The Contribution of “Greek” Rome (7th-mid 9th century) to the Formation of Post-Iconoclastic Iconography

Jean-Pierre Caillet

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ART OF THE BYZANTINE WORLD
INDIVIDUALITY
IN ARTISTIC CREATIVITY

A Collection of Essays
in Honour of Olga Popova
ИСКУССТВО ВИЗАНТИЙСКОГО МИРА
ИНДИВИДУАЛЬНОСТЬ
В ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННОМ ТВОРЧЕСТВЕ

Сборник статей
в честь Ольги Сигизмундовны Поповой

МОСКВА
2021

The collection includes papers from the conference ‘Art of the Byzantine World. Individuality in Artistic Creativity’, which took place on 7–10 November 2018 and was dedicated to the prominent scholar Olga Popova (1938–2020). Essays by Russian and foreign specialists on the art of Byzantium and its neighbours investigate a range of problems connected with individuality: the roles of artists and donors, creativity and tradition, metropolitan and regional tendencies. This publication is intended for specialists and readers interested in various aspects of Byzantine culture.

СОДЕРЖАНИЕ
CONTENTS

Об Ольге Ситизмундовне Поповой
A. В. Захарова, О. В. Овчарова, И. А. Орецкая
About Olga Popova
A. Zakharova, O. Ovcharova, I. Oretskaia
14

О. С. Попова
Почему я византинист
Olga Popova
Why I am a Byzantologist
17

Список работ О. С. Поповой
List of works by Olga Popova
21

М. Н. Бутырский
Портретное творчество в византийской нумизматике (конец VII — начало VIII века): традиции и новаторство
Mikhail Butyrski
Portrait Imagery in Byzantine Numismatic Art (Late 7th — Early 8th Century): Traditions and Innovations
30

А. Ю. Виноградов
Столичные мастера в Юго-Западной Анатолии начала X века (Маставра и Исламкёй)?
Andrey Vinogradov
Constantinopolitan builders in the early 10th-Century South-West Anatolia (Mastaura and Islamköy)
40

5
Elena Vinogradova
On the Earliest Palaiologan Frescoes of Constantinople

Georgi P. Gerov
On the 12th- and 14th-Century frescoes in the Bachkovo Church-Ossuary

Liliya Evseeva
The Mosaics of Monreale: Donors and Artists

Anna Zakharova
The Problem of Byzantine Painters’ Individuality in 11th-Century Miniatures

Armen Kazaryan
Regarding Creativity in Medieval Architecture.
Gagkashen Church in Ani: Copying or Interpretation?
Jean-Pierre Caillet
The Contribution of ‘Greek’ Rome (VII—mid-IX Century) to the Formation of Post-Iconoclastic Iconography
Ж.-П. Кайе
Вклад «греческого» Рима (VII—середина IX века) в формирование постиконоборческой иконографии
144

Sophia Kalopissi-Verti
Donors in the Palaiologan Churches of the Mani in the Southern Peloponnese: Individualities, Collectivity and Social Identities
С. Калописси-Верти
Ктиторы в палеологовских храмах Мани на Юге Пелопоннеса: индивидуальное, коллективное и социальная идентичность
160

М.А. Лидова
«Что значит имя?»: подписи византийских мастеров как проявление авторской индивидуальности
Maria Lidova
‘What’s in a Name?’:
Signatures of Byzantine Artists as Manifestations of Authorship and Individuality
190

Л.И. Лифшиц
Об этапах развития стиля русской живописи в первой трети XIII века
Предварительные заметки
Lev Lifshits
On the Stages of Stylistic Evolution of Russian Painting in the First Third of the 13th Century. Preliminary Notes
210
Svetlana Maltseva
The Special Features of the Church of the Prophet Elijah in Thessaloniki: The Problem of Regional Traits in Late Byzantine Architecture

Seyranush Manukyan
The Cilician Miniature and Byzantine Traditions of the 11th Century: A Model or an Impulse for Creativity

Tatiana Oblitsova
A Fresco Image of the Madonna in the Cathedral in Rossano in the Context of the Relationship between the Byzantine and Western Traditions

Olga Ovcharova
On Studying the Style of 12th-Century Byzantine Painting
I. A. Orettekaya
Второй слой фресок в церкви Сан Пьетро в Отранто
Заметки на полях
Irina Oretskaya
The Second Layer of Frescoes in the Church of San Pietro at Otranto: Notes in the Margins
296

Е. Я. Осташенко
Рельефы резной кости из Музеев Ватикана и их место в византийском и русском искусстве второго четверти XV века
Elena Ostasheenko
Ivory Reliefs from the Vatican Museums in the Context of Byzantine and Russian Art of the Second Quarter of the 15th Century
318

Maria Panayotidi-Kesisoglou
Donors’ Personalities in the Komnenian Period as Seen Through Iconographic Programs.
The Question of the Daphni Monastery Donor
М. Панайотиди-Кесисоглу
Отражение личностей ктиторов в иконографических программах комниновского периода
Вопрос о ктиторе монастыря Дафни
338

Valentino Pace
‘By the Hand of the Painter Theophylaktos...’ (‘ДИА ΧΕΙΡΟΣ ΘΕΟΦΥΛΑΚΤΟΥ ΖΩΓΡΑΦΟΥ’):
The ‘Crypt of St. Christine’ in Carpignano Salentino and its Painters
В. Паче
«Рукою мастера Феофилакта» («ДИА ΧΕΙΡΟΣ ΘΕΟΦΥΛΑΚΤΟΥ ΖΩΓΡΑΦΟУ»):
критта Святой Кристины в Карпиньяно Салентино и ее художники
362
Silvia Pedone
The Byzantine Sculptor: Identity and Status Between Originality and Rules
С. Педоне
Скульптор в Византии: индивидуальность и статус между оригинальностью и рутиной
390

Г.В. Попов
Житийная икона святителя Николая Мирликийского в Зарайске
Gennady Popov
The Vita Icon ‘St Nicholas of Myra in Lycia’ from Zaraisk
402

А.С. Преображенский
Надписи с именами русских иконописцев XIII—XV веков
Alexander Preobrazhensky
Inscriptions with Names of Russian Icon Painters of the 13th—15th Centuries
420

Е.М. Саенко
«Святитель Николай Мирликийский, с житием» — новооткрытый памятник ростовской живописи конца XIV — начала XV века
Elena Saenkova
‘St Nicholas of Myra, with Scenes from His Life’
A Newly Discovered Monument of Rostov Painting of the Late 14th — Early 15th Century
446

А.Л. Саминский
Чеканный оклад грузинской константинопольской рукописи 1070 года
Alexander Saminsky
The Chased Book Cover of a Georgian Manuscript Written in Constantinople in 1070
464
С.В. Свердлова, Д.С. Першин
Икона «Спас Нерукотворный. Поклонение Кресту» последней четверти XII века из Государственной Третьяковской Галереи — два этапа создания памятника
Sofya Sverdlova, Dmitry Pershin
The Icon ‘Mandylion. Adoration of the Cross’ of the Last Quarter of the 12th Century from the State Tretyakov Gallery. Two Stages of Creating a Work

Д.А. Скобцова
К вопросу о времени создания мозаичных икон святого Георгия и святого Димитрия из монастыря Ксенофонта на Афоне
Darya Skobtsova
Dating of the Mosaic Icons of St George and St Demetrios from Xenophonos Monastery on Mount Athos

Э.С. Смирнова
Художники-миниатюристы в Новгороде во второй четверти XIV столетия
Engelina Smirnova
Miniature Painters in Novgorod in the Second Quarter of the 14th Century

Н. Станкович
Традиции, новации и индивидуальное творчество в монастырской архитектуре: святой Афанасий Афонский и кафоликон его Великой Лавры
Nebojša Stanković
Tradition, Innovation, and Individual Creation in Monastic Architecture: The Case of St Athanasius the Athonite and the Katholikon of His Great Lavra
В.Е. Сусленков
Неклассические / антиклассические приемы в искусстве римского портрета III века и логика развития императорского культа

Vitaliy Suslenkov
Non-Classical/Anti-Classical Methods in the Roman Portrait of the 3rd Century and the Logic of the Development of the Imperial Cult

546

Н. Хелу
Фреска с изображением донатора в церкви Святого Фоки в Амьюне

Nada Hélou
A Fresco with the Image of a Donor in the Church of St Phocas in Amiun

576

А.Б. Чугасян
«Страшный суд» в некоторых армянских миниатюрах XIII—XIV веков

Levon Chookaszian
The Last Judgment in Certain Armenian Miniatures of the 13th and 14th Centuries

590

Anis Chaaya
The Continuity of Byzantine Architecture and Art in the Levant under the Umayyad Caliphate

А. Шаайа
Преемственность развития византийской архитектуры и искусства в Леванте при Омейядском халифате

610

И.А. Шалина
Переплетение византийских и западных художественных традиций в новгородской иконописи конца XIII — первой трети XIV века

Irina Shalina
Western and Byzantine Traditions in Late 13th – 1st Quarter of 14th Century Novgorod Icon Painting

616
Л.А. Щенникова
Своеобразие иконографии византийской иконы
«Богоматерь Умиление Владимирская» и ее списков
Liudmila Shchennikova
Peculiarities of the Iconography of the Byzantine ‘Eleousa of Vladimir’ and Its Copies
644

Приложения
666
Intending to talk about Rome from the 7th until the mid-9th century, I first of all wish to remind you that we are dealing with a centre which at that time really belonged to the Byzantine sphere. This occurred because the city and its surroundings were still officially attached, at least until the mid-8th century, to the Eastern Roman Empire. From 642 to 649 the local bishop — i.e. the pope for the Latin community — was the Greek Theodoros, and from 678 to 752 he was succeeded, almost without interruption, by eleven bishops of Hellenic (or Hellenised) origin. I refer to the thorough study by Jean-Marie Sansterre concerning the importance of the Greek monasteries established in the city during the whole period that I here take into account: to be precise, historical sources mention ten foundations of this kind; and as to the recruitment having permitted their flourishing, it was first related to the arrival of fugitives from countries invaded by the Persians and Arabs and then to that of iconodule monks during the decades of official iconoclasm. Among these Greek monasteries, I want to draw particular attention to the one attached to St Praxedes church by a decision of Pope Paschal I shortly after 817: in effect, as we shall see soon, the annex chapel of St. Zeno, and partly the church itself, display very significant samples of iconography foreshadowing the great Middle-Byzantine achievements.

Regarding these, which I will discuss in detail now, it seems advisable to begin with the placement of the Saviour’s figure above that of Mary, which corresponds to a very fundamental feature of any classical program, focusing the worshipper’s attention and underlining, at once, the rational structure of the building itself, as clearly expressed by Patriarch Photios in his famous description of the Virgin of Pharos in the second half of the 9th century. In fact, we come across something of this kind.

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kind as early as the 640s in the chapel of St. Venantius, an annex to the Lateran baptistery erected on the initiative of Pope John IV and adorned with a mosaic by his successor Theodoros (the first Greek pope, mentioned above) (ill. 1). It is true, of course, that both Christ and Mary are here brought together in the space of the sole semi-dome of the apse (the oratory being provided with a single timber roof). Nevertheless, Christ’s figure is undoubtedly presented in celestial context, surrounded by clouds and flanked by angels; and below Mary, both arms half stretched in prayer, suggests the transition from the celestial to the terrestrial world, accosted by apostles, saint martyrs and at least one prophet (John the Baptist). So, this image is a good match for the description by Photios, written two centuries later.

The forerunner of this canonical church decoration is even more strikingly marked in St Zeno chapel beside St Praxedes; also mentioned above. In particular, and in accordance with the vaulting of the whole space, Christ’s figure, exalted by angels, now really occupies the apex of the building (ill. 2). Many saints — as well as narrative Christological scenes, i.e. Transfiguration and Anastasis, which later became widely used in church decoration — are displayed below on the walls. Moreover, as noted by Beat Brenk and Marianne Wirenfeldt Asmussen, a main east-west axis is here clearly accentuated. This is because on the eastern wall Mary and John the Baptist are depicted, turned towards each other and with a gesture of prayer (ill. 3): i.e. a genuine Deesis, taking over an iconography first attested in a mural icon probably dating back to the mid-7th century at the entrance of the choir in St Mary Antique (ill. 4). And on the opposite, western wall of St Zeno, the apostles Peter and Paul are shown acclaiming the Empty Throne, alluding to Christ’s final return (ill. 5). So, we are dealing with a perfect complementarity involving, first, the supplication addressed to the Lord by entering the chapel and, second, the expectation of the Judgement induced by the Hetimasia; a complementarity which is frequently observed in Middle-Byzantine programmes.

Focusing specifically on Christological scenes, and in a broader perspective than is given by the only two compositions in St Zeno chapel, we must go more than

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Ill. 2. Christ and angels
Vault mosaic in St Zeno chapel in St Praxedes, Rome. Circa 820
Photo by the author

Ill. 3. Deesis
Mosaic of the Eastern wall in St Zeno chapel St Praxedes, Rome. Circa 820
Photo by the author, after a design by R. Wisskirchen

Ill. 4. Deesis
Mural icon (fresco) at the entrance of the choir in St Mary Antique, Rome, mid 7th century
Photo by Maria Lidova

Ill. 5. Hetimasia with apostles
Peter and Paul
Mosaic of the Western wall in St Zeno chapel St Praxedes, Rome
Circa 820
Photo by the author
one century backwards and consider the decoration of the oratory dedicated to the Virgin by Pope John VII in 706. This sanctuary, localised in the eastern end of the northern external aisle of the paleo-Christian basilica Vaticana, would be destroyed together with the latter in 1609, but its iconographic program is well known thanks to Grimaldi’s description and Tasselli’s design. Above the altar placed against the eastern wall (i.e. the reverse of the façade of the basilica), a mosaic panel with a standing figure of Maria regina in its centre presented a sequence of thirteen scenes illustrating Christ’s Infancy, Miracles and Passion: i.e. Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Presentation in the Temple, Baptism, Healings of the blind and of the woman affected by issue of blood, also Lazarus’ raising, then Entrance into Jerusalem, Last Supper, Crucifixion and Anastasis (ill. 6). As was recently noted by Paola Pogliani, it should be pointed out that the Nativity included the Announcement to the shepherds, a feature of post-iconoclastic Byzantine iconography of this event, attested here for the first time; the same is true for the Anastasis, unobserved in previous realisations. Moreover, it should be said that, regarding the whole sequence, we are facing a true preliminary sketch — and a rather elaborated one, — of the canon...
cal Twelve Feasts cycle. Their existence in Early Medieval Rome is confirmed by a few scenes in the chapel commissioned by Pope Paschal I around 820. It is an enamelled reliquary cross preserved in the Sancta Sanctorum chapel near the Lateran Cathedral. It is decorated with scenes of Annunciation, Visitation, Journey toward Bethlehem, Nativity, Presentation in the Temple and Baptism (ill. 7). It should be recognised that the Journey toward Bethlehem is not particularly relevant to the later canonical cycle; the events of the Ministry, Passion and Resurrection are completely missing (probably in relation to the nature of the relic, which was originally enclosed within it). But several variants of the Feast cycle are attested in post-iconoclastic times as well. And it is not before 1059 that in a manuscript now in the Vatican Library the sequence appeared — including in particular Transfiguration, Pentecost and Mary’s Dormition — more frequently reproduced later.

The Roman monuments here mentioned certainly reflect an evolution leading to formation of the classical system of subdivision of the liturgical year, and to the iconography related to it.

12 E. Kitzinger, Studies in Late Antique, Byzantine and Medieval Western Art (London, Pindar Press, 2002), especially p. 537 (the Psalter (Vat. gr. 752), fols. 17v – 18v).
Another important aspect of Byzantine post-iconoclastic programs — and more exactly, of those of the period from the beginning of the Palaiologan period onwards — is the development of hagiographic cycles as can be observed, for instance, in Hagios Demetrios in Mystra, then in Hagios Nicholas Orphanos in Thessaloniki. Again, significant antecedents are attested in Early Medieval Rome. I here particularly mention the frescoes with which, around 820, the transept of St Praxedes, commissioned by Pope Paschal I, was embellished after he gathered relics of numerous local martyrs in this church, renewed especially for such a purpose. As noted in the recent thorough study by Carles Mancho, we are dealing with several superimposed sequences, where the iconographic scheme is constantly repeated: i.e. of the saint standing before a magistrate (or other person of highest rank), then the saint put to death, then his burial. These frescoes are unfortunately

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53 Γ. Μαρίνου, Άγιος Δημήτριος. Η Μητρόπολη του Μυστρά (Υπουργείο Πολιτισμού, Δημοσιεύματα του Αρχαιολογικού Δελτίου αρ. 78) (Athens, 2002), especially pp. 88 sq. (in Greek), and 246 (English abstract).
in poor condition and are mainly known from a design by Tabarelli dating back to the beginning of the 20th century (ill. 8). But the same theme also appears in better preserved frescoes created notably earlier: for instance, the depiction of St. Erasmus’ judgement and martyrdom in St Mary in Via Lata (now in the National Roman Museum, Cripta Balbi),6 and the cycle dedicated to Saints Cyricus and Julitta in Theodotos’ chapel, an annex of St. Mary Antique7 (ill. 9), both painted around the mid-8th century. In all these examples the theme is

seen in a somewhat ancillary zone: i.e. in a subsidiary space or on lateral walls, as is generally the case in later Byzantine churches.

I also want to draw attention to another feature of Theodotos’ chapel. It is the depiction of the eponymous donor, primicerius (i.e. one among the dignitaries) of the pontifical court, kneeling before the standing patron saints\(^{18}\) (ill. 10). Even if the figure does not yet adopt the thorough bending of the proskynesis, it nevertheless almost corresponds to the genuine scheme. And practically the same is seen in the image of Paschal I before the Theotokos, created around 820 in another of his renewed churches, St Mary in Domnica\(^{19}\) (ill. 11). Of course, we are not dealing here with an iconography

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frequently favoured in Byzantine post-iconoclastic monumental art. But we should recall, at least, the Emperor’s depiction — that of Leo VI, probably created around 920 in the narthex of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople26 then the metropolitan’s image in Hagia Sophia in Mystras (later partially cancelled by one of his successors, but anyhow surely attested).27 This most humble devotional attitude was particularly in use in Byzantium.

I want finally to come to one of the most recurrent themes of the post-iconoclastic programmes: the Last Judgment, the canonical version of which can be first observed in the narthex of the Panagia ton Chalkeon in Thessaloniki, which was decorated with frescoes in 1028.28 But more than one century earlier (at the end of the 8th century, or perhaps shortly after), a similar formula appeared on the reverse of the façade in the abbey church of Münstair, now located in south-east Switzerland29 (ill. 12). The convent is far from Rome and belonged to the bishopric of Chur, which was part of the Carolingian realm, occupying a highly strategic position in the Alpine region and being situated on the way to Italy.30 But it cannot reasonably be imagined that such an elaborate iconography was conceived in a provincial place. And if we consider the artistic situation in the main Carolingian centers of those decades, it appears that it was still in an emergent phase, after a long period of decline following Late Antiquity. The artistic renewal of the Frankish realm broadly relied on contacts with Rome. There are good reasons to think of the participation of a Roman painter in the illumination of one of the first — and most important — Carolingian manuscripts (the so-called Godescalc’s Evangelistary), in direct connection with Charlemagne’s journey to the pontifical city in 781.31 And apart from stylistic analogies between the miniatures of this manuscript and the paintings in Münstair and in another monastery in its vicinity (the one in Mals),32 technical observations should be taken into account: on the basis of spectrometric analysis, it has recently been established by Patricia Roger that the same “Egyptian blue” — a rare component at that time — was used in frescoes in Rome, in those in Münstair and in this manuscript.33


27 M. Chatzidakis, Mistra. La cité médiévale et la forteresse (Athens: Ekdotike Athenon, 1981), especially p. 35. Also, for the chronology, G. Mapíou, Αυγός Αμφίπολος, pp. 19–33 (in Greek) and 245–246 (English abstract).


32 E. Rüber, Sankt Benedikt in Mals (Bozen: Verlaganstalt Athesia, 1992), especially p. 35.

I here also rely on Michael Schmitz’s observation about what might have originally existed in St Cecilia in Trastevere, another church renewed by Pope Paschal I around 820. In effect, Marangoni’s description before the mid-18th century modifications of the building indicates that the Biblical and hagiographic scenes on the upper part of the walls were placed over portraits of successive popes, from St Peter to Paschal I, the last ones depicted in the spandrels of the arches. So, Schmitz reasonably proposes that towards the end of the 13th century, Pietro Cavallini, responsible for the partially conserved paintings, was the one who mainly restored decoration dating back to Paschal I’s time (as he probably also did for the cycles in the nave of St Paul fuori le mura). Consequently, I cannot exclude that the Last Judgment of the reverse of the façade, Pietro Cavallini’s achievement again in its present state, might also have been inspired by a scheme of similar nature at this same place, also conceived around 820.

It is probable that in the paleo-Christian period several of these themes already started to appear (and sometimes were even noticeably defined). In particular, the placement of the figure of Christ above Mary is clearly attested in the 6th century, sometimes were even noticeably defined). In particular, the placement of the figure of Christ above Mary is clearly attested in the 6th century, the placement of the figure of Christ above Mary was the one who mainly restored decoration dating back to Paschal I’s time (as he probably also did for the cycles in the nave of St Paul fuori le mura). Consequently, I cannot exclude that the Last Judgment of the reverse of the façade, Pietro Cavallini’s achievement again in its present state, might also have been inspired by a scheme of similar nature at this same place, also conceived around 820.

...recognise partial antecedents of the scenes of the Feast cycle on some pilgrims’ ampullae. As for the hagiographic cycles, texts from the second half of the 4th century or the first half of the 5th allude to their existence in several churches dedicated to martyrs, and we also have, in Rome itself, the testimony of the apostolic cycles in the naves of St Peter and St Paul, no later than the 5th century. Plus, a remote forerunner of the proskynesis attitude can be recognized in the 6th-century painting of the catacombs of Commodilla, depicting the defunct Turtura before the Theotokos; one must note, however, that Turtura is still standing upright, and this main difference establishes Theodotos’ image as the very first true step towards the post-iconoclastic scheme. This aside, we are facing true innovations, like the genuine Deesis, the clearest prefiguration of the Twelve Feasts cycle in the mosaics of John VII’s oratory, and (probably, as suggested above) a Last Judgment that is generally close to its canonical version. This occurred mainly during the period when, in Constantinople, true creations in imagery seem to have been very rare and iconoclasm prevailed. So, within the broad hiatus that occurred in the heart of the Empire, the Greek popes and monks in Rome (as the primicerius Theodotos and Pope Paschal I had close relations with them) played a crucial role in maintaining the heritage of the first Christian centuries. Moreover, they brought about its flourishing and helped it develop towards the great achievements of classical religious imagery in the Byzantine world.

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32 E. Kitzinger, Studies..., pp. 546–547 (but limited, in fact, to seven events – Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Baptism, Crucifixion, and we know that Pope Theodoros, commissioner of the mosaic in St Venantius in Lateran, had improved relations with Palestine. It is also possible to recognise partial antecedents of the scenes of the Feast cycle on some pilgrims’ ampullae. As for the hagiographic cycles, texts from the second half of the 4th century or the first half of the 5th allude to their existence in several churches dedicated to martyrs, and we also have, in Rome itself, the testimony of the apostolic cycles in the naves of St Peter and St Paul, no later than the 5th century. Plus, a remote forerunner of the proskynesis attitude can be recognized in the 6th-century painting of the catacombs of Commodilla, depicting the defunct Turtura before the Theotokos; one must note, however, that Turtura is still standing upright, and this main difference establishes Theodotos’ image as the very first true step towards the post-iconoclastic scheme. This aside, we are facing true innovations, like the genuine Deesis, the clearest prefiguration of the Twelve Feasts cycle in the mosaics of John VII’s oratory, and (probably, as suggested above) a Last Judgment that is generally close to its canonical version. This occurred mainly during the period when, in Constantinople, true creations in imagery seem to have been very rare and iconoclasm prevailed. So, within the broad hiatus that occurred in the heart of the Empire, the Greek popes and monks in Rome (as the primicerius Theodotos and Pope Paschal I had close relations with them) played a crucial role in maintaining the heritage of the first Christian centuries. Moreover, they brought about its flourishing and helped it develop towards the great achievements of classical religious imagery in the Byzantine world.

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34 Not signalled as so, let’s note, in the study by E. Kitzinger Studies... (see 32).
Название: Вклад «греческого» Рима (VII — середина IX века) в формирование постиконоборческой иконографии

Автор: Жан-Пьер Кайе — профессор истории искусства Средних веков. Университет Париж Нантер (MAE, UMR 7041/THEMAM, 200, улица Республики, 92001 Нантер, Франция)
E-mail: fjpc2@wanadoo.fr

Аннотация
Хорошо известно, что в течение рассматриваемого периода «греческая» культура получила широкое распространение в Риме, особенно в папских кругах. По заказам понтификов были выполнены фресковые и мозаичные ансамбли, а также элементы литургического устройства церквей и капел города. Что касается главных черт византийской постиконоборческой иконографии, то можно назвать несколько памятников, в которых они уже присутствуют: ораторий Св. Венанция в Латеране (образ Христа над изображением Богоматери в апсиде), церковь Санта Мария Антиква (последовательность агиографических сцен и донатор, представленный в положении, близком к позе проскинесиса в капелле Теодота), Санта Прасседе (образ Христа в куполе капеллы Св. Зенона и нервюрное расположение фигур под ним и вокруг него, прежде всего Денусус), реликварии, изготовленные по заказу папы Пасхалия I для Sancta Sanctorum (несколько сцен двунадесятых праздников). Мы можем учесть также классическую схему изображения Страшного суда, впервые появляющуюся на западной стене церкви в аббатстве Мюстер — скорее всего, оно было выполнено приехавшими из Рима художниками. Для некоторых рассмотренных здесь сюжетов можно найти образцы уже в V—VI веках, в основном в восточном Средиземноморье. Тем не менее можно утверждать, что в период иконоборчества в Константинополе и на периферии имитации папских папских кругов играли особенно важную роль в развитии христианской иконографии.

Ключевые слова: иконография раннего Средневековья, греческая культура, образ Христа над образом Богоматери, Денусус, двунадесятые праздники, агиографические циклы, проскинесис, Страшный суд, Мюстер.

Title: The Contribution of ‘Greek’ Rome (7th — mid-9th century) to the Formation of Post-Iconoclastic Iconography

Author: Jean-Pierre Caillet, Professor in Medieval Art History, Paris Nanterre University, MAE, UMR 7041/THEMAM, 200 avenue de la République, 92001 Nanterre cedex, France. E-mail: fjpc2@wanadoo.fr

Abstract
It is well known that during the period in question ‘Greek’ culture largely prevailed in Rome, especially in the papacy’s circle. Popes’ orders initiated most of the significant fresco or mosaic programmes, as well as elements of liturgical setting in the churches and main oratories of the city. Regarding what would become major features in Byzantine Post-Iconoclastic iconography, several antecedents clearly appear in St Venantius in Lateran (Christ over Mary in the apse), St Mary Antique (sequence of hagiographic scenes, and donor in (almost) proskynesis in Theodotos’ chapel), St Praxedes (Christ at the apex of St Zeno chapel and the whole hierarchical disposition of the figures beneath and all around, including in particular a Deesis), and in the reliquaries commissioned by Paschal I for the Sancta Sanctorum (several compositions of the Twelve Feasts cycle). We can take into account the classical scheme of the Last Judgment, attested for the first time on the reverse of the front wall in Müstair abbey, very probably the work of Roman painters. For some of these subjects, it is possible to find examples as early as in the 5th and 6th centuries, mainly in Eastern Mediterranean areas. Nevertheless, it seems that especially during the period of official Iconoclasm in Constantinople and in its periphery the initiatives of the pontifical circle played a very important role in the development of Christian iconography.

Keywords: Rome, Early Medieval iconography, Greek culture, Christ above Mary, Deesis, Twelve Feasts, Hagiographic cycles, proslyneis, Last Judgment, Müstair.

References


