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The Presentation of an Icon at Mount Sinai

Annemarie WEYL CARR

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THE PRESENTATION OF AN ICON AT MOUNT SINAI

It is characteristic of my relation to Doula Mouriki that I offer in her homage a mere addendum to material that she laid out and organized for scholarly use. Here as so often I am working within the foundations that she laid. The subject of my offering is the famous twelfth-century icon of the Virgin and Child surrounded by prophets at Mount Sinai, of which she wrote the major analysis (Fig. 1)¹. A richly layered image of multiple meanings, the icon shows Mary in full length enthroned, laying her cheek against the head of a bare-legged Christ Child who grasps her maphorion with his left hand and turns away from her, kicking vigorously. A broad frame of smaller figures surrounds them. Paired figures of prophets with scrolls stand to either side; Joachim and Anna on the one hand and Adam and Eve on the other flank Joseph below; and in the upper frame Peter, Paul, John Prodromos and John the Evangelist flank Christ, labelled ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΤΗΣ ΔΟΞΗΣ and enthroned in a mandorla amid Cherubim and the apocalyptic beasts in a composition that recalls strongly the headpiece of Parma, Biblioteca Palatina². My interest here is in the relation of this variant of the Virgin and Child to the frame of prophetic figures that surrounds it³.

It was with Doula Mouriki's help that I was able on a visit to Sinai to study the icon at first hand⁴. As in photographs, usually cropped to the central figures, so in fact the panel is dominated by the central composition of the Virgin and Child, which assumes the dimensions of a small private icon (28.4 × 14.2 cm) and lends an impression of personal intimacy to the object. Virgin and Child are linked by innumerable bonds of color and composition to the surrounding frame of figures, however, and with its frame the icon measures a less intimate 48 × 41.2 cm. There is no question but that it was made for close personal inspection, though. Thin and heavily bowed, the panel is light in weight and easy to hold. To hold it comfortably, given its particular shape and size, is automatically to hold it at optical distance to read its many inscriptions: inscriptions on the scrolls of the prophets⁵, and inscriptions in red on the golden ground. Clearly, then, the icon offers itself for intimate and detailed reading. Its messages are remarkably rich. Characteristically we speak of messages in terms belonging to verbal processes; in this case the prophets look inward to view the Virgin and Child, just as we do, and so we turn to their scrolls to read the messages which

frame that shared vision. A number of their messages treat Christ, and he is certainly a major figure in the icon. Enthroned as a child on his mother's lap in the central panel, he appears enthroned upon the Cherubim in the frame above, thus showing his dual nature as God and man and linking his first coming with his Second, his incarnate visibility in the New Testament with the visions of the Old. Clothed in a short tunic that reveals his plump little kicking legs, he exhibits his humanness, turning at the same time from his mother's embrace along the outward direction of her pensive gaze as if straining into a future that she anticipates.

The Virgin's gaze is aligned along a strong diagonal in the icon's composition; it leads us to the frame to the figure of Symeon, the last dying voice of the Old Testament, who holds on his scroll his prophecy of the sword, characteristically linked with Christ's death. Christ strains, then, toward his mortality. His mortality is the gift of his mother; it is she who veils his divinity in flesh, as he indicates by gripping her veil⁶. The scroll that she hands him, the skin bearing the word, is again an image both of herself, the skin who bears the Logos, and of the mortal shroud with which she enfleshes his divinity⁷.

These elements turn attention to Mary: it is, in fact, she

1. In Konstantinos A. Manafes, gen. ed., *Sinai. Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, Athens 1990, p. 105, 385 notes 26-28.

2. Robert S. Nelson, *The Iconography of Preface and Miniature in the Byzantine Gospel Book*, New York 1980, p. 56-58 and frontispiece.

3. The prophets include Moses and Aaron, Symeon and Anna, David and Ezekiel, and Habakkuk and Balaam on the Virgin's right, and Jacob, Zacharias and Elizabeth, Isaiah and Daniel, and Solomon and Gideon on her left.

4. My thanks go also to Father Silouanos, who looked after my visit with great generosity.

5. All inscriptions are given by Mouriki in Manafes, *Sinai*, p. 385 note 27. A number of these have been retouched in heavy black strokes, but there is no reason to question their content.

6. Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich 1990, p. 326 (hereafter: *Bild und Kult*). This gesture will be the subject of further interpretation by Chrysanthi Baltoyianni, whom I thank for sharing her thoughts with me. Since I wrote this I have seen H  l  ne Papastavrou, *Le voile, Symbole de l'Incarnation*, *CahArch* 41 (1993), p. 141-168.

7. *Ibid.*

who is cited in the majority of the prophet's scrolls, and even more than Christ, it is she who is the focal image here. Enthroned as a queen, she is also the passionate mother whose sorrow Symeon prophesied. She is the avenue of salvation: at her feet the opening line of Romanos the Melode's hymn for the feast of her birth — "Joachim and Anna conceived and Adam and Eve were saved" — introduces the figures of Joachim, Anna, Adam, and Eve at her feet, arrayed symmetrically around Joseph, who proclaims his faith in Mary's purity in terms derived from the same hymn. Mary's purity, in turn, is echoed in her garb, as her maphorion lies at an angle over her head recalling its slanted contour in the Virgin of the Annunciation on the triptych doors at Sinai and its slanting fold in the famous Annunciation icon of the late twelfth century there (Figs 2 and 3)⁸. No less than her mother Anna and the proto-mother Eve, she is shown in marital terms, the bride unwed between her husband Joseph at lower center and her divine spouse above.

Striking in the image is its great literacy: with its many inscriptions, the icon is clearly meant to be read. No less striking, though, is the immense multiplicity of messages. Linking Old Testament vision to New Testament revelation and Incarnation to Second Coming; moving from Child to Mother and back again; from Mary's son to her husband to her father to her father in Heaven who is her son; from feast to feast of the Marian year, the image unfolds dimension on dimension of meaning, inviting the mind ever deeper into the endless layers of Marian meaning. It quickly becomes clear that the inscriptions, legible as they are, do not control the proliferation of messages. The images take over, leading one inexorably from the words at the margin to the central configuration of Mary embracing the child Christ. Just as the prophets turn from their scrolls to gaze on Mary, so we turn from their words to the figures. In the process, the triumphant tone of the frame's inscriptions confronts the tragic intimacy of the central group. Though each of these has been read separately in earlier studies of the icon, the two have not been examined together.

The Sinai icon is not the only panel from the twelfth century that adopts this richly suggestive set of themes. A painting in the Hermitage from the later twelfth century repeats the enthroned Virgin, the triumphant Christ and Cherubim, the scroll-bearing prophets, and the group of Joseph, the Virgin's parents, and the proto-parents below⁹. Here again Mary's veil is given particular emphasis, in this case by being not only canted, but painted in a pale color overlying her darker maphorion. Together, the two panels anticipate the well-known

theme of post-Byzantine art, "Ἀνωθεν οἱ προφηταὶ, named for a hymn on the prophets' praise of Mary¹⁰. The icons on Sinai and in the Hermitage, however, include many elements that are unexplained by the hymn, making it unlikely that it inspired them. These include the prophetic vision and Apostles above; the family groups below — Adam and Eve, Joachim and Anna, and Joseph; and the veil of the Virgin and her intricate posture in the Sinai panel. Both the Sinai and the Hermitage panels use an intimate and tender posture for Mary in which she nestles her cheek against the head of her child, a posture often — if probably erroneously¹¹ — labelled *Eleousa* in modern literature and associated with the passionate prolepsis found in homilies that parallel the Virgin caressing her child with her embrace of his body at the Lamentation¹². The version in Russia recalls the posture seen in the Vladimirskaya; that in Sinai, on the other hand, offers the earliest known example of the pose that came to be associated especially with the Virgin of Kykko on Cyprus. Both images offer a provocative contrast of the central image, at once tragic and intimate, with the triumphant imagery of heraldic prophecy and redemption that surrounds it. Both icons challenge one, thus, to understand the idea that gave rise to this juxtaposition of contrasting themes.

The challenge is especially pointed in the case of the Sinai icon. For in this, the earlier of the two paintings, the intimate and suggestive central image brings with it

8. See Kurt Weitzmann, *Fragments of an Early St. Nicholas Triptych*, ΔΧΑΕ Δ', Δ' (1964), p. 1-23; idem, *Eine spätbyzantinische Verkündigungssikone des Sinai und die zweite byzantinische Welle des 12. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Festschrift Herbert von Einem*, Berlin 1965, p. 299-312 (both reprinted in idem, *Studies in the Arts at Sinai*, Princeton 1982, articles VIII, X). The Annunciation icon is in Manafes, Sinai, p. 160, pl. 29. It is Athanasios Papageorgiou, *Η αμφιπρόσωπη εικόνα της εκκλησίας της Παναγίας Θεοσκέπαστης στην Πάφο*, in: *Εὐφρόσυνον. Ἀφιέρωμα στὸν Μανόλη Χατζιδάκη*, 2 vols, Athens 1991, p. 485, who pointed out the relationship of the Virgin in the Annunciation on the triptych wings with the Virgin known eventually as the Kykkotissa.

9. Olga E. Etinhof, *Ermitazhn' yu pamiatnik byzantiyskoy zhivopisi kontsa XII veka = A Byzantine Painting of the Late Twelfth Century in the Hermitage (Style and Iconography)*, in: *Bostochnoe Sredizemnomor'e i Kavkaz IV-XVI vv.*, Leningrad 1988, p. 141-159.

10. Doula Mouriki, *Αἱ βιβλικαὶ προεικονίσεις τῆς Παναγίας εἰς τὸν τροῦλλον τῆς Περιβλέπτου τοῦ Μυστρᾶ*, ΑΔ 25 (1970), Meletai, p. 240-251; Chrysanthi Baltoyianni, *Icons*, Demetrios Ekonomopoulos Collection, Athens 1986, number 9, p. 22.

11. Nancy Patterson Ševčenko, *Icons in the Liturgy*, DOP 45 (1991), p. 54-55.

12. Henry Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium*, Princeton 1981, p. 102.

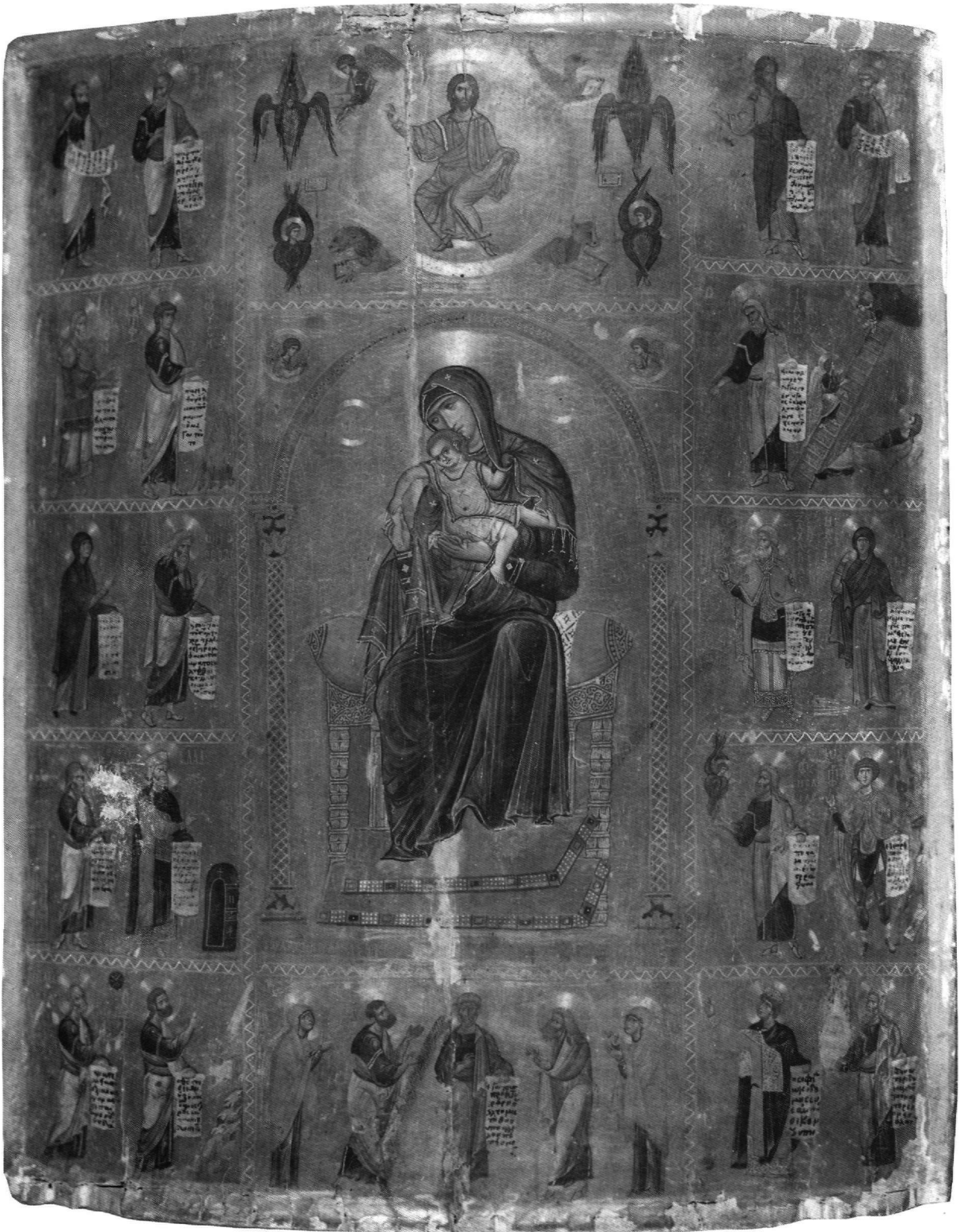


Fig. 1. Mount Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine. Virgin and Child with Prophets.



Fig. 2. Mount Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine. Annunciate Virgin, from triptych with scenes of St. Nicholas.

a particular reference. As Rebecca Corrie showed, the Child's short tunic, kicking legs, and straining posture are carried over from the Presentation¹³. This association is confirmed by the appearance of the same pose in the scene of the Presentation at the cave of the Candeloro in Massafra, Apulia (Fig. 5), where the Child grips Mary's veil, and in the image of 1192 in Lagoudera on Cyprus, where the Child is in Symeon's arms and grips his robe (Fig. 7)¹⁴. An icon on Sinai shows a very similar figure of Symeon within the Presentation scene (Fig. 4)¹⁵.

The Presentation was classed as a Marian feast¹⁶. It was celebrated annually on February 2 with imperial ceremonies at the church of Blachernai in Constantinople, the church that housed the relic of the Virgin's veil¹⁷. The Presentation itself is readily associated with the theme of Old Testament prophecy. Symeon was the last of the prophets of Mary. Euthymios Zigabenos called

him "the Old Testament, that wishes to die"¹⁸: Old Testament and New Testament meet in his meeting with Christ. Christ's presentation in the Temple was in accord with Old Testament law and showed him as the old law's fulfilment. The Temple itself was associated in the twelfth century with the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, where contemporary pilgrims celebrated the site of Christ's Presentation alongside the sites of Old Testament events laden with prophetic implications for the New. The Greek pilgrim John Phocas juxtaposed in neat symmetry the site of the Presentation on the one hand with the site of Jacob's ladder on the other, thus drawing together two of the themes that appear also in close juxtaposition on the Sinai icon, where the ladder is among the most conspicuously placed prophetic images of the frame¹⁹. The icon's linkage of Presentation and prophets accords, then, with the theme of the Presentation. Homilists made the same association: the homily attributed to the ninth-century George of Nicomedia, for instance, lists a number of prophets in its text²⁰. Like many homilists on the Presentation, he cites Adam and Eve, too, as recipients of the salvation seen by Symeon²¹.

13. Rebecca Corrie, *Coppo di Marcovaldo and the Meaning of the Child in the Virgin Kykkotissa*, forthcoming. I am very grateful, indeed, to Rebecca Corrie for showing me this fundamental study.

14. On the cave of the Candeloro, named after the painting in question, see Marina Falla Castelfranchi, *Pittura monumentale bizantina in Puglia*, Milan 1991, p. 152-153 and pl. 129; C. D. Fonseca, *La civiltà rupestre in Puglia*, in: *La Puglia tra Bizanzio e l'Occidente*, Milan 1980, pl. 125 in color. On Lagoudera, see Henry Maguire, *The Iconography of Symeon with the Christ Child in Byzantine Art*, *DOP* 34-35 (1980-81), pl. 10 (hereafter: *the Iconography of Symeon*). I thank Linda Safran for pointing out to me the mural of the Candeloro cave.

15. Manafes, Sinai, p. 158-159, pl. 28.

16. Alexander Kazhdan, gen. ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), s.v. Hypapante.

17. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *Constantine VII Porphyrogénète, Le Livre des cérémonies*, trans. and ed. Albert Vogt, 2nd ed., 2 vols in 4, Paris 1967, 1, 1:137-142.

18. PG 129, 896.

19. Joannes Phocas, *The Pilgrimage of Joannes Phocas in the Holy Land (In the Year 1185 AD)*, *Palestine Pilgrims Text Society* 5, London 1896, p. 20: "On the left side of this church are two vaulted chambers, in one of which is depicted the Presentation of our Lord Christ, because in that place the just man Simeon received our Lord Christ into his arms, and in the other the wondrous ladder which Jacob saw reaching up to heaven..."

20. The sermon is published in PG, 28, 973-1000, with the list of prophets on col. 993. On its attribution see Maguire, *The Iconography of Symeon*, p. 265-266.

21. PG 28, 990.



Fig. 3. Mount Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine. Annunciate Virgin, from icon of Annunciation.



Fig. 4. Mount Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine. Presentation of Christ, from tetraptych with feast scenes.

Though the themes of prophecy and Presentation, then, offer a readily precedented pairing, the imagery of the Sinai icon remains exceptional. For although the Presentation was a feast of Mary, it is not Mary who dominated either its literary tradition or its representation in art. The festival was known by the title *Hypapante*, meaning meeting; the meeting in question was that of Christ and Symeon. Though Mary facilitated the meeting by carrying Christ, she was herself no more than accessory to the action and secondary to its interpretation. As Henry Maguire has noted, she begins to assume a role in the scene only in the post-Iconoclastic period with the introduction of the theme of Christ's mortality as a concomitant to that of his incarnate and visible humanity²². This theme finds its locus in Symeon's prophecy of the sword that will pierce Mary's heart. Barely cited in Cosmas's famous *kontakion* that forms the basis of the Matins liturgy for the Presentation²³, the sword was interpreted by Romanos the Melode as a reference not to the Passion but to the stabbing thrust of doubt²⁴. George of Nicomedia, however, interprets the sword with reference to the Passion. In the interim the visual iconography of the scene had seen the introduction of

the altar between Symeon and Mary, forming a visual reference to Christ's sacrificial role that answers the literary one in the homily²⁵. It is to Mary that George of Nicomedia directs references to the Passion; it is in turn in Mary's gestures that Maguire traces the visualization of this theme in art. Even here, however, Maguire's analysis traces Mary's assumption of the passive posture of an accessory and witness, the posture of grieving onlooker that she assumes in the Crucifixion, and his narrative comes to a climax in an image that virtually excludes the Virgin in favor of Symeon and the Child alone²⁶. The Virgin's role is illustrated well in George of Nicomedia's homily. She is singled out; attention is drawn to her by Symeon's prophecy of the sword. It is at this point, in reference to her — as in the icon —, that prophets are cited, one after another in a laudatory chain of prefigurations anticipating her. But why, the homilist asks, is Mary so singled out? Because she will watch her son's death²⁷. Here as in the imagery that Maguire traces, Mary is an onlooker and not an actor in the story. In view of this history, the imagery of the Sinai icon becomes striking, singling out from the composition of the Presentation not Symeon and Christ but



Fig. 5. Massafra, Grotto of the Candeloro. Presentation of Christ.

the figure of the Virgin herself, bearing her child in her arms. This raises the question of the validity of carrying over to the complex Sinai icon the association with the Presentation that has been seen in Mary's pose. Is this presuming too much upon the force of the visual image; is this presuming too much upon the visual literacy even of the very literate viewer that the icon addresses?

Insight into this question may emerge from a sermon composed at a moment closer to the conception of the icon itself. The twelfth-century Cypriot holy man, Neophytos, authored a sermon on the feast of the Presentation that offers a striking kinship to the icon. He invites his fellow monks to contemplate the Presentation in the Temple²⁸.

Brothers and Fathers, closing our sensory eyes for a little while, let us lift our inward vision and contemplate in our minds the pure Mother of God. For she comes into our minds like a living Heaven, carrying the Sun of righteousness in her arms to brighten and warm those who flee to him in faith... She comes as a firmament bearing on her arm the star of Jacob... She comes as a ladder, having the Lord firmly grounded in her... She comes as a saving cloud of

22. Maguire, *The Iconography of Symeon*, p. 265-266 and passim.

23. PG 98, 509-514, with the prophecy of the sword mentioned on col. 511. See also R. P. Feuillen Mercenier, *La Prière des églises de rite byzantine*, II: *Les fêtes*, 1: *Grands fêtes fixes*, Priuré d'Amay-sur-Meuse 1939, p. 213-218.

24. Marjorie Carpenter, *Kontakia of Romanos*, Byzantine Melodist, 2 vols, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1970, 1: 44.

25. Anna Kartsonis, *Anastasis. The Making of an Image*, Princeton 1986, p. 103. After an isolated appearance on the marriage ring at Dumbarton Oaks, the altar in the Presentation appears for the first time in the enamel cross of Pope Paschal I from the early ninth century. It then appears notably often in conjunction with the earliest images of the Anastasis, and would seem to parallel this in its message, bringing out the Incarnation and Passion and their necessity to redemption.

26. Maguire, *The Iconography of Symeon*, passim, culminating in the icon of Symeon with the Christ Child (fig. 10).

27. PG 28, 993-996.

28. Ermanno M. Toniolo, *Omilie e catechesi mariane inedite di Neofito il Recluso (1134-1200 c)*, *Marianum* 36 (1974), p. 305-307. The text comes from Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Suppl. gr. 1317:

Ἄδελφοί καὶ πατέρες· μικρὸν ἀπειρήσαντες τοὺς αἰσθητοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς, τοὺς τῆς διανοίας ἐπάρωμεν, καὶ κατίδωμεν νοητῶς τὴν ἀγνὴν θεομήτορα. Ἦκε γὰρ ὡς ἔμψυχος οὐρανός, τὸν ἥλιον τῆς δικαιοσύνης ἐν ἀγκάλαις φέρουσα, ἵνα φωτίσῃ καὶ θάλψῃ τοὺς πιστῶς πρὸς αὐτὴν καταφεύγοντας... Ἦκε καθάπερ στερέωμα, τὸ ἄστρον τὸ ἐξ Ἰακώβ ἐν ὠλέναις βαστάζουσα... Ἦκεν



Fig. 6. St. Petersburg, Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library, gr. 105, f. 131v. Transfiguration.

rain, bearing the holy rain in her breast to bathe and nourish the soil of our mind. She comes as fertile God-bearing earth, as a sheaf carrying the life-giving grain to nourish the hearts that hunger for it. She comes as a pyramid, having within her the grain of life to measure out to those who need grain. She comes as a table, having upon it the bread of life... She comes as a grapevine bearing the cluster so that new wine may slake the faithful... She comes as a spotless heifer and as a ewe without blemish... She comes as tongs grasping the burning coal to burn to the roots the briar of sins... She comes as a candelabrum of pure gold with seven lights... She comes as an ark, having within her the right hand of the Father... She comes as a palace and royal throne and as a queen adorned, bearing as a mother the King of Glory, in

order to invite into the kingdom of God those who crave it.

You see, beloved ones, how the Mother of God manifests herself to your minds today; see the excellence of this feast that reveals to us today the Virgin Mary and Mother of God. This is why I told you at the beginning of my talk that we should close the eyes of our senses for a little while and raise our minds so that we could contemplate the Virgin as a Heaven, as a firmament, as a ladder, as a cloud, as a sheaf, as a pyramid, as a table, as a vine, as a chariot, as a heifer, as tongs, as a candelabrum, as an ark, as a palace, and as Pantanassa... Come, then, beloved, so that — through this above-mentioned sun and star streaming as light from the virginal firmament, we may be irradiated with divine light for the revelation of divine visions and with glory for our salvation.

The sermon of Neophytos cannot have inspired the icon on Sinai; quite aside from their qualitative difference, the icon antedates the sermon by a good half-century. By the same token the icon is very unlikely to have inspired the sermon. Instead, the two testify to a shared conception of the Presentation, a conception that stands behind both. The sermon and the icon together are meditations upon the Presentation in similar terms. As such, they share common features. In both, the Presentation is interpreted as a revelation of the Virgin. Neophytos's repeated "she comes" contrasts vividly with the similarly repeated «αὐτός» in Cyril of Jerusalem's homily²⁹. It is Mary who represents the essence of the event. In both icon and sermon, moreover, the Virgin is revealed as a concrete manifestation of prophecies come to pass. She is the revelation that the prophets had promised. The two coincide in their approach to their subject.

Beyond their coincidence in interpretive approach, however, the two share a second kind of kinship. This lies in aspects of formal realization. The sermon of Neophytos, no less than the icon, invites us to visual contemplation. His sermon, too, is an exercise in seeing. Its message is to be seen with the eye of the spirit, and not simply to be heard. What Neophytos offers the eye is an ever shifting message. With each glance, it has assumed new connotations, new dimensions. Kaleidoscopic, kinetic, it shifts before the viewing eye. This, surely, is the way the icon was seen, as well: not as a static crystallization, but as a kinetic and shifting stimulus to ever new dimensions of meaning in which individual components assume ever new connotations, one overlying the other.

The overlay of one meaning over another leads to a third aspect of the sermon's coincidence with the icon.



Fig. 7. Lagoudera, Church of the Panagia tou Arakou. Symeon with the Christ Child and John the Baptist.

Neophytos's sermon relates in a distinctive way to the event it conjures. The Virgin "comes" to the contemplating listener, and the listener, seeing her revealed, hastens to offer her his or her focussed being. Symeon and Anna, too, Neophytos says, hasten to offer her their homage. His listeners become seers, counterparts to Symeon and Anna. Seeing the Virgin bearing in her arms the sun of righteousness, they, too, can say that "my eyes have seen your salvation". Neophytos both recreates the event in the viewer's mind and installs the viewer in the event so that it happens to him. As to a Symeon — or as the case may be to an Anna —, the Virgin "comes" to the listener.

Much the same can be said of the icon. Belting has noted how the gaze of the depicted Virgin falls upon the figure of Symeon in the icon's frame³⁰. Thus the icon recreates the event before the viewer. But the viewer is

also installed in the event. The round sun of the celestial Christ's mandorla is at the same time a dome over the apse-like niche in which the Virgin appears. Herself an ark in the sanctuary, as Cosmas says³¹, the Virgin bears the divinity who draws aside her veil as a virtual temple veil to manifest himself. Through the door margins of prophecy the Virgin comes before the icon's viewer as she did before Symeon, bearing her child in her arms. In Cosmas's kontakion, incorporated in the Matins office

ὡς κλίμαξ, ἐν αὐτῇ ἐστηριγμένον τὸν Κύριον ἔχουσα... Ἦκεν ὥσπερ ὀμβροτόκος νεφέλη σωτήριος, τὸν θεῖον ὄμβρον ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ κατέχουσα, ἵνα λογικὰς γαίαις ὀμβρήσῃ καὶ θρέψῃ ὁμοῦ. Ἦκεν ὡς ἄρουσα θεοφόρος, ὡς δράγμα κρατοῦσα τὸν ζωηφόρον ἄσταχυν, ἵνα θρέψῃ καρδίας πεινώσας αὐτόν. Ἦκεν ὡς πυραμίδας, ἔχουσα ἐγκόλπιον τὸν σῖτον τῆς ζωῆς, ἵνα σιτοδοτήσῃ τοὺς ἔχοντας χρεῖαν τοῦδε τοῦ σίτου. Ἦκεν ὡς τράπεζα, ἔχουσα ἐν ἑαυτῇ τὸν ἄρτον τῆς ζωῆς... Ἦκεν ὡς ἄμπελος, τὸν βότρυν βαστάζουσα, ἵνα γλεῦκος ποτίσῃ πιστούς... Ἦκεν ὡς ἄρμα ἐποχούμενον τῷ Λόγῳ... Ἦκεν ὡς δάμαλις ἄσιλος καὶ ἀμνάς ὑπεράνωτος... Ἦκεν ὡς λαβίς, κρατοῦσα τὸν παμφαέστατον ἄνθρωπον, ἵνα ἐμπρήσῃ προθέλυτον τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν τὴν ἄκανθαν... Ἦκεν ὡς πάγχρυσος λυχνία ἐπτάφωτος... Ἦκεν ὡς κιβωτός, ἔχουσα ἐν αὐτῇ τὴν πατρικὴν δεξιάν... Ἦκεν ὡς παλάτιον καὶ ὡς Βασιλέως καθέδρα καὶ ὡς Βασιλεὺς ὠραῖσμένη, τὸν Βασιλεῖα τῆς δόξης κράτουσα μητροπρεπῶς, ἵνα καλέσῃ πρὸς βασιλείαν Θεοῦ τοὺς αὐτῆς ἐραστάς.

Ὁρᾶτε, ἀγαπητοί, πῶς νοητῶς ἡ Θεομήτωρ ἡμῖν ἐμπεφάνισται σήμερον· ὁρᾶτε τῆς ἑορτῆς ταύτης τὸ ἐξαιρετικόν, πῶς τὴν Παρθένον Μαρίαν καὶ Μητέρα τοῦ Θεοῦ Λόγου ἡμῖν σήμερον ἀπεκάλυψε. Διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ πάντως καὶ ὑμῖν εἶπον ἐν τῇ τοῦ λόγου ἀρχῇ, ὅτι ἀπειρηγῶμεν μικρὸν τοὺς αἰσθητοὺς ὀφθαλμούς, καὶ ἐπάρωμεν τοὺς νοητούς, ἵνα ἰσχύσωμεν κατιδεῖν τὴν Παρθένον ὡς οὐρανόν, ὡς στερέωμα, ὡς κλίμακα, ὡς νεφέλην, ὡς ἄρουραν, ὡς πυραμίδα, ὡς τράπεζαν, ὡς ἄμπελον, ὡς ἄρμα, ὡς δάμαλιν, ὡς λαβίδα, ὡς λαμπάδα, ὡς λυχνίαν, ὡς κιβωτόν, ὡς παλάτιον, ὡς θρόνον, καὶ ὡς Παντάνασσαν. Καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα πάντα, καὶ τὸν δίκαιον Συμεὼν καὶ Ἄναν τὴν ὑποφῆτιδα κατοπτεῦσωμεν· καὶ τὸν μὲν, ἀπόλυτον ἐξαιτούμενον, τὴν δὲ, ἀνθομολογοῦσαν περὶ τοῦ βρέφους καὶ μαρτυροῦσαν λύτρων δι' αὐτοῦ.

29. PG 33, 1192-1193:

...αὐτὸν ἐν ἀγκάλαις τοῦ πρεσβύτου οἰκονομικῶς, καὶ αὐτὸν ἐν θρόνοις χερουβικοῖς· αὐτὸν προσφερόμενον καὶ ἀγνιζόμενον, καὶ αὐτὸν τὰ πάντα ἀγνίζοντα καὶ καθαίροντα. Αὐτὸς τὸ δῶρον, καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ ναὸς ὧν· αὐτὸς ὁ ἀρχιερεὺς, καὶ αὐτὸς τὸ θυσιαστήριον· αὐτὸς τὸ ἱλαστήριον. Καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ προσφέρων· καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ ὑπὲρ κόσμου θυσία προσφερόμενος, καὶ αὐτὸς τὰ ἔξυλα τῆς ζωῆς καὶ τῆς γνώσεως. Αὐτὸς ὁ ἀμνός, καὶ αὐτὸς τὸ πῦρ ὑπάρχων· αὐτὸς ἡ ὀλοκαυτίσις καὶ αὐτὸς ἡ μάχαιρα τοῦ Πνεύματος· αὐτὸς ὁ ποιμήν, καὶ αὐτὸς τὸ ἄρνιον· αὐτὸς ὁ θύτης καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ θυόμενος· αὐτὸς ὁ ἀναφερόμενος, καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ τὴν θυσίαν δεχόμενος· αὐτὸς ὁ νόμος, καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ νῦν ὑπὸ νόμον γινόμενος.

30. Belting, *Bild und Kult*, p. 324.

31. PG 98, 509: Τῆς κιβωτοῦ γὰρ προελθὼν τοῦ ἁγιάσματος σου τῆς ἀφθόρου μητρὸς, ἐν τῷ ναῷ τῆς δόξης σου ὤφθης ὡς βρέφος ἀγκαλοφορούμενος.

of the Presentation, Symeon bends to Mary's feet in veneration³². In offering the icon the veneration of a kiss, the viewer does precisely the same thing. At Mary's feet is Joseph with his declaration of faith in her. The icon elicits a similar commitment of belief as, with Symeon, the viewer recognizes and so affirms the image with its freight of meaning.

That an icon should engage the viewer in this kind of kinetic and participatory contemplation challenges the characteristic metaphors used in explaining icons — metaphors in which the icon becomes “transparent”, “like a window”, or in some other way vanishes from view. Few Byzantine images, moreover, invite the viewer so explicitly to complete the action³³. I can, however, cite a miniature in a manuscript that comes, once again, from the twelfth century, and perhaps from a locality not far removed from Neophytos. This is the miniature of the Transfiguration on f. 131v of the Gospel Book, St. Petersburg, Public Library, gr. 105 (Fig. 6)³⁴. In this case, only Christ, Moses, and Elijah are shown in the miniature. The readers themselves are thus invited to “become” the disciples and to “see” before their eyes the revelation of the transfigured Christ. Examples of scenes completed by the viewer in Byzantine art are few. I believe they can, however, illuminate the idea of the “living icon” that Belting offered³⁵, while at the same time suggesting that the icon should be understood less as vanishing than as ceaselessly focussing and feeding the dynamism of the contemplative imagination.

It is, as noted, quite impossible that Neophytos's sermon served as a basis for the Sinai icon; it is quite implausible, in fact, that any one literary text served as a basis for it. The icon is a text in its own right. What Neophytos's sermon can offer, I believe, are three things. It shows a similar mode of conceiving the Presentation in the Temple, permitting us both to credit the central figure of the Virgin with the full connotative force of its distinctive posture, and — in response to our initial question — to understand this figure in conjunction with those in the frame. In sermon and icon alike, the Presentation is viewed less as the meeting of Christ and Symeon than as the coming of the Virgin, bearing Christ in her arms. Like the icon, the sermon frames this advent in the terms of Old Testament prophecy fulfilled. Second, the sermon offers the issue — as yet open — of the relevance of time or perhaps more interestingly of place in the conception we have just observed. Doula Mouriki proposed that the icon was produced for a member of the community at Sinai³⁶. The possibility that icon and sermon together reflect an interpretation of the Presentation rooted more in the Holy Land than in Constantinople deserves investigation. It is, after all,

in Cyprus that the posture seen in the icon lives on. Third and finally, the sermon offers us an instance of visual contemplation formulated in our familiar medium of words. As such, it affords us an example of the way the images of the icon were probably meant to be viewed: kaleidoscopically, kinetically, with message overlying message in a manner fueled less by the icon's transparency than by its meticulously orchestrated forms.

32. *Ibid.*, 511: Προκύψας ὁ πρεσβύτες, καὶ τῶν ἰχνῶν ἐνθέως ἐφάπαμνος τῆς ἀπειρογάμου καὶ Θεομήτορος. Πῦρ, ἔφη, βαστάξεις, ἀγνή. Βρέφος φρίττω ἀγκαλίσσασθαι Θεόν, φωτὸς ἀνεσπέρου καὶ εἰρήνης δεσπόζοντα. In Mercenier, *La Prière*, p. 215, he kisses her feet.

33. This is, however, an idea seen in epigrams and homilies, as illustrated especially vividly by Michael Psellos in his description of an icon of the Crucifixion, published by Paul Gautier, *Un Discours inédit de Michel Psellos sur la Crucifixion*, REB 49 (1991), p. 5-66, and soon to be published in translation with commentary by Elizabeth A. Fisher.

34. Annemarie Weyl Carr, *Byzantine Illumination 1150-1250: The Study of a Provincial Tradition*, Chicago 1987, fiche 11 D 6. Ernest Cadman Colwell and Harold Rideout Willoughby, *The Four Gospels of Karahissar*, 2 vols, Chicago 1936, 2, p. 293-295 and pl. LXXX.

35. Belting, *Bild und Kult*, p. 292-330: “beseelte Ikonen”.

36. Manafes, Sinai, p. 385, note 28.

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Fig. 5: Photograph, Gerald L. Carr.

Fig. 6: Reproduced by permission of the Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library, St. Petersburg.

Fig. 7: Photograph, the author.