

# Forelocks in Early Christian Tradition

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Inspiration for the forelocks which occur as a frequent motif in Christological iconography, particularly in Pantocrator representations, has frequently been adduced to bloodstains on the forehead of the image on the Shroud of Turin. Examination of other Christian iconography -- portrayals of saints, for example, and various figures other than Christ -- as well as comparison with Hellenistic portraiture and pagan religious art we may gain a new perspective on the question of the relation of the Shroud bloodstains to the forelocks motif on icons of Christ.

We have previously shown that many features of Christological iconography said to have been copied from or inspired by the Shroud of Turin have numerous precursors in Graeco-Roman portraiture and direct parallels in Christian art of non-Christological subjects.<sup>1</sup> Let us briefly review some of these motifs.

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1. Fulbright, Diana, "Hellenistic Portraiture, Christological Iconography and the Shroud of Turin," *Proceedings of the Worldwide Congress, "Sindone 2000,"* edited by Maurizio Marinelli and Emanuela Marinelli. (Rome: Collegamento pro Sindone, 2001).

For example, the "box" like mark between the brows of a number of Pantocrator images, such as the twelfth-century Hagia Sophia mosaic of the Pantocrator has both Christian and non- or pre-Christian precursors. It quite deliberately marks the forehead of the apostle Andrew in the lunette mosaic of the early sixth-century Archiepiscopal Chapel at Ravenna and the Emperor Justinian from Hagia Sophia. A similar mark is found in a number of funerary portraits from Roman Egypt -- for one example, in the tying panel portrait of an elderly man from the third century -- and in Coptic fresco work in Rome.

I also discussed another feature that is found between the brows -- the so-called "V" mark, shown here in the daunting Pantocrator of Daphni. As early as the late fifth

century we find this mark on a mosaic of a martyr in the Church of Salonica. The feature seems to have rapidly become an almost ubiquitous feature of Christian iconography. It appears to have been associated with spiritual wisdom, and was not by any means limited to representations of Christ.

The supposedly uneven eyes of the Sinai Pantocrator also have been adduced to the Shroud of Turin. But in fact, owing in part to a peculiarity of Hellenistic and early Byzantine art, "reverse foreshortening," this occurs very commonly in Graeco-Roman portraiture.

The gaze of the Sinai Pantocrator, who seems to stare into eternity, is an effect of the omission of highlights. This feature also has a number of forerunners -- in the art of Egypt of the Graeco-Roman period, and even in Pharaonic art.

Even the raised hand of Christ is not unique to Christological iconography. This open-hand gesture is found on a number of Severan funerary portraits from Roman Egypt. (Whether or not they are Christian is an open question.)

### **Forelocks as a sacred motif: <sup>2</sup>**

Forelocks in religious symbolism were associated most famously in antiquity with the god devised by the Ptolemies, Sarapis, usually portrayed with a standard arrangement of three forelocks. His adherents, or at any rate his priesthood, also affected this hairstyle.

But even earlier, the forelock motif had come to represent philosophic wisdom. Aristotle was generally portrayed with several forelocks. So strong was this tradition of forelocks connected with Aristotle that it persisted even into the late medieval period, as we find in a relief of the philosopher on the Gothic Cathedral of Chartres.

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2. Painted or "illuminated" manuscripts frequently mirrored church fresco and mosaic art, and reflect the same themes discussed here. I have not included manuscript art in this paper, but plan to investigate the genre with respect to these various themes, and report separately.

Mosaic, iconic and other representations of Christ which include the forelocks, however, most usually feature not three, but two locks of hair. In later traditions, especially notable in the Russian schools, this frequently was reduced to one.

The forelock motif, however, was never associated with Christ in a consistent manner. For example, consider the monumental mosaic of the Transfiguration, which fills the conch of the apse in the Church of the Transfiguration at the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai. (The apse is partially obscured by a 17th century iconostasis, so to see it, one has to stand behind the bema of the iconostasis.) Here Christ is presented without the locks of hair on his forehead. Yet the artist has chosen to use this very motif with other figures of the same composition. Thus John the Baptist, the prophet Elijah and the prophet Malachi feature the forelock motif. And other mosaics in the stupendous fortress portray the prophet Moses with rough forelocks. Virtually all of these mosaics, including the great Transfiguration, were produced during the lifetime of Justinian, who funded the construction and adornment of the monastery. Much of this mosaic art appears to have been executed, if not by the same artist, then under the same master artist who designed and supervised the creation of these works.

The icon collection of the Monastery of St. Catherine spans many centuries, from the sixth to the twentieth, and represents the work of many countries and many schools of icon art, notably, Constantinople, Italy, France, Greece, Acre (Palestine) the Balkans and Russia<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, traditional motifs, including the locks of hair on the forehead of the Savior, persisted through the centuries. The *Deesis* Iconostasis beam, no doubt the

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3. With the death in 1958 of Father Procopios, the last icon and fresco painter at Sinai, the long tradition of icon painting within the monastery itself came to an end. (See John Galey, *Sinai and the Monastery of St. Catherine* (Massada Press, Israel, 1979), p. 90.

work of an Italian crusader artist, was probably made for the Chapel of St. Catherine of the Franks. The central *Deesis* with the Virgin is flanked by Peter on the left and the Baptist on the right. The hair and beard of the Savior are rendered carefully and precisely, while those of the Baptist of the Judean wilderness are, typically, unkempt. Yet both figures exhibit forelocks.

The Dome mosaic in the Church of Daphni is an outstanding example of a Byzantine artist placing several figures in the same composition with Christ -- all with forelocks. Not only the Baptist, but the angels, too, have these locks of hair.

The Nativity mosaic in the Nave of the Church of the Dormition at Daphni, provides further examples of angels with forelocks. Joseph also presents rough forelocks,

as he does elsewhere, as for example in the Journey to Bethlehem portrayed in vivid mosaic at St. Mark's in Venice. These rough forelocks are often associated with the Baptist and with prophets of the Old Testament.

The stern Pantocrator in the dome of the Church of Daphni, (like St. Mark's so rich in mosaics) is surrounded by some fragmentary figures which are seldom examined. Above the head of Christ are two saints. A closer look reveals that both have been portrayed with forelocks.

In an interesting reflection of the stories of Hannah and Elizabeth, a magnificent mosaic in the narthex of the Daphni Church portrays on one side Anna, the mother of Mary, praying, it would seem, for a child, and on the other, an Annunciation scene with Joachim. The angel of the annunciation is portrayed with forelocks, as is an enigmatic young woman observing Anna from what would appear, from the cross on the roof, to represent a church. None of the other figures, neither Anna, nor the angel blessing her nor Joachim, have this feature.

An intriguing mosaic of the Anastasis portrays the risen Christ reaching out to release Adam and Eve from limbo, as John the Baptist, whose hand is raised in blessing, observes in the background. In this mosaic, also in the Daphni Church, forelocks adorn both Jesus and the Baptist.

The Transfiguration mosaic in the Daphni Church is interesting because only the visionary figures -- Christ, Elijah and Moses -- have absolutely clear forelocks. Those of Peter, James and John are, if anything, ambiguous. Yet all the figures of the composition are adorned with halos -- Christ's alone including the cross. I might add here that Elijah and Moses are invariably depicted with forelocks, as are many other notables of the Old Testament.

John the Baptist, generally portrayed, as we have seen, with forelocks even when Jesus is not, is also the subject of some fascinating iconographic speculation. We see him, with angelic wings and forelocks, holding his own decapitated head. Curiously, the decapitated head lacks the forelock. In another icon of the Baptist, as he is about to be beheaded, he views his own decapitated head, which, again, lacks the forelocks. But the forehead of the not-yet-beheaded Baptist is marked with them.

An icon of the Forty Martyrs of the Lake from the Stavronikita Monastery at Mount Athos portrays many, if not most, of the drowning martyrs with the double forelock motif, clear and well defined. Yet those of Jesus in this Icon are ambiguous.

We saw in the Transfiguration mosaic of the Church of Daphni that the transfigured Christ, Elijah and Moses were distinguished by the forelocks, enhancing the sacred connotation of this motif. So also in a Palestinian icon of the Ascension, probably a work of the late eighth century, only Christ and four attending angels have the forelocks. Moreover, these figures also have the nimbus, while the apostles lack both.

We also find a good number of examples of the infant Jesus with the forelocks, including an early Palestinian nativity. Not only the Infant, but a shepherd, too, in the upper left of the panel, has the forelocks. This is not unique. The marks on the Infant Christ are found also in an imperial mosaic at Constantinople.

From a very early date, the forelocks adorned female figures (leaving aside altogether the matter of whether angels are male or female). In the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, the *Procession of Female Saints* is complemented by the *Procession of Male Saints*. All of the women, insofar as I have been able to discern, are marked with the double forelocks, while none of the men in procession have this feature!

Another woman depicted with forelocks is Eve, in the narthex mosaic of the *Dome of Creation* at the Church of St. Mark in Venice. Eve is also depicted with this feature in other scenes from this grand mosaic (*i.e.*, *Expulsion from Paradise*. Compare also *The Prayer of Anna* mosaic from Daphni.

## **Conclusion:**

There is overwhelming evidence, much more than we have been able to present here, that the forelocks were widely utilized as a sacred motif in Byzantine Christian art from an early date. They were not restricted to representations of Christ, and not restricted to male figures. The motif appears not to occur in secular portraiture, except where there is an obvious religious theme.

Whether or not the feature may be adduced to marks on the forehead of the Man on the Shroud is another question, however. Several considerations give me pause: First is the exceptional fidelity and continuity of the Christian iconographical tradition, a tradition in which the same features were copied faithfully over a span of many centuries. It seems likely that this same fidelity would apply also to the blood on the forehead of the image on the Shroud (figure 75), which would have been copied with care and accuracy. I don't see anything on the forehead of the Man on the Shroud that resembles any type of forelocks portrayed in Christian art -- from the sixth century until the present. I see rivulets of blood. Second, why is it that the icon most closely associated with the Shroud of Turin by many sindonologists -- that is, the Pantocrator of Sinai has no such forelocks? Why is it that the other image most closely associated with the Shroud -- the image of Christ on the Emessa vase has no such forelocks? Third, there is clear evidence that forelocks were associated with both sacredness and wisdom in the pre-Christian era. Fourth, even as early as the first quarter of the sixth century, these locks of hair were deliberately placed on the foreheads of *women* saints.

This does not mean that I believe that the use of forelocks in Christological or any Christian iconography was created with conscious intent to imitate or reinterpret Hellenistic art, religious or otherwise. Rather, the motif seems to have been a part of the artistic *Zeitgeist* of the ancient world, transformed and spiritualized in Christianity to represent self-sacrifice, long-suffering and unselfish love for others, as borne by Christ and so many martyred saints.

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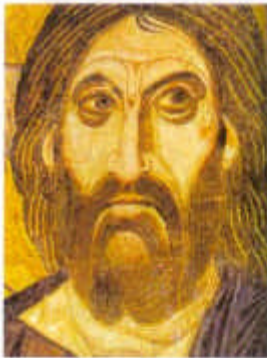
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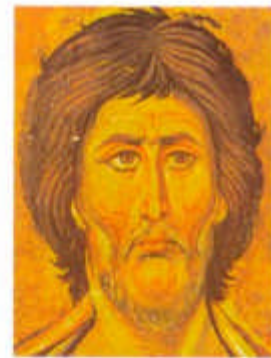
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8. Christ Pantocrator (detail) dome mosaic, c. 1100 AD Church of the Dormition, Daphni, Greece



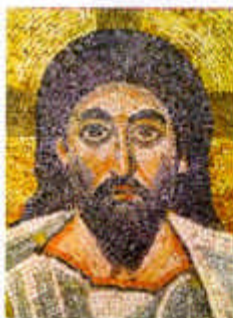
9. Young Martyr (detail) dome mosaic fifth/sixth century AD Salonica, Church of St. Demetrios



10. Icon of Bust of Moses (detail) late thirteenth century AD St. Catherine's Monastery at Sinai



23. The Transfiguration of Christ Apse Mosaic, Church of the Transfiguration, middle of sixth century AD Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai



24. Head of Christ (detail of Transfiguration mosaic) mid-sixth century AD Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai

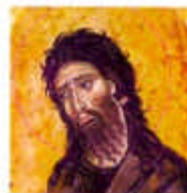
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30. Deesis Iconostasis Beam tempera and gold leaf on wood  
middle of thirteenth century AD Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai



31. Deesis Iconostasis Beam (detail of Christ)  
mid-thirteenth century  
AD Monastery of  
St. Catherine at Sinai



32. Deesis Iconostasis Beam  
(detail of John the Baptist)  
mid-thirteenth century AD  
Monastery of  
St. Catherine at Sinai

33. Baptism of Christ  
Dome mosaic, Greece, c. 1100 AD  
Church of the Dormition,



46. The Prayer of Anna and  
Annunciation to Joachim  
Narthex mosaic, c. 1100 AD,  
Church of the Dormition,  
Daphni, Greece

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