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Μία ελάχιστα γνωστή τυπολογική απεικόνιση της μονής στο Σινά

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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 Sinai. 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 x 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 1925; 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. However, I have had the advantage of access to the excellent photographs taken by the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai.

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 αγία 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 by read. I now give a list of them.

1. (top left) ...ον ὄπλρ πάν δόρος [Θεός] γάρ ἐν σοι τὰς νόμους σειρας τῶν 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 πέρηκας ἄξιος τόπος, Moses receives these (sc. the tablets) from here. Truly thou art naturally a place worthy of God.

3. (lower left) Μωσῆς... βάτοι ὡς ἅπασις παρθένον εἶδε, Moses saw in the bush (the) Virgin as a vision.

4. (lower right) Διδυμός ἐκλήθης παρθένος ἡ δόξη τῶν προδότων παρασκεύασες, Thou was called an angel of the Father, the Word foretelling to us thy coming.

5. (lower left) Πύρ ἐν βάτοι καὶ θαύμα ταύτην οὐ φλέγει, oū πῦρ τὸ πῦρ, οὐ βάτος ἔστιν οὐ βάτος καὶ πύρ τὸ πῦρ καὶ βάτος ἔστιν οὐ βάτος, ἄλλα εἰκονίζει τὸν τόκο 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 εὐλαβείων προστρέχοντας απάντων καὶ δυσουριώντων, Thou hast relieved 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) Απέστρεψε δὲ Μωσής τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ, ἐγείρετο γαρ κατεμβλέψει ενώπιον τοῦ Θεοῦ, Moses turned away his face, for he was afraid to gaze at God.

8. (between Moses and the Virgin and Child) Μωσῆς, Μωσῆς, μή έγγίσῃς ὅδε, λόγια τοῦ ὑπόδημα ἐκ τῶν


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.
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 Sinai. 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”. 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 Nyssa, the original iconography simply shows Moses taking off his sandals before the Burning Bush, while the voice which he hears is attributed to an angel. This iconography was maintained in Octateuch illustration in the twelfth century, for example in Vatican gr. 746, f. 157v. 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 bush. Subsequently typological illustrations occur regularly, for example at Lesnov and in the Kariye Djamii. 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. 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 Cathe-
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Fig. 1. Sinai. Monastery of St. Catherine. Fragment of an iconostasis beam with scenes from the Life of the Virgin.

rime occupies the central place10. 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.
6. Ibid., no 100, p. 225.
7. Ibid., no 1, p. 243.
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.
15. PG 116, 301a-b.
17. Ibid., p. 225, 243.
18. PG 116, 297b-c.
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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 century, nor on the slightly later biographical icon, although, among the scenes surrounding the saint's portrait, is the incident of the angel breaking the wheel. The earliest example of a portrait of Saint Catherine with the wheel seems to be on the Catalan retable by Martinus de Vilanova, dated 1387. It appears also on the seventeenth-century icon by Jeremiah Palladas, and on the embroidery noted above.

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 dispel 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.

20. Ibid., 1, pl. 166; 2, p. 147-149.
22. Ibid., no 96, p. 221; no 1, p. 243.