

# Annunciation to Anastasis

## - A St.Catherine's Icon, Göreme's Sakli wall-paintings, and the Turin Shroud

In the icon collection at St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai is a two foot high icon that any Shroud aficionado might easily pass by with hardly a second glance. Dating around the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it is of the Annunciation. At the left the Angel Gabriel tells Mary that she is to give birth to a child by no human father. At the right Mary is seen in front of the Jerusalem Temple, spinning wool yarn for its Holy of Holies' curtain (the one that will be rent in two from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus' death). From on high a shaft of golden light beams towards Mary's womb. Surely there can be nothing of Shroud relevance here, can there?

But look closer – a lot closer - at where the shaft of light ends at Mary's robe. Vanishingly faint there can just be discerned the ghost-like figure of the Christ child being imprinted in Mary's womb. OK, it's Christ at the very start of his life, in embryo, in the womb, rather than at the very end of his life, covered in mortal wounds, in the tomb, as seen on the Shroud. But in the entirety of Byzantine art no other image get us closer to the shadowy, ghost-like character of the imprint that is still to be seen on Turin's Shroud. So could the artist who created the St.Catherine's Annunciation have been displaying some awareness



*Above: icon of the Annunciation, St.Catherine's Monastery, Sinai; Below: Detail of the same, showing faint 'imprint' of the Christ child in embryo on Mary's chest, at the end of the golden beam of light running diagonally from the top left.*



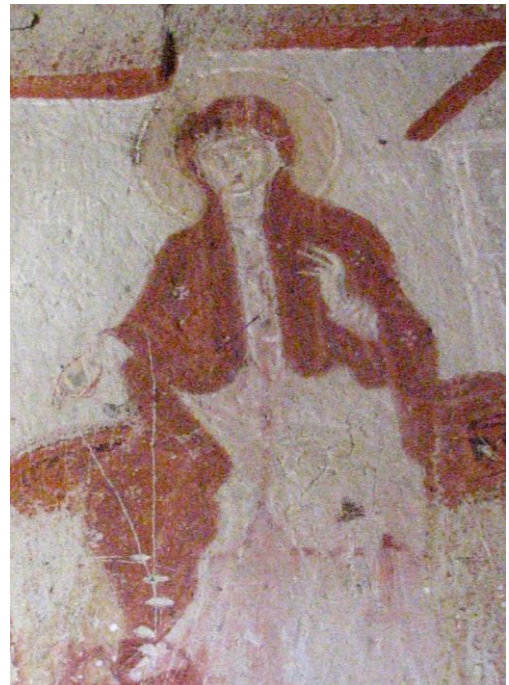




*Interior of the Sakli Church, Göreme, Cappadocia, showing the Annunciation scene at either side of the central archway. The Image of Edessa can just be seen (arrowed in red) at the apex of the second, right-hand archway. Photo by Mark Guscini, 2009. Below right: detail of the Virgin Mary from the same scene. Photo by Judith Wilson, 2009*

direct or indirect, of the image on our Shroud?

One of the fundamental features of Byzantine art is that certain thematic scenes, after their having been originated by some master icon painter (usually supposed as Constantinople-based), become repeated, with just the subtlest of local variations, by other icon painters scattered across the Byzantine world. And it so happens that one place where we see essentially an identical Annunciation scene is among the late 11<sup>th</sup> century frescoes decorating the Sakli Kilise, or Hidden Church, at Göreme, Cappadocia. This diminutive cave church is spanned by three arches, the middle one of which features on its right side Mary spinning on front of the Temple (*see detail at right*), while on its left is angel Gabriel making his momentous announcement to her.







*Above: Right-hand archway in the Sakli church, Göreme, showing the Image of Edessa at the apex of the arch, between the prophet Isaiah at right, and the Virgin Mary at left. Photo: Lennox Manton*



*Right: Detail of the Image of Edessa fresco, photo Mark Guscini*

Now in this instance there seems to be no shaft of light coming from heaven. Nor is there to be seen an embryonic imprint at the end of it. However, immediately next to the Temple, at the apex of the arch to Mary's right, is the so Shroud-like depiction of the Image of Edessa first brought to light by Lennox Manton. (*see above*) And immediately next to this is depicted the Prophet Isaiah bearing his scroll with its prophecy 'Behold a virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son.'

Jesus's end-of-life imprint on the Edessa cloth is therefore most intimately linked with his start-of-life imprinting in Mary's body. And when we look again at the announcing angel Gabriel, both on the Sinai icon and on the Sakli arch, we see him presenting Mary with a large cloth draped over his right arm (*see right*). Symbolically the swaddling wrapping for Jesus' infancy melds seamlessly into the all-enveloping wrapping that will be found left behind in the otherwise empty tomb. And in the gospels an angel is present on both occasions, the Annunciation and at the empty tomb's discovery following Jesus' Resurrection (in Greek, the Ananastis).





That this is no one-off association of the Image of Edessa with the Angel of the Annunciation is evident from a number of later examples. A late 13<sup>th</sup> century example in the St. Euthymios chapel, Thessalonika (*see above*) has the Image of Edessa immediately between Mary and the annunciating angel. Examples of the Edessa cloth depicted between two angels proffering cloths include the 12<sup>th</sup> century Mandyllion facing the Christ Pantocrator at Monreale, Sicily, also on the title page of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Russian manuscript known as Zakhar's Prologue.

And is it mere coincidence that not only were the two Constantinople churches that housed the Image of Edessa dedicated to the Virgin Mary, when Geoffrey de Charny built his Lirey church to house the Shroud, he dedicated this very specifically to the Virgin of the Annunciation?

### **Bibliography:**

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Editor's note: Ian Wilson has provided this article for discussion purposes with regard to what seems to him a hitherto unnoticed allusion to the Shroud, albeit an extremely subtle one, in an icon that scholars confidently date to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He will welcome any direct email correspondence on the topic at: [ian.wilson@hotkey.net.au](mailto:ian.wilson@hotkey.net.au).