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The Holy Face of Edessa on the Frame of the *Volto Santo* of Genoa: the Literary and Pictorial Sources

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Introduction

AN ICON OF CHRIST known as *Volto Santo* (Fig. 1) is kept in the Armenian church San Bartolomeo in Genoa. It is a tempera painting on linen with a background of golden foil, attached to a wooden panneau.¹ The painting is set in a thick frame of gilded silver, decorated with filigree and ten plates worked in relief, enhanced by chiselling and the *niello* technique,² which depict the story of the miraculous image called Mandylion,³ its copies and the letter of Jesus to Abgar, king of Edessa.

In 1384 Lionardo Montaldo, an officer of the Genoese colony on the Bosphorus, bequeathed the picture to San Bartolomeo. He had received it, or, as some scholars believe, stolen it from John V Palaiologos.⁴ The icon had the reputation of being the Mandylion, that is a true image of Christ, not made by human hand (*acheiropoietos*). From the time of that donation, the painting is often mentioned in written sources and its history from the fourteenth century is well documented.⁵ But many problems still remain regarding its origin and provenance.⁶

¹ Measuring 17,5 × 28 cm.

² The icon is preserved in a silver box with engravings on the back. The front is adorned by a golden frame ornately decorated with precious stones, C. Dufour Bozzo, *Il 'Sacro Volto' di Genova* (Rome, 1974), pl. I–VIII, XXII.

³ *Mandylion/mandilion* (from Arabic *mandil* = kerchief) seems to be used in liturgical contexts. Otherwise the image is called *theia eikon*, *apeikonisma*, *ektypoma*, *ekmageion*, *cheiromaktron*.

⁴ Dufour Bozzo, *Il 'Sacro Volto'* (note 2), 13–17.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 63–70.

⁶ C. Dufour Bozzo presented the results of her many years of research about the icon in two monographs and numerous papers which were published between 1967 and 1996, cf. note 2 and C. Dufour Bozzo, *La cornice del "Άγιον μανδύλιον di Genova* (Genoa, 1967); eadem, “La Cornice del Volto Santo di Genova,” *CahArch* 19 (1969), 223–30; eadem, “Sur une étoffe placée derrière la ‘sainte face’ de Gênes,” *Bulletin de liaison du Centre international d'études des textiles anciens* 30 (1969), 35–38; eadem, “Documenti di un incerto tessuto figurativo,” in *La pittura a Genova e in Liguria*, 1, *Dagli inizi al Cinquecento* (Genoa, 1970), 23–25; eadem, “Un’ ipotesi sulla tavoletta del ‘Sacro Volto’ di Genova,” in *Atti del III Congresso nazionale di archeologia cristiana* [Antichità altoadriatiche, 6] (Trieste, 1974), 567–573; eadem, “Il ‘Sacro Volto’ di Genova. Problemi e aggiornamenti,” in H. L. Kessler & G. Wolf (eds.), *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation: Papers from a Colloquium held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome and the Villa Spelman, Florence* [Villa Spelman Colloquia, 6] (Bologna, 1998), 55–67 (henceforth *Paradox*). The icon is often mentioned in the very extensive literature concerning the illustration of the legends of King Abgar and the Mandylion, Ch. Walter, “The Abgar cycle at Mateič,” in B. Borkopp, B. Schellewald, L. Theis (eds.), *Studien zur byzantinischen Kunstgeschichte. Festschrift für H. Hallensleben* (Amsterdam, 1995), 221–31, where earlier literature is listed. I

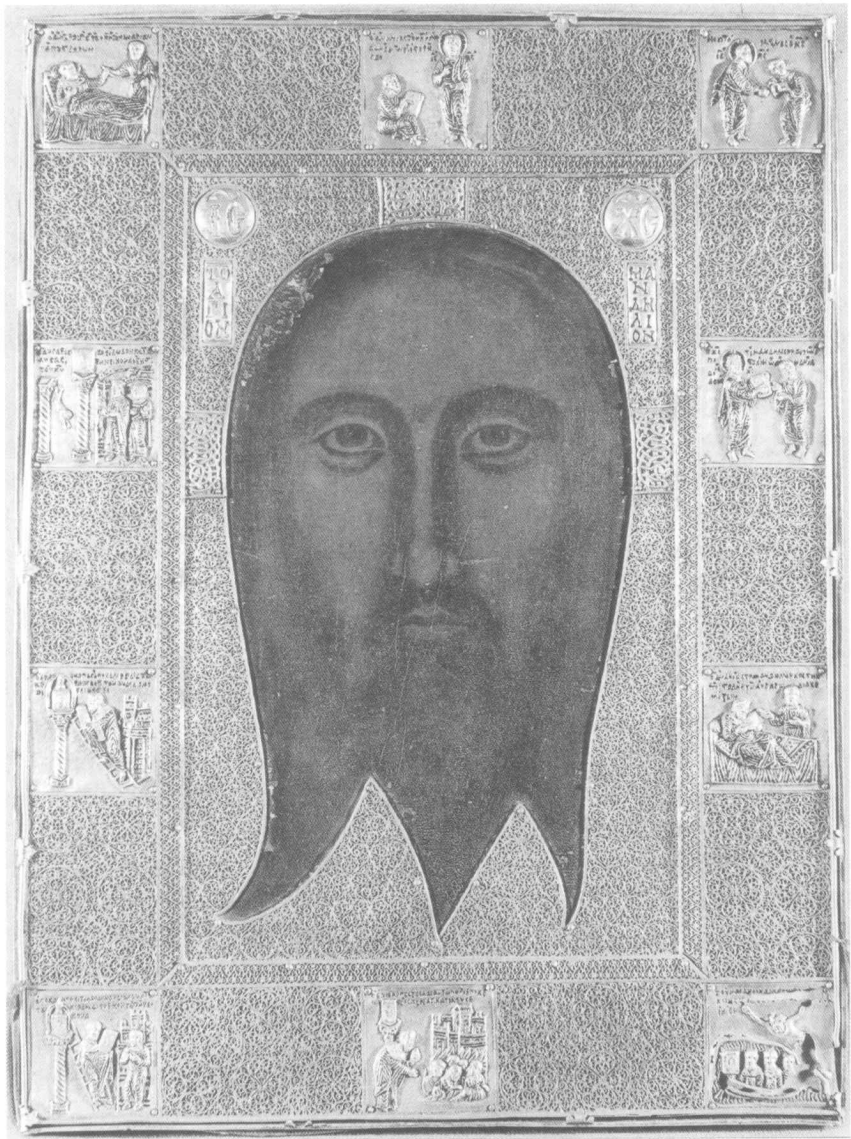


Fig. 1. The *Volto santo* of Genoa.

Unlike other icons which are considered to be miraculous and therefore have been inaccessible for research, the Genoese Mandylion has been examined in detail.⁷ It shows the face of Christ frontally, wearing a tri-partite beard, which fuses with his flowing, simply dressed hair. The painter used reddish-brown pigments exclusively, with the result that the facial features became indistinct.⁸ An unnatural calm, timelessness and sense of

was not able to consult the monograph by G. Ricci, *Il mandilion di Edessa e il Santo Volto di Genova* (Rome, 1998).

⁷ Stylistic and radiographic analysis show that the image was repainted at least three times, the first time in the 11th century. However the changes were not considerable and the present painting seems to be very close to the original version, Dufour Bozzo, *Il 'Sacro Volto'*, 40–43.

⁸ For a reproduction in colour see *Chiese di Genova*, text by C. Ceschi (Genoa, 1967), pl. 157.

distance emanating from the visage represent an absolute ideal of beauty created in accordance with early Christian aesthetic canons.⁹

The relief-decorated frame is dated on stylistic and palaeographic grounds to the Palaiologan epoch. Comparative studies of its filigree and *niello* technique allow us to suppose that the frame was produced in Constantinople in one of the workshops connected to the imperial court.¹⁰ Such a conclusion seems to be confirmed by a palaeographical analysis of the inscriptions which accompany each scene, and by surveying the semantic field of the word *mandylion*.¹¹ The word appears together with the monogram of Christ inside the frame and is consequently used in the inscriptions on the reliefs (Fig. 9a–j).

On the back of the panel there is a fragment of fabric with a purple woven motif representing a winged animal within a medallion surrounded by small quadrupeds.¹² Its origin, dating and iconographical affiliation with the legend of the Mandylion is still a matter for discussion.¹³

It is not surprising that in the case of such a complex artefact as the *Volto Santo* of Genoa there are still many problems which should be further investigated. Among these are the textual and pictorial sources of the story represented on the frame of the painting.¹⁴

The legend

The legend of the Mandylion, known in many versions and preserved in many languages, is a very complex narrative. It grew gradually over several centuries, having different traditions, which included both historical and literary sources, as background. Three main topics are linked in the legend: the miraculous image of the Holy Face, its copies (the most famous being the Keramion, imprinted on clay), and the letter of Jesus to the king of Edessa. It seems that the legend did not develop after the eleventh century when this precious icon became a part of the large collection housed in the imperial Chapel of the Pharos church in Constantinople.¹⁵

⁹ H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: a History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago & London, 1994), 210–214. It was discovered that the painting by its size and iconography matches two 10th-century panels from Sinai which contain pictures relating to the legend of Abgar, and that all three may be parts of the same triptych. However the same features are present in the portrait of Christ which is kept in the Roman church of S. Silvestro in Capite, op. cit., 210, figs 125, 15. In 1996, in connection with the symposium on the Mandylion held in Rome, a closer examination of the latter was made possible. It was established that the icon from Genoa is older. A definitive solution to the problem of the affinity of all four pieces will require a detailed dendrological and pigment analysis.

¹⁰ A. Lipinsky, "Oreficerie bizantine dimenticate in Italia," in *Atti del I Congresso Nazionale di Studi Bizantini (archeologia, arte), Ravenna 23–25 maggio 1965* (Ravenna, 1966), 107–37; A. Grabar, *Les revêtements en or et en argent des icônes byzantines du Moyen Âge* (Venice, 1975), 12–14, 63–64.

¹¹ H. Drijvers, "The Image of Edessa in the Syriac Tradition," in *Paradox* (note 6), 13–31, esp. A. Cameron, "The Mandylion and Byzantine Iconoclasm," *ibid.*, 37.

¹² Technical report on the fragment by G. Vial, in *Il 'Sacro Volto'* (note 2), 140 f., fig. XXIII.

¹³ It seems to be either Sassanian or Byzantine using Sassanian patterns and was produced between the 8th and 10th centuries, Dufour Bozzo, *Il 'Sacro Volto'* (note 2), 33–40; Dufour Bozzo, "Sur une étoffe" (note 4); Dufour Bozzo, "Documenti" (note 6). The problem was also discussed by D. Taverna, "Il cavallo alato. Elementi per uno studio iconologico di un tessuto orientale della teca del Santo Volto di Genova," *Mesopotamia* 28 (1993), 195–223, who dates the fragment to the 8th–9th centuries and connects its production with an Armenian workshop in Edessa. See also Dufour Bozzo, *Il 'Sacro Volto'*, 60 f.

¹⁴ C. Dufour Bozzo, "La cornice" (note 6), 230, note 18; Dufour Bozzo, *Il 'Sacro Volto'* (note 2), 59.

¹⁵ Cf. *infra*, note 27.

Since the pictorial programme decorating the frame represents an intricate version of the legend in which all three relics are involved, it seems worthwhile to outline the narrative.

King Abgar of Edessa in Syria, who was seriously ill, learned from his messengers about Jesus and his miracles. He wrote a letter to Jesus in which he invited him to Edessa, saying that he was ready to share his kingdom with the honoured guest. The letter was delivered by an artist who was ordered to paint a portrait of Jesus. In his response Jesus declined the invitation for himself but assured the king that he would send one of his disciples to Edessa. He blessed the city and promised that no enemy would ever prevail over it.¹⁶ Abgar also received a portrait of Jesus which, according to some versions of the legend, was a picture painted by the king's artist or, according to others, a print of the face of Jesus on a piece of linen. The image had healing power, which had already manifested itself during its journey to Edessa: a paralytic who touched it was miraculously cured. King Abgar experienced the same miracle. After physical contact with the image his health was restored and all the sick people of Edessa were cured.

The portrait had another remarkable feature: it was able to replicate itself. That was revealed for the first time when Abgar's messenger went through the city of Mabbugh (Hierapolis) carrying the relic. Afraid that it might be stolen, he buried it in a pile of bricks. When a column of fire revealed the hiding place the people found that a print of the face of Jesus had appeared on the brick which lay closest to the image.

Abgar was schooled in Christian doctrine and baptised by Addai, one of the seventy disciples of Jesus. The portrait, greatly venerated in Edessa, was first kept in the royal palace and later displayed in a niche over the main city gate. Together with the letter of Jesus, it was considered to be Edessa's *palladium* which gave the city constant protection. Already during Abgar's time the letter saved the city by making it invisible to attacking enemies.

When one of Abgar's successors who had abandoned the Christian faith planned to destroy the icon it was walled up in a secret place by a bishop of Edessa. Hundreds of years later the Persian army attacked Edessa, but the picture, miraculously discovered, saved the city. The Holy Face's fame grew throughout the whole Christian world. Even the Persians held it in high esteem after one of its copies healed the daughter of their king.

When the Byzantine emperor Romanos Lekapenos used the threat of military force to claim the relic it was delivered unwillingly and only after much debate. The inhabitants of Edessa protested and were themselves ready to use force to stop the departure of their icon. However the picture showed by unusual signs that it was willing to be given away. During its journey to Constantinople many miracles took place. One of them attracted special attention because of its clearly political context. A demented man who watched the entry of the portrait into the Theotokos monastery

¹⁶ The belief that the city of Edessa enjoyed the special protection of Christ has some historical foundation. In the middle of the 2nd c., during Sapor I's war in Mesopotamia and Syria the whole territory was laid waste and all big fortified cities were besieged, except Edessa. The same situation was repeated during the invasion of Chosroes, see *infra*, p. 110. Prokopios, who himself doubts the authenticity of the promise, relates that the Persian kings attempted to capture the city in order to disprove the validity of this reputed protection, Prokopios, *History of the Wars*, II, 12, 26, ed. & trans. by H. B. Dewing (London & New York, 1914 [1992]), 369–371.

in Bithynia “declared” that Constantine Porphyrogennetos would accede to the throne. He was cured immediately after this prophetic utterance.

The entry of the icon into Constantinople was celebrated with great pomp. A paralytic watching the painting being carried in procession along the streets was healed. When, after all the ceremonies, the relic was deposited in the chapel of the Pharos and then at the Blachernae Palace, it revealed again that Constantine had been chosen by God to ascend to the throne: while looking at the image, he saw the face of Christ clearly but the sons of Romanos Lekapenos, the emperor’s legitimate successors, discerned only a blurred smudge.

The final legendary tale about the icon concerns the hermit Paul of Latros, the only person considered worthy to contemplate the Holy Face. He got a copy of the image when it was miraculously replicated on a piece of linen applied to the icon. The new picture was visible exclusively to the pious monk.

The relics

THE ICON AND ITS COPIES. It is quite possible that an old icon of Christ, which gave rise to the Legend of the Mandylion, was once preserved in Edessa.¹⁷ The presence in the region of pictures of this type were recorded in written sources. Eusebios in his *Church History* mentions painted portraits of Christ, and a Syrian *Church History* reports that at the beginning of the sixth century “an icon of the Lord Jesus, depicted in the likeness of the Galilean,” was kept in the treasury of a church in Amida.¹⁸

The image in Edessa did not have the status of *acheiropoietos* from the outset. This ranking was a later development and opinions differ as to when and under what circumstances it happened. Some scholars suggest that an old icon was displayed for the Edessenes during Chosroes I’s siege of the city in 544 in order to bolster the courage of the besieged citizens. Soon thereafter, in order to make manifest the protection of Christ through the picture, a story which raised its prestige was invented.¹⁹ Other historians who question the dating of the relevant texts put the phenomenon in the eighth century.²⁰

More references to the Edessene picture are to be found in sources from the seventh–eighth centuries, the period when Edessa was the scene of religious controversy between Monophysites and Chalcedonians. It seems that the latter owned an icon which they kept in their church and promoted as being a miraculous portrait of Christ. Throughout the prolonged conflict between these two religious parties the icon was the object

¹⁷ The reliability of the reference to the Edessene painting in the unpublished *Vita* of St. Daniel of Glesh († 439), written at the beginning of the 6th c. by Jacob of Serugh, is still discussed by scholars, cf. Drijvers, “The Image of Edessa” (note 11), 17 f.

¹⁸ Eusebios, *The History of the Church*, VII, 18, 4, trans. by G. A. Williamson (Harmondsworth, 1981), 302; *The Syriac Chronicle known as that of Zachariah of Mitylene*, trans. by F. J. Hamilton & E. W. Brooks (London, 1899), 158. The same chronicle refers to a portrait of Christ in Kamouliana in Caesarea of Cappadocia, op. cit., 320 f.

¹⁹ The icon is not mentioned by Prokopios who describes the same siege in *Bellum Persicum*, nor in the *Chronicle of Edessa*. It appears for the first time in Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, IV, 27, trans. by A.-J. Festugière, *Byzantion* 45 (1975), 386–88. See also S. Runciman, “Some Remarks on the Image of Edessa,” *Cambridge Historical Journal* 3 (1929–30), 243; Cameron, “The Mandylion” (note 11), 39.

²⁰ Drijvers, “The Image of Edessa” (note 11), 18–19; J. Chrysostomides, “An Investigation Concerning the Authenticity of the Letter of the Three Patriarchs,” in J. Munitiz & J. Chrysostomides (eds.), *The Letter of the Three Patriarchs to the Emperor Theophilus and Related Texts* (Camberley, 1997), XXVIII, XXXV, XXXVIII.

of negotiations and ownership often changed hands. The quarrel ended at the beginning of the eighth century when a Monophysite merchant was able to make a copy of the icon. The duplicate, deliberately made to look antique, was so similar to the original that the Monophysites were able to pretend to the Chalcedonians that they were returning the genuine picture.²¹ Since nobody was willing to acknowledge the forgery Edessa now owned two portraits of Jesus, both of equal value. In addition a couple of other copies appeared in the city, one in a Nestorian and the other in an Orthodox church. The latter was associated with the story about the healing of the daughter of King Chosroes.²²

It seems that the Greek historians and writers knew nothing of those events. The *Chronicle* of George the Synkellos († about 810) mentions only that the whole city of Edessa still venerated the image of the Holy Face.²³ The *Vita* of St. Euthymios of Sardis, written in 831 by patriarch Methodios, recounts that the holy bishop saw it and venerated it, together with a multitude of people.²⁴

However it appears that, some hundred years later, the rumour about the copies of the famous picture reached the Byzantines. In 943 John Kourkouas, the general of Emperor Romanos Lekapenos who laid siege to Edessa, spared the city in exchange for the miraculous image of the Holy Face.²⁵ Some liturgical texts which mention the event say that the Byzantines, wishing to be sure that they got the real treasure, confiscated all the famous Edessene relics: the letter from Jesus, his portrait and all its copies. One of the latter was later sent back.

The relic or relics were taken to Constantinople in a ceremonial journey and its arrival in the capital on August 16, 944, was declared to be a feast day. The magnificent reception organised as an imperial triumph was commemorated in several texts.²⁶ The most detailed account about the

²¹ The story is related in the *Chronique de Michel le Syrien patriarche Jacobite (1166–1199)*, ed. & trans. B. Chabot, 2 (Paris, 1901), 475–477; in *Acta Sancti Maris*, ed. J.-B. Abbelos (Brussels, 1885), 19; and in an unpublished text of a Syriac dialogue, Drijvers, “The Image of Edessa” (note 11), 27. See also J. B. Segal, *Edessa, the Blessed City* (Oxford, 1970), 214.

²² Runciman, “Some Remarks” (note 19), 248 f.; S. H. Griffith, “Theodore Abu Qurrah’s Arabic Tractate on the Christian Practice of Venerating Images,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105 (1985), 53–73; Drijvers, “The Image of Edessa” (note 11), 28.

²³ George the Synkellos, *Ecloga Chronographica*, ed. A. Mosshammer (Leipzig, 1984), 399, 21–400, 3.

²⁴ J. Gouillard, “La vie d’Euthyme de Sardes,” *TM* 10 (1987), 34–35.

²⁵ The event, extensively described in Greek texts (cf. *infra*, note 26), was also noted in Syriac sources, cf. for instance the chronicle of Eliash bar Shinaya from Nisibis: “The year 331 [A.H. = A.D. 942/943]: In this (year) the king of the Romans wrote a letter to the king of the Arabs, in which he asked him to send him the Mandylion [Syr. *mandilā*] which Christ had sent to Abgar, the king of Edessa, on which there was the image of Christ, so that he would release all the Arab captives who were in the realm of the Romans. And King Muttaqi gave orders to the governor of Edessa to give the Mandylion to the king of the Romans”; [Elias BarShenaya] Eliae metropolitae Nisibeni, *Opus chronologicum*, pars prior, ed. & interpr. E. W. Brooks [CSCO (62*), SS 3:7 (= 21), textus] (Paris, 1910), 211, 13–22; [CSCO (63*), SS 3:7 (= 23), versio] (Rome, 1910), 101, or *The Chronography of Gregory of Abū’l-Faraj 1225–1285 ... known as Bar Hebraeus*, trans. E. A. W. Budge (London, 1932, repr. Amsterdam, 1976), 162–163; and in Arabic sources: Ibn al-Atīr, *Chronicon quod perfectissimum inscribitur*, ed. C. J. Tornberg, VIII (Leiden, 1862), 302; Al-Masū’dī, *Les prairies d’or*, ed. C. Barbier de Meynard, II (Paris, 1863), 331.

²⁶ Leo Grammaticus, *Chronographia* [= the Logothete Chronicle], ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1842), 326; Ps.-Symeon Magistros, in Theophanes Continuatus, *Chronographia*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1838), 432–33; B. Flusin, “Didascalie de Constantin Stilbès sur le Mandylion et la Sainte Tuile (BHG 796m),” *REB* 55 (1997), 53–79; A.-M. Dubarle, “L’Homélie de Grégoire le Référendaire pour la réception de l’image d’Édesse,” *REB* 55 (1997), 5–51. See also É. Patlagean, “L’entrée de la Sainte Face d’Édesse à Constantinople en 944,” in A. Vauchez (ed.), *La religion civique à l’époque médiévale et moderne (chrétienté et islam)* (Rome, 1995), 21–35; Cameron, “The Mandylion” (note 11), 33–34. Almost all sources state that the icon was met at the bank of the river Sagar by an imperial official *parakoimomenos* who accompanied it to Blachernae where the Emperor was waiting. The next day

festivities is related in a work known as *Narratio de imagine Edessena*, and ascribed to Constantine Porphyrogenetos.²⁷ It is not clear where precisely the relics were placed immediately after the celebrations. Some sources, the *Narratio* included, mention the Pharos chapel. However the credibility of these accounts may be questioned. It is not impossible that the relics or at least the Holy Face were enshrined above the Chalke Gate, in a chapel dedicated to Christ the Saviour that was erected by Romanos Lekapenos.²⁸ This place was certainly the most appropriate place for the icon which, according to tradition, had been installed over the main gate of Edessa in order to protect the city.²⁹ Later, probably at the end of the eleventh century, the relic was moved to the Pharos chapel where it was seen by Western pilgrims.³⁰

However, when the famous icon was placed near other renowned Christian relics it lost some of its prestige. It seems that it was not properly displayed but kept, possibly rolled, in a golden case³¹ suspended from the ceiling of the Pharos chapel³² and only occasionally left this place.³³

the procession was attended by the Emperor's two sons Stephen and Constantine and his son-in-law Constantine Porphyrogenetos, the patriarch Theophylaktos and the members of the senate. All accompanied the icon on foot as it was carried from the Golden Gate to Hagia Sophia. After a solemn mass the relic was taken to the palace but the exact location is not mentioned.

²⁷ *Narratio de Imagine Edessena*, ed. E. von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder: Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende* [TU 18] (Leipzig, 1899), "Beilagen," 39**–85** (PG 113, 423–54); trans. by B. Slate & al., in I. Wilson, *The Shroud of Turin. The Burial Cloth of Jesus Christ?* (London, 1978), appendix C, 315–329. The text recounts that when the Holy Face and the letter of Jesus arrived in Constantinople 15 August, enclosed in a box (called in the text *kisótos*, "ark"), they were placed in the upper oratory of the Virgin Mary church at the Blachernae, the place traditionally attended by the emperors on that particular day to celebrate the Dormition. Still enclosed in the box they were venerated by the emperor and his court and then carried on board the imperial ship. It sailed to the Boukoleon palace where the relics were placed in the Pharos chapel. The next day they were worshipped again and taken back to the imperial ship but this time accompanied only by the sons of the emperor and Constantine Porphyrogenetos. They sailed to the western point of the city walls encircling Constantinople, obviously an apotropaic action probably recalling King Abgar's procession with the letter of Jesus around Edessa (cf. *infra*, p. 110). After disembarking, the relics were carried into the city through the Golden Gate and along the enlightened *Mese*, until the Augousteion and beyond, for solemn services in the sanctuary of Hagia Sophia. Later on, they were displayed on the throne in the Golden *Trichinium* while the celebrants recited the *ektene* prayer, perhaps also in reminiscence of a ritual once performed in Edessa.

²⁸ S. G. Engberg, "Romanos Lekapenos and the Mandilion of Edessa," expected to appear in the volume *Les reliques de la Passion*, ed. B. Flusin.

²⁹ The persistence of this tradition is confirmed by the custom of painting the Mandilion above or near to the entrances of a church or a sanctuary; for an example, see A. Grabar, *La Sainte Face de Laon. Le mandyilion dans l'art orthodoxe* [Zografika 3] (Prague, 1931).

³⁰ Cf. *infra*, note 32, and A. Cameron, "The History of the Image of Edessa: the Telling of a Story," in *Okeanos: Essays presented to Ihor Ševčenko = Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7 (1983), 92–93 and note 58; S. Engberg, "In His own hand' (οἰκεῖα χεῖρ)" in J. Luis-Jensen & R. Mosesdottir (eds.), *Grace-notes played for Michael Chesnutt on the occasion of his 60th birthday* (Copenhagen, 2002).

³¹ Designated in the texts as *kistos*, *capsula* or *vasa*.

³² P. E. D. Riant, *Exuviae sacrae Constantinopolitanae*, II (Geneva, 1878), 211 ff., 231; K. Ciggaar, "Une description de Constantinople dans le Tarragonensis 55," *REB* 53 (1995), 117–140, esp. 120; eadem, "Une description de Constantinople traduite par un pèlerin anglais," *REB* 34 (1976), 254; Robert de Clari, *La conquête de Constantinople*, ed. A. Pauphilet (Paris, 1952), 73 ff.; Nikolaos Mesarites, "Die Palastrevolution des Johannes Komnenos," in F. Grabler (trans.), *Die Kreuzfahrer erobern Konstantinopel* [Byzantinische Geschichtsschreiber 9] (Graz, 1958), 287.

³³ Such an occasion took place in 1036 when the icon together with the letter of Jesus and His swaddling-clothes were carried from the palace chapel to Blachernae in order to break a drought which had lasted for six months, cf. John Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum*, ed. H. Thurn [CFHB 5] (Berlin & New York, 1973), 400,39 ff.; Michael Glykas, *Annales*, PG 158, 588B–C. The event is represented in the manuscript of Skylitzes in Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, vitr. 26-2, fol. 210^v, where the relics are carried in three rectangular boxes, cf. V. Tsamakda, *The Illustrated Chronicle of Ioannes Skylitzes in Madrid* (Leiden, 2002), fig. 497.

The icon disappeared from Constantinople when the Crusaders sacked the city in 1204. Despite the fact that the object called “*sanctam Toellam tabulae insertam*” is on the list of relics ceded by Baldwin II to Saint Louis of France written in 1247,³⁴ two churches claimed and indeed still claim to possess the icon: San Silvestro in Capite in Rome³⁵ and San Bartolomeo in Genoa.

It has not been possible to find any reliable information in the written sources about the physical features of the Holy Face. Evagrius, who first mentions it, refers to the image as being “not made by human hand,” but nothing is said about what it looked like or the circumstances of its production.³⁶ Later on it is described either as a painting, usually old and indistinct,³⁷ or as a miraculous imprint, impossible to comprehend or define.³⁸ The most informative source is the *Homily* of the Archdeacon Gregory who describes the Holy Face as it would be a painting.³⁹ Although his description follows the aesthetic criteria of the epoch influenced by the spiritual view of icons, Gregory also adds some “technical” details, for instance the method of drawing the facial features of Christ and the use of colours.⁴⁰

Uncertainty about the characteristics of the Holy Face is most probably due to the fact that the icon was rarely, if ever, displayed publicly. We learn from the *Narratio* that Emperor Romanos venerated it in an unlocked box. The accounts of the Western pilgrims also refer to the inaccessibility of the relics for close inspection. Finally the miniature in the Madrid Skylitzes shows the priests carrying in procession the Mandyllion, the Keramion and the swaddling-bands of Jesus in three closed cases.⁴¹ The only text which vaguely suggests that the Mandyllion might have been displayed to the faithful is the *Vita* of Paul the Younger in Mount Latros. It tells that the monk travelled to Constantinople to see the Holy Face in order to confirm that the person appearing to him in visions was really Christ.⁴²

THE KERAMION. The Keramion, that is the Mandyllion’s miraculous impression on a tile, also existed in many copies. There are at least two sto-

³⁴ *Le trésor de la Sainte Chapelle* [Catalogue de l’exposition, Musée du Louvre, 31 mai – 27 août 2001] (Paris, 2001), 70–71; Riant, *Exuviae*, I (note 32), CCIX, n. 3. In Byzantine art the Keramion is depicted side by side with the Mandyllion. One of the oldest representations is to be found in the manuscript of the *Heavenly Ladder* of John Klimax, dated to the 12th c. (Rome, Biblioteca Vaticana, cod. Rossianus 251, fol. 12”), cf. Th. Raff, “Das ‘heilige Kerámion’ und ‘Christos der Antiphonetés,’” in H. Gerndt et al. (eds.), *Dona Ethnologica Monacensia. Leopold Kretzenbacher zum 70. Geburtstag* (Munich, 1983), fig. on p. 105.

³⁵ On this picture, I. Ragusa, “Mandyllion–Sudarium: The ‘Translation’ of a Byzantine Relic to Rome,” *Arte Medievale* 2:5 (1991), 97–106, where the older literature is quoted.

³⁶ Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* (note 19).

³⁷ Cf. the story related by Ps.-Symeon Magistros (note 26), 433, about Constantine Porphyrogenetos who, unlike the sons of Romanos Lekapenos, had been able to discern the facial features of the Mandyllion, or the Life of the hermit Paul (*BHG* 1474) who owned an indistinct imprint of the Holy Face; “Vita S. Pauli Iunioris in Monte Latro,” ed. H. Delehaye, *AnalBoll* 11 (1892), § 37, 150,18–151,6.

³⁸ Cf. *infra*, p. 111.

³⁹ von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder* (note 27), 212*–213*, and Dubarle, “L’Homélie” (note 26), §§ 3, 16.

⁴⁰ Dubarle, “L’Homélie” (note 26), §§ 10,11, 25. The problem is discussed by G. Dagron, “Holy Images and Likeness,” *DOP* 45 (1991), 23–33; G. Wolf, “From Mandyllion to Veronica: Picturing the ‘Disembodied’ Face and Disseminating the True Image of Christ in the Latin West,” in *Paradox* (note 6), 153–179.

⁴¹ Cf. *supra*, note 33.

⁴² *Vita S. Pauli* (note 37), 150,18.

ries concerning its origin; one connects the relic with the replica of the image in Mabbugh-Hierapolis, another with the episode of the walled Edessene icon.⁴³ Moreover a version of the story relates that two holy Keramia were created in Mabbugh, because the portrait of Jesus was hidden between two tiles. One of them remained in Mabbugh, the other followed the Holy Face to Edessa.⁴⁴

According to one tradition the Keramion, which was brought to Constantinople during the reign of Nikephoros II Phokas (966) or that of John I Tzimiskes (974), originated from Mabbugh. It was first kept in the Blachernae in a golden box ornamented with precious stones and later on deposited in the Church of All Saints.⁴⁵ Finally, by the late eleventh century it joined the Holy Face in the Pharos chapel where it was displayed in a similar way, in a golden *capsula* suspended from the ceiling on silver chains.⁴⁶ The copy that was taken from Edessa to Constantinople by Lekapenos' messengers was believed to have been returned, together with the copies of the Holy Face.⁴⁷ The Constantinopolitan relic was lost during the capture of the city in 1204.⁴⁸

THE LETTER OF JESUS. The relic believed to be the original letter written by Jesus to king Abgar was kept in Edessa's archives. It had distinctive apotropaic connotations because its text contained the famous blessing of the city. From very early times the blessing was written on the walls of the towns and houses to afford them protection.⁴⁹ With the same purpose, and probably also very early on, it found its way into magic scrolls,⁵⁰ where it was often followed by a sign called the Seal of Christ and by his signature.⁵¹ It seems that in time the letter was moved from the royal archives to the cathedral of Edessa and placed under the altar, inside a golden cylinder.⁵²

The authenticity of the letter was questioned very early due to a tradition stating that Jesus had dictated his answer to Abgar, not written it personally. As early as 494 the text appears in the *Decretum Gelasianum* among

⁴³ Raff, "Das 'heilige Kerámion'" (note 34), 145–49; Flusin, "Didascalie" (note 26), 60–65; D. Spanke, *Das Mandyllion. Ikonographie, Legenden und Bildtheorie der "Nicht-von-Menschenhand-gemachten Christusbilder"* (Recklinghausen, 2000), 28.

⁴⁴ Related in the group of texts belonging to the so-called *Epistola Abgari*, cf. for instance an Arabic version, R. J. H. Gottheil, "An Arabic version of the Abgar Legend," *Hebraica* 7 (1890–91), 276–277.

⁴⁵ Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* (note 33), 271,60–61; F. Halkin, *Inédits byzantins d'Ohrida, Candie et Moscou* [Subsidia hagiographica 38] (Brussels, 1963), 259–260. It is represented side by side with the Mandyllion in the miniature of the manuscript of John Klimax in the Biblioteca Vaticana, cod. Rossianus 251, fol. 12^v, cf. note 34.

⁴⁶ Anonymus Mercati, in Ciggaar, "Une description ... par un pelèrin anglais" (note 32), 245; Riant, *Exuviae*, II (note 32), 231; Mesarites "Die Palastrevolution des Johannes Komnenos" (note 32), 287.

⁴⁷ However Antony of Novgorod, ed. Riant, *Exuviae*, II (note 32), 223, mentions two *keramia*.

⁴⁸ Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, ed. I. van Dielen [CFHB 11/1] (Berlin & New York, 1975), 347.

⁴⁹ F. Nau, "Une inscription grecque d'Édesse," *ROC* 21 (1918–19), 217 f.; H. Youtie, "Gothenburg Papyrus 21 and the Coptic Version of the Letter to Abgar," *HTbR* 24 (1931), 61.

⁵⁰ von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder* (note 27), 124, 179; H. Youtie, "A Gothenburg Papyrus and the Letter to Abgar," *HTbR* 23 (1930), 302; E. Drioton, "Un apocryphe anti-arien: la version copte de la correspondance d'Abgar, roi d'Édesse avec Notre Seigneur," *ROC* 10 (1915–17), 307–326, 337–373, esp. 308 f., 368–73. See also R. A. Lipsius, *Die edessenische Abgar-Sage* (Braunschweig, 1880), 21, note 1; H. Leclercq, "La légende d'Abgar," *DACL*, I (1907), col. 97.

⁵¹ The seal itself was considered to be a very powerful holy prophylactic against all manner of illnesses, E. Testa, *Il simbolismo dei giudeo-cristiani* (Jerusalem, 1962), 362 ff.; F. Feydit, *Amulettes de l'Arménie chrétienne* (Venice, 1986), 153; Getatchew Haile, "The Legend of Abgar in Ethiopic Tradition," *OCP* 55 (1989), 386 f.; L. Melikset-Bek, "Semipečatije i ego tolkovanije," *Khristianskij Vostok* 3 (1915), 44–50, 203–205.

⁵² Leo the Rhetor, in Mansi, XIII (1767), col. 191 f.

the apocryphal writings.⁵³ This probably detracted from the status of the relic and the portrait of Jesus gradually overshadowed it in importance. According to a tradition, which is echoed in the *Synaxarium Constantinopolitanum*,⁵⁴ only a copy of the letter was taken to Constantinople together with the Mandylion and later sent back to Edessa. The relic, which was considered to be the original letter, first reached the capital in 1032 by the efforts of Emperor Romanos III and was preserved in the Pharos chapel, in a golden *capsula* suspended from the ceiling.⁵⁵ It seems that by that time its fame and importance was re-established because in the pilgrim accounts it is always mentioned side by side with the miraculous icon.⁵⁶ Moreover some of them refer exclusively to the letter.⁵⁷ It remained in the Pharos chapel until 1185 when it disappeared during the riots.⁵⁸



The history of the relics shows how their importance changed over the centuries, depending on political and religious circumstances. These changes were reflected in the texts about them, which were manipulated according to contemporary topical concerns, and in the longer term in the pictorial versions of the story. Sometimes the relics were presented side by side, sometimes only one of them attracted attention. One can form an opinion about this complex process by looking more closely at the development of the legend, first in the written, then in the pictorial tradition.

Literary traditions

The Abgar legend appears for the first time at the beginning of the fourth century in Eusebios's *Church History*, but the author mentions only the correspondence between the king and Jesus. He quotes both letters (Abgar's to Jesus and that of Jesus to Abgar), referring to the documents kept in the archives of Edessa, which were his sources of information. Eusebios does not tell whether Jesus answered personally or an envoy of the king wrote down his message. The historian noted the circumstances which led to Abgar's and Edessa's conversion to Christianity but does not mention the portrait of Jesus.⁵⁹

The pilgrim Egeria, who visited Edessa about 380 and described in detail the monuments of the city, does not mention it either. Instead she recounts a story which confirms that the legend about the special protection afforded to the city by the letter of Jesus was already well-rooted. During a Persian attack the city is said to have disappeared from the sight of the enemy, being surrounded by darkness, when the letter was carried by Abgar around the city and finally displayed outside the main gate. The

⁵³ E. von Dobschütz (ed.), *Das Dekretum Gelasianum* [TU 38:4] (Leipzig, 1912), 8,1–2.

⁵⁴ *SynaxCP*, 901; Macaire de Simonos-Petras (trans.), *Le Synaxaire. Vie des saints de l'Église orthodoxe* (Thessalonique, 1996), 428.

⁵⁵ Nicolaus Thingeyrensis, ed. Riant, *Exuviae*, II (note 32), 213–216; *Diegesis*, K. Ciggaar, "Une description anonyme de Constantinople du XII^e siècle," *REB* 31 (1973), 341; Anonymus Mercati, eadem, "Une description ... par un pèlerin anglais" (note 32), 245.

⁵⁶ Riant, *Exuviae*, II (note 32), 217.

⁵⁷ Nicolaus Thingeyrensis, ed. Riant, *Exuviae*, II (note 32), 213; *Diegesis*, Ciggaar, "Une description ... du XII^e siècle" (note 55), 341.

⁵⁸ Ephraim Ainos, *Historia Chronica*, ed. Od. Lampsidis [CFHB 27] (Athens, 1990), 3001–3003; Niketas Choniates, *Historia* (note 43), 347,54–56.

⁵⁹ *Historia ecclesiastica*, I:13 (note 18), 65–69.

same famous relic caused a spring to spout up in the middle of the town when Persian troops blocked Edessa's water supply.⁶⁰

A Syriac text called the *Teaching of Addai* seems to use the same sources as Eusebios. In a version finished between 412 and 436,⁶¹ the portrait is mentioned, as well as the letter of Abgar and the oral reply from Jesus written down by the king's *tabularius* Hannan. The portrait is described as being the work of the same servant.⁶² But its importance is not emphasised. No miracles are attributed to the image whereas the baptism of king Abgar and the Christianisation of his kingdom is ascribed to the apostle Addai.⁶³ Early Armenian sources, both the translation of the *Teaching of Addai* attributed to Labubna and the *History of the Armenians* by Moses of Chorene, give almost the same account but include some more details.⁶⁴

A new element is added to the story in the Greek version of the *Acts of the Apostle Addai (Thaddeus)*. Abgar's messenger, called Ananias (Hannan), is not able to fulfil the king's wish, that is to immortalize the appearance of Jesus, and receives from him a kerchief with an imprint of his wet face.⁶⁵ The letter of Jesus is not mentioned. It is difficult to establish the time of this important change in the legend,⁶⁶ as opinions about the final redaction of the *Acts* differ, placing it between the middle of the sixth century and the beginning of the eighth century.⁶⁷

However, from about the eighth century the unnatural circumstances of the creation of the portrait of Jesus were used as the standard explanation of the origin of the painting. An account similar to the *Acts* is found in the anti-Iconoclastic work *Antirrhethikos*, written before 820 by the patriarch Nikephoros, which is considered to be the first unequivocal Byzantine testimony of the Edessene image.⁶⁸ The same concerns the longest version of the Abgar legend preserved in the anonymous Syriac *Chronicle to the year 1234*.⁶⁹

When Evagrius mentions the siege of Edessa by Chosroes I in his *Church History* written in 594, he associates the military success of the Ed-

⁶⁰ Égérie, *Journal de voyage*, ed. P. Maraval [SC 296] (Paris, 1982), 17–19; P. Devos, "Égérie à Édesse. S. Thomas l'Apôtre. Le Roi Abgar," *AnalBoll* 85 (1967), 392–400.

⁶¹ J. W. Drijvers, "The Protonike Legend, the Doctrina Addai and Bishop Rabbula of Edessa," *VigChr* 51 (1997), 288–315.

⁶² Some scholars suppose that this fragment has been interpolated since it is not present in the oldest versions of the legend. R. Peppermüller, "Griechische Papyrusfragmente der Doctrina Addai," *VigChr* 25 (1971), 289–301.

⁶³ G. Howard, *The Teaching of Addai* (Chicago, 1981), 9–11; Cameron, "The History of the Image" (note 30), 81 f.; Drijvers, "The Image of Edessa" (note 11), 15–17.

⁶⁴ Moses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, ed. R. W. Thomson (London, 1978), 167–171; M. A. Carrière, "La légende d'Abgar dans l'histoire d'Arménie de Moïse de Khoren," in *Centenaire de l'École des langues orientales vivantes 1795–1895: recueil de mémoires publié par les professeurs de l'École* (Paris, 1895), 357–414. About the visit to Edessa of St. Rhipsime and her companions and their contact with the portrait of Jesus, see B. Outtier & M. Thierry, "Histoires des saintes hripsimiennes," *Syria* 67 (1990), 697, 709.

⁶⁵ *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, ed. R. A. Lipsius & L. M. Bonnet (Leipzig, 1891; repr. Hildesheim, 1972), 1, 273–278, and B. Flusin, "Christianisme byzantin," *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études. Section des sciences religieuses* 106 (1997–98), 389–395 (Résumé des conférences et travaux).

⁶⁶ The discussion concerning the time and circumstances which changed the painting into a *acheiropoietos* carried on for a long time, cf. Runciman, "Some Remarks" (note 19), 244 ff.; E. Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images before Iconoclasm," *DOP* 8 (1954), 103 f.; recently Cameron, "The Mandy-lion" (note 11), 39 ff.; Drijvers, "The Image of Edessa" (note 11), 18 ff.

⁶⁷ von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder* (note 27), 212; Cameron, "The History of the Image" (note 30), 91; Drijvers, "The Image of Edessa" (note 11), 23–25; Flusin, "Christianisme" (note 65), 391.

⁶⁸ Nikephoros, *Antirrhethici adversus Constantinum Copronymum*, PG 100, 461 A–B.

⁶⁹ Here the letter is mentioned and Abgar wants the portrait to be painted on wood; *Anonymi auctoris Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens*, ed. J.-B. Chabot [CSCO 81–82] (Louvain, 1916–20); trans. by idem [CSCO 109] (Louvain, 1937), and A. Abouna [CSCO 354] (Louvain, 1974), 96 f.

essenes with the presence of the miraculous picture among the defenders.⁷⁰ It helped to kindle the fire that destroyed the earthworks raised by the Persians around the city in preparation for the final assault. In Evagrius' text, which is rather short and not totally clear, the picture is called an icon *not made by (human) hands*, but there is no description of its appearance. Evagrius' account was, and still is, used as an important reference point in discussions about the introduction of the *acheiropoiētos* story into the literary tradition, even though a closer examination of the text shows that the important passage is an interpolation, most probably introduced during the iconoclastic controversy.⁷¹

Although scholars are unsure when exactly the miraculous portrait entered the Christian tradition they do agree that it happened quite a long time before the first iconoclastic period. During that controversial epoch the idea was already so deep-rooted in the consciousness of the people that it could be used as an argument against iconoclastic theology.

Among many texts from the iconoclastic period that provide an account of the origin of the Holy Face the earliest are two works of John of Damascus, the treatise *De fide* and the *florilegium* appended to the text *De imaginibus*.⁷² In both, the stories of Abgar and the portrait—an imprint on cloth—are briefly recounted. The writer only develops the motif that the image came directly from Jesus and that it was created with his full consent. In *De fide* we even find an explanation why the painter did not attempt the task: the face of Jesus, we learn, shone so brightly with supernatural light that he was unable to see it. However this passage, which became important in the later development of the legend, is presently regarded as a later interpolation.⁷³

In the text known as the *Letter of the Three Patriarchs*,⁷⁴ written in defence of the icons in the ninth–mid-tenth centuries, the Holy Face of Edessa occupies an important place. It opens the list of the twelve most famous miraculous objects that were presented as arguments justifying the veneration of icons. The story of the portrait contains new elements as compared with earlier versions: the face of Jesus was sweaty, not wet, when he printed it on a towel and his supernatural force made the piece like a colour painting and as precise as a reflected image.⁷⁵ It was also Christ himself who first sent the imprinted towel to Abgar. Finally, the report of the miracle which rescued Edessa from Chosroes's army⁷⁶ recounts that the wind turned the flames on the Persian army, not that the flames were quenched. This text is the only one to name Eulalios, the bi-

⁷⁰ Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* (note 19).

⁷¹ Cf. the arguments in Drijvers, "The Image of Edessa" (note 11), 19 and 30; Chrysostomides, "Investigation" (note 20), XXV–XXX.

⁷² PG 94, col. 1173, 1261B; *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, ed. B. Kotter (Berlin, 1973), II, 206–208; III, 145–146.

⁷³ Chrysostomides, "Investigation" (note 20), XXVII–XXXI.

⁷⁴ *Letter of the Three Patriarchs* (note 20). The question of the authenticity of this enigmatic text has not been completely clarified. New material that asks for revision of the conclusion in the English edition of the text was brought to light recently by D. Afinogenov, "The New Edition of 'The Letter of the Three Patriarchs': Problems and Achievements," due to appear in *Σύμπεριστα* 16 (2004).

⁷⁵ In the oldest version of the document presented by Afinogenov (note 74), these two latter features of the image are not mentioned.

⁷⁶ In the Slavonic version Chosroes besieges not Edessa but Jerusalem and the Holy Face is brought there by the visiting Metropolitan of Edessa, see J. Porfiriev, "Apokrifičeskije skazanija o novozavetnikh licakh i sobitijakh po rukopisam Solovetskoj Biblioteki," *Sbornik Otdelenija ruskogo jazyka i slovesnosti Imperatorskoj Akademii Nauk*, t. 54:4 (1893), 239–244, 250–252.

shop of Edessa, who discovered the holy image and carried it around the walls.⁷⁷

The next and most important step towards a more comprehensive redaction of the legend is the so-called *Narratio de imagine Edessena*,⁷⁸ composed at the court of Constantine Porphyrogenetos in connection with the translation of the Mandylion to Constantinople. The text is skilfully compiled even in the sections about the miracles and supernatural phenomena. In an attempt to be objective the author included different versions of the same events, and left it to the reader to decide their reliability. There is, for instance, “another story” about the origin of the picture, which is connected to the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane. In some cases the author even mentions his sources: Evagrius and the *Letter of the Three Patriarchs* are among them.⁷⁹

A slightly reworked version of the *Narratio* was incorporated into the menologion of Symeon Metaphrastes while the *Synaxarium Constantinopolitanum*⁸⁰ contains a shortened version, enriched with some additions which seem to derive from the *Acts of Thaddeus*.

The homily for the *translatio* written by Gregory, a referendarios in Hagia Sophia, probably contemporary to the event, adds the episode of the Mandylion’s crowning with a wreath and describes the procession in Old Testament terms, recalling Aaron and the people of Israel rejoicing after crossing the Red Sea or David dancing in front of the Ark.⁸¹

When the letter of Jesus, considered to be the original, arrived in Constantinople in 1032, the text called *Epistola Abgari* was composed. It is believed that the story was the work of a Christian Arabic writer who used an old version of the Abgar legend. He begins with a quotation of the letter, points to its apotropaic features and encourages the reader to use it as an amulet. The seal of Jesus is also mentioned and its hidden mysteries explained. The story of the portrait is briefly recounted: the holy image was not brought to Edessa together with the letter but was acquired during the second visit of Abgar’s envoy to Jesus. The narrative contains the miracle of the Keramion, the healing of a lame man, and ends with the baptism of Abgar.⁸²

The *Synopsis historiôn* compiled by George Kedrenos in the twelfth century belongs among the later texts which recapitulated the whole legend and therefore may be regarded as a source of inspiration for the artists during the Palaiologan epoch.⁸³ It seems that his primary sources were the *Epistola* and the *Narratio* from which he excerpted the main versions of the episodes.

The legend of the Edessene image was also well known in other parts of the Christian Orient, as the versions in Coptic, Arabic, Georgian, Ar-

⁷⁷ An almost identical text is to be found in Ps.-Damaskenos’s *Letter to Theophilos*, PG 95, 349 C–D, see also J. A. Munitiz, “Wonder-working ikons and the Letters to Theophilos,” *ByzForsch* 21 (1997), 115–123.

⁷⁸ *Narratio* (note 27), 424–53.

⁷⁹ The investigation of the work is not yet finished, and not all of its sources are identified, but it is clear that beside the Greek version of the *Acts of Thaddeus*, the Oriental, in the first place Syriac, texts must be taken into consideration, Flusin, “Christianisme” (note 65), 389–395.

⁸⁰ *SynaxCP*, 899–901; *Le Synaxaire* (note 54), 426–429. This version omits the passage describing the journey of the Mandylion on a boat around Constantinople and shortens the account of Romanos’s participation in the festivities.

⁸¹ Dubarle, “L’Homélie” (note 26), § 16, 18.

⁸² *Epistula Abgari*, in *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 1 (note 65), 279–283.

⁸³ Kedrenos, *Historiarum compendium*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1838), I, 308–315.

menian, and Ethiopic testify. Brief accounts are found in the synaxaria in these languages but there are also more extended versions which circulated independently. Usually they contain episodes linking them with local traditions which are absent from the Greek texts. Almost all the oriental versions emphasize the apotropaic character of the relic and its power of healing.⁸⁴

Pictorial traditions

Contrary to the written sources, which are both numerous and rich in variants, the pictorial material preserved is somewhat sparse. If we exclude the panels from Sinai, which cannot be regarded as narrative representations of the legend,⁸⁵ the earliest cycle is to be found in two Metaphrastic menologia, both dated to the second half of the eleventh century.⁸⁶

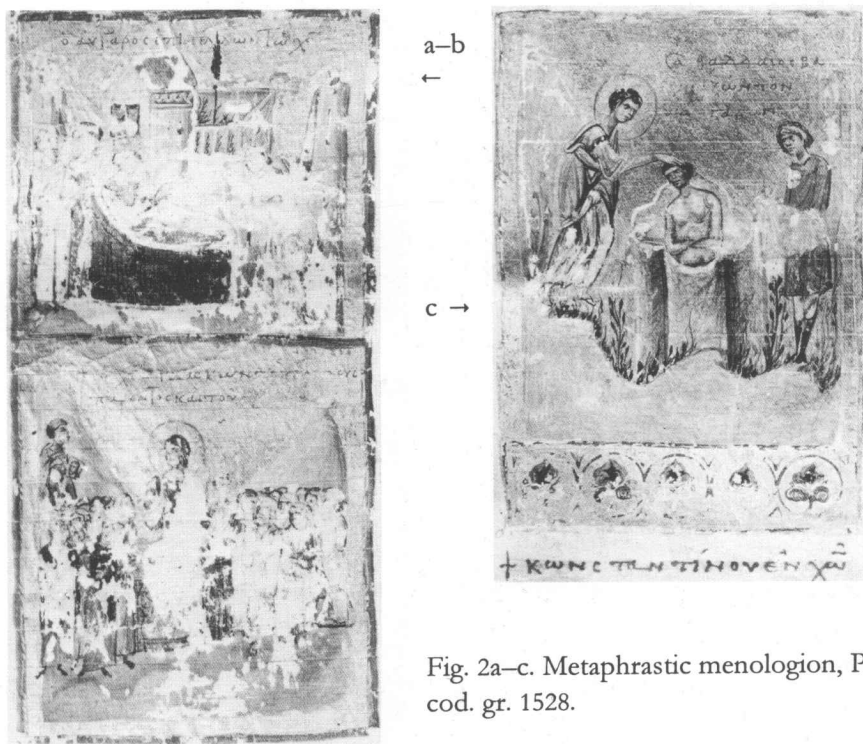


Fig. 2a–c. Metaphrastic menologion, Paris, cod. gr. 1528.

In a menologion in Paris (Bibliothèque nationale, cod. gr. 1528) three miniatures (Fig. 2a–c) accompany the text. They are found on the *verso* and the *recto* of two successive folios and create a visual entity. In the first, Abgar, lying in bed, hands his letter to an envoy, who, according to the story,

⁸⁴ For instance, a Syriac text recounts that immediately after a thief dropped the portrait in a spring its water started to show healing powers, especially efficient against gout, *Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens*, II (note 69), 135; see also Segal, *Edessa* (note 21), 250. In one of the Ethiopic versions the special qualities of the portrait and the letter are described by Jesus himself who invited the faithful to use them as amulets, cf. S. Grébaud, “Les relations entre Abgar et Jésus,” *ROC* 21 (1918–19), 73–87, 190–203, esp. 200–203.

⁸⁵ Cf. note 9.

⁸⁶ H. Omont, *Inventaire sommaire des manuscrits grecs de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, II (Paris, 1888), 80; S. Der Nersessian, “La légende d’Abgar d’après un rouleau illustré de la Bibliothèque Pierpont Morgan à New York,” in eadem, *Études Byzantines et Arméniennes*, I (Louvain, 1973), 180; K. Weitzmann, “The Mandylion and Constantine Porphyrogenetos,” *CahArch* 11 (1960), 171; N. Patterson-Ševčenko, *Illustrated Manuscripts of the Metaphrastian Menologion* (Chicago & London, 1990), 142, and microcard B3–B4.

found Jesus in the open air, preaching to the people. He sat down aside on a rock and started to paint him.⁸⁷ The second scene depicts this moment. The painter of the miniature cleverly sidestepped the complicated issues surrounding the creation of the portrait of Jesus and depicted the painting as being already finished.⁸⁸ The baptism of Abgar by the apostle Thaddeus completes the cycle. The choice of episodes makes a good summary of the Abgar legend, as both the letter and the portrait are important parts of the story.

The illustration in the second menologion (Moscow, Historical Museum, cod. 382) is composed of four pictures, all gathered on one page (Fig. 3a–d).⁸⁹ The first scene is the same as in the Paris menologion. In the second, Christ sits writing his answer in the presence of Abgar's messenger who is holding the letter from the king. Here the painter follows in detail the illustrated text which recounts that Jesus did not need to read the letter because he already knew what it contained.⁹⁰ In the third scene, Christ

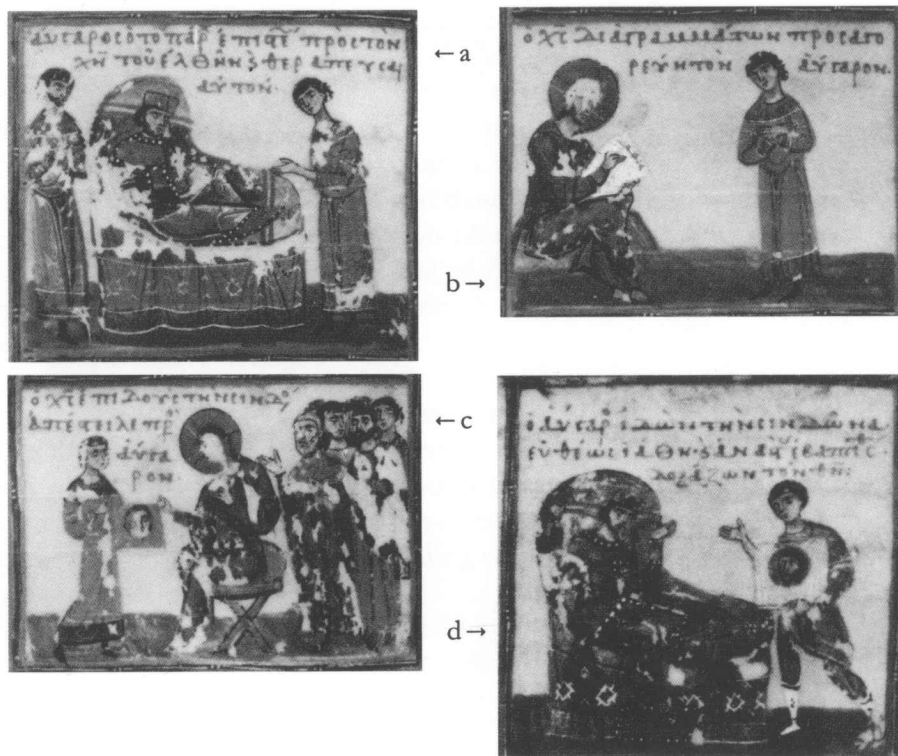


Fig. 3a–d. Metaphrastic menologion, Moscow, Historical Museum, cod. 382.

hands the veil bearing his image to the messenger, and in the fourth, Abgar, who seems to rise from his bed, stretches out his hands to receive the portrait. Here also the legend is skilfully summarised and the importance of both letter and image is stressed. However, the higher status of the portrait is emphasised by the concluding scene which alludes to the healing power of the image.

⁸⁷ Cf. for instance *Narratio* (note 27), 429A.

⁸⁸ Der Nersessian, "La légende" (note 86), 180, interprets the scene differently. According to her the messenger was able to paint the portrait, consequently the miniature depicts the Syrian version of the event.

⁸⁹ V. N. Lazarev, *Istorija vizantijskoj žvopisi*, I (Moscow, 1986), 109, 313.

⁹⁰ *Narratio* (note 27), 429B. The idea is present already in the Syriac text of the *Acts of Mari* dated to the 7th century, *Acta Sancti Maris* (note 21), 12 ff.

Two other examples of the legend are known from Georgia, where the cult of the Mandylion was very popular. According to local tradition, the Keramion was brought to Georgia in the middle of the sixth century by the thirteen “Syrian fathers” who were regarded as the founders of Georgian monasticism.⁹¹ An icon representing the face of Christ, which was considered to be the true image from Edessa, was kept in the cathedral of Anči.⁹² The two oldest pictures of the Mandylion also came from Georgia: one, dated to the seventh century, was kept in the cathedral of Cromi and the second, dated to the eighth–ninth centuries, in the church of Telovan.⁹³

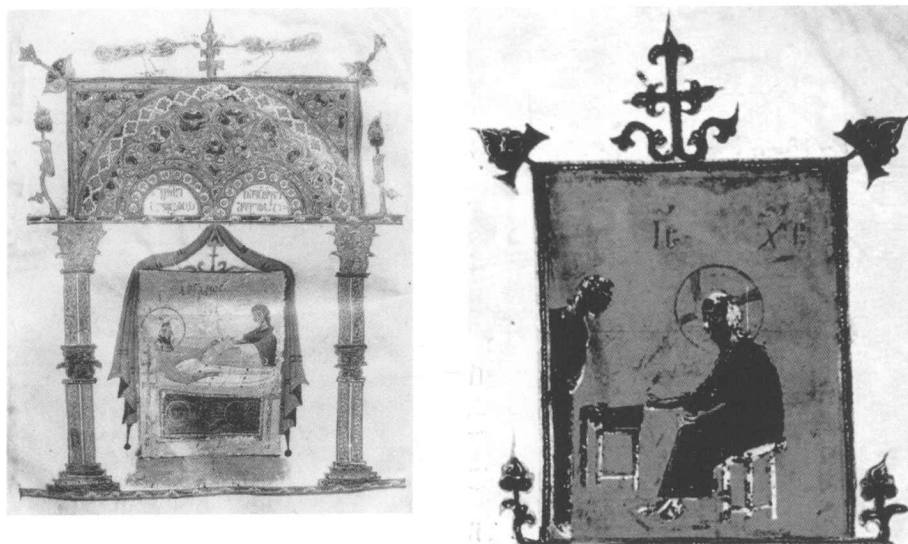


Fig. 4a–b. Alaverdi Gospel Book, Tbilisi, cod. A. 484.

The older of these two, composed of four miniatures, decorates the so-called Alaverdi Gospel Book (Tbilisi, Institute of Manuscripts, cod. A. 484), dated 1054.⁹⁴ It follows the Georgian short version of the legend, which was composed by St. Euthymios of Athos at the end of the tenth century or the beginning of the eleventh century. The text⁹⁵ is based on a Greek version which seems to develop the oriental traditions, mostly the Syriac *Teaching of Addai*.

⁹¹ A. Murayev, *Gruzija i Armenija*, I (St. Petersburg, 1848), 1–9; Z. Skhirtladze, “Canonizing the Apocrypha: the Abgar Cycle in the Alaverdi and Gelati Gospels,” in *Paradox* (note 6), 70 f.

⁹² V. Putsko, “Les images clipeatae chrétiennes primitives et l’icone du Saviour d’Anči,” *Revue des études géorgiennes et caucasiennes* 2 (1986), 202 f.

⁹³ Š. Arminašvili, *Istorija gruzinskoj monumentalnoj živopisi* (Sekhelgami, 1957), 23–30; T. Velmans, “Valeurs sémantiques du mandylion selon son emplacement ou son association avec d’autres images,” in *Festschrift für H. Hallensleben* (note 6), 173–184.

⁹⁴ Written in the Georgian monastery on the Black Mountain near Antioch.

⁹⁵ It is known only from the Alaverdi manuscript, N. Čkhikvadze, “Avgarozis apokripis kartuli redakciebi (= Georgian versions of Abgar’s apokryphon),” *Proceedings of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, Series on Linguistics and Literature* 4 (1992), 65–82. Text with a translation into Russian by A. Khakhanašvili in “Ekspeditsija na Kavkaz 1892, 1893, 1895,” in A. Chachanov (ed.), *Materialy po arkeologii Kavkaza* 7 (1898), 11–17.

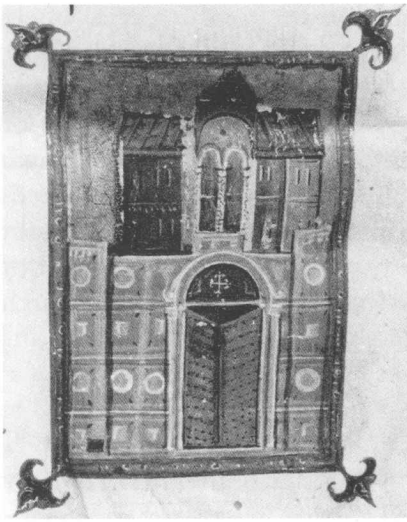


Fig. 4c. Alaverdi Gospel Book, Tbilisi, cod. A. 484.

The introductory scene is the same as in the Metaphrastic menologia: a messenger is sent with the letter of Abgar (Fig. 4a). In the second scene, Jesus dictates his answer to Abgar's envoy (Fig. 4b).⁹⁶ The next picture, which represents a city gate marked with a cross, is to be associated with Christ's promise about the inviolability of Edessa, an important moment which is accentuated in the Syrian tradition (Fig. 4c). The closing scene, as

in the Paris menologion, depicts the baptism of Abgar. On the whole, this manuscript and its pictorial suite confirm the hypothesis of Kurt Weitzmann, developed without knowledge of the Georgian examples, that the oldest Syriac version of the legend had been illustrated.⁹⁷



Fig. 5a. Gelati Gospel Book, Tbilisi, cod. Q. 908.

The second Georgian cycle decorates the so-called Gelati Gospel Book (Tbilisi, Institute of Manuscripts, cod. Q. 908) dated to the twelfth century, which contains a long version of the legend. The text was composed in the eleventh century by St. George of Athos,⁹⁸ and is similar to the *Epistola Abgari*.⁹⁹ Ten miniatures decorate the text¹⁰⁰ but some are divided into more than one episode,

making the cycle much longer. The first scene depicts the king lying in bed while a servant hands his letter to a messenger (Fig. 5a). The artist appears thus to depict the king's serious illness since he was unable to instruct the envoy himself. The next two episodes show the exchange of the letters: a messenger gives Abgar's letter to Christ and receives his answer, written on a scroll (Fig. 5b).¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ The scene was wrongly identified by scholars as representing Jesus writing the letter to Abgar, A. Khakhanašvili, *Očerki po istorii gruziŋskoj slovesnosti*, I (Moscow, 1895), 16; I. Myslivec, "Skazanie o perepiske Khrista s Avgarom na ruskoj ikone XVII veka," *Seminarium Kondakovianum* 5 (1932), 188; Skchirtladze, "Canonising" (note 91), 80. It is clear however that Jesus is not depicted writing the letter. A piece of paper in his left hand represents the letter from Abgar; he gives his answer verbally and the messenger leans towards him, in order to hear better.

⁹⁷ Weitzmann, "The Mandyllion" (note 86), 170.

⁹⁸ Cf. Čkhikvadze, "Avgarozis" (note 95), 71–79.

⁹⁹ O. Podbedova, "Programma dekora Gelatskogo Evangelija kak otraženije idejnykh dviženii vtoroj poloviny XII veka," in *2nd International Symposium on Georgian Art* (Tbilisi, 1977), 10 ff.

¹⁰⁰ N. Pokrovski, "Opisanie miniatjur Gelatskogo evangelija," *Zapiski Otdelenija Russkoj i Slavjanskoj Arkheologii Imperatorskogo Russkogo Arkheologičeskogo Obščestva* 4 (1887), 307–311.

¹⁰¹ Since the illustrated text is close to the *Epistula Abgari* where the letter of Jesus is followed by an explanation of the seven seals, the Georgian painter dedicated a separate miniature to them (fol. 289^v).

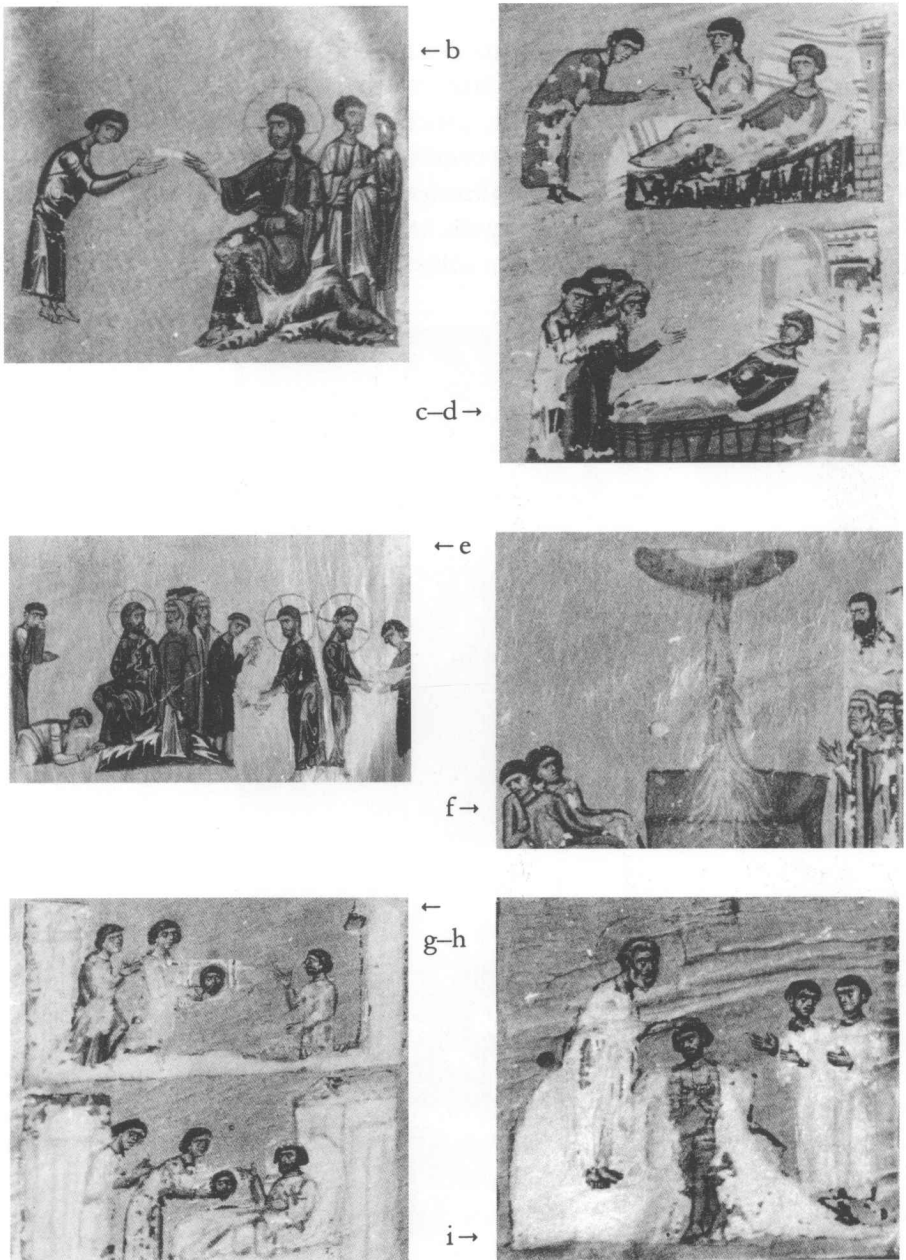


Fig. 5b–i. Gelati Gospel Book, Tbilisi, cod. Q. 908.

The next miniature, following the text of the *Epistola*, tells the story of the portrait and shows the king accompanied first by two, then by a group of people (Fig. 5c–d). The conventional composition makes it difficult to determine which episodes of the story are depicted here. The first probably shows the departure of the painter. As for the second, we may surmise that it refers to the linen used for the portrait which, as some texts suggest, was taken from Edessa to Jerusalem by the painter.¹⁰² The first meeting between Jesus and the messenger and his unsuccessful effort

¹⁰² On this topic see *infra* p. 119.

to produce the portrait is omitted from this version of the story,¹⁰³ but later it closely follows the text (Fig. 5e). Jesus sees the painter's problem and asks for the piece of linen, which the artist, bowing ceremoniously, then hands to him. Jesus uses it to dry himself but his printed face is not visible when he hands the linen back to the painter. The imprint is not depicted in the next scene either, which shows the episode in Mabbugh (Fig. 5f). It appears for the first time in two subsequent scenes, which represent a cripple being healed by touching the picture (Fig. 5g), and Abgar being restored to health by the mere sight of the portrait (Fig. 5h). The baptism of the king closes the suite (Fig. 5i).



Fig. 6a. St. Mary in Mateič.



Fig. 6b. St. Mary in Mateič.

An unusual version of the legend is represented in the unique example of a wall-painting, dated to the middle of the fourteenth century, in

¹⁰³ An Arabic version gives a more down-to-earth explanation of the messenger's difficulties with the portrait: he was a sculptor, not a painter; Gottheil, "An Arabic Version" (note 44), 276.

the Serbian church of St. Mary in Mateič (Fig. 6a–c).¹⁰⁴ Two of the three scenes tell the story of the linen brought from Edessa by Abgar's messenger. In the first scene, Jesus, accompanied by a group of disciples, is clearly gesticulating towards Abgar's messenger, whose hands are raised in admiration. A large piece of linen hangs over his shoulder which is explained by the inscription: "Here you have the linen (*sondon*) from Abgar."¹⁰⁵ The second scene takes the account to its next stage: the linen, now in the messenger's hands, is handed over to Jesus. The story is not continued, as the final scene shows Abgar respectfully bowing in front of the Mandylion held by the messenger.



Fig. 6c. St. Mary in Mateič.

It is clear that a large pictorial cycle with each episode divided into several consecutive phases was the model for the Mateič paintings. This would have greatly facilitated the understanding of the intricate story. What is not clear is why the linen episode was chosen to decorate the church. Christopher Walter pointed out that both the paintings and the *Epistola Abgari* contain the story and both use the word *sondon* in their description.¹⁰⁶ There is, however, a difference between the text and the pictures in the staging of the event. According to the *Epistola*, Jesus and Abgar's messenger met in a synagogue, whereas the wall painting shows them in an open landscape.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, in the *Epistola* the episode is brief whereas the two scenes in the paintings suggest that they are derived from a longer text. There is in fact an Armenian version of the *Teaching of Addai* where the linen sent by Abgar is the subject of a lengthy narrative.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ N. Okunev, "Gradja za istoriju srpske umetnosti. 2. Crkva Svete Bogorodice Mateič," *Glasnik Skopskog naučnog društva* 7–8 (1930), 89–119; V. Petković, "Abgarova legenda u freskama Matejiča," *Prilozi z Literatury* 12 (1932), 11–19; Walter, "The Abgar Cycle" (note 6).

¹⁰⁵ Jesus and one of the apostles are holding a scroll. It may be the letter of Jesus, even though this part of the story is not represented here.

¹⁰⁶ Walter, "The Abgar Cycle" (note 6), 222, 229.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. the Paris menologion and the Gelati Gospels (figs. 2b, 5b).

¹⁰⁸ B. Outtier, "Une forme enrichie de la Légende d'Abgar en arménien," in V. Calzolari Bouvier et al. (eds.), *Apocryphes arméniens: transmission – traduction – création – iconographie. Actes du colloque interna-*



Fig 7a–f. Scroll, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, cod. 449.

That the *Epistola Abgari* itself was also illustrated is proved by the existence of a scroll decorated with thirteen miniatures and dated to the fifteenth or sixteenth century (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, cod. 449).¹⁰⁹ On this, the depiction of the *Epistola* text is interrupted twice by scenes from the life of the apostle Thaddeus.¹¹⁰ The Abgar suite begins in the usual way (Fig. 7a–b) with two pictures representing the exchange of letters between the king’s messenger and Jesus, and another depicting the delivery of the letter to Abgar. The next miniature takes up the story of the portrait: Abgar sends a painter carrying a linen cloth and Jesus returns it, now bearing the offprint of his face (Fig. 7c). The depictions of the miracle with the Keramion (Fig. 7d) and the healing of a cripple who runs to Abgar announcing the arrival of the Mandylion (Fig. 7e) are both divided into two miniatures. In the closing scene Abgar receives the holy image (Fig. 7f).

tional sur la littérature apocryphe en langue arménienne, Genève, 18–20 septembre 1997 (Lausanne, 1999), 129–145, esp. 133, 139. A similar topic appears in a Greek version, cf. Yassā ‘Abd Al-Masīh, “An unedited Bohairic Letter of Abgar,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale* 54 (1954), 28–31.

¹⁰⁹ Der Nersessian, “La légende” (note 86); G. Vikan (ed.), *Illuminated Greek Manuscripts from American Collections: An exhibition in honor of Kurt Weitzmann* (Princeton, 1973), 194 f.

¹¹⁰ Der Nersessian, “La légende” (note 86), 176 f.

Summing up, at least three important points should be stressed about the pictorial material:

- the cycles described above differ from each other, even when they illustrate the same literary unit. Generally the relationship between the illustrated texts and the pictures is not very close but some manuscripts render the story more exactly than others.
- all the pictorial cycles are limited to the *Legend of Abgar*, even in the *Epistola* scroll, although the story is continued in that text.
- the secondary episodes in the Gelati Gospel Book and the subdivision of one episode into a couple of consecutive phases in the Mateiç murals suggest that an extensive cycle once illustrated the legend of the origin of the Edessene relics.

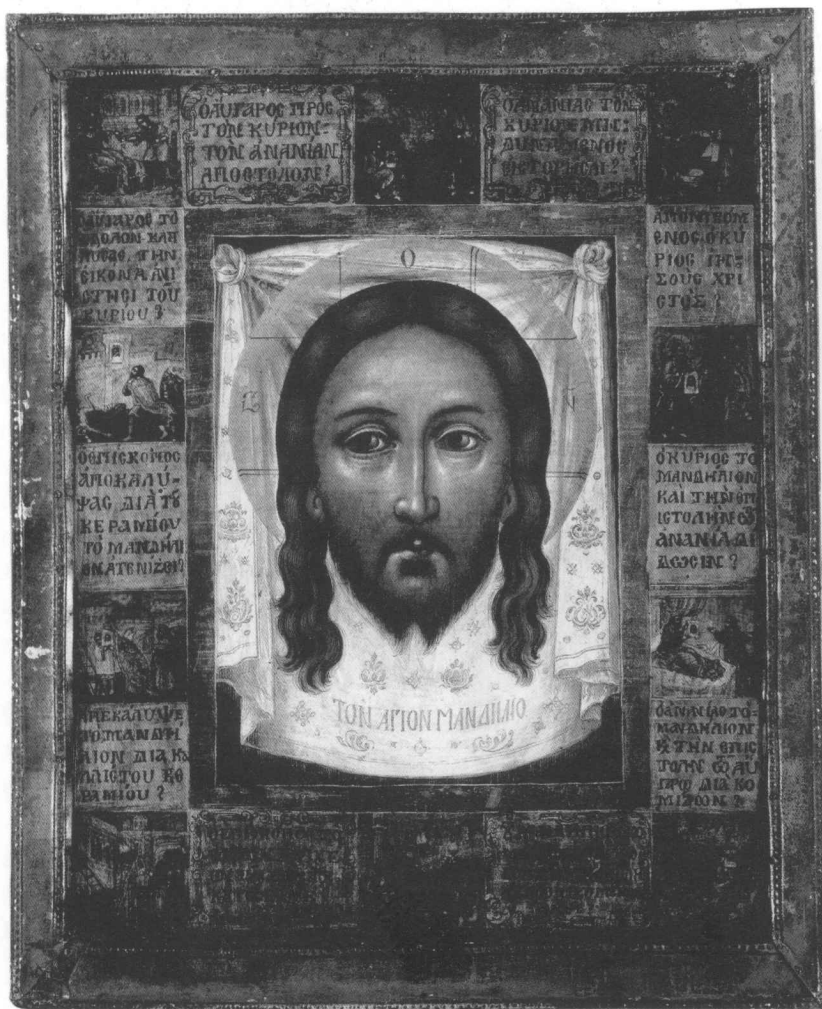


Fig. 8. Cretan copy of the *Volto Santo*, 18th c.; Buckingham Palace, London.

The cycle of the Genoese *Volto Santo*

The scenes on the frame of the *Volto Santo* are arranged in the following way (Fig. 1). The narrative starts in the upper left corner and develops clockwise through five scenes. The remaining five scenes go clockwise,

starting from the upper left panel.¹¹¹ The explanatory inscriptions which accompany each relief are not easy to decipher. Fortunately we can consult a very close Cretan copy of the Genoese icon dated to the eighteenth century (London, Buckingham Palace, the Royal Collection)¹¹² where the legends are noted in a calligraphic script (Fig. 8).¹¹³

In the first relief (Fig. 9a), introduced by the inscription 'Ο Αὐγαρος πρὸς τὸν Χ(ριστὸ)ν Ἀνανίαν ἀποστέλλων ("Abgar sending Ananias to Christ"),¹¹⁴ the king gives his letter to a messenger. This episode introduces most of the texts and most of the pictorial cycles. The relief portrays Abgar lying in bed under a quilt, without royal attributes. This differs from the versions shown in the miniatures of the menologia and that of the *Epistola rotulus*, where Abgar, dressed in the regalia of a Byzantine emperor, is sitting rather than lying. However the two Georgian miniatures seem to stress his bad health. In the Alaverdi manuscript he lies outstretched under a quilt, in the Gelati Gospel Book he seems so weak that a servant has to hand the letter to an envoy.



Fig. 9a and 9b. *Volto Santo*, first and second relief.

In the *Teaching of Addai* and some other old sources, the king's illness is only mentioned, often without details concerning its nature.¹¹⁵ Some of the later texts follow this tradition, but in others, mainly oriental, the nature of the illness is specified and its symptoms are exaggerated.¹¹⁶ We find this in the *Narratio*, which often used oriental sources,¹¹⁷ in the *Synaxarium Constantinopolitanum* and in Kedrenos. Since in the relief the king is represented lying in bed as a mere mortal, which expresses the seriousness of his illness, we can surmise that the artist was trying to illustrate one of the texts which emphasised the king's disorder.

¹¹¹ Dufour Bozzo, *La cornice* (note 6), 15, enumerates the artefacts where a similar disposition of the scenes is applied.

¹¹² Inv. no. 1567 403934; cf. G. Morello & G. Wolf (eds.), *Il Volto di Cristo* [Catalogue of an exhibition held in Rome, Palazzo delle Esposizioni] (Milan, 2000), III.9.

¹¹³ I wish to thank Professor J. O. Rosenqvist for help with reading and translating the inscriptions.

¹¹⁴ The Cretan painting has τὸν κύριον, "the Lord", for τὸν Χ(ριστὸν), "Christ."

¹¹⁵ *The Teaching of Addai* (note 63), 9, describes it as "a certain illness." Eusebios reports that it was incurable, *Historia ecclesiastica* (note 19), 65.

¹¹⁶ Leclercq, "La légende d'Abgar" (note 50), col. 93. Abgar is most often mentioned as suffering from leprosy or podagra.

¹¹⁷ The king suffered from leprosy and arthritis. He was confined to bed and disfigured to such a degree that he never appeared in public and even refused to meet his friends, *Narratio* (note 27), 427A.

In the second relief (Fig. 9b) Jesus, holding a *rotulus*, is standing in front of the seated Ananias, who is holding a tablet. He is not drawing but looks at Jesus with wide-open eyes and gestures in allocution. Only the upper part of the head of Jesus is visible on his tablet. These details suggest the painter's lack of success with his portrait, not being able to capture the face of Jesus. The inscription expresses the same idea: 'Ο Ἀνανίας τὸν Χ(ριστὸ)ν μὴ δυνάμενος ἱστορῆσαι ("Ananias being unable to portray Christ").¹¹⁸

The episode, which explains why the portrait of Jesus was created by a miracle, is based on the old belief that a human being cannot look at the Godhead or comprehend its real appearance. In the old Christian writings there are many examples of such thoughts.¹¹⁹

The scene where Jesus presses the linen to his face is not included in other Mandylion pictorial cycles, even though the event is known from many written sources. It is first implied in the *Acts of Thaddeus*, then developed in John of Damascus's version of the story.¹²⁰ Later, it is mentioned by the historians George the Monk (9th c.) and Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos (14th c.). According to these authors, the light which emanated from the face of Jesus was so intense that it dazzled the painter.¹²¹ Another version suggests that the painter's difficulties were due to constant changes in the features of Jesus.¹²² In the *Synaxarium Constantinopolitanum* an attempt was made to combine both versions, stating that the face of Jesus changed constantly because incomprehensible grace emanated from it.¹²³ An explanation, similar but worded very solemnly, is to be found in Constantine Stilbes's *Didaskalia* on the Mandylion.¹²⁴ In the *Narratio* the event is not mentioned at all. According to one of the Ethiopian versions, the painter was able to complete his task, but by the next day the face of Jesus had changed and the portrait was no longer a good likeness.¹²⁵ The topic returns in the later development of the legend. One story tells that God's favourite, Constantine Porphyrogenetos, and the less lucky sons of Lekapenos perceived the portrait differently.¹²⁶ There are, however, no pictorial versions of this account.

The third relief (Fig. 9c) accompanied by the inscription Νιπτόμενος ὁ Χ(ριστὸ)ς ("Christ washing himself")¹²⁷ represents the first part of the episode, which recounts the miraculous origin of the Mandylion: a servant is pouring water from a pitcher on to the hands of Jesus. This episode,

¹¹⁸ The Cretan painting again has τὸν κύριον, "the Lord", for τὸν Χ(ριστὸν), "Christ."

¹¹⁹ For instance the apocryphal *Acts of John* describe how the apostle saw Christ once change himself into a young man and once into an old man. G. Stroumsa, "Polymorphisme divine et transformation d'un mythologème: l' 'Apocryphon de Jean' et ses sources," *VigChr* 35 (1992), 412–434. In the Syriac apocryphon *On the revelation of the Magi*, known from the *Chronicle* of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, Jesus shows himself to the Magi in different forms, *Incerti auctoris chronicon pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum*, tr. J.-B. Chabot [CSCO 121, SS, Versio] (Louvain, 1929), 45–70, esp. 47, 66–67. The problem of Christ's polymorphism is the subject of research carried on by H. Garcia, cf. Flusin, "Christianisme" (note 65), 393.

¹²⁰ *De fide orthodoxa* (note 72), 1173.

¹²¹ Georgius Monachus, *Chronicon*, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig, 1904, repr. Stuttgart, 1978), I, 321; II, 740, 785; Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2:7 (PG 145, 771). Light is also a factor which enabled the creation of copies of the Mandylion.

¹²² Kedrenos (note 83), 309: διὰ τὸ ἐτέρα καὶ ἐτέρα ὄψει φαίνεσθαι.

¹²³ *SynaxCP*, 896; *Le Synaxaire* (note 54), 426.

¹²⁴ Flusin, "Didascalie" (note 26), 73–75.

¹²⁵ Getachew Haile, "The legend of Abgar" (note 51), 401.

¹²⁶ Cf. note 37.

¹²⁷ The Cretan painting: Ἀποιπτόμενος ὁ κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός ("The Lord Jesus Christ washing himself").

which is mentioned for the first time in the *Acts of Thomas*, is illustrated only in the Gelati Gospel Book, even though it is mentioned in many written sources. In the miniature the scene is included in a suite of episodes connected to the event.¹²⁸ It differs from the relief because the servant has a basin as well as a pitcher, a detail mentioned only in the *Synaxarium Constantinopolitanum*.



Fig. 9c and 9d. *Volto Santo*, third and fourth relief.

The next phase of the episode is represented on the fourth relief (Fig. 9d). Jesus, who has already dried his face, hands the Mandylyon to Ananias. It is clear that the Mandylyon was a piece of linen because the artist has carefully marked its fringed edge. There is one more detail which deserves attention. The imprinted face of Jesus on the linen, with shoulder-long hair and a pointed beard, differs from the face of the relief figure. It is the face of the central icon of the *Volto Santo*, i.e. the archetypal image of Christ.¹²⁹

The presentation of the imprint is portrayed in the menologion of Moscow and in the *Epistola rotulus*, but somewhat differently from the relief. In both cases the Mandylyon is already in the messenger's hands and Jesus is sitting on a throne. The picture in the menologion has a more clearly narrative character. Lively gesturing people gathered behind Jesus should be connected with the *Epistola Abgari* version. According to the text a group of spectators witnessed the miracle and loudly expressed their admiration and reverence. The miniature of the *Epistola rotulus*, with a composition limited to two figures and with the archetypal face of Christ, has much more in common with the relief.

One more detail must be noted in connection with this particular relief. The inscription 'Ο Χ(ριστὸς) τὸ μανδῆλιον καὶ τὴν ἐπιστολὴν τῷ Ἀνανίᾳ διδοῦς ("Christ giving the Mandylyon and the letter to Ananias")¹³⁰ does not correspond to the representation because only the portrait is depicted. Jesus is portrayed on relief number 2, holding a letter, whether Abgar's or his own is unclear. It seems that the artist is illustrating the story of the image specifically, since the topic of the letter is apparently of less importance to him.

¹²⁸ See supra p. 118 and Fig. 5e.

¹²⁹ This feature is repeated in all representations of the Mandylyon depicted on the frame. Sometimes the cross-nimbus is visible behind the head but this detail does not seem to be significant.

¹³⁰ The Cretan painting: 'Ο κύριος τὸ μανδῆλιον καὶ τὴν ἐπιστολὴν τῷ Ἀνανίᾳ δίδωσιν ("The Lord gives the Mandylyon and the letter to Abgar").



Fig. 9e. *Volto Santo*, fifth relief.

The fifth relief (Fig. 9e), described by the inscription as 'Ο'Ανανίας τὸ μανδύλιον καὶ τὴν ἐπιστολὴν τῷ Ἀβγάρῳ διακομίζων ("Ananias bringing the Mandyllion and the letter to Abgar")¹³¹ shows the accomplishment of the messenger's mission. He stands close to the king's bed, holding a scroll. Abgar already has the portrait in his hands. He embraces it and presses his face against the picture

of Jesus. It is not a gesture of reverence, as some scholars suppose, but depicts his desire to be cured by direct contact with the relics.¹³² As most versions of the story reveal, Abgar was healed by the holy picture. The relief represents the very moment when the king, relieved of his suffering, lowers his legs towards the floor, ready to rise up from the bed.

Such an "explicit" illustration of the healing episode seems to be unique. The Moscow menologion, the Gelati Gospel Book, the *Epistola rotulus* and the wall painting in Mateič all depict what happened in different ways. In all four, the Mandyllion is shown to Abgar by the messenger, but each renders the reaction of the king differently. In the *Epistola rotulus*, the healing of Abgar is not even suggested: he lies in bed in the same position as in the introductory scene. The menologion and the Gelati Gospel Book show the king stretching his hands towards the picture. In some ways, this corresponds to the text of the *Epistola Abgari* which recounts that Abgar recovered immediately after he took the Mandyllion into his hands. According to Kedrenos, the king had been healed whilst venerating the picture, a version which seems to correspond most closely with the Mateič wall painting. The Synaxarium speaks about Abgar in *proskynesis*, but none of the known representations follows this.

In the *Narratio*, Abgar's recovery is attributed to the healing powers of the Mandyllion, but it takes place when the apostle Thaddeus arrives in Edessa with the image. Apart from this detail, the description evokes close associations with the scene in the relief.¹³³ When Thaddeus, accompanied by the people, moved towards the palace, the apostle bound the portrait to his forehead.¹³⁴ The light which emanated from the portrait was so bright that Abgar was able to see the approaching procession from afar. At first he was petrified by fear, but then he jumped from his bed and ran towards Thaddeus, his legs no longer being paralysed. He took the Mandyllion in his hands and reverently put it on his head, then touched the picture with his lips and other parts of his body. He immediately realised that his illnesses were leaving him.

¹³¹ The inscription of the Cretan painting is identical.

¹³² The text of the *Epistola* contains the instruction that the letter from Jesus should be placed upon the head in order to drive away evil spirits.

¹³³ *Narratio* (note 27), 434.

¹³⁴ *Narratio* (note 27), 434–45. A long comment, which explains the unusual behaviour of the apostle, is to be found in the homily composed by Gregory Referendarios, Dubarle "L'Homélie" (note 26), 20.



Fig. 9f. *Volto Santo*, sixth relief.

The sixth relief (Fig. 9f) with the inscription 'Ο Αὔγαρος τὸ εἶδολον καταλύσας τὴν εἰκόνα ἴστησι τοῦ Χ(ριστο)ῦ ("Abgar, having overthrown the idol, raises the image of Christ")¹³⁵ depicts the results of Edessa's conversion. The king, wearing a purple cloak and a crown, stands surrounded by his officials outside the walls of the city. Two columns are visible in front of him: an idol is

falling from one of them, on the other the portrait of Christ is exhibited.

The Syriac *Teaching of Addai* mentions only that the portrait was kept in the royal palace. It says nothing about the fall of old gods but does mention a huge pagan temple in the middle of the city and a church which was built by the orders of Abgar.¹³⁶ From a later Syriac source it appears that the holy image, enclosed in a gold cylinder together with two *keramia* and the letter of Jesus, was kept in this church under the altar until 1029.¹³⁷ Leo the Rhetor, who wrote about 787, tells that the image, usually hidden in a box, was displayed during the first week of Lent and venerated by an especially composed *officium*. Covered with a white hanging, it was carried in procession around the church and finally placed on a throne.¹³⁸

Moses of Chorene does not say where the picture was preserved but assures us that during his time it was still in Edessa. From him we also learn that the pagan temples in the city were closed and statues of idols on columns were covered.¹³⁹ According to the *Synaxarium Constantinopolitanum*, the Holy Face was kept in a niche above the city gate where it replaced the statue of an idol. By order of Abgar, the relic was accompanied by the inscription: *Christ and God. Who believes him will never meet a misfortune*.¹⁴⁰ The *Narratio* and Kedrenos add that the picture was fastened to a panneau and decorated with gold. It is possible that the latter two authors might have had in mind a frame of some kind.¹⁴¹

The scene represented in the relief seems to have no direct pictorial parallels. The other illustrated stories about Abgar are completed either by the king receiving the image, or by his baptism. The closing miniature of the Alaverdi Gospel Book depicting Edessa is almost analogous. It shows the wall of the city and a niche in the gate, but with a cross inside (Fig. 4c).¹⁴²

The next three scenes illustrate events during the siege of Edessa by Chosroes in the year 544 and the circumstances leading up to it. From the story which is described in detail in the *Narratio* we learn that Abgar's

¹³⁵ The Cretan painting: 'Ο Αὔγαρος τὸ εἶδολον καταλύσας τὴν εἰκόνα ἀνίστησι τοῦ κυρίου ("Abgar, having overthrown the idol, raises the image of the Lord").

¹³⁶ Howard, *The Teaching of Addai* (note 63), 53, 65, 69.

¹³⁷ G. Khuri-Sarkis, "Le Livre du guide de Yahya ibn Jarir," *L'Orient Syrien* 12 (1967), 307. A Syriac manuscript dated 723, British Library, Or. 8606, mentions the church called the "House of the Image," but without any further details.

¹³⁸ Leo the Rhetor (cf. note 52).

¹³⁹ Carrière, "La légende" (note 64), 397, 399.

¹⁴⁰ *SynaxCP*, 897; *Le Synaxaire* (note 54), 427–428.

¹⁴¹ *Narratio* (note 27), 435 and 438; Kedrenos (note 83), 311.

¹⁴² This iconographic formula corresponds with the illustrated text which recounts only the exchange of letters and does not mention the Mandylion, cf. supra p. 116.

grandson, who had reverted to paganism, decided to treat the portrait just as his grandfather had treated the statues of the old gods, that is to destroy it. The bishop of Edessa thwarted his plans. He hid the portrait in a wall niche, lighted a lamp in front of the icon and covered the place with bricks. Many hundreds of years later, the troops of Chosroes besieged Edessa and began to climb the walls of the city with the help of sophisticated war machines. They also dug a tunnel under the city wall in order to penetrate the city at a crucial moment in the battle. When there seemed to be no hope for the Edessenes, a woman appeared in a dream to bishop Eulalios. She advised him to find the Mandyllion because the promise given by Jesus to Abgar was still valid and the portrait would save the city. The bishop found the relic, which was lighted by the continuously burning lamp, as well as two imprints which the portrait had left on the bricks. The holy image was carried to the tunnel by the Edessenes who intended to repel their enemies under ground. The oil from the lamp which burned in front of the image set fire to the explosives collected in the passage and a huge fire killed the Persians working there. According to another version, also reported in the *Narratio*,¹⁴³ the Persian war machines were sprinkled with water that had been in contact with the holy picture. The water, miraculously changed into oil, lit the fire, which consumed the Persian construction. The final victory was also the miraculous work of the Mandyllion. When the Persians encircled the city with fire, the bishop Eulalios, carrying the holy image, went in procession around the walls. A heavy wind blew up and turned the flames back onto the enemy, destroying the whole army.



Fig. 9g and 9h. *Volto Santo*, seventh and eighth relief.

The scenes seem to follow the text of *Narratio*. The first shows a cleric climbing up a ladder which leans against the column surmounted by the image (Fig. 9g). The holy picture is hidden in a niche and lighted by a hanging lamp. The cleric holds its replica, reverently covered by a textile, in his hands. A partly illegible inscription describes the scene: 'Ο ἐπίσκοπος ἀποκαλύψει (read ἀποκαλύψας?) διὰ τοῦ κεραμιδίου τὸ μανδύλιον ἐπὶ(?) τε...ει ("The bishop will uncover [after having uncovered?] the Mandyllion with the little keramion...").

¹⁴³ The *Narratio* seems here to follow the *Letter of the three Patriarchs*, cf. note 23.

The second relief (Fig. 9h) shows more or less the same setting except that a cleric, now in the presence of another person, is climbing down the ladder holding a replica of the Mandyllion. The inscription reads: Ἀποκαλύψει (read ἀπεκάλυψε?) τὸ μανδήλιον διὰ καλλίστου κεραμιδίου ἔχοντος τὴν εἰκόνα (“*He will uncover [He uncovered?] the Mandyllion with a beautiful little keramion which has a picture*”).

It is not easy to determine what is represented here. Since the first picture shows both the portrait of Christ and the imprint, the scene may depict bishop Eulalios finding the Mandyllion and the Keramion. The inscription seems to confirm such an interpretation. If this is the case, however, the second relief would be a repetition. On the other hand, it is probable that the inscription mistakenly reads “will uncover” instead of “will cover”, although the picture does suggest that the icon is being bricked up, because the ecclesiastic is climbing up a ladder. Taking that into consideration, we may surmise that the first relief was intended to depict the saving of the Holy Face, when paganism made its comeback during the reign of Abgar’s grandson, and the second, the continuation of the story when the Mandyllion and its copy were discovered hundreds of years later.

If our explanation is correct, one more detail in the first relief remains obscure. The *Mandyllion* is depicted twice: first in the hands of the bishop and then inside a niche, waiting to be bricked up. A closer examination of the face of Christ engraved on the object held by the bishop shows that it differs from all other representations of the Holy Face on the frames. It cannot be excluded that this detail may be an addition by somebody who realised the inconsistency between the inscription and the picture and decided to “correct” the latter.¹⁴⁴

Unfortunately the Cretan copy of the Genoese icon does not help to clarify the problems which arise in connection with the first relief (Fig. 8). Although this painter did not make a mistake (a bishop’s attendant, holding the Mandyllion, approaches a ladder leaning against a wall which contains an empty niche), the accompanying inscription remains unclear: Ὁ ἐπίσκοπος ἀποκαλύψας διὰ τοῦ κεραμείου τὸ μανδήλιον ἀτενίζει (“*When the bishop has uncovered the Mandyllion by means of [taking away] the keramion he contemplates it*”). Moreover the inscription on the second scene, showing a bishop displaying the Mandyllion to the people gathered around a wall containing an empty niche is also misleading: Ἀπεκάλυψε τὸ μανδήλιον διὰ καλλίστου κεραμίου (“*He uncovered the Mandyllion by means of [taking away/removing] a beautiful keramion*”). It is obvious that the uncertainty about the meaning of the events continued throughout the centuries.

Much easier to interpret is the third scene of this intricate story, accompanied in the Genoese icon by the following text: Ὁ ἐπίσκοπος τὸ ἔλαιον τῷ πυρὶ ἐπιχέων τοὺς Πέρσας κατέκαυσε (“*The bishop poured oil on the fire and burned the Persians*”) (Fig. 9i).¹⁴⁵ The bishop Eulalios, with the help of an oil lamp sanctified by close contact with the Mandyllion, sets fire to Edessa’s enemies. Since the Persians are sitting surrounded by flames, huddled in a pit below the city walls, we can surmise that the artist wished to depict the enemies as being killed in the tunnel.

¹⁴⁴ I wish to thank Johan Heldt for his valuable reflections on the problems signalled above.

¹⁴⁵ The Cretan painting: Ὁ ἐπίσκοπος τὸ ἔλαιον ἐπιχέων τοὺς Πέρσας κατέκαυσε (“*The bishop poured oil and burned the Persians*”).

A detail of the relief proves once again that he was not really acquainted with the story. The Mandylion is still depicted outside the city even though most texts state that it was its presence inside the wall of Edessa that caused the downfall of the Persians.¹⁴⁶



Fig. 9i and 9j. *Volto Santo*, ninth and tenth relief.

The relief which closes the cycle renders the journey of the portrait from Edessa to Constantinople as first reported in the *Narratio* (Fig. 9j). It depicts a ship with three persons on board and the portrait of Christ standing in the stern. The inscription, partly damaged, may be reconstructed as follows with reference to the Cretan icon: Τοῦ μανδιλίου διακομ<ιζομένου εἰς> Κωνσταντινίου<πολιν δαιμονιζόμενος> ἰάθη (“When the Mandylion was being brought to Constantinople a man possessed by a demon was healed”).¹⁴⁷

It seems that the artist has summarised a long fragment of the story by juxtaposing two separate episodes in one relief. They are not easy to recognise because lack of space forced him to drastically abbreviate the pictorial formulae. The beginning of the episode, not mentioned in the inscription, concerns the miracle, which occurred on the riverbank at Edessa when the Mandylion, followed by two bishops and a Muslim representative, was carried on board. The indignant citizens of the city decided to stop the procession but were prevented by strong currents. Meantime the boat, carrying the bishops and the portrait, cast off from the shore, even though no one had touched the oars. In the relief, a large circle surrounding the group probably represents a surging wave of water, and an oar visible lying on one side suggests that the boat is moving by its own power. There is however, one detail in which it differs from the story. The *Narratio* reports that during the journey the Mandylion was locked up in a box,¹⁴⁸ while on the relief the portrait is fully visible. Since the text strongly emphasises that the transfer of the Mandylion was accomplished in accordance with God’s wish, it cannot be excluded that the display of the image symbolises that its divine power is directing the journey.

The figure floating over the boat belongs to the other episode. Its frenzied movement and the inscription allude to the story of a mentally ill

¹⁴⁶ According to them, both the Mandylion and the Keramion carried in procession around the city caused the destruction of the Persian troops, *SynaxCP*, 900; *Le Synaxaire* (note 54), 428.

¹⁴⁷ The Cretan painting: Τοῦ μανδιλίου κομιζομένου εἰς Κωνσταντινίπολη δαιμονιζόμενος [σ]ιάθη.

¹⁴⁸ The rectangular objects in the hands of two persons in the boat could be either books or boxes with two other relics, the letter and the Keramion.

person who prophesied before the Mandylyon about the accession to power of Constantine Porphyrogennetos and then was immediately healed. The story is included in all the texts which describe the journey of the Edessene image to Constantinople but its clearly political message suggests that it could have arisen in circles connected to Constantine.



To summarise the observations on the frame of the Genoese icon: unlike all other depictions of the Mandylyon legend, the frame contains a cycle which recounts the whole story of the holy image and the related relics, i.e. the letter from Jesus and the Keramion. The cycle is composed of ten pictures but in fact represents at least seventeen episodes. The choice of episodes for the cycle and the iconography of the particular scenes allow us suppose that the whole legend had once been extensively illustrated, not just the account of Abgar, as it appeared from the analysis of other pictorial suites. We may further assume that the comprehensive and skilfully formulated *Narratio de imagine Edessena* was the most likely text to have inspired the creation of such a cycle.

It is known that the largest pictorial narratives were developed for the manuscripts, since ability to consult the text freely promoted the development of continuous illustration. If a richly illustrated manuscript of the *Narratio* was ever created, it would have been a very exclusive book produced in a very limited number of copies. It was easy for such a rare object to disappear or be lost, much easier than for more common liturgical books. Consequently it should not be surprising that not one example of the illustrated *Narratio* is presently known to exist while the menologia, evangelaria and the apotropaic *Epistola* scroll containing the Mandylyon legend have survived, sometimes in more than one copy.

However, it cannot be excluded that a glimpse of the extensive pictorial suite of the *Narratio* may be preserved on the frame of the Genoese *Volto Santo*. A comparative analysis of the scenes with relevant pictorial and textual material proves that the cycle of the frame was not an original creation but the result of a redaction, which abbreviated a larger pictorial model. The abbreviations are not very skilfully made and the suite of scenes does not identify the focal points of the story. Their choice and composition are devoid of clarity and importance. Some episodes occupy more than one relief while others, equally important, are missing or crowded onto one panel. The same lack of skill is shown in the formulation of the inscriptions. Some of them do not follow the narration properly, others do not correspond with the linked representations. Also the iconographical errors made by the artist show that he was not very familiar with the legend of the Mandylyon.

Finally, it is difficult to agree with the opinion of André Grabar that the relief presents a remarkable quality of design, careful modelling of the clothing of the figures and admirable aptness in displaying the nuanced expressions on their faces.¹⁴⁹ In fact, the design is by no means skilful. The figures are stocky, the folds of draperies are linear and the faces, predominantly rendered in three-quarter profile, are schematic and bereft of

¹⁴⁹ Grabar, *Les revêtements* (note 10), 63.

expression. On the whole, one has the impression that we are dealing here with a copy, quickly made and not very well conceived.

One may ask what kind of model our artist used. Analysis of the scenes shows that an illuminated manuscript with the Mandylion legend would be least likely. The iconographical and compositional errors noted on the frame would hardly have occurred, had the artist been able to consult an illustrated text. His model could have been a wall painting, since the church in Mateič proves that the legend found its way on to the walls of the churches. However, if we look closer at the iconography of the scenes where a very limited number of figures and details are depicted, that possibility must also be dismissed. The most plausible answer seems to be a small-sized artefact. It could have been metalwork or an icon similar to the *Volto Santo* but painted.

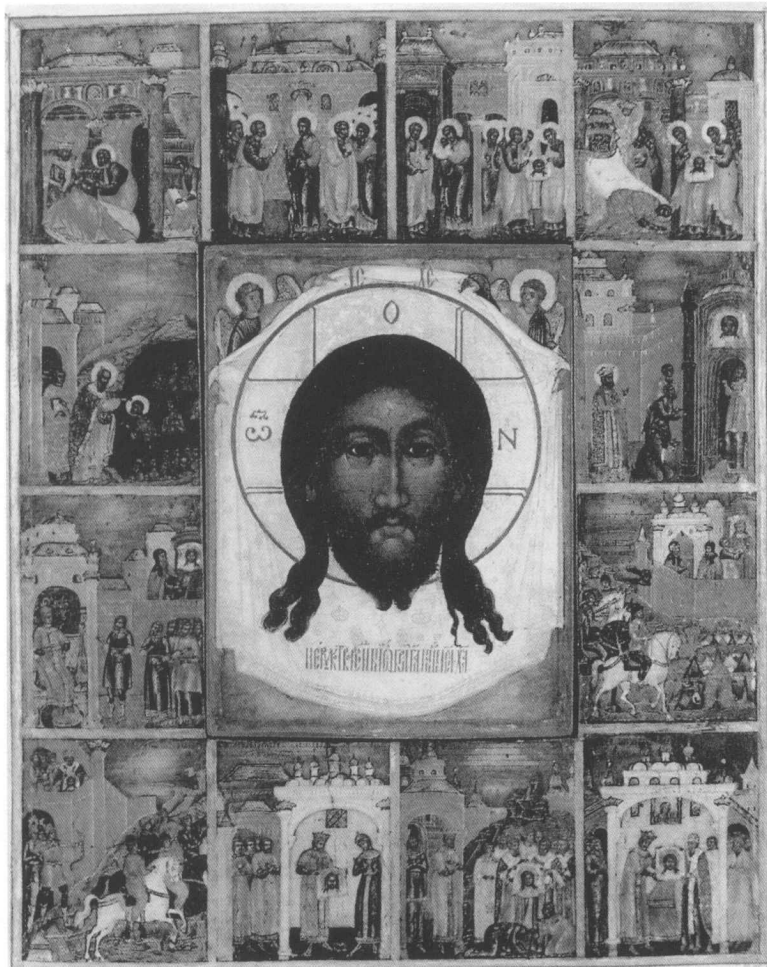


Fig. 10. The Mandylion. Russian icon (18th c.), Recklinghausen, Ikonenmuseum.

The icons which presented the main subject, surrounded with narrative scenes, are so-called “biographical” or “reading” icons, which became popular from the twelfth century.¹⁵⁰ In some of them the pictorial *diegesis* of the events became very stretched, represented either separately, one by one, or in short sequences.¹⁵¹ Unlike metalworking, where the number of

¹⁵⁰ Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (note 9), 249–260.

¹⁵¹ Cf. the examples in K. Manaphes (ed.), *Σινά. Οι θησαυροί της Ι. Μονής 'Αγ. Αικατερίνης* (Athens, 1990), figs. 46, 51–53.

details which keep the picture story moving is necessarily limited, painting could easily multiply them for the sake of the narrative. These small details which are important for the coherent and free-flowing development of the story are difficult to discern and errors could easily appear when a cycle is abbreviated, especially by a person with a superficial knowledge of the text.

Not a single old icon representing the Mandylyon legend seems to have been preserved but some idea of such a work could be had by looking at a Russian painting dated to the eighteenth century (Fig. 10).¹⁵² Here the story is divided into twelve scenes, which depict seventeen episodes, but the cycle belongs to a pictorial tradition different from that of the Genoese *Volto Santo* and the painted copy from the British Royal collection. For instance, the journey of the Mandylyon to Constantinople and the accompanying events are omitted. Instead the reception of the Holy Face in the capital is expanded into four episodes which have a historical rather than legendary character.¹⁵³

Having taken all this into consideration, we may conclude that the question about the direct model for the frame of the Genoese icon remains without a definite answer because of limited and disparate comparative material. For the same reasons it is uncertain whether the compositional and iconographic errors were those of the artist himself, were transferred from his model, or were a combination of both factors.

¹⁵² Recklinghausen, Ikonenmuseum, coll. Gleser, Inv. no. L.720. The central movable part is dated to the first part of the 18th c., the painted frame to the second part of the same century, cf. *Il Volto di Cristo* (note 112), no. III.10. Another example is an icon painted by Fjodor Zubov, preserved in the church Spas Nerukotvornyj, Moscow; cf. V. Brjusova, *Fjodor Zubov* (Moscow, 1985), fig. 74 (painted frame dated to the 19th c.).

¹⁵³ Op. cit., 96.1841

Additional note: The scroll illustrated in Fig. 7 (p. 129) above and its second fragment (presently at the University of Chicago Library, cod. 125) were recently shown at the exposition of Byzantine art in the Metropolitan Museum, New York City, March 12 – July 4 2004; cf. the catalogue, H. C. Evans (ed.), *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557)* (New York, 2004), 438–439, no.265AB.

Unfortunately, the article by P.Hetherington, “The frame of the *Sacro Volto* Icon in S. Bartolomeo degli Armeni, Genoa: the Reliefs and the Artist,” *CahArch* 50 (2002), 175–184, appeared too late to be considered here.

