

# Two early icons from Egypt in the Benaki Museum<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*The two icons discussed in the article, which belong to the Benaki Museum collection and come from Egypt, provide interesting evidence about panel painting in the provinces or borderlands of the Byzantine world, in a period of momentous change for both the empire and the Eastern Mediterranean. The fragmentary seventh-century icon of Christ with the Coptic votive inscription must have been intended as a votive offering, and the emphasis on Christ Emmanuel probably proclaims the Miaphysite tendencies of the patron. Its encaustic technique and confirmed Egyptian provenance link it with a group of works of the seventh century preserved at St Catherine's Monastery in Sinai and once again raises the question of the provenance of those icons. The artistically modest yet iconographically surprising two-sided icon, with the apostle Paul on the obverse and St Apa Stephanos on the reverse, adds one more example to the small number of painted panels to have survived from the eighth and ninth centuries. The Greek inscriptions, the iconographic link with the Fieschi Morgan stavrotheke, as well as its similarities with the reliquary-crosses that flooded Byzantium from the ninth century onwards, bear witness to both the common origins of the Coptic art of Egypt under Arab rule and the art of Byzantium and some instances of parallel development. Nevertheless, Coptic painting acquired a life of its own after the region broke away from the political sphere of Byzantium and this new independence gave Coptic painting greater flexibility in handling and adapting the iconography of the saints.*

In 1929 Antonis Benakis set about converting his private collection and family home into a museum, which he then gave to the Greek state.<sup>2</sup> Alongside the conversion of the building and the purchase of fixtures and fittings for the new museum, he continued to buy art works, increasingly focusing on his chief areas of interest, the decorative arts and artifacts from the Eastern Mediterranean cultures from the Hellenistic period up to Modern Greek art, including heirlooms from the struggle for independence and icons.<sup>3</sup> Despite having moved permanently to Athens in 1926, he maintained close ties with Egyptian antiquities dealers, as well as keeping in close contact with archaeologists, other collectors and antiques dealers all over Europe.<sup>4</sup> Through them, Benakis learnt about everything that was going on in the antiquities market and kept abreast of current academic thinking. It was in this atmosphere of international collecting, in which the art of Coptic Egypt had pride of place,<sup>5</sup> that in 1929 Antonis Benakis bought a small, two-sided icon of Egyptian provenance with Greek

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1 An earlier short version of this paper was read at the conference *Byzantium in the 7th–9th centuries (610–867): Crisis, transformation, reconstruction and reform*, organized by the Department of History and Archaeology of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and the Institute of Historical Research/NHRF (June 8, 2017).

2 The Benaki Museum was inaugurated on April 22, 1931. On its founder see Soulogiannis 2004; Tomara Sideri 2004; Drandaki (forthcoming).

3 Macridy 1937.

4 Drandaki (forthcoming).

5 Thomas 2000; Drandaki 2021, 13–6.

inscriptions from one of the best known antiquities dealers in Cairo, Phocion J. Tano.<sup>6</sup> It depicts two full-length, frontal saints: the Apostle Paul on one side and a saint recorded in the museum's accession register as 'unidentified' on the other (Fig. 1). From the moment the museum opened officially, in April 1931, this icon was displayed in Room Γ', the only gallery in the museum exclusively devoted to Byzantine art, and it remained on display there during the subsequent decades. However, Andreas Xyngopoulos did not include or even mention it in the catalogue of icons of the Benaki Museum that he published in 1936,<sup>7</sup> and since then, this small icon has attracted the attention of no other scholars either.



Fig. 1. Two-sided icon with the Apostle Paul and St Apa Stephanos. Tempera on wood. From Egypt, Benaki Museum no. 8954. © The Benaki Museum.

The second work, on which I shall focus in this paper, was bought in the same year that Xyngopoulos published his catalogue of icons, i.e. 1936. Benakis acquired it from the same source, Phocion J. Tano. It is a fragment of an icon of Christ, of which only the upper part of the head with its characteristically large eyes has survived (Fig. 2). This icon had to wait thirty years for its first publication, which finally appeared in 1967, when Manolis Chatzidakis, then Director of the Benaki Museum, included it as comparative material in an article in *Art Bulletin* on the famous encaustic icon of Christ from Sinai.<sup>8</sup> The icon then remained in obscurity, until it was given brief mentions by Kathleen Corrigan, Elizabeth Bolman and myself at various points in the last fifteen years. A more detailed account of the icon's technical features, inscription and genre was published by Thomas Mathews, who included it in his book on early icons.<sup>9</sup> The fragmentary icon of Christ was first presented to an international public in 2011, when it was included in the exhibition *Transition to Christianity*, which the

6 On the antiquities trade in Egypt in the last decades of the 19th and first decades of the 20th century, see the work by Hagen and Ryholt (2016; 2017).

7 Xyngopoulos 1936.

8 Chatzidakis 1967, 200, fig. 19.

9 Bolman 2006, 88; Corrigan 2010; Lazaridou 2011, 171, no. 144 (A. Drandaki); Mathews and Muller 2016, 198–99.



Fig. 2. Christ Emmanuel. Encaustic on wood. From Egypt, Benaki Museum no. 8953. © The Benaki Museum.

Byzantine Museum of Athens organized for the Onassis Foundation in New York.<sup>10</sup> This is a brief account of the provenance and bibliographical history of the two works.

The two icons have a common provenance in Egypt, but unfortunately we have no evidence as to where they were found.<sup>11</sup> Despite its damaged condition, the icon of Christ and similarly the two-sided icon are important, as they are among the few examples of early icons to have survived and, as far as I know, the only ones in a Greek collection. They can provide precious information on the production of icons in the period between the seventh and ninth centuries, complementing what we know from those in Sinai and Rome, and the small number of other works of Egyptian provenance nowadays scattered between various collections and museums.<sup>12</sup>

I will start by looking at the fragmentary icon of Christ. It is 36 cm wide and 14.5 cm high in its present state; the panel is 9 mm thick. Its original height must have been ca. 45–55 cm. The figure is depicted against a blue background and has white flesh tones, black hair, thick, black eyebrows and large, brown eyes with lively, black pupils. A red line below the eyebrow follows the curve of the eye lid and the outline of the nose, further accentuated by a dark grey shadow. A cruciform halo with a thick black outline surrounds the head. The edges of the board are bare, with no ground layer, so the icon must have been intended to have some sort of frame or, more likely as we shall see, to be fixed on some sort of wooden support, as the surviving holes in the upper part testify.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in the upper part, the holes for fixing it to some sort of wooden support have been preserved (Fig. 3). The blue ground between the figure and the frame is entirely covered with inscriptions in white-painted majuscule lettering. On the left, in Greek: ΕΜΜΑΝΟΥΗΛ ΜΕΘ ΗΜΩΝ (Emmanuel with us). The inscription, which contains the Jewish name for Christ and the Greek interpretation of it, recalls the corresponding prophecy by Isaiah and the passage from Matthew (Matt. 1.23): “The Virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and [they] will call him Emmanuel – which means, ‘God with us’”. It is highly probable

10 Lazaridou 2011, 171, no. 144 (A. Drandaki).

11 Mathews refers to the icon of Christ as “of Fayumic origin,” but this provenance is not based on archival information but rather on the Fayumic dialect he recognizes in the wording of the Coptic inscription (Mathews and Muller 2016, 198–99).

12 Weitzmann 1976; Durand 1992, 144–47 (J. Durand and M.-H. Rutschowscaya); Rutschowscaya 1998; L’art copte en Égypte 2000, 108–10 (M.-H. Rutschowscaya and F. Ferrer-Joly); Barber 2000; Wolf 2005; Evans and Ratliff 2012, 53–8 (K. Corrigan), 84–6 (D. Bénazeth); Mathews and Muller 2016.

13 Mathews and Muller 2016, 198–99.



Fig. 3. Details from the upper side of the Christ Emmanuel. Benaki Museum no. 8953. © The Benaki Museum.

that the inscription on the Benaki Museum icon would originally have given the relevant part of this quotation in full, i.e. “Ἐμμανονὴλ μεθ' ἡμῶν ὁ Θεός” (Emmanuel God with us). The inscription on the right-hand side is in Coptic. I am most grateful to Dr. Andrea Achi, Assistant Curator at the Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters, for transcribing and reading it for me as follows: “Abba Timotheos, remember him and may God bring him.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the icon is a dedication to the memory and salvation of Abba Timotheos. The existence of Greek and Coptic inscriptions side by side on the icon is a common feature of icons and wall-paintings from Egypt, dating between the sixth and the eighth century, and a testimony to the bilingualism permeating Egyptian society in late antiquity.<sup>15</sup>

The encaustic technique, in which melted wax is used as the binding agent for the pigments, has been used on this icon of Christ. This technique is known from ancient Greece and the Roman period and is described at some length by Pliny the Elder.<sup>16</sup> In the Roman Imperial period some wonderful examples of encaustic painting were created in the hybrid culture of Egyptian society (Fig. 4). The Roman tradition of portraiture was combined with Egyptian burial customs, in which adding a portrait of the deceased to the mummified body was considered essential to the afterlife.<sup>17</sup> The well-known funerary portraits of the first through fourth century C.E. are for the most part painted using either encaustic or a mixed technique.<sup>18</sup> Encaustic was also applied to a large number of early Christian icons and to Egyptian wall paintings as late as in the early Middle Ages, according to the analyses conducted in Apa Apollo in Bawit and in Deir al-Surian.<sup>19</sup> In an elegant epigram on an icon of the archangel Michael, Agathias (third quarter of the sixth century) refers poetically to the wax as the agent for the representation of holy images.<sup>20</sup> The technique requires skill and rapidity in the application of the pigments

14 Regarding the Coptic inscription, different readings have been proposed in the literature. Mathews (Mathews and Muller 2016, 198) proposes: “Apa Timotheos [has offered this icon]. Remember him that God may bring me out [of Sheol]”; Corrigan (2010): “Brother Timothy, remember him before God twofold.”

15 Bagnall 1993, 230–60; Fournet 2012; Zanetti and Davis 2016.

16 Plin. *Nat.Hist.* 35.31, 35.39, 35.41. On chemical analyses of the binding medium in Roman encaustic paintings, Cuni et al. 2012.

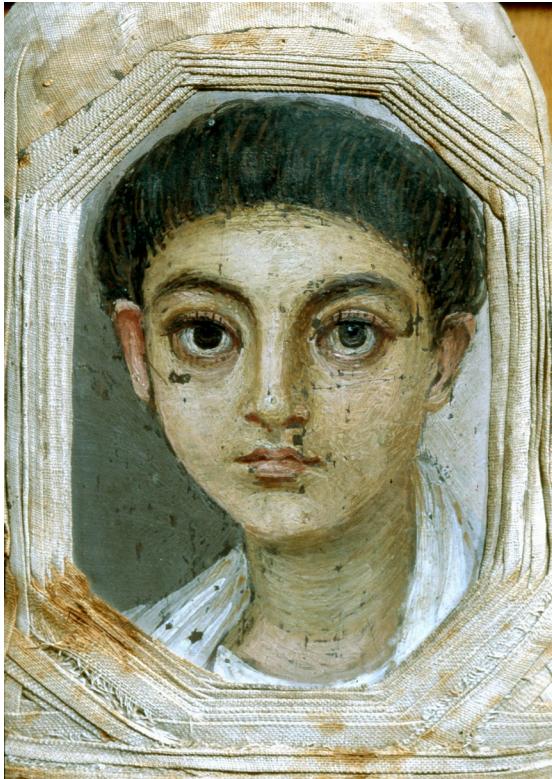
17 Doxiadis 1995; Aubert and Cortopassi 2000, 17–21, 25–30 (M.-F. Aubert and R. Cortopassi) and 22–4 (I. Franco).

18 Doxiadis 1995, 82–102.

19 Chatzidakis 1967; Nelson and Collins 2006, 123–27 (Th. F. Mathews); Innemée 2006; Gehad et al. 2015.

20 *Greek Anthology* I.34: ἀσκοπὸν ἀγγελίαρχον, ἀσώματον εἰδεῖ μορφῆς, ἢ μέγα τολμήεις κηρὸς ἀπεπλάσατο [The wax, greatly daring, has represented the invisible, the incorporeal chief of the angels in the semblance of his form, transl. by Cyril Mango (1986, 115)].

—especially when the wax was used in molten state— and at the same time it gives volume to the rendering of the figures and a sense of three-dimensionality in the viscous brushstrokes.<sup>21</sup> All these things characterize the Benaki Museum's icon of Christ, in which the quick, agitated brushstrokes create a paint surface in relief. This swift, nervy use of the *cestrum*, the implement with which the wax is spread, distinguishes the Christ icon from the smoother and more painterly application of this same technique on sixth-century masterpieces allegedly originating from Constantinople, such as the famous Sinai Christ and the enthroned Mother and Child with



4.



5a.



5b.



6.



Fig. 4. Encaustic mummy portrait of a young boy from Hawara, 100–120 C.E. British Museum, no. EA13595. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Fig. 5a. Detail of the face of the Christ from the Benaki Museum icon no. 8953. © The Benaki Museum. Fig. 5b. Detail of the face of the Virgin from the icon with the Virgin and Child between angels and saints. Constantinople, mid-sixth century. The Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai. Photo: Anastasia Drandaki. Fig. 6. Encaustic icons with the Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace and Christ Emmanuel/Ancient of Days. Workshops in Syria-Palestine, 7th century. The Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai. Published by Courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai.

21 On the composition of the binding medium in Roman encaustic painting, Cuni et al. 2012.

saints and angels, also at St Catherine's, Sinai.<sup>22</sup> In those works, the rendering of the flesh is soft and uniform, giving the figures their tender, youthful faces (Fig. 5). By contrast, the agitated application of the technique to the Benaki Museum icon has close parallels in a group of other icons from Sinai, such as the Prophet Elijah, the Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace and the Christ the Ancient of Days, all works of the seventh century, attributed by Weitzmann and subsequent scholars to workshops in Palestine or, more generally, the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>23</sup> (Fig. 6). Equally vigorous brushstrokes have been applied on the impressive encaustic icon of St John the Baptist from Sinai –now in Kiev– that Weitzmann, Mathews and others date in the sixth century, while Corrigan argued, persuasively in my view, in favor of a later, mid-to late seventh century dating.<sup>24</sup>

The Sinai icons have Greek inscriptions, leaving the issue of their precise provenance (Sinai itself, the Syria-Palestine region or elsewhere) an open question. In this respect, the Benaki icon may be a precious piece of evidence. The combination of Greek inscriptions with Coptic ones confirms beyond all doubt that it is the product of a workshop operating in Egypt, commissioned by Coptic patrons. Consequently, its geographical origins having been established, Egypt emerges as a likely centre of production for other icons in this group, now also kept at Sinai. In order to confirm this hypothesis, it will be necessary to carry out a comparative study of the works in this group, ideally with the help of technical analyses that can ascertain whether the encaustic technique was employed in the same way on all the works of this group. It is worth mentioning that Kathleen Corrigan's detailed study of the icon of the Three Hebrews at Sinai pointed to Egypt as its most possible place of origin.<sup>25</sup> In any case, Weitzmann's so-called Syro-Palestinian group, already called into question by other scholars, needs re-examining.<sup>26</sup>

The original iconographic type used for the Christ on the Benaki Museum icon cannot be reconstructed with certainty. It could equally well have depicted a beardless Christ or one in the form of a mature, bearded man. Despite the inscription 'Emmanuel', which in the Middle Ages was generally linked with a depiction of Christ as a beardless boy,<sup>27</sup> in the period in question the various iconographic types of Christ and their accompanying descriptions were still shifting and interchangeable.<sup>28</sup> This is clearly confirmed by the contemporary Sinai icon mentioned above, in which an enthroned Christ, in the form of a Pantocrator, is depicted with white hair and beard as the Ancient of Days – despite being accompanied once again by the inscription 'Emmanuel'<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 6). The same appellation accompanies a mature, bearded Christ on a sixth-century sardonyx intaglio in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.<sup>30</sup> The iconography of the gem is comparable to that on several pilgrim lead ampullae of the sixth-seventh century.<sup>31</sup> In both cases, the bust of the bearded Christ-Emmanuel is depicted above the holy cross, flanked on the sardonyx by the two chief apostles and on the ampullae by the crucified thieves, in a condensed representation of the Crucifixion. In any case, the iconographic type of Christ used in this icon cannot be reconstructed on the basis of its inscription. We can, however, use the wording to explore the theological ideas that pervade the work and how it addressed the bitter theological disputes of the period.

The inscription's text "Emmanuel, God with us" connects the icon to a group of pilgrimage artifacts of the sixth and seventh centuries, the celebrated lead ampullae from the Holy Land. Some of them bear the same

22 Chatzidakis 1967; Vassilaki 2000, 262–63 (R. Cormack).

23 Soteriou and Soteriou 1958, 23–9, pls. 8–9, 12–14; Weitzmann 1976, 40–2, 49–50, 56; Corrigan 2009; Corrigan 2010.

24 Weitzmann 1976, 32–5; Corrigan 1988; Nelson and Collins 2006, 124–25 (Th. F. Mathews).

25 Corrigan 2009.

26 Karl Innemée (2006) has also put to doubt the famous 6th–7th century Constantinopolitan group of icons at Sinai, proposing instead Alexandria or another Egyptian center as possible places of origin. In the same article Innemée discusses the longevity of the encaustic technique in Egypt, based on the technical analyses of the wall paintings in Deir al-Surian.

27 *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* I, 438, s.v. Christ Emmanuel (N. Patterson Sevcenko).

28 Leatherbury 2018; Grabar 1966, figs 134, 141, 142, 146, 147–49, 165.

29 Corrigan 2010.

30 Weitzmann 1979, 586–87, no. 525 (M. E. Frazer).

31 Grabar 1958.

inscription accompanying scenes of a Mother and Child, the Crucifixion or the Ascension.<sup>32</sup> Studying the Sinai icon of Christ Emmanuel/the Ancient of Days, Kathleen Corrigan astutely observed that the reference to Emmanuel was not simply a title for the depiction of Christ, but constituted a theological comment on his nature, in a period of intense Christological arguments and heresies within the Church, which had assumed a deeply political character, especially in Egypt.<sup>33</sup> The references to Christ as Emmanuel are at the heart of this debate, especially in the works of Cyril of Alexandria, who formulated theological thinking on the nature of Christ as a response to Nestorianism.<sup>34</sup> Cyril's views had a significant influence on Orthodox theologians, such as Anastasios of Sinai (d. 700),<sup>35</sup> yet at the same time these same ideas were the basis and inspiration for drawing up the Miaphysite arguments of the anti-Chalcedonian, Coptic Church (based on Cyril's phrase "One incarnate nature of God the Word"). Thus, the gospel phrase "Emmanuel, God with us", also found on pilgrimage mementoes of the period, undoubtedly reflects the contemporary disputes about the nature of Christ, but could be deployed with a variety of doctrinal interpretations.<sup>36</sup> However, on the Benaki icon this inscription is found in a prominent position on a seventh-century Egyptian icon, alongside Coptic inscriptions. Therefore, I think that, in this case at least, the prominent reference to Emmanuel as the living, enduring presence of God should be read as an expression of Miaphysite views.

The location of the inscriptions on the Benaki icon is also interesting. Lengthy inscriptions are found on many early icons dating between the sixth and the eighth century; most of them are votive in nature and provide evidence of the places to which the icons were dedicated.<sup>37</sup> If the icons have a frame, the inscriptions are generally inscribed on that, running around the icon. Thus they laid the foundations for a tradition of framing icons with votive inscriptions, invocations and metrical verses that would last as long as the Byzantine Empire itself.<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting that on the early icons the frame was nailed to the support before the ground was prepared for the icon, and then icon and border were painted together.<sup>39</sup> On icons with no frame, the inscriptions were written in a similarly conspicuous manner on the narrow area of ground available beside the holy figures, usually next to the heads of the figures or more specifically, as Thomas Mathews has observed, by their ears, in hopes of the saint lending a "listening ear" ("εὐήκοον οὖς").

The position of the dedicatory inscription on the Benaki icon suggests that there was no frame, and Mathews confirms this supposition. Examining the holes preserved at the top of the icon, he noticed that they were made on a slant, set at a 45° angle to the back of the wooden panel.<sup>40</sup> In other words, they were meant to attach the icon to a wooden support with slanting dowels. Mathews was of the opinion that the most likely destination for the Benaki icon and some other Egyptian works of the same period was on some sort of wooden construction, such as a templon or other barrier. What is certain is that, from as early as the fourth century, Egyptian churches had wooden chancel barriers dividing the area of the sanctuary from the nave of the church. Indeed, from the seventh century on archaeological evidence from Ostrakine (mod. El-Felusyat), Bawit, Saqqara, the Red Monastery and elsewhere confirms that barriers or partitions defined not only the area of the sanctuary, but also that of the *khurus*<sup>41</sup> (Fig. 7). The *khurus*, from the Greek word *choros*, is a peculiarity of Egyptian churches, a space

32 Grabar 1958, nos. Monza 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 15, 16 and Bobbio 14; Corrigan 2010. See also the ampulla in Bonn, Weitzmann 1979, 587, no. 526 (A. St. Clair).

33 Corrigan 2010.

34 Weinandy 2003.

35 On the theology of Anastasios of Sinai and his dependence on Cyril's treatises, Uthemann 2015 and Hovorun 2019.

36 Corrigan 2010, cf. 301–3.

37 Corrigan 1995; Mathews 2006, 43–5.

38 Rhoby 2010.

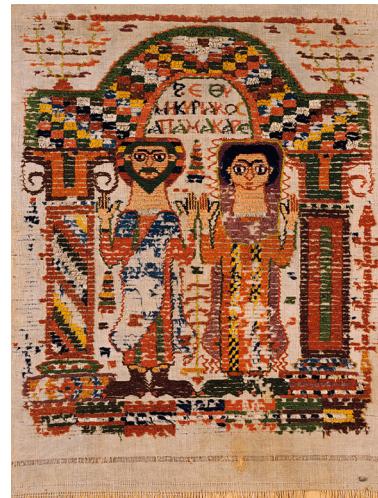
39 See for example the icon of Christ Emmanuel/Ancient of Days at Sinai, on which the ground and the frame share the same dark blue color (Corrigan 2010; Mathews 2006, fig. 4).

40 Mathews and Muller 2016, 198–99.

41 Grossmann and Severin 1991; Grossmann 1991a; Grossmann 1991b; Grossmann 2012; <https://ccdl.claremont.edu/digital/collection/cce/id/213/>; Bolman 2006.



7.



8.

Fig. 7. Wooden sanctuary screen discovered in Bawit, North church, Monastery of Apa Apollo, during the excavations in the early 20th century (After Bolman 2006, fig. 18). Fig. 8. Linen and woolen screen curtain, in the looped pile weave. From a monastery in Antinoe, 5th century. Benaki Museum, no. 7145. © The Benaki Museum.

between the sanctuary and the main body of the church, which occupied the whole width of the church and was reserved for the clergy. These partitions carried portraits of holy figures and Christological scenes in various media, such as glass,<sup>42</sup> wood-carving,<sup>43</sup> hangings, like the Benaki Museum linen and woolen screen curtain, in the looped pile weave, depicting two praying figures (Fig. 8),<sup>44</sup> and quite possibly painted icons too, like the one under examination.<sup>45</sup>

Moving on to the second work under discussion, the small two-sided icon has remained in obscurity, as I mentioned at the beginning, for the last ninety years. Given the problems it presents, it is not very surprising that no one has taken the trouble to study it. So, I shall attempt to untangle, to some extent, the jumble of its iconography and style. It is painted in tempera on a thin wooden panel, measuring 24.5 by 11.5 cm. The two figures are flat and frontal. One side depicts the Apostle Paul, but a very different Paul from the one with which we are familiar: he has short, black hair and a small black beard and is dressed as a prelate, with bejewelled draperies and an *omophorion* (Coptic: *παλλιπ*, *βαλλιπ*, *ωμοφοριον* and Arabic: *ballin*, *cardi*, *umfuriyun*) decorated with zigzag ornament.<sup>46</sup> He is holding a rectangular object with both hands, which is not, however, a codex or book, but rather a group of scrolls, as is apparent from the small circular element at the top, which indicates the hole at the top of the cylinder formed by a scroll when rolled up. Scrolls accompany depictions of the evangelists Luke and Matthew in the mosaics of San Vitale, Ravenna.<sup>47</sup> An even closer parallel to the painting on our icon is found in the depiction of Paul holding scrolls from the third layer of wall-paintings in the Red Monastery

42 Bolman 2006, fig. 5.

43 Bolman 2006, figs 11, 14, 20–21.

44 Inv. no. 7145, dim. 105 by 86 cm. According to the Benaki Museum archives, the textile was found in a monastery in Antinoe. The Benaki looped hanging carries a Coptic inscription that reads: “Hethyme (daughter of) Kyriakos and Apa Makare,” Georgoula 2007, 154–55 (S. Tsourinaki).

45 Mathews and Muller 2016, 194–201.

46 On the Coptic ecclesiastical vestments and the difficulties in identifying their names and use, particularly as regards the *omophorion*, see Innemée 1992, 23–30, 50–5, where he states that “The *omophorion* in the Coptic church is a source of confusion and contradictions” (p. 50).

47 James 2017, 236–42, fig. 93. More generally on Ravenna, Herrin 2011 (esp. ch. 15).



Fig. 9. Secco paintings with the Apostle Paul (a) and St Stephen (b). Red Monastery, near Sohag, Egypt, third phase, late 6th–7th century (After Bolman 2016, figs 10.23 and 8.10).

of the late sixth or seventh century<sup>48</sup> (Fig. 9a). It seems likely to be a visual reference to the Pauline epistles, in contrast to the evangelists who hold books. The figure on the Benaki icon is identified by the Greek majuscule inscription ΠΑΥΛΟΥ ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ (i.e. of the apostle Paul). On the ground next to the figure two pairs of stars are depicted, one star on either side of the saint's shoulders and one outside each leg.

The reverse depicts another figure dressed as a priest, with an *epitrachelion* prominently depicted over his *phelonion*. The figure has black hair with a thin, drooping moustache and a patch of facial hair below his lower lip. He is holding a chalice at chest level. This figure has been inexplicably recorded in the museum files as 'unidentifiable,' but on either side of the head the inscription ΑΓΙΟΣ ΑΠΑ ΣΤΕΦΑΝΟΣ ([our holy] Father St Stephen) can be made out clearly. There is no doubt that both sides are from the same period and by the same hand. The colour palette and materials used are extremely simple. On a brown ground the figures are depicted in white and ochre with thick black outlines. They are very linear, with wide-open, 'goggling' eyes that are practically circular, with round black pupils in the centre. The main characteristic of the painting is its intensely decorative feel with the geometric motifs, which –especially on the figure of St Paul– are found all over the surface of the draperies at regular intervals.

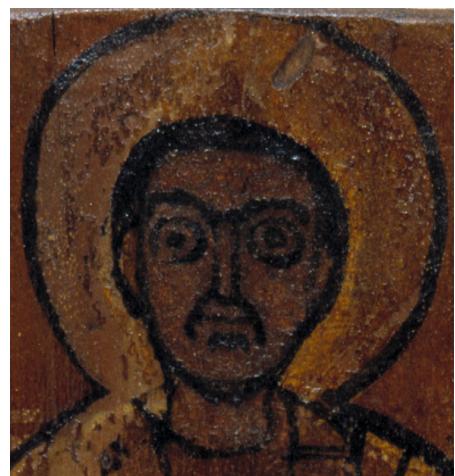
The iconography, the decorative tendency with the proliferation of geometric motifs, even the iconographic type of St Stephen, can all be traced back to a trend in painting that was prevalent in Egypt from the end of the sixth up to the eighth century. In the second and above all in the third paint layer in the Red Monastery, recently restored and published by a team led by Elizabeth Bolman, we find a similar profusion of geometric decoration and figures with virtually circular, 'goggling' eyes, though the rendering is certainly more painterly there, with an extensive colour palette, the work of a talented workshop<sup>49</sup> (Fig. 10). Nevertheless, it is clear that the roots of the Benaki icon lie in this painting trend of the late sixth and seventh centuries from Upper Egypt. Yet, at

48 Bolman 2016, 174, fig. 13.1.

49 Bolman 2016, esp. 119–73.



10a.



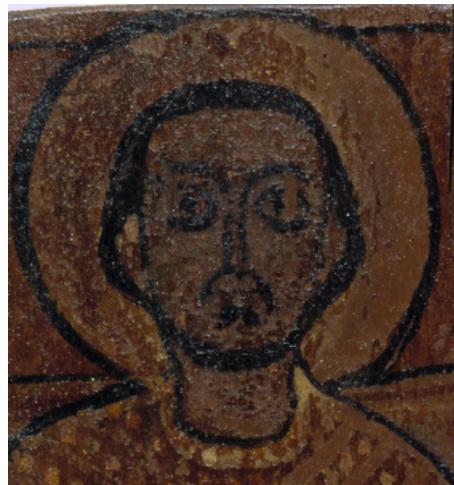
10b.



11a.



11b.



12a.



12b.

Fig. 10a. Prophet Daniel. Secco paintings Red Monastery, near Sohag, Egypt, third phase, late 6th–7th century (After Bolman 2016, fig. 11.2). Fig. 10b. St Stephen (det) Benaki Museum, no. 8954. © The Benaki Museum. Fig. 11. Copper-alloy reliquary-crosses, 9th–11th century. Benaki Museum, left: no. 35551 (from Constantinople); right: no. 11410. © The Benaki Museum. Fig. 12a. The Apostle Paul (det) Benaki Museum, no. 8954. © The Benaki Museum. Fig. 12b. Apostle Paul from the Fieschi Morgan *Stavrotheke*. Ca. 800. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, no. 17.190.715a, b.

the same time, the intense stylization and the prevailing linearity of the icon betray not just the painter's lack of skill or training, but it also shows just how far removed the icon is in artistic terms from such models and the distance in time that separates them. Indeed, we find much the same geometric ornament on the draperies of figures of saints on the copper-alloy reliquary-crosses that begin to appear literally in their hundreds from the ninth century onwards in Byzantium and the wider sphere of its influence<sup>50</sup> (Fig. 11). A comparison with another very well-known Byzantine work of the early ninth century suggests a dating in the eighth or early ninth century, for the Benaki Museum icon. I am referring to the famous Fieschi Morgan *stavrotheke*, dated to ca. 800<sup>51</sup> (Fig. 12). Despite the difference in media –enamel on one and painting on the other– the figures are drawn in exactly the same way, with a single curving line outlining the eyebrows and the nose, and in both works St Paul is depicted with the same specific portrait type: with black hair and a short black beard. Finally it is worth noting that the stars that decorate the ground of the Benaki icon are also found on a badly damaged icon of the Virgin and Child on Sinai, which can be dated to the seventh to eighth century.<sup>52</sup> Based on the above criteria, the Benaki Museum's two-sided icon can be dated with relative certainty to the eighth or the early ninth century.

If we can now consider the dating of the work resolved, its iconographic peculiarities require further discussion. The fact that the honorific Coptic appellation APA, i.e. father, has been added to the inscription "St Stephen" reflects a very common practice in Coptic art, where it often accompanies portraits of monastic fathers of some of the great Egyptian monastic centres who became saints.<sup>53</sup> The prosopographical features of St Stephen and his attire recall the depiction of the eponymous deacon-martyr in the Red Monastery (Fig. 9b). There the saint's portrait has the same features and facial hair and holds a large chalice, though he is not wearing full priestly garments but a simple, undecorated stole.<sup>54</sup> Despite the disparity in their garments, the St Stephen on the Benaki icon is likely to be meant to represent the well-known deacon-saint himself, albeit dressed as an officiating priest.

The depiction of Paul on the other side is even more problematic. The accompanying inscription precludes any other Paul from the Coptic festal calendar. And, of course, putting the name in the genitive ("Παύλου Αποστόλου") indicates its possessive nature. Inscriptions were written in the same way (i.e. using the genitive case for a name) on numerous sixth- to eighth-century clay lamps from Egypt, e.g. [of] St John, St Eustathios or St Philemon, etc. (Fig. 13).<sup>55</sup> These were either offerings given to churches, dedicated to the corresponding saints or pilgrimage mementoes (*eulogies*) from monasteries bearing these saints' names, whose inscriptions were intended to transmit a blessing and a reminder of the sanctity of the place. And we can make the same assumption in respect of the little, two-sided icon, which –given its dimensions and how thin the panel is– could easily have performed the same function in some shrine dedicated to the Apostle Paul.

But why is the chief of the apostles dressed as a prelate? In Christian iconography the way holy persons are dressed is inalienably linked with their identity. It epitomizes a set of symbols that point to the identity and define the place and role of any given individual in the hierarchy of the heavenly Church. In the visual 'grammar' of early and medieval Christian pictorial vocabulary clothing plays a leading role, on a par with facial features. Consequently, a change in costume, especially in the case of Paul, one of the two leaders of the apostles, constitutes a significant shift in his theological identity. Is this a careless iconographical distortion or a deliberate transformation?

The same iconographical phenomenon is at work in another small group of painted works from Egypt. In the Red Monastery, in the third layer of wall-paintings from the late sixth or seventh century, in the south apse

50 Pitarakis 2006.

51 Evans and Ratliff 2012, 88–89, no. 54 (B. Ratliff), with earlier bibliography.

52 Soteriou and Soteriou 1958, 42–43, pl. 28, broadly dating it in the seventh to ninth centuries. An earlier tentative dating, "about seventh century" has been proposed by Weitzmann (1976, 51, no. B.28), followed by Hans Belting (1994, 112–13, fig. 64).

53 *The Coptic encyclopedia*, 1 (1991) s.v. Apa (A. Atiya).

54 Bolman 2016, 180, fig. 13.3.

55 Unpublished. Benaki Museum, Inv. Nos. 12019 and 12032.



13a.



13b.



14a.



14b.



15.



Fig. 13. Oil lamps from Egypt with Greek inscriptions: 13a. ΤΟΥ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΦΙΛΗΜΩΝ (of St Philemon). Benaki Museum, no. 12019; 13b. ΤΟΥ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΘΕΟΔΩΡΟΣ (of St Theodore). Benaki Museum, no. 12032. © The Benaki Museum. Fig. 14a. Secco painting with the Apostle Peter, Red Monastery, near Sohag, Egypt, third phase, late 6th–7th century (After Bolman 2016, fig. 12.4). Fig. 14b. The Evangelist Mark, encaustic on wood. From Fayum, 6th–7th century, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris, No. 1129a (After Durand 1992, no. 99). Fig. 15. Bawit, Two groups of apostles with two abbots flanking the Enthroned Virgin, 6th century. Coptic Museum, Cairo. Photo: N. Drandakis archive.

of the triconch at the eastern end of the basilica, full-length figures of saints, including the Chiefs of the Apostles Sts Peter and Paul, flank a nursing Virgin. Whereas Paul, whom we discussed earlier with scrolls in his hand, is depicted in the usual iconographical type (Fig. 9a), Peter is dressed as a monk with the typical monastic garb worn in the Shenoute monastic federation,<sup>56</sup> three wealthy and powerful monasteries, founded by St Shenoute, including both the White and the Red Monasteries (Fig. 14a). At their peak the three monasteries had 2,200 male and 1,800 female religious.<sup>57</sup> As regards the Red Monastery, Bolman has convincingly interpreted the idiosyncratic and unexpected monastic garb of St Peter as an orchestrated attempt to flaunt the special identity and the prestige of the monks of the federation using iconography.<sup>58</sup> The importance of the monastic community is highlighted through an artistic composition showing an ecclesiastical genealogy that appropriates the foremost saints of the Christian Church. Yet this is not an isolated phenomenon. Later, in the early eleventh century, in the wall-paintings of the Monastery of the Archangel Gabriel at Gabal-al Naqlun, in Fayum, the Apostle Peter is once again transformed. He is depicted among the other apostles, but distinguished from them, as in addition to the roll of letter –identified by a Coptic inscription– and the keys he is holding, he wears the dress of a bishop and a monk's hood. The Coptic inscriptions identify him with Bishop Peter of Alexandria, thus this holy figure, set among the other apostles, with his features and attire is both a Church leader and martyr specially honoured in the Coptic Church.<sup>59</sup> His portrait represents a rare instance of a deliberate and openly acknowledged fusion of two discrete saints with the same name.

The iconographic and ideological transformations of St Peter are not the only example. On a sixth-century icon from Crocodilopolis in the Fayum region, now in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris, St Mark the Evangelist, the founder and first patriarch of the Christian church in Egypt, is depicted dressed as a bishop, wearing the typical Coptic omophorion around his neck<sup>60</sup> (Fig. 14b). He is accompanied by a Coptic inscription that can be translated as “Our Father Mark the Evangelist.”<sup>61</sup> Mark's exceptional position as the role model for the leaders of the Coptic church is reflected in the sources, as for example in John the Deacon's account in which patriarch Michael I (743-767), is proclaimed “the new Mark.”<sup>62</sup>

Equally interesting is an inversion of this iconographic process of transformation seen in sixth-century wall-paintings from Bawit, recently studied by Thelma Thomas<sup>63</sup> (Fig. 15). In the well-known apse painting, now in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, the line-up of apostles is extended at either end by two abbots from the monastery, who have been transformed iconographically from monks into apostles, wearing the conventional dress of the ancient philosopher. And in this instance, as at the Red Monastery, this iconographic deviation is aimed at highlighting the role of the monastic community, this time ranking its leaders with the twelve apostles by means of their dress.

The above examples illustrate how the surprising iconography of the prelate-apostle Paul of the icon can be integrated in a tradition, which, albeit diverging from the ‘norm,’ was apparently considered acceptable in an Egyptian context. If in the Red Monastery the monastic habit worn by St Peter is easier to interpret in the confines of the monastic environment, where the chief apostle dressed as Shenoutian monk lends holy ancestry and authority to the leaders of the monastic community, the hieratic dress of Peter, Mark and Paul in the other examples that have been identified reflects more general concerns and more complex ecclesiastical and historical phenomena. In the cases mentioned above, the foremost apostles and evangelists are pressed into service by patrons to bear witness through their hieratic or episcopal dress to the apostolic succession of the Coptic

56 Bolman 2016, fig 12.4, 169–71.

57 Schroeder 2007; Bolman 2016, esp. parts I and III.

58 Bolman 2016, 164–73.

59 Gabra 2002, 52–3, pls. 5.5 and 5.6.

60 On the Coptic omophorion see above Innemee's discussion on the subject, above n. 39.

61 Durand 1992, 145 (J. Durand).

62 Swanson 2010, 20. Interestingly, it was Michael I who succeeded in having St Mark's church in Alexandria restored.

63 Thomas 2012; Thomas 2019.

hierarchy. Representations of the leadership of the heavenly Church in vestments that transform their role in the heavenly church, create a specific visual ‘locus for the social memory’ of the Coptic church.<sup>64</sup> Apostles and evangelists are transformed iconographically from timeless philosopher figures and founders of Christianity to battle-ready Church leaders, hierarchs and role models, connected with historical time and the troubles of the earthly Church and its notional shepherding;<sup>65</sup> a Church which, in the case of the Coptic community, was for nearly two centuries at odds with the political leadership of the state, while Egypt remained part of the Late Roman world and under the Byzantine, Chalcedonian regime, in other words a mostly hostile regime.<sup>66</sup> After the Arab conquest, the fortunes of the Coptic Church under Islamic rule fluctuated, reflected in the gradual shrinking and ultimate abandonment of many monasteries, and a reduction in the wealth and population numbers of the Coptic community itself.<sup>67</sup> In these circumstances, the leadership of the Coptic Church was charged not just with religious duties, but also with responsibility for maintaining a historical identity and distinguishing the Copts from the non-Christian political regime. The Church’s enhanced status, as well as the challenges it faced, also created a need to adapt the artistic repertoire, to depict its new role and provide the Copts’ religious leaders with symbolic weapons.

The Benaki icon, with combined images of St Stephen as a priest and the Apostle Paul in the form of a prelate, meet precisely this need. It emphasizes the pre-eminence of the episcopal role, while at the same time giving the commissioner or recipient, most probably a priest, a new exalted role model in the person of the hierarch Paul.

To sum up, the two icons I have discussed provide interesting evidence about panel painting in the provinces or borderlands of the Byzantine world, in a period of momentous change for both the empire and the Eastern Mediterranean. They demonstrate, each in its own way, a certain commonality with as well as some divergences from the Byzantine artistic tradition in the critical period of two centuries, when Egypt broke away politically from the main body of the empire. Religious art, stemming from shared roots, continued to develop, but had to face different historical challenges. The damaged icon of Christ with the Coptic votive inscription must have been intended as a votive offering, and the emphasis on Christ Emmanuel probably proclaims not only the Miaphysite tendencies of the patron, but also of the place that was to receive the work. If, indeed, Mathews’ suggestion holds water and it was intended for a templon or *khurus* screen, then the icon of Christ and its inscriptions would indeed have been prominently displayed in the cult space. The details of its technique and its confirmed Egyptian provenance link it with a group of works of the seventh century preserved at St Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai, and once again raises the question of the provenance of those icons. Rather than necessarily coming from Syria-Palestine, as Weitzmann suggested, they too may come from Egypt itself, which in that period had wealthy and extremely powerful monasteries and a highly developed trade in art.

The artistically modest yet iconographically surprising two-sided icon adds one more example to the small number of painted panels to have survived from the eighth and ninth centuries. The Greek inscriptions, the iconographic link with the Fieschi Morgan *stavrotheke*, as well as its similarities with the reliquary-crosses that flooded Byzantium from the ninth century onwards bear witness to both the common origins of the Coptic art of Egypt under Arab rule and the art of Byzantium and some instances of parallel development. Nevertheless, the loss of contact with the great artistic centres of Byzantium that imposed certain rules of iconography and style on the art of the empire is also apparent in the icon. Coptic painting acquired a life of its own after the region broke away from the political sphere of Byzantium and this new independence gave Coptic painting greater flexibility in handling and adapting the iconography of the saints. Patrons and artists could vary icono-

64 I am borrowing here Rebecca Krawiec’s wording on the role of monastic habits (Krawiec 2014, 55–6). From the vast literature on social memory, habitus and cultural representation, apart from Bourdieu’s seminal work (1984), see Castelli 2004, esp. 10–32.

65 Swanson 2010, 1–11.

66 Frend 1972; Davies 2004; Davies 2008; Millar 2008.

67 Swanson 2010.

graphic types that had been accepted as the norm from the very beginnings of Christian art, like the iconography of the chiefs of the apostles Peter and Paul, in order to adapt painted programmes to the current political and religious conditions and to respond to the social needs of the faithful in a direct way through the medium of the visual arts.

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