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KAFTOUN 2004

THE WALL PAINTINGS

Nada Hélou and Mat Immerzeel

The first observations on the wall paintings uncovered so far reveal that some scenes are common for church decoration in Lebanon, while others have no precedents in the region. A scene to be added to the list of similar representations elsewhere in the Tripoli area is the *Deesis* in the half-dome of the apse.¹ It is composed of the more than life-size figures of Christ Enthroned flanked by the Virgin (left) and St. John the Baptist (right) [*Figs. 1-2*]. In between Christ and his Mother are traces of a seraph; another one must once have been represented to the right. On the triumphal arch surrounding the half-dome elements of an *Annunciation* are present, with the Archangel Gabriel rendered to the left and the Virgin to his opposite [*Figs. 3-4*]. The posterior barrel vault of the church separates the archangel and Virgin into two halves; their heads can only be seen when one has access to the room above the vault. This particular location of the scene has also been found in the Church of St. Theodore (Mar Tadros) in Bahdeidat² and in Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi in Syria.³

The north and south walls of the nave must have been entirely decorated, but

paintings are preserved only in the upper zones. At the east side of both walls there is the *Communion of the Apostles*, the first example of this theme discovered in Lebanon [*Fig. 5*]. Normally spoken, the *Communion* should be rendered in the apse with Christ represented twice, to the left and right of a central altar, handing out bread to six apostles on each side, but in Kaftoun the representation is divided into two separate scenes with two altars. Traces of more themes are to be found at the same level on the north wall, all bordered with a red frame, but most of them are severely mutilated. There is a medallion containing the bust of an anonymous archangel over the top of the easternmost arch [cf. *Fig. 3* on p. 450], and directly to his left a few Greek letters of a name have survived. One reads: ΔΟ.Α., which in theory can be extended to ΔΟ[Μ]Α[ΤΙΟΣ]: St. Domatios or Domatios. Still on the same wall, to the right of the eastern arch and below the *Communion*, a tonsured saint is depicted frontally with an angel to his left. He may represent a deacon, which is not surprising on a spot near the altar room. Among the fragmented paintings found in the nave are scenes or

1 E. Cruikshank Dodd, *Medieval Painting in the Lebanon* (Wiesbaden 2004), 34-36; N. Hélou, "La représentation de la Déisis-Vision dans deux églises du Liban", *Parole de l'Orient* 23 (1998), 1-27; id., "Le decor des absides dans les églises du Liban", *Iconographica* IV (2005), in press.

2 Cruikshank Dodd, op. cit., 57-59, 342, Pls. LXXXIV, 19.29-30.

3 E. Cruikshank Dodd, *The Frescoes of Mar Musa al-Habashi. A Study in Medieval Painting in Syria* (Toronto 2001), 34-38, 128-129, Pls. V, 9a/b, 10.

saints placed at the inside of the central arches of the tripartite arcades. At the western inside of the south arch, one distinguishes a huge standing soldier saint.

Concerning the style, the paintings can be divided into two groups. The *Deesis* and *Annunciation* betray another hand than the images on the upper zones inside the nave. The stylistic features of the first group appear to be more simple and graphic, while those of the second are very elaborate, with graceful pleats, heavily shadowed faces and careful highlighting (see below). There is also a difference in the languages used. The first group displays inscriptions in Greek, in particular for the names of the persons and the text on Christ's open book. In the *Communion of the Apostles*, however, the

apostles' names are in Syriac, although, as said before, the name of the saint to the left of the angel's bust is written in Greek again. A large Arabic inscription runs over the length of the north wall, but only the first words, above the *Communion* scene, have escaped destruction [cf. Fig. 3 on p. 450].

The first conclusions about the artist, or artists, who decorated the east wall and half-dome appear to be very spectacular. We have recognized the style of a workshop that was responsible for several icons in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, in particular a two-sided icon representing a Virgin *Hodegetria* (obverse) and Sts Sergius and Bacchus on horseback (reverse), an icon with St. Sergius and a fe-



Fig. 1. *Deesis scene in the half-dome of the apse in the Church of Mar Sarkis in Kaftoun*
(Photo T. Waliszewski)



Fig. 2. St. John the Baptist (detail) from the Deesis scene in the half-dome of the apse in the Church of Mar Sarkis in Kaftoun (Photo T. Waliszewski)



Fig. 3. Archangel Gabriel (detail) from the Annunciation scene on the triumphal arch in the Church of Mar Sarkis in Kaftoun (Photo T. Waliszewski)



*Fig. 4. The Virgin Mary (detail) from the Annunciation scene on the triumphal arch
(Photo T. Waliszewski)*



*Fig. 5. Communion of the Apostles on the nave wall of the Church of Mar Sarkis in Kaftoun
(Photo T. Waliszewski)*

male suppliant, another showing a Virgin *Blachernitissa* holding a medallion containing the bust of Christ Emmanuel in front of her, and an iconostasis beam representing a *Deesis* in between Sts Peter and Paul, the four evangelists and the soldier saints George and Procopius, all to be dated roughly in the third quarter of the 13th century, however with wide margins.⁴ In particular the *Deesis* in the church seems to be a faithful copy of the same, much smaller, scene on the iconostasis beam, but the formal resemblances between the Virgin and the one on the bilateral icon are even more striking. These icons are generally attributed to a Latin⁵ or Cypriot⁶ workshop, which Jaroslav Folda baptised 'The Workshop of the Soldier Saints',⁷ but from our recent research it follows that the artists were very likely indigenous Christians. The clue to this attribution is the presence in the present Monastery of Kaftoun of another 13th-century bilateral icon with a Virgin *Hodegetria* on the obverse and a Baptism on the reverse, which we ascribe to the same atelier.⁸ In particular, the styl-

istic features of the *Hodegetria* on the front side betray the same hand which painted a similar image on the double-sided icon and that of the Virgin *Blachernitissa* on Mount Sinai. It should be noted as well that the face of the Virgin in the *Annunciation* is very similar to that of St. Bacchus of the Sinaitic icon, in particular from the point of view of graphic rendering of the features, the modest greenish shadows and the highlighting.

In the representations on the north wall, in particular the apostles in the *Communion* scene, one discerns a different artistic language, distinctively close to Byzantine art. These figures, with their powerful brushstrokes accentuating the volumes and the contrast of colors, incontestably display classical inspiration. This very refined style has no precedent in the wall paintings of Lebanon, in particular in the former County of Tripoli, but is closely connected to painted cycles on Serbian territory from the 13th century, for example the murals of Studenica, Milieshevo, Pec, and Sopocani.⁹ It is known that after the capture of Con-

4 The most recent publications about these icons, including references to earlier studies, are the exhibition catalogues: H. Evans (ed.), *Byzantium. Faith and Power (1261-1557)* (New York/New Haven 2004), nos. 230, 229, 212, and 232, respectively; and *Trésors du monastère de Sainte-Catherine Mont Sinai Égypte* (Martigny 2004), nos. 17-20. See also note 8.

5 Weitzmann attributes them to South Italian artists working in one of the crusader states (K. Weitzmann, *Icon Painting in the Crusader Kingdom*, *DOP* 20 (1966), 49-83, esp. 70-71; id., *Studies in the Art of Sinai* (Princeton 1982), 345-346, 435; id., "Crusader Icons and Maniera Greca", in: I. Hutter (ed.), *Byzanz und der Westen. Studien zur Kunst des Europäischen Mittelalters*, *Sitzungsberichte der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 432 (Wien 1984), 143-170.

6 D. Mouriki, "Thirteenth-Century Icon Painting in Cyprus", in: *Studies in Late Byzantine Painting* (London 1995), 341-443, esp. 400-403 (reprint from *The Griffon* 1-2 (1985-86), 9-112). The author suggests that the icons were made by a Syrian artist working on Cyprus.

7 See note 4.

8 Exhibition catalogue: *Îcônes du Liban* (Paris 1996), 22-27; N. Hélou, "L'icône bilatérale de la Vierge de Kaftoun au Liban: une oeuvre d'art syro-byzantin à l'époque des croisés", *Chronos* 7 (2003), 101-131; M. Immerzeel, "Holy Horsemen and Crusader Banners. Equestrian Saints in Wall Paintings in Lebanon and Syria", *Eastern Christian Art* 1 (2004), 29-60, esp. 49-53, Pls. 23, 24; id., "Medieval Wall Paintings in Lebanon: Donors and Artists", *Chronos* 10 (2004), 7-47, esp. 25, Pl. 13; see also R.J. Mouawad, "Les mystérieux monastères de Keftun au Liban à l'époque médiévale (XIIe-XIIIe siècles): maronite et puis melkite?", *Tempora* 12-13 (2001-2002), 95-113, esp. 105-111, Fig. 2 (Baptism).

9 V.N. Lazarev, *Istoria Vizantiiskoi Jivopisi*, Moscou 1986, 134 (in Russian); V. Djuric, *Visantijske Freske u Jugoslave* (Belgrad 1975), 32-33 (in Serbian).

stantinople by the crusaders in 1204, the art of the capital was dispersed over different regions of the Byzantine Orthodox world, and also spread to present Serbia, where the Middle Byzantine tradition reached its peak. Here, 13th-century Byzantine art is characterized by its monumentality. The artists had a strong preference for wealthy shapes, large surfaces, massive and heavy figures with faces not only typified by a profound spirituality, but also by a strong physical strength. Incontestably, the apostles of Kaftoun resemble the persons of these cycles, in particular those of Mileshevo, dating from the 1230s.¹⁰ Like in Mileshevo, through their massiveness and monumentality, these figures display an intensive dramatic expression. In both cases, the wealthy touch emphasizes the volumes and color contrasts, while the faces, rendered with liberty, are drawn with intense green shadows and highlighted with fine white lines, underlining the internal dynamism. The movements of the figures develop in space and are often angular. The *Communion of the Apostles* in Kaftoun may date from the same period as

the wall paintings of Mileshevo, or were painted a few years later.

It is remarkable to find such a striking influence of Serbian-Byzantine art in murals situated in the remote mountains of Mount Lebanon. This 'Serbian' style certainly is related to the art of Constantinople, because in more than one case paintings have been attributed to artists from the capital, or to local painters co-operating with them.¹¹ This could also have been the situation in Kaftoun. After the Latin conquest of Constantinople, artists who, for one reason or another, fled from occupation, may have found refuge in other areas with Byzantine Orthodox communities, even as far as Mount Lebanon.

In view of these observations, the estimated chronology of the murals in Kaftoun is the second quarter of the 13th century for the nave decoration, and the third quarter of that century or somewhat later for that of the apse. These conclusions are, of course, preliminary. A more profound study after the entire restoration of the paintings will undoubtedly help us in drawing more elaborated and precise conclusions.

10 V.J. Djuric, "La peintre murale serbe au XIIIe siècle", in: *L'art byzantin du XIIIe siècle*, Symposium de Sopocani (Belgrad 1967), 148.

11 Id., 153.