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"Proskynetaria" from Jerusalem : souvenirs of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land

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*Proskynetaria from Jerusalem.
Souvenirs of a Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*

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Visitors to the holy places in Palestine never returned homewards with empty hands. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, icon workshops in Jerusalem produced a typical topographic representation of the Holy Land, called a *proskynetarion*. Until recently, these remarkable objects have escaped the attention of art historians. The first publication on this subject was written by Otto Meinardus in 1967, in which he described fourteen instances in Egypt and mentioned other specimens in Greece and Iraq.¹ Since then several *proskynetaria* have been exhibited in the Middle East and Europe and published,² while in 1999 a first inventory was included in *Essays on Christian Art and Culture in the Middle East (ECACME)*.³ During the last years, many more examples have been discovered in museums, churches and private collections in Western and Eastern Europe as well as in the Middle East, or are offered for sale by icon dealers. Some have been published, while other *proskynetaria* are only known from personal observations, pictures and information provided by other persons. This article aims at a short introduction to these particular objects as well as to icons and other icon-like objects made in Palestine for pilgrims.

¹ Meinardus, O.F.A., 'Greek Proskynetaria of Jerusalem in Coptic Churches in Egypt', *Studia Orientalia Christiana*, XII (1967), pp. 311-341.

² See the inventory in this publication.

³ M. Immerzeel, 'Proskynetaria from Jerusalem', *Essays on Christian Art and Culture in the Middle East*, II (1999), pp. 53-62.

Pilgrims and their acquisitions

By the fourth century Christians were already travelling to Palestine to visit the places where Christ and his apostles had lived, and where biblical events had occurred. The Arab conquest of the Middle East in the seventh century caused a marked decrease in the number of Western visitors, but pilgrimage to the holy places boomed again during the Crusader period. In the Ottoman period the number of pilgrims rose by leaps and bounds. In particular at Easter time, countless Christians, mainly Orientals, visited Jerusalem.

Travelers have never been able to resist the temptation of collecting objects during their journeys. Today testimonies to pilgrimages to Palestine can still be admired in many churches, monasteries, museums, libraries, and private collections all over the world. In the early Christian period visitors brought flasks filled with holy oil or holy water with them, while later on all kinds of objects and commodities found their way to their homelands.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, icons from Palestine were appreciated as holy souvenirs. An example showing Saint Anthony painted in the style of a local workshop was brought back from Jerusalem by the grandfather of the Damascene icon collector Antoine Touma, who visited the city in 1878 (Fig. 2).⁴ It was obviously purchased because Touma's ancestor's name was also Antoine. Without any doubt, the influx of so many potential buyers was very profitable to the icon workshops in Jerusalem. This must have been one of the reasons why in the period under consideration the Palestinian «icon industry» was the most flourishing one in the Middle East. Another reason for this boom in Palestinian icon painting was the need for icons for the representatives of the many Orthodox Churches in the Holy City. A striking instance of this is an icon showing the Resurrection, now in the Coptic Museum in Cairo (Fig. 3).⁵ An inscription in Arabic tells us part of its history: *The person who commissioned this icon with his modest possessions, is Girgis Grees from Sabra from the bishopric of Koskaam and the procurator of the Coptic pious foundation in Holy Jerusalem, 1563 (A.M. = Year of the Martyrs, corresponding with A.D. 1847/48).* Apparently, this Father Girgis was sent to Jerusalem to take care

⁴ *Idem, Syrische iconen/Syrian Icons*, Gent 1997, no. 32.

⁵ P. P. V. Van Moorsel, M. Immerzeel, L. Langen, *Catalogue général du Musée Copte. The Icons*, Cairo 1994, no. 97, Pl. 24a.



1. Jerusalem on the map of Bernard von Breitenbach; late 15th century (Röhrich 1901).



2. Icon: Saint Anthony; 1878, Collection Antoine Touma (M. Immerzeel).



3. Icon: Resurrection, School of Jerusalem; A.D. 1847/48; Coptic Museum, Old Cairo (H. Hondelink).



4. Icon: Nativity with Russian inscriptions; 2nd half of the 19th century; private collection in Egypt (slide collection Paul van Moorsel).

of the Coptic chapel in the Church of the Resurrection, and when he returned to Egypt he took his icon with him.

Several Palestinian icons are provided with Russian inscriptions, and may have been meant for the Russian Orthodox monastery in Jerusalem or for Russian pilgrims. Up till the present, only a few examples of such 'Russianised' icons are known, for example an icon of the Nativity in a private collection in Egypt (Fig. 4), and another one showing the same theme in the collection of Antoine Touma.⁶ Undoubtedly, others are to be found in Russia; there even is some written evidence that such mass-produced works were not very much appreciated by the Church authorities.⁷

The icons under discussion demonstrate that the scenes represented on 'souvenir icons' are determined by three aspects that are related to each other. The first aspect is the *subject*: the saint represented, an episode from his or her life, or a biblical event. The second one is the *place* with which the saint is connected, or where the event took place, while the third aspect is *time*, or rather a particular moment of the year related to a saint, an event, or a feast. In the case of the icon owned by Girgis Grees the theme is the Resurrection, which is particularly related to the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem in which the Coptic Orthodox Church and many other Churches have their own chapels, and which is celebrated at Easter. Nativity icons can be related to Bethlehem, but may of course also have been available in Jerusalem.

The Resurrection icon of Girgis Grees may have been made for private use at first, and would become a personal souvenir only after the return of its owner to Egypt, rather than having been made for an incidental visitor. Special souvenir icons related to particular holy places outside Jerusalem were also produced. Two nineteenth-century fish heads painted with the Baptism of Christ that are preserved in the Monastery of the Syrians (Deir al-Surian) in the Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt, can be considered as such (Fig. 5). Presumably, the fish whose skulls were used were netted in the River Jordan. In this case the holiness of the object was double: a holy representation was painted on an object from a holy river.⁸ Five such fish heads are in the

⁶ M. Immerzeel, *Syrische iconen...*, no. 15; another 'Palestinian-Russian' icon is present in Deir al-Surian (unpublished).

⁷ Z. Skálová, G. Gabra, *Icons of the Nile Valley*, Cairo 2003, p. 147.

⁸ M. Immerzeel, *Syrische iconen...*, no. 28, fig. 10; K. C. Innemée, *Some Notes on Icons and Relics*, in: *Byzantine East, Latin West. Art-historical studies in Honor of Kurt Weitzmann*, D. Mouriki et al. (eds.), Princeton 1976, pp. 519–521; K. C. Innemée, 'Veneration of Portraits, Icons and Relics in Christian Egypt', *Visual Resources*, XIX/1 (2003), pp. 64–66, Fig. 4; Z. Skálová, G. Gabra, *op. cit.*, p. 147.



5. Painted fish heads, Baptism of Christ; 19th century; Deir al-Surian (M. Immerzeel).



6. Icon: Nativity scenes; 18th century; Deir Anba Bishoy (M. Immerzeel).

Hermitage in St. Petersburg, but they have been attributed to Greek or Slavonic masters⁹ and should therefore be subject to additional research.

The images on *proskynetaria*

Just as modern post-cards show us landscapes and buildings that are characteristic of the location where the cards are purchased, icons intended for the «souvenir market» often show subjects with recognizable prominent elements. In monasteries like on Mount Athos in Greece and Saint Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai, representations of the building complexes set in the surrounding landscape were available to visitors. Illustrated guides which were also called *proskynetaria* were printed in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards for Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox pilgrims. A guide in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (BN G. 606) was printed in 1728 and contains an engraved map of Jerusalem with comments at the bottom, which was described by Waldemar Deluga.¹⁰ The concept of these maps, however, is much older. The design goes back to the famous map that was included in Bernard von Breitenbach's account of a journey that he made to the Middle East as a companion of Felix Fabri in 1483–1484; it was allegedly designed by Erhard Reuwig from Utrecht in the Netherlands (Fig. 1).¹¹

Such European topographic images may have inspired Palestinian icon painters to develop a similar model for their clients. Represented in bird's eye view is the city of Jerusalem including the city walls and important religious buildings such as the Church of the Resurrection, and the surrounding landscape consisting of hills and the River Jordan (Figs. 7, 8). The harbour of Jaffa, where the pilgrims went ashore, was consequently depicted, while other famous sites, such as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Monastery of Saint Sabbas near Jerusalem were given their place in the panorama as well. Each *proskynetarion* was filled with

⁹ *Khristiane na Vostoke. Iskusstvo Melkitov i inoslavnykh khristian* (ex. cat.), Sankt Peterburg 1998, cat. nos. 167–171.

¹⁰ W. Deluga, 'Gravures et vue de Jérusalem dans les *proskynetations* grecs et leurs copies serbes et russes du XVIIIème siècle', *Jewish Art*, XXII/XXIV (1997–1998), pp. 370–377, Fig. 1.

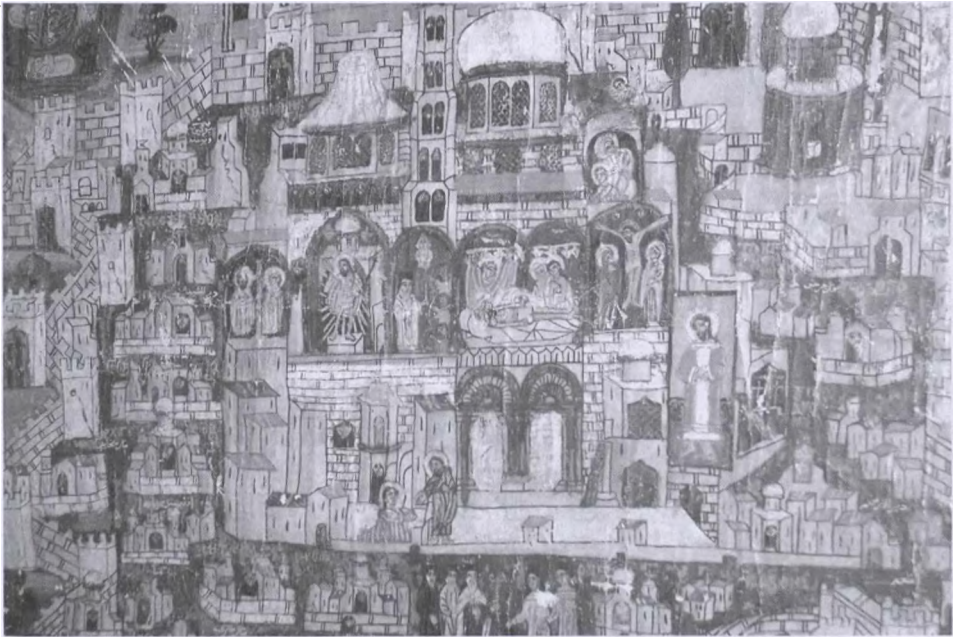
¹¹ R. Röhrich, 'Die Palästinekarte Bernhard von Breitenbach's', *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins*, 24 (1901), pp. 129–135; M. Immerzeel, *Proskynetaria* from Jerusalem..., p. 55, Fig. 2.



7. Icon: interior of the Church of the Resurrection with scenes; 1st half of the 19th century; Deir al-Surian (M. Immerzeel).



8. Proskynetarion; 19th century; Monastery of Saydnaya (M. Immerzeel).



9. Proskynetarion, detail, Jerusalem; 19th century; Monastery of Saydnaya (M. Immerzeel).



10. Proskynetarion, tabula with inscription; 19th century; Monastery of Saydnaya (M. Immerzeel).

small icons; e.g. of the Virgin Mary; saints and episodes from their lives; biblical scenes (the Creation, themes from the life of Christ); and local legends. The accompanying inscriptions were written in Greek and in some cases also in Arabic.

To facilitate transport, *proskynetaria* were painted on linen that could be rolled up or folded. The oldest known example is dated A.D. 1704 and is preserved in the museum of Saumur in France (Fr 1 in the inventory), while on the most recent one the date 1896 was written (Mc 2). At first, hagiographic-topographic *proskyneteria* dominated, but in the course of time, very likely in the late eighteenth century, hagiographic representations became more dominant. In these cases, the city of Jerusalem is only recognizable by the opened-out interior of the Church of the Resurrection including scenes from the Easter cycle, mainly the Crucifixion, the Anointing and the Resurrection. Several liturgical representations were added as well; moments in the Easter procession emphasize the relevance of this subject as this was the time that the pilgrims gathered near and in the church – it was the main reason for their visit! In the second half of the nineteenth century topographic elements almost entirely disappeared. Instances from this period are typified by a sort of patchwork of different icons, which have a central section focusing on the Church of the Resurrection in common, flanked by scenes related to the Virgin at one side, and to Christ at its opposite.

Proskynetarion-like icons were also produced as paintings on linen. The Monastery of Deir Anba Bishoy (Wadi al-Natrun; Egypt) owns a partly preserved eighteenth-century representation of scenes related to the Nativity, painted on linen (Fig. 6). This icon might well have been a souvenir from Bethlehem. Above the altar in the *haykal* of the Church of al-^cAdra in nearby Deir al-Surian an icon from the first half of the nineteenth century shows only the Church of the Resurrection and related images, without the surrounding hagiographic and topographic elements that are characteristic of *proskynetaria* (Fig. 7).¹²

Supposedly, the workshops produced large quantities of *proskynetaria* of different qualities and prices throughout the year, ready to be available at Easter time, when the bulk of visitors passed through Jerusalem. This advanced manufacture was necessary because the pilgrims never stayed long enough to commission their own specimen. This would also have raised the prices too much. Sometimes a small field on the surface was left

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 54, pl. 2.

unpainted, offering the client the possibility of having an inscription added. On the *proskynetarion* in the Church of Anba Shenute in Old Cairo (Eg 6) the standardized part of the text was already written in the field: *Hadji ... Pilgrim of the All-Holy and Live-Giving Tomb, 1767*. The only element that is still missing is the name of the client, who probably found satisfaction enough in the purchase alone. A lady called Magdalena had her name added to the inscription on the specimen in the Monastery of Saydnaya in Syria, which, if the reading of the date as A.H. 1151 is correct, was painted in A.D. 1738/39 (Sy 3; Figs. 8–10). The standard text has almost vanished, but Magdalena's name written in red remains clearly visible.

It seems that in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century the concept of the painted *proskynetarion* was abandoned. This charming souvenir was replaced by more easily reproducible (and consequently cheaper) posters with photographs of sites and churches. An example is present in the Greek Orthodox church of Deir Attiyya in Syria. This one demonstrates the weak point of photographic reproductions: its state of conservation is rather bad, and it must be feared that because of the vulnerability of the materials used only few have survived.