

ALLEGORICAL ART IN THE EARLY BYZANTINE ERA : ICONS

Few icons have survived from the early Byzantine Era, and most of these can now be found in the monastery at Mount Sinai. This fortified monastery was founded by Emperor Justinian and completed sometime between the death of Empress Theodora (548) and the death of Justinian (565)—that is, during the lifetime of Dioscorus and before the death of St. Theodosius. It was originally called the Monastery of the *Theotokos* (“Mother of God”) and the church still bears this name, but the monastery is now called St. Catherine’s. The Sinai peninsula in the 6th century was not part of the province of Egypt, but was in the province of Palaestina Tertia, also called Palaestina Salutaris, whose capital was the ancient city of Petra (in modern Jordan). Mount Sinai was a popular destination for Jewish and Christian pilgrims. There was easy access to Sinai from Antinoöpolis, Egypt, by way of the *Via Nova Hadriana*, which ran across the desert to the Red Sea and then south to the port of Berenike. When Muslim Arabs subjugated the Sinai peninsula and Egypt in the 7th century, the fortified monastery remained independent but was tied off from Constantinople and the rest of the Byzantine World. Therefore, the three icons below (Figures 1, 2, and 3), which appear to have been created by Constantinople artists, were probably donated to the monastery by Justinian at its foundation or certainly before the middle of the 7th century. All three sixth-century icons at the Sinai monastery demonstrate an allegorical style. Christ, the Mother of God, saints, and angels are presented as a Byzantine emperor, empress, consuls, generals, and courtiers.

Figure 1 (facing page). *Christ Pantocrator*. Artist: Unknown. Date: first half of the 6th century. Provenance: Constantinople. Present location: Sinai. 84 x 45.5 cm. Encaustic icon.

This is the earliest of the three Sinai icons, and the least allegorical. As in all three icons, there is not an attempt at an historical reproduction of the life of Christ. It is an image of Christ in heaven, the All-Powerful, and was created for devotional purposes. The golden *nimbus* (“halo”) suggests his spiritual nature, as does the general aloofness of his facial expression. His eyes are not fixed on any particular point. He has raised two fingers, which are the standard sign of spiritual blessing. Yet the heavenly king is presented here as a very real emperor on earth. He is wearing a tunic and mantle that appear simple in design, but their color is imperial purple. He is carrying a jewel- and pearl-studded codex of the Bible, such as would be found in the imperial palace. Palace architecture is behind him. The realism of the figure is emphasized by the asymmetry of his wide-open eyes, the arched eyebrow, the flesh beneath his eyes, and the treatment of his moustache and beard. The color of his skin is especially vibrant. This icon, an accomplished masterpiece whose artist is unknown, was probably an imperial gift to the monastery.



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Figure 2 (facing page). *The Theotokos, Flanked by St. Theodore and St. George*. Artist: Unknown. Date: 6th century. Provenance: Constantinople. Present location: Sinai. 68.5 x 49.7 cm. Encaustic icon.

This is a representation of the *Theotokos* (“Mother of God”) in heaven. It was created for devotional purposes. She is flanked by Saint Theodore (bearded) and Saint George, and two archangels stand behind. The spirituality is suggested by the angels’ translucent *nimbi*, raised eyes, and pure white garments. The hand of God descends and emanates white light upon the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. The angels are bending away in religious awe and looking not at the hand, but at the invisible God. The spirituality is also emphasized by her aloofness, which is conveyed by averted eyes. The spiritual hierarchy is clear: the *Theotokos* is at the center of the composition and raised off the ground on her throne. Although seated, she is equal in height to the two saints. But the hand of God is above her, and the Christ Child is in front of her.

In an allegorical style more comprehensive than Figure 1, the Mother of God is depicted as a Byzantine empress. She is wearing a *maphorion* of imperial purple and thick makeup. Her scarlet shoes were a prerogative of the empress. She is seated upon a pearl-studded throne. Her child is clothed in gold. The two saints, soldiers during their lifetime, are here depicted as Byzantine generals, wearing the sumptuous clothing and slippers of civil authorities. At the time of Justinian, the *strategos* (“general”) was an administrative office as well as a military rank. The two archangels are holding golden scepters. The realism of this imperial allegory is conveyed by several details. The Christ Child is presented as a real infant, with the mother holding him securely on her lap with her right hand. She is carrying his full weight on her left thigh, which she tries to relieve with her left hand. With her right foot and right knee turned sideways, she balances the child’s right foot. In contrast to the active eyes, hands, and legs of the mother, the generals are stiff as pylons: their eyes straight ahead, their shoulders squared. The older soldier is bearded and sunburnt, the younger is pale.



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Figure 3 (facing page). *Saint Peter*. Artist: Unknown. Date: second half of the 6th century. Provenance: Constantinople. Present location: Sinai. 92.8 x 53.1 cm. Encaustic icon.

This is the last of the three Sinai icons from the 6th century and is the most realized allegory. (It might even date to the early 7th century.) It is an imitation of one half of a consular *diptych* (“two-wings”). The two consuls were the highest civil and military magistrates in the Roman republic. In the empire, they were second in power only to the emperor, until the consulship was finally abolished in the 6th century. The consul here is wearing the *toga praetexta*, worn only by high ranking officials. His hair and beard are well-trimmed and groomed, and his face betrays a well-educated, care-worn appearance. In the background is palace architecture. This architecture, hinted at in Figures 1 and 2, is now elaborate.

The artist has made a few changes to the standard secular design in order to show that this is not a living consul but a saint in heaven. There is the large golden *nimbus*. In the three medallions above, one would normally find representations of the emperor, empress, and co-consul. Instead, the three medallions here might be recalling the episode of the crucifixion when John was given guardianship over the Virgin by Jesus (note the cross behind). Saint Peter, instead of holding the typical symbols of secular authority—a *mappa* and scepter—is holding the keys to heaven and a cross staff. The cross might be suggesting Peter’s own death by crucifixion. Despite its secular design, this icon was created for devotional purposes.



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Figure 4 (following pages). *Christ and the Theotokos*. Artist: Unknown. Date: 6th century. Provenance: Ravenna, Italy. Present location: Berlin. 29 x 13 cm.; 29 x 12.7 cm. Ivory diptych.

This *diptych* was created roughly at the same time as Figure 2 and probably by Constantinople artists working in Italy. It is a concealed spiritual allegory modeled on the consular *diptych*. The aged and bearded consul is sitting uneasily upon the consular *sella curulis*. His forehead is lined with care. He is wearing a Roman toga and holding a large, jewel-studded codex, a prized possession symbolizing his stature as a judge. The highly adorned palace architecture in the background contains pagan Hellenistic motifs. Two nobles stand behind, also wearing Roman togas. Their faces are haggard and wearing the same serious expressions that are seen in the Ravenna mosaic of emperor Justinian and his court (Figure 6). (This *diptych* shows similarities to the artwork in the throne created for Maximian, the Archbishop of Ravenna.) The consular design of the left wing is mirrored on the right. In fact, the consul on the left has turned his knee toward the other consul, who has turned her knee toward him, thus visually strengthening their close relationship. In the background of the right wing is again ornate palace architecture boasting pagan Hellenistic motifs. The woman is sitting on the consular *sella curulis* and holding her child firmly between her legs. Her face is unlined and her figure is soft and ample. Her attendants are young and obviously uneasy; both are wearing the *chlamys* of soldiers. While both attendants have their eyes fixed on the consul, she is staring straight ahead in a rigid expression, challenging the viewer. The child is scowling. The entire scene exudes royal wealth and power.

It is with difficulty that one detects another, hidden level of meaning. The noble on the consul's right side is staring ahead and holding up a hand, perhaps in greeting or to stop the viewer from approaching closer. If it is a warning, it is echoed by the lion heads on the consul's *sella*. The consul, however, is holding up two fingers in blessing. These two fingers are the only clear indication that this wing is not part of a secular, consular *diptych*.

In fact, the surface level, intensified by arresting details, veils a highly spiritual allegory. The seated figure in the left wing is Christ as the Ancient of Days, a

prophecy found at Daniel 7:22. In this vision, the Ancient One passes judgement and the Holy Ones gain possession of the kingdom. This identification accounts for the Mosaic Laws (the Christian term for the first five books of the Bible) on the Ancient's knee. Behind him stand Peter and Paul. In the right wing of the *diptych* sits the *Theotokos*. Behind her stand the archangels Gabriel and Michael. The Christ Child is imitating the blessing of the Ancient One. In the Child's left hand is a papyrus roll of the New Testament, which supplanted the Mosaic Laws.

The common indications of allegory—haloes, wings, aloofness, crosses, etc.—have been eradicated by the artist. But the hierarchical symmetry and religious symbolism clearly demonstrate that this was a devotional icon.





Figure 5 (facing page). *The Theotokos, Apostles, and Ascension*. Artist: Unknown. Date: 6th century. Provenance: Egypt. Present location: Cleveland. 179 x 100 cm. Hanging tapestry icon.

This allegorical icon from Egypt reflects the Coptic art of the period in its rustic renderings and bold colors. The imperial, secular level of meaning provides only a thin veil for the spiritual level of meaning. Similar to the Sinai icon (Figure 2), the archangels Michael and Gabriel stand behind the *Theotokos*: their names are inscribed in Greek above the columns of the palace architecture. The Mother of God is seated on a jeweled throne. Flowers bloom and vines swirl behind her, on the floor, and in the margins. In the zone above, Christ is enthroned. Both are wearing imperial purple.

The spiritual level is seen vividly in the Ascension: Christ is being carried aloft by two angels into a red heaven beyond the star-filled blue. As in the other icons, he is blessing the devout viewer. (In the popular belief of the Byzantine Era, these icons carried the same beneficent grace as the spiritual beings themselves.) The spirituality is also emphasized by the elevation of the Virgin's throne and footstool: the feet of the archangel Michael are visible beneath. The eyes of the attendant archangels are focused on the *Theotokos*. But emphasizing the spiritual detachment, her eyes are unfocused and the eyes of the Christ Child are averted. The twelve medallions hold busts of the apostles, whose names are written in Greek.



Clement A. Kuehn

