

ΧΡΟΝΙΚΑ
ΑΙΣΘΗΤΙΚΗΣ

ANNALES
D'ESTHETIQUE

ΤΟΜΟΣ 33/1994
VOLUME 33/1994

ΑΝΑΤΥΠΟ - EXTRAIT

ΕΤΗΣΙΟ ΔΕΛΤΙΟ
ΕΚΔΙΔΕΤΑΙ ΑΠΟ ΤΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΠΑΝΑΓΙΩΤΗ ΚΑΙ ΕΦΗΣ ΜΙΧΕΛΗ
ΜΕ ΤΗ ΣΥΝΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ ΑΙΣΘΗΤΙΚΗΣ

BULLETIN ANNUEL
EDITE PAR LA FONDATION PANAYOTIS ET EFFIE MICHELIS
EN COLLABORATION AVEC LA SOCIETE HELLENIQUE D'ESTHETIQUE

LILA DE CHAVES
THE "CRUCIFIXION WITH
THE TWELVE APOSTLES"
AT THE BENAKI MUSEUM*

*In memory of Laskarina Bouras
and Doula Mouriki*

The "Crucifixion with the twelve Apostles" (fig. 1), a unique embroidered panel (283cm × 48cm), was purchased in May 1929 by Anthony Benaki, the founder of the Museum, from Nahman, an antique dealer, for the price of 100 sterling pounds. It appears listed for the first time in the 1935 Catalogue of the Benaki Museum, with the simple description "The Crucifixion with the Twelve Apostles".

The same description is used, by the director of the Museum Prof. A. Delivorrias in "*The guide to the Benaki Museum*" Athens 1980, with the only addition "Tentatively assigned to the 7th century" and by Otto Meinardus in "*The Collection of Coptica in the QAŞR of the Monastery of St Antony*" who describes it as an embroidery of "the Crucifixion on silk with six Apostles on each side, one of whom slightly elevated"¹.

From the Early Christian period, the theological interpretation of the death of Christ found expression through the Crucifixion² in works of minor art (manuscript illustration, weaving, metalwork, engraving) such as the Crucifixion on the Monza ampula and that on a 5th century ivory relief from North Italy, (British Museum).

It became common from the 9th century and after the Iconoclastic Controversy in the East, Syria, Armenia, Egypt and the West, especially during the late Carolingian and Ottonian periods, in a great number of iconographic variations; in some instances, it might be ac-

* Acts of the Fifth International Congress of Coptic Studies, Rome 1993.

accompanied by the Virgin, St. John, the thieves, or other figures associated with the Passion. The representation of the "Crucifixion" in question, with Christ in the center and six Apostles on either side, standing next to each other in frontal poses is quite a rare one. The earliest similar type occurs, on a Greek sealstone, 3d century, in the British Museum, but this type as attested by Gertrud Schiller most probably comes from heretical circles³.

Usually, in the various christian iconographic depictions of the Crucifixion, the twelve Apostles are never presented all together, since Judas had already died. If this occurs, in a rare case, then Matthew B is selected as the 12th Apostle, in the place of Judas. From (Chapter B, of the Acts of the Apostles), it is derived that the depiction with the twelve Apostles is established iconographically with the Pentecost. That is, when the number of the twelve Apostles is complete, and all of them together receive The Holy Spirit, after which, they start preaching in the different languages. This is also mentioned in the First Epistle (16, 8) of Apostle Paul to the Corinthians.

The Crucifixion with the twelve Apostles, although rendered stylistically in a primitive and non-naturalistic way, with a total absence of any decorative elements, has undoubtedly a monumental nature. The Christ, nailed on the cross, occupies the center of the panel dividing the scene in two symmetrical parts in an unusual compositional configuration. On either side, stand six Apostles, one next to each other, in frontal poses, all of equal size except for the one far right, who is smaller. Only the Crucifix is larger thus the scene acquires importance and becomes centrobaric. Neither the Apostles, nor the figure of Christ seem to be supported firmly on any pictorial ground. They all look rather suspended in the narrow space of the textile, in an endless arrangement; thus being in accordance with the aesthetic expression, of the two dimensional surface, on which everything is suspended in a world that is transcendental and symbolic, so dear to the Copts. Christ his eyes closed in death⁴, depiction which was first traced on an icon from Mount Sinai of the 8th century as presented by K. Weitzmann and M. Chatzidakis, is nailed to a T-shape cross (*Crux Comissa patibulata*), or cross of St. Antony of Egypt⁵ (fig. 2). The cross is embroidered in purplish brown with some details in black, which evidently, although rendered in a naive way, play the role of the chiaroscuro around Christ's figure. His arms are outstretched and nailed; blood is also traced in salmon pink⁶.

Both his legs, the right one on the top of the left, are nailed to the upright of the cross, with only one nail and are not supported on a suppedaneum. This type of Crucifixion with only three nails, has its roots in the North and it first appeared in the 12th century. This representation shows a new outlook on the Passion, *Arma Christi*⁷, frequently appearing in many regions. Eventually it travelled to the East with the Crusades, during the 12th - 13th centuries⁸. Christ has a dark beard embroidered in black and lighter hair embroidered in brown. According to G. A. Sotiriou, these iconographic features are of a Jewish type⁹.

His body is portrayed frontally, rendered in a primitive style, with obvious disproportion, his legs being much shorter than his torso. His posture is heavy and stiff without any realistic leaning either to the right (Byzantine type), or to the left, *contraposto*, (western type).

He is wearing a *perizoma* (loin-cloth) which replaced the *colobium* or sleeveless *Chiton* (Tunic) from the 9th century onwards. Though, an interesting scene with the Christ wearing a *colobium* in later time¹⁰, can be noticed on a fresco from the *Episcopi* church in *Eurytania*, first layer, middle 12th century in the Byzantine Museum in Athens. In either of the two lateral compositions flanking the Crucifix the massive figures of the Apostles, are portrayed. They all have bell-shaped conventionally rendered bodies, a style which is properly Coptic, as evidence is found in various iconographic sources, on works of minor arts, on icons and frescoes as presented in detailed articles and works of Maggy Rassart-Debergh, Piotr O. Scholz, P. P. du Bourguet, M.-H. Rutschowskaya, L. A. Hunt, to mention only a few of the many experts. Some of the Apostles are wearing *colobia*, others *chitons*, with a small cross on the breast and *himatia* (*BIKOYKAION* in Coptic that is, the Byzantine *Phelonion*, or the Catholic *Chasuble*)¹¹.

Their heads are larger in proportion to the rest of the bodies. Their eyes are rendered with just a black line, the same goes for the eyebrows and the nose which is rendered in an oblong V shape. Their mouths are marked with only a small, either red or salmon pink line or dot. Their hair are embroidered in black and only one Apostle has a brown embroidered hair line on top of the black one. Most probably the embroiderer meant to portray a figure of a fair complexion. It is worthwhile to note, that none of the Apostles in this case is portrayed with white hair, that is, in an elderly age. Usually in the Eastern iconographical prototypes, in codices, Gospel illustrations etc. the Apostles

are represented through the Byzantine era with naturalistic features that follow specific iconographic rules, as presented in the most important work of the 17th century by Denys de Fourny, representing an iconographic variety of ages¹². Though at first sight, the Apostles, all look alike, one will soon notice that each one has its own particular features and thus personality. Two of the twelve look younger, with oval faces traced in black, three wear a beard and the rest have fat almost round faces with no apparent neck.

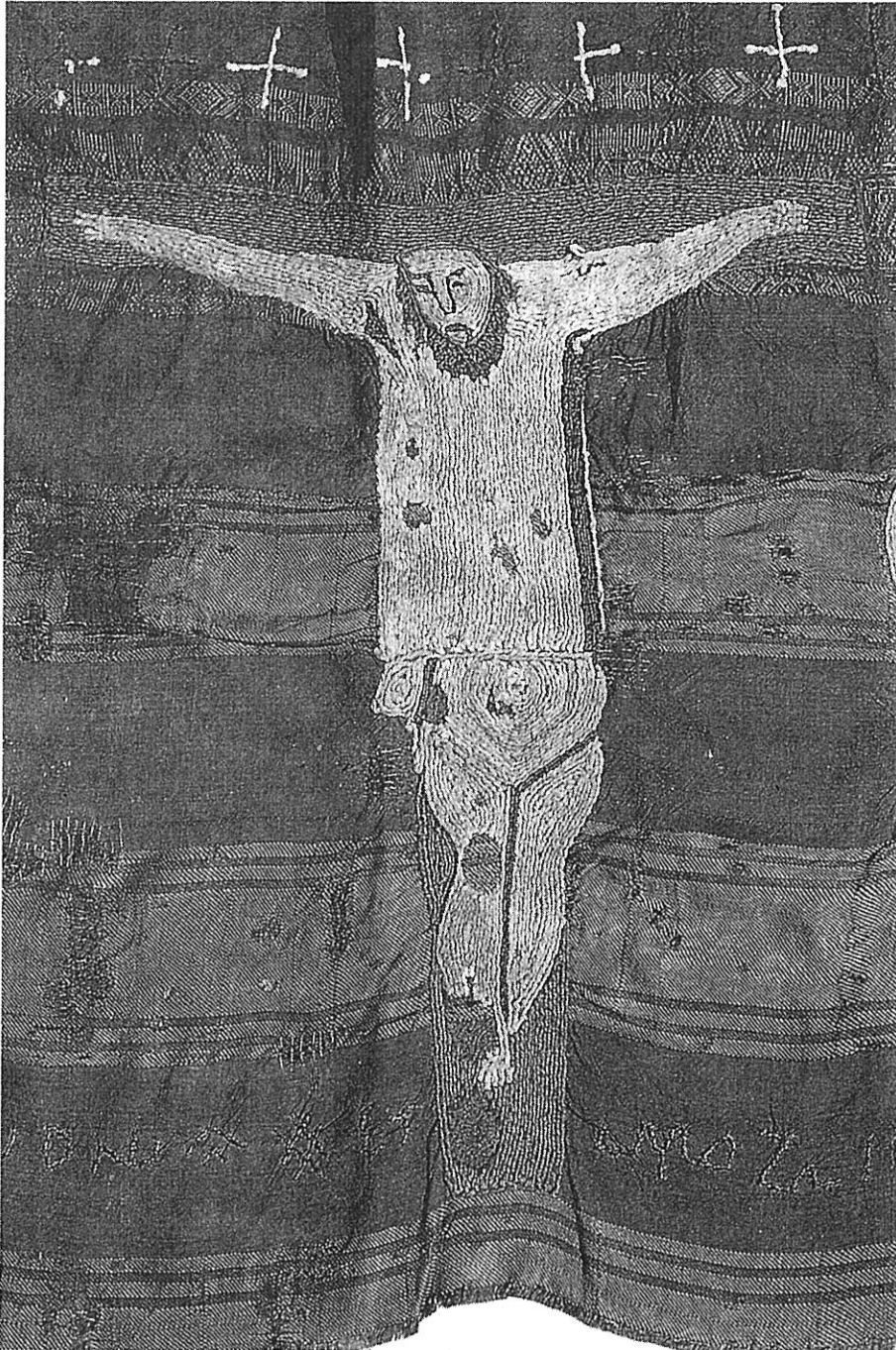
Their feet are bare, portrayed in the traditional Coptic style. A custom still preserved in Coptic ritual, where the priest is barefooted through the liturgy, symbolizing God's command to Moses to approach barefooted (Exodus 3, 5). This can also be traced in many icons and fresco depictions of Saints, as seen for instance in the icon of St. Antony and St. Paul in the Coptic Museum, or as well as, in the icon and the fresco of St. Thomas the Hermit.

In spite of the fact, that the Apostles seem to be in a static state, their feet show movement only five of them have been staying still. Three on the right side of the Crucifix, seem to walk towards Christ. The same goes for one Apostle in the other lateral composition, who also walks towards Christ only in the opposite direction.

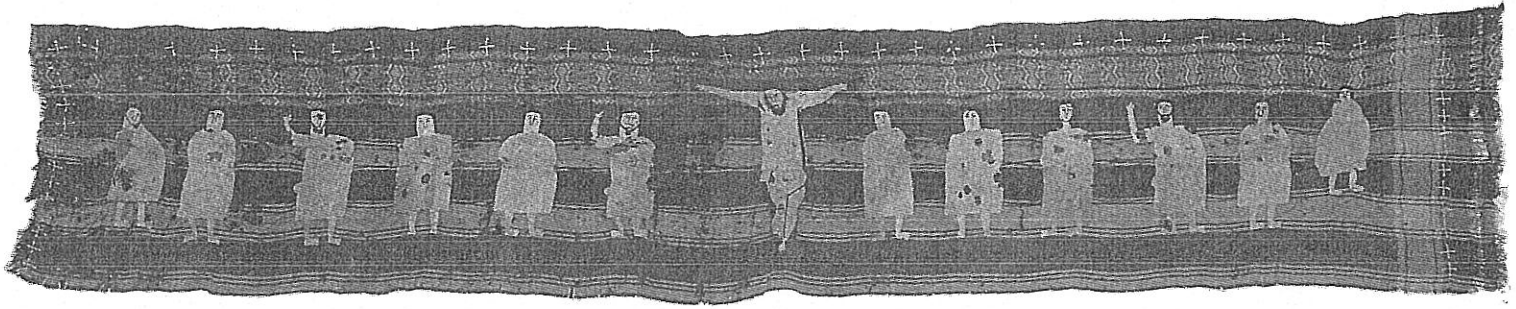
The three of the Apostles who wear a beard (perhaps meant to be older and wiser) two on the left and one on the right side of the scene, have their right hands raised in a gesture of testimony (fig. 3). Each one is holding an orb with an inscribed red cross, in their left hand. They are believed to represent the Apostles Peter, James and John (John XVII, 23), who are rendered in this same pose to symbolize the transfiguration (St. Catherine, Sinai) and the Ascension (The Rabbula Gospels)¹³.

Both these iconographic scenes belong to the cycle of the Theophany, that is of God's divine nature. At this point, we must turn our attention to the figure on the far right of the iconographic Crucifixion scene. As Otto Meinardus has already noticed, this Apostle is not on the same level with the others, but is elevated and seems somehow detached from the rest (fig. 2). He is smaller in size, differently dressed and seems to be moving away from the main dominant image, thus playing a second part in the scene.

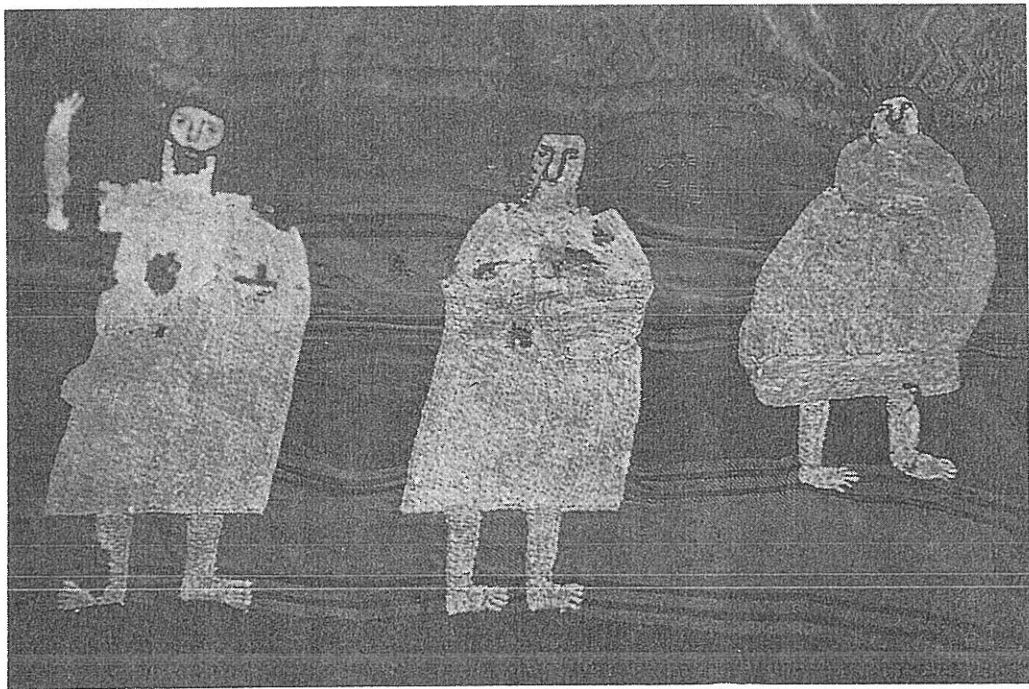
As I have already pointed out the iconographic representation of all twelve Apostles is referring either to the Ascension or to the Pentecost. Consequently, at this point, a question rises. Does this elevated figure



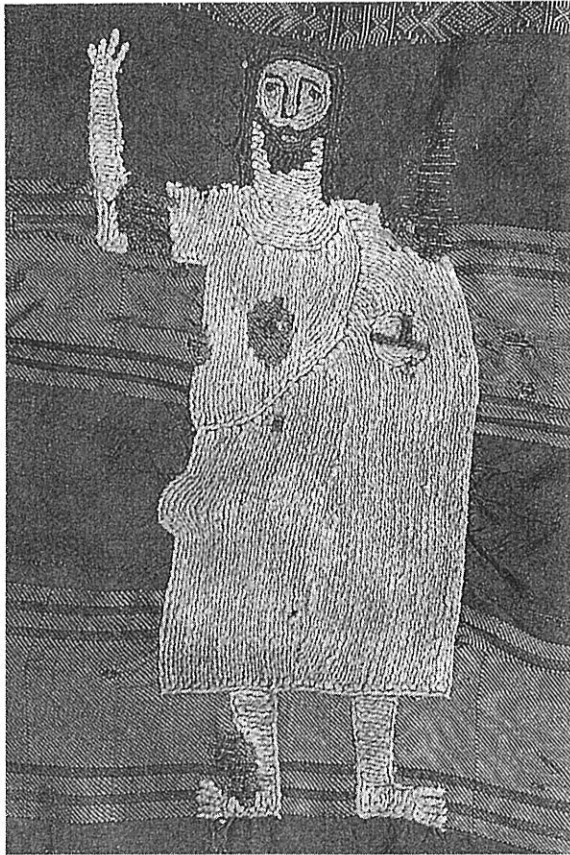
2. The crucifix stands in the middle of the scene, his eyes closed in death, being nailed on a T-shaped cross (Crux comissa patibulata) with only three nails and wearing a loincloth "perizoma".



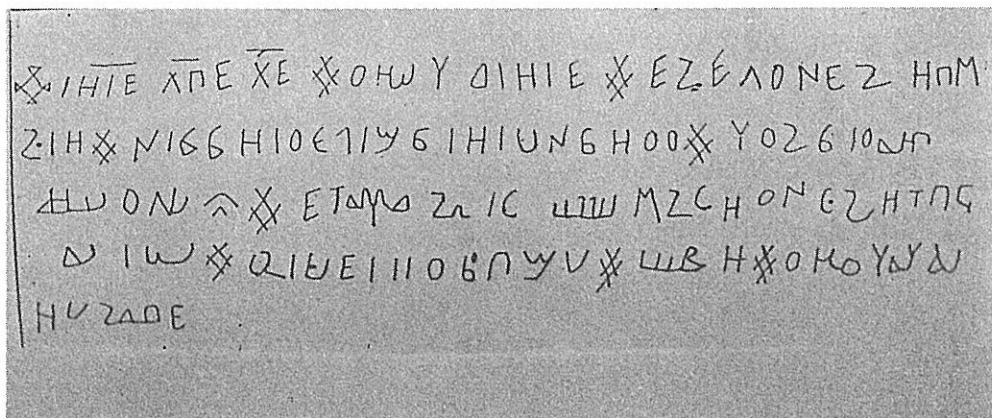
1. "The crucifixion with the twelve Apostles". A rare and mysterious embroidered silk panel (283 cm x 48 cm) of the late Coptic monastic period 13th-14th cent., Benaki museum.



4. Does this elevated figure represent Matthew (Chapter B of the Acts of the Apostles) thus representing Juda?



3. Three of the twelve bell-shaped Apostles have their hands raised in a gesture of testimony. Each one is holding an orb with an inscribed red cross in their left hand.



5. Unidentifiable inscription in coptic, greek, etc. characters (Δοξαστικόν?) embroidered in black length wise, in one line, exactly under the scene separated at intervals by a chrisme.

represent Matthew (Chapter B of the Acts of the Apostles) thus replacing Juda in a symbolic depiction reminiscent of Juda's death, hunged by the tree, therefore being elevated and not touching the ground?, as shown, for instance, in the depiction on an ivory carved casket in the British Museum¹⁴ (fig. 4).

In any case, we believe, that this unique representation of the Crucifixion with the Twelve Apostles which involves also the Ascension is not only an unusual and unique compositional formula, but allows us to assume that it represents Christ's Death as a triumph over Death emphasizing along with the other factors the non-Chalcedonic origin of the embroidered panel.


The scene of the Crucifixion is enframed by a row of small embroidered crosses on top, alternatively displayed in black and white. The two vertical sides left and right, have respectively twelve crosses in white. On top of the scene lengthwise there is a row of seventy crosses. We believe that the embroiderer has not embroidered the crosses merely by chance, but he or she, must have chosen these respective numbers on purpose, trying to emphasize their symbolic meaning.

If we are on the right track, the twelve crosses on the vertical sides are referring to the twelve Apostles (Number twelve being the symbolic representation of the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew XVIII, 28) and (Luke VI, 13).

As for the seventy crosses all along the top of the crucifixion scene, they must represent the Seventy Apostles; disciples which were named by Christ himself during his lifetime to spread his Word all over the World (Luke X, 1).

On the other hand, little crosses which surround an icon, or decorate a haical door, a haical curtain or an iconostassis or even the ecclesiastical vestments on the ΠΙΒΑΛΛΙΝ as found in the extensive works of A. J. Butler, Evelyn White, L. A. Hunt and others are of typically Coptic style, used for the exorcism of Satan, as pointed out by Reverend Pola Amba Bishoi, of the Coptic Church in Athens.

INSCRIPTION

Last but not least is the issue of the inscription which is embroidered in black lengthwise, in one line, exactly under the scene. It is separated at intervals by a Chrisme embroidered also in black  (fig. 5).

I am far from being an expert in the field of inscriptions. Nevertheless, being Greek I am familiar with the letters of the Greek alphabet and I believe, that I can recognise certain abbreviations common to my field of knowledge. In that respect and only, I permitted myself to present the inscription on the Crucifix, pointing out certain remarks, though I am well aware of the fact that to an expert these might be of trivial value.

The embroidered inscription is written in Greek and Coptic characters while in some parts there is a variation of other letters, as is pointed out by Reverend Pola Amba Bishoi of being Syriak (ⲬⲰ ⲛⲟⲩ) Tentatively, I recognized myself a galgolic one (Q). Some other letters are unidentifiable such as (ⲰⲰⲰ) is it Arabic?

Nevertheless, the first three abbreviations at the beginning of the inscription give us a clue that they are of Greek meaning. The first abbreviation, even though, misspelled is referring to the Monogram of Christ IHIE. The ⲰⲦⲎ second one adding (E) could be read as (ΕΛΕΗΣΕ /have mercy) and the third (ΧΕ) is deciphered with a great certitude as ΧΡΙΣΤΕ (Oh! Christ)¹⁵. Thus we are led to the conclusion that, this inscription is a Δοξαστικόν of either the holy Friday (ΔΟΞΑΣΤΙΚΟΝ of the Crucifixion) or a ΔΟΞΑΣΤΙΚΟΝ of the twelve Apostles, (30th of June). A coptic inscription with same chrisme, lozenge shaped, at intervals, is also traced on a late coptic tapestry fragment in the Louvre, that P. P. du Bourguet has described, as curtain or an altar hanging, from the Fayoum, 12th century¹⁶.

In conclusion, the iconographic scene of the Crucifixion with the twelve Apostles in the Benaki Museum, is a most particular, mysterious and unique representation of the Crucifixion. It is a hybrid, which has no similar. Iconographically it has elements from both the East, the West and the North as proved, stylistically in many details which are not apparent at first sight, one can trace Armenian connotations as for instance in the protuberant knot of Christ's loin-cloth (perizoma). In addition one can notice a Syrian influence especially in the rendering of the Apostles faces. The inscription in itself is a synthesis of letters from different Alphabets. However its obvious cyncretism, the particular personality of Coptic Art prevales, with its abstract, conventional forms and its pronounced mysticism and symbolisme, that nonetheless remains deeply Christian¹⁷. As for its place of origin only by instinct I would assign it to the Low Egypt region of Fayoum. Having no iconographic or stylistic parallels of the Crucifixion here examined,

it is practically impossible to gain any insight in its earlier history and in its origin. Dated at the 13th-14th century.

TECHNICAL CONTEXT

Both the fibers of the textile and those of the embroidered figures, have been examined by Microtomic section, at the (Institut Textile de France) ITF Paris laboratories, in 1992. The results were as follows.

Textile: purplish brown and orange fibers - Silk.

Embroidery: Crucifix, Apostles undyed white fibers - Cotton.

— Inscription, crosses, black dyed fibers Cotton (of particularly good quality).

TECHNIQUE OF TEXTILE

Despite the damage to parts of the Textile (263cm × 48cm), the crucifixion is a rare complete example of late coptic monastic embroidery. The narrative scene is embroidered on a purplish brown silk field in plain weave, which is decorated with three perpendicular to the embroidery woven bands (263cm × 7,5cm) of unspan orange silk threads in samit (2Z1). The third orange samit band, under the iconographic scene on which an inscription is embroidered lengthwise, is cut in the middle. This attests that the textile was wider. The upper larger band of the embroidered panel is decorated with an inlay-brocaded pattern with the same orange unspun silk threads. It consists of a repetition of geometric designs, such as the diaper scheme and a motif reminiscent of the candelabra tree ending to a smaller "head" upperelement, an important motif of the Umayyad period which was soon adopted by the Coptic weavers of the time¹⁸ and has persisted throughout the Mamluk period. By a happy chance, the salvedge at the top of the embroidered scene, (that is, at the right side of the textile, on which the embroidery was made), has been preserved and shows along with the weaving, the close fitted dents of a proper reed. This enables us to assume, taking into consideration the technical evolution of the draw-loom, that the textile must have not been woven before the late 12th - 13th centuries. Therefore we are dealing with a silk textile, excellently woven, but nevertheless, associated with a draw-loom mainstream production, which limits us to date it, between the 13th - 14th centuries.

TECHNIQUE OF EMBROIDERY

The scene is embroidered on part of the textile, occupying the space between the orange bands in the self-couched and knotted stem stiches, which were not only characteristic of the late Coptic period, but also used commonly in Medieval Eastern and Western Monasteries¹⁹. The embroidered version of the "Crucifixion and the twelve Apostles" shows a primitive and inferior technique. In spite of that, the effort of the embroiderer is obvious, which is, the portrayal of various iconographical details. This can be seen on the garments of the Apostles, the details of which have been rendered only by means of using a different direction of the stitch. This is a consequence of the fact that the embroidery mainly embroidered with white threads, except for some details which were rendered in red, brown, blue, salmon pink, black, (cotton dyed threads). Some of these colors have faded with time. The textile at the places of the embroidered figures, has shrunk and unsightly folds appear, which were created by the reaction of the cotton threads possibly, due to the fact, that the embroidery remained for a long time in a humid environment. The wears and holes on part of the textile are due to oxidation the origin of which has not been yet chemically determined.

NOTES

1. Otto Meinardus, The collection of Coptica in the QAŞR of the Monastery of St. Antony, *Bulletin de la Société d' Archéologie Copte*, vol. XVIII, p. 272; A. Delivorrias, *Guide to the Benaki Museum*, Athens 1980, p. 34.

2. For the evolution of the iconography of the Crucifixion see G. Millet, *Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'évangile*, Paris 1916, and Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian art*, vol. 2, New York 1972, figs. 323-324.

3. Gertrud Schiller, *op. cit.*, fig. 321. A similar arrangement of the Apostles is to be found in a scene of the Ascension. Fresco in the Baouit Monastery VII. R. P. Pierre du Bourguet, *L'art copte*, Paris 1968, p. 42.

4. In the East the iconography of the dead Christ first appeared after the iconoclast controversy in 843 AD, as it did in the West (School of Reims); see Radbertus, *De corpore et Sanguine Domini* 831-3, p. 9.

5. It is also used as the head of Pastoral staffs for the actual or symbolic support of ecclesiastics in the Orthodox and Coptic church. Heather Child and Dorothy Colles, *Christian symbols - ancient and modern*, Bell and Hyman, London 1960, p. 18.

6. G. A. and M. Soteriou, *Eikones tes Mones Sina - Icones du Mont Sinai*, 2 vols.,

Athens 1956-8, figs. 24-27. K. Weitzmann in *Icons from South Eastern Europe and Sinai*, London 1968.

7. For Arma Christi see Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, vol. 2, *The Passion of Jesus Christ*, New York 1971-1972, p. 146.

8. G. Millet, *op. cit.*, p. 412.

9. G. A. Soteriou, *Ὁ Χριστός ἐν τῇ τέχνῃ*, 1914, p. 109.

10. Gertrud Schiller, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

11. For an extensive description of Coptic ecclesiastical vestments, see A; Fred J. Butler, *The Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt*, vol. II, Oxford 1884.

12. For the Apostles representations see Διονυσίου τοῦ ἐκ Φουρνά «Ἑρμηνεία ζωγραφικῆς τέχνης» ἐν Πετρούπολει 1909, p. 298-299. French translation Denys de Fourná, *Manuel d'íconographie Chrétienne* par A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, St. Petersburg 1909.

13. Icon in the Benaki Museum. Ascension. 17th century. *Guide to the Benaki Museum*, Athens 1980, p. 77; manuscript illustration in the Bibliothèque Laurentienne, Florence; cf. A. Grabar, *La peinture Byzantine*, Genève 1953, p. 164.

14. Rowena Loverance, *Byzantium British Museum*, London 1988, fig. 15, p. 15.

15. On a unique icon of the Cretoitalian School, in the Byzantine Museum of Athens (T. 2638) 15th century is depicted a most rare representation of both the crucifixion and the resurrection in the East (Εἰς Ἄδου Κάθοδος) and west prototypes. The icon underneath has a two row inscription of a supplicatory troparion and has been eventually a donation.

16. Pierre du Bourguet, *Catalogues des étoffes Coptes I, Musée National du Louvre*, Paris 1964, L1 AC827, p. 647.

17. Evelyn White, *The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and the Scetis*, New York 1931 and *Publications of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Egyptian Expedition*, vol. VIII, New York 1973.

18. Carl Johan Lamm, *Cotton in medieval textiles in the Near East*, Paris 1937, p. 10, 12, 53, 55, 145. For a most extensive information on Textiles see Deborah Thomson in *Bulletin de Liaison du C.I.E.T.A.* Nos 61-62, Lyon 1985, 1-2 vol. fig. 8, p. 35-49.

19. P. P. du Bourguet, *Les étoffes Coptes du Musée du Louvre*, 13, 15 p. 646. Also in *Bildkataloge des Kestner-Museums Hannover Textilien I. Weberein und Stikerein des Mittelalters*, 1964 (Medieval stitches in Western monasteries).

I would like to extend warm thanks to:

Prof. M. Rassart-Debergh, Prof. D. Johnson, Prof. A. Delivorrias, Prof. Maria Theoharis, Prof. Marie-Hélène Rutschowskaya, R. Pola Amba Bishoi and John Meimaris.