

A CERTAIN QUESTION

A certain question was addressed to the rabbinate of a large European city. The chief Rabbi responded as follows (I translate):

"As for the custom of ancient Israel to close the eyes of the deceased laying — coins (it is not necessary to underline the stupidity of certain assertions !!! - *sic* - the Jews are not gentiles, they faithfully observe the Torah !!! - *sic*). Only one thing is true, that today it is the custom to sprinkle the eyes and the whole body of the deceased with dust of the earth of Israel."

* * *

PINK

Byzantine art is replete with narrative scenes illustrating the presentation of a precious gift to Christ or the Virgin, or to a person of elevated rank. Depending on the event, there are variations in the depictions, but one feature remains constant: consistent with oriental custom, the hands of the offeror are covered with a cloth. Examples abound of kings, emperors and popes offering to Christ or the Virgin a model of a church they have built: in Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura, about A.D. 625, we see Pope Honorius I offering his church to St. Agnes, his patron saint. Pelagius II, Bishop of Rome (570-590) offers the Basilica of San Lorenzo to Christ; Pope St. Felix IV (526-530) comes forward with his model of SS. Cosma and Damiano. All hold their models in the long folds of ecclesiastical vestments. A splendid mosaic in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, (VIth c.) celebrates a procession of Holy Virgins, moving forward in a stately manner, bringing to Christ their crowns, which they hold through a width of their ankle-length veils, while coming from the other direction, slowly but with less uniform pace, a theory of martyrs bearing crowns in the amplitude of their white cloaks. Many times we see angels floating toward Christ, bringing him the instruments of his Passion, but not even an angel presumes to touch the holy symbols without a diaphanous wrap. There is a little-known marble sarcophagus in Ravenna, of the Vth century, on which a rigidly symmetrical composition depicts martyrs forging toward Christ, offering him their crowns and a cross. They take wide steps in their eagerness; the long garment on which their gifts are held pass over their shoulders and flow out behind them in the rush of their forward movement (Fig. 1). Santa Prassede in Rome is a joyous museum of such scenes of victory. Perhaps the most impressive



Fig. 1: Fifth century sarcophagus, the Cathedral, Ravenna.

reflects St. John's vision of the seniors of the Apocalypse (Apo. 4:1-11). In hieratic dignity, in a pose of perfect unanimity, their personalities absorbed in oniric intensity, they hold out their equal crowns to Christ (Fig. 2). And before we forget; in a IXth century manuscript illumination, the Three Kings, *munera offerunt*, advance with sprightly step, their symbolic gifts lapped in their voluminous mantles.

Sometimes the situation is reversed, and we see Christ or the Virgin in the role of donor. In the Vth century mosaic at Santa Maria Maggiore, representing the Presentation in the Temple, the patient Simeon lunges forward to take in his arms the Infant Christ. His haste is indicated by a wide-spread, nearly-kneeling step, and by the backward sway of the large doth draped over his hands and arms. Later, in the XIVth century wood reliefs, even the High Priest dares not take the Child in his bare hands. The Rabula Gospels (VIth c.) portray the disciples receiving Holy Communion from Christ the Priest; needless to say, ample napkins cover their unworthy hands. On a VIth century silver paten of Constantinople, as well as an XIth century fresco at Ochrid, Christ the Priest distributes Holy Communion to Apostles who bow as they humbly extend towel-covered hands.

So familiar is the reverent gesture of carrying a book with covered hands that we seldom pay heed. But art respects a convention and artists like the opportunity to paint gauzy fabrics — as late as the XVth century where the Master of Flemalle looks in upon the Virgin as she reads Scripture, holding her book with a dainty doily. Perhaps she embroidered it herself!

It is in this tradition that the Skylitzes miniature belongs. Frère Bruno Bonnet-Eymard gives this information, along with a reproduction in color (*Le Saint Suaire, Signe de Contradiction*, Tome II, 1990): The Skylitzes codex is a XIIIth century copy of the *Chronique* of Jean Skylitzes, composed in Constantinople in the first quarter of the XIIth century. The codex is illustrated by 581 miniatures. The

scene under our scrutiny represents the transfer of the Icon of Edessa, on 15 August 944, to Emperor Romano Lecapenus in Constantinople.



Fig. 2: The seniors of the Apocalypse, IXth c. mosaic, Santa Prassede, Rome.

There are variations in the scene, but no departure from the century-long conventions cited above. The action is situated in the center of the picture, under the arched entry to a palace; stylized walls to right and left balance and delimit the picture area. Beyond the central arch that frames an envoy and the emperor, there is nothing in the background to detract attention from their encounter. Only the title of the picture, Το αγιον μανδυλ (The Holy Mandylion) in small letters, is written beneath the curve of the arch. To the left, behind the envoy, solemn witnesses crowd close, immobile; they probably represent the co-members of this mission; they are wearing hats. To the right, a bishop stands complacently behind the emperor while the royal retinue, curious, try to look over his shoulder. The envoy is poised on tiptoe in a slight forward sway, as if he had only just arrived; the emperor's feet are solidly planted, as if he had been waiting. The climactic moment of the arrival of the Holy Icon of Edessa is expressed in every detail.

And here is an unusual feature: neither the offeror nor the recipient considers himself worthy to hold the icon in uncovered hands! Underneath his mantle, the envoy's arms still reach out, not letting go of the precious picture even as the emperor takes it in his reverent grasp. The hands of the envoy and those of the emperor are under the cloth, invisible to us; but the artist shows us clearly that what the emperor receives with such emotion is a Holy Face on a panel. Fringe, meticulously marked, stands up stiffly along the top of the board, suggesting that the Image could be on cloth.

The envoy is the only person standing there in only his tunic. The men behind him are still wearing their mantles over their tunics. They have not removed their mantles nor their hats. We see how the mantles hang loosely from the shoulders, in front and in back. The emperor wears his royal cloak, the bishop his vestments. The envoy is the only person who has taken off his outer garment; it is this, obviously, that hangs over his shoulder, drapes over his arms, and falls below the Mandylion; it was in this garment, obviously, that the Mandylion had been wrapped and carried.

The garment could be a mantle, such as his companions are wearing. Or it could be a τήβεννος, a very long rectangular cloth draped over the left arm and shoulder, brought under the right arm, sashed about the waist and thrown back again over the left shoulder, as we see in countless examples. It could also be draped with a deep fold over the chest, making a pocket for carrying objects *in sinu*.

The cloth is pink. One of the men in his company wears a pink mantle. The emperor's cloak is the same color. Pink, in many shades, was a favorite hue with Byzantine artists. A good example is found in a IXth century Greek illumination: St. Paul is depicted in four scenes of his walk to Damascus. His pink τήβεννος, in four poses, distinguishes him from his drabber companions. But the

Skylitzes artist has used pink to tie his composition together. From a staccato on the left, the color, crescendo, widens to bind the envoy to the emperor and terminates with a soft touch in a garment on the right.

When we consider the elaborate care the Byzantines took in swathing their gifts in the folds of their robes, to imagine an envoy presenting the Emperor of Byzantium with a treasure as sacred as the Shroud of Christ slung thus cavalierly over his shoulder, is unthinkable.

The long pink cloth in the Skylitzes miniature is not the Shroud. The lugubrious gazing-eyed face on fringed white cloth attached to a panel is, as the inscription designates, a Mandylion.



Saints Cosma and Damian
Mosaic, VIth century