

Sinaiticus



The Bulletin of the Saint Catherine Foundation
London * New York * Geneva
2012

ON THE OTHER PAGES

News

The work of Ligatus continues
NICHOLAS PICKWOOD Page 2

Foundation launches new website Page 3

Helen Evans to lecture in London Page 3

Reviews

Exhibition. *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition (7th-9th Century)*
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 14 March - 8 July 2012
ROBIN CORMACK Page 4

Catalogue. *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition (7th-9th Century)*
Edited by Helen C. Evans with Brandie Ratliff SEBASTIAN BROCK Page 7

Obituaries

Vassilis C. Constantakopoulos Page 8

Michel Lassithiotakis Page 9

Events

New York, Private Viewing and Dinner
20 March 2012, Metropolitan Museum of Art Page 10

Les activités de l'Association suisse des Amis de la Fondation Sainte-Catherine en 2011
CHARLES MÉLA Page 13

Articles

A singular gift: an Islamic predatory bird at Mount Sinai ANNA BALLIAN Page 14

Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition (7th-9th Century): the icons from the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai
KATHLEEN CORRIGAN Page 18

The icons of Sinai: continuity at a time of controversy FATHER JUSTIN Page 22

SPECIAL *BYZANTIUM AND ISLAM* ISSUE

This issue of *Sinaiticus* is dedicated to the 2012 *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition* exhibition on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York earlier this year. With articles by Anna Ballian and Kathleen Corrigan, the bulletin features important scholarship on the Byzantium and Islam theme. Professor Robin Cormack reviews the exhibition especially for *Sinaiticus*, and Dr Sebastian Brock assesses the exhibition catalogue. Father Justin allows us to publish the transcript of the illustrated talk he gave at the museum on 18 March, and photographs of the Private Viewing and Dinner organised by the American Associates on 20 March appear on the Events pages.

Reviewers universally praised *Byzantium and Islam*. 'Sparkling', 'an unlikely blockbuster', wrote Christian C Sahner in the *Wall Street Journal* (16 May). He called the exhibition 'beautiful and ambitious' and commented on the 'bold vision' it presented. *The New Criterion's* reviewer, Eric Ormsby, said, 'To step into the discreetly illumined rooms of the major new Byzantine exhibition at the Met is to experience, with a gentle shock, some of the wide-eyed wonder which early visitors to the court at Constantinople felt well over a millennium ago' (June). Lance Esplund, writing on the Bloomberg.com website, enthused, 'Meditative, scholarly and low-lit, the show's strength is its reserve' (10 April). Peter C Brown, in his considered, eight-page appreciation of the exhibition in the *New York Review of Books* (10 May), said that 'the Met exhibition offers the thrill of looking at the very first stages of a new world in the making'.

The withdrawal of loans from Egypt, including icons and manuscripts from Saint Catherine's, was the only cause for disappointment. The Egyptian loans did at least appear in the catalogue, if not on the gallery walls.



THE WORK OF LIGATUS CONTINUES

As we wait for the renovation of the library to start, we remain in touch with Father Justin about the care of the manuscripts and printed books wrapped and boxed in crates on metal racking in the storage rooms specially prepared for them. Depending on the security situation in Sinai, Marco di Bella, a conservator from Palermo and member of the survey team, will visit the monastery from Cairo, where he will be working, to check on the plastic crates and the conditions in the storage rooms (using the readings made by Father Justin of the temperature and humidity levels). What we hope will be the final version of the plans for the conservation workshop were drawn up in collaboration with Prof. Petros Koufopoulos in December of last year, fitting into the configuration of spaces that the Egyptian authorities have authorised at the western end of the upper levels of the south range. With a little ingenuity, it proved possible to incorporate all the features needed for a fully functioning conservation workshop suited to the needs of the collection.

In the meantime, Ligatus has continued with the thesaurus project under the title *The Language of Bindings*, initiated as a necessary component of the survey of the bound manuscripts in the monastery. The absence of an agreed terminology for the description of bookbindings has long been seen as an impediment to the further integration of bookbinding studies into mainstream bibliographical research, and is not only necessary for the description of books for catalogues and historical research, but also essential for the accurate recording of books during conservation, so that information can be shared across the field. A grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council has allowed us to assemble an international team of conservators, librarians and book historians to collaborate on what is intended to be a multilingual thesaurus. The countries involved include Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the Republic of Ireland, Romania, Slovenia and Spain. The thesaurus is designed to make use of the latest work on knowledge organisation, which is being carried out by the Foundation for Research and Technology - Hellas (FORTH) Institute at the University of Heraklion, Crete. This is one of the foremost centres for such work in Europe, under the direction of Dr Martin Doerr. The AHRC grant allowed us to bring the project members together for a series of meetings in London to discuss the scope and contents of the thesaurus. One of the outcomes of the project, in addition to the thesaurus itself, will be a manual to provide guidance on how to describe a binding. This will be available in the languages of the project and will therefore offer the possibility of a widely accepted methodology for such descriptions.

The Language of Bindings project was also intended to serve as preparation for a much larger European project to select, record, photograph, index and make available online approximately 15,000 historic bindings (including

a selection from the monastery) from 19 European countries, including all of those involved in the thesaurus project. This was intended to serve as a representative reference collection of bindings for anyone working with or interested in early books, and the application was made to the European Research Council for an Advanced Grant totalling €2.5 million. The competition for these grants is very strong, and they had a much larger number of applications this year than before, largely as a consequence of cut-backs in other sources of research funding. We were, sadly, unsuccessful in this application, but our bid is now the subject of an appeal against this decision, as we believe that our application was not properly judged on its merits by reviewers sufficiently familiar with the subject and the methodology proposed. We now await the results of this appeal.

The Ligatus Summer School series continued in September of last year with a highly successful fortnight in Venice, offering its usual two week-long courses, *European Bookbinding 1450-1830*, given by Professor Nicholas Pickwood, and *Identifying and Recording Bookbinding Structures for Conservation and Cataloguing* by Dr Thanasis Velios and Dr George Boudalis. The courses were given in the large *salone* of the Istituto Ellenico, designed by Baldassare Longhena, which, thanks to the generosity of the Istituto, we were allowed to use free of charge. The Istituto also allowed the lecturers to stay at the Istituto at very favourable rates. In order to be able to comply with Italian VAT regulations without having to register at what would have been an impossibly high cost, the course was run this time under the aegis of the University of Udine, with help (and an evening lecture) from Dr Neil Harris, with a free place offered each week to a student from the university. This has set a precedent of co-operation between the University of the Arts London and other universities that is likely to be repeated. In the course of the summer school, the students were able to visit the Biblioteca Marciana, the Biblioteca del Museo Correr and the Biblioteca S. Francesco della Vigna to examine examples of bookbindings held in their unparalleled collections. These visits, together with the opportunity to explore Venice, offered the students an unusually rich experience. This year, from 3-14 September, the courses were held in Paris, and there are plans to hold the 2013 summer school in Uppsala.

During the past year, Ligatus has continued to supervise the work of a number of post-graduate students, including Heather Ravenberg, better known to many members as the Administrator of the Saint Catherine Foundation, who has gained an M. Phil with her thesis entitled *A data model to describe book conservation treatment activity*, which made use of the Ligatus thesaurus. In June 2011, we were joined for nine months by a Japanese student from the University of Tokyo, Yuri Nomura, who came on a grant from Japan to gain experience in the analysis and description of historic bookbindings, as well as working as an intern at the Oxford Conservation Consortium and the British Library. She has made a lively and enthusiastic contribution to our work.

On 16 July, the University of the Arts London honoured Christopher Clarkson, a long-term member of the Saint Catherine's Monastery Conservation Project, with an Honorary Doctorate in recognition of his extraordinary contribution to the conservation of parchment and paper manuscripts, early printed books and bookbindings. This was the first time that the university (or possibly any university) had offered such a distinction to a book conservator, and it is a fitting tribute to a remarkable man and a remarkable – and continuing – lifetime of work. It was an occasion on which to remember his first contact as a 13-year-old schoolboy with the then independent Camberwell College of Arts and Crafts and to mark his continuing dedication to the education of young conservators, not only in the United Kingdom but also across the world. In doing so he has kept alive and carried on the work of Sidney ("Sandy") Cockerell and Roger Powell, taking his skills to the Library of Congress, the Walters Art Gallery and the Bodleian Library, among other institutions. He was heavily involved in events such as the rescue of the flooded libraries in Florence in 1966 and the repair of such famous material as the Codex Sinaiticus and the Hereford Mappa Mundi. The continuation of traditional skills did not prevent innovative developments, such as perspex exhibition cradles for books and the stepped wedge foam-block book supports for general reading room use. He has always striven to instill the highest standards, not only of craftsmanship but also of historical awareness, and this he emphasised in his brief address after receiving the award. In 2004 he was awarded the Plowden Gold Medal of the Royal Warrant Holders Association in recognition of his significant contribution to the advancement of the conservation profession. The foundation is fortunate to be able to benefit from his skill and experience.

NICHOLAS PICKWOOD

PROFESSOR NICHOLAS PICKWOOD is Director of the Ligatus Research Centre at the University of the Arts London and Leader of the Library Conservation Project at the Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai.

FOUNDATION LAUNCHES NEW WEBSITE

The Saint Catherine Foundation's new website went live in May 2012. The site, built by a team from Hatt Owen Design, combines style and usability to give the foundation a more modern web presence. Like the foundation itself, the site is international and multi-lingual. French, Greek and Arabic versions should be online very soon.

Visitors to the website are greeted by a dramatic slideshow of photographs by Bruce White, known for his photographs of works of art and historic architecture and his collaborations with museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Getty. The images convey the beauty and enduring presence of the monastery, which Bruce White captures so well.

A key aim behind the redesign was to keep members up to date with the activities of the foundation, including

news of events in Great Britain, the United States and Switzerland. Father Justin, the Librarian of Saint Catherine's, has kindly volunteered to keep a blog, and there is useful information about the monastery and visiting Sinai. Visitors to the site will be able to shop in our online store, which sells Christmas cards and publications from the foundation, and donate securely online.

See the new website at:
www.saintcatherinefoundation.org.

HELEN EVANS TO LECTURE IN LONDON

Dr Helen C Evans, curator of *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition*, will deliver the forthcoming 'ICMA at the Courtauld' lecture on Byzantium and Islam at the Courtauld Institute of Art in the Strand, London WC2, at 5.30 pm on Wednesday, 20 February 2013. Dr Evans is the Mary and Michael Jaharis Curator of Byzantine Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and a member of the Board of Directors of the American Associates of the Saint Catherine Foundation. The lecture series is sponsored by the International Center of Medieval Art, New York. The annual lecture is delivered at the Courtauld by a scholar based in North America, strengthening transatlantic contacts among medievalists from the university and museum worlds.

Sinaiticus: the Bulletin of the Saint Catherine Foundation
Edited by Earleen Brunner and Heather Ravenberg
Designed by Emilia López (www.emilialopez.com)
© Saint Catherine Foundation 2012

The Saint Catherine Foundation and its related associations in Switzerland and the United States support conservation work at the Monastery of Saint Catherine. The monastery's library is the present focus of conservation activities. To safeguard this historic archive, the foundation is raising funds for the renovation of the Library building and for the conservation and boxed storage of the manuscripts and early books.

SAINT CATHERINE FOUNDATION

14 Cleveland Row, London SW1A 1DP, UK

Telephone +44 20 7396 5420

Fax +44 20 7396 5440

Registered charity number 1053138

AMERICAN ASSOCIATES OF THE SAINT CATHERINE FOUNDATION

485 Madison Avenue - Suite 200, New York, New York 10022, USA

Telephone +1 212 541-6950

Fax +1 212 757-7213

ASSOCIATION SUISSE DES AMIS DE LA FONDATION SAINTE-CATHERINE

2, rue Saint-Laurent

1207 Geneva

Switzerland

secretary@saintcatherinefoundation.org

www.saintcatherinefoundation.org

REVIEWS

BYZANTIUM AND ISLAM: AGE OF TRANSITION (7TH-9TH CENTURY)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York, 14 March - 8 July 2012.

ROBIN CORMACK

My first thought on entering the set of galleries in New York of the exhibition *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition (7th-9th Century)* was to wonder how many people have had the opportunity of visiting all four of the Metropolitan Museum's exhibitions of Byzantium? The follow-up question is, of course, how did this new show connect with the aims of these previous related exhibitions? The first of the series was the *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, which ran from November 1977 to February 1978. This was to be followed twenty years later in 1997 by *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, AD 843-1261* and then in 2004 by *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)*. The first exhibition was the brainchild of the late Professor Kurt Weitzmann, and the following three exhibitions have been curated with the major input of Dr Helen Evans, now the Mary and Michael Jaharis Curator of Byzantine Art, Department of Medieval Art and the Cloisters at the Metropolitan Museum. Previously she worked jointly with William Wixom for *Glory*, was sole curator for *Faith and Power*, and for *Byzantium and Islam* she has worked with Brandie Ratliff.

Judging by the popularity of this series of exhibitions, one must hope that there will be still more to come! But there are growing problems in the curating of 'blockbuster' exhibitions, not only the great costs of the enterprise, but impingement of political and other factors on the accessibility of objects. In this case the materials from Egypt and Russia, which are included in the catalogue and integral to the scholarly conceptions of the exhibition, did not arrive in New York. In a paradoxical sense this connects this exhibition with *Spirituality*, for several items in that catalogue were not on display in the exhibition. Obviously for anyone that had looked forward especially to seeing the important materials from the monastery of Saint Catherine's, their absence was a disappointment. However the exhibition remained strong enough intellectually to withstand this situation, and the catalogue essays and entries substantiate the importance of the art at Sinai in understanding the cultural history of the period, helped also by an essay from the librarian Father Justin.

The fourth exhibition can be seen as filling in a chronological gap in the series, covering the period which was once so dismissively called the 'Dark Ages' of the early Middle Ages—and which by some no doubt still is. But whereas both *Glory* and *Faith and Power* might be regarded

as comprehensive survey exhibitions in which a significant selection of representative surviving materials was brought together in one place for analysis and appreciation, both *Spirituality* and this exhibition represent a more directed and planned ambition. *Spirituality* was a major attempt to document and explain the character of the first Christian art and to relate it to past traditions and ideas, showing where there were continuities and where there were discontinuities. The current exhibition also has a didactic element in it, but it is a much more coherent selection of materials than *Spirituality*, which was a somewhat confusing cobweb of interrelated threads of argument.

The central purpose of *Byzantium and Islam* was, as I viewed it, to inform the visitor about the nature of Byzantine art after the death of the emperor Justinian (emperor 527-65), who had grandiose plans of Mediterranean dominance and of the re-establishment of the Roman Empire integrated as a Christian hegemony. This Justinianic world-view quickly fell to pieces in the seventh century, with hostile incursions into the empire from the east (Persia), the north (Slavonic tribes) and more radically from the south, with the Arab conversion to Islam, initiated by Muhammad (570-632). The exhibition explored what happened when the rise of Islam in the seventh century altered the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean regions. This 'Age of Transition' (the subtitle of the exhibition) is handled through the selected works of art from the former Byzantine regions which passed into a different religious orbit, and changing cultural reaction to this. The story was taken up to the tenth century. The choice of the Byzantine objects certainly gave a new and fresh profile to the period after Justinian.

Every visitor to an exhibition takes away their personal response to the ensemble. I don't pretend to be any different, though as a frequent curator of exhibitions (most recently *Byzantium 330-1453* at the Royal Academy), I do claim some inside knowledge of the extraordinary hazards and challenges of these events. So my highlights may not have been the highlights of others, but I will try to give some reasons for mine.

The scene is set by defining the period of the emperor Heraclius (610-41) through various works. Never before have the six silver plates with the Life of David, now in the Metropolitan Museum collection and found in Cyprus in 1902, looked to me so striking. By a serendipitous circumstance another excellent exhibition in New York, *Transition to Christianity: Art of Late Antiquity, 3rd-7th Century AD* at the Onassis Cultural Center, showed the other three pieces, which are now in the collection of the Cyprus Museum at Nicosia (and shown also at the Royal Academy exhibition). Helen Evans questions whether the nine preserved plates did actually constitute the whole cycle as made in the seventh century, but she is confident enough that these luxury objects were produced in Constantinople as an imperial gift and that 'David' is in some way an allegory of Heraclius and conveys his image as a successful emperor. The dates do of course fit the connection with this triumphant emperor, but it is still a controversial



© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

David and Goliath Battle. Byzantine, Constantinople, 629-30, silver, cast, hammered, engraved, punched, and chased.

question how a connection between the Old Testament king and the living Christian emperor was understood in the time of production. How directly was this (putative) analogy read by those who were allowed to gaze on these luxury objects, and how far are these plates religious and how far are they secular—or do they break down the boundaries?

The ivories too looked exquisite in this display—both the whole set of 14 ivory plaques, once claimed (on very flimsy evidence) to belong to a throne made in Alexandria and to have been donated by the emperor Heraclius to the cathedral of Grado in North Italy, and also the (considerably restored) Louvre ivory with an apostle (St Mark?) on a throne amongst a group of figures. All these pieces are treated as works to be confidently dated from the sixth to the eighth century (and good reasons are given in the catalogue entry by Gudrun Bühl), and to be attributed to the eastern Mediterranean, and perhaps to Alexandria itself. This attribution brings back into active discussion a longstanding controversy about the importance or not of Alexandria as an artistic centre, an idea once very popular among art historians until it was seen that there was almost nothing certainly surviving from the art of Alexandria from which to characterise its artists. There seems no inherent reason why Alexandria might not have contained ivory workshops, as the raw materials would presumably have been exported to the Mediterranean through this port. But nor is there any firm evidence that these particular pieces were made in Alexandria rather than Constantinople, which some might argue simply on the basis of their quality and style. Their representations of St Mark are hardly sufficient to locate their provenance in his supposed place of death. So the challenge of the first objects in the exhibition was to re-assess the nature of Byzantine art in the period after Justinian, and to wonder how far Constantinople was the

centre of creative ideas or how far the regions were equally active. This is why the early icons at Saint Catherine's are so important. The exhibition included a number of items from the monastery which were reckoned to be produced in Egypt, Palestine or possibly within the walls of the monastery itself. Their role in the exhibition was therefore to explore the idea that the regions which subsequently fell under Islamic occupation were previously artistically significant in the cultural production of the larger Byzantine Empire. The question, in other words, of how dominant Constantinople rather than the wider Orthodox world was in the development of Orthodox art.

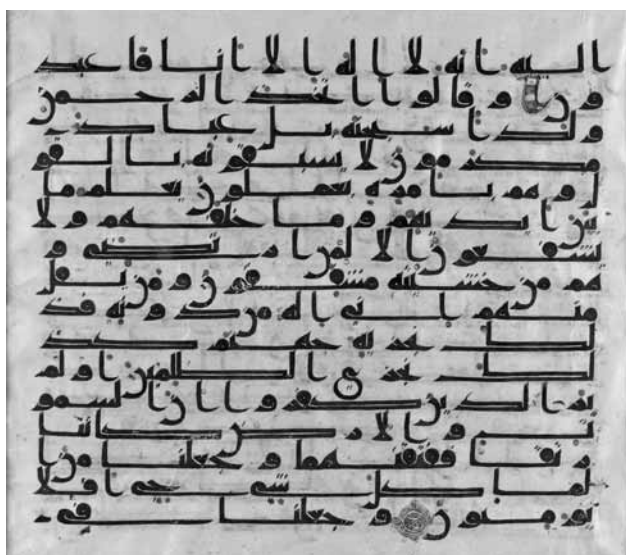


Annunciation to the Virgin. Eastern Mediterranean or Egypt, 7th-8th century, ivory. Civiche Raccolte d'Arte Applicata, Castello Sforzesco, Milan.

The quest to understand the importance of local production in this part of the Mediterranean world was further developed by the inclusion of Arab Christian manuscripts, and items from Syria (like the basalt relief of a stylite saint), Egypt (both Orthodox and Coptic) and Jordan. The significance of the regions was also underlined by objects connected with pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and

objects made for Jewish patrons. The same logic explains the section covering trade and commerce. It became even clearer that we should never underestimate the amount of travel in the period—both by people and by the works of art themselves, which circulated around the Mediterranean.

The challenge of this particular period is to understand the ways in which these regions and their cultures went into and then emerged from the political and religious crises of the eighth and ninth centuries. Orthodox Christianity, Judaism and Islam had all in common banned figurative religious images at this time, and this can hardly be something which happened coincidentally. But in 843 Byzantium reversed the ban and returned to its earlier tradition of figurative art, including portrait devotional icons of Christ, Mary and the saints. In many ways it is reasonable to regard this Byzantine revival of art as one of the great periods of Christian art production. Islam, however, continued its ban, and calligraphy instead of imagery became the identifying sign of the art of the mosque and the Koran. The final exhibits collectively documented this ‘transition’ in Islam. Among the most striking items were the several carved limestone sculptures



Folio with Verses from Qur’an 21:19-25. Damascus, late 8th century. Ink, pigments and gold leaf on parchment.

of the mid-eighth century from the Umayyad Palace of Mshatta in Jordan, which included sinuous vegetal designs as well as an equally sinuous naked female torso (these pieces came from Jordan, and not Berlin where most of the decoration of the palace is now displayed). The antecedents of these designs go back through Byzantium to Greco-Roman architectural decoration and perhaps are the legacy of Persia too.

What pieces most remain in the memory after the exhibition? The answer for me is the textiles, particularly the silks from Byzantium and Egypt, and the tunics, notably the Persian-style riding coat from Egypt, now in Berlin. This turquoise coat from a male body in a tomb at Antinoë excavated in 1896 and brilliantly restored at that time gives



Fragment Carved with Vine Scroll and a Vase. Qasr al-Mshatta, Jordan, mid-8th century. Limestone, carved. In situ, at the archaeological site of Qasr al-Mshatta, Jordan.

an insight into the taste of its wealthy owner, who was only one of several people there who wore clothes imported from Persia. For me this was one of a previously unknown group of striking objects which visually documented the outlook and appearance of people living in Egypt at the time covered by the exhibition. This coat was one of several pieces which eloquently made visible the complex cultural mix of life in the east Mediterranean.

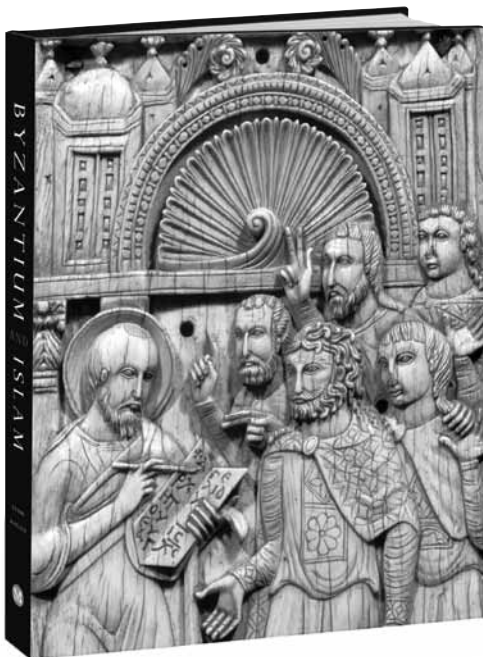
Perhaps one of the key questions raised by this exhibition and its manner of display of the objects is how far chronological ordering helps to explain change (or ‘transition’). What emerged clearly was the difference between the early objects, like the ivories and silver plates, which continued the stylistic traits of Late Antiquity, and the obvious move into more abstract and decorative work of the Islamic pieces of the ninth and tenth century (as well as the Coptic painting of Egypt). The familiar explanations for this change are ‘decline’ or ‘the move to the abstract’ or the ‘power of spirituality’ and so on. As in all periods of the history of art, one wants to find the most convincing kind of explanation. The late Ernst Gombrich often said in conversation that to ask ‘why’ was a pointless exercise for the art historian, who should only document and set out the evidence for the circumstances of production. Yet he himself was prone to search for the ‘why’ of artistic change and the influence on the artist of the patron of any work of art. This exhibition certainly opened up the question with new alignments of works of art (and incidentally with an invaluable catalogue).

PROFESSOR ROBIN CORMACK is Emeritus Professor in the History of Art, Courtauld Institute of Art and a member of the Classics Faculty, University of Cambridge.

BYZANTIUM AND ISLAM: AGE OF TRANSITION (7TH-9TH CENTURY)

Edited by Helen C Evans with Brandie Ratliff. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Catalogue distributed by Yale University Press, ISBN 978-0-300-17950-7).

SEBASTIAN BROCK



Whether or not they have had an opportunity to visit this exhibition held in the Metropolitan Museum from 14 March until 8 July 2012, readers of the issue of *Sinaiticus* for 2011 will have been well aware of its imminent arrival, thanks to the preview by Father Justin and others in that number. The theme of the exhibition is doubly welcome: firstly, because it is dedicated to a period in history which is sometimes dismissively referred to as the ‘dark ages’, being the centuries falling between the splendour of Justinian’s reign and what has been termed the *renovatio* under the Macedonian dynasty; here, much more appropriately, this period is designated ‘the Age of Transition’, which indeed it certainly was. Secondly, the theme is welcome because the aim of the exhibition has been to bring together three discrete worlds, each of which is usually considered in isolation, namely, Byzantium proper, the Eastern Christian communities no longer living within the Byzantine Empire, and the early Islamic world under whose rule they now lived.

The catalogue of 193 items is superbly illustrated, and is arranged with the two main sections, ‘Byzantium’ and ‘Islam’, appropriately linked by a large section entitled ‘Commerce’. There are just under 40 short but instructive essays by 25 different specialists accompanying the catalogue proper. It is an indication of the significance—so

often overlooked—of the Christian communities living *outside* the Byzantine Empire that 12 of the 16 essays in the section ‘Byzantium’ are specifically devoted to them. Here it is good to find that one of the two essays specifically dealing with the Monastery of Saint Catherine is by Father Justin himself. The illustrations are by no means confined just to the exhibited items, for there are also over a hundred further figures illustrating comparable materials; among these it is particularly exciting to see two illustrations of the architectural frontispiece of a luxury eighth-century Qur’an found, along with other early fragments, in San’a in 1972.

Anyone who peruses the illustrations of this catalogue will quickly come to realize that, far from being a ‘dark age’, the seventh to ninth century witnessed an astonishingly high level of artistic production, whether it be the amazingly fine silk medallion with the Annunciation depicted within interlinked roundels (see below), or the wonderful eighth-century mosaics that have been discovered in Jordan in recent years, and again, on the Islamic side, the delicate portrayal of two standing musicians from one of the Umayyad desert palaces, or the beautiful calligraphy of some of the early Qur’an fragments.

Although not intended as such, the catalogue, with its formidable bibliography of just over 25 three-columned pages, happens to serve as an excellent introduction and guide for anyone interested in the material culture of this particularly momentous ‘Age of Transition’.



Annunciation, 8th–9th century. Made in Alexandria or Egypt (?), Syria (?), Constantinople (?). Weft-faced compound twill (samit) in polychrome silk. Vatican Museums, Vatican City (61231).

By a happy coincidence the exhibition partially overlapped with another exhibition on view in New York (at the Onassis Cultural Center), arranged by the Onassis Foundation (USA) and the Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens, entitled ‘Transition to Christianity: Art of Late Antiquity’, concerned with the period third to seventh century, immediately preceding that covered by the Metropolitan Museum’s exhibition.

DR SEBASTIAN BROCK is Emeritus Reader in Syriac Studies at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford, and an Emeritus Fellow of Wolfson College.

OBITUARIES

Vassilis C Constantakopoulos
(1935 - 2011)



The Greek shipowner and businessman Vassilis Constantakopoulos was a longstanding benefactor of the Saint Catherine Foundation. Members of the foundation came to know Vassilis and his wife Carmen in St Petersburg during the White Nights weekend in June of 2000. Vassilis is pictured above right with Carmen on the St Petersburg trip. He will be remembered for his easy manner, passionate support for Greek culture and early environmental awareness.

Vassilis Constantakopoulos was born in Diavolitsi, a mountain village in Messinia in the Peloponnese. He maintained a lifelong connection to his native region, developing the Costa Navarino resorts there. His aim was to provide jobs for the local people, who were leaving for Athens in search of work, just as his own family had in 1948.

The young Vassilis worked to help the family, attending school at night. The move to Athens brought the village boy closer to the sea. He began his shipping career in 1953 as an 18 year-old deck hand on a freighter sailing from Piraeus, and he continued working on cargo ships while he studied to qualify as an officer and then as a master.

After two decades at sea, in 1974, 'Captain Vassilis', as he had become known, established Costamare Shipping. Costamare pioneered container shipping in Greece, and the company became the world's largest independent charter-owner. In November 2010 Costamare was listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Other Constantakopoulos ventures included Costacruising, a leisure craft business, and the industrial minerals company Geohellas.

Through his business dealings, Vassilis Constantakopoulos developed a keen interest in China, which led him to promote maritime co-operation between Greece and China. In 2000 Vassilis and Carmen Constantakopoulos founded the Center for Hellenic Studies at Beijing University.

Vassilis Constantakopoulos was a founding member of the Association of Greek Tourist Enterprises, the Vryonis Center for the Study of Hellenism, the Messenian League, the United Hellenic American Congress and the Pylos Archaeology Foundation. He served on the boards of the Greek Shipowners' Association, the Hellenic Chamber of Shipping, DVB NedshipBank and the National Bank of Greece. He was active in the Hellenic Marine Environment Protection Association (HELMEPA), and he founded and supported HELMEPA Junior. Earlier this year, the Kalamata International Airport was named the Captain Vassilis Constantakopoulos Airport in his honour.

Michel Lassithiotakis
(1955 - 2012)

L'Association suisse des Amis de la Fondation Sainte-Catherine a la tristesse d'annoncer la disparition soudaine le 23 juin 2012 du professeur Michel Lassithiotakis, membre de son comité directeur, dont les travaux portaient sur la littérature néohellénique de la fin du Moyen Âge à l'époque contemporaine.

Né en 1955, ancien élève de l'École Normale Supérieure de la rue d'Ulm (promotion 1976) et ancien pensionnaire de l'Institut hellénique de Venise, agrégé de lettres classiques, docteur de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV, 1985) puis Professeur ordinaire de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Genève, où il avait succédé en 1995 au professeur Bertrand Bouvier, sur la chaire prestigieuse de langue et littérature grecques modernes qu'avait occupée Samuel Baud-Bovy de 1942 à 1958, il avait été nommé Professeur de langue et littérature néohelléniques à l'Université Paris-Sorbonne en 2011.

La liste de ses travaux témoigne de la richesse et de la variété de l'apport qui fut le sien aux recherches néohelléniques dans les domaines littéraire, historique et philologique :

Kazantzakis et Bergson (1907–1927). Éléments pour une lecture « bergsonienne » d'Ascèse. In: LALIES 2 (Thessalonique, 24 août – 6 septembre 1980), 1983.

Recherches sur la vie et l'œuvre de François Skoufos (1644–1697), prédicateur et écrivain. Thèse de doctorat, Institut de Recherches Néohelléniques, Université de Paris IV Sorbonne, Paris 1985.

Le rôle des influences philosophiques dans la formation intellectuelle de Kazantzakis. In: Mésogeios 1 (1998).

Topography and demography of the underworld in the unpublished descent to hell Παλαιά και Νέα Διαθήκη. In: Mésogeios 2 (1998).

François Scouphos (Φραγκίσκος Σκούφος): *Ὁ Γραμματοφόρος : Le Courrier.* Édition critique du recueil de ses lettres avec introduction, commentaire et répertoires par Manoussos Manoussacas, avec la collaboration de Michel Lassithiotakis. Académie d'Athènes, Centre des recherches médiévales et néo-helléniques, 1998.

Place du canzoniere chypriote dans l'histoire de la poésie amoureuse en grec vulgaire au XV^e-XVI^e siècle : La notion de recueil lyrique. In: Andréas Chatzisavvas (Ανδρέας Χατζησάββας, Hrsg.): *Chypre et l'Europe.* Editions Praxandre, Besançon 1998.

Le rôle du livre imprimé dans la formation et le développement de la littérature en grec vulgaire (XVI^e–XVII^e siècles). In: Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée 87-88, 1999, 187-208.

Le metochion de Sainte-Catherine et la vie culturelle en Crète au XVI^e-XVII^e siècles: de l'histoire à la légende. Genève : Association suisse des amis de la Fondation de Sainte-Catherine, 2006 (Cahiers de l'Association suisse des amis de la Fondation de Sainte-Catherine, numéro 4).

Η Ελληνική γλώσσα από τον 12ο έως τον 17ο αιώνα: Πηγές και εξέλιξη. 2007.

Traduction française : La langue grecque du XII^e au XVII^e siècle: Sources et évolution. 2007.

En collaboration avec Jean-Michel Spieser, François Boespflug, Rémi Labrusse, Averil Cameron: *Présence de Byzance.* Infolio, 2007.

Avec Martha Vasiliadi (Μάρθα Βασιλειάδη): *Διακειμενικότητα και βιογραφικές πρακτικές στην Ζαΐδα του Αλέξη Πανσελήνου: Μία πρώτη προσέγγιση.* In: *Ο Ελληνικός κόσμος ανάμεσα στην εποχή του Διαφωτισμού και στον εικοστό αιώνα.* Επιμέλεια: Konstantinos Dimadis. Ελληνικά γράμματα, Αθήνα, 2007, 671-680, online (PDF).

Το εὐγενειᾶς τὰ δῶρα : passion, vertu et noblesse dans Erotocritos. In: *Passions, Vertus et Vices dans l'Ancien Roman.* Actes du colloque de Tours, 19-21 octobre 2006, organisé par l'université François-Rabelais de Tours et l'UMR 5189, histoire et Sources des Mondes Antiques, édités par Bernard Pouderon et Cécile Bost-Pouderon avec la collaboration de Sébastien Montanari. Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, Lyon 2009 (Collection de la Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, 42, série littéraire et philosophique, 14), pp. 223-238 (PDF).

Littérature et culture de la Crète vénitienne. Daedalus, Paris, 2010.

CHARLES MÉLA

EVENTS

NEW YORK

PRIVATE VIEWING AND DINNER

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

20 MARCH 2012

The American Associates of the Saint Catherine Foundation organized a very special night at the museum for friends and benefactors. The grand staircase at the Met glowed with candles, lighting the way to the Cantor Gallery and the *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition* exhibition. The Private Viewing offered guests the opportunity to enjoy the exceptional works on display in the company of friends—the Purple Vellum Gospels and Blue Qur'an, the silver chalices and dove of the Attarouthi Treasure, to name but a few. There was plenty of time afterwards for drinks, canapés and conversation amid the marble plinths and sculptures of Petrie Court.

Dinner was served in the suitably Egyptian setting of the Temple of Dendur, dramatically lighted for the evening. Jewel colours played on the temple's sandstone walls as the guests took their seats, welcomed by the foundation's President, HRH Crown Princess Katherine of Serbia. HE Archbishop Demetrios of America, Patron of the American Associates, pronounced the Invocation, and the delicious meal began. The succession of courses was punctuated by a filmed address by the foundation's Honorary Patron, HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, and a short talk by Father Justin, Librarian of Saint Catherine's, an introduction to the exhibition she so admirably curated by Dr Helen C. Evans, Mary and Michael Jaharis Curator of Byzantine Art at the Metropolitan and a member of the Board of Directors of the American Associates.

Also a member of the Board, Peter Vlachos made a very popular Master of Ceremonies. He was joined on the podium by the formidable Event Chairperson Mary Jaharis, member of the Board of Directors, major sponsor with her husband Michael of *Byzantium and Islam* and, with Michael, the driving force behind the creation of the Metropolitan's Mary and Michael Jaharis Galleries of Byzantine Art. Mrs Jaharis thanked fellow Event Chairs and Board members Zoe Moshovitis, Robert Shaw and Peter Vlachos for all they did to make this an evening to remember.



Arriving at the Met (left to right): Mr George Stamas, Mr Dean Metropoulos, Mrs Pepe Harovas, Mr Angelo Tsakopoulos, Mrs Zoe Moshovitis, Mr Jimmy Moshovitis.



At the reception: Mr Spiros Milonas, Ms Korinne Kotovos, Mrs Antonia Milonas.



Mr Carlos Picon, Mrs Tarsi Georgas.



Mrs Maria Embricos, HRH Crown Princess Katherine of Serbia, Ms Sana Sabbagh, Dr Nada Milosavljevich.



Mrs Sylvana Sursock Khouri, Mrs Marie-Christine Bilimatsis.



Entering the Temple of Dendur gallery.



The table set for dinner.



His Excellency Anastasios Mitsialis, the Greek Ambassador to the United Nations, Mrs Mary Jaharis, Mr Angelo Tsakopoulos and His Excellency Vassilios Kaskarellis, the Greek Ambassador to the United States.



In the Temple of Dendur: guests stand for the Invocation.



VHE Archbishop Demetrios of America, His Excellency Vassilios Kaskarellis, the Greek Ambassador to the United States, and the Very Revd Father John.



Mrs Mary Jaharis, Event Chairperson, thanks the guests.

GENÈVE

LES ACTIVITÉS DE L'ASSOCIATION SUISSE DES AMIS DE LA FONDATION SAINTE-CATHERINE EN 2011

Dans le cours de l'année 2011, le comité directeur a tenu six réunions et l'Assemblée générale a eu lieu le 25 mai. A cette occasion le grand slavisant Georges Nivat, professeur honoraire à l'Université de Genève, a donné une belle conférence sur « Soljenitsyne, le courage d'écrire », accompagnée d'une visite de l'exposition consacrée à ce dernier au Musée de la Fondation Martin Bodmer où étaient notamment présentés les manuscrits de *l'Archipel du Goulag*, *du Pavillon des cancéreux* et de certaines parties de *La Roue Rouge*, confiés par sa veuve, Natalia Dimitrievna.

Au début de l'année, une autre exposition intitulée « La médecine ancienne. Du corps aux étoiles », organisée à la Fondation Martin Bodmer par le docteur Gérald d'Andiran, a été l'occasion d'une visite commentée pour les membres de l'Association qu'intéressait l'histoire de la médecine dans la Grèce ancienne, suivie d'une conférence stimulante, illustrée de projections, donnée par le Dr. Stefanos Geroulanos sur le thème d'Anciens Ex-votos permettant un diagnostic médical exact.

Au mois d'octobre, une exposition de photographies en noir et blanc provenant de l'ancienne collection de Fred Boissonnas sur le monastère de Sainte-Catherine (« Expéditions au Sinaï 1929-1933 ») a été présentée en même temps que des objets d'art du Benaki Museum au Centre œcuménique orthodoxe de Chambésy à Genève. La visite qui a réuni une soixantaine d'amis de l'Association a également permis d'entendre une conférence remarquable sur l'art du photographe (« Travel Photography as Pilgrimage »), de Mme le professeur Oriana Baddeley (University of the Arts London), commissaire de l'exposition.

CHARLES MÉLA

Le PROFESSEUR CHARLES MÉLA est professeur honoraire de l'Université de Genève, où il a enseigné de 1982 à 2007 la littérature française du Moyen Âge, directeur de la Fondation Martin Bodmer, dont il a présidé antérieurement le Conseil, président du Centre Européen de la culture fondé par Denis de Rougemont, et président de l'Association suisse des Amis de la Fondation Sainte-Catherine.



Professeur Oriana Baddeley s'adressant aux Amis suisses le 6 octobre 2011.



Invités au dîner.



(De gauche à droite) Mme Christiane de Senarclens, Me Nicolas Gagnebin, Mme Nicole Gaulis, Me Stanley Walter.



Mme Margarita Latsis Catsiapis et M. Anthony Papayoannou.

A SINGULAR GIFT: AN ISLAMIC PREDATORY BIRD AT MOUNT SINAI

ANNA BALLIAN



Sinai Bird-Shaped Vessel, Syria or Iraq, early 9th century.

The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai houses a large, bird-shaped object inscribed in Arabic that was deposited in its treasury at an unknown time in the past. Throughout the centuries the monastery was a popular destination for pilgrims, itinerant monks and lay visitors. In most cases they left their gifts to the monastery as a token of gratitude and in anticipation of the salvation of their souls. The quality and varied provenance of the donated gifts attest to the means and religious fervor of the donors and also to the monastery's great repute in the Eastern and Western Christian worlds.

This bird-shaped object is an Islamic metalwork artifact notable for its size, sculptural qualities and early date. Sculpture is not a typically Islamic artistic expression; it rather characterizes the art of Greco-Roman antiquity or the medieval West. In the world of Late Antiquity newly conquered by Islam, figural sculpture and painting abounded, portraying deities, saints, emperors, the wealthy religious and the secular elite. In the eyes of Islam's true believers, statues and images were immediately identified with idols and the old religions. Idolatry, whether pagan or Christian, was vehemently condemned by the new faith that had come to suppress and replace all others. In the Qur'an, God's abomination of wine, games of chance, statues and divining arrows is specifically mentioned and their avoidance is urged. In the *Hadith*, the Traditions of the Prophet, the

condemnation of idol makers is categorical and is provided with a philosophical foundation. On Judgment Day idol makers will be called to breathe life into their images but will be unable to do so and thus will be damned eternally for attempting to usurp the creative powers of God.¹

Nonetheless there are several instances of three-dimensional images from the early and medieval Islamic periods. Zoomorphic objects in ceramic, stucco or metal were especially popular from the 11th to the 13th centuries.² In most cases they had a functional purpose and thus could not have been worshipped as idols; they comprised furniture supports, oil lamps, ewers or other containers and also incense burners, in which case they were pierced to allow the smoke to escape.

The Sinai bird (height 36.1 cm) is a large container for water, wine or other beverages. It is made of cast copper alloy and has attached to its back a handle in the shape of a quadruped holding a ball in its mouth. On the neck is a round cylindrical opening for filling with water (the lid is missing), while the hole in its beak was made for pouring the liquid. There is another, irregular, hole in the bottom, made later. The bird stands on three supports – its two legs and a rod under its crossing tail feathers through which it has been riveted; the latter is probably an antique repair. Its size and weight would have required a special person, an attendant (or groom), to handle it.

The exact species of the bird is not clear. The intention is to represent a predatory animal, but the characteristics are mixed, both real and fantastic, perhaps more eagle-like than anything else, although differing in several details. The small head with hanging 'crest' recalls a cock or pheasant, rather than the so-called bearded vulture (*gypaetus barbatus*), which has only a small black beard. The short neck and curved beak of our bird are closer to that of a common buzzard (*buteo buteo*), while the long legs, although typical of eagles, are lacking plumage—eagle's legs are entirely covered in feathers. The toes (one is missing) terminate in claws that look ferocious, but in real life they would have been three times longer.³ On the whole, claws are a feature that is conventionally emphasized in the depiction of birds in Late Antiquity, especially raptors on metalwork, pottery or textiles.⁴



Detail of the Sinai Bird-Shaped Vessel showing the chest and belly decoration.



Bird-Shaped Vessel, Inventar-No: I. 5623, Museum für Islamische Kunst – Berlin State Museums.

Under the prominent eyebrows the eyes are round and hollow, indicating that they may have been filled with glass paste, a common practice in Late Antique statuary. The engraved decoration is schematically rendered and consists of plumage, a dotted scale-like pattern, rosettes and vine scrolls; a few punched lines add to the decorative effect. The engraved lines are sharp and in places a kind of blackish color is apparent, but whether this is inlay or dirt is a matter to be determined by metal analysis.

The Sinai bird-shaped vessel forms a group with three other examples, in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, in Lucca—once standing on the apex of the church of San Frediano—and in the Hermitage Museum, this last dated 796-97.⁵ Several comparisons can be made: the handle survives in the Sinai and Berlin examples, the latter in the shape of a dolphin; the Hermitage, Sinai and Lucca birds bear an inscribed band across their breast; the birds in Berlin and the Hermitage are said to have once been inlaid and also display molded details on their plumage, including a boss, whereas those from Sinai and Lucca are strictly engraved. It seems likely that this last distinction may correspond to some difference in date.

However, they all share the same type of decoration, although it is used in various ways. All the birds bear a central rosette on the breast and a dotted scale-like pattern used to suggest feathers on several parts of their body, including, typically, the upper part of the wings. Scaling is a conventional feature in Late Antique bird images. In Byzantine and late Sasanian examples feathers are rendered with a central vein, or strokes and lateral striations or semicircles.⁶ On the Berlin bird this type of scale decoration appears on the molded part of the wings, and on the Sinai bird on the back, while on the rest of the body the simplified dotted version is used in both cases. The closest example to the Sinai bird appears to be that from Lucca. They both have long legs, a short neck and hollow eyes, as well as similar breast decoration: triangular panels with

dotted scales under the neck and a rosette amidst vine scrolls on the belly.

The Late Antique world is replete with vine scrolls and their infinite variations, which were continuously used and further elaborated in early Islamic art. They are most commonly found on vessels, textiles and architectural decoration.⁷ The Hermitage bird bears a small decorative zone, but the bellies of the Sinai and Lucca birds are covered with a vine pattern which characteristically has a dot on each of its five petals. The most elaborate version is on the raptor in Berlin: its breast and a large part of the neck are covered by an inhabited scroll with peaceful birds and hares, and guilloche roundels with a pair of birds and other individual animals.⁸ Vine scrolls with dotted details are characteristic of early Islamic art. They are found carved and incised on ivory and bone, on famous pieces of early metalwork such as the Tbilisi and Marwan ewers, and on beveled-style stuccowork from ninth-century Raqqa, Samarra or Egypt.⁹

On the whole, the Berlin bird seems to be closer to Late Antique examples, with its use of the inhabited scroll and the dolphin handle. The inhabited scroll is applied here with an overall concept as on floor mosaics or textile patterns, and is similarly used on the late Umayyad façade



Bird-Shaped Vessel once standing on the apex of the church of San Frediano in Lucca, Italy.

of the palace of Mshatta (see p. 5, illustration upper right).¹⁰ On the other hand, the handle in the shape of a dolphin rendered vividly as if leaping out of the water, is extremely common in Late Roman metalwork and appears in both secular and Christian contexts.¹¹

Zoomorphic handles are indeed a typical feature of Late Roman vessels, something which was transmitted at an early stage to Sasanian Iran and subsequently naturalized.¹² The handle of the Sinai vessel is shaped like a quadruped with long ears, perhaps a vestigial feline reminiscent of the Dionysian panther drinking from the lip of a vessel. The early transmittance of Western, Roman shapes and designs to Sasanian Iran, their reinterpretation by both Iranian and Late Roman craftsmen, and their later use in the early Islamic period confounds the quest for their origins. This state of things becomes even more complex when we consider that China had been exposed to Iranian art since the pre-Islamic period, and Sasanian silver and textiles had been the most influential precious items traded and imitated along the Silk route. In the ninth century China was in turn exporting its precious commodities, including metalwork and pottery, to the central Islamic lands. One such ceramic piece, from the famous Belitung shipwreck, containing a large consignment of Tang dynasty export goods en route to the Middle East, has a feline-shaped handle.¹³ Whatever the ultimate origin, issues of ambivalent provenance may point to cultural fusion and transformation, which would have taken place in the fertile ground provided by Abbasid Baghdad and Basra, a lively entrepôt of maritime trade with the Far East. One more puzzling feature of the Sinai bird may be viewed as a product of such cultural fusion and lends itself to varied interpretation: the ball in the mouth of the feline can be compared with a pearl, either Aphrodite's pearl, held in the mouth of dolphins, or the Buddhist pearl in the dragon's mouth.¹⁴

Similarly zoomorphic vessels are found in all cultures and Iran is famed for the manufacture of such drinking vessels, especially the drinking horns or *rhyta*. Apparently as late as 740, vases in the shape of animals were made in Merv, probably in a post-Sasanian or Sogdian style, and presented to the caliph.¹⁵ However, none has been identified and there are no other known examples of early Islamic vessels of the size and form of our eagle-like birds, but there are roosters and peacocks and a much larger number of felines and other quadrupeds, mostly from later Iran or Spain. The Hermitage bird, dated 796-97 and originally found in Grozny, is the earliest known dated example and is followed by a few other cocks or cockerels, and felines, found likewise in the Russian, Caspian and Central Asian districts and attributed to Iran between the 11th and 13th centuries.¹⁶

The closest in date seem to be the Spanish examples. Three peacock-shaped ewers or *aquamanilia*, the earliest probably made in Cordova in 976, form a quite distinct Andalusian group but share a few similarities with our birds: a zoomorphic handle, the scale pattern covering the majority of the body and the horizontal zone on the breast containing either an inscription or a scroll. They also share a common technical device which gives extra stability to the heavy cast birds by connecting their feet with a small compact circle in the case of the Sinai bird or a larger semicircle or arch in the case of the Cordovan peacocks.¹⁷ The Spanish connection is not as remote, geographically



© The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

Bird-Shaped Vessel or aquamanile, Iraq or Syria, AH 180 (796-97).

or culturally, as one would have thought. Spanish Umayyad art of the tenth century is a clear case of continuity of the art of Late Antiquity, all the more so in that it owes its ideological and aesthetic origins to the Umayyad art of Syria on the one hand, while on the other hand it was regularly refreshed by a steady stream of renovation issuing from Abbasid Baghdad. This Spanish connection, as well as its association with the famous bronze Pisa griffin that once stood on the roof of the cathedral there and is now predominantly attributed to Spain, explains why the Lucca bird has also been cautiously attributed to either Spain or Iran. The common fate of two medieval zoomorphic Islamic objects ending up on the roofs of Italian churches is extraordinary. Sometime in the 13th or 14th century, the Lucca bird was transformed from an eagle-like form into a cockerel functioning as a weathervane. The conversion was carried out by adding, among other details, a high cock's tail and a crest or cockscomb, presumably to complement the beard already featured; it may even be the case that the existing beard, suggesting a wattle, inspired the idea of transforming the avian aquamanile into a cockerel.¹⁸

Although eagles with clear connotations of power are a common motif in the Late Antique world, the precise models of these ewers cannot at present be identified. However, they seem to initiate a tradition which led to later Islamic zoomorphic figures, incense burners and *aquamanilia*, mostly, as we have seen, from Iran or Spain, which in turn shaped the production of Western European *aquamanilia*.¹⁹

The Sinai bird, in common with the Lucca and Hermitage birds, is inscribed in Arabic. The Sinai inscription follows a formula that would become standard

in the following centuries when inscriptions with blessings gradually became an integral part of metalwork decoration. It begins with the Muslim invocation to God, the *basmala*, 'In the name of God', a shortened form used in inscriptions on certain objects for reasons of space, and is followed by the supplicatory prayer of the anonymous owner: 'In the name of God God's blessing on the owner' (*bism Allah baraka min Allah lisabibih*). The Lucca bird is similarly inscribed, although the reference to the unknown owner is missing: *bismallah baraka min Allah*.²⁰ In contrast the inscription on the Hermitage bird is not generic. The *basmala* is inscribed in full, after which come the supplicatory blessings from God, and then the maker, the city (unfortunately undeciphered) and the date: 'In the name of God merciful, compassionate. God's blessing. This is what has been done by Suleiman in the city ... Year one hundred and eighty' (796-97). This is one of the earliest dated inscriptions on Islamic metalware, the other being on the already mentioned Tbilisi ewer made by Ibn Yazid at Basra in 69 AH (either [1]69 or [2]69 AH, 783-84 or 882-83).²¹

The question arises whether a Christian would have been offended by the inscription, which despite its shortened form alludes to the Muslim invocation of faith. Its counterpart in Christian Arabic texts of the early Islamic period is the opening formula of Gospel Lectionaries: 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, one God'.²² Perhaps the formula 'In the name of God' was understood in its wider sense, as the one God in general, and thus considered suitable for use in a Christian environment.

The Sinai bird was most probably manufactured in the early or first half of the ninth century. Like the rest of the group, it is a prestigious object made for the market but destined for the contemporary elite, and for this reason it was deemed suitable as a donation to the Monastery of Saint Catherine. The original, or a subsequent owner who donated the *aquamanile*, could equally likely have been either Christian or Muslim, as the monastery, in addition to being a Christian shrine, was also a sacred Muslim site from as early as the seventh century. Moses is a prophet for Christians as well as Muslims, and Mount Sinai is mentioned several times in the Qur'an. The site of the burning bush was a respected secondary pilgrimage for Muslims who, at least in the later period, visited it on their way back from Mecca.²³

In the eighth and especially the ninth century, we know that the monastery was part of a nexus linking Christian Arab centers of the caliphate, monasteries in Palestine and Mount Sinai, mostly Melkite communities, as the old followers of the Chalcedonian, pro-Byzantine church were then, and are still now, called. Christian communities under Muslim rule were cut off from the life of Byzantine or Western Christianity, but in the lands of the caliphate itinerant monks and pilgrims demonstrated an extraordinary mobility. The lives of saints who flourished in Syria and Palestine under the early Abbasids are the best source available to us. They offer a glimpse of life in villages and urban centers and help us to reconstruct the religious itineraries of the wandering monks.²⁴ For example,

the monk Anthony of Baghdad found himself in the Palestinian monastery of Mar Saba, where he copied and translated into Arabic religious texts commissioned by the Sinai monastery. There is evidence of similar mobility by two other Sinai monks who later became martyrs. One is the monk Pachomios, who is said to have been a cousin of the caliph and was martyred in front of him, supposedly in Damascus. The other is the abbot Qays, whose travels, starting from his birthplace Najran in Arabia, included visits to Mar Saba, Ayla (today Aqaba), Ramla and Edessa (today Urfa).²⁵ Interestingly there is no mention of Egypt in these early itineraries, probably because it was territory of the Coptic Church and the Miaphysite doctrine.

It seems that during this early period the pilgrimage routes went mostly through Syria/Palestine. In the mid-ninth century we know of only one case of Western pilgrimage, undertaken by a certain Fromont and his anonymous brother, from Rennes, France, who traveled to Sinai via Rome and Jerusalem seeking penitence for a murder.²⁶ The route from Iraq also led to Jerusalem and Damascus, and this would make it quite likely that the heavy bronze bird came from either Syria or Iraq. The Iraqi option seems plausible, as ninth-century Baghdad and its port of Basra were at the forefront of most artistic innovations in this period.

DR ANNA BALLIAN is the Honorary Curator of Islamic Art at the Benaki Museum in Athens and has published extensively on Byzantine-Islamic subjects.

1. Thomas W. Arnold, *Painting in Islam: A Study Of The Place Of Pictorial Art In Muslim Culture*, Dover Publications 1965, first published Oxford 1928, pp. 4-6.
2. Melanie Gibson, 'The Enigmatic Figure: Ceramic Sculpture from Iran and Syria c.1150-1250.' *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 73 (2008-09), pp. 39-50.
3. Identification of the bird was attempted with the assistance of Yannis Pouloupoulos at the Hellenic Wildlife Hospital on the island of Aegina.
4. B. Marschak. *Silberschätze des Orients Metalkunst des 3.-13. Jahrhunderts und ihre Kontinuität*. Leipzig 1986, fig. 19; Maryam Ekhtiar, Priscilla P. Soucek, and Sheila R. Canby. *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New Haven, 2011, p. 145, no. 93; Françoise Demange, ed. *Les Perses sasanides: Fustes d'un empire oublié (224-642)*. Exh. cat. Paris, 2006, pp. 178-79, no. 128; Helen C Evans with Brandie Ratliff. *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition (7th-9th Century)*. Exh. cat. New Haven and London 2012, p. 235, no. 170.
5. V. Enderlein et al. *Museum für islamische Kunst: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*. Mainz, 2001, pp. 27-28; A. Contadini. 'Translocation and Transformation: Some Middle Eastern Objects in Europe.' In *The Power of Things and the Flow of Cultural Transformations*, edited by Liselotte Saurma-Jeltsch and Anja Eisenbeiss. Berlin, 2010, pp. 55-57, figs 1.10-1.12. My special thanks to Anna Contadini for kindly sending me a copy of her article and a picture of the Lucca bird. For the Hermitage bird, see Evans, Ratliff 2012, pp. 234-45, no. 169 (Anatoly A. Ivanov). More detailed is Ivanov's entry in *Masterpieces of Islamic Art in The Hermitage Museum*. Exh. cat. Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Kuwait 1990, no. 1.
6. Ulrike al-Khamis, 'An early Islamic bronze ewer reexamined', *Muqarnas* 15 (1998), pp. 13-14, fig. 9; A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, 'Studies in Iranian Metalwork V: A Sasanian Eagle in the Round', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1969), pp. 3-4; Esin Atil, W.T. Chase, Paul Jett, *Islamic Metalwork in the Freer Gallery of Art*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., 1985, pp. 55-57, no. 1.

7. See the small pig-like animal covered with scrolls and used as a fountainhead in Eva Baer, *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art*. New York, 1983, p. 157, fig. 132.
8. F. Sarre. 'Bronzeplastik in Vogelform: Ein sasanidisch-frühislamisches Räuhergefäß.' *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 51 (1930), fig. 4.
9. Evans with Ratliff 2012, pp. 178-180, cat. nos. 121 A-G, pp. 219-20, cat. no. 152, p. 235-36, no. 171, figs. 104, 106, 108.
10. Evans with Ratliff 2012, pp. 209-11.
11. Dolphin-shaped lamps and *polycandela* with dolphin candle supports are the most common. The latter are even mentioned in the *Liber Pontificalis* as presented by the emperor Constantine the Great, see B. Alaoui et al. *L'art copte en Égypte: 2000 ans de christianisme*. Exh. cat. Paris, 2000, no. 193.
12. Prudence O. Harper. *The Royal Hunter: Art of the Sasanian Empire*. Exh. cat. New York, 1978, p. 67, fig. 22a.
13. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ewer_with_feline-shaped_handle_from_the_Belitung_shipwreck_ArtScience_Museum_Singapore_-_20110618-02.jpg
14. Alaoui 2000, no. 158; James C.Y. Watt, ed. *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD*. Exh. cat. New York 2004, p. 203, no. 109; see also a pair of Chinese *rhya* in the Art Institute of Chicago, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/unforth/4224085472/>. For the dragon and the pearl in Chinese culture see Ernst Ingersoll, *Dragons and Dragon Lore*, New York 1928, republication Dover Publications 2005.
15. Demange 2006, p. 79.
16. Mikhail B. Piotrovsky and J.M. Rogers, eds. *Heaven on Earth: Art from Islamic Lands*. Exh. cat. Munich, 2004, pp. 85-87, nos 35-37, p. 89, no. 39; see also Martha Bernus-Taylor and Éric Delpont. *Les Andalouses de Damas à Cordoue*. Exh.cat. Paris, 2000, p. 34, no. 18.
17. Bernus-Taylor and Delpont 2000, pp. 111-13, nos. 87-89.
18. Contadini 2010, pp. 55-57. The beard of the Lucca bird may be less prominent compared to the other birds, or perhaps some of it may have been cut away when a funnel-shaped collar was introduced over its beak in the process of transforming it into a weathervane.
19. Peter Barnet, Pete Dandridge, 'Lions, Dragons and other Beasts.' *Aquamanilia of the Middle Ages, Vessels for Church and Table*, New Haven and London 2006, pp. 10-17.
20. Contadini 2010, p. 55.
21. Eva Baer, *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art*, New York 1983, pp. 188-90, fig. 167; Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Inscriptions*, Edinburgh 1998, pp. 103-04, 117-18. For the Tbilisi ewer, see Evans and Ratliff 2012, pp. 219-20, no. 152.
22. Yiannis Meimaris. *Sacred names, saints, martyrs and church officials in the Greek inscriptions and papyri pertaining to the Christian church of Palestine*. Athens, 1986.
23. Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon. *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (ca 680-850): The Sources, an Annotated Survey*. Aldershot, 2001, pp. 56-60; Georgios Manginis. 'Hagia Koryphe' (Jabal Musa) in Sinai, Egypt. PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 2010, section 4.1, pp. 153-60.
24. Clive Foss. 'Byzantine Saints in Early Islamic Syria.' *Analecta Bollandiana* 125 (2007), pp. 93-119.
25. Sidney H. Griffith. 'Antony David of Baghdad, Scribe and Monk of Mar Sabas: Arabic in the Monasteries in Palestine.' *Church History* 58 (March 1989), pp. 7-19; Mark N. Swanson. 'The Martyrdom of 'Abd al-Masī, superior of Mount Sinai (Qays al-Ghassāni).' In *Syrian Christians under Islam. The First Thousand Years*. Edited by David Thomas. Leiden, 2001, pp.107-29; Brandie Ratliff. 'The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai and the Christian Communities of the Caliphate.' *Sinaiticus* (2008), pp. 14-17.
26. Manginis 2010, pp. 163-64.

BYZANTIUM AND ISLAM: AGE OF TRANSITION (7TH-9TH CENTURY): THE ICONS FROM THE MONASTERY OF SAINT CATHERINE AT MOUNT SINAI

KATHLEEN CORRIGAN

This essay is based on the author's contribution to the Metropolitan Museum exhibition catalogue Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition (7th-9th Century).

Given the theme and time period covered by the recent Metropolitan Museum exhibition, it is not surprising that a number of early Byzantine icons from the Saint Catherine Monastery collection were intended to be included. Some forty icons from Saint Catherine's fall within the range of dates defining the exhibition; this is the largest single collection of seventh through ninth-century Byzantine icons in existence. The icons vary in style, subject, and iconography, and include portraits of saints, Christ, the Virgin, Old Testament prophets, and a number of New Testament narratives.

Dating the early Byzantine Sinai icons more precisely and determining their places of production have proven difficult. Kurt Weitzmann made an attempt at this in his groundbreaking 1976 corpus. He dated only a small number of the Sinai panels to the period before the Muslim conquest. These include several of the most famous sixth- or early seventh-century panels, such as the impressive icon of Christ Pantokrator and the small Virgin and Child with angels and saints. Weitzmann attributed these to Constantinople, and thought that they had come to the monastery as gifts.

But for the icons that probably date to the second half of the seventh through the ninth centuries, it is possible, as Weitzmann suggested, that many were made in the Middle East, and perhaps at Sinai itself. Given that contacts between the monastery and the Byzantine empire were less frequent after the Muslim conquest, and that Iconoclasm prevailed in the areas controlled by the Byzantines, it is unlikely that icons were being imported to the monastery from Byzantium. The Sinai icons, then, are important evidence for understanding Christian religious art in the Middle East during the period of transition covered by the exhibition.

This is the case with the five icons chosen for the exhibition. They represent a variety of subjects and formats, and bring up interesting issues about the role of icons in early Byzantine religious practice and theological speculation.

The eighth-ninth-century icon of Saint Irene with a donor kneeling at her feet invites us to think about how icons arrived at the monastery. We know that this icon, which perhaps was made in Palestine or Egypt, has been at the monastery since the Middle Ages, but since we have no documentation other than the icon with its inscriptions,



Icon with Saint Irene and Donor, Palestine or Egypt, eighth-ninth century, tempera on wood.

we can only enumerate some possible circumstances of its production. The small figure of a monk kneeling at Irene's feet is inscribed Nikolaos Sabatianos, a name which may suggest his connection to a particular geographical location and ethnic group (see the catalogue, *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition*, p. 57). Did Nikolaos visit or come to join the monastery and bring this icon along as a gift? Did someone have it made for him on the occasion of his entry into the monastery? Or did he have the icon made at Saint Catherine's?

We might also ask why Nikolaos was devoted to St Irene. There are many martyrs named Irene; the one depicted here is probably the daughter of a pagan king, Licinius, and underwent many tortures because of her conversion to Christianity. There are also many versions of her life. In the Syriac version, Irene's story is set in the fourth century in the Eastern cities of Edessa and Nisibis, where she dies at the hands of the Persian king Shapur. This Vita is contained in the famous palimpsest manuscript Sinai Syriac 30, written in Syria in 778 and comprising a collection of the lives of holy women martyrs (see Father Justin's discussion of this manuscript in the 2011 edition of *Sinaiticus*). Thus the story of the Syrian St Irene would have been well known at Mount Sinai (although it is not known when the manuscript containing her life was brought to the monastery).

The seventh-century icon of the Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace, which was probably made in Egypt or at

Mount Sinai, also would have been of particular interest to monks living in this area. Though the story of the Three Hebrew youths comes from the Old Testament Book of Daniel and was a popular subject in Early Christian funerary art, by the time this icon was made a cult devoted to the Three Hebrews had developed, especially in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Christians saw them as saints who had suffered for the faith, and their relics were collected and venerated at cult centers. They were also seen as models of endurance for the Christian monk, and, in fact, they are shown in the icon wearing the monastic *koukoullion*, or scapular—a sign of suffering and penance. Both this icon and that of St Irene show the developing devotion to the cult of icons during this period. Sinai and the Middle East obviously played an important role in this development.



Icon with the Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace, Egypt or Sinai(?), seventh century, encaustic on wood.

The tenth-century icon depicting the story of King Abgar and the Mandylion also shows the important role played by the Middle East in the development of the cult of icons, particularly devotion to the image of Christ. The icon today consists of two rectangular panels enclosed in a later frame. Originally the panels probably formed the wings of a triptych. In the upper portions of the panels we see on the right King Abgar of Edessa, a contemporary of Christ, whom the apostle Thaddeus, on the left, had converted to Christianity. Abgar sent his messenger, Ananias, to try to obtain a portrait of Christ. Though Ananias was not able to paint Christ's portrait because of the light emanating from His face, Jesus obliged him by imprinting his face on a cloth—the so-called Mandylion. Ananias is shown here presenting the cloth to Abgar. It is thought that the original central panel of the triptych may have contained a large devotional image of the Mandylion. The lower portions of the panels contain portraits of St Paul of Thebes and St Anthony (left), and St Basil and St Ephrem (right).

The story of Abgar and the Mandylion has a long and complex history in the Greek and Syriac sources. By the late sixth century the story mentions the ἀχειροποίητος (not



Icon with St. Thaddaeus and King Abgar of Edessa and with Sts. Paul of Thebes, Anthony, Basil and Ephrem, Early Islamic Palestine, mid-tenth century, tempera on wood.

made by human hands) image and credits it with defending the city of Edessa during the Persian siege of 544. By the early eighth century, John of Damascus describes it as an image on a face cloth (Mandylyon) and uses it to defend the production and veneration of images of Christ against the Iconoclasts. If Christ himself had miraculously produced an image of his face, certainly Christians were justified in reproducing this image.

This tenth-century icon is the earliest visual evidence we have of the existence and appearance of the Mandylyon. It is thought to have been made on the occasion of the cloth's transfer to Constantinople. In the seventh century the city of Edessa had been taken over by the Muslims. Various Byzantine emperors had attempted to retake the city. In the mid-tenth century the Byzantine emperor Romanos I Lecapenos negotiated with the city's Muslim rulers to obtain the famous miraculous image of Christ. The story of the negotiations and the Mandylyon's triumphal entry into Constantinople is recorded in the *Narratio*, a text probably commissioned by Romanos' successor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos. It has been suggested that the face of Abgar is based on portraits of Constantine VII.

It is not certain where the icon was made. The connection to Constantine VII and the *Narratio* has led some to attribute it to Constantinople, but, as Weitzmann noted, there are also stylistic similarities to other Sinai icons attributed to Palestine. Also, several of the saints

on the panel have more eastern, monastic connections. Sts Anthony and Paul were considered the founders of Egyptian monasticism; their monasteries in Egypt's Eastern desert drew pilgrims who also went to Mount Sinai. St Ephrem spent the later part of his life in Edessa. Whether it was made in Constantinople or Palestine, this icon speaks to the importance of the Eastern Christian communities in the development of the cult of icons.

The exhibition was also meant to include two important icons depicting the Crucifixion. In fact, there are four Crucifixion icons at Mount Sinai dating to the eighth and ninth centuries (the other two are also illustrated in the exhibition catalogue). All four of these icons have been attributed to Palestine or Sinai. All of them introduce into the Crucifixion image new themes and iconographic motifs that explore the theological implications of Christ's death on the cross.

The earlier of the two Crucifixion icons probably dates to the eighth century. Christ is shown in an upright position on the cross; he is dressed in the long sleeveless garment known as the colobium, which covers most of his body. He is flanked by the two thieves (one now missing), and the Virgin and John the Evangelist, while the soldiers cast lots



Icon with the Crucifixion, Early Islamic Palestine, perhaps Sinai, eighth century, tempera on wood.

for Christ's garment at the foot of the cross. The sun and moon and a group of angels appear in the sky above the cross.

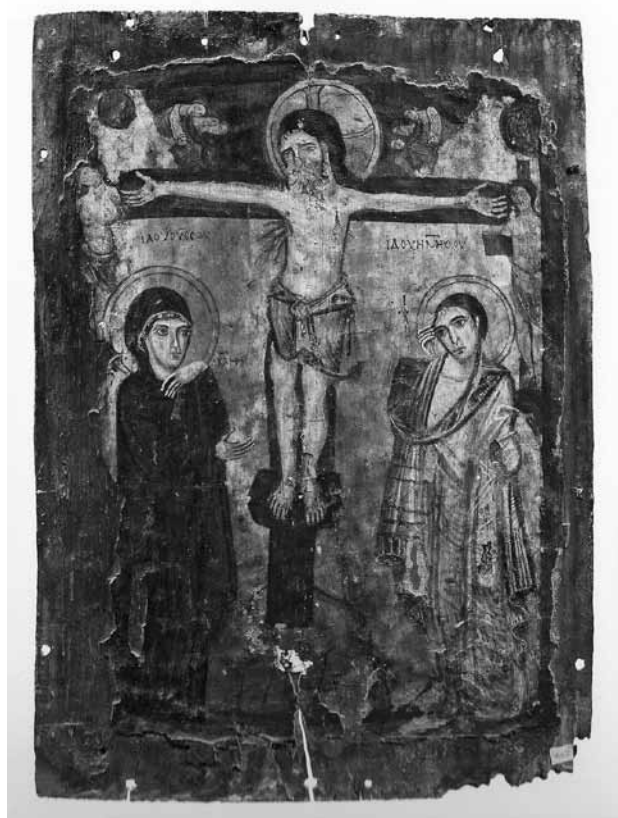
This icon is the earliest known representation of Christ dead on the cross. His eyes are obviously closed, blood and water flow from his side, and he is wearing the crown of thorns—the earliest preserved example of this motif as well. This apparent new interest in exploring Christ's suffering and death has been related to the theological controversies concerning the relationship between Christ's human and divine natures, especially at the time of his death. By emphasizing Christ's humanity, this icon has been seen as a rebuttal of the Miaphysites, whose teachings implied that Christ's divine nature had suffered and died (Theopaschitism). In a text written in the 680s, the orthodox monk Anastasius of Sinai suggested that images of the dead Christ on the cross could be used effectively to argue that it was only Christ's human body that died on the cross, thus refuting the Miaphysite position.

This and other Crucifixion images of the period seem intent on capturing the precise moment of death, in part by referencing the upheavals of nature reported in the Gospels and elaborated by later Christian writers. The sun was darkened, the earth shook, and the rocks were rent (see Matthew 27:51). The steep, rocky outcroppings flanking Christ are unusual: they look as if they are being torn asunder by the bottom of the cross. The blood and water from Christ's side flow directly onto the rocks below. One of the other Sinai Crucifixion images not in the exhibition shares this dramatic rocky setting, with mountains that are bluish below and turn fiery red above.

The second of the two Crucifixion icons probably dates to the ninth century and has many of the same features as the earlier icon. Christ is also shown dead on the cross; his eyes are closed and his head is tilted to one side. He is flanked by the Virgin and St John, with the two thieves in the background, the sun and moon and groups of angels above the arms of the cross. Prominent in this icon is the near nudity of Christ: the colobium has now been replaced by a sheer loincloth through which one can see most of Christ's body. This display of Christ's body is apparently a new feature in the East at this time.

Like the depiction of Christ's death, the display of his naked body might also be seen as a way of emphasizing Christ's humanity, thereby countering not only the various Miaphysite heresies, but also the teachings of the Iconoclasts, who were accused of denying the reality of Christ's human suffering when they denied the possibility of representing his human body. Furthermore, Christian theologians, especially those living in Palestine and at Mount Sinai, were well aware of the Muslim denial of Christ's death on the cross. Given the continuing shame and humiliation attached to crucifixion, Muslims, who respected Jesus as a prophet, found it necessary to deny that it was actually Christ who was crucified (Qur'an 4:157).

The Sinai icons that date from the period covered by the exhibition *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition* provide us a window into the artistic, social and religious developments of this time. They were made in a context



Icon with the Crucifixion with Christ in a Loincloth, Mount Sinai(?), ninth century, tempera on wood.

in which people believed in the miracle-working power of some icons, in which devotion to the saints and belief in the power of their relics and cult centers was strong, and in which there was an intense desire for a sensual experience of religious belief. Some of the icons, such as the Crucifixion panels, reflect a belief in the power of icons to address complex theological concepts and issues of representation such as those contemporary theologians struggled with in their writings. The exhibition prompts us to compare this 'project' with the path being taken by the Christians' Muslim neighbors who were working out ways to express their religious beliefs without resorting to figural imagery.

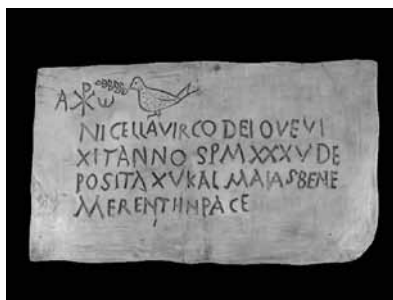
DR. KATHLEEN CORRIGAN is Associate Professor of Art History at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, USA, where she teaches Early Christian, Byzantine and Roman art.

THE ICONS OF SINAI: CONTINUITY AT A TIME OF CONTROVERSY

FATHER JUSTIN OF SINAI



1



2



3

The text that follows was delivered by Father Justin at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on 18 March 2012, as part of the 'Sunday at the Met' talks held in conjunction with the exhibition, *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition (7th - 9th Century)*.

Inscriptions and Images in the Roman Catacombs

The eighth and ninth centuries witnessed an intense debate over the very principles of Christian imagery. This was the iconoclast controversy, which lasted over one hundred years, from its beginnings in the year 726, to its final resolution in 843. But the issues that were then in conflict were not new. We will better understand them if we begin by looking briefly at the earliest surviving examples of Christian art. These are to be found in the Roman catacombs, vast underground cemeteries that surrounded the city of Rome. Epitaphs and tomb paintings from the catacombs date principally from the second to the fourth centuries.

The first example, now in the Lateran Museum, is dated to the fourth century, and is thought to have come from the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, or of Praetextatus (1). It reads, 'Aurelius Castus [who lived] eight months. Antonia Sperantia made [this] for her son'. Below is the depiction of a shepherd. He bears a lamb on his shoulders, and two sheep recline at his feet.

These early Christians expressed their faith instinctively in both text and images. But inscriptions are accessible in a way that imagery is not. Depictions such as this are for the initiate, and require explanation. Jesus told a parable about a shepherd who sought out the sheep that had gone astray, and bearing it on his shoulders, he returned it to its place in the fold (Luke 15:4-6). He also said, 'I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep' (John 10:11). The Gelasian Sacramentary, which preserves some of the oldest Latin liturgical prayers, includes a prayer for the burial service that refers to the dead as 'carried home on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd'.¹ Other recurring Christian symbols are the anchor, or the dove bearing an olive branch in its beak (2). On later epitaphs, we find more overt Christian emblems: the Chi-Rho monogram, or the Alpha and Omega.

The Catacomb of Commodilla contains an image of Christ, dating from the late fourth century (3). In the Catacomb of Saint Priscilla, one finds a depiction of the Virgin Mary dated to the second century. Here also, in the third century, Christians painted the Good Shepherd, and doves bearing olive branches (4). They also painted the Three Children in the fiery furnace of Babylon, examples of courage and perseverance, and reminders of God's protection, at a time of persecution (5).

The epitaphs of these early Christians reveal much about their faith (6). We read, 'To dear Cyriacus, sweetest son. Mayest thou live in the Holy Spirit.' 'Regina, mayest thou live in the Lord Jesus'. 'Matronata Matrona, who lived a year and fifty-two days. Pray for thy parents'. 'Anatolius made this for his well-deserving son, who lived seven years, seven months, and twenty days. May thy spirit rest well in God. Pray for thy sister'.² The catacomb inscriptions are ill-composed, ill-written, not infrequently ill-spelt, half Latin, half Greek. But neither bad grammar nor defective orthography can dim or distort the light with which the consciousness of an immortality floods and glorifies these subterranean vaults.

Such inscriptions are popular expressions of the same hope that we find in a theological treatise, *De Mortalitate*, written by Cyprian of Carthage in the year 252. He reminds his flock that death 'is not an ending, but a transit, and, this journey being traversed, a passage to eternity'.³ The dead 'are not lost, but sent before'.⁴ He writes,

We regard paradise as our country – we already begin to consider the patriarchs as our parents: why do we not hasten and run, that we may behold our country, that we may greet our parents? There a great number of our dear ones is awaiting us, and a dense crowd of parents, brothers, children, is longing for us, already assured of their own safety, and still solicitous for our salvation.⁵

Christian or pagan?

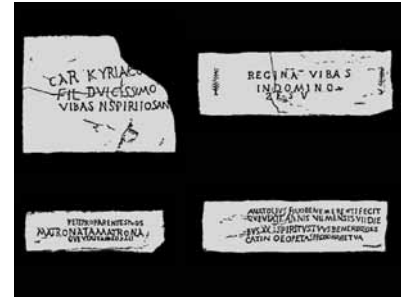
In this spontaneous expression of their faith through words



4



5



6

and images, had Christians gone too far? The Roman world was filled with paintings and statues of the pagan deities. The Jews had always been careful to distance themselves from this idolatry. There were those who felt that such Christian depictions were an unguarded appropriation from the pagan world. Eusebius of Caesarea, in his fourth century *Church History*, relates that the woman with an issue of blood who was healed by Christ (Matthew 9:20-22), made a bronze statue to commemorate this miracle. Christ was depicted standing and blessing her, while she was portrayed kneeling, and looking up to him in gratitude. Eusebius writes that he has seen this statue for himself. Yet we cannot miss the note of criticism in his voice when he goes on to write,

Nor is it strange that those of the Gentiles who, of old, were benefited by our Saviour, should have done such things, since we have learned also that the likenesses of his apostles Paul and Peter, and of Christ himself, are preserved in paintings, the ancients being accustomed, as it is likely, according to a habit of the Gentiles, to pay this kind of honour indiscriminately to those regarded by them as deliverers.⁶

One would want to know what these fourth-century paintings of Christ, and of the apostles Paul and Peter, looked like. But paintings are fragile, and in general, they have not survived from the world of late antiquity. The exception to this is Sinai. This remote desert monastery, with its dry and stable climate, and an unbroken history extending back to the early fourth century, holds what is today the most important collection of panel icons, thirty-six of which have been dated to the sixth or seventh century.

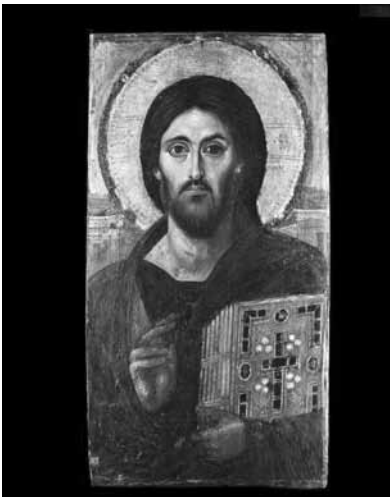
Sixth-Century Sinai Icons

The icon of the Sinai Christ is the most famous (7). It was painted in the wax encaustic technique, which uses wax as the medium for the colours. The gold halo is set off by alternating four- and eight-petalled punched rosettes.

Christ's mantle and tunic were rendered in a saturated purple. He blesses with his right hand. In his left he holds the Gospel, a thick volume closed with two clasps. The cover is adorned with a cross, executed in precious stones and decorated with pearls. The formal, frontal depiction of Christ conveys a sense of timelessness, yet the many intentional departures from strict symmetry add a naturalistic effect. In this subtle manner, the artist has attempted to convey both the divine and human natures of Christ.

A second icon depicts the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child enthroned (8). Here also, Christ blesses with his right hand, while with his left he holds a scroll. The Virgin Mary wears red shoes, an imperial prerogative, and holds Christ tenderly. She gazes off into the distance. A soldier saint stands to either side, wearing the ceremonial robes of the imperial guard. These are identified by later iconographic types as Saint George to the viewer's right, and Saint Theodore to the viewer's left. Above, two Archangels holding sceptres look up towards heaven. The hand of God extends from an orb, and a ray of light descends to the halo of the holy Virgin. The two Archangels, rendered in a continuation of the Hellenistic tradition, contrast with the enthroned Virgin and Christ Child and two soldier saints, which reflect the splendours of the imperial court, giving the icon a complexity and richness.

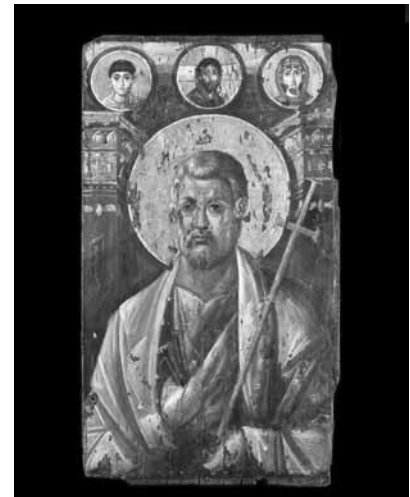
The third icon shows the Apostle Peter (9). In his right hand he holds three keys, the keys of the Kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:19). In his left, he holds a staff surmounted by a cross. The artist has painted the garments of the apostle in shades of olive, using criss-crossing highlights rendered in bold brushstrokes. The gaze of the viewer is drawn to the calm and pensive eyes, the face set off by the whirling tufts of hair and beard. The apostle has the face of the sunburned fisherman, but he also has the aristocratic demeanour of the leader of the Church. At the top of the icon are three medallions. The central depiction is that of Christ. Kurt Weitzmann identified the other two as depictions of the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Theologian, though it has been recently suggested that they may be, instead, *ex voto* images included as an expression of thanksgiving by those who commissioned the icon.⁷



7



8



9

Iconoclasm

All three icons are thought to have been painted in Constantinople, and may have been sent to the monastery in the sixth century as gifts of imperial patronage, when the Emperor Justinian ordered the construction of the great basilica and the surrounding fortress walls.⁸ As such, they are examples of the icons that would have been in Constantinople at the outbreak of iconoclasm, which the Emperor Leo III the Isaurian began to institute in the year 726. There were two phases to iconoclasm. The first came to an end under the Empress Irene in 787. An iconoclastic policy was instituted again in 815 by the Emperor Leo V the Armenian. This second phase was brought to an end in 843 by the Empress Theodora.

The origins of iconoclasm have been much debated. The seventh century was very much an age of transition for the Byzantine empire. It was the culmination of a long process of centralization by which Constantinople emerged as the dominant centre of power. In this same century, the empire lost Syria, Egypt, and north Africa to the Arab world, while Slavs threatened its hold in the Balkans, and the Lombards became more assertive in Italy. Arab forces attacked Constantinople itself in 674-78, and again in 717-18, the Greeks famously defending their City with Greek fire (10). All of these far-reaching changes and conflicts caused a reassessment of the Byzantine polity. This brought into the open issues concerning the place of Christian imagery, that had remained unresolved. One must look to these conflicts for the origins of iconoclasm, more than to any infiltration of the church and the empire by alien ideas.

God commanded Moses, 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them' (Exodus 20: 4-5). The central charge brought by the iconoclasts again and again is that of idolatry. Any image that has been created for use in worship draws attention to the visible material creature rather than the invisible deity.

Saint Paul, in his Epistle to the Colossians, refers to Christ as 'the image (εἰκών) of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15). In the language of the Creed, Christ is one in essence (ὁμοούσιος), 'consubstantial', with the Father. For the iconoclasts, in order for an image to be true, it must be the same in essence as that which it represents. There must be a formal identity between a model and its archetype. A portrayal differs in its very nature from that which it represents, and is therefore insufficient, if not deceptive. Jesus said, 'God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth' (John 4:24). Created images could not be allowed to intrude in worship, which must remain entirely spiritual. In a number of churches, iconoclasts removed icons of Christ and replaced them with a depiction of the cross. The cross, being a symbol, did not detract from the worship that is due to God alone (11).

Saint Stephen the New was insistent in his veneration of the holy icons. He was brought before the Emperor Constantine V, who asked him, 'Do you imagine that Christ is trampled upon when we trample on these images?' Saint Stephen had expected this, and had brought with him a coin (12). He showed it to the emperor and asked, 'Whose is this image and superscription?' 'It is mine', answered the emperor. The saint placed it on the ground and trampled on it. The emperor's guards were outraged and ready to avenge this affront to the imperial dignity, but the emperor called them off. The saint had made his point.⁹

And yet, while everyone knew that there had been icons in the Church for centuries, in many ways they had been taken for granted. There were passing references to them in the writings of the Fathers, but there was no formal theology of the icons. What could be said in their defence?

The Veneration of Icons

Those who revered the icons pointed out that God had indeed forbidden the making of graven images, but at the same time he had commanded Moses, 'And thou shalt make



10



11



12

two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy seat' (Exodus 25:18). The second commandment was thus not a prohibition against representational art, but it was a prohibition against attempting to portray the deity, for God had revealed himself, but not in any form. Moses said to the children of Israel, 'For ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire' (Deuteronomy 4:15).

But in the fullness of time, 'the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14). The Word of God, who was uncircumscribable, condescended to be circumscribed by time and place, and he who was indepictable became depictable. Saint Theodore the Studite wrote that in Christ, the divine nature and the human nature were united into a single πρόσωπον ('person') and a single ὑπόστασις ('subsistent entity'), which has individual characteristics, and can be portrayed.¹⁰ And Saint John of Damascus wrote, 'I do not venerate the creation instead of the creator, but I venerate the Creator, created for my sake, who came down to his creation without being lowered or weakened, that he might glorify my nature and bring about communion with the divine nature. . . . I do not depict the invisible divinity, but I depict God made visible in the flesh'.¹¹ Icons are a witness to the historical Christ. A refusal to accept icons was a refusal to accept the full implications of the Incarnation.

Courts of Roman law had an image of the emperor, and this image was honoured as if the emperor himself were present. Basil the Great, in the fourth century, pointed out that this does not mean there are two emperors, 'because the honour offered to the image crosses over to the archetype'.¹²

An image conveys the likeness of the original person. Image and archetype are thus said to share the same likeness. Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, had written, 'for the truth is shown in the likeness, the archetype in the icon. Each in the other with the difference of essence'. This was quoted by Patriarch Nikephorus of Constantinople in the early ninth century, who himself wrote, 'Likeness is an intermediate relation and mediates between the extremes, I mean the likeness and the one of whom it is a likeness, uniting and connecting by form, even though they differ by nature'.¹³

And yet, a traditional icon was not a simple portrait. The likenesses conveyed in icons were those of Christ or the saints, who live in heaven. Here, Saint John appealed to

the example of the tabernacle that had been constructed for the worship of God in the Sinai wilderness. God said to Moses, 'And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it' (Exodus 25:8-9). The tabernacle on earth shared the likeness with the tabernacle in heaven that had been revealed to Moses. Because of this correspondence, the ministry of the priests within the tabernacle was 'unto the example and shadow of heavenly things', as we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hebrews 8:5). Saint John of Damascus writes, 'and this whole tabernacle was an icon. And look, said the Lord to Moses, that thou make everything after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount' (Exodus 25:40).¹⁴ The tabernacle is called an icon, in that it is a reflection of its heavenly prototype. Icons of Christ and the saints are also reflections, each corresponding to an archetype in heaven. As Saint Theodore the Studite wrote, 'the copy shares the glory of its prototype, as a reflection shares the brightness of the light'.¹⁵

Christ said to his disciples, 'Blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear' (Matthew 13:16). Saint John of Damascus invoked this verse as he stressed the parallels between hearing the holy scriptures, and seeing the holy icons: our hearing is sanctified and blessed when we hear Christ's words in the holy Gospels, even as we also rejoice and are assured, beholding in the holy icons his bodily form, his miracles, and all that he endured.¹⁶ Both scriptures and icons are distinct but complementary means of knowing the Gospel narrative.

Where iconoclasts had created a dualism, deprecating the material world in their reverence for the spiritual, those who venerated the icons pointed to a material world sanctified by the Incarnation, and the means of our ascent to the spiritual. We read in Saint John of Damascus, 'For since we are twofold, fashioned of soul and body, and our soul is not naked but, as it were, covered by a mantle, it is impossible for us to reach what is intelligible apart from what is bodily'.¹⁷ And Saint Theodore wrote,

So whether in an image, or in the Gospel, or in the cross, or in any other consecrated object: there God is manifestly worshipped 'in spirit and in truth', as the materials are exalted by the raising of the mind towards God. The mind does not remain with the materials,



13



14



15

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

because it does not trust in them: that is the error of the idolaters. Through the materials, rather, the mind ascends towards the prototype: this is the faith of the Orthodox.¹⁸

The theology of the icons championed by John of Damascus, Theodore the Studite, and a multitude of other saints, was formally proclaimed by the bishops who assembled in 787 at the Second Council of Nicaea, the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

Eighth- and Ninth-Century Icons at Sinai

Sinai became a part of the world of Islam in the year 633. Even so, both monks and pilgrims continued to come to this remote wilderness (13), attracted by its austerity, its Biblical associations, and its reputation as an established centre of monasticism. The area was thus outside the Byzantine empire in the eighth and ninth centuries, and remained unaffected by iconoclasm. Fourteen panel icons at Sinai have been dated to this time. These are of special importance, in that they show the continuity of the iconographic tradition during the period of iconoclasm.

An icon of the crucifixion (14) has been dated to the eighth century because of many similarities with a fresco at Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, that can be dated to 741-52. Christ is depicted affixed to the cross, wearing a red brown colobium. Streams of blood and water issue from his side. To his right stands the Virgin Mary. She points to Christ with her right hand, and with her left, holds a handkerchief to her cheek. Above are the monograms for **Η ΑΓΙΑ ΜΑΡΙΑ**, 'the holy Mary'. To Christ's left is a youthful John the Theologian. His depiction is inscribed simply **ΙΩΑΝΝΗC**, 'John'. Above, angels look on in wonder, while the sun and the moon are darkened. Below, three soldiers divide Christ's garments. This is the earliest icon giving the names of the two thieves: **ΓΕCΤΑC**, 'Gestas', to Christ's right, and **ΔΗΜ[ΑC]**, 'Demas', to his left. Earlier icons invariably portray Christ with his eyes opened, before his death. An important example is the Fieschi Morgan

Staurotheke, which also dates from the eighth century, kept here in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (15). The Sinai icon is the first to depict Christ with his eyes closed, and bearing the crown of thorns. This was done to emphasize his human nature. Anastasius of Sinai, in the *Hodegos* ('Guidebook'), written in the 680s, notes the importance of depicting the reality of Christ's death. This, and several stylistic details, make it possible that the icon was painted at Sinai.

An icon dated to the eighth or ninth century depicts Saint Irene (16). The inscription above gives her name, **Η ΑΓΙΑ ΗΡΕΙΝΗ**, 'Saint Irene'. She stands in a frontal pose. In her right hand she holds a cross, emblem of her martyrdom, and in her left, a handkerchief. She is dressed in a chiton, originally of blue, which has turned green, a maphorion of carmine, and red shoes. The figure of the saint is disproportionate, with emphasis given to her face.

At the base of the icon, the donor has been depicted venerating the saint (17). He wears a light brown tunic and a black mantle. An inscription above gives his name, **ΝΙΚΟΛΑΟC [CΑΒ?]ΑΤΙΑΝΟC**. The icon shares the likeness of its prototype in heaven, as we have learned from the passages quoted above. The donor has caused his own likeness to be included in the icon. The likeness of the saint and the likeness of the donor meet on the plane of the icon, the donor in veneration of his beloved saint.

Concerning the veneration of saints, John of Damascus wrote, 'The saints are the sons of God, sons of the kingdom, the co-heirs of God and of Christ. Therefore, I venerate the saints and glorify them: slaves and friends, and the co-heirs of Christ – slaves by nature, friends by choice, sons and heirs by Divine grace'.¹⁹ He also said, 'From the time when he that is himself life and the Author of Life was numbered among the dead, we do not call dead those who have fallen asleep in hope of the resurrection and faith in him'.²⁰

The Three Children in the Fiery Furnace

Sinai has an icon of the Three Children in the fiery furnace of Babylon (18). It was executed in the encaustic technique,



16



17



18

and has been dated to about the seventh century. Enough of the inscriptions survive to identify the three: from the viewer's left, Ananias, Azarias, and Misael. They are depicted wearing Persian garments. An angel has descended into the fiery furnace. He places his left hand comfortingly on the shoulder of Ananias, and with a cross-surmounted staff, he annuls the burning of the flames. The panel icon fits into a frame, which has been inscribed with verses from the Book of Daniel, 'An angel of the Lord came down into the furnace to be with Azarias and his companions and made the inside of the furnace as if a moist breeze were whistling through' (Daniel 3:49-50 LXX).

The Three Children in the fiery furnace inspired the early Christians. They were no less an inspiration to the monks of Sinai in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries: examples of courage and steadfastness, and reminders of God's protection.

Continuity

In the isolation of the Sinai desert, icons continued to be painted even during the eighth and ninth centuries, the time of iconoclasm. These icons form a link to earlier iconography that can be traced back in time to the Roman catacombs, where Christians expressed their faith instinctively in both inscriptions and images. Saint John of Damascus justified the place of icons in Christian worship and veneration. In his writings, we also find the same consciousness of an immortality that was so pronounced in the epitaphs from the Roman catacombs. It is not only the imagery that has continued from those early centuries, but the faith and hope as well that placed the images and epitaphs in the Roman catacombs long ago.

1. H A Wilson, ed., *Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Ecclesiae* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1894), pp. 298-9.
2. J Spencer Northcote, *Epitaphs of the Catacombs, or, Christian Inscriptions in Rome During the First Four Centuries* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1878), p. 81.
3. Cyprian of Carthage, *De Mortalitate*, par. 22, translated by Ernest Wallis, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919), p. 474.
4. Cyprian of Carthage, par. 20, p. 474.
5. Cyprian of Carthage, par. 26, p. 475.
6. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, chapter 18, NPNF, p. 304.
7. Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era: c. 680-850: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 36.
8. Kurt Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 15.
9. Demetrius of Rostov, *The Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints*, volume 3, translated by Thomas Marretta (House Springs, Missouri: Chrysostom Press, 1997), pp. 648-9.
10. Saint Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, III.18, translated by Catharine P Roth (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), p. 84.
11. John of Damascus, I.4, p. 22.
12. John of Damascus, I.35, p. 42.
13. Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 116.
14. John of Damascus, II.14, p. 70.
15. Saint Theodore the Studite, I.8, p. 28.
16. Saint John of Damascus, III.12, p. 93.
17. Saint John of Damascus, III.12, p. 93.
18. Saint Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, I.13, translated by Catharine P Roth (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), p. 34.
19. John of Damascus, III.26, p. 103.
20. John of Damascus, *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, IV.15, translated by S D F Salmund, NPNF, vol. 8, p. 87.

The foundation's online shop is open!
Purchase your Christmas cards at www.saintcatherinefoundation.org

CHRISTMAS CARDS 2012

Support the Saint Catherine Foundation

Order charity Christmas cards by post or online



Bell tower and minaret at Saint Catherine's
Photograph by Fred Boissonnas, 18 April 1929
Roussen Collection



The Flight into Egypt, detail from an icon with Scenes of the Nativity
Constantinople(?), 11th century, tempera and metal leaf on panel
Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai

The Saint Catherine Foundation charity Christmas cards for 2012 feature an icon from the important Saint Catherine's Monastery collection and a black-and-white image of Sinai by the celebrated Swiss photographer Fred Boissonnas (1858-1944). The cards are produced on heavy semi-gloss paper with a matt interior writing surface. The matching envelopes have a self-sealing flap.

Thanks to the sponsorship of the EFG Group, all proceeds from Christmas card sales benefit the Saint Catherine Foundation and its work.

Printing costs have been met by the

