

Icon of the Mandyllion of Edessa at Hampton Court Palace, in the collection of H.M. the Queen

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For many decades the painting seen at right, in the Collection of H.M. the Queen at Hampton Court Palace, was wrongly attributed to the Crete-born Venetian artist Emmanuel Tzanes (1637-1694). In 1974 the Greek expert N. Drandakis conclusively showed that the painting is not by Tzanes' hand. Even so, this 40 x 52 cm wood panel painted with egg tempera may actually be rather more interesting and significant than has hitherto been realised.

Professional art curator Alexander Sturgis, writing in *The Image of Christ*, the catalogue of the London National Gallery's year 2000 *Seeing Salvation* exhibition, expressed the view that the Royal Collection painting dates from the eighteenth, rather than the seventeenth, century and 'seems to be a free copy of the Mandyllion image that is preserved in the Barnabite Monastery attached to the Church of S.Bartolomeo degli Armeni at Genoa.' (see below right)

Sturgis went on:

The Genoese picture is one of three Mandyllion images that were claimed as original during the Middle Ages. Another, in the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, was lost during the French Revolution, while the third, identical in size and very similar in appearance to the Genoa image, is now preserved at the Vatican [in the Matilda Chapel, the pope's private chapel], having belonged to the nuns of the order of Saint Clare in the Convent of S.Silvestro in Capite until 1870. Unlike the Vatican version, and indeed unlike other versions and copies of the Mandyllion icon, the Genoese example has ten small scenes running around the silver gilt frame of the panel. These are identical in subject and arrangement to those on the Royal Collection icon and the inscriptions differ only very slightly. This makes it highly likely that this icon [i.e. the Royal Collection one] was copied from the one in Genoa, or from a copy of that one.

Now some entirely unexpected evidence suggests the need for a complete change to this interpretation.

The new evidence in question centres on the so-called 'Lukasbild' (see right), housed in the Diocesan Museum in the small but very ancient German town of Freising, 35 km north of Munich. Up until the late nineteenth century Freising was the seat of the Munich area's bishopric, and in the late 1950s the present Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Cardinal Ratzinger, was professor at its theology school. The Pope's coat of arms actually carries Freising heraldry. Freising's Diocesan Museum houses Germany's largest ecclesiastical collection, with a vast array of baroque and rococo artworks, including two paintings by Rubens. But focus of our interest is a quaint Byzantine icon that is nearly dwarfed by the seventeenth century baroque altarpiece within which it is housed. Known in art history circles as the 'Lukasbild', this icon purports (unconvincingly, of course), to be a painting of the Virgin by St. Luke.

The Lukasbild's more recent provenance is readily summarised by the Freising baroque altarpiece's Latin inscription, which translates as follows:

This icon of the Virgin of Virgins, painted by St. Luke, was received from the Emperor of the East by Giangaleazzo Duke of the Insubres, and from him by the Earl (*comes*) of Kent in England, and from her [*sic*] by Brunoro della Scala, who sent it as a gift to his brother Nicodemo, the bishop of Freising, on 23 September 1440. From henceforth it is an object of veneration, and not a gift: nor would others have given it, if they had been sufficiently knowledgeable. Veit Adam, the Bishop of the church of Freising, placed the Mother of God on behalf of the Mother of God, 1629.

'Giangaleazzo' was Giangaleazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan from 1395 to his death in 1402. His dukedom coincided with a visit to Milan by 'Emperor of the East' Manuel II Palaiologos, as part of the pan-European tour – Venice, Padua, Milan, Paris, even London - that Manuel made between 1399 and 1403 in a desperate bid to raise funds and military support against Sultan Bayezid I's Ottoman Turks, who at that time already had Constantinople under siege. As evident from the 'Lukasbild's own internal inscription, which was rather awkwardly divided into ten parts to accompany the original enamel medallions surrounding Mary's portrait proper, the icon was not new when Manuel took it on his European tour. This 'inner' inscription records that prior to the icon's acquisition by Emperor Manuel, its original initiator/donor was one Manuel Dishypatos, whom the Greek scholar M.Kalligas has identified with the Metropolitan of Thessaloniki of that name who held office from 1258 to 1261.

As modern-day studies by Maria Vassilaki and others have determined, Emperor Manuel most likely acquired the icon sometime during his two residencies in Thessaloniki during the 1370s and 80s. Needing diplomatic gifts for his itinerary of visits to potentially helpful foreign potentates, he ordered it to be given greater gift appeal. This took the form of some over-painting of the central panel, the decoration of this panel with a metal revetment in the fashion of the day, plus the verbal window-dressing of a story that it had originally been painted by St.Luke. Then off he went with the icon in his baggage-train to use it for what Manuel's modern-day biographer has aptly dubbed 'reliquary diplomacy'.

For us the key point of interest is the quite remarkable similarity between the Lukasbild's scheme of inscription panels, in which the division of a single message into ten sections has been forced, and that on the Royal Collection Mandylion icon, where the ten inscriptions naturally relate to the ten separate historical incidents that are individually pictured. The very strong implication is that whoever the artist was who created Hampton Court's Royal Collection painting, he had before him as recently as the eighteenth century (assuming the correctness of Sturgis's redating), a hitherto unsuspected mid-thirteenth century icon of the Mandylion whose broad appearance would have been much as reconstructed at right. Scenes from the Edessa story would have been where we see the Lukasbild's round pictorial enamels. And corresponding inscriptions for the Edessa story would have been where we see the Lukasbild's inscription panels.

So when around 1269 Thessaloniki Metropolitan Manuel Dishypatos ordered the creation of his 'Lukasbild' portrait of the Virgin Mary, arguably his artist had somewhere close to him this same ten panel Mandylion icon, probably only recently created, to use it as his inspiration for how he would 'arrange' his lettering for the inscription. Likewise when in the 1380s Emperor Manuel II's father, Emperor John V Palaiologos, wanted a suitably impressive icon to present as a gift to

Leonardo Montaldo, then captain of the Genoese colony on the Bosphorus, for *his* help against the Turks, it was this icon that John V's craftsman had as his point of reference for his crafting the ten enamel panels around the Genoa icon's frame.

In direct contradiction of Alexander Sturgis's interpretation, therefore, not only was this 'lost' thirteenth century inspiration for the Hampton Court painting not the Genoa icon, the fact that it was still extant for being copied somewhere unknown in the eighteenth century means that it cannot have been the Vatican's S.Silvestro/Matilda Chapel Mandylion either. This is because the latter is reliably recorded from 1517, and had been given its present frame in 1623. Nor can it have been the lost Paris Saint Chapelle Mandylion—because this, whatever it was (its identification as a Mandylion is far from certain), had already arrived in Paris by 1247, and would remain there until its destruction by revolutionaries during the French Revolution.

Studying the surround of the Royal Collection Mandylion we are therefore looking at an (?) eighteenth century copy, and arguably quite a good one, from a *fourth* very special icon of the Mandylion that existed in a ten panel frame back in the thirteenth century, and appears to have survived somewhere in Europe, in apparent obscurity, up to the time that the eighteenth century artist used it as his model..

So who was the 'eighteenth century' artist in question? And was present-day art curator Alexander Sturgis right even in his re-dating of the Hampton Court painting to this later century? Here the important element is the Hampton Court painting's central panel, which depicts Christ's face in an altogether more naturalistic manner than we would expect of the thirteenth century. This gives us a first hint of its likely date and provenance. The second comes from the three Greek letters—omicron, omega and nu ('I am') - to be seen inscribed on the bars of Christ's halo. This three letter inscription is relatively unusual in depictions of the Mandylion, certainly before the 14th century. Normally the only lettering we see is IC XC, for Jesus Christos. But in Russian depictions the omicron, omega and nu letters are quite commonly set into the halo.

And when we look to the work of the Russian icon painter Simon Ushakov (1626-86), who created several unusually naturalistic icons of the Mandylion during the two decades 1658-78, not only do we see these omicron, omega, nu Greek letters identically placed on Christ's halo, we also see one particular Ushakov version of the Mandylion, painted in 1673 (see above, right), in which the resemblance to the Christ face on the Hampton Court painting is far too close for any mere coincidence (see above). It can hardly be doubted that the Hampton Court artist had Ushakov's painting before him as he worked. And it is unlikely that the Ushakov painting has ever left Moscow.

Immediately it is important to avoid any quick assumption that the Hampton Court Mandylion must therefore be the work of Ushakov. Making this most unlikely is a clumsy gaffe to be seen in the Greek lettering that its artist has inscribed below Christ's beard. This reads TON AGION MANDYLIO—a grammatical mistake. Ushakov, by contrast, always inscribed his versions correctly TO AGION MANDYLION. Not only does this mistake therefore betray the artist as someone unfamiliar with Greek and Cyrillic lettering, thereby most likely to have been a westerner, we know from historical sources that Ushakov created quite a stir in Moscow by attracting several talented western artists to the Kremlin Armoury where he had his studio. So there has to be a strong likelihood that the Hampton Court artist was one such visitor to Ushakov's studio—and stayed sufficiently long to make a kind of pastiche between the interesting old 13th century Mandylion icon that he found in Ushakov's workshop and Ushakov's own rather more avant-garde renderings

of the Mandylyon theme.

But when and from whom did Prince Ludwig von Oettingen-Wallerstein acquire the icon? Fascinatingly, in the Library of the University of Augsburg there has been preserved a handwritten catalogue of Prince Ludwig's von Oettingen-Wallerstein's art collection as this existed around the years 1817-18, some thirty years before the icon's transfer to the UK. Although the Mandylyon icon now in HM the Queen's collection clearly features in this catalogue (on pages 16 and 17), the document's handwriting is in such an ornate German script that it has proved extremely difficult to read. However, just at the time of this Newsletter going to press the head of manuscripts at Augsburg University, Dr. Günter Hägele, has managed to read sufficient of the entry to determine that Prince Ludwig's source for the icon was a noted French collector of artworks, Charles-Philippe Campion, Abbé de Tersan (1736-1819), from whom the Prince acquired the icon in 1814 when the Abbé was 78 years old. Special thanks are due to Torsten Lederer of Dresden, Germany for his kind help arranging the contact with Dr. Hägele from which this information was gleaned. So when, where and from whom did the Abbé de Tersan acquire the icon? Could this yet lead us to seventeenth century Russia? That is the next step on an increasingly fascinating detective trail....

Further reading:

Lionel Cust & Prof E. von Dobschütz, 'The Likeness of Christ in the Royal Collection', *The Burlington Magazine*, 1904

Maria Vassilaki, 'Praying for the salvation of the empire', chapter in Maria Vassilaki (ed.), *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, Ashgate Publishing, 2005, pp.263-276

Lorne Campbell, *The Early Flemish Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen*, Cambridge University Press, 1985

Alexander Sturgis, 'Icon of the Mandylyon of Edessa. Eighteenth century', entry 41 in Gabriele Finaldi (ed.), *The Image of Christ*, London, National Gallery Company, 2000, pp.98-101

'Descriptive Catalogue of a Collection of ancient Greek, Italian, German, Flemish and Dutch Pictures now at Kensington Palace, *The Athenaeum*, July 22, 1848

N.B.Drandakis, *Sympleromatika eis ton Emmanouil Tzane. Dyo agnostoi eikones tou.* *Thesaurismata*, II, 1974, pp.36-72