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THE ICONOGRAPHIC CYCLE OF THE APOCALYPSE
IN THE CHURCH OF THE DORMITION OF THE
VIRGIN AT ASKLIPIO, RHODES (1676-7)

The church of the Dormition of the Virgin at the village of Asklipio in Rhodes was built on a free-cross plan in the 15th-16th centuries, with additional side aisles on either side of the west arm of the cross. The wall-paintings, in two layers, are generally in good state of preservation. Two inscriptions mention the donors, the painter Michael from Neochori on Chios and the dates 1676 and 1677, which belong to the second mural layer. The iconographic scheme is encyclopaedic in character, containing the christological cycle, the cycle of the Passion, the Last Judgement, scenes from the Old Testament, Genesis and the Acatistos Hymn, prefigurations of the Theotokos and the cycle of the Apocalypse of St. John. This last cycle, spread over the vault and walls of the south arm of the cross, unknown in earlier times and unusual in churches of southern Greece, are unique for the islands of the Aegean and merit further discussion.

In the Orthodox church the prophetic book of the Apocalypse was treated with suspicion as possibly uncanonical until the 14th century. The text, comprehensible to the early faithful, became a conundrum for later Christians. In the West the Apocalypse was from the beginning accepted along with the rest of the New Testament. Many cycles, mostly in illuminated manuscripts, date from the 9th century onwards.

In 1498, the engravings of Albrecht Dürer for the Apocalypse marked a turning point in its iconography. The ease of reproduction through printing at a low price made them widely accessible. The dissemination of the Apocalypse engravings was associated with the antipapal campaign and the reformative movement of Luther which shook Europe, alongside other important events of the 16th and 17th centuries, accentuating the insecurity and the feeling that the end of the world was near. During the general misery of the years from

1562 to 1648 on the continent – a passing reference to the Wars of Religion and the Thirty Years' War should suffice – the text of John served as a convenient interpretative model for general unrest. The illustrations of the Apocalypse, fitting into a widespread anticipation of disaster, promoted the idea that the end of history was part of the Divine Plan. The Antichrist at times represented Islam, the Ottoman sultan, the Jews, the Roman Catholic clergy and, for Protestants, the pope.

When Eastern representations of the cycle first made their appearance is uncertain. The impetus for the spread, study and possibly the illumination of the Revelation, came from the Orthodox scholars in the milieu of the oecumenical patriarch Cyrillos Loukaris (1572-1638) who had assembled for the translation of the New Testament and other texts in the Greek vernacular. The engravings found wide acceptance on the Mount Athos, possibly assisted by the anti-papal allusions they contained. The dating of Athonite Apocalyptic cycles in the 16th century requires revision. I believe that, indirectly, the Rhodian cycle contributes also to a later dating for them.

The southern vault of the church is dominated by the central theme, while the rest of the cycle is arranged on the lateral walls of the same vault. The Father as Supreme Judge, pivotal to the vision, with a fiery sword issuing from His mouth, points towards a Book with seven seals. There are also a lamp with seven seals, the Lamb with seven horns holding a book with seven seals, seven stars – symbols of seven bishoprics – and seven candlesticks, the seven Churches of Asia Minor to which the Apocalypse is addressed. Elders and groups of angelic orders are depicted glorifying God. Also depicted the Four Horsemen following the opening of the first four seals, the four angels holding the winds, a group of palm bearers, angels blowing trumpets and the cosmic storm of the seventh seal, the Hosts of Hell, the ingestion of the book by John, Enoch and Elias with the Beast, the seventh angel blowing his trumpet, the woman clothed with the sun, the fighting of the angels with the dragon, the beasts of sea and land, the Lamb of Zion and the Fall of Babylon, the vision of the vintage of the world, an angel alongside John, angels emptying vials, the Harlot with her Beast, an angel with a stone and, finally, the angels on horseback bent on restoring order.

The iconographic analysis of the Rhodian cycle shows that the Chian painter, within the frame of post-byzantine art, does not follow the Athonite models. About the middle of the 17th century the iconography developed variants. The prototype of the Rhodian cycle leaned towards the Western style of detailed visualization and was at the same time associated with an extensive cycle in the "Byzantine manner", possibly decorating an illuminated manuscript. The Eastern origin of the Rhodian cycle is clear from the exclusion by the painter of particular scenes and elements present in the Western engravings: their realism ran counter to the basis of the artist's Byzantine iconographic attitude and the continuous narrative type he preferred to the compounded and synoptic character of the engraved cycles.

Apart from the relatively homogeneous group of Athonite Apocalyptic cycles – that is to say, those directly linked to the engravings – post-Byzantine treatments of the subject in Orthodox lands vary widely, as is made clear by the icon of the Apocalypse in the church of the Dormition in the Moscow Kremlin (c. 1500), the cycles of the three known illuminated manuscripts with the commentaries of Maximus the Peloponnesian, the directions given in the Painter's Manual of Dionysius of Fournas and the iconographical cycle of Rhodes. All the above indicate that the dating of the oldest Athonite cycles should be placed after the middle of the 17th century, as Manolis Chatzidakis suggested, and not in the 16th: the marked variety observed does not support the view of an already fixed illustration code in the 16th century, especially as the Mount Athos, the centre of eastern spiritualism, in iconography always led the way. It seems obvious, therefore, that in 1676-7 the Chian artist was ignorant of an Athonite tradition, because it was at precisely that time – and not in the 16th century – that the oldest Apocalyptic cycle was painted at Athos.

The harmonization of our painter with the Orthodox iconographic tradition is of great interest. The Asklipio cycle rarely betrays Western influence, or the fact that it was realized under Ottoman occupation. Its details are fully assimilated into the Byzantine tradition: for example, in matters of civilian and military dress the painter does not use contemporary references. His aim was to depict the key elements of the text without condensing them into independent compositions as the engravings were. Allusively,

details are sometimes preferred to certain events as focal points, while other events are treated in extenso. The cycle of the Apocalypse is unique in the religious iconography of the region. On Patmos, in particular, with the exception of the celebrated icon of Thomas Bathas (c. 1596), which does not seem to have influenced later art on the island, Apocalyptic themes are not known.

The variants in the development of the cycle are due to its irradiation through various centres and is explained by the new needs of post-Byzantine Orthodox society, but causes embarrassment to the researcher, since connecting links are missing. What were the special circumstances in the islands – and more particularly Rhodes – which encouraged eschatological representations in the 17th century? After the Knights of St. John were driven out of Rhodes by the Turks in 1522, artistic and spiritual activity were apparently suspended for about a century. In the 17th century things changed. From 1617 to 1689 six precisely dated sets of murals on the island, and several portable icons, testify to an increased artistic activity not justified by local economic conditions, since the period is anything but prosperous.

Chian artists were much sought after at that time. It is not known whether the painter Michael from Neochorio on Chios was a permanently settled or a passing presence on Rhodes. His scholarly grounding is obvious not only in his correctly spelled inscriptions, but also in the breadth of the church's iconographic programme, when considered together with the special elements which enrich the cycle of the Apocalypse. This must surely associate him with an environment of high culture and a religious osmosis between the Orthodox and Roman Catholics just is apparent in Chios, the painter's place of origin. Leo Allatius, the great scholar and native son of the island boasted of the spiritual development of Chios, even under Ottoman domination. No other Ottoman possession enjoyed greater religious freedom. The 17th century was the golden age of the Jesuits on Chios; they were also exclusively responsible for meeting the religious needs of the Latins in Rhodes and, as far as conditions allowed, the conversion of the Orthodox population. In the iconographic cycle under consideration, the painter stays aloof from any propaganda against the West, the Turks or the conflict between the Roman Church and Protestantism. There is also no hint

in any of the other murals of the church of the superiority of the Christian world over the Infidel, or of the Orthodox against Catholicism. This attitude, naturally approved by the donors, cannot be seen as simply neutral: it implies conciliation, or even the ideological stance of an Orthodoxy above arid confrontationism. In Chios, a spiritual centre rivalling Constantinople, the painter's familiarity with manuscripts, or pattern books, would present no particular difficulties. There can be no comparison with the climate then prevailing in Rhodes. 16th and 17th century Chios, benefiting from a number of privileges, was an advanced, prosperous society, while on Rhodes, for example, only in the mid-18th century a school did exist.

The Cycle of the Apocalypse in Rhodes, like all the others in the Balkans, must belong to a spiritual climate showing a strong leaning towards eschatological themes, which made its appearance almost simultaneously everywhere. This particular cycle is important because it is one of the oldest in Greece, and differs from the others. In addition, the Rhodian church was not a monastic establishment, as occurs with most churches containing this subject, but a parish church. Apocalyptic cycles usually decorate the exonarthex, refectories, auxiliary spaces and chapels; thus, this instance of Rhodes, where it is located within the main church, is unusual. The subject with its eschatological content and constant reminders to the living is a special example of the ways used to present a complex text within the Byzantine tradition.

ΣΥΝΤΟΜΟΓΡΑΦΙΕΣ

AAA: Αρχαιολογικά Ανάλεκτα εξ Αθηνών

ABME: Αρχαίον Βυζαντινών Μνημείων Ελλάδος

ΑΔ: Αρχαιολογικόν Δελτίον

ΔΧΑΕ: Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας

ΕΚΜΙΜΚ: Επετηρίδα Κέντρου Μελετών Ιεράς Μονής Κύκκου

ΗπειρΧρον: Ηπειρωτικά Χρονικά

ΘΗΕ: Θρησκευτική και Ηθική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια

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ASA: Annuario della Scuola Archeologica di Atene
e delle Missioni Italiane in Oriente

CahArch: Cahiers Archéologiques

DOP: Dumbarton Oaks Papers

JWCI: Journal of Warbourg and Courtauld Institutes

JÖBG: Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft

OCP: Orientalia Christiana Periodica

RDAC: Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus

PG: Patrologia cursus completus, Series graeca

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