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ΔΕΛΤΙΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΗΣ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΗΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ

A Little Known Typological Representation of the Monastery at Sinai

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A LITTLE KNOWN TYPOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE MONASTERY AT SINAI

Among the many fields of interest of the late Doula Mouriki was the collection of icons in the monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai¹. It therefore seems appropriate to present a little-known representation of the monastery on an icon in its collection in this number of the *Δελτίον* dedicated to her memory. The icon, which measures 236 × 170 millimetres, contains two scenes, separated by the frame. The lower one, a portrait of John Vladimir, has interested a number of Slav scholars since its publication by Benešević in 1925²; the upper one (Fig. 1), with which I am concerned here, has been largely ignored. Previous scholars have had to rely on the mediocre reproduction published by Benešević. I, however, have had the advantage of access to the excellent photographs taken by the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai³.

The background is made up of the three typical peaks of Sinai landscapes. In the centre is the monastery surmounted by the enthroned Virgin and Child encircled by fire (the Burning Bush). Slightly to the left Moses, in small scale, unties his sandals. A larger scale representation of Moses appears to the left and of Saint Catherine, with the broken wheel, to the right.

The icon is accompanied by a considerable number of inscriptions, of which only one, the title in larger scale letters, was transcribed by Benešević: ἡ ἁγία βάτος. Possibly the icon at the time of his visit was too grimy for them to be deciphered. Now the inscriptions, except for a damaged area in the top left hand corner and occasional letters, may be read. I now give a list of them.

1. (top left) ...ον ὑπὲρ πᾶν ὄρος [Θεός] γὰρ ἐν σοι τὰς νόμ[ου] γ...θει πλάκας, One can only infer an allusion to God giving Moses the tablets of the Law on the mountain.

2. (top right) Μωσῆς δὲ ταύτας ἐξ ἐκείνου λαμβάνει, ὄντος Θεοῦ πέφυκας ἄξιός τόπος, Moses receives these (sc. the tablets) from here. Truly thou art naturally a place worthy of God.

3. (lower left) Μωσῆ... βάτω ὡς ὥφθης παρθένον εἶδει, Moses saw in the bush (the) Virgin as a vision.

4. (lower right) ἄγγελος ἐκλήθη π[ατ]ρ[ὸς] ὁ λόγος τὴν πρὸς ἡμᾶς σου προ[λέγ]ων παρουσίαν, Thou hast been called angel of the Father, the Word foretelling to us thy coming.

5. (lower left) Πῦρ ἐν βάτῳ καὶ θαῦμα ταύτην οὐ φλέγει, οὐ [π]ῦρ τὸ πῦρ, οὐ βάτος ἐστὶν ἡ βάτος καὶ πῦρ τὸ πῦρ καὶ βάτος ἐστὶν ἡ βάτος, ἀλλὰ εἰκονίζει τὸν τόκον τῆς Παρθένου, Fire in (the) bush and — marvel — does not burn it. Not fire the fire, not bush is the bush, and fire (is) the fire, and bush is the bush, but symbolizes the motherhood of the Virgin.

6. (lower right) + Πάθη συντόμως ἀπαλλάττει Παρθένος τῶν εὐλαβεία προστρεχόντων ἀπάντων καὶ δυσουριών(α) ἰᾷτ(αι), ὦ μεγίστη χάρις, The Virgin relieves summarily the sufferings of those approaching her with discretion, answering. (The next words seem to imply a cure from dysuria). Oh very great grace!

7. (to the left of the standing figure to Moses) a direct quotation of *Exodus* 3, 6: ἀπέστρεψε δὲ Μωσῆς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ, εὐλαβεῖτο γὰρ κατεμβλέψαι ἐνώπιον τοῦ Θεοῦ, Moses turned away his face, for he was afraid to gaze at God.

8. (between Moses and the Virgin and Child) Μωσῆ, Μωσῆ, μὴ ἐγγίσης ὧδε. λύσαι τὸ ὑπόδημα ἐκ τῶν

1. Doula Mouriki, *Icons from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century, Sinai Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, edited K. S. Manafis, Athens 1990, p. 102-104.

2. V. Benešević, *Monumenta sinaitica archaeologica et palaeographica*, Petropolis (Sankt Petersburg) 1925, p. 46-47, pl. 25.

3. The late Kurt Weitzmann personally authorized me to use this photograph, which is reproduced through the courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai. I also gratefully thank A. Failler and N. Oikonomides for help in reading the inscriptions.

ποδῶν σου, ὁ γὰρ τόπος ἐν ᾧ σὺ ἔστηκας γῆ ἁγία ἐστίν. Ἐγὼ εἰμὶ ὁ Θεὸς τοῦ πατρὸς σου, ὁ Θεὸς Ἀβραὰμ καὶ ὁ Θεὸς Ἰσαὰκ καὶ ὁ Θεὸς Ἰακώβ, This inscription corresponds closely to *Exodus* 3, 4-6: Moses, Moses, do not approach. Take your sandal(s) from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.

9. (between the Virgin and Child and Saint Catherine) εἰς ὁσμὴν μύρου σου ἔδραμον Χ(ριστὸς) ὁ Θεός ὅτι τέτρωμαι τῆς σῆς ἀγάπης ἐγὼ, I ran to the perfume of your unguent, Christ God, that I trembled from thy love.

10. (above and to the right of Saint Catherine) Παρθενομάρτυς δώρησ(ον) Ἀναστασίῳ λύσιν πταισμάτων πάντοτε δεομένῳ, Virgin martyr, grant to Anastasius enchained freedom from guilt eternally.

11. (to the right of the monastery at the bottom) ἐν Σινάι ὄρει (?) 1781, On Mount (?) Sinai 1781⁴.

The legends give us some information about the production of the icon. It was commissioned by a certain Anastasius, in thanksgiving for a cure from illness, with the hope also of pardon for his sins. It was painted at Sinai in 1781.

This genre of representations of Sinai is well known. Three other eighteenth-century examples were published in the volume on Sinai to which the late Doula Mouriki contributed. One, painted on the back of the archiepiscopal throne in the katholikon of the monastery by Ioannis Kornaros, would seem to derive from the *Pokrov*⁵. To left and right Moses and Saint Catherine hold the ends of a protective veil over the monastery. In the centre are the Virgin and Child in a mandorla surrounded by flames (the Burning Bush). The Virgin also extends a hand to hold up the veil. Above her head, in clouds and surrounded by angels, is a bust of Moses holding the text of the Ten Commandments. A hand, emerging from the clouds, points to the eighth commandment.

An icon by Iakovos Moskos is more topographical⁶. Although it includes representations of Moses before the Burning Bush, Moses receiving the tablets of the Law and angels placing Saint Catherine's body on the summit of one of the three mountains, it is more popular in style and content than our icon. The third, an embroidery, is more simple in its construction⁷. Moses, with his sheep, is placed to the left of the monastery and Saint Catherine, with her wheel, to the right. Above the monastery is the Burning Bush, encircling the Virgin and Child in bust form, each of them represented orans. On the summit of the mountain to the right Saint Catherine's body is placed.

Behind these icons is a long and developing tradition both in cult and iconography. It does not seem that the Jews were particularly interested in locating the sites mentioned in the *Exodus*. It was the Christians who did this, and established sanctuaries visited by pilgrims to Mount Sinai⁸. Of these the most popular was the Burning Bush. Egeria, who visited Sinai in December 383, found a group of hermitages and a church at the place where the bush "still to this day is robust and puts out tendrils"⁹. Although the typological explanation of the Burning Bush as prefiguring the Mother of God's virginity retained intact after the birth of Christ probably dates back to Gregory of Nyssa¹⁰, the original iconography simply shows Moses taking off his sandals before the Burning Bush, while the voice which he hears is attributed to an angel¹¹. This iconography was maintained in Octateuch illustration in the twelfth century, for example in Vatican gr. 746, f. 157¹². Here a haloed angel in bust form is placed above the bush addressing Moses.

Although the Kokkinobaphos Master illuminated manuscripts of the Octateuch, the typological interpretation of the Burning Bush was only introduced into the illustration of the Homilies, where a small bust of Christ Emmanuel is placed in the bush¹³. Subsequently typological illustrations occur regularly, for example at Lesnovo and in the Kariye Djami¹⁴. In this last case a small medallion of the Virgin and Child is placed on the bush, while an angel addresses Moses. It must be said that it is dogmatically more correct that an angel should represent the voice of God in the Old Testament. However, the angel disappears from the eighteenth-century representations. Moreover the bush also tends to disappear, the entire space inside the circle of flames being occupied by the Virgin and Child. On our icon, it is to be noted that the Christ Child extends a hand towards Moses in a speaking gesture, while a legend, transcribed above, attributes to Christ the title of 'angel of the Father'.

It is one of the curious features of the history of cult that the monastery of the Burning Bush should have become known as that of Saint Catherine. The legend that angels were seen carrying the body of Saint Catherine to Mount Sinai does not figure in the Constantinopolitan Synaxary for her feast-day (November 24th). In fact it is first attested in the *Metaphrastic Life*¹⁵. At some date, which cannot be fixed with precision, the possession of the relics of Saint Catherine seems to have become more important for the monastic community than the presence of the Burning Bush. At least the place became known, as it is to this day, as Saint Catherine's monastery. On a nineteenth-century *epitaphios*, Saint Catherine



Fig. 1. Sinai. Monastery of St. Catherine. Fragment of an iconostasis beam with scenes from the Life of the Virgin.

rine occupies the central place¹⁶. In other eighteenth-century representations of Sinai her body is placed on the summit of a mountain¹⁷. On our icon there is simply her typical portrait. She is imperially dressed, carries a martyr's palm and is accompanied by the wheel of torture, which, according to legend, was broken by an angel¹⁸.

4. Apparently this inscription was illegible in Benešević's time. It confirms the date earlier postulated for the icon, and implies that it was actually painted at Sinai.

5. *Op.cit.* (note 1), p. 15.

6. *Ibid.*, no 100, p. 225.

7. *Ibid.*, no 1, p. 243.

8. P. Maraval, *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d'Orient*, Paris 1985, p. 38-41; p. 308-310.

9. *Egérie, Journal de voyage*, edited P. Maraval, Paris 1982, p. 140-141.

10. Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio in diem natalem Christi* (BHG 1915; Clavis 3194), PG 46, 1136b. Migne printed the homily among the doubtful works of Gregory of Nyssa. However it is listed as authentic in Clavis. In his *Life of Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa did not interpret the incident of the Burning Bush typologically.

11. Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *Program and Iconography of the Frescoes of the Parecclesion, The Kariye Djami*, edited P. A. Underwood, 4, Princeton/London 1966, p. 336-338. In Paris. gr. 139, f. 442v, there is just a green bush with red flames at the top of the mountain in the scene of Moses receiving the Law, A. Cutler, *The Aristocratic Psalters in Byzantium*, Paris 1984, p. 67, fig. 254.

12. J. Lowden, *The Octateuchs. A Study in Byzantine Manuscript Illustration*, University Park 1992, p. 70, fig. 92.

13. Der Nersesian, *op.cit.* (note 11).

14. *Op.cit.* (note 11), 3, New York 1966, pls 444-452.

15. PG 116, 301a-b.

16. Sinai, *op.cit.* (note 1), p. 246-247.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 225, 243.

18. PG 116, 297b-c.

This attribute is less common than might be supposed. It does not occur in the earliest icon of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai attributed by the Sotiriou to the eleventh century¹⁹, nor on the slightly later biographical icon, although, among the scenes surrounding the saint's portrait, is the incident of the angel breaking the wheel²⁰. The earliest example of a portrait of Saint Catherine with the wheel seems to be on the Catalan retable by Martinus de Vilanova, dated 1387²¹. It appears also on the seventeenth-century icon by Jeremiah Palladas, and on the embroidery noted above²².

A final detail which should be noted is the posture of the standing figure of Moses. He extends a hand towards the theophany represented by the Burning Bush, but turns his head away. The explanation of his posture is given by the accompanying legend citing *Exodus*: Moses turned his face away, for he was afraid to gaze at God. There is no doubt that we have here a picture which is not only of high quality but which also combined a high

level of erudition with specific personal piety: thanksgiving for relief from a disagreeable malady and request for pardon of sins. This scene of the icon gives no clue as to the identity of Anastasios, the donor. The lower part, with the representation of John Vladimir, does not dispell the obscurity; rather, perhaps, it deepens it. I hope to discuss the lower part of the icon in another article dedicated to the memory of the late Doula Mouriki in the volume of essays which the Faculty of Architecture of the National Technical University of Athens has decided to publish.

19. G. and M. Sotiriou, *Icônes du Mont Sinai*, 1, Athens 1956, pl. 50; 2, Athens 1958, p. 68.

20. *Ibid.*, 1, pl. 166; 2, p. 147-149.

21. Sinai, *op.cit.* (note 4), no 73, p. 200.

22. *Ibid.*, no 96, p. 221; no 1, p. 243.