιν. In the same vein (col. 344) γαστήρ is made to refer to the Virgin's womb and προεωσφόρος to the night of the Nativity, contrary to accepted exegesis.

21. Theodoret, PG 82, cols. 516f. (on Ephesians), 685B (on Hebrews).

22. Mansi, X, p. 993D-E.

23. Theophanes, de Boor, p. 362, 382.