

# Painters, Patrons, and Patriarchs

## Byzantine Artists in the Latin and Islamic Middle East of the Thirteenth Century

Despite turbulent events in the thirteenth century, the Christian communities of the Middle East enjoyed a great cultural revival, which is notably marked by an impressive number of works of church art that have survived to this day. Itinerant Byzantine artists contributed substantially to the embellishment of their churches. To illustrate the range of their activities, a fascinating passage in the chronicle of Maphrian Bar Hebraeus, who as the second in rank after the patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church was in charge of the dioceses in Mesopotamia and Iran, furnishes extensive information on the wanderings of two artists, who travelled from Constantinople to Tabriz to decorate a church on behalf of Maria, the illegitimate daughter of Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos and wife of the Buddhist Mongol ruler Abaqa Khan. In Tabriz in 1282, the Maphrian became acquainted with the painters and used the opportunity to ask one of them to decorate the brand new church of the Monastery of St John Bar Naggare – near Bartelli in the vicinity of Mosul – on his way back home<sup>1</sup>. The murals no longer exist, but are said to have represented the chariot of Ezekiel surrounded by cherubim in the dome, that is, Christ Enthroned, prophets, four evangelists on the soffits of the arches and the Virgin flanked by Church fathers behind the altar<sup>2</sup>.

Whereas this account perfectly accords with other textual sources on the life of Maria, the »Queen of the Mongols«, the historical circumstances of other thirteenth-century Byzantine murals and icons in the Middle East are less evident and therefore require further investigation. In an effort to fill these gaps in our knowledge, this study aims to reconstitute the contextual background of such artworks found in present-day Lebanon, Syria and Egypt. The analysis will first focus on the finds within the former Kingdom of Jerusalem (1091-1291), the County of Tripoli (1099-1289), and neighbouring Muslim Syria, before moving on to Cairo.

### Byzantine or Byzantine-trained Artists?

Considering the complexity of medieval Christian art in the Eastern Mediterranean in the period under discussion, the definition of »Byzantine artists« used in this study requires some explanation. The most comprehensive interpretation of this term applies to painters, who followed stylistic models proper to Byzantine art. In this matter, the content of representations is an unreliable guideline, as typically Byzantine scenes could also be reproduced by other artists on the basis of shared iconographic traditions or available models. However, it should be emphasized that Byzantine artists did not by definition originate from territories under control of the Byzantine state. Given the rapid decline of the Empire in this era, they may also have been born and educated in relinquished regions where the deeply-rooted Byzantine cultural *koinē* continued. Well-known examples of such lost territories with a predominantly Byzantine Orthodox, Graecophone population and a persistent artistic tradition are Frankish Cyprus and Seljuk Cappadocia. As a matter of fact, the painters responsible for the artwork to be discussed may well have originated from any Byzantine cultural stronghold other than Constantinople. Accepting that it is not always possible to determine their exact origins, one has to be content with the observation that their *œuvre* gives proof of training in the best Byzantine artistic traditions, this in distinction from the stylistically and technically less complex works attributed to local masters<sup>3</sup>. In consequence, the application of »Byzantine artists« should first of all be understood as a synonym for »Byzantine-trained artists«.

In addition, it should be noted that the Byzantine Orthodox Church possessed one steady rock in the Middle East: the Monastery of St Catherine. Sizeable though the monastery's reputed collection of medieval icons may be, it displays

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1 Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicum ecclesiasticum* 3,462-466.

2 Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles* 27; Snelders, *Christian-Muslim Interaction* 250-253.

3 Waliszewski et al., *Kaftun* 306-313.



Fig. 1 Lebanon and Syria. – (Drawing M. Immerzeel).

too much diversity to seriously consider the existence of a long-lasting, consistent Sinaitic art production. In all probability, St Catherine's role was confined to hosting Byzantine craftsmen and collecting, or receiving, icons from other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>4</sup>. This is to say that the complex collection of Mount Sinai is not the principal objective of this research. Quite the opposite, in fact: by highlighting works of art in a well-defined context in other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean, it hopes to add a new dimension to the study of the variegated Sinaitic materials.

### Lebanon and Western Syria

In 1211/1212 the German canon Wilbrand of Oldenburg travelled through the Holy Land as the envoy of the emperor Otto IV. Once in Beirut, the northernmost city of the

Kingdom of Jerusalem, he had the opportunity to observe the newly-built palace of John of Ibelin, »the Old Lord of Beirut«, at that time the kingdom's regent. Overwhelmed by its sumptuous decoration, he left an appreciative description of the many works of art, in particular the paintings on the ceilings, mosaics on the floor and a marble fountain in the courtyard, and was no less surprised by the variegated team of craftsmen in charge of the embellishment of the complex: »Syrians, Muslims and Greeks boast of their virtuosity in this art and compete with each other in producing such delightful work«<sup>5</sup>. Clearly, the artistic competition between indigenous Christians, Muslims, and Greek-speaking artisans from abroad fascinated him.

The involvement of Byzantine painters in the decoration of churches within Frankish territory was not a new phenomenon. Outstanding instances of twelfth-century Byzantine murals in the Kingdom of Jerusalem are those in the Hospi-

4 Panayotidi, *Icons and Frescoes*.

5 Wilbrand de Oldenburg, *Peregrinatio 167: In quibus omnibus Suriani, Sarraceni et Greci in magistralibus suis artibus quadam delectabili operis altercatione gloriantur*. Folda, *Crusader Art* 136f.

**Fig. 2** Life of St Marina; Cave Church of St Marina, Qalamun. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).



taller Church of St Jeremiah in Abu Gosh<sup>6</sup> and in a Melkite church at Ascalon, which was decorated between 1153 and 1187<sup>7</sup>. Taking the fall of Latin strongholds such as Jerusalem and Ascalon in that year as a turning point, our main interests concern the aftermath of this – in Crusaders' eyes – dramatic turn of events. The building of the Ibelin Palace concluded the reconstruction of Beirut in the wake of turbulent events that redrew the map of the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>8</sup>. First, the conquest of Cairo in 1169 by Turkish and Kurdish troops brought an end to Fatimid hegemony and paved the way for Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn, the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty. In 1187, the new sultan saw his efforts to push back Latin influence crowned with the capture of Jerusalem and coastal cities such as Beirut, leaving freshly-arrived Crusader reinforcements no other choice but to divert to Cyprus and lay claim to the island in 1191. Encouraged by this questionable victory, the Franks made up lost ground in the coastal strip of the Holy Land and present-day Lebanon in 1197 and finally took Constantinople in 1204. In that year, the Ayyubids and Latins agreed upon a truce which more or less ended the hostilities

in the Middle East and ushered in well over half-a-century of relative peace and cultural flourishing in the region<sup>9</sup>.

It must have been around 1200 that Byzantine artists arrived in the Tripoli area. The stylistic affinities of the murals they left behind with Cypriot wall paintings – in particular those in the Enkleistra of St Neophytos (1183) near Paphos and the Church of the Panagia tou Arakou at Lagoudera (1192) – allow us to specify that these painters must have originated from Cyprus. The trace of one of these itinerant masters can be picked up in two sanctuaries between Tripoli and Batrūn. Although poorly preserved, the second layer of paintings in a cavity near the village of Qalamūn, situated at a short distance from the main road from Tripoli to the South and the Cistercian Abbey of Belmont (Balamand), constitutes a telling instance of high-quality Byzantine brushwork from the final decades of the twelfth century or slightly later (figs 1-2)<sup>10</sup>. Tradition has it that the cave was the birthplace of St Marina the Monk. Initially decorated in the twelfth century with the Annunciation, the Deesis, St Demetrios on horseback and, remarkably, St Marina of Antioch, all

6 Kühnel, Wall Painting 177-182.

7 Peers, Ascalon.

8 Pringle, Kingdom 111.

9 Runciman, A History 3-131.

10 Cruikshank Dodd, Lebanon 292-296 pls LXXX-LXV, 16.1-14; Immerzeel, Identity Puzzles 82-86 fig. 10, pl. 49.



Fig. 3 Dormition, detail; Church of St Sabas, Eddé al-Batrūn. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).

with Greek inscriptions, the Byzantine master covered St Demetrios with scenes from the life of St Marina the Monk. By doing so, he contributed to the »Latinizing« of the site, which follows from the application of explicatory Latin inscriptions to all representations. Where these additions give proof of the Frankish identity of his patrons, striking painterly analogies with a fragmented Dormition scene in the Maronite Church of St Sabas (Mār Sābā) in Eddé al-Batrūn, a village situated near Batrūn, suggest that the artist also took assignments from indigenous Christians (fig. 3)<sup>11</sup>. Built in the second half of the twelfth century, the interior of this Romanesque church was embellished on several occasions (see below). The surviving elements of the Dormition, which in line with Maronite customs is provided with Syriac inscriptions, clearly show that the delicately-rendered persons fit neatly into the late Komnenian stylistic tradition of that time.

That Byzantine-trained artists also extended their activities on behalf of the Maronites to remote areas, follows from the murals in Dayr Ṣalīb, or the Monastery of the Cross, a ruined monastic site in the Qadisha Valley<sup>12</sup>. Despite the fragmentary state of the paintings, which, once again, are inscribed in Syriac, one recognizes late Komnenian brushwork of high

quality. Among the represented saints in the central apse are the Prophet Daniel, John Chrysostom, John the Evangelist, Bartholomew, Paul and probably Stephen. The paintings in the southern nave include the Annunciation, a Maria *Platitera*, or *Blachernitissa*, and St Salomone. One painter ventured as far as the Qalamūn, a Muslim-ruled territory across Mount Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley with a predominantly Christian population. Here, he decorated the Chapel of the Prophet Elijah (Mār Elias) near Ma'arrat Ṣaydnāyā, a monastic cave complex at a short distance from the reputed Melkite Monastery of Our Lady of Ṣaydnāyā<sup>13</sup>. Now very deteriorated, one can still recognize saints such as Demetrios, George and Nicholas, the Virgin Enthroned with Child (fig. 4) and the Virgin and concelebrating prelates carrying scrolls and converging on the centre of the apse<sup>14</sup>. In this case, too, the evident stylistic and iconographic links with Cypriot art point to an insular origin for this master.

As far as the decoration of Melkite churches on Lebanese soil is concerned, the first layer of paintings in the Church of St Phokas (Mār Fawqa) in Amyūn to the southeast of Tripoli substantiates further suspicions of tight affiliations between the Syrian mainland and Latin Cyprus<sup>15</sup>. The scenes include

11 Cruikshank Dodd, Lebanon 281 f. pls LVI-LVIII, 15.3-9; Hérou, Saint Saba; Immerzeel, Identity Puzzles 110.

12 Cruikshank Dodd, Lebanon 250-261 pls XXXVIII-XLV, 12.1-17; Immerzeel, Identity Puzzles 118 f. pls 100-102.

13 Immerzeel, Saydnaya; idem, Identity Puzzles 49-56 pls 14-17.

14 Immerzeel, Prophet Elijah; idem, Identity Puzzles 49-56 figs 4-5, pls 14-17.

15 Cruikshank Dodd, Lebanon 159-163 pls I-X, 1.4-1.26; Immerzeel, Identity Puzzles 89.



**Fig. 4** Virgin with Child; Cave Chapel of Mar Elias, Ma'arrat Şaydnāyā. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).



**Fig. 5** St Philip with the donor Philip; Church of St Phokas, Amyūn. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).

the Anastasis in the apse with the Twelve Apostles in the lower zone, St Simeon Stylites and St Philip in the company of a supplicant and paintings on the piers of the Virgin, Christ and several saints. Conspicuous in the matter of possible Cypriot connections is the *ex voto* image of St Philip, which on account of its style recalls the paintings of the Enkleistra of St Neophytos and Lagoudera (fig. 5). He is accompanied by a homonymous donor, who, judging from his bareheaded and beardless appearance, must have been a Frank who apparently wished to be eternalized while supplicating his patron saint. Significantly, the precise formulation of the text (Π[ ]ΤΥ Δ[ΟΥΛ]ΟΥ ΘΩ / ΦΗΛΗΠΟΥ; »The servant of God, Philip«) was introduced in Cyprus in the late twelfth century. Moreover, the supplicant's attire parallels the vestments worn by both Greek and Latin donors in later Cypriot murals, such as the bearded Cypriot John Moutoullas in the Church of the Panagia at Moutoullas (1280) and a beardless donor in the Church of the Transfiguration in Sotera near Famagusta<sup>16</sup>. As to the identity of the supplicant in Amyūn, Erica Cruikshank

Dodd suggests that he is none other than Philip of Ibelin (ca. 1180-1227/1228), the steward of Cyprus and brother of John, the »Old Lord of Beirut«<sup>17</sup>. Her hypothesis merits serious consideration. As the sons of Balian of Ibelin and the Byzantine princess Maria Komnene, the brothers were influential protagonists in the Latin states in the first quarter of the thirteenth century. The fact that Philip played a major role in defending the interests of the Byzantine Orthodox Church in Cyprus in the face of Latin pressure, which should probably be regarded in relation to his own half-Greek descent<sup>18</sup>, makes him a likely candidate to be represented in the Church of St Phokas.

Recent finds clarify that Byzantine-trained artists continued to work on behalf of various clients in the mountainous area to the east of Batrūn at least until the launch of large-scale Mamluk attacks on the Latin states from the 1260s, which would ultimately end with the fall of Tripoli in 1289 and of Acre in 1291. Crucial in this matter is the art of the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Our Lady at Kaftūn, to the

16 Snelders/Immerzeel, *From Cyprus* 83; Mouriki, *Moutoullas* 181 f. fig. 10; Stylianou/Stylianou, *Painted Churches* 323-325 fig. 192; Sotera: Weyl Carr, *Perspectives* 90 fig. 4.

17 Cruikshank Dodd, *Christian Arab Painters* 259; Snelders/Immerzeel, *From Cyprus* 87.

18 Rudt de Collenberg, *Les Ibelin* 203; Runciman, *A History* 179 f.



Fig. 6 Communion of the Apostles, Church of Sts Sergios and Bakchos, Kaftün. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).



Fig. 7 Deesis-Vision, Church of Sts Sergios and Bakchos, Kaftün. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).

southeast of Tripoli, which is comprised of murals in the nearby Church of Saints Sergios and Bakchos and a large bifacial icon in the monastery's chapel<sup>19</sup>. It seems that the embellishment of the church was entrusted to two artists. The first master worked in a Byzantine style and decorated the upper levels of the nave, showing amongst others the Communion of the Apostles, with Syriac inscriptions (fig. 6). Because of their somewhat diverging style, the second series of murals, which includes the Deesis-Vision in the apse (fig. 7), the Annunciation on the triumphal arch and monastic and military saints on the piers, all with Greek and/or Syriac inscriptions, can be attributed to the second artist. Remarkably, this master's painterly approach displays affiliations with both the oeuvre of local artists in the area from around the middle of the thirteenth century and contemporary Cypriot art<sup>20</sup>. At the same time, his hand is also recognized in the icon of Kaftūn, showing the upper body of the Virgin *Hodēgētria* on its front, and the Baptism of Christ, with Greek, Syriac and Arabic inscriptions, on its back (figs 8-9). The murals appear to be crucial in the confirmation of earlier suspicions of common craftsmanship for this piece and some of the icons in the Monastery of Saint Catherine. The most prominent specimen of this series is a large double-sided icon with the Virgin *Hodēgētria* (obverse) and St Sergios carrying a red-crossed white banner and St Bakchos on horseback (reverse). Earlier studies label this specimen as an outstanding example of Crusader art<sup>21</sup>, however, the detailed formal similarities with Kaftūn's second series of wall paintings and icon indicate that it was painted by the second master. Although it cannot be ruled out entirely that he was active in different locations in the Middle East, one cannot escape the impression that this piece originates from Kaftūn, if only because of the emphatic presence of the patron saints of the church near the Monastery of the Virgin.

The recent discovery of murals in the Chapel of Sayyida Ḥarāyib («Our Lady of the Ruins») in Kfar Ḥildā, situated about 7 km to the east of the Monastery of the Virgin, testifies to further activities of the «School of Kaftūn» in the area<sup>22</sup>. As in the Church of Sts Sergios and Bakchos, the conch of the apse displays the Deesis-Vision, which on stylistic grounds can be attributed to the second master, but is much better preserved than its counterpart in Kaftūn (fig. 10). The nave's fragmented decoration consists of a tonsured St Dometios on the north wall and a partly preserved Nativity scene opposite him, and judging from the stylistic aspects recalls the Baptism on the icon of Kaftūn (fig. 11). My preliminary observations support the presumption that members of



Fig. 8 Icon: Virgin with Child; Monastery of Our Lady, Kaftūn. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).



Fig. 9 Icon: Baptism; Monastery of Our Lady, Kaftūn. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).

19 For the art of Kaftūn, see Hérou, *Icône bilatérale*; eadem, *École syro-libanaise*; eadem, *Les fresques*; Immerzeel, *Icon Painting*; idem, *Identity Puzzles* 94-99, 125-142; Waliszewski et al., *Kaftun*.

20 Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles* 132 f.; Snelders/Immerzeel, *From Cyprus*.

21 Folda, *Crusader Art* 338-342 figs 197 f.

22 Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles* 99, pls 62 f.; Chmielewski / Morzycki-Markowski, *Wall Paintings*; Hérou, *Saydet el-Kharayeb*; Nordiguan, *Note*; Waliszewski et al., *Kaftun* 311 f. pls. 25 f.



Fig. 10 Deesis-Vision; Church of Our Lady of the Ruins, Kfar Hildā. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).



Fig. 11 Nativity, detail; Church of Our Lady of the Ruins, Kfar Hildā. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).

this team also took up the decoration of the aforementioned Maronite Church of St Sabas in Eddé al-Batrūn. The style and painterly approach characteristic of the »atelier« return in a fragmentary Crucifixion (fig. 12) and St Mamas riding a lion. Significant for the close ties between Maronites, Franks and Byzantine-trained artists is the clean-shaven appearance of the donor near St Mamas, which identifies him as a Frank<sup>23</sup>. While the Romanesque architecture of the church already raises suspicions of a certain Frankish interest in this building, it should also be noted that it is situated a few kilometres from the Crusader stronghold of Smār Ġbayl (Smar Jbeil), which remains as yet unexplored.

A lead for the dating of the frescoes in St Sabas, and by extension possibly also for the oeuvre of the »School of Kaftūn« as a whole, is the reference of the Maronite patriarch Iṣṭifānūs ad-Duwayḥī (1670-1704) to a now vanished Syriac inscription from 1573 AG in this church, corresponding to 1261/1262 AD<sup>24</sup>. While excluding the possibility that the inscription was related to the cogently earlier Dormition scene in St Sabas, it perfectly corroborates the estimated age of the murals of Kaftūn, Kfar Ḥildā and related icons: all would have been painted in the second or third quarter of the thirteenth century.

## Egypt

While periodic discoveries in Lebanon and Syria may continue to astonish scholars, there are no less fascinating works of art available for further research in Egypt, in particular in Cairo. This study does not pretend to provide full documentation of the dozens of late Byzantine and post-Byzantine icons in various Egyptian churches, monasteries and museums. Devoid of any appealing context or mutual coherence, these pieces can only speak for themselves: in fact, they could have arrived at any given moment in the places where they are presently kept<sup>25</sup>. Because of these limitations, the focus will be on the activities of thirteenth-century Byzantine-trained painters in the very heart of the Coptic Church, namely the papal churches of Old Cairo, or Miṣr: the Church of al-Muʿallaqa and that of St Merkourios, better known as Dāyr Abū Sayfayn, to the north of Old Cairo. Both churches would alternately house Coptic patriarchs depending on their personal preferences, from about 1100 until the transfer of the See to the Ḥārat Zuwayla quarter within the walls of Fatimid al-Qāhira in the early fourteenth century. The Egyptian context differs from Lebanon and Syria in the unique opportunity to accurately reconstruct the contextual background on the basis of historical sources.

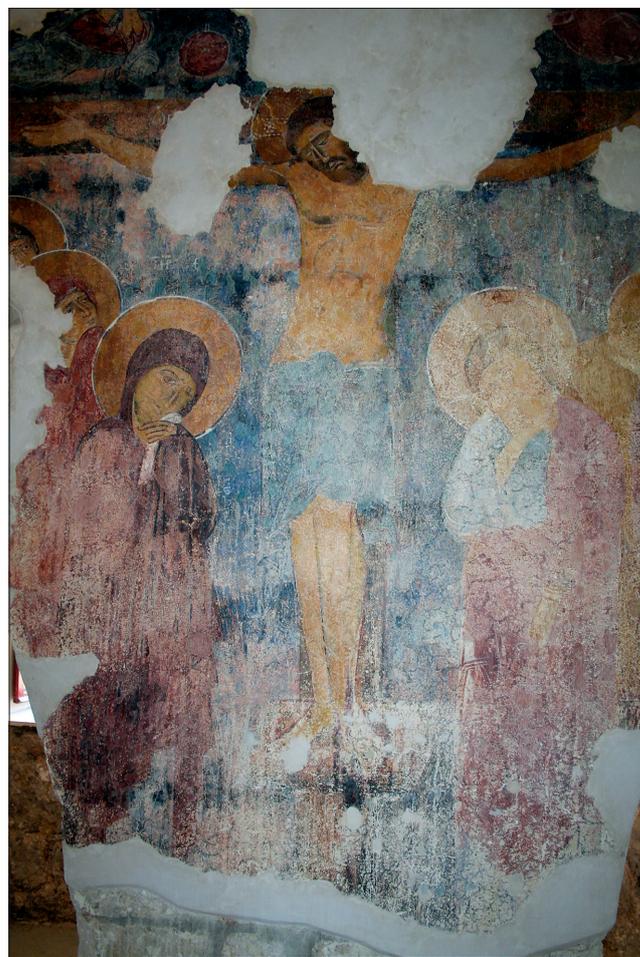


Fig. 12 Crucifixion; Church of St Sabas, Eddé al-Batrūn. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).

## The Church of al-Muʿallaqa

Erected on the remains of the Roman fortress of Babylon, the Church of the Virgin, better known as al-Muʿallaqa (»the Hanging Church«), was the stage for official events – including patriarchal elections, consecrations and burials, synods and the preparation of the holy chrism – from 1047. To accommodate the popes, a cell was furnished on the upper floor of the »Little Chapel« (an annex built over the south gate of the antique fortification; fig. 13) during the primacy of Patriarch Michael IV (1092-1102)<sup>26</sup>.

When entering the Little Chapel, the visitor's gaze is immediately caught by the monumental wall paintings and a sanctuary screen with two small, rectangular icons (figs 13-14). The embellishment is concentrated in the two chapels at the eastern side: the sanctuary presently dedicated to the Ethiopian saint Takla Haymanot (left) and the Baptismal Chapel (right). Starting with the first, two gilded icons representing

23 Snelders/Immerzeel, *From Cyprus*.

24 Cruikshank Dodd, *Lebanon 17*; Hérou, *Saint Saba 400*; Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles 109f*. In any case, ad-Duwayḥī discusses the inscription in the context of events that took place in 1264.

25 Other thirteenth-century icons in Egypt represent the Virgin Enthroned (Church of St Barbara, Old Cairo; Skalova, *Icon Painting 176-179 no. 8*); St Sergius and

Bakchos (obverse), St George (?; reverse; Coptic Museum, but originating from Dayr as-Suryān), the Crucifixion (Dayr as-Suryān; Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles 32f. pl. 5*). See also Skalova, *Icon Painting 96-119*.

26 Coquin, *Vieux-Caire 69-73*; van Loon, *Old Cairo 80*.

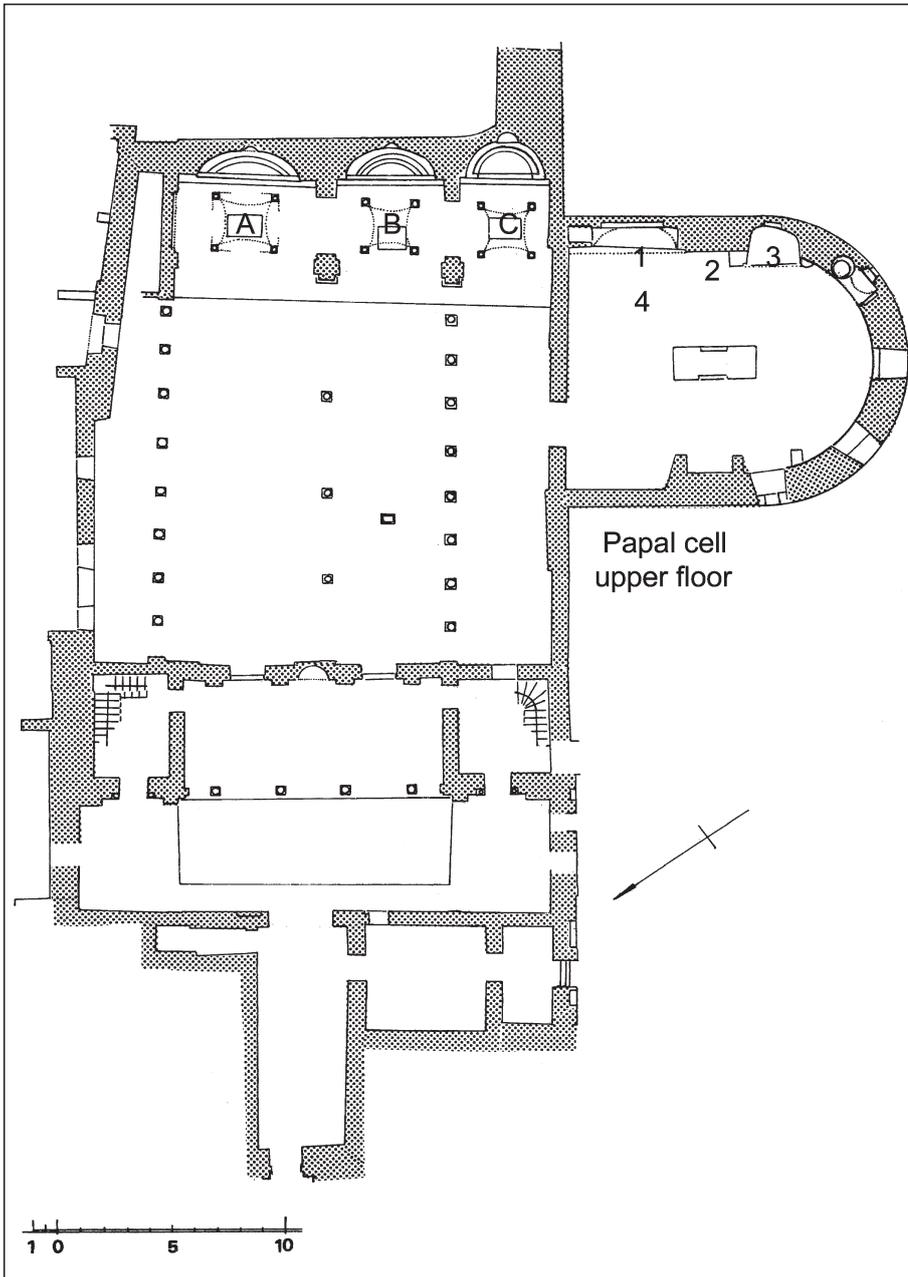


Fig. 13 Church of al-Mu'allaqa. – (After Alcock/Gabra, Cairo fig. 10).

the Annunciation and Nativity are placed in the entablature of the fourteenth-century sanctuary screen and are fully Byzantine in style<sup>27</sup>. No less fascinating is the huge fragmentary representation of the standing Virgin *Blachernitissa* between two archangels in the chapel's straight-backed niche (figs 14-15)<sup>28</sup>. A wooden beam with a monumental Coptic inscription separates this scene from the Twenty-Four Elders of the Apocalypse in the lower zone. In twelve medallions on the niche's wooden frame the busts of saints, perhaps the apostles, are featured. The best-preserved mural is located on the wall between the chapels and shows the Nativity (fig. 13, no. 2). Inside the apse of the Baptismal Chapel, one recognizes

the remains of a row of prelates, probably patriarchs, and in the lower zone an archangel and the Presentation in the Temple<sup>29</sup>. Whereas the stylistic features of the Nativity, the Presentation in the Temple and the portraits on the wooden frame typify these paintings as exponents of Coptic painting from the second half of the twelfth century and the first half of the thirteenth century, the *Blachernitissa* mural exudes an entirely different artistic atmosphere. Not only does this scene have no parallels in the Coptic artistic tradition, its Byzantine craftsmanship comes to the full in the voluminous and dynamic appearance of the Virgin and the dark-winged archangels at her side. Their garments are highlighted with

27 Hunt, *Iconic and Aniconic* 62-68 figs 1-11; Jeudy, *Masterpieces* 129f.

28 Hunt, *Artistic Interchange* 64f. figs 15a-b.29 Van Loon, *Old Cairo*, pl. on 93.

29 Van Loon, *Old Cairo*, pl. on 93.

**Fig. 14** Little Chapel; Church of al-Mu'allāqa, Old Cairo. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).



**Fig. 15** Virgin *Blachernitissa*; Church of al-Mu'allāqa, Old Cairo. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).



**Fig. 16** Canopy: Christ *Pantokrator*; Church of al-Mu'allāqa, Old Cairo. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).



**Fig. 17** Canopy: Archangel; Church of al-Mu'allāqa, Old Cairo. – (Photo A. Jeudy).

great delicacy. Unfortunately, only part of the Virgin's face remains and those of the angels are lost entirely.

The commitment of Byzantine artists to the refurbishing of al-Mu'allāqa is further substantiated by the richly embellished and gilded canopies in each of the three altar rooms of the main church, which are hidden from view behind the sanctuary screens and remain to be documented in full (figs 16-17)<sup>30</sup>. Despite minor mutual iconographic differences, the interior of the domes shows the bust of Christ in a mandorla with the Four Creatures, carried by four archangels. In particular, the dynamism and highlighting of the archangels parallels the rendering of those flanking the Virgin *Blachernitissa*. Owing to their bright colours and classicising stylistic tendencies, the figures of Christ and the archangels resemble the murals in the Chapel of St James in St Catherine's and the monastery's refectory from the third quarter of the thirteenth century<sup>31</sup> and contemporary Sinaitic icons<sup>32</sup>. Further afield, the same classicising formal language also comes to expression in the murals of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Trebizond (Trabzon) from about 1255-1260<sup>33</sup>. Since the canopy paintings and the Virgin *Blachernitissa* stylistically branch to these works, a provisional dating to around the third quarter of the thirteenth century is acceptable.

30 Gabra et al., *Churches of Egypt*, pls on 112f.; Jeudy,  *Icônes et ciboria* 82-86 pls 17-20; van Loon, *Old Cairo*, pls on 89.

31 Panayotidi, *Icons and Frescoes* 93-97; Parpulov, *Mural and Icon Painting* 344f. fig. 978, pl. XIX.

32 Folda, *Crusader Art* 324-331.

33 Caillet/Joubert, *Trebizonde*.

**Fig. 18** Icon: The Twenty-Four Elders; Church of St Merkourios. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).



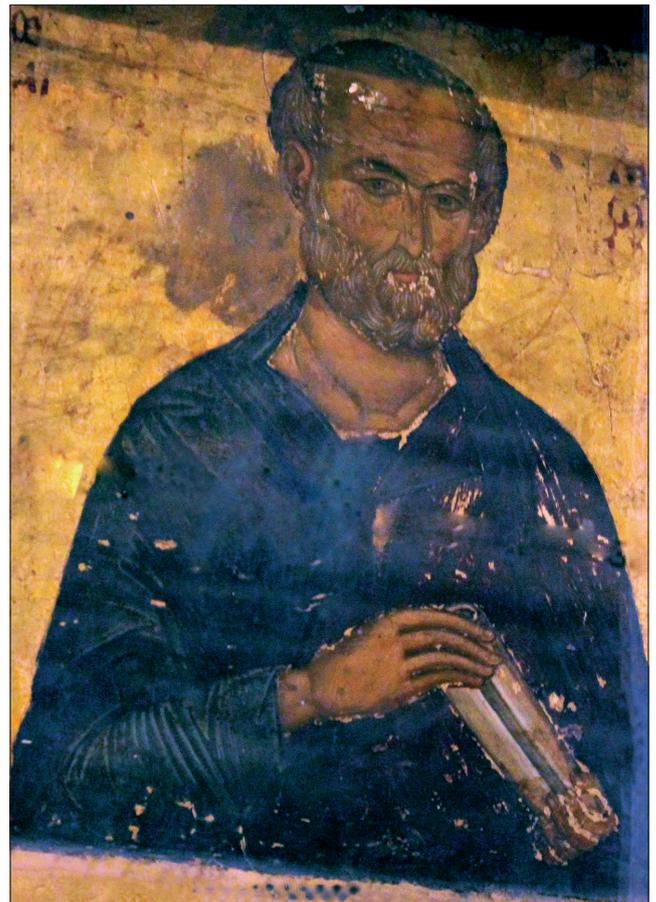
### The Church of St Merkourios

Designated for patriarchal use in the 1070s, the Church of St Merkourios entered Coptic history as the alternative papal accommodation and the stage of consecrations and burials of Church leaders<sup>34</sup>. Probably from the late eleventh century onwards, the upper floor of the church served as the papal compound.

St Merkourios preserves a particularly interesting collection of common icons and huge specimens meant to be placed on top of sanctuary screens from the second half of the thirteenth century. Like the aforementioned works of art in al-Mu'allāqa, these pieces can be attributed to artists trained in Byzantine ateliers but contracted by Coptic patrons. In the following, I will briefly describe these pieces and some related icons in other locations and subsequently dedicate a few lines to the group as a whole.

#### 1. Icon: St Philip converting the Eunuch of the Candace of Abyssinia<sup>35</sup>

The evangelist stands to the right and turns to the dark-complexioned eunuch, who is seated on a chariot between two ditto servants to the left. The eunuch holds an opened book inscribed in Arabic (Isaiah 53:7: «He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter»).



**Fig. 19** Screen icon: St Simon; Church of St Merkourios. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).

<sup>34</sup> Coquin, *Vieux-Caire* 21-23.

<sup>35</sup> 85 × 78 × 1 cm; Skalova, *Icon Painting* 194 f. no. 14.



**Fig. 20** Screen icon: Nativity and Entry into Jerusalem; Church of St Merkourios. – (Photo H. Hondelink).

**2. Icon: The Twenty-Four Elders (fig. 18)<sup>36</sup>**

The Twenty-Four Elders of the Apocalypse are arranged standing in two rows while holding an incense box and swinging a censer (inscription: Ο ΗΕΡΟΙΣΗ ΚΔ). Owing to their style and orientation, the Elders recall the identical representation in the zone below the Virgin *Blachernitissa* in al-Mu'allāqa (fig. 14).

<sup>36</sup> 73 × 106 × 1 cm; Skalova, Icon Painting 190f. no. 12.

**3. Icon: St Merkourios<sup>37</sup>**

This huge *Vita* icon is composed of a central representation of St Merkourios framed with scenes from his life. The central image was entirely repainted in the early eighteenth century.

<sup>37</sup> 140 × 104 × 2 cm; van Loon, Old Cairo pl. on 185; Skalova, Icon Painting 188f. no. 11.



Fig. 21 Screen icon: Patriarchs; Church of St Merkourios. – (Photo H. Hondelink).

#### 4. Screen icon: Apostles (fig. 19)<sup>38</sup>

This specimen constitutes the lower part of a larger screen icon, which quite possibly represented the Twelve Apostles. Depicted are the busts of the Apostles Thomas, Bartholomew, Simon, Andrew, James, Philip and a figure whose name is now lost.

#### 5. Screen icon: Festal cycle (fig. 20)<sup>39</sup>

Displayed are ten festal scenes provided with Greek inscriptions, the Arabic translation of which is written on the frame: the Annunciation, the Nativity, Christ Pantokrator, the Presentation in the Temple, the Baptism (top), the Transfiguration, the Entry into Jerusalem, the Ascension, Pentecost and the Dormition of the Virgin (bottom).

#### 6. Screen icon: mounted martyr saints<sup>40</sup>

Being originally much larger, the screen icon was sawn into sections at some point and reassembled at random with the omission of the apparently damaged parts. Its present assemblage shows six equestrian saints who are placed within a protruding arcade, from the left to the right: Sts Philotheos, Victor, Menas, Theodore Stratelates killing the Dragon, George rescuing the Youth and Isaac of Tiphre. The busts in the spandrels depict Christ, two angels and the kings David and Solomon, with Arabic Bible quotations on their scrolls. In

reconstruction, the section with the juxtaposed Sts George and Theodore, with Christ in the spandrel between them, took the centre of the composition. In view of the emphatic position of these two warrior saints, this piece would have been placed on a sanctuary screen in the Church of St George in the patriarchal compound on the upper floor.

#### 7. Screen icon: the Virgin between prelates and monks (fig. 21)<sup>41</sup>

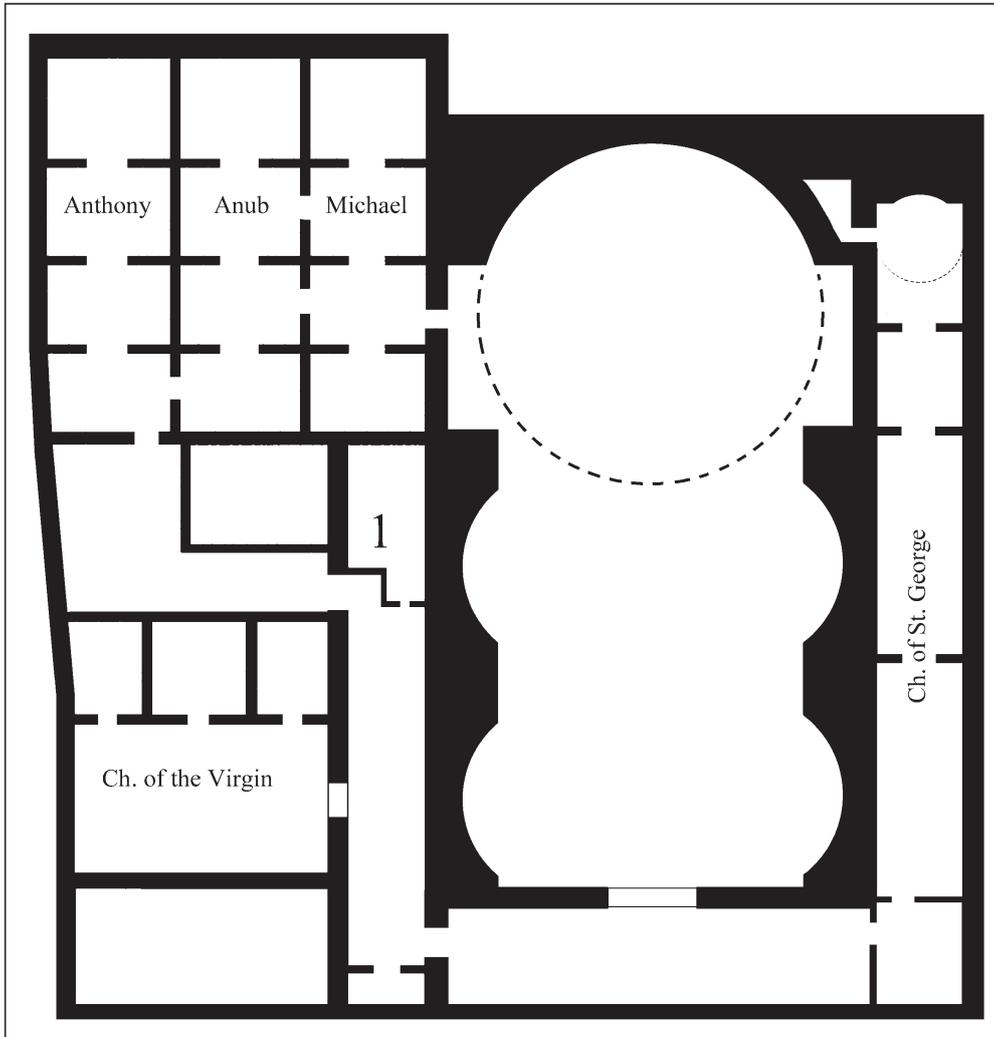
Regarding craftsmanship, similarly-shaped protruding arcades (43 cm in height) and spandrel figures holding scrolls inscribed in Arabic connect this screen icon to the previous one. Represented are the Virgin Enthroned between two archangels, flanked to the left by three groups of three prelates and an equal number of monastic saints to the right. Most of the saints' names are retrieved from the original Greek inscriptions near their heads. Modern Arabic inscriptions on the frame do not entirely fill the gaps as their reliability leaves much to be desired [mentioned between brackets]. Starting with the prelates, those in the left-most niche are Ignatios of Antioch, [Nicholas] and [John the Merciful]. The second niche contains the patriarchs Cyril, Athanasios and Peter the Last Martyr, and the third Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzos and John Chrysostom. Directly to the right of the central Virgin between two archangels we find the monastic saints Paul,

38 35.3-35.8 × 181 × 1 cm; Skalova, Icon Painting 192f. no. 13.

39 73 × 190 × 3.2 cm; Skalova, Icon Painting 198f. no. 16.

40 43 × 165 × 2.5 cm; Skalova, Icon Painting 184-186 no. 10.

41 43 × 252 × 2.5 cm; Skalova, Icon Painting 180-183 no. 9.



**Fig. 22** Upper level of the Church of St Merkourios. – (After Butler, *Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt* 1 fig. 7).

Antony and Pachomios, followed by the three saints Makarios and finally [Shenute], [Arsenius] and [Ephraim]. The spandrels are filled with Old Testament figures (Gideon, Ezekiel, King David and King Solomon) and four angels. Given the central position of the Virgin, this piece may have originated from the church dedicated to her on the upper floor of St Merkourios (fig. 22; see below).

#### 8. Icons from Great Deesis sets in the Wādī an-Naṭrūn<sup>42</sup>

Five icons that originally formed part of a Great Deesis set are presently kept in the monasteries of the Wādī an-Naṭrūn, between Cairo and Alexandria. The preserved panels represent Sts Mark, Matthew and Paul, and the Archangel Gabriel (in the Monastery of St Makarios) and St John the Evangelist (in the Monastery of St Bishoy; fig. 23). Zuzana Skalova believes them to originate from the Church of St Merkourios, where they would have been incorporated within the entablature of the central sanctuary screen and been replaced

in 1751/1752 with a new Great Deesis set of eleven icons of the same dimensions. Given their size and close stylistic affinities with some of the icons in St Merkourios, one can only agree with her suggestion<sup>43</sup>. In addition, the artist(s) responsible for this set produced at least one more Great Deesis of different dimensions, of which a poorly preserved icon of St John the Baptist in the Monastery of the Syrians (Dayr as-Suryān) is the only survivor. The corresponding piece of the supplicating Virgin was also kept in this monastery, but perished in a fire<sup>44</sup>.

#### 9. Screen icon: Festal cycle; Church of the Holy Virgin, Ḥārat Zuwayla<sup>45</sup>

Depicted are the Annunciation, Nativity, Baptism of Christ, Entry into Jerusalem, Anastasis, Ascension and Pentecost. All scenes are placed within a shallow protruding arcade, the spandrels of which are filled with medallions containing the busts of King David and the Prophets Zechariah, Zephaniah, Zechariah (as a young man) and Joel. In contrast to their

42 89 × 55 × 4 cm; Skalova, *Icon Painting* 108-112, ills 37a-e; eadem, *Indigo*.

43 Skalova, *Great Deesis*; eadem, *Icon Painting* 108f. ill. 34.

44 Skalova, *Icon Painting* 174f. nos 6 (Virgin) and 7 (St John).

45 55 × 305 × 2 cm; Skalova, *Traced by Incense*; eadem, *Icon Painting* 200-207 no. 17. See also Gabra et al., *Churches of Egypt* pl. on 136f.

names and the titles of the scenes, which are all inscribed in Greek, the inscriptions on the scrolls held by these figures are in Arabic and comprise Old Testament quotations alluding to the New Testament events below. Bearing in mind that the patriarchate was transferred to Ḥārat Zuwayla in the early fourteenth century (see below), the icon may have been brought on this occasion from St Merkourios or al-Mu'allaqa.

Indications for the Byzantine craftsmanship of these icons follow from the brushwork, style, several iconographic features and the application of Greek inscriptions. Believed to be painted on a support of local sycamore wood, these works of art must have been made on Egyptian soil rather than imported<sup>46</sup>. Additional evidence for a production on behalf of a Coptic clientele is the application of Arabic inscriptions and unambiguous Coptic themes. Since the Eunuch of the Candace was believed to be an Ethiopian (Acts 8:27), the icon displaying his conversion evidently alludes to the leading position of the Coptic Patriarchate in Ethiopia and perhaps also to the Church of St Merkourios as the burial place of metropolitans who served in this country (no. 1)<sup>47</sup>. In the Coptic tradition, the theme of the Twenty-Four Elders was related to the liturgy and the visionary appearance of Christ and, as a consequence, it is featured in altar rooms (no. 2)<sup>48</sup>. Furthermore, the two large screen icons (nos 6 and 7) include genuine Egyptian saints, such as Philotheos, Victor, Menas and Isaac of Tiphre, the Alexandrine patriarchs Athanasios, Cyril and Peter, and the monastic saints Paul, Anthony and Pachomios. In all innocence, the painter of these pieces betrayed his Byzantine background through two crucial »mistakes« in the icon showing the Virgin, prelates and monks. Some of the prelates are dressed with a *polystaurion*, i.e. a *phelonion* covered with crosses, the wearing of which was a prerogative of Byzantine Orthodox patriarchs to distinguish them from common bishops<sup>49</sup>. In contrast, this garment was never part of the wardrobe of Coptic prelates and accordingly, it does not occur in Coptic iconography. Furthermore, »John the Merciful« is the odd man in the company of Alexandrine bishops. Identified as the seventh-century pro-Chalcedonian patriarch John V of Alexandria, who originated from Cyprus and enjoyed wide veneration as John the Almsgiver, he was never recognized by the Miaphysite Coptic Church.

Limiting the analysis to the individual pieces, stylistic coherences and differences allow for the subdivision of these icons into three main groups. The first group includes the two icons in the Little Chapel in al-Mu'allaqa, the icon with the Twenty-Four Elders (no. 2), the screen icon with the apostles (no. 4), the festal icons in St Merkourios and Ḥārat Zuwayla (nos 5, 9), the Greater Deesis pieces in the Wādī an-Naṭrūn (no. 8), and perhaps the icon of the Conversion of the Eunuch of the Candace (no. 1). All display a refined artistic quality pointing to a high level of craftsmanship. The second group

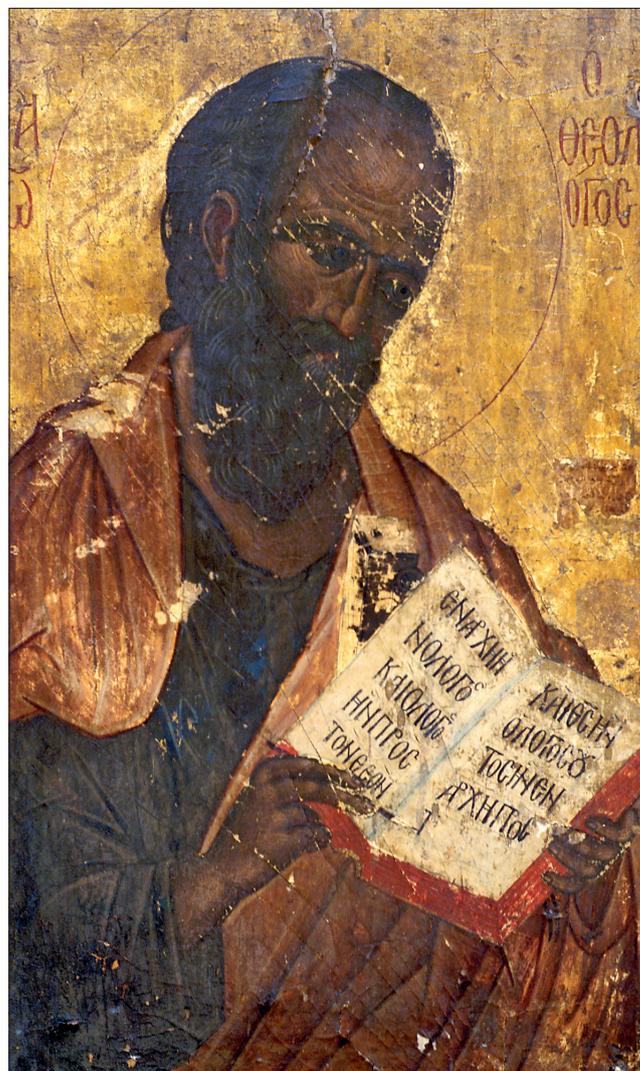


Fig. 23 Icon: St John the Evangelist; Deir Anba Bishoy. – (Photo M. Immerzeel).

consists of the corresponding screen icons representing the Virgin between prelates and monastic saints, and warrior saints (nos 6, 7). Although the elaborate drapery and some other details testify to professional Byzantine craftsmanship, the present state of the pieces leaves much to be desired because of improper retouching in the past. For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that the Church of St Merkourios also owns a large tripartite iconostasis beam of similar composition and height, which was, however, entirely repainted in the eighteenth century. Finally, the surviving vita scenes on the icon of St Merkourios stand out for the Palaiologan dynamism of the figures (no. 3). As a whole, these icons represent the gradual absorption of early Palaiologan standards and should therefore date from the second half of the thirteenth century, or the early fourteenth century at the latest<sup>50</sup>.

46 Skalova, *Icon Painting* 110f.

47 Skalova, *Icon Painting* 195.

48 Meinardus, *Twenty-Four Elders*.

49 Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon* 21-28.

50 Immerzeel, *The Narrow Way*.

## Patriarchs and *Archōns*

To provide a better understanding of all these paintings' relevancy in the specific context of patriarchal churches, the gradual changes in the position of Coptic papacy from the late tenth to the early fourteenth century merit further consideration. From the beginning, the Patriarchal See was officially established in Alexandria. Following the ecclesiastical divisions based on Christological differences, which came to a climax during the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and led to the subsequent foundation of a non-Chalcedonian church hierarchy, the Miaphysite patriarchs were more and more inclined to reside in the Monastery of St Makarios (Dayr Abū Maqār) in the Wādī an-Naṭrūn. Moreover, they were elected from monastic circles.

The importance of Old Cairo increased after the foundation of the new capital Fustāt, at a stone's throw from the fortified city, following the Arab conquest of Egypt in the 640s. The Fatimid conquest and the foundation of al-Qāhira as the next capital in 961 posed a major challenge to the attitude of the Church towards civil power. The first turning point in the early days of Fatimid rule was the election of Patriarch Abraham (975-978), who, in contrast to his precursors, was not a monk but a merchant of Syrian descent from Fustāt<sup>51</sup>. This remarkable shift was not a coincidence, as the new rulers undertook to actively involve non-Muslim laymen in the extension of the centralized bureaucratic system. The subsequent rise of a wealthy elite of Christian administrators and tradesmen (*archōns* or *ṣayḥs*) resulted in their emphatic interference in Church affairs. As for Abraham, probably in reaction to the request of the caliph to settle in Fustāt/Old Cairo in order to be available for consultation as the leader of the country's most important religious community at any time, he instigated the renovation of the long neglected Church of al-Mu'allāqa and that of St Merkourios. His early death prevented him from effecting the transfer of the residence to Old Cairo, but it was partially realized by his successors. From the primacy of Christodoulos (1047-1077), al-Mu'allāqa would enjoy the privilege of serving as the church of papal consecration. In the 1070s he granted al-Mu'allāqa and the Church of St Merkourios the status of a patriarchal church, thus paving the way for the definitive installation of the See in Old Cairo after 1084 under Cyril II (1078-1092)<sup>52</sup>. Soon a start was made with the construction of patriarchal quarters on the upper floors of both churches. Apparently, some *archōns* took the accommodation of the supreme spiritual leader as a personal commitment. A key senior officer in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries was Abū I-Faḍl Ibn al-Uṣqūf, whose position as the private secretary of Vizier al-Afḍal Ṣāhanṣāh (1094-1121) lent him almost unlimited powers. At

his expense a church dedicated to St George was erected in the papal compound at St Merkourios. In the course of the twelfth century, the patriarchs and *archōns* jointly extended the upper floor with other sanctuaries, one of which was assigned as the pope's private cell and dedicated to the Archangel Michael (fig. 22)<sup>53</sup>.

As the »urbanization« of patriarchal authority coincided with the increasing importance of Cairene laity, the Coptic community as a whole greatly benefited from their contacts at the highest levels and the resulting financial means to restore and refurbish urban churches<sup>54</sup>. The *archōns'* tight grip on the Coptic Church comes particularly to the fore in the events from the second half of the twelfth century. By that time, the election of patriarchs from their ranks had become the rule rather than the exception. After the defeat of the Fatimids in 1169, Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn initially expelled Christian notables from their offices, but soon allowed them to resume their duties. His decision heralded a Coptic »Golden Age« that would last until the end of the thirteenth century. Encouraged by the beneficiary power change, the *archōns* initiated large-scale projects to restore and decorate the many churches that had been damaged in the turmoil of war or neglected over a longer period<sup>55</sup>. The repair of the complex of St Merkourios, which had been damaged by arson in 1168, was one of their major projects. A main benefactor in this matter was Ṣayḥ Ibn Abū I-Faḍā'il Ibn Farrūḡ. In 1174/1175 he took charge of the building of a fenced wall around the complex and probably also of the renovation of the Church of St George and its decoration with wall paintings, which survive today<sup>56</sup>. An inscription under the image of an archangel (Michael?) near the papal cell states that it was painted in 1174/1175 on his orders (1 on fig. 13)<sup>57</sup>. Although next to nothing is known about contemporary adaptations to papal requirements in al-Mu'allāqa, the Coptic-style paintings in the Little Church are believed to date from the second half of the twelfth century or slightly later. Particularly conspicuous is their position opposite the patriarchal cell on the upper floor of this annex. From this spot the Church leader had an excellent view of the decorated walls and niches, an aspect that may have been decisive in the later extension of the iconographic programme with the Virgin Blachernitissa (figs 14-15).

The power of the notables reached its peak in the thirteenth century. In concert with several bishops, the powerful Awlād al-'Assāl family supplied excellent scholars who shouldered the task of urgently needed church reforms<sup>58</sup>. By contrast, the papacy had gradually been reduced to an extension of lay factions. After the death of John VI in 1216, the See would remain unoccupied for various reasons until the consecration of the highly controversial Cyril III in 1235. When he died in 1243, the *archōns* once again were not in

51 For Abraham, see Swanson, *Coptic Papacy* 48-52.

52 For these patriarchs, see Swanson, *Coptic Papacy* 59-67.

53 Abū I-Makārim, *Churches and Monasteries of Egypt* 119-124 fols 36b-38b; Immerzeel, *Churches of Cairo* 35-40; idem, *The Narrow Way*.

54 Immerzeel, *Churches of Cairo*; idem, *The Narrow Way*; Jeurdy, *Élite civile*.

55 *History of the Patriarchs* 165f.

56 Van Loon, *Gate of Heaven* 17-30.

57 Van Loon, *Gate of Heaven* 29 pls 30f.

58 *Coptic Encyclopedia* 1,309b-311b.



Fig. 24 St Mark; ms. Bibl. 196 fols 111<sup>v</sup>-112<sup>r</sup>; Library of the Coptic Patriarchate. – (After Atalla, Illustrations, pl. on 28).

a hurry to elect a successor<sup>59</sup>. Undoubtedly, the absence of the only authority who was entitled to appoint new bishops suited the intellectual elite; this situation gave them free rein to go ahead with their reform projects and eventually to elect patriarchs among the close-knit «old boys'» network of the Church of al-Mu'allāqa, which by that time functioned as the «Coptic Vatican».

Strikingly, the debates on the succession of Cyril immediately reached a deadlock through fierce rivalry between the *archōns* of al-Qāhira and Miṣr. Bad feelings were temporarily smoothed over after the election of Athanasios III (1250-1261), but rose again after his death. What followed was an awkward affair, with an additional embarrassing role played by the Mamluk vizier Bahā' ad-Dīn, who wanted to cash in on the scramble around the See. Elected by lot, the first candidate, Gabriel, who was a priest of al-Mu'allāqa and cooperated with the reformers as a scribe, was set aside in 1262 in favour of his rival, another priest of this church who would be consecrated Patriarch John VII. As John was not able to pay the expected bribes, the vizier simply deposed John six

years later and reinstalled Gabriel. Since he, too, failed to raise enough funds, he was forced to abdicate in 1271, after which John resumed his primacy until 1293<sup>60</sup>.

In that year, an unfortunate incident with an *archōn* evoked growing dissatisfaction among the Muslim population with the excessive influence and exuberant appearance of the Christian functionaries. The anger of these, so to speak, frustrated taxpayers, who wanted their money back, came to blows in the plundering of the Church of al-Mu'allāqa and of the houses of public servants<sup>61</sup>. But the worst was yet to come. After these incidents, the initially impervious attitude of the Mamluks towards the indispensable Christian administrators of financial matters and tax collectors, who, after all, anchored their own prosperity, changed, which resulted in the implementation of discriminatory dress regulations on all *ḍimmīs* and pressure to convert to Islam. In 1301, the continuing anti-Christian riots induced the Mamluk rulers to close al-Mu'allāqa, St Merkourios and other churches. Although persistent foreign pressure resulted in the reopening of one sanctuary after the other, the unrest compelled

59 Swanson, Coptic Papacy 83-95.

60 Swanson, Coptic Papacy 97-100; see also Immerzeel, *The Narrow Way*.

61 Little, *Coptic Conversion*; Ward, *Ibn al-Rif'a*.

John VIII (1300-1320) to relocate to the Church of the Virgin in the Ḥārat Zuwayla quarter, which was securely located within the walls of al-Qāhira. Decisive for the downfall in the Coptic Church was the confiscation of Church properties in 1354<sup>62</sup>. Many *archōns* embraced their fate: the best option to secure their positions was to continue under the wings of Islam. In the longer term, this expropriation and mass conversion deprived the Coptic community of its intellectual flexibility and financial means to renovate and furnish church buildings. By extension, Church leadership would again be a concern of clerical leaders instead of the laity.

It goes without saying that these developments sketched above provide excellent opportunities to interpret the value of the Byzantine-style works of art in al-Muʿallaqa and St Merkourios. While pointing out again that their stylistic characteristics allow for their dating to roughly the second half of the thirteenth century, the paradox of an inflated papacy at the time cannot be ignored. Frankly speaking, nothing happened in Greater Cairo without the efforts or assent of the omnipotent *archōns*. In line with the longstanding practice of their self-imposed responsibility for the maintenance and embellishment of urban and papal churches, it is reasonable to assume that they also contracted the artists who provided al-Muʿallaqa and St Merkourios with proper works of art. Probably painted in the third quarter of the thirteenth century, the ambitious canopies and the *Blachernitissa* mural in al-Muʿallaqa date from the period when the prestige of the papacy was at its lowest point. One is inclined to believe that these works of art were meant to constitute the splendid façade of official events in the very centre of a vital Christian community, in the sense that they embodied the self-assurance of its well-to-do lay leaders, rather than the anything but untouchable position of the official spiritual leader.

The question remains as to why the *archōns* did not entrust the task of furnishing the patriarchal churches to Coptic painters. Did they perhaps hold qualified Byzantine artists in high esteem? A potentially interesting answer is found in an illustrated Arabic Gospel book from 1291 in the library of the Coptic Patriarchate, which was produced on behalf of Šayḥ al-Amğad Ibn aš-Šayḥ at-Taqaḥ as a present to his son<sup>63</sup>. Al-Amğad involved two artists in this project: a local illustrator, who was responsible for the ornamentation of the text pages, and a Byzantine master for the figurative representations. In line with the Coptic fashion of those days, the overwhelming marginal illustrations and a full-page cross composed of geometric, vegetal and arabesque elements display inspiration from contemporary Mamluk art. However, in terms of craftsmanship, the ornamentation sharply contrasts with the gilded full-page illustrations that precede the Gospels of St

Mark, Luke and John and represent these evangelists while writing their gospels (fig. 24). Provided with their names in Greek, these delicate portraits are exemplary exponents of Palaiologan art of the late thirteenth century.

The patron's motivations for this intentional division of labour should be sought first and foremost in the apparent prestige of Byzantine artists in lay Coptic circles. Likewise, the furnishing of the papal churches with splendid artworks should also be considered an indication of the fashionable taste of the leading notables. Keeping in mind the complaints of the Muslim population about the Christian functionaries' conceited attitude and appearance, and the plundering of their houses and al-Muʿallaqa in 1293, it was perhaps this desire for luxury that would ultimately usher in their downfall.

## The Egyptian Melkites

Some seven centuries after the Council of Chalcedon (451), the adherents of the Chalcedonian doctrines persisted in Alexandria and the Nile Delta, as well as in Greater Cairo and to a lesser degree in the Nile Valley<sup>64</sup>. Regarding extant witnesses of the medieval Melkite artistic tradition, next to nothing remains. However, the Museum of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Alexandria owns a number of thirteenth-century icons originating from the Melkite Church of St George in Old Cairo, which based on their craftsmanship seem connected to the icons in Coptic possession<sup>65</sup>. At this point our research reaches its limits, as this crucial collection remains to be studied and published in full.

Apparently, the Melkite system of sponsorship and influence of the aristocracy in Fatimid service functioned in the same way as that of the Copts, with a key role played by the al-Layṭ family<sup>66</sup>. The main Melkite monastic settlement was Dayr al-Quṣayr near Tura to the south of Old Cairo. Here, Šayḥ Abū I-Barakāt Yūḥannā Ibn Abī Layṭ had the Church of St Sabas restored under the supervision of his brother, the scribe Abū I-Faḍāʿil. Its interior was embellished with »excellent pictures, of extremely skilful and admirable execution«, including representations of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste<sup>67</sup>. Abū I-Barakāt was the supervisor of the *diwān at-taḥqīq*, founded by Vizier al-Afḍal Šāhanšāh in 1107/1108 to regulate his fiscal reforms and the redistribution of land. In this capacity, he was one of the most powerful men in the country, but he eventually fell from grace and was beheaded in 1134<sup>68</sup>. Another relative, or perhaps even brother, was the doctor Anbāʾ Sabas Ibn al-Layṭ, who sometime between 1101 and 1121 travelled to Constantinople, ostensibly to heal the emperor from an illness. There he spent 10000 Egyptian

62 Little, Coptic Conversion 568f.

63 Bibl. no. 196; Atalla, Illustrations 27-31; Leroy, Manuscrits coptes 178-180 pls 5,1; 96f.,1.

64 Immerzeel, Churches of Cairo 40f.; idem, The Narrow Way.

65 Skalova, Icon Painting 119.

66 Pahlitzsch, Melkites 496-502.

67 Abū I-Makārim, Churches and Monasteries of Egypt 150f. fols 50b-51a. Dayr al-Quṣayr was renowned for the memory of the ninth-century apse mosaics representing the Virgin holding the Child between two angels and the twelve apostles in the Church of the Apostles, which were destroyed in 1010 (Abū I-Makārim, Churches and Monasteries of Egypt xii, 148-150 fol. 50b).

68 Immerzeel, Churches of Cairo, with further references.

dinars on the purchase of precious liturgical accoutrements and a gilded icon of the Virgin with Child for an unspecified church in Alexandria. Sabas' visit to the Byzantine capital did not pass unnoticed: »The king bestowed a great honour upon Sabas, so that he rode a horse at day time in Constantinople and had a lighted taper in his hand«<sup>69</sup>. On account of this stunning homage, which was a prerogative reserved for patriarchs, Krijnie Ciggaar has revealed the doctor's true identity: he was the Melkite patriarch Sabas of Alexandria, who participated in a synod held in Constantinople in 1117<sup>70</sup>. It was probably the icon he brought from the Byzantine capital that Western travellers, such as the Flemish nobleman Joos van Ghistele, noticed in the Melkite Church of St Sabas at Alexandria during his visit in 1480<sup>71</sup>.

## Conclusion

In summation, the emphatic activities of Byzantine-trained artists in the Middle East from the turn of the twelfth century display some interesting patterns. On the condition that favourable working circumstances, defined by periods of peace and attractive socio-economic conditions, allowed them to travel and practice their craft, they turned up in Latin- and Muslim-ruled territories to take assignments from a variety of clients. More precisely, they excelled at establishing profitable contacts with civil and ecclesiastical representatives of virtually all major Christian communities in the Middle East, that is, Copts, Latins, Maronites, Melkites and Syrian Orthodox. In this respect, the matter of patronage turns out to be a revealing key factor, which upon closer examination should merit

more attention than the search for the origins of the artists. This study lays bare particularly the interaction between these protagonists, but simultaneously raises questions that cannot easily be answered within its limitations. To illustrate this with an example, one of the painters from Constantinople who travelled to Tabriz to embellish the church of Princess Maria in 1282 succeeded in obtaining an additional painting commission from Maphrian Bar Hebraeus on his return journey. Some artists may likewise have travelled by order or on invitation and prolonged their stay to respond to the protracted local demand. Others may have taken the haphazard decision to try their luck in potentially interesting areas, perhaps as a reaction to the collapse of the »home market« caused by dramatic changes in political leadership. It cannot be ruled out that they spent the rest of their lives abroad in the knowledge that this secured their livelihood. To put our definition of »Byzantine artists« in perspective, these immigrants may also have educated a new generation of indigenous pupils, who probably never set foot on Byzantine soil.

Leaving these challenging matters to future researchers, there is one more tantalizing question to be answered: did itinerant artists benefit from their status as Byzantine painters in one way or the other? With indispensable prudence, a positive answer can be given in the case of the embellishment of the patriarchal churches in Cairo, but it remains to be seen whether this provisional conclusion is also applicable to the Byzantine works of art in Latin and Muslim Syria. In the end, this topic cannot be detached from the position of Byzantine artists as an attractive alternative to less-skilled local painters or as pioneers, whose activities fostered the genesis of local schools.

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## Summary / Zusammenfassung

### Byzantine Artists in the Latin and Islamic Middle East of the Thirteenth Century

In the thirteenth century, the Latin and indigenous Christian communities of the Middle East enjoyed a prospering artistic revival. If two contemporary textual sources attest to the employment of Byzantine craftsmen or painters in Frankish Beirut and the Muslim-ruled Mosul area, respectively, the presence of Byzantine-style works of art – mainly wall paintings and icons – in present-day Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt suggest that their input in the artistic production was considerable. Contextual circumstances point out that artists trained in the Byzantine painterly traditions have been contracted by Latin and Eastern Christian patrons (Copts, Maronites, Melkites, and Syrian Orthodox).

### Byzantinische Künstler im lateinischen und islamischen Nahen Osten des 13. Jahrhunderts

Im 13. Jahrhundert erlebten die lateinischen und die indigenen christlichen Gemeinschaften des Nahen Ostens einen florierenden künstlerische Aufschwung. Auch wenn lediglich zwei zeitgenössische Textquellen die Beschäftigung byzantinischer Handwerker oder Maler im fränkischen Beirut bzw. im von Muslimen beherrschten Gebiet von Mosul bezeugen, so weist die Präsenz von Kunstwerken im byzantinischen Stil – hauptsächlich Wandmalereien und Ikonen – im heutigen Libanon, Syrien und Ägypten dich darauf hin, dass ihr Beitrag zur künstlerischen Produktion insgesamt beträchtlich war. Kontextspezifische Begleitumstände zeigen, dass Künstler, die in der byzantinischen Maltradition ausgebildet waren, von lateinischen und ostchristlichen Kunden (Kopten, Maroniten, Melkiten und Syrisch-Orthodoxen) unter Vertrag genommen wurden.