

6. THE MARTYR OF COPTE ART - FROM THE "CHAPEL OF THE EXODUS" (PHILOSOPHICAL-SOCIAL ASPECTS, ARTISTIC SYMBOLS)

**Eleonora Florea,²²⁵
Alina Viorela Mocanu²²⁶**

Abstract: *In the current situation, when the majority of the planet is urged to tolerate and accept, to promote peace and respect for other people and their choices, and culture, our fellow men in Egypt, Coptic Christians are fighting an unprecedented struggle against oppressors who demolish their churches and try to destroy their faith. Although we are far away physically, we cannot remain indifferent to what is happening to the cultural heritage they are trying to keep alive. This article reminds us of the wonderful artistic treasures found in Coptic culture.*

Key words: *copt, necropolă, pictură, Capela Exodului*

1. Introduction

We should first clarify that the term Coptic art refers to the Orthodox icon of Egypt, Eritrea and Ethiopia and has as its artistic root the very art of Ancient Egypt. The Copts are direct descendants of the Egyptians, the word Coptic being in fact an abbreviation by deleting the diphthong from the beginning of the word Aigyptios which in turn was modified by the Greeks.

2. Philosophical-Social Aspects

Iconography is the sacred art of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Unlike other Abrahamic beliefs, Judaism and Islam, Orthodox Christianity has the human figure as the goal of its visual expression of faith. The theological basis for this is found in the incarnation of the Logos, the second person of the Trinity, according to the Gospel of St. John: "And the Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). Icons are an integral part of the Orthodox liturgy and stand on the threshold between the spiritual and material realms, heaven and earth. Icons also have an important didactic function, teaching believers about the mysteries of the Orthodox faith through the means of art and symbolism. Iconography is, first and foremost, visual theology.

The golden age of Coptic civilization is known as the Coptic period, the 4th-7th centuries, which roughly coincides with the era between Constantine's official recognition of Christianity in 311-313 AD. and the invasion of Egypt by Islamic forces in 642 AD. Coptic spirituality, art and culture flourished during this period, which saw the emergence of Coptic monasticism and the legendary Desert Fathers. Later, Coptic artists and craftsmen were very prolific during the Fatimid

²²⁵ Professor PhD., Academy of Music, Theatre, Fine Arts from Chişinău, Republic of Moldavia, email: eleonora.florea@mail.ru

²²⁶ Candidate Doctoral, Free International University from Chişinău, Republic of Moldavia, email: cojocar_u_stela@mail.ru

rule (9th-12th centuries), a notable period of church construction and restoration, flourishing in a renewal of Coptic art. However, At the end of the 19th century, Coptic iconography fell into disrepair and eventually disappeared for 150 years, until the 1950s when Coptic art was reborn, with the help of Isaac Fanous.

Prof. Isaac Fanous is the founder of the School of Contemporary or Neo-Coptic Iconography. This new school was born as part of a general renaissance of Coptic culture, which gained momentum during Patriarch Abba Kyrillos VI (1959-71). The proportional canon, the artistic vocabulary and the system of symbols of the contemporary style inherited a lot from Ancient Egypt. The designs are unwavering, without unnecessary elements and decorations and present the essential information to the viewer. The hieratic figures of the saints, radiating uncreated celestial light, are devoid of human sentimentality and passion.

The techniques used to make icons on wooden panels have not changed over the centuries. There are two main techniques, encaustic and egg tempera. The first seems to have fallen out of use around the 8th-9th centuries, but was developed to a very high standard in the Greco-Roman period, as best exemplified by the famous funerary portraits of the Fayoum and Saqqara necropolises, considered immediate precursors of the Christian icon. The latest, egg tempera technique is still used today in making icons. Both techniques are used on wood.



(Fig. 1. Icon in encaustics, 6th century, Egypt)

There are very few examples of surviving paintings, especially murals. At the height of the medieval period, Arab writers described magnificent paintings; those at the sanctuary of St. Menas, for example, were especially well known. But

few survived. S. Der Nersessian confirmed this fact briefly and strikingly: "With the rise of monasticism, churches appeared in the most distant oases, but these constructions did not last in time. Made mostly of brick and often with too little care, they failed to withstand the effects of time and man. The Arab historian Al-Makrizi describes in considerable detail the destruction of churches and monasteries in the fourth century. Earlier in the fourth century, there were also severe persecutions, causing great damage and what was just as fatal, resulting in the apostasy of many: for example, after the persecution of 743, twenty-four thousand Christians, they are said to have embraced the Muslim faith. Christian communities, small in number and poor, could no longer adequately care for their churches, and what escaped the destruction of Muslims fell into disrepair through neglect."²²⁷

The only chance of survival of the churches was the existence of sand and arid climate, which did not allow their deterioration even more. However, to quote S. Der Nersessian again: "But even in important centers such as Bawit in Upper Egypt or the Saqqara in Lower Egypt, the great churches were completely destroyed and the paintings covering their walls were also lost forever. Only some of the smaller chapels have preserved the painting, so that, at best, we know the Coptic painting from the examples of a lower rank."²²⁸ Therefore, we can only get a rough picture of what was once found in abundance in churches and monasteries.

3. Artistic Symbols

In the following, I would like to dwell a little on the painting of El Bagawat in the Oasis of Kharga. The Bagawat necropolis is located on the southern slope of Gebel El-Teir, north of the ancient city of Hibis, the capital of the Great Oasis. With an area of about 1000 square meters, the necropolis seems to be of pre-Christian origin, the oldest excavated tombs not bringing evidence of Christian presence.²²⁹ Of the more than 260 mudbrick funeral chapels, two date from the end of the 3rd century, the beginning of the 4th century, until approximately the 8th century. The Exodus Chapel is one of the only two that has kept its decorative program of paintings of Christian origin.

The decorative schemes of Christian painting in El Bagwat were first described by W. de Bock and published in detail by A. Fakhry.²³⁰ Fakhry Ahmad, a famous Egyptologist, calls it the "Chapel of the Exodus" because the most distinctive of the themes represented here is that of the flight of the Children of Israel from Egypt. The background of the dome is a uniform white. At the top of the dome is found carelessly made, a vine covered with grapes that are pecked by birds. Then follows a series of people who begin the Exodus from Egypt. In contrast to everything we already know about early Christian art, this event is

²²⁷ S. Der Nersessian (1941) Pagan and Christian Art in Egypt, An exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in „The Art Bulletin” Vol. 33, pp. 165–167

²²⁸ Ibidem

²²⁹ Walter Hauser (1932) The Christian Necropolis in Khargeh Oasis, „The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin” Vol. 27, pp.38-50, No. 3, Part 2, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

²³⁰ Fakhry Ahmed (1951) The Necropolis of El-Bagawat in Kharga Oasis, Government Press, Cairo

remarkably lacking in dynamism in its presentation.



(Fig.2. Painting from the El Bagawat Funeral Chapel in the Kharga Oasis)

The Israelites form a long line, led by Moses and Jethro, and then we similarly observe a line of Egyptians following them. Above the first Egyptian horsemen are written the words: Red Sea. Groups of fleeing Israelites are depicted in detail: some carrying something in their arms, others holding their children, many riding on beasts of burden, and others leading them by the reins, but, with the exception of the inscription, there is no reference to the catastrophe that it happened to Pharaoh's army, although this was a fairly popular subject, often depicted on sarcophagi and mosaics.



(Fig. 3. Pharaoh's Army Painting from the funeral chapel of El Bagawat in the Kharga Oasis)

If the explanation had not been written above the pursuers, it would have been difficult to understand the idea that this scene should represent the Wonderful liberation of the Chosen People and the destruction of the enemies. Both rows of people are heading for a huge building, like a great palace, which, according to O. Wulff, would be the heavenly Jerusalem.²³¹ The exodus and crossing of the Red Sea have been, since ancient times, paradigms of baptism in

²³¹ Wulff Oskar (1914) *Early Christian art from its beginnings to the middle of the first millennium*, Berlin-Neubabelsberg, Akad.Verl.-Ges. Athenaion

the Old Testament. The exodus symbolizes leaving this world without God; the crossing of the Red Sea, symbolizes baptism; the calamity that befell Pharaoh's army, which was assimilated as the Devil, symbolizes the destruction of sin and the devils who led those who were not baptized. The crossing of the Red Sea has long been considered a parallel to Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge, and indeed, Eusebius compares Maxentius' troops who drowned in the Tiber to Pharaoh's army drowning in the Red Sea. Both can be symbols of Christian death, because baptism and death were very close in the old Christian world. An example of this was the widespread custom of being baptized on the deathbed to enter eternal life purified from all sin.

This well-known Old Testament symbolism from the Christian cemeteries of the ancient world is found in the lower part of the dome. Here we meet many singular scenes like this: under the stairs to the Heavenly Jerusalem, we can see Adam and Eve preparing to leave Paradise and behind them is the tree with the serpent. The scene is different from the ones we are used to for that period. The appearance of the first people was quite common, they being naked or semi-naked, and between the two was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, on the trunk of which was seen coiled, the snake. In the Chapel of the Exodus, Adam and Eve are shown naked to us, in the garden of Heaven. Adam leads Eve to a door on the left. A snake with an apple in its mouth crawls from Eve's shoulder to the ground. This is considered the moment before their expulsion from Eden and the curse of the serpent, to crawl on its bellie.



(fig. 4. Adam and Eve from the funeral chapel of El Bagawat in the Oasis of Kharga)

To the left of this scene is Daniel in the lions' den, then the three young men in the furnace fire, Isaiah sawed in half, two small unreadable scenes, a shepherd with his flock, Thecla at the stake, Abraham's sacrifice, The Wise Virgins who advance to the Temple, the Ark of Noah and the scene with Jonah. The story of Jonah who was swallowed by the sea monster was very often represented by Christians in the period before Constantine the Great (306-337) but we have very few examples from the period after Constantine the Great: the catacombs of Via Latina, some mosaics dating from the fifth century in North

Africa and the depiction from Bagawat. Here, Jonah is described in three hypostases: in the first image, he is thrown into the sea; in the second, he is swallowed by the monster; and in the third, he is regurgitated by the sea monster and finds himself lying under the vine. This event of Jonah foretold the death and resurrection of the Savior, as the Gospel of Matthew 12: 39-40 tells us. Jonah was usually depicted naked, symbolizing rebirth by baptism. In this scene, however, Jonah is depicted clothed.

4. Conclusions

From the way the scenes are painted, we can conclude that this is similar to the ones we find in the Roman catacombs, but in Bagawat you can see the influences of ancient Egypt. This is evidenced by the fact that both Noah's ark and Jonah's ark look like Egyptian vessels floating on the Nile at that time; but also by the overwhelming presence of scenes from the Old Testament, which suggests that this Christian necropolis has a vast Jewish tradition behind it.

The one who painted the chapel, or the one who ordered its realization, knew thoroughly the traditions and the Old Testament, or was guided by someone very well prepared. However, the skill with which the scenes were made, the painter's technique, seems to be a very poor one. He painted in two shades of red, without making a sketch of the drawing beforehand. The human figures represented by him are largely very poorly formed, see, for example, the representation of Eve. He can reproduce the movement very well, but the animation of his characters seems to be taken to the border with caricature. His plants are decorative and quite flat as if it had been pressed. The figures are equally flat and lacking in shape and two-dimensionality. Characteristic of the representations from El Bagawat are the harsh accents of the contours and the fact that everything seems to be done only as a sketch.

The representation of buildings, which depict the two side views next to the front view, disregarding perspective, is common in late antiquity and is completely flat, the effect fits well with the two-dimensional nature of these images. Wulff says of painting that it is "full of fresh inventions" and wonders if it has freed itself from the influences of the classical style. There is a lot of truth in his opinion. Here, of course, we have a painter who boldly translates the iconographic possibilities of rich funerary art into a style he is familiar with, like a child experimenting with a brush. This painter did not know at all the rules of classical painting and also nothing of those of the late classical style, as is often highlighted in the painting of the Roman Catacombs where the influence of folk art is very obvious.

He had a theme that was definitely commissioned, he knew his Bible and began to paint, without any pretensions to art, and he did not feel burdened by his lack of knowledge. By the aesthetic standards of classical art, what he produced could be characterized as a misfortune. But it is precisely the naivety of these stories painted in a place of death that is touching and, in its own way, mystical and does not presuppose that it would be a descent from a higher art. It seems that we have a testimony here about people quite untouched by ancient culture and art,

that come on an exciting, unexplored territory of painting and express their piety in images. Following them archaically and in a similar way, are the paintings from the necropolis in Bawit but also from elsewhere, but they do not have the originality and naivety that delight the eye in the "Chapel of the Exodus."

References

1. S. Der Nersessian (1941) Pagan and Christian Art in Egypt, An exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in „The Art Bulletin” Vol. 33, pp. 165–167
2. Walter Hauser (1932) The Christian Necropolis in Khargeh Oasis, „The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin” Vol. 27, pp.38-50, No. 3, Part 2, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
3. Fakhry Ahmed (1951) The Necropolis of El-Bagawat in Kharga Oasis, Government Press, Cairo
4. Wulff Oskar (1914) Early Christian art from its beginnings to the middle of the first millennium, Berlin-Neubabelsberg, Akad.Verl.-Ges. Athenaion