



The rendering of Christ in the *Temple icon* of the *Theotokos*: a gaze from the fourth century. Part two

La representación de Cristo en el *icono del Templo* de la *Theotokos*: una mirada del siglo IV. Segunda parte

A representação de Cristo no *ícone do Templo* da *Theotokos*: um olhar do século IV. Segunda parte

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Abstract: This text brings new evidence to prove that the visual representation of Mary the Virgin with the child that has come to be known as the *Temple icon* was painted at an earlier date (the fourth century) than the one initially put forward by specialists (the sixth and seventh centuries). In an article published in 2007 I used arguments which referred to the *Theotokos* to support this date; now I adduce more of those as well as some concerning the representation of the infant Jesus.

Keywords: Icon – Egypt – Christ – Mary – *Theotokos* – Fourth century AD.

Resumo: Este texto trae nueva evidencia para probar que la representación visual de la Virgen María con el niño que se conoce como el *icono del Templo* fue pintada en una fecha anterior (siglo IV) que la presentada inicialmente por especialistas (los siglos VI y VII). En un artículo publicado en 2007 utilicé argumentos que se referían a *Theotokos* para respaldar esta fecha; ahora presento más de esos y algunos sobre la representación del niño Jesús.

Palabras-clave: Icono – Egipto – Cristo – María – *Theotokos* – Siglo IV.

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Since I published the article “A Gaze from the Fourth Century: The *Theotokos* Icon of the Temple Gallery” in the journal *Byzantinoslavica*, vol. 65,² where I dated what I think

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is a Coptic piece to this particular time [the fourth century], more evidence to support the respective temporal assignation – even to push it to an earlier period – has come out. An early dating of this piece is in variation to that most specialists who work on iconography in Britain have proposed; they maintain that the icon was painted in the sixth or even seventh century – I was in direct dialogue about it especially with Robin Cormack, but he has also written about the icon.³ The others scholars preoccupied with the topic have just follow the opinion of this professor.⁴

In addition to the arguments I adduced referring to Mary in order to support an early dating of the icon in London within the above-mentioned publication, here I point out that the figure of Christ the Child looks like seconds-third century portraits of children from Egypt under the Roman rule. As it is obvious in **image 1a** below he, like the other two children (from Antinoe/Antinoopolis), wear a tunic with purple *clavi*, the garment specific to the youngsters in the Roman Empire, a bulla, and probably an earring (it seems to be a suggestion in the image of such a piece of jewellery as it is also the case with the portrait of the girl in fig. 1b; her image has been dated to the third century.⁵). The purple *clavi* (stripes) were a designation of the high status of the person clothed in the garment displaying them. The meaning of their existence varied in time – initially purple *clavi* were only for aristocracy (as purple was the colour they exhibited in ceremonies) – but later the simple existence of *clavi* denoted that the owner of the garment was a free person. In our figures the *clavi* on

² ENE D-VASILESCU, E. “A Gaze from the Fourth Century: The *Theotokos* Icon of the Temple Gallery”. In: *Byzantinoslavica* 65, 2007, p. 83-90. Just to remind the reader: the icon was discovered at an auction in Avignon, France, in 2004 by Dr. Richard Temple and the restorer Laurence Morocco; they acquired it for the Temple Gallery in London (Richard is its owner).

³ The icon is reproduced and discussed in CORMACK, R. “Virgin and Child from Egypt”. In: TEMPLE, R. (ed.). *Masterpieces of Early Christian Art and Icons, catalogue published by the Temple Gallery based on the exhibition, Icons, 15th June-30th July 2005*. London: Temple Gallery, 2005, p. 22-29; it is also shown on the cover of the catalogue to which this scholar has contributed. In that publications the details of the icon, which formed part of an exhibition in Temple Gallery in 2005, are thus: “S003. Virgin and Child; Item #14585; Egypt, 6th or 7th century.” I had a discussion about this icon with Prof. Cormack at the 21st Congress of Byzantine Studies, London, 21-26 August 2006.

⁴ The piece is also reproduced in BARKER, M. “Wisdom Imagery and the Mother of God”. In: BRUBAKER, L; CUNNINGHAM, M. B. (eds.). *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images. Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies 11*. Aldershot, Hampshire, 2011, p. 92-108, where the holy mother represented there is referred to in terms of ‘Mary as Wisdom’; BRUBAKER, L.; CUNNINGHAM, M. B. (eds.), *op. cit.*, Plate 6; p. 108; the image is also commented on there.

⁵ According to the caption within the Musée du Louvre, Département des antiquités égyptiennes; this is item AF 6488 in the museum.



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the cloths of the first two children are very dark, almost black; that can be so because over time both the tunics and *clavi* came to be made in a variety of hues. The dark colour in the case of our figures might also indicate that the pigment of the purple colour reacted with the oxygen and darkened. In the image below, where this is visible, the long-sleeved white tunics seem to have attached to them double cuff bands of deep purple (or black).

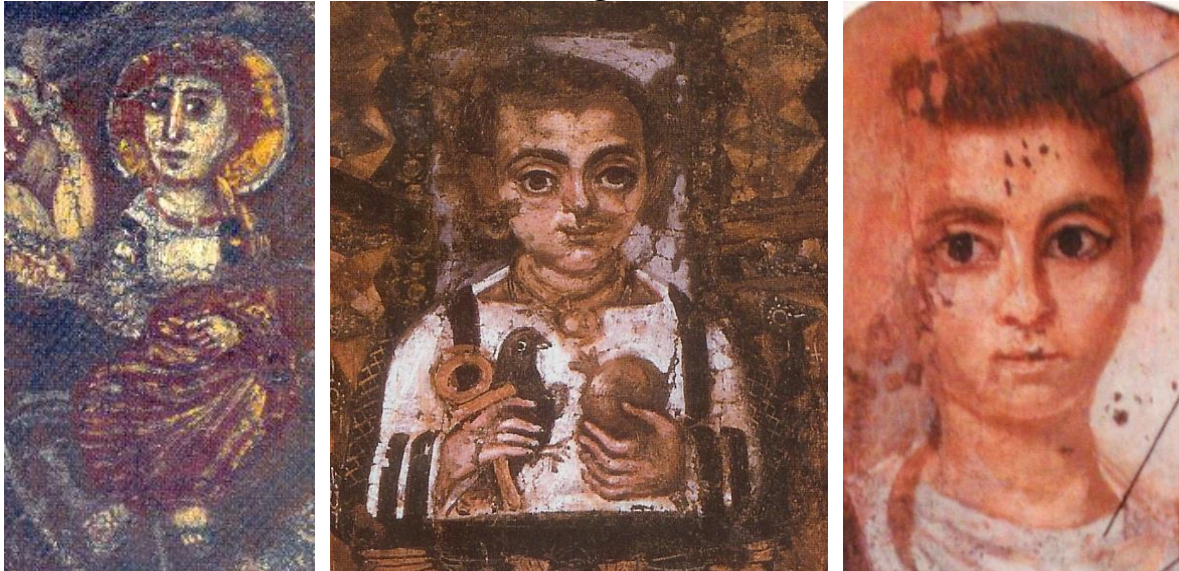
The bulla (lunula for girls), the necklace of gold for the rich, and a pouch of leather for the rest, indicated the fact that the young person had not yet reached the official adulthood. A good exemplar of such an object has been preserved very well in the image reproduced in **image 2**.

Valentina Cantone opines that the motif of the child inscribed by a mandorla was firstly attested within the Syriac manuscript 341 in the Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris, fol. 118r, sixth-seventh century; the image containing it is entitled ‘The Virgin between Solomon and the Church as Wisdom’.⁶ Nevertheless, she considers that this iconographic theme is a very early one: it is a heritage of the imperial cult. The emperor was carried in triumph on a shield, which was usually of an oval shape, and also his aura resembles a mandorla. Cantone further considers that the image representing this reality became popular, at least partially, through the circulation of consular diptychs “that took over and developed the imperial prototype.”⁷ Since this is the case, the occurrence of the motif happened much earlier than sixth century. There is an obvious continuity between the practice of the court ritual and its Christianization, sublimation, and consequent depiction in icons, on the walls of churches, and in the pages of illuminated manuscripts as that mentioned above.

⁶ CANTONE, V., *op. cit.*, p. 18. The page of the Syriac manuscript 341 that shows Mary with the child in mandorla is reproduced in *Rivista di Storia della Miniatura* XV, 2011, fig. 1 on p. 9.

⁷ CANTONE, V., *op. cit.*, p. 25.

Image 1



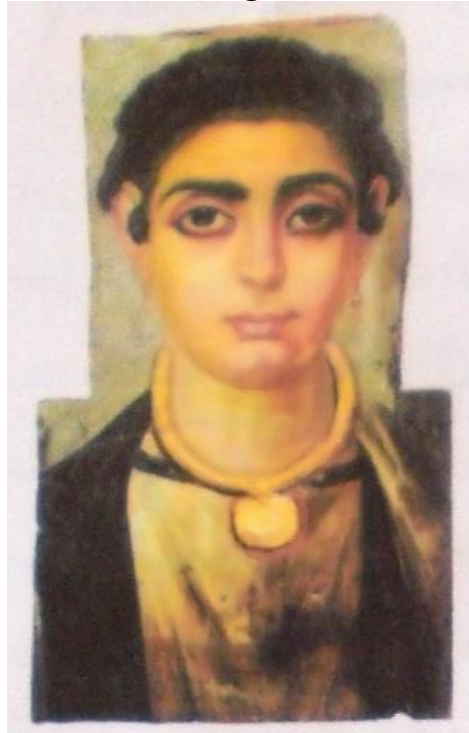
a) On the left, *The child Christ in the 'Temple' icon 'Virgin and Child'*. Encaustic on linen laid on modern panel; 48 x 23 cm, panel: 53.5 x 29.5 cm⁸; b) in the middle, *A child identified as a girl of 3-4 years*, encaustic on linen with plaster applications. Today this in the Musée du Louvre, Département des antiquités égyptiennes, AF 6488 (formerly in the Musée Guimet, MG 71)⁹; c) on the right, *The portrait of a boy*. Encaustic on fig wood; late second to early third century AD.¹⁰

⁸ In my opinion this icon was painted in the fourth century AD. I made a photograph of it *in situ* when Richard Temple invited me to see it; in my article “A Gaze from the Fourth Century: The *Theotokos* Icon of the Temple Gallery” (*op. cit.*), this is image ‘c’ on p. 89; also CANTONE, V. “Iconografia mariana e culto popolare nel codice Siriaco 341 di Parigi”. In: *Rivista di Storia della Miniatura* XV, 2011, p. 17-25 (fig. 2 on p. 19) as well as COUDERT, M. *et al.* “Momies”. In: LINTZ, Y.; COUDERT, M. (eds.). *Antinoé: momies, textiles, céramiques et autres antiques: envois de l'État et dépôts du musée du Louvre de 1901 à nos jours*. Musée du Louvre, Département des antiquités égyptiennes. Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, Louvre éditions, 2013, p. 175-255 (fig. 45d on p. 197; its description is on p. 196-197) reproduce it.

⁹ This was excavated at Antinoopolis by A. Gayet (exhibited 27th May to 31st July 1908 at Musée Guimet; information gathered during my visit to the Louvre (September 2018).

¹⁰ This was excavated at Antinoopolis by Gayet in 1904-1905. Today in the Musée du Louvre, Département des antiquités égyptiennes, E 12570; according to the caption of the image within the museum it was acquired in 1905.

Image 2



The head of a girl with lunula, painting on wood, third century. In: DOXIADIS, Euphrosyne. *The mysterious Fayum portraits: faces from ancient Egypt*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1995, p. 112, n. 84.

Cantone compares the icon in the Temple Gallery with that of the Virgin and Child within the frescoes in the south church of the monastery of St. Apollo from Bawit where a first building that dates to the fourth century has been discovered. She does the same with regard to the corresponding scene that is depicted in the apse of chapel B in the Monastery of Saint Jeremiah at Saqqara (early sixth century).¹¹ The comparison refers to the fact that the positioning on the baby on Mary's lap in a particular manner (closed to the chest) suggest that he is still within the uterus (a mandorla), but the iconographers wanted to make it visible in order to emphasize that the pregnancy of the Virgin is the expression of the mystery of the Incarnation.¹²

Depictions of Mary holding the child in this way (but without the mandorla) exist in the catacombs from the second-third century; the oldest is that in the Catacomb of Priscilla on the Via Salaria, Rome (150 AD). It is very likely that by the fourth the

¹¹ CANTONE, V., *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹² CANTONE, V., *op. cit.*, p. 17-25.



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scene of the child being held on the lap sometimes acquired a *mandorla*. The motif persisted in iconography until at least the thirteenth century; I found a representation very similar to that peculiar to the ‘Temple’ icon in St. Sophia Cathedral, Ohrid in the layer of painting from the eleventh century (it has three layers¹³). This church was erected on the foundation of an early church which is still to be precisely dated; Boris Cholpanov estimates that it was founded by Boris I (852-889).¹⁴

Another similar representation of the Mother and child exists in the Church of Virgin Peribleptos in the same town, which was painted in the thirteenth century¹⁵ (this is a double church, on two levels, and today it is better known as the Church of St. Clement; the present iconography within the larger church is modern – it was realized between 1972 and 1990¹⁶). A community of Egyptians existed there from the fifth century; most of its representatives were craftsmen who worked in gold and iconography. My own theory is that they might have brought this motif with them and from very early small churches that did not survive it might have been adopted by the medieval Byzantine iconographers who painted the images we see today. (The artistic contribution of these Egyptians to the cultural heritage of Ohrid has been recently recognized by the local authorities through the decision of having the reproduction of an Egyptian golden mask on the banknote of 500 denars).

Going back to the Temple icon, additionally to the arguments above that refer dating it on the basis of the portraiture of the infant Jesus, I found communalities between

¹³ The third layer is was painted under the Palaeologue family by the famous Michael and Eutiches Astrapas from Thessaloniki.

¹⁴ CHOLPANOV, B. *Land of a global crossroads*. Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Science, 1993, p. 131.

¹⁵ The inscription above the door of the building that survived until today indicates as founder Progan Zgur, the cousin of the Byzantine Emperor Alexios Komnenos (1081-1118), and a high hierarch within the Church. The extant painting dates to the thirteenth century.

¹⁶ DJURIĆ, Srdjan. *Ohrid*. *Grove Art Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. The main church is dedicated to St. Clement of Ohrid; it was consecrated on 12 August 1990. The church below, painted in the thirteenth century, has Virgin Mary Peribleptos (the All Seeing) as a patron. One of the chapels is dedicated to Sts. Constantine and Helena, and the other to St. Mina the martyr. The panels on the iconostasis were painted between 1972 and 1990 by Gjorgji Danevski and Spase Spirovski, and the frescoes by Jovan Petrov and his workshop. Jesus Christ is painted on the surface of 70 square meters, with each eye having a diameter of 1.5 m. A departure from tradition is that the Old Testament prophets are depicted as sitting instead of standing. The second departure from tradition are the large windows. To avoid large amounts of light a crystalline acrylic is placed in front of them, creating wondrous rays of color depending on the angle by which the light falls on it. Lighting of the church is done by five tons hard polileum which is placed under the central dome.



this icon in London (**image 3a**) and two representations of the Virgin with the child. One is in Rome and is known as Our Lady of Consolation (the fifth century);¹⁷ it is kept in the church of Santa Maria Nuova's sacristy¹⁸ (**image 3b**). The other one exists in an arcosolium on the south wall of the tomb of Theodosia, within the northern necropolis at Antinoopolis (fourth-fifth century AD, **image 3c**). The fresco within the arcosolium depicts an outdoor scene with three figures identified by the Greek inscriptions above their heads as Saint Colluthus (on the left), Theodosia (the deceased), and Saint Mary (i.e. the Virgin Mary) on the right.

Concerning the resemblance of the icon in London and that in Rome it consists in the obvious manner in which the face of Mary was painted – especially the way in which the expression of the eyes was rendered. Except for the fact that the holy figures look in a different direction, they are identical (even the shape of Mary's vestment around the neck is very similar). The three images certainly date from the pre-iconoclastic times.

According to tradition, the icon in Santa Maria Nuova was brought from the East by Angelo Frangipane¹⁹ in the fifth or sixth century and transferred to the Basilica in the time of Pope Honorius III (b. 1150, in See 1216-1227). In 1950, during his restoration of the church's works of art, Prof. Pico Cellini found it under two layers of painting, respectively added in the Middle Ages and later in 1805.²⁰ Modern technology using nuclear magnetic resonance sensors determined that the first layer of paint of this icon dates to the fifth century.²¹

¹⁷ PROIETTI, N.; CAPITANI, D.; DI TULLIO, V. "Applications of Nuclear Magnetic Resonance Sensors to Cultural Heritage". In: *Sensors* 14, 2014, p. 6983-6984, determined that the first layer of paint of this icon dates to the fifth century.

¹⁸ Its official name is 'Basilica di Santa Maria Nova. Santa Francesca Romana al Foro Romano'. The construction of the Capella di San Francisca Romana – St. Frances of Rome, 1450, was sponsored by Mabilia Papazzurri, the wife of Battista de' Poziani, grandson of the saint. See NYBORG, C. *Santa Francesca Romana*. Rome: [s. n.], 2000.

¹⁹ The Frangipani were a Roman noble family that expanded in all Italy. There were many branches all over Italy and Europe.

²⁰ CELLINI, P. *Falsi e restauri: oltre l'apparenza*. Rome: Archivio Guido Izzi, 1992.

²¹ PROIETTI, N.; CAPITANI, D.; DI TULLIO, V., *op. cit.*, p. 6983-6984.

Image 3



a) On the left, icon of the *Theotokos*, Egypt; fourth century; b) in the middle, *Our Lady of Consolation* in the sacristy of the church of Santa Maria Nuova, fifth century;²² c) on the right, *St Mary* [the Virgin]; fresco *in situ* in an arcosolium at Antinoopolis, Egypt; the south wall of the tomb of Theodosia in the northern necropolis. Date: fourth-fifth century AD.²³

With respect to the comparison of the Temple icon with the image in Antinoopolis one can see that the style in which Mary’s eyes are represented in both pieces is strikingly similar as it also is the way in which the *mandorla* and the disk are held; this suggest that the images were realized in accordance with the same iconographical canon (to affirm that they come from the same painting school would be to take the similarity too far; until now there is no evidence to support such a statement).

²² The image exists in VASSILAKI, M. (ed.). *Images of the Mother of God. Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, p. 42, fig. 3.1 (black and white); my colour image is from a card. It also exist on line and free to use in accordance to the Creative Commons Attribution License.

²³ Excavations of the Istituto Papirologico “G.Vitelli” in 1936 and 1937; image in CALAMENT, F. “Les fouilles d’Antinoé d’hier à aujourd’hui: un mise en perspective”. In: LINTZ, Y.; COUDERT, M. (eds.). *Antinoé: momies, textiles, céramiques et autres antiques: envois de l’État et dépôts du musée du Louvre de 1901 à nos jours*. Musée du Louvre, Département des antiquités égyptiennes. Paris: Somogy éditions d’art, Louvre éditions, 2013, p. 23-29, fig. 4 on p. 29.



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All this information shows that the icon in the UK is a rare piece of Egyptian art that was certainly painted before the sixth century. It is one of the few pre-iconoclastic pieces to have survived; none of the specialist doubts that the panel was painted before the iconoclastic controversy.

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