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A CYPRIOT ICON IN 19th CENTURY GONDAR (ETHIOPIA)

By

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One of the more interesting, but least studied aspects of Graeco-Ethiopian cultural history is the 'immeasurably old practice', as Stanislaw Chojnacki observes, 'whereby Greek icons were imported into Ethiopia where they served as an inspiration for the local artist'.¹

Apparently the first, as well as one of the most important, Greek icons to gain influence in Ethiopia was the Virgin of Eleousa, or Tenderness. Examples of this type of painting are thought by Chojnacki to have exerted an influence in the country in the early fourteenth century and 'poor copies' of it were being executed, he says, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²

Concrete evidence on the import into Ethiopia of this type of icon is provided by a Cypriot icon known to have reached the Ethiopian capital, Gondar, some time before the end of the nineteenth century.³

The icon, which measures 21 centimetres by 16, is of the Virgin and Child, and is painted on a solid block of plastered wood on which has been implanted a picture-moulded edge.

An inscription in Greek in the top right corner reads *Eleousa tou Kykkou*, and thus clearly identifies the picture as a Virgin of Eleousa from the notable monastery of Kykkos. This establishment, which is under the patronage of the Virgin, stands in the mountains of Western Cyprus.

The original icon at Kykkos is famous, and traditionally believed to have been painted by St. Luke. It was brought to the island, according to the Cypriot

art historian Athanasios Papageorgiou, during the reign of Emperor Alexius I Comnenus, i.e. in the twelfth century, and was 'the prototype of a special type of image of the Virgin which was reproduced in Byzantine painting under the name of *Kykkotissa*.' The original painting can no longer be viewed, for, as Papageorgiou notes, 'unfortunately' for the art student of today it is 'permanently concealed under a cover of silver gilt'.⁴ Several later versions of the work can, however, be seen. One of them, in the bishop's palace, in Kyrenia, is reproduced by Papageorgiou in his study of *The Icons of Cyprus*.⁵ Among the picture's distinctive features is a band or veil on the Virgin's head, and the Christ-child, who is older than in most pictures of Him and the Virgin, is turning away from Her.

Works of the *Eleousa tou Kykkou* type were produced in Cyprus for hundreds of years and were particularly popular in the sixteenth century when icon-painting developed in the villages and mountainous areas of the island. Despite a 'sharp recession of the arts' resulting from the Turkish occupation icons of artistic significance continued to be produced 'throughout the 17th century and into the early years of the 18th'.⁶

The Eleousa icon which reached Ethiopia, to judge from its appearance, may well, however, have been of a somewhat later date. The painting in the opinion of Dr. Robin Cormac of the University of London's Courtauld Institute of Art is 'most likely' of the eighteenth or nineteenth century.⁷

How this work of art actually reached Ethiopia cannot, for the present at least, be established.

The icon, it may be surmised, probably came to Gondar prior to the city's capture in 1887, by the

1. S. Chojnacki, *Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting* (Wiesbaden, 1983), p. 428. See plate 128. On earlier Greek paintings in Ethiopia see also *idem*, pp. 428-9, and D. Spencer, «In search of St. Luke Icons in Ethiopia», *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* (1972), IX, No. 2, pp. 67-95.

2. Chojnacki, *op. cit.*, p. 428.

3. On Ethiopian contacts with Cyprus see E. Cerulli, *Etiopi in Palestina* (Roma, 1943-7), *passim*; *idem*, «Two Ethiopian Tales on the Christians of Cyprus», *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* (1967), V., No. 1, pp. 1-8.

4. A. Papageorgiou, *Icons of Cyprus* (London, 1969), p. 42. See also G. Soteriou, *Ta byzantina mnemeia tes Kyprou* (Athens, 1935), plate 116.

5. Papageorgiou, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-1.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 118, 121-4.

7. Letter of June 1, 1979, to the present author.

Dervishes from the Sudan who 'set fire to the churches' and 'destroyed the houses' as Wallis Budge notes.⁸ The settlement was left desolate, and was indeed thereafter scarcely any longer visited by traders or travellers (for which reason it would seem unlikely that the icon would have been brought there during this period).

One of the first foreign observers to inspect the war-torn metropolis was Major P.H.G. Powell Cotton, a British game-hunter and ethnographer, who arrived there in 1900. He recalls in his memoirs that 'the nearer we approached Gondar the more numerous became the ruins of villages, farmsteads, and churches.'⁹

Powell-Cotton, though *par excellence* a hunter, took a scientific interest in the country. He was collecting artifacts for a museum he had established in 1896, on his estate at Quex Park, Birchington, Kent,¹⁰ and reports that it was 'extremely difficult' to obtain examples of Ethiopian paintings. This was because they

were mainly in the possession of churches or monasteries, and 'sacrilige' was 'severely punished.' Nevertheless on reaching the ruined city, which had been the cultural centre of Ethiopia for over two centuries—and was hence a potentially important source of paintings—he made enquiries as to whether any example of Ethiopian art could be procured. His perseverance was rewarded when, one evening in May 1900,

'a man who had undertaken, after much persuasion, to try and get me some church paintings and relics, brought several wood-panels and a long roll of coarse cotton-cloth painted with Biblical subjects.'

The traveller had 'no compunction in buying these fragments which, after escaping the hands of the Dervishes had been thrust away into dusty corners, where they were rapidly going to decay.'¹¹

One of the paintings he acquired was the Cypriot icon described above which thus found its way into the Powell-Cotton Museum where it is preserved to this day. The photograph of this work of art here reproduced was kindly provided by the museum's present curator to whom thanks are due.

8. E.A. Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia* (London, 1928), 11, 404.

9. P.H.G. Powell-Cotton, *A Sporting Trip through Abyssinia* (London, 1902), p. 299.

10. *The Powell-Cotton Museum Illustrated Guide* (Quex Park, Birchington, Kent, 1976).

11. Powell-Cotton, *op. cit.*, p. 346.



The Powell - Cotton Museum, Quex Park, Birchington, Kent.