

Aspects of the Sakli Church Frescos in relation to its Mandylion and that of the Goreme Chapel 21

Lennox Manton

Lennox Manton obtained his degree at Bristol University in 1939 and spent the war years in the Middle East, serving at military hospitals in Palestine, the Sudan, Eritrea and finally Alexandria during the Battle of El Alamein. After the war he served as a specialist at the base hospitals of Millbank, Colchester and Chester. He was given the Fellowship of the Edinburgh College of Surgeons and subsequently went into practice in Guildford.

While at Bristol he also studied art at the Royal West of England Academy Schools, and had a work exhibited there at their yearly summer open exhibition. After the war he regularly exhibited in London in the yearly exhibitions of the Royal Institute of OIP painters, the RBA, the United Society of Artists, the Goupil Galleries (now defunct), and others. He also exhibited at the Paris Salon and was awarded their Diploma of Honour in 1975.

Lennox also spent time each year travelling by car throughout Libya, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco visiting the ancient Roman sites and many of the more remote Saharan Oases. This resulted in his being by Batsfords to write a book on the archaeological sites of North Africa. This was published in 1988 under the title of "Roman North Africa". Over the years he subsequently travelled extensively by car throughout Turkey, from Istanbul to the Russian border, visiting the Byzantine churches of Ani, Trabzon and other sites in Cappadocia. For many years running he visited the Cappadocian churches to record the frescoes. Though much of the work is badly damaged, sufficient remains to attest to its significance. The area is literally one large museum of Byzantine art that decorates some 350 recorded churches and chapels dating from the late tenth century to 1204. The Turkish government flew him out on three subsequent occasions and provided him with a car, driver and guide. On two of these visits Canon Colin Semper, who at the time was Director of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC, was included and this resulted in a series of Epilogue programmes put out by Southern TV.

The Turkish government finally sponsored an exhibition, put together by Kodak with large prints from his slides of the region, and this subsequently travelled to the Edinburgh Festival and Coventry Cathedral.

The following article is a detailed description of one of the sites visited in Turkey, of vital importance for understanding the history of the Image of Edessa, or Mandyllion.

(Article Begins Here)

There has been some speculation as to the significance of the roundel markings that are a feature of the fresco of the Mandyllion in Sakli Church; it has been suggested that they could have echoed the round burn holes to be seen in the Shroud. However, comparison with other frescos in Sakli appear to denote the markings to be a format used by the artists concerned to depict an expensive and sumptuous material, such as a brocade. The roundels also feature in the Mandyllion fresco in Goreme Chapel 21, but it must be noted that in this fresco they differ in their distribution; this at the whim of the artist concerned. Though these frescos could be more or less contemporary the differing position of their roundels would appear to indicate that they were by different hands, though possibly from the same workshop. The damp, unfortunately, has caused the white roundels in the Sakli fresco to become indistinct but the red still remain very clear, figs 1,2. The other fresco of the Mandyllion to be seen over the Piscina in the church has also suffered much from the damp, and this to the extent that it has lost nearly all of its detail.

The frescos of Helena and Constantine, prominently featured on the columns of Sakli, also show the roundel motifs in red and white on their garments. Those that feature on the dress of St Helena closely resemble the roundels of the Mandyllion Fresco, whilst those on the dress of Constantine have another central theme to differentiate between the rich material of their respective garments, figs 3,4. This decorative motif to express such a material can be seen in other frescos in the church; notably on the garments of the Militant Saints that are depicted on other columns, one to be seen below that of St Cosmos. Fig. 5. The fresco of the Crucifixion depicts large roundel decoration on the entire robe of the individual seen offering to the crucified Jesus the sponge of vinegar on a pole, fig 6, and they also feature on the sumptuously dressed figure of the nearby St Joseph in his flowing cloak and closely fitting trousers fig 7.

This roundel decoration to signify an expensive material can clearly be seen in frescos in the Karanlik Church in Goreme, where it is featured on the robe of the High Priest in the scene of the 'Betrayal in Gethsemane. Here the motifs closely resembles those of the Sakli Mandylion' fig 8, and they also decorate the robes laid down before Jesus in the fresco of 'The Entry into Jerusalem', but here the motif is more elaborate, Fig 9. Again the motif can be seen on the robes of a likewise fresco in the Barbara church in Solagne where the iconography, all though almost identical, appears to be the work of a different painter fig 10.

The frescos in Karanlik have exceptional colour and quality and were painted between 1000 and 1050 by artists from an Atelier in Constantinople; this at the expense of several donors, six being shown in attitudes of supplication with one named John having the title Entalmatikos, These frescos replaced the red ochre linear decoration of the Iconoclastic period, 723-824, a period revoked by the Edict of 'The restitution of Images'. Redecoration of the churches with scenes from the New Testament was then allowed in an Iconography laid down by the Byzantine Church; an Edict that inspired the local incumbent monks to decorate their own chapels with differing expertise. Other donors of wealth, like those responsible for the colourful decoration of Karanlik, must have been responsible for the decoration of the nearby Apple Church where the iconography is very similar in format and colour to that of Karanlik. The decoration here could have been the work of painters from the same atelier. The Barbara Church in Solagne is also of such a date having colourful frescos that could well be attributed to Constantinopolitan artists, and this in view of the fact that the painting and format here too are also very similar to the Karanlik frescos. That of the 'The entry into Jerusalem' in particular where the roundel decoration is again featured on the garments thrown down before the donkey.

The decoration shown in the depiction of some of the clothes in these frescos would seem to indicate that the artists of Constantinople had adopted this roundel motif, with slight variations, to show that the nature of the material used was sumptuous and expensive, to be reserved mainly for individuals of significance such as that of a High Priest, and of Jesus entering Jerusalem shown riding his donkey over such garments to emphasise the importance of the occasion.

From these frescos it would seem that the Mandylion, as depicted in Sakli, was at that time kept in Constantinople in a cover of some such brocaded material considered suitable only for such a relic. Though it would appear that the Sakli frescoes

were the work of Artists from Constantinople it is apparent that the quality of the paintings and the pigments used do not compare in any way with those of the Karanlik, Apple, and Barbara churches where the colouring is far more brilliant. A blue has been sparingly used in the shield motifs in Sakli, but the cloak of the Virgin, who appears to be seated on a cushioned chair, does not reflect the clear blue that has been used in other depictions, being of a dirty indiscriminate hue. Earth colours in various shades of ochre, that are indigenous to the valleys, have mostly been used with a red predominating, as can be seen in the depiction of the face of Christ in the Sakli Mandylion. This comes from the clays of the Kizil Irmak, or Red-river, that was once the boundary of the Biblical Province of Cappadocia, its clays still being used in a flourishing pottery in the local town of Avanos, fig 11. There is no record in Sakli of a Donor having been responsible for its decoration but it is clear that the work did not entail the expense that must have accrued to the those who initiated the decoration of the Karanlik, Apple, and Barbara churches. In the majority of the Churches the names of the donors responsible for the decoration have not been recorded and no dating given for the completion of the work, but there is an exception in that of the Karabash, or Virgin Church, in the Solagne Valley where the donors include a named Michael Skepides and a specific date of 1061; the quality of the decoration here though generally good is not outstanding.

However, in Sakli there are some clues that could possibly point to an approximate date for the decoration. The fresco of St Helena features an almond shaped shield, see fig 3, and there are also depictions of somewhat similar shields in the ceiling decoration, figs12-13.

This almond shaped shield is graphically illustrated in the Bayeux tapestry where it is illustrated as having been used by the Normans at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. fig 14. The exact date when the almond shape design first came into common use is not known but according to Dr Nickel, once Curator of Arms and Armour at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the shape of shield that was in common use till the first half of the eleventh century was either round or oval. This round shape can be seen as part of the dress of a Militant Saint in a fresco in the Barbara Church in Goreme fig 15. A church that is situated high up in the cliffs above the Valley of the Swords; now permanently closed for being in danger of falling some hundreds of feet into the valley below and one where its decoration is thought to date from the late tenth to the early eleventh centuries.

It appears that the almond shape came into use at some time during the first half of the eleventh century, its first depiction being in a Spanish book dating around 1047; also to be seen in later sources from Scandinavia, Portugal, and Germany the design having become commonplace by 1066. The almond shape, through various degrees of development, began to be replaced between 1100 and 1140 by a flatter topped shield that was in general use by 1200.

However, according to an illuminated manuscript entitled 'Carmen in honorem augusti' of Petrus da Rbulo dated to 1140 both designs were then still in use up to that date; the flatter topped design being the precursor of the shield that is prevalent today.

It is known though that some Byzantine Emperors employed Anglo Saxons and Vikings before the First Crusade in the so called 'Varangian Guard,' and it appears that they came into contact at times with the Normans during the Byzantine conquests of areas of Southern Italy together with the Islands of Bari and Sicily. A campaign that lasted from 1017 to 1091; it is thus possible that the Byzantines could have become acquainted with the Norman Shield during this period. In view of this possibility Dr Dirk Breeding, formerly Keeper of Arms and Armour at the British Museum and now acting in that capacity at the Metropolitan in New York, has suggested that the decoration of Sakli could lie between 1050 and 1091. However, it is possible that this date bracket could be somewhat narrowed.

The First Crusade under Baldwin of Boulogne passed through Constantinople in 1097 to arrive in Edessa in 1098, and it would seem to be inconceivable that he and others of the Crusade did not seek at that time to see the Mandyllion then being preserved in the Pharos Chapel. At that date the Norman shield must still have been in vogue, and consequentially it is possible that many of those of the Crusade would have used it as part of their equipment. Further more to reach Edessa in 1098 those of the Crusade who still followed Baldwin would doubtless have passed through Cappadocia when on the journey; the valleys being situated almost equidistant between Constantinople and Edessa. Having reached Edessa Baldwin then deposed Thorus, an Armenian who had seized control of the region in 1095, to found the dynasty of 'The Counts of Edessa,' and so they remained for some fifty odd years before being displaced in turn by Zengi of Aleppo in 1144.

After the death of Zengi in 1146 the city fell into the hands of Saladin, to then pass to the Mamlukes and finally the Ottomans. Thus after the fall of Byzantine Edessa

to Zengi there was no longer a question of there being any Christian Authority in the region.

There are some features in the decoration of Sakli that appear to reflect Crusader influence and to orientates the church to Edessa. The frescoes of Cosmos and Damian, Medical saints who suffered martyrdom with their mother there, are prominently depicted on some of the columns. The shields in the ceiling decoration appear to reflect too the Norman design, and do not figure as such in the decoration of any other church in the Goreme and Solagne valleys. The lattice motif that too is a feature of the ceiling decoration, see fig13 is an echo of the design specifically used in the ceremonial dress of the Parthian Kings, fig16. This motif can also be seen in the Goreme church of St Barbara and as such it would seem to be traditional to the East and Edessa. Militant Saints feature on the columns of the Church and are shown wearing a Chest protection that consists of overlapping scales, possibly of leather.

The fresco of the Mandylyon over the arch is in context with the figure of the Virgin on the left and that of St Issac on the right. In the same context are the frescos of a tower and a building that could represent a church fig17. Frescos of independent buildings as such are not to be seen in any of the other Cappadocian churches, but usually in context with the Virgin in scenes of the Annunciation where she has been shown standing in a type of Kiosk. This depiction of a building resembling a church could be a reference to the Hagia Sophia built by Justinian in which to keep the Mandylyon after its initial discovery in the ruins of the West gate house of Edessa in 525; that of the tower a reference to the gate itself.

The Mandylyon reached Constantinople on August 15th 944 to be kept initially in the Pharos chapel. Originally thought to have been preserved in a folded state on a frame it appears to have been firstly unwrapped to its full length in 1025, to be kept folded prior to being exhibited again at full length on public festivals. The French Crusader, Robert de Clari, records having seen it thus in 1203 in the Church of St Mary of Blachernae. Logically then it could have been after 1025 when a cover of brocade was made in which to keep it in its folded state. Such a cover could well have inspired the artists of Constantinople to so depict the Mandylyon in the Sakli and Chapel 21 frescos between 1204 and 1144; needless to say though this must only be a speculation.

Little decoration seems to have been done in the Cappadocian valleys during the latter part of the twelfth century, but that of the Monastery Church of the Forty Martyrs cut into the hills by the village of Sahin Effendi is thought to date to 1200. It seems that

such a date had once been seen recorded in the Church, but there is nothing now extant confirm such a date. After the fall of Constantinople to the Templars in 1204 the ateliers of the city were disbanded with many of their artist workforce, according to Runciman, going to the region of Synop; to return only in the later years.