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Manuscript Illuminations and Mural Paintings: Medium Interactions in Christian Egypt

Abstract: It has been suggested that some illustrations in Christian manuscripts from the Middle East are derived directly from murals or mosaics in churches. The question is, however, whether this can also be demonstrated on the basis of surviving works of manuscript and monumental art. Assuming that an illustration can be linked to documented murals encountered at the location where it was produced, this paper examines two cases in Egypt. The first concerns the production of manuscripts in the Fayyum region, exemplified by the frontispiece representing St Theodore the Oriental from manuscript New York, MLM, M.613, written in the early tenth century at Tebtunis/Tutun, which is compared with a mural rendering the identical subject excavated at the same site. The second case focuses on the reused miniature in manuscript Arab N.F. 327 in the Rossijskaja nacional'naja biblioteka in Saint Petersburg. Stylistic similarities allow one to connect this image to eighth-century murals in several monasteries in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn area.

1 Introduction

Kurt Weitzmann discussed several manuscript illustrations in his *Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination* (1977) that he believed were based on wall paintings or mosaics in churches. Regarding the art of Middle Eastern Christianity, this particularly concerns the scenes of the Ascension and Pentecost in the sixth-century Syriac-written Rabbula Gospels (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 1.56).¹ The first scene renders the ascending Christ extended with the wheels of the fiery chariot and the Tetramorph from the Vision of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1), above the Virgin between the Apostles (fol. 13^v). This design obviously reflects the widespread double composition in the apses of altar rooms, consisting of Christ in the conch and the Virgin in the lower area behind the altar.² A further

¹ For the complex structure of the Rabbula codex, see Bernabò 2008, 2014.

² Van Moorsel 2000.

indication of the type of model used is the rectangular frame of the image, made up of squares imitating *tesserae*, which reinforces the impression of a wall mosaic.³

The Pentecost scene leaves even less to the imagination (fol. 14^v). Set in a semi-circular niche with a shadowy arch and its spandrels filled with trees, it explicitly sketches the structure and ornamentation of a monumental setting.⁴ Weitzmann suggested that this miniature was a copy of the mosaic in the Chapel of the Holy Spirit in the Church of Zion at Jerusalem. However, this hypothesis cannot be evaluated as the mosaic no longer exists. Only briefly mentioned in John of Würzburg's account of his visit to the Holy Land in the 1160s, it most probably did not even exist in the sixth century.⁵ This example perfectly illustrates the point at issue here: despite the scholarly consensus on the artistic coherence between Byzantine monumental and manuscript art,⁶ it is difficult to link miniatures to specific wall paintings or mosaics that served as their models.

The links between Middle Eastern Christian mural art and manuscript illumination are perhaps less obvious than one might be inclined to think. The illuminators, as daily churchgoers, were undoubtedly familiar with the images inside churches. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that the decoration of these churches may have influenced their work. In practice, however, both media had to serve their own contextual purposes. Whereas the boundaries of monumental church art are usually set by the architecture and religious functions of the building, illuminations are inextricably bound by the textual content, folio size and layout of the manuscript in question.⁷ Any scene copied from a church wall would normally be paraphrased and fitted into the established format of manuscript illustration rather than being faithfully reproduced on a smaller scale, possibly including details of the architectural setting. In this respect, the Pentecost in the Rabbula codex would be an exemplary exception, were it not for the fact that our knowledge of the proposed source of inspiration falls short.

It is equally unlikely to find miniatures and mural paintings that can be attributed to the same workshop or artist based on the shared formal features and brushwork: differences in scale and structure of the carriers imply medium-specific skills, knowledge and tools. Moreover, a muralist may not be the best

³ Weitzmann 1977, 101, plate 36; see also Bernabò 2008, 108–110, table XXVI, with references to previous studies; Ziadé 2022, 128, illus. 124.

⁴ Weitzmann 1977, 105, plate 38; see also Bernabò 2008, 111–112, table XXVIII, with references to previous studies.

⁵ Pringle 2007, 265.

⁶ See e.g. Grabar 1953, 183–184.

⁷ Grabar 1953, 159.

person to devote himself to the fine-tuned elaboration inherent in manuscript illumination. But this is all theoretical; it cannot be ruled out that individual artists may have mastered more than one skill, although identifying matching works of art is usually a case of looking for a needle in a haystack.

Using common localisation, chronology and art historical criteria, such as iconography and style, as a starting point, two case studies focusing on Egypt are considered here to illustrate the complexity of researching such issues. The first concentrates on the Fayyum region (al-Fayyūm; Fig. 1) as one of the few recognised centres of production for both monumental art and illustrated manuscripts in Egypt between the eighth and the thirteenth centuries. The second discusses the exceptional case of a miniature in the manuscript Saint Petersburg, Rossijskaja nacional'naja biblioteka (Russian National Library), Arab N.F. 327, fol. 226^r, which, on formal grounds, bears comparison with eighth-century wall paintings in the monasteries of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn area between Cairo and Alexandria (Fig. 1). While the first case study concentrates on the analysis of iconographic aspects, the second focuses mainly on stylistic criteria.⁸

2 Miniatures and murals in the Fayyum

The art of the Fayyum, to the south-west of Cairo, offers an excellent opportunity to explore the possible links between wall and manuscript painting.⁹ This region has produced an impressive quantity of manuscripts from the ninth to the early eleventh centuries, some of which contain miniatures that deserve our particular attention. A large collection was discovered in 1910 at the site of the former monastery of the Archangel Michael (Dayr al-Mal'ak Miḥā'il) near the village of al-Ḥāmūlī on the western edge of the Fayyum (Fig. 1).¹⁰ Its library was apparently left unattended after the monastery was abandoned in the early eleventh century until its rediscovery.¹¹

⁸ I would like to thank Renate Dekkers and Lucas Van Rompay for their valuable advice and contributions.

⁹ For Christianity in the Fayyum, see Gabra (ed.) 2005.

¹⁰ Leroy 1974a; Depuydt 1993; Achi 2018.

¹¹ Coquin and Martin 1991, 824a–825a.

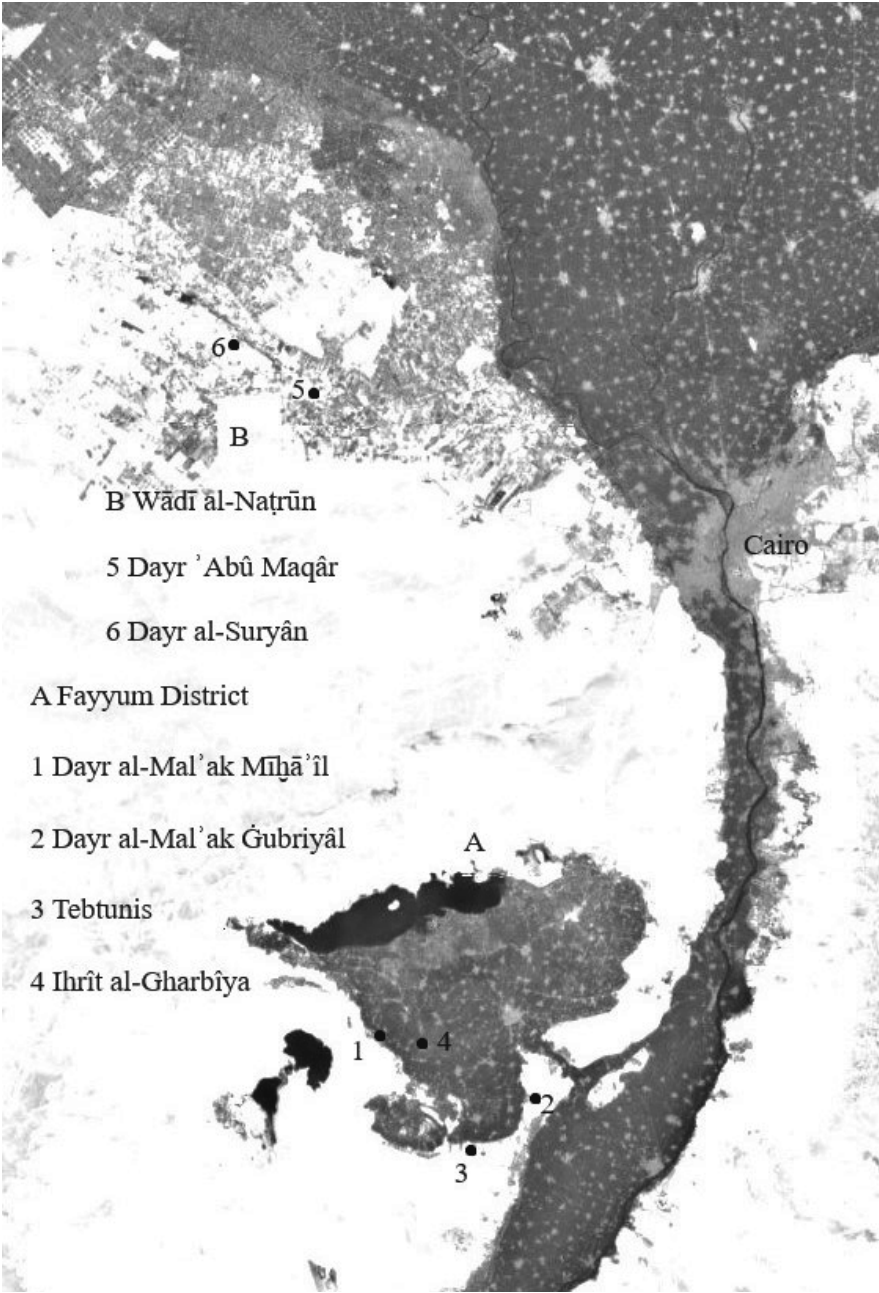


Fig. 1: Map of Wādī al-Naṭrūn and the Fayyum area.

As for wall paintings, the only surviving *in situ* examples in the region are those thought to have been painted between 1022 and 1032 CE in the monastery of the Archangel Gabriel (Dayr al-Maʿlak Ġubriyāl, or Dayr al-Naqlūn), located nearly 30 km to the south-east of al-Ḥāmūlī (Fig. 1).¹² However, this estimate only applies to the scenes in the sanctuary, as the murals in the nave and narthex are stylistically different. This latter group of paintings, which includes a number of equestrian saints, can be tentatively dated to the twelfth or thirteenth century.¹³

Further wall paintings from the Fayyum, which unfortunately have not survived, came to light in a church excavated in 1899 at the archaeological site of Tebtunis (Greek) – Touton in Coptic and Ṭuṭūn in Arabic (hereafter: Tutun) – at ʿUmm al-Burayġāt, some 25 km to the south of al-Ḥāmūlī (Fig. 1). Superficially documented by Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, their notes and photographs were first analysed and published by Colin Walters almost a century later.¹⁴ A dated donatory inscription allowed Walters to suggest that the earliest scenes – such as several saints and the Resurrection – were applied in 669 of the Coptic Era of the Martyrs (Anno Martyrum; hereafter: AM), corresponding to 952/953 CE.¹⁵ Walters argued that a second group of paintings, consisting of four dragon-slaying equestrian saints, such as Theodore Stratelates (‘the General’), could be dated between about 950 and 1050.¹⁶ Thematically, the presence of holy horsemen is in keeping with the prevalence of this motif in Coptic churches from about the eighth century onwards.¹⁷ However, careful examination of various iconographic details in the Tebtunis murals, in particular the Turkish-style saddlecloths on and knotted tails of several of the horses depicted, suggest an even later date; both elements were introduced into Egypt after the Zengid conquest in 1169. The cortege of mounted saints rendered in the monastery of St Antony (Dayr ʿAnbā Anṭūniyūs), executed in 1232/1233 CE, offers the best analogies.¹⁸ If it is accepted that the second group of murals at Tebtunis were applied in the last quarter of the twelfth or thirteenth century, they could not possibly have served as a source of inspiration for any of the earlier illustrated manuscripts found near al-Ḥāmūlī.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the settlement of Tebtunis/Tutun also functioned as a centre of manuscript production from the ninth to the early elev-

¹² Godlewski 1997, 1999; Parandowska 2005.

¹³ See Bolman 2002b, 93, n. 19; Godlewski 2008, 47; Immerzeel forthcoming.

¹⁴ Walters 1989.

¹⁵ For the Era of the Martyrs, see Cody 1991.

¹⁶ Walters 1989, 206.

¹⁷ Immerzeel 2016, 102–105; Immerzeel 2017, 40–44.

¹⁸ Immerzeel forthcoming. For Dayr ʿAnbā Anṭūniyūs, see Bolman 2002a; Bolman 2002b; Lyster 2002.

enth century.¹⁹ Significantly, several al-Ḥāmūlī manuscripts were produced here and various inscriptions found in the excavated church also attest to the local community's contacts with Dayr al-Ma'āk Miḥā'il.²⁰ One of the volumes in The Morgan Library & Museum in New York (M.613) was copied and illustrated by the deacon Mouses and his brother, the subdeacon Khael of Tutun in the early tenth century, and subsequently presented to Dayr al-Ma'āk Miḥā'il.²¹ The Sahidic Coptic text, which remains to be edited,²² describes the martyrdom of Sts Theodore the Anatolian, or the Oriental (not to be confused with the widely venerated St Theodore Stratelates), Leontius, and Panigerus, all commemorated on 12 Ṭūba / 7 January in the medieval Coptic synaxarion.²³ The manuscript's only miniature arouses our full interest (fol. 1^r; Fig. 2). This simply drawn frontispiece depicts an equestrian saint and includes some additional narrative details.²⁴ A Coptic inscription identifies the horseman as the said St Theodore the Anatolian (Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ΑΠΑΘΕΩΔΩΡΟΣ ΠΑΝΑΓΩΛΕΟΣ), who is shown slaying an androcephalous dragon called 'Demoniakos' (ΔΕΜΩΝΙΑΚΟΣ).²⁵ The demon wears a ring through his nose and is chained to a long white object between the horse's forelegs, divided into irregular brown and ochre cross bands and labelled 'the throne' (ΗΚΑΘΕΔΡΑ). Anthony Alcock's online article on this obscure and under-represented martyr focuses on two versions of his *Vita*: the chapter on 12 Ṭūba in the Arabic synaxarion²⁶ and an earlier, longer Bohairic Coptic text in the manuscript Vatican City, BAV, Vat. copt. 63, fols 28–54.²⁷ The more informative Coptic account, which introduces the future martyr as narrator, elaborates on Theodore's visionary encounter with the dragon as follows:

19 For Tutun, see Coquin 1991. René-Georges Coquin rejects the term scriptorium, arguing that none of the scribes presented themselves as monks; they were deacons, subdeacons or occasionally a priest.

20 Walters 1989, 205.

21 <<https://www.themorgan.org/collection/coptic/214172>> (accessed on 7 December 2022), CLM 639. For an estimate of the age, see van Lantschoot 1929, vol. 1, 74–76, no. XLVII, n. 6. Arnold van Lantschoot based his conclusion on the mention in the volume of Abbot Elias of Dayr al-Ma'āk Miḥā'il, whose name is also found in several manuscripts dated to the early tenth century.

22 For the preliminary reading of the text by Renate Dekker, see Immerzeel forthcoming.

23 Basset (ed. and tr.) 1915, 577–581; Alcock 2018, 1–2.

24 Immerzeel 2016, 102–105.

25 Leroy 1974a, 188, plate 107,2; Depuydt 1993, vol. 1, 282–284, no. 144; 397; vol. 2, plate 19; Alcock 2018, 4–5.

26 Alcock 2018, 1–2; translation from Basset (ed. and tr.) 1915, 577–581.

27 Alcock 2018, 5; English version after the Latin translation in Balestri and Hyvernat 1907, 30–46. See <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.copt.63> (accessed on 4 September 2023).

In the morning I saw a path rising from the ground like a staircase of a cathedra, the top of which reached to the apses of heaven. I saw a young man of 20 with an incorruptible face sitting on the top of the staircase of the cathedra. There was great glory and great faces around the throne, on the right side the faces of a lion and a calf and on the left those of an eagle and a man. Their faces were veiled by many wings. In a wheel there were four saws, arranged in pairs above each other going round like a turbine. When I looked again I saw a great tabernacle on top of the cathedra. I was not told the secret of the cathedra and the tabernacle, but I was told: 'This place is the vision'. [...] When I got to the last step, I saw a large dragon with an iron ring through his nose. It had the head and neck of a man, but the body of a dragon. It made me fear and tremble. It was lying on the bottom step of the staircase to heaven, preventing anyone from entering the presence of God.²⁸

In a second encounter, Theodore plunged his lance through the head of the infernal creature, who was chained to the stairs and had revealed himself to be Demoniakos, the father of the persecutor Diocletian.²⁹ There can be little doubt that the miniature is based on the story told in Vat. copt. 63 or, more obviously, the text in M.613, which corresponds in part to this account.³⁰ The illustrator has faithfully reproduced the chained, nose-ringed Demoniakos at the foot of what appears to be the staircase or ladder leading to the throne mentioned in the inscription but not clearly depicted.

Interestingly, the same scene was also painted in the excavated church at Tebtunis, namely on the west wall of what was probably the nave (Fig. 3).³¹ In the absence of further information, Walters was inclined to identify the largely effaced rider as St Sisinnius, whose name was copied in the excavators' notebook but without any indication of the scene's exact location within the building (ΑΠΑ ΣΙΣΙΝΙΟΣ ΠΕΣΤΡΑΤΗΛΑΤΗΣ; 'St Sisinnios the General').³² The photograph of the painting shows that only the lower half, showing the belly and legs of the horse and the dragon, was relatively intact when it was discovered. The latter is depicted as an outstretched snake with a human upper body, attached by a rope to a vertical wooden ladder on the left – the carefully crafted wood joints are clearly visible. The name Mastema (ΜΑΣΤΕΜΑ), written above the creature's head, further helps to identify the rider; significantly, Mastema is also mentioned as another of the devil's identities in both Vat. copt. 63 and the text of M.613.³³

²⁸ Alcock 2018, 13–14. The dragon at the foot of the ladder is also briefly mentioned in a Bohairic encomium in Vatican City, BAV, Vat. copt. 66, fol. 32^v (ninth–tenth century); Winstedt 1910, 3–4, 75.

²⁹ Fols 54–55; Alcock 2018, 17–18.

³⁰ Immerzeel forthcoming.

³¹ Walters 1989, 195–196, plates XVI and XIX.

³² Walters 1989, 195; Immerzeel forthcoming.

³³ Alcock 2018, 11; for manuscript M.613, see Immerzeel forthcoming.



Fig. 2: Illustration: St Theodore the Anatolian; M.613, fol. 1^r; early tenth century; photograph The Morgan Library & Museum. Purchased for J. Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913) in 1911–1912.



Fig. 3: Wall painting: St Theodore the Anatolian; church, Tebtunis; late twelfth/thirteenth century; photograph courtesy of The Egypt Exploration Society, London.

It is difficult to assess the significance of the fact that two of the few documented medieval depictions of St Theodore the Anatolian were made in Tebtunis/Tutun.³⁴ The fact that the miniature is several centuries older than the mural does not detract from the assumption that the subject was circulating in

³⁴ A recent discovery concerns a tenth-century mural in Dayr al-Suryān, which depicts the mounted saint, the ladder, and the dragon (Innemée 2023, 54–55, fig. 65). The saint was also represented in Dayr 'Anbā Anṭūniyūs (1232/1233 CE), but only a fragment of his name and the bust of Christ survive; Bolman 2002a, 40–41, fig. 4.4.

the area over a longer period. The possibility that the muralist may have consulted M.613 can also be ruled out; as mentioned above, the library of Dayr al-Mal'ak Miḥā'il had been abandoned since the early eleventh century. It is certain that the performance of St Theodore the Oriental as a horseman, a detail not mentioned in the written sources, should be understood as an adaptation of the saint's narrative to the customary iconographic format of the victorious equestrian warrior saint defeating an enemy of Christendom.³⁵ In a way, he was an offshoot of St Theodore Stratelates, the most famous of the holy dragon slayers at the time, who was also painted to the right of his namesake and companion in the excavated church.³⁶

Vat. copt. 63 provides another fascinating insight into the dialogue between textual sources and church embellishment. It concerns the extended discourse on Christ Enthroned in Theodore's vision, quoted above. In particular, the text contains a surprisingly accurate description of the transcendent image of Christ in Glory in the conch of church apses, also found in Tebtunis,³⁷ which symbolically allows a glimpse into heaven from the position of the altar. The account further provides details of elements of the Vision of Ezekiel, namely, the Four Living Creatures and the wheels of the chariot, which were also depicted in various compositional variants in churches in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East.³⁸ As mentioned above, the Ascension in the Rabbula codex provides a perfect example of this visionary dimension in the decoration of sanctuaries.

The most recent Fayyum miniature is inserted in a *Book of Homilies* written and illustrated by the deacon Philotheos in 989/990 CE at Hrit, identified as Ihrīt al-Ġarbiyya, 11 km east of al-Ḥāmūlī (manuscript London, BL, Or. 6782, fol. 1^v; Fig. 4).³⁹ The image depicts the Breastfeeding Virgin or *Galaktotrophousa* in the company of St John the Evangelist. It cannot be ruled out that the illustrator was inspired by another miniature representing the Nursing Virgin in the late-ninth- and early-tenth-century manuscripts from Dayr al-Mal'ak Miḥā'il nearby,⁴⁰ but

³⁵ Immerzeel 2016, 102–105.

³⁶ Immerzeel forthcoming, plates 1–2; Walters 1989, 193–194, plates XVI–XVIII. On the various warrior saints named Theodore, see Walter 2003, 44–66. On the relationship between Sts Theodore the Anatolian and Theodore Stratelates in the Coptic tradition, see Winstedt 1910 (Vat. copt. 66).

³⁷ Walters 1989, 192–193, plate XVII.

³⁸ Immerzeel 2017, 46–49.

³⁹ Leroy 1974a, 105–107, plate 29,1; CLM 182; Cormack and Vasilaki (eds) 2009, 349, 457, no. 305 (entry Vrej Nersessian).

⁴⁰ The *Galaktotrophousa* is depicted in four al-Ḥāmūlī manuscripts written in Tutun, all in New York, MLM: M.612, fol. 1^v = CLM 239 (892/893 CE); M.574, fol. 1^v = CLM 213 (897/898 CE); M.600, fol. 1^v

what distinguishes this depiction are the niches framing the figures. The curved lower edge of their conches suggests perspective, as if they were drawn from reality.⁴¹

This architectural setting is reminiscent of the monastic prayer cells in the monastery of St Apollo in Bawit and that of Apa Jeremias in Saqqara, where the Mother of God, breastfeeding or not, was repeatedly painted in apse-like niches behind the altar.⁴² Although the *Galaktotrophousa* has not been found in Dayr al-Maʿlak Ġubriyāl and Tebtunis, we can safely assume that the subject was a familiar one in Fayyumic churches. The closest example was discovered in 1991 in the prayer cell of a rock-cut hermitage near the monastery of St Macarius (Dayr ʿAbū Maqār) in the monastic area of Wādī al-Naṭrūn, some 100 km to the north of the Fayyum (Fig. 5).⁴³ Dated in an inscription commemorating the foundation and decoration of the cave complex at the instigation of the ascetic Father Mena Panau (ΜΗΝΑ ΠΑΝΑΥ) in 660 AM, corresponding to 943/944 CE, the double composition on the chapel's flat east wall consists of the *Galaktotrophousa* flanked by two archangels to the left of Christ in Glory engulfed in the flames of Ezekiel's fiery chariot, and, unusually because of the low ceiling, arranged horizontally.⁴⁴ Apart from the addition of the archangels and the mirrored design, the compositional analogies with the illumination painted forty-five years later are obvious.

= CLM 216 (905/906 CE); and M.597, fol. 3^v = CLM 233 (913/914 CE). See Leroy 1974a, 94–95, plate 31; 96–97, plate 34; 101–103; plate 36; and 103–104, plates 35 and B, respectively.

⁴¹ The best examples of saints rendered either in a constructed niche or a painted architectural background (including the *Galaktotrophousa*) are in the sixth- to the eighth-century murals in the Red Monastery near Sohag; see Bolman 2016.

⁴² Bolman 2005; Higgins 2012; Immerzeel 2016, with references to previous studies.

⁴³ van der Vliet 2009, 335–336; Immerzeel 2016, 98, figs 3–4; Immerzeel 2017, 46, fig. 19, plates 9–10; Immerzeel forthcoming; Kupelian 2018; Ziadé 2022, 216, 218, illus. 220.

⁴⁴ For an eighth-century *Galaktotrophousa* in nearby Dayr al-Suryān, see Innemée 1998, 294–295; Ziadé 2022, 218, fig. 223.



Fig. 4: Illustration: *Galaktotrophousa* and St John; Or. 6782, fol. 1^r; 989/990 ce; © British Library Board.



Fig. 5: Wall painting: *Galaktotrophousa*; hermitage of Father Mena Panau, Dayr 'Abū Maqār; 943/944 CE; photograph: author/Paul van Moorsel Centre, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

3 Common artistry: The case of Arab N.F. 327

Although the results of the study of the relationship between wall paintings and miniatures in the Fayyum have revealed some interesting thematic links, we are still a long way from establishing a common workshop attribution, which also requires corresponding stylistic features and, ideally, identical brushwork. The most promising case in this respect is the miniature accompanying an Arabic Epistles of Paul preserved in the Rossijskaja nacional'naja biblioteka in Saint Petersburg, Arab N.F. 327, fol. 226^r (Fig. 6).⁴⁵ The illumination is inserted after the colophon at the end of the text, i.e. behind the left cover. Its composition shows two frontal, nameless saints set against a dark blue and dark green background. Weitzmann, in his 1943 study of this representation, convincingly identified the bearded figure on the right as St Paul and the one on the left as his disciple St Timothy, whom St Paul consecrated as the first bishop of Ephesus and to whom he addressed an epistle.⁴⁶ The sheet is in reasonably good condition, except for some superficial flaking off of the colours and the blackening of St Paul's head. St Paul is dressed in a red tunic decorated with orange-yellow rosettes and a yellow *himation*; he holds a rolled scroll in his left hand and makes a blessing gesture with the other. St Timothy is rendered as a young bishop, holding a red codex in his left arm and also making the blessing gesture with his right hand.⁴⁷ His episcopal vestments consist of a crimson-brown *sticharion* decorated with orange-yellow rosettes, a blue *phelonion* and a white *omophorion* with modest black crosses. The latter is draped around his neck, the one visible end overlapping the overturned part and hanging down from his left shoulder to his knee.⁴⁸ The saints' nimbi are yellow and outlined in red with a thin black inner circle, and their feet are sandaled.

⁴⁵ 27.8 × 19.8 cm; Leroy 1974a, 92–93, plate 28,1; Weitzmann 1943, 119–134, figs 1, 11; see also Immerzeel 2017, 102–103, plate 45.

⁴⁶ Weitzmann 1943, 121–124.

⁴⁷ Leroy interprets St Timothy's darkly shaded chin as a small beard ('un mince collier de barbe'; Leroy 1974a, 93), but this interpretation is questioned by the absence of a moustache.

⁴⁸ For this use of the *omophorion*, which can also be found in medieval Coptic murals, see Inne-mée 1992, 52.



Fig. 6: Illustration: Sts Timothy and Paul; Arab N.F. 327, fol. 226'; eighth century; after Leroy 1974a, plate 28,1.

Even at first glance, this colourful illustration is of a very different quality to its much simpler Fayyumic counterparts. The most striking feature of the scene is the classicising flavour of the saints' robes. This painterly style is particularly evident in the softly undulating patterns and voluminous drapery of St Paul's *himation*, which is rendered with strong contrasts of light highlights and dark shadows. Both figures are outlined in black with an additional white border. The best preserved face is that of St Timothy, which is rounded with large eyes, a sharp, straight nose and mouth, and a red flush on the cheeks. Its plasticity and contrast compensate for its lack of naturalness. Weitzmann compared the figures to those in the Saqqara wall paintings, but argued that the classical formulae of the miniature had no counterparts in Egypt.⁴⁹ This may have been true in 1943, but, as discussed below, more recent discoveries allow us to revise this impression.

The scene in the manuscript Arab N.F. 327 is framed by a vermillion border, which, in Weitzmann's words, 'nearly reaches the edges of the folio. This clearly indicates that the miniature has been cut, probably at the same time the codex was rebound and cut'.⁵⁰ He suggested that the leaf had originally formed the frontispiece of a Greek or Coptic volume, in which it preceded the text written from the left to the right. Remarkably, it was reused in the same position while disregarding the right-to-left writing direction of the Arabic script, implying that the illustration now came after the text.⁵¹ Jules Leroy agreed in his discussion of the miniature with Weitzmann's analysis, but expressed doubts about its hypothetical reuse.⁵² His caution is understandable; as early as 1901, Edvard Stenij argued that the Epistles of Arab N.F. 327 were translated from Syriac.⁵³ If the frontispiece had been taken from the Syriac manuscript consulted, it would logically have been placed directly behind the right cover, since Syriac is also written from right to left. Since this is not the case here, we need to dig deeper into the matter and look for an alternative explanation.

The known history of Arab N.F. 327 begins in 1853 with the return of the biblical scholar Constantin von Tischendorf from his second journey to Egypt, bringing with him the first 75 parchment leaves. He would collect the remaining 151 leaves on his next visit in 1859. Once completed, the manuscript was presented to Tsar Alexander II and deposited in the Public Library of Saint Petersburg, now known as the Rossijskaja nacional'naja biblioteka. Heinrich Fleischer, who had the opportunity to study the first part in 1854, dated the manuscript on the basis of palaeography to the eighth or ninth century.⁵⁴ Seven years later, reading the colophon at

⁴⁹ Weitzmann 1943, 128.

⁵⁰ Weitzmann 1943, 121.

⁵¹ Weitzmann 1943, 122.

⁵² Leroy 1974a, 92–94.

⁵³ Stenij 1901; see also Zaki 2020, 235.

⁵⁴ Fleischer 1854.

the end of the text, he was able to confirm his estimate; the writing was completed in Sha'bān 279 AH, corresponding to October/November 892 CE.⁵⁵

Von Tischendorf had been suspiciously discreet about the manuscript's provenance for unexplained reasons. His confrere Franz Delitzsch revealed that it came from an Egyptian monastery which he left unspecified, no doubt because he had been left in the dark or had been instructed to conceal its exact origin.⁵⁶ Looking at von Tischendorf's career, he became famous for his discovery of the fourth-century Codex Sinaiticus in the Greek Orthodox St Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, which he visited in 1844,⁵⁷ 1853 and 1859. But his first journey also took him to the four Coptic monasteries of Wādī al-Naṭrūn: Dayr 'Abū Maqār, Dayr al-Suryān, Dayr 'Anbā Bīshūy and Dayr al-Baramūs (Fig. 1).⁵⁸ Given von Tischendorf's itinerary, there is every reason to explore the likelihood that the Arabic Epistles came from either St Catherine's or Wādī al-Naṭrūn.

3.1 St Catherine's Monastery

In order to investigate the possible Sinaitic provenance of the manuscript and the miniature, it is necessary, firstly, to establish the presence of comparable early Arabic manuscripts in the St Catherine's Monastery, and, secondly, to identify Sinaitic works of art with stylistic features corresponding to those of the illumination. Indeed, the monastery's library contains several Arabic manuscripts from the eighth and ninth centuries which, like Arab N.F. 327, are also dated according to the Islamic Hijrī era.⁵⁹ A nice parallel to the Saint Petersburg volume is the manuscript Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, Ar. 151, which contains the Pauline Epistles and Acts of the Apostles, but this manuscript was not written on Mount Sinai. As stated in the colophon on fol. 186^v, the text was translated from Syriac by Bišr ibn al-Sirri, who completed his task in Damascus in 253 AH / 867 CE.⁶⁰ When and under what circumstances the manuscript was transferred to St Catherine's remains unknown, but what matters for now is the conclusion that von Tischendorf may indeed have come across early Arabic manuscripts in the monastery.

55 Fleischer 1861, 386. 'Finished is his epistle to the Hebrews which was written and sent from Rome. Completed are the fourteen epistles of Paul, thanks be to Christ. They are written as it is worthy of Him. Written in Sha'bān of the year two hundred and seventy-nine' (Weitzmann 1943, 120).

56 Delitzsch 1857, 768.

57 von Tischendorf 1847, 95–110. Most of the manuscript is in London, BL, Add. 43725; see <<https://codexsinaiticus.org/en/>> (accessed on 28 September 2023).

58 von Tischendorf 1847, 45–56; Evelyn White 1926–1932, vol. 1, xxxii, xli; Evelyn White 1926–1932, vol. 2, 45 (Dayr al-Suryān).

59 Zaki 2020, 201, 218.

60 Zaki 2020, 208, 215. For this manuscript, see Staal 1983; Zaki 2022.



Fig. 7: Icon: Sts Paul, Peter, Nicholas and John Chrysostom; St Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai; seventh/eighth century; by permission of St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt; photograph courtesy of Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai.

In the absence of relevant Sinaitic wall paintings and convincing analogies among the monastery's manuscript illuminations,⁶¹ the art historical component of the investigation concentrates on four encaustic icons in the Sinaitic collection that share some notable formal similarities with the miniature: a panel showing the Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace;⁶² a four-part icon representing Sts Paul, Peter, Nicholas and John Chrysostom (Fig. 7);⁶³ a more sophisticated panel depicting Christ as the Ancient of Days;⁶⁴ and a ditto triptych wing representing the Prophet Elijah.⁶⁵ Weitzmann considered the attribution of these specimens to Palestine in his study of the early Sinaitic icons, with Egypt as an alternative for the Christ panel. He dated the first two to the seventh/eighth century, and the better quality icons to the seventh century. Opinions have changed little since then, with Kathleen Corrigan recently attributing the Christ icon to Egypt, Palestine or Mount Sinai.⁶⁶ Although obviously painted by different hands, these pieces share a classicising rendering of the garments and white outlining reminiscent of that of the miniature. If we take the four-part icon, measuring 41.5 × 13.2 cm, and depicting figures of approximately the same size as the most attractive stylistic counterpart, the figure of St Nicholas shows the closest analogies to St Timothy in terms of appearance and pose (Figs 6–7). Other iconographic correspondences include the *omophorion* of Sts Nicholas and John Chrysostom, worn similarly to that of St Timothy, except that the wrapped part overlaps the loose end. These saints and St Paul also hold a red codex identical to that of St Timothy in the miniature. In all cases, the cover is ornamented with a lozenge enclosing a cross within a rectangular frame. Here, however, the similarities end; the coarseness of the icon contrasts with the delicacy of the miniature. The saints' features lack the expressive shadowing of St Timothy's face, and their eyes are more angular. In addition, the proportions of their bodies are significantly different, making the saints in the icon

⁶¹ See Weitzmann and Galavaris 1990.

⁶² Weitzmann 1976, vol. 1, 56, no. B31; vol. 2, plates XXII, LXXXII–LXXXIII; <<https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/2757#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-722%2C0%2C5443%2C2681>> (accessed on 28 September 2023).

⁶³ Weitzmann 1976, vol. 1, 58–59, no. B33; vol. 2, plates XXIV, LXXXV–LXXXVII; <<https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/6915#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-2741%2C0%2C8118%2C3999>> (accessed on 28 September 2023).

⁶⁴ Weitzmann 1976, vol. 1, 41–42, no. B16; vol. 2, plates XVIII, LXII–LXIII; <<https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/6945#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-2623%2C0%2C8118%2C3999>> (accessed on 28 September 2023).

⁶⁵ Weitzmann 1976, vol. 1, 42–43, no. B17; vol. 2, plate XIX; <<https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/10701#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-836%2C0%2C2078%2C1023>> (accessed on 28 September 2023).

⁶⁶ Corrigan 2010.

more compact.⁶⁷ As far as the painterly approach is concerned, the icon's sharp highlights, composed of thin white lines, are in radical contrast to the smooth gradations of the brushwork in the miniature. Although the idea of a distant shared workshop tradition is probably not too far-fetched, the execution – not only of this panel but also of the three other specimens – differs considerably. It is also important to note that painted wooden panels are as portable as manuscripts. Since it has been shown that a manuscript such as Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, Ar. 151 was not written in the monastery, the same applies to the icons under discussion. They may well have been painted in Egypt or Palestine and then transferred to Mount Sinai at some point in history. Of course, such uncertainties do little to help our efforts to link the manuscript Arab N.F. 327 to St Catherine's Monastery.

3.2 Wādī al-Naṭrūn

Von Tischendorf's account of his stay in Wādī al-Naṭrūn in 1844 digresses briefly on the acquisition of Coptic leaves in Dayr 'Abū Maqār and then refers to the Syriac and Ethiopian manuscripts he saw in Dayr al-Suryān, but remains silent on any other acquisitions.⁶⁸ Nor does he mention a possible follow-up visit in 1853 or 1859 in later reports. But Stenij's conclusion that the Epistles were translated from Syriac makes it worth exploring the possibility that this work took place in Dayr al-Suryān (Fig. 1). Initially an all-Coptic stronghold dedicated to the Virgin, from the early ninth century, the monastery also housed a colony of Mesopotamian Miaphysite monks originating from Tagrit (Tikrit in Iraq), who, in turn, maintained a steadily growing collection of Syriac manuscripts. Their library was greatly expanded in 931/932 CE when Dayr al-Suryān's abbot Moses (Mushe) of Nisibis returned from a journey to Mesopotamia with some 250 volumes he had collected along the way.⁶⁹

Of the many Syriac manuscripts transferred from this monastery to London in the nineteenth century and documented by William Wright, three copies containing the Pauline Epistles and written well before 892 CE could theoretically have served as a source for the Saint Petersburg copy. The earliest is London, BL, Add. 14479, completed in 845 AG / 534 CE at the expense of an unidentified commis-

⁶⁷ For the icon, the head-to-body ratio is about 1:5–5.6 (Sts Paul, Peter, Nicholas) and 1:6.2 (St John Chrysostom), against 1:6.8 for both figures in the miniature.

⁶⁸ von Tischendorf 1847, 52.

⁶⁹ Leroy 1974b; Brock 2004.

sioner living near Homs on behalf of a monastery in Edessa.⁷⁰ This is followed by London, BL, Add. 14478 of 933 AG / 622 CE, commissioned by one John bar Sergius of Halūgā near Sērūgh (*dixit* Wright), now Seruç in central Turkey.⁷¹ Finally, London, BL, Add. 14448 is dated 1012 AG / 80 AH, corresponding to 699/700 CE, thus, a good century before the establishment of the Mesopotamian community at Dayr al-Suryān.⁷² These volumes were obviously not made in Wādī al-Naṭrūn. An additional note in Add. 14478 mentions that it was brought to the monastery by Moses of Nisibis (very probably in 931/932; see above), and it remains unclear whether the two other manuscripts had already been transferred well before 892. The only Syriac Pauline Epistles known to have been in the monastery at that time is a fifth- or sixth-century copy, also preserved in the Rossijskaja nacional'naja biblioteka in Saint Petersburg (N.S. Syr. 3). A Syriac note on fol. 2^r states that it was rebound by the priest Yuḥanon bar Maqari, or John the (spiritual) son of Macarius. This Yuḥanon was the abbot of Dayr al-Suryān between Maqari and Moses in the last decade of the ninth and early tenth centuries (see below).⁷³

Significantly, notes in several Syriac manuscripts written in Dayr al-Suryān between 893/894 CE (1205 AG) and 903/904 CE (1215 AG) reveal that Yuḥanon not only participated in binding older manuscripts, but also translated texts from Coptic.⁷⁴ Against this background, it is difficult to see how the translation of a Syriac source into Arabic can be reconciled with the picture of a community that prioritised the expansion and preservation of its collection of manuscripts written in Syriac.⁷⁵ Another point of concern is the discrepancy between the age of the manuscript and the relatively late introduction of Arabic into Egyptian Christian writings in the tenth century – considerably later than in Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia.⁷⁶ Bearing these objections in mind, another possibility is that Arab N.F. 327 may have been written in another part of the Middle East rather than in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn. Vevian Zaki's observation that its text is 'known for its East Syriac readings and Qur'anic extensions' supports this assumption.⁷⁷ From this perspective, the manuscript may be one of many that were transferred from Mesopotamia and

⁷⁰ Wright 1870, CXXXV, 86.

⁷¹ Wright 1870, CXLI, 90–92.

⁷² Wright 1870, LXIV, 41–42.

⁷³ Innemée, Ochała and Van Rompay 2015, 174–175 (Van Rompay).

⁷⁴ Innemée, Ochała and Van Rompay 2015, 173–180 (Van Rompay).

⁷⁵ On the question of the translation of Coptic texts into Syriac in the ninth century and later into Arabic in Dayr al-Suryān, see Toda 2012, 64, 112.

⁷⁶ Rubenson 1996. For the earliest Bible translations in Arabic, see Griffith 2013, 97–121.

⁷⁷ Zaki 2020, 235.

Syria to Dayr al-Suryān over time and rebound there, in this case, with the addition of a presumably locally made, earlier frontispiece.

Dayr al-Suryān is also famous for the spectacular wall paintings in the church of al-‘Aḍrā’ (the Virgin), dating from the seventh to the thirteenth century.⁷⁸ Given that the Arabic Saint Petersburg Epistles were completed in 892 CE, a recently discovered decoration programme in the nave of al-‘Aḍrā’ with Coptic and Syriac inscriptions commemorating the death of Abbot Maqari of Tagrit in 1200 AG / 889 CE and commissioned by his successor Yuḥannon, mentioned above, deserves a closer look. The scenes include, amongst others, the usual double composition of Christ in Glory and the Virgin Enthroned; two equestrian saints, the deceased’s patron saint Macarius, and the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Paradise.⁷⁹ Although contemporary with Arab N.F. 327, there are no compelling art historical arguments to link this series of murals to its illustration. There are no convincing iconographic or stylistic analogies between the figures in the murals and those in the miniature: The wall paintings lack the latter’s classicising flavour, being considerably flatter and more linear.

The church of al-‘Aḍrā’ was extensively decorated in the eighth century, as evidenced by the remains of earlier Coptic-inscribed encaustic murals that have been gradually uncovered and restored by the Deir al-Surian Conservation Project since the 1990s. The combination of common formal features with a wide variety of brushwork, not to mention the considerable size of the decorated surface, suggests that the painting project was entrusted to a team rather than a single artist, or was spread over a longer period of time. The best preserved and most artistically appealing scene is located in the conch at the west end of the nave, depicting the Annunciation between the prophets Isaiah, Moses, Elijah and Daniel (Fig. 8).⁸⁰ The encaustic colours give the representation an incomparable freshness, enhanced by strong shadows, the intensity of which surpasses the comparable shadows in the miniature. It is striking that the garments of the figures in the wall paintings show similar drapery patterns to those of the miniature, including the combination of black and white outlines.

⁷⁸ For the restorations in Dayr al-Suryān, see the studies consulted, <<http://deiralsurian.uw.edu.pl/>>, and <<https://www.facebook.com/DeirAlSurianConservationProject>> (both accessed on 8 September 2023).

⁷⁹ Innemée, Ochała and Van Rompay 2015. Some of the scenes remain to be published.

⁸⁰ Innemée 1995; van Moorsel 1995; Immerzeel 2017, 101, plate 41.



Fig. 8: Conch painting: Annunciation; church of al-'Aḡrā', Dayr al-Suryān; eighth century; photograph: author/Paul van Moorsel Centre, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.



Fig. 9: Conch painting: Virgin of the Epiphany; church of al-'Aḡrā', Dayr al-Suryān; eighth century; photograph: author/Paul van Moorsel Centre, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Another fresh-coloured but more damaged depiction in the church is the Epiphany, located in the northern conch, within the space (*khūrus*) between the nave and the sanctuary (*haykal*; Fig. 9).⁸¹ Although stylistically reminiscent of the Annunciation, some significant differences indicate that this scene was painted by other artists working in the same pictorial tradition. The lower *khūrus* walls display a number of saintly figures, but most of them are in such a poor state of preservation that their recognisability had to be enhanced by retouching and filling in the gaps. It is possible to discern the same classicising elements as in the conch scenes, but generally, too little remains to make a credible comparison with the illustration. Only the retouched depiction of Sts Luke (left) and Barnabas (right) on the north wall seems to retain enough original detail to meet this challenge (Fig. 10).⁸² Rendered in full length and frontal view, the saints correspond compositionally with the figures in the miniature. Particularly noteworthy is the correspondence between the drapery patterns and white outlining, and, in terms of proportions, the head-to-body ratio is 1:6.8 in both cases is particularly noteworthy. The largely reconstructed faces of the Apostles are not considered here, but there is a striking similarity between the facial features of St Timothy and those of the Virgin in the Epiphany (Figs 6, 9). These similarities include the strong contrast between highlights and shadows, the large eyes, the narrow, straight nose bridge, the reddish blush on the cheeks and the triangular corners of the thin, brown-red mouths.

While the miniature perfectly mimics the stylistic formulae of Dayr al-Suryān's eighth-century murals, there are also tangible links with contemporary, though badly damaged paintings at Dayr 'Abū Maqār, some 12 km south-east of Dayr al-Suryān. The features of St Timothy and the Virgin of the Epiphany reappear in the portraits of the Virgin and an archangel (Gabriel?) painted on wooden roundels, acquired from Dayr 'Abū Maqār by the German prince Johann Georg Herzog zu Sachsen on the eve of the First World War and now in the Landesmuseum Mainz (Fig. 11).⁸³ The use of these extraordinary tondos can still be seen in the central *haykal* of the church of St Macarius, where similar 'head' panels remain attached to the faded images of the Twenty-four Elders of the Apocalypse – an extraordinary application not found elsewhere.⁸⁴ In brief, Dayr al-Suryān's team of painters also seems to have worked in Dayr 'Abū Maqār and undoubtedly

⁸¹ Innemée 2011; Immerzeel 2017, 101–102, plates 42–43. The church originally had a triconch at the east end, which was transformed into the present *khūrus* and *haykal* in the early tenth century.

⁸² Innemée, Van Rompay and Sobczynski 1999, 173–176, illus. 6–10; Innemée and Van Rompay 2002, 246–248, plates 2–5.

⁸³ Herzog zu Sachsen 1914, 69–70, figs 225–226; Immerzeel 2017, 102, plate 46; Leroy 1982, 25–26, fig. 4.

⁸⁴ Leroy 1982, 23–27, diagram A.

also in other Coptic settlements in Wādī al-Naṭrūn. Against this background, the obvious suspicion that the manuscript was kept and rebound in Dayr al-Suryān may be too narrowly formulated: Dayr 'Abū Maqār, where von Tischendorf had done good business in 1844, could be a no less serious candidate. In summary, our current state of knowledge allows us to attribute the illustration to Wādī al-Naṭrūn with a reasonable degree of certainty, particularly based on stylistic arguments. However, this conclusion does not necessarily imply that von Tischendorf himself took the volume from one of the monasteries in the area. He may also have obtained it from an unidentified intermediary source, such as an antiquities dealer or a priest of a church in Cairo.



Fig. 10: Wall painting; Sts Luke and Barnabas; church of al-'Aḡrā', Dayr al-Suryān; eighth century; photograph: author/Paul van Moorsel Centre, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.



Fig. 11: Panel painting: Head of the Virgin; from Dayr 'Abū Maqār; Mainz, Landesmuseum; eighth century; photograph: archive Paul van Moorsel Centre, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

4 Conclusions

Our search for connections between monumental church art in the Middle East and manuscript illuminations has yielded several promising matches, but they do not stand up to critical scrutiny. The first case concerns the iconographic links between the scenes representing St Theodore the Oriental in the excavated church of Tebtunis in the Fayyum, and in the manuscript M.613, produced in the same city in the early tenth century. Given that the illustration predates the mural by several centuries, it may, at most, have been inspired by an earlier monumental scene that has not survived.

As discussed above, the Nursing Virgin scene in London, BL, Or. 6782, written in the Fayyum in 989/990 CE, probably reflects a wall painting because of the architectural background elements and its likeness to this scene in the hermitage of Father Mena Panau near Dayr 'Abū Maqār (943/944 CE). Although the iconographic similarities are striking and the mural is the earliest of the two, a direct connection is unlikely because the sites are too far apart. In this case, the illustrator may also have been inspired by a nearby mural, also lost. On a more critical note, influences could theoretically also have been transmitted indirectly; the copying of miniatures from other manuscripts was undoubtedly common practice and it is

difficult, if not impossible, to establish when and where the hypothetical monumental prototype was created.

Regarding the Saint Petersburg manuscript Arab N.F. 327 of 892 CE and the possible links of its miniature to monumental ecclesiastical art, both St Catherine's Monastery and Wādī al-Naṭrūn have been investigated as possible provenances. Art historical considerations tip the balance in favour of the latter location. The best match is found in the eighth-century murals in Dayr al-Suryān, painted when the population was still entirely Coptic. Such an origin is all the more plausible given that the Pauline Epistles in question were translated from Syriac, the language of the Mesopotamian Miaphysite monks who lived in the monastery from the early ninth century onwards. However, this does not mean that the volume was written in Dayr al-Suryān; it is more likely that it had arrived there from Mesopotamia or Syria sometime after 892 CE. The time gap between the creation of the illustration in the eighth century and the writing of the manuscript supports Weitzmann's theory that the illustration was originally part of a Coptic (or Greek) manuscript. Going further, the current state of affairs allows us to shift our attention from the writing of the manuscript to the process of its care. To follow this line of thought, imagine that the book had to be rebound after its arrival in Egypt. At this stage of the process, a probably Coptic monk in charge of this task had the idea of reusing a contextually appropriate illustration taken from an earlier Coptic manuscript. Accustomed to placing the frontispiece at the beginning of a Coptic text, the bookbinder mistakenly inserted the page at the end of the Arabic text out of habit. It should be noted that it is conceivable that this person lived and worked in Dayr al-Suryān or one of the settlements nearby, such as Dayr 'Abū Maqār, where the same eighth-century muralists also left their traces. This suggests that the miniature may have been taken from a manuscript in the library of one of these monasteries. In view of the uncertainties above concerning the provenance and production process of the manuscript prior to the addition of the illustration and its subsequent whereabouts, it is advisable to provisionally assess Wādī al-Naṭrūn as the most likely origin of the rebound volume, without further specification of who brought it from there and when.

Within the broader perspective of Middle Eastern Christian art, the present study confirms that the process of identifying direct connections between specific miniatures and works of monumental art is indeed as complex as expected, although no stone has been left unturned. The main achievement is the well-founded contextualisation of the Saint Petersburg miniature within the artistic production of Wādī al-Naṭrūn in the eighth century, even if the history of the manuscript itself remains a mystery. However much it contributes to the discussion of the

connections between monumental and manuscript art, it is to be expected that this exceptional case will remain unique.

Finally, an interesting outcome of this research is the remarkable similarities between the Saint Petersburg miniature and the eighth-century murals at Wādī al-Naṭrūn, on the one hand, and the four Sinaitic panels mentioned, on the other. These analogies challenge us to further explore the possibility of artistic links between these works of art and consider, in the future, the attribution of the icons to an Egyptian atelier. However, one burning question remains unanswered. Given that the icons and murals discussed here had all been executed in the encaustic painting technique, one wonders whether the miniature was also encaustic. A conclusive chemical analysis of the pigments and binders would add much to our knowledge and pave the way for further evidence.

Abbreviations

BAV = Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

BL = London, British Library.

CLM = Coptic Literary Manuscript.

MLM = New York, The Morgan Library & Museum.

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