

MUSÉOGRAPHIE

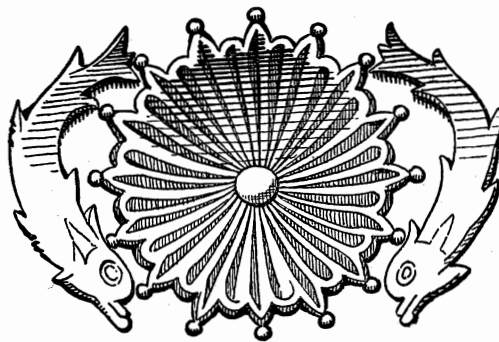
# THE BYZANTICA OF SCETIS

BY

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In our study entitled «The Collection of Coptica in the Monastery of St. Macarius» we included in our list of icons five Byzantine panel-paintings of the Evangelists SS. Mark and Matthew, the Apostle St. Paul and the Archangels SS. Michael and Gabriel<sup>(1)</sup>, as well as a Byzantine panel-painting of the Panagia Elëusa<sup>(2)</sup>. In this study we shall provide additional information pertaining to these mediaeval Byzantine icons. For this purpose, we shall devote the first part of this article to a description of those icons which belonged to a Great Deësis (ΜΕΓΑΛΗ ΔΕΗΣΙΣ), while in the second part we shall deal with the icon of the Panagia Elëusa.

It is significant to record that almost none of the numerous travellers, pilgrims or scholars who have visited the Coptic Desert Monasteries of the Wādî 'n-Natrûn during the past two or three hundred years seemed to have noticed these rather unusual pieces of Byzantine art. This is the more surprising, since some of these distinguished visitors must have studied these monasteries and their antiquities with great interest and thoroughness, a fact which is evident from the records of such eminent scholars as Dr. Tattam (1839), Sir Gardner Wilkinson (1843), Konstantin von Tischendorf (1844), Greville Chester (1873), the Reverend Fr. Michael Jullien, s.j. (1881), Alfred J. Butler (1883), Dr. George Steindorff (1899), A. Gayet (1901), Agnes Smith Lewis (1904) or even H.G. Evelyn White (1920-1921). Of course, we do

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<sup>(1)</sup> MEINARDUS, O., «The Collection of Coptica in the Monastery of St. Macarius», *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte*, XIX, 1967-1968, p. 242, pls. IV A, IV B, V A.

<sup>(2)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244, pl. VI B.

not know when the Monasteries of St. Macarius and St. Bishoi received these icons, although they must have been acquired before 1912, for Johann Georg, Duke of Saxony, noticed the icons of St. Mark and St. Matthew when he visited the Monastery of St. Macarius in that years <sup>(1)</sup>.

### *The Icons of the Great Deësis*

There is no doubt that four of the Byzantine panel-paintings, of which three are in the Monastery of St. Macarius and one is in the Monastery of St. Bishoi, belonged to a Great Deësis of a Greek Orthodox Church. There are numerous examples from churches in Serbia, Mount Athos, Sinai and Cyprus, where, in addition to the customary representations of the Feasts of the Church on the iconostasis, there is also a set of panel-paintings depicting the Deësis flanked by the Archangels and a certain number of Apostles. A XIIIth century Great Deësis of the Monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai includes, in addition to the Deësis, SS. Luke, John, Peter, Paul, Matthew and Mark as well as SS. George and Procopius. In this case, the Evangelists are portrayed with their Gospels closed <sup>(2)</sup>. Some of the other better known examples are the famous XVIth century Great Deësis of the iconostasis of the Church of Krusedol with the Deësis flanked by two Archangels and twelve Apostles <sup>(3)</sup>, the five XVIth century icons of the Great Deësis, representing St. Peter, the Holy Virgin, the Pantocrator, St. John the Baptist and St. Paul in the Mount Athos Monastery of Dionysiou <sup>(4)</sup>, and the Cypriote icons of the

<sup>(1)</sup> JOHANN GEORG, *Streifzüge durch die Kirchen und Klöster Ägyptens*. Berlin, 1914, p. 39.

<sup>(2)</sup> SOTERIOU, G. and M., *Icones du Mont Sinäi*. Athens, 1956, vol. I, pl. 117, vol. II, p. 242.

<sup>(3)</sup> MIRKOVIĆ, L., «La Déësis de l'Iconostase de Krusedol», *Starinar*, N.S. III/IV, 1952-1953, pp. 93-101. *Idem*, «Icônes du Monastère Dečani», *Antiquités de Kosovo et Metohija*, vol. II and III. Prishtine, 1963, pls. 16-20.

<sup>(4)</sup> CHADZIDAKIS, MANOEL, «Ο ΖΩΓΡΑΦΟΣ ΕΥΦΡΟΣΥΝΟΣ» ΚΡΗΤΙΚΑ ΧΡΟΝΙΚΑ, X, 1956, pp. 273-291.

Great Deësis in the Monastery of St. Neophytos<sup>(1)</sup>, and the Church of the Panagia Elëusa in Polemi<sup>(2)</sup>.

The four panel-paintings under discussion represent the three Evangelists SS. Matthew, Mark and John and the Apostle Paul. Each painting measures 89 × 55 cm. These four icons belonging to the same set were part of a Great Deësis, which included a minimum of at least nine separate paintings. Those paintings, which are definitely missing are : The Pantocrator, the Holy Virgin, St. John the Baptist, St. Peter and St. Luke. We should expect the arrangement of this particular Great Deësis to be composed in the following sequence from north to south : St. Mark, St. John, St. Peter, the Holy Virgin, the Pantocrator, St. John the Baptist, St. Paul, St. Matthew and St. Luke.

St. Mark holds in his hands his Gospel, which shows the text of the Gospel of St. *Mark* I : 1, 2a. He is turned to the right and his head is slightly bent downwards. His eyes are turned to the left. He has an aquiline nose, a short beard and short and crisp hair. As in the case of all of these four icons, the nimbus and the letters of the name are in dark red on a golden background. The inscription Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ΜΑΡΚΟΣ is clearly legible. This icon would have taken the northernmost position on the iconostasis. It is the best preserved icon of the set. At present, it adorns the haikal-screen in the Church of St. Macarius of the Monastery of St. Macarius (Pl. I, A).

St. John holds in his left hand his Gospel, which shows the text of the Gospel of St. *John* I : 1, 2a. The Evangelist is turned to the right and his head is slightly bent downwards. His eyes are turned to the left. He has a long nose, a long beard, and a bald head. There are two distinct wrinkles on his high forehead. In his right hand he holds his pen, with which he is in the process of writing the word ΤΟΝ. Behind the left page of the Gospel there is an ink-pot and pen-holder. To the left of his head, there are the letters Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ΙΩ, to the right the letters Ο ΘΕΟΛΟ-

<sup>(1)</sup> TSIKNOPOULLOS, IOANNIS P., *The Enkleistra and St. Neophytos*. Nicosia, 1965, pp. 57-62.

<sup>(2)</sup> Cf. PAPAGEORGIU, ATHANASIOS, *Ikonen aus Zypern*. Genf, 1969 and RICE, D. TALBOT, *The Icons of Cyprus*. London, 1937, pp. 241-242.

ΓΟC. The icon is in a relatively good state of preservation. Its present location is in the choir of the Church of St. Bishoi in the Monastery of St. Bishoi (Pl. I, B).

St. Paul with his head upright and turned to the left belongs to the icons to the south of the Deësis. He is portrayed with a long aquiline nose and a long beard. In his left hand he holds a closed book containing his epistles. Only three letters to the right of his head are legible, they are ΛΟC. The icon is sadly damaged. Its present location is in the choir of the Church of St. Macarius in the Monastery of St. Macarius (Pl. II, A).

St. Matthew holds in his right hand his Gospel which shows the text of the Gospel of *St. Matthew* I : 1, 2a. He is turned to the left and his head is slightly bent downwards. He is depicted with a short hooked nose, his eyes are turned to the right. To the left of his head there are the letters . . . Γ ΟC ΜΑ, to the right there are the letters ΘΑΙΟC. This icon is severely damaged. Its present location is on the haikal-screen of the Church of the Forty-Nine Martyrs in the Monastery of St. Macarius (Pl. II, B).

These four panel-paintings, which are the product of an artist of the Cretan School, ought to be assigned to the XVIth or XVIIth century.

It is most unlikely that the two panel-paintings of the Archangels belonged to the same Great Deësis as the above-mentioned icons of the Evangelists and Apostle. Style and size are sufficiently different. Both of these icons are severely damaged. Their measurements are 81 × 50 cm.

St. Michael with the drawn-sword in his right hand faces the onlooker. His eyes are surrounded by dark eye-shadows. His hair is tied on either side of his face. Upon the Archangel's brow there is the traditional, elongated triangle, the symbol of Deity<sup>(1)</sup>. His long neck is especially marked. The letters to the left of his head are Ο ΑΡ ΜΗ, the letters to the right are ΧΑΗΛ. This icon is presently kept in the haikal of the Church of St. John the Baptist, the Church of St. Macarius of the Monastery of St. Macarius (Pl. III, A).

<sup>(1)</sup> DIDRON, A.N., *Christian Iconography. The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages*. New York, 1965 (republ.), vol. I, p. 283, vol. II, p. 97.

Whereas normally St. Gabriel is depicted with his head turned towards the left, this Archangel has his head turned towards the right, and slightly bent downwards. Neither the customary staff of St. Gabriel nor any letters provide us with a definite identification of this Archangel. This icon adorns the haikal-screen of the Church of the Forty-Nine Martyrs in the Monastery of St. Macarius (Pl. III, B).

*The Icon of the Panagia Elëusa*

The icon of the Holy Virgin and Child of the iconographical type of « Our Lady of Tenderness », known as the Elëusa in Greek, or the Umilenya in Russian, measures  $65 \times 49,5$  cm. Without entering into a more detailed discussion of this masterpiece in our previous article, we assigned this icon to the XVIth-XVIIth century (Pl. IV, A). The icon is sadly damaged. Apart from being broken vertically into two halves<sup>(1)</sup>, the painting has suffered from careless handling. It is presently kept in the northern sanctuary of the Church of St. Iskhirûn of Killin in the Monastery of St. Macarius in the Wâdî 'n-Naṭrûn<sup>(2)</sup>.

The iconographical type of the Panagia Elëusa can be traced back to the famous XIIth century Vladimirskaja<sup>(3)</sup>. At the same time, it would be presumptuous to identify the Holy Virgin of Vladimir with the earliest example of the Elëusa type, for, after all, the type as such existed already

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<sup>(1)</sup> It is impossible to determine whether the icon was purposely broken by an iconoclast or « fell apart » due to careless handling. The splitting of icons of the Holy Virgin and Child used to be a common way to demonstrate iconoclastic conviction. Cf. the splitting of the Zimarovskaja of Rjazan, which was split by the invading Tatars. The Panagia Soumeliotissa was split by a thief in a fit of anger.

<sup>(2)</sup> I have seen this icon in the above-mentioned locality in March 1968. It is very probable that this icon may have been kept in the store-room east of the principal haikal, which to my regret I never investigated. EVELYN WHITE, H.G., *The Monasteries of the Wâdî 'n-Naṭrûn*. New York, 1933, vol. III, p. 117.

<sup>(3)</sup> GRABAR, IGOR, « Sur les origines et l'évolution du type iconographique de la Vierge Elëoussa », *Mélanges Charles Diehl*, Paris, 1930, vol. II, pp. 29-42.

in Egypt several centuries before <sup>(1)</sup>, though these earlier versions were so much more rigid and severe, that it seems legitimate to place the origin of this particular type with its distinct humanistic traits into the XIIth century. The characteristics of this type are revealed in the essentially personal and intimate relationship of the Holy Virgin to her Divine Child. The Child's cheek is pressed against that of the Holy Virgin in gentle compassion. «The composition is essentially that of an adoring mother and a loving child. In fact, the interpretation of the concept of love has become the aim of the icon, rather than a mere depiction of two figures as symbols of divinity» <sup>(2)</sup>.

Each and every iconographical school has produced its panel-paintings of this theme. Some of the better known icons belonging to this type include the famous XIVth century Donskaja, a variation in so far as the Holy Virgin looks lovingly at her Child <sup>(3)</sup>, the icon of «Our Lady of Tenderness» at Sinai <sup>(4)</sup>, the Tolgskaja belonging to the Jaroslav School <sup>(5)</sup>, the Epikopsis <sup>(6)</sup> and the Panton Chara <sup>(7)</sup>. From the XVth to the XVIIth century, the type of the Panagia Elëusa became increasingly popular also with the artists of the Cretan School of iconography, to which the icon under discussion ought to be assigned. Whereas many of the panel-painters of this school lived in Crete, others worked on the Greek mainland and even in Venice. Directly dependent upon the developments in Constantinople, the artists of the Cretan School were the most important exponents of the metropolitan style from the beginning of the XVth century

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<sup>(1)</sup> A rendering of this theme on a IXth century ivory is in the Walter's Art Gallery in Baltimore. POGLAYEN-NEUWALL, STEPHAN, «Eine frühe Darstellung der Elëusa», *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, VII, 1941, pp. 293-294. *Early Christian and Byzantine Art, an Exhibition held at the Baltimore Museum of Art*, 1947, pl. XX, n° 160.

<sup>(2)</sup> RICE, DAVID T., *Byzantine Painting. The Last Phase*. London, 1968, p. 11.

<sup>(3)</sup> Probably the work of Theophanes the Greek, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

<sup>(4)</sup> SOTERIOU, G. and M., *op. cit.*, vol. I, pl. 235, vol. II, p. 205.

<sup>(5)</sup> RICE, D.T., *Byzantine Art*. Penguin Books, p. 366, pl. 331.

<sup>(6)</sup> WEITZMAN, K., CHATZIDAKIS, M., MIATEV, K., RADOČIĆ, S., *Frühe Ikonen*. München, 1965, n° 51.

<sup>(7)</sup> Cf. Anon., *Handbuch der Ikonenkunst*. München, Slavisches Institut, 1966.



onwards. Some of the better known icons of this school which belong to this period include the famous «Lady of Tenderness» by Michael Damaskinos of 1570<sup>(1)</sup>, the «Lady of Tenderness» by Angelos<sup>(2)</sup>, and the icon of the same type by Emmanuel Lampardos (1609), which Alexander Embiricos considers to be one of the most remarkable pieces of iconographic art of the post-Byzantine period<sup>(3)</sup>. There is the Cretan icon of the «Umilenya», which once upon a time belonged to the Collection Lichačev and which is published in his book *Ikonoğrafija Bogomateri*<sup>(4)</sup>. The similarities of this icon with our Panagia Elëusa are striking, the posture of the Holy Virgin and the Child are identical, although the eyes of the Child are directed to His mother. Moreover, there are minor differences in the apparel of both the Holy Virgin and the Child which prohibit us to assign our icon to be a copy of the Lichačev Elëusa<sup>(5)</sup>.

The Panagia Elëusa of the Monastery of St. Macarius is almost identical to the XVIth century Panagia Elëusa of Sibenik, Dalmatia, which was acquired by the Collection Sekulić in Belgrade<sup>(6)</sup>. The Šibenik Elëusa is somewhat smaller (43 × 53 cm.) than the Panagia Elëusa of the Monastery of St. Macarius (Pl. IV, B). Moreover, the colour of the headdress of the Holy Virgin is different. Whereas the Panagia Elëusa of Šibenik is portrayed with a dark green headdress under the maphorion, the headdress of the Panagia Elëusa of the Monastery of St. Macarius

<sup>(1)</sup> EMBIRICOS, ALEXANDRE, *L'École Crétoise. Dernière phase de la peinture Byzantine*. Paris, 1967, p. 156.

<sup>(2)</sup> EMBIRICOS, A., *op. cit.*, p. 175, pl. 88. (Byzantine Museum, Athens).

<sup>(3)</sup> EMBIRICOS, A., *op. cit.*, p. 170, pl. 84. (Benaki Museum, Athens).

<sup>(4)</sup> *Op. cit.*, n° 379.

<sup>(5)</sup> The fact that this particular type was very popular is also seen in the striking parallels in the Latin and Slavic churches. The Latin parallel is the Madonna della Salute in the Church of St. Francis, Ripa, the Russian parallel is the famous miraculous icon of the Kievo-Bratskaja, which appeared in 1654 in the Monastery of the Brotherhood of Kiev. SKROBUCHA, HEINZ, *Maria. Russische Gnadenbilder*. Recklinghausen, 1967, p. 57.

<sup>(6)</sup> *La Collection d'Icônes Sekulić*. Institut pour la protection des monuments historiques de la ville de Belgrade. Belgrade, 1967, p. 52, n° 51. A coloured print of this icon is published as a calendar-postcard n° 498 by Aries Verlag, München.

is white. Otherwise, however, we note a striking resemblance of the two icons, which leads us to suggest that both these icons are copies of another icon, the so-called Cretan prototype. Still, it is interesting to compare the two icons of the Panagia Elëusa and notice the meticulous care with which the XVIth century artists copied such details as the folds of the maphorion, the designs on the himation, etc.

The icon under discussion reveals clearly the iconographical transformation from the severe type of the Hodigitria to that of the Holy Virgin of Tenderness. The Holy Virgin has her head inflected towards her Child and looks past her Child and also past the observer of the icon, turning in a melancholy gaze towards the far distance, as if she were foreseeing with her spiritual eyes the innocent suffering and the vicarious death of her Son. The Child sits on the left arm of the Holy Virgin. The left hand of the Holy Virgin is slipped under the Child's left thigh, so as to support Him. Her right arm is bent, and the left hand of the Child rests between the thumb and the four fingers of His Mother's right hand. Like His Mother, the Child looks past the observer of the icon. His right cheek is tenderly pressed to the left cheek of His Mother. In His right hand the Child holds a scroll, symbol of the propagation of the Gospel. The Child has placed His right foot under His left leg. On His left foot He wears a sandal, whereas the sandal of His right foot is portrayed hanging on a sandal-string, presumably a golden cord, from His foot. The Holy Virgin's wine-red maphorion, a large shawl covering her head and her shoulders, is trimmed with a plain gold braid and golden fringes. Her white undergarment, which is also trimmed with a plain gold braid, shows a sharp contrast to the darker maphorion. The Child's white himation which is adorned with geometrical designs and His light reddish coat are well set off against the dark wine-red maphorion of the Holy Virgin. The halos which are marked by two lines are hardly visible. The monograms of Christ and the Holy Virgin are written in red on the dim golden background.



A. — St. Mark.



B. — St. John.



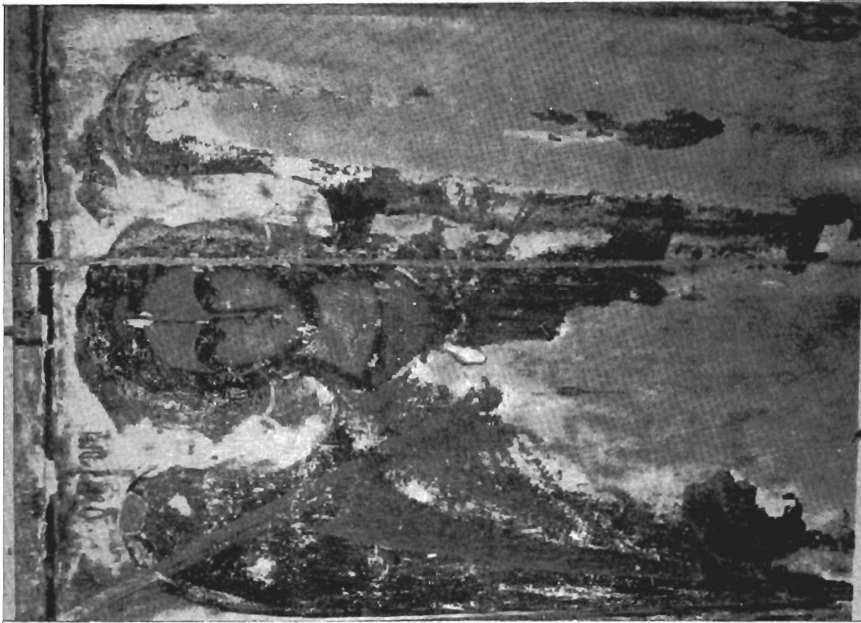
B. — St. Matthew.



A. — St. Paul.



B. — An Archangel.



A. — St. Michael.



B. — Panagia Eleusa of Sibenik.



A. — Panagia Eleusa of the Monastery of St. Macarius.



